

MARTHANNE SHUBERT



DEADbolt

DEADbolt

By

Marthanne Shubert

Uncial Press

2009

Aloha, Oregon

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and events described herein are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locations, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 13: 978-1-60174-082-3

ISBN 10: 1-60174-082-4

Copyright © 2009 by Anne W. Shubert

Cover design

Copyright © 2009 by Judith B. Glad

All rights reserved. Except for use in review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the author or publisher.

Published by Uncial Press,
an imprint of GCT, Inc.

Visit us at <http://www.uncialpress.com>

Chapter One.

The Ancient Mariner

“You wouldn’t *believe* the way the Coast Guard’s been hassling me.” The plaintive words and aggrieved tone reached me as I stuck my head out the forward hatch of my boat on that summer day in 1988. I sighed and pulled it in again.

George was doing his Ancient Mariner imitation out there on the dock and, what was worse, he was doing it between me and the laundry room. If I tried to sidle past him and whoever was doing victim duty today, I would surely get sucked in; and whatever else you said about George, you had to admit he had staying power.

And the bigger the audience, the longer he’d hold forth. I’d just have to wait till he finished his tirade—it would save time in the long run. I lay back in the V-berth and turned on the fan.

“So I said to them,” he rumbled in his bass voice, “you fellows have boarded and searched me five times already, and every time you did it, you’ve put some kind of a ding on my boat. My rubrail is cut in three places, and your fuckin’ great boots have scratched up my deck paint over and over. And you’ve never found a thing, either—not so much as one tiny leaf of marijuana.”

I could hear the murmur of a feminine voice. Whoever she was, she sounded sympathetic. I decided she must never have talked—or rather, listened—to George before. Sympathetic response was a mistake one made only once. I stifled a groan and settled myself more comfortably. This was going to take awhile.

“No, that’s right,” George said. “But if you don’t let ‘em search your boat, they’ll confiscate it—and prob’ly give it to their brother-

in-law or somebody. Or sell it. So you have to let 'em search.

"What I did, though," he continued in an instructive tone, "was I said to them, 'I'm not running away, mind you. I'm just going to pull in at the nearest dock—say, Pier 66—and you fellows can board me there, and search till your eyes bubble, for all I care.

"Just no more of this boarding-at-sea crap. Your helmsman can practice on somebody else for awhile. Okay, here I go—you boys follow me in now, hear?' And I signed off and went in to Pier 66. They made noises about confiscating my boat anyway, but they didn't do it. Knew they didn't have a leg to stand on.

"Course, they searched that boat like there wasn't any tomorrow, and I still haven't got things stowed like they were before—can't find a thing in my pot locker. But at least they didn't mess up my topsides like they did the other five times."

The too-encouraging murmur came again, and George laughed. "No, I didn't make 'em take their shoes off," he said. "I should have, though. The clodhoppers they—Hey, Irv!" he yelled. "Over here! Did you bring the belt sander?"

"You'll have to excuse me—I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name. Mary? You'll have to excuse me, Mary. Irv and I are going to patch up some of those dings I was telling you about. Been nice talkin' to you."

His voice receded northward. I cautiously stuck my head up through the hatchway again and, seeing only a rather dazed-looking girl on the dock, followed it with the bod.

"Is he gone?" I asked in a low voice.

"Looks like," she said. "Yeah. He's just gotten on a boat—I guess it's his."

"Good." I reached down through the hatchway and brought up my garbage bag full of dirty laundry. "How did you happen to fall victim to George?"

"Is that his name? You ought to put up posters on all the pilings, warning people about him. Is he always like that?"

"Oh, no," I assured her. "Sometimes he's much worse. You were just lucky old Irv came along." By this time I was out on the

dock, standing beside her.

She was a little bit of a thing, but her shorts and bikini-top revealed a figure that, while miniaturized, had the proper quantities of everything in all the right places. A thick braid of blonde hair hung down her back to her waist, and her face, while not classically beautiful, must certainly be rated fairly high on the cute-to-pretty scale.

"I don't think I've met you before, either," I said. "I'm Gin Ritchey, and I live on that sailboat. *Blue Jasmine*, she's called."

"I'm Mary Frances Knoop," she said. "We just came in a couple of hours ago—got slip four."

"Must've been while I was out, I guess. Let's see—slip four; that'd be where Fat Al had his old Crocker till yesterday. Funny—I thought he was coming back in a couple of weeks. Where you from?"

"St. Louis. But the boat's been here in south Florida for a long time. She's Daddy's boat, really, but he hardly ever uses her any more, and it's summer vacation for me, so we're living on her, Peter and I. Daddy decided he wanted to move her over here from Bahia Mar, so Peter and I brought her in. It's lots prettier here."

"Than Bahia Mar? Lots cheaper, too, I bet."

"Yeah, Daddy said it was costin' him an arm and a leg to keep her there. That's why we moved her. But was all that true, what George was sayin' about the Coast Guard? Did they *really* board his boat five—no, six—times?"

"Oh, I think George is *truthful* enough," I said. "I expect they did board him six times. But what he keeps forgetting to tell people is that he bought that boat from a fellow who *claimed* he imported exotic birds from Costa Rica.

"Everybody was pretty sure that what he imported was more or less exotic drugs from Colombia or somewhere. Anyway, the Coast Guard kind of got in the habit of searching the boat when the other guy had it, and they—"

I had lost my audience. She was gazing up the dock toward the sundeck. Two Fort Lauderdale policemen were advancing over the

deck, toward the dock.

"I wonder what *they* want," she said.

"I don't know. Maybe they've come to pick George up on a charge of felonious buttonholing, or maybe statutory boredom." The policemen were coming our way.

"Scuse me, ladies," the taller of the two said, "but do y'all live on boats here at the dock?"

We assented.

"Do y'all think you could round up the other boat people for us? We'd like to talk to all of you."

Oh, boy, I wonder what law we've violated now. "Certainly, officer," I said aloud. "Mary, you start at slip one, down at the other end, and I'll start at six, and we'll meet in the middle."

I went and knocked on the hull of Sally and Brian's boat, next door to mine, and Mary went down to the other end of the dock to Vivienne and André's boat.

After I'd talked to Sally, I turned to the cops and said, "Some of us aren't home during the day. Brian works in a marine supply store, I know, and Ulf—the fellow in the next boat—is gone all day, too. I don't know where *he* works."

"That's okay, ma'am," the shorter policeman said. "We only want to talk to the people that are here in the daytimes."

I decided maybe we *hadn't* all violated some recondite statute, after all. I still felt pretty wary, but less apprehensive than at first. I skipped Ulf's boat and the next one, which was Mary's.

She came down the dock followed by Vivienne, André, George, and Irv. The last two looked moderately painty and not a little disgruntled at being interrupted in their work.

"I couldn't raise anybody on the boat in slip three," Mary said breathlessly. "Should there be somebody there?"

"That's Jerry's boat," said George. "He doesn't live aboard. Only a weekend sailor," he added with contempt.

"That's okay, then," said the taller cop. "Is this everybody?" He looked around at the group: Mary, a massively-built, blond young man in brief swimming trunks who, I decided, must be Peter, Sally,

Vivienne, André, George, Irv, and me. We all nodded.

“How many of y’all would’ve been here last Saturday?” he asked. “The twenty-fourth of June?”

There was a pause while we cast our minds back to the preceding week.

Mary looked at Peter, then said, “*We* weren’t. We just came into this slip today.”

“Any particular *time* last Saturday?” asked Irv, a tall, potbellied man with a midwestern accent and a receding hairline. “I was here in the morning, but not in the afternoon— isn’t that right, George?”

“Yeah, we were both here all morning, working on my diesel,” said George. “That *was* Saturday, wasn’t it, Irv?”

“Yeah. And then we went out in the afternoon to buy parts, ‘member, and ran across Ed and those two girls, and didn’t get back till—gosh, it must’ve been after midnight. Anyhow it was one o’clock when I got back to my boat.”

The shorter cop was writing frantically in a little notebook.

Vivienne asked me, “Please, what do they wish to know? Is about Saturday—*Samedi*—but *what* about *Samedi*?”

“They want to know who was here that day,” I explained. “On our boats, I guess. That right, Officer—?”

“I’m Officer Laurel,” said the tall one, “and this here’s Officer Hardy.” His tone and expression dared us to laugh, and most of us—particularly Vivienne and André, who had apparently never heard of Stan and Ollie—managed to keep straight faces. Only George laughed.

Officer Laurel continued, his face an interesting shade of magenta, “What we want to know, ma’am,” he said, addressing Vivienne and speaking very slowly, “is, who was either on the boats or on the dock last Saturday—possibly at about eleven in the morning.” He looked around the group. “Try and remember,” he said. “It could be important.”

There was a mutter of conversation as people compared notes and thought back.

Finally Sally spoke up. “I was in my cockpit all morning,

sewing—working on a sail,” she said.

“I was in and out all morning,” I said. “I repotted some pepper plants—over on the dock.” I indicated it with a gesture, “And then... Let’s see; I guess I was washing the boat after that.”

George, still stifling laughter, chimed in.

“Irv and I worked on my diesel till noon, Officer—*oomp!*—Laurel, and then we went out, like I said. Right, Irv?”

Irv agreed that that was right. André, whose English is a shade better than Vivienne’s, spoke up.

“We were at home—on our boat, I mean—all day, but we were not—what is the word?—outdoors. It is very hot, so we stay below, with the *climatisation*. Air conditioning.”

Officer Hardy was still writing furiously in his little book. Presently, he finished and spoke up.

“So there were at least two people outside,” he said. “You, ma’am,” he indicated me with a nod, “and you,” indicating Sally.

“What about you gentlemen?” he asked, giving George a dirty look. George’s chuckles had not endeared him to either policeman.

“Well, we were out in my cockpit, working on the motor,” said George, “but poor ol’ Irv here spent a lot of time kinda upside-down, with his head stuck down the engine hatch. You know, it’d help a lot if you fellows’d tell us what you want to know.”

“Did any of you see anything goin’ on across the canal?” asked Officer Laurel.

“Well, I spent a fair bit of time watching a pair of long-tailed green parrots on that dead palm tree over there after I finished repotting my plants,” I said, “but somehow I have the feeling that’s not the kind of thing you’re looking for, Could you be just a little bit more specific?”

“Well, okay,” said Officer Hardy in desperation, “did anybody hear a shot?”

We all shook our heads.

“My dear man,” said Sally in her precise Oxbridge accent, “they could have been having rehearsals for World War III over there, and no one the wiser. In the first place, that big barge with the crane on

it came down the canal at about eight-thirty, and tied up at the place where they're renovating the dock—Playa Vista? I always think what a ridiculous name that is; it's nowhere *near* the beach.

"It was clanking about down there until nearly noon, when it went back *up* the canal. That's in addition to the chap with the loud motor-mower. He was working across the canal that day, wasn't he, Gin?"

"He was that. I think he got the motor for that lawnmower off an old airplane—it sounds like it's going to take off any minute. And he always does three lawns in succession—those three—" I pointed across the canal to the lawns in question—"so you can't hear yourself think for positively hours.

"And that's not to mention the fact that it's getting on for Fourth of July, so there are firecrackers going off at irregular intervals all the time. I'm sorry, Officer, but I couldn't tell you if somebody fired a cannon over there. Which house is it you're asking about?"

I looked at the houses on the other side of the canal. All but one of them looked perfectly normal. "Is it the one with the hurricane shutters?"

Officer Laurel nodded.

"Now I come to think of it, I haven't seen those shutters open for two or three days, now," I said. "I wondered if they'd gone to Cape Cod or something."

"What do they normally do about the shutters?" Laurel said. "I mean, do they have a regular routine or anything?"

Sally and I said yes at the same time. After a brief politeness duel, I spoke up.

"They usually open 'em about nine o'clock in the morning. It's kind of spooky. There's this sort of ratchety noise—not very loud—and then they all roll up at once. They're usually open all day.

"I've seen a man and a woman over there, sometimes sitting by the pool, but mostly inside the house. The walls are all glass, except the one on the north end. That's a door."

"We've been inside, ma'am," said Officer Hardy patiently.

“When do they usually roll them down?”

“Well, that depends,” I said. “Usually about nine or ten at night. One night they had a party, and the blinds were open till very late.”

“They certainly were,” said Sally in a disapproving tone. “And all the guests were outside. They had very *noisy* guests, and live music. With loudhailers.” She meant outside speakers.

“Fair-to-middlin’ loud, all right,” said George. “But the music wasn’t bad. They had that bunch of Latinos that hire out for private parties.”

“So the shutters are usually opened in the morning and stay open all day,” said Officer Laurel, wrenching us all back onto the subject. “Did any of y’all see them opened last Saturday?”

We all looked blank. None of us had, it seemed.

“But they might have *been* opened, for all I can remember,” said Sally. “As it happens, I was sitting with my back to that side of the canal, to get the light behind me while I sewed. I think I glanced over there once or twice, and I certainly turned around when the barge went by. It makes me very nervous; I’m always absolutely *sure* it’s going to take off our rudder as it passes.”

“And I was all over my boat,” I said. “It was *filthy*. The plumbers dug us all up to put in the emergency water line, and the grass *still* hasn’t all grown back. So, try as I may to avoid it, I keep tracking the dirt onto my boat.

“Anyway, I looked over there now and then—like Sally says, I always watch that barge like a hawk. But I don’t remember seeing the blinds open. Or closed, either, for that matter.”

“Second the motion,” George said. “In spades. Did you see anything, Irv?”

“Nothin’ but the bottom of your fuckin’ motor compartment,” Irv grumbled. “If that damn’ diesel goes out again, you can get somebody else to help you. I *still* haven’t got the grease from under my fingernails.”

Mary spoke up. “Officers, won’t you please tell us *what’s going on?*”

The rest of us chorused our approval of her request.

"Well, I don't know," said Officer Hardy. "Think we ought to tell 'em, Fred?"

"Don't know why not," said Officer Laurel. "Nobody said not, did they?"

"Well, no, but you know how Lieutenant Offenbach is," said Officer Hardy.

Mary put her little hand on his arm and smiled bewitchingly. "Oh, *please*, officer," she begged. "You wouldn't want to be responsible for our dyin' of curiosity, now, would you?"

"Oh, all right," he said, turning magenta again. "I guess it'll be in all the papers pretty soon, anyway. Fellow who lived over there got shot. Killed. Near as anybody can figure, it happened last Saturday morning. Or maybe Friday night.

"A neighbor lady thought maybe she heard a shot about eleven-thirty Saturday morning, but like you said, ma'am," he nodded to Sally, "she couldn't be sure, because of all the noise and the firecrackers and all."

"But what about his wife?" I asked. "Surely she'd know when it happened, wouldn't she?"

Officer Hardy grinned. "Likely she would, ma'am. Specially since Lenny—oop! I mean, Lieutenant Offenbach—figures she probably did the shootin'. But we can't find her to ask her."

"Well, but what's all this crap about the shutters?" asked George impatiently. "What's it matter if they were open or closed?"

"Well, trouble is, see," said Officer Laurel, "we don't know how she got out after she shot him. The front door was locked—an' I mean, locked and bolted with a deadbolt—an' if the shutters weren't opened, there's no other way out."

"Well, I don't see how anybody could have got out that way, either," I said. "How could you close those shutters from the outside?"

"Well, that's another problem," said Officer Hardy. "You couldn't. The switches are all on the inside."

Chapter Two.

The Statuesque Redhead

Perhaps I'd better do a bit of scene-setting before I go any further. To begin with, I'm Gin Ritchey, and I'm a private investigator. Like most Florida residents, I'm not a native; my husband Steve and I started out in Illinois some thirty years before this incident took place. A Korean War veteran, Steve had discovered warm climates while in the Air Force—Mississippi, Okinawa, Guam; he loved them all.

When I met him at U. of I. during a cold winter in the late fifties, he was studying to become an ecologist. "Stick with me, kid," he'd said, "and we'll go places. *Warm* places."

In the course of our married life and his—too short—career, we went to a lot of those warm places: Texas, Louisiana, Fiji, Australia, Hawaii...then he was killed in an accident in Gainesville. Knocked off his bike by a reckless sophomore in a BMW.

Well, I couldn't hack Gainesville any more after that. As soon as the '86 semester was over I told the English Department at University of Florida what they could do with my job, and headed south.

Gainesville was too cold, anyway. Steve and I hadn't planned to stay there after he finished his book on the local pine/oak/hammock ecology. I came to Fort Lauderdale like a homing anthinga and took up residence on our sailboat, *Blue Jasmine*. Lots of people in Fort Lauderdale live on boats.

Then I found I couldn't hack solitude and contemplation, either. so I went and took a lot of law enforcement courses at Broward

Community College and qualified as a P.I. I'd had a number of little cases since that time, and three big ones. The shooting across the canal turned out to be the fourth.

After the police left, the little group of yachties on the dock was slow to disperse. We were all consumed with curiosity and chagrin. Here there had been a murder right under our very noses, right across the canal, and we'd missed the whole thing.

"Does anybody know who lived in that house?" I said. "I don't have a clue."

"Sure," said George.

I don't know how he did it while monopolizing every conversation he took part in, but George picked up an astonishing amount of information, and almost all of it turned out to be accurate.

"Fellow name of Lovatt," he went on. "Elwin Lovatt."

"What?" I said. "Win Lovatt, the deejay? The one that comes on early in the morning with 'Chick-a-boom, chick-a-boom, don't you just *Lovatt*'?"

"I don't know about that," said Mary, "but there's a Win Lovatt has a talk show in the afternoon. He's a real bastard, from the sound of him."

"Was," I corrected absently. "By all accounts, he's dead. Yeah, I heard that show—once. I hate talk shows, but one time I was sunbathing over there by the pool, and this—ah—elderly man from New York was on the next lounge to me, listening to it on the radio. I finally gave up and rode my bike over to the beach. Fairly set my teeth on edge, it did."

"I don't now why anyone wants to listen to those things," said Sally. "But then, I can't understand why anyone watches soap operas, either. Why borrow trouble?"

"I can't imagine," I said. "But listen, George, is this the same Lovatt, do you know?" I was taking a big risk, asking George a leading question—if he once got the bit in his teeth, we were all stuck for the rest of the day, and I'd *never* get my laundry done. Still, I really wanted to know.

George was quick with his answer. "Yep, that's the one. Win

Lovatt, the radio personality. I had this fellow painting my topsides a while back—that was between the third and fourth times those Coast Guard shithheads boarded me—and he was real what you might call awestruck about it. Said, ‘Don’t you know who lives over there? Win Lovatt, the big radio star!’

“I said, ‘What do you mean, big radio star? There aren’t any big radio stars any more. Now, television—’ An’ he got real heated about it.

“Said, sure there were radio stars. Said Win Lovatt was a big local personality and had been written up in the *Sun-Sentinel’s* Sunday magazine, and if that didn’t make him a star, what did? So I said, okay, okay, but how about let’s get on with the painting. So he said—”

“Hey, pack it in, George” said Irv. “How *about* let’s get on with the painting? It’ll be dark pretty soon.

“That guy must’ve done a pee-poor job,” he grumbled. “Paint’s still all scratched up and looks like hell.” He virtually dragged George off, still protesting, while we all watched in admiration.

“Well, how about *that?*” I said. “I vote we keep Irv around as much as possible. I wouldn’t have believed it!”

“Me, either,” said Mary. “Once he fixed me with his glittering eye, I was done for. I guess maybe Irv’s immune to glittering eyes, or something. Well, we better be going too, huh, Peter? Got to get those spring lines adjusted, or we’ll be banging into the dock, and Daddy won’t like *that* any at all.”

Peter nodded politely to the rest of us and allowed Mary to lead him off. It wasn’t till he was back aboard their boat that I realized that he hadn’t spoken a word the whole time he was there. “Sally,” I said, “do you suppose that boy’s a deaf mute?”

She considered that for a minute. “No, I don’t believe he’s deaf,” she said. “He seemed to understand everything that was said. I saw him nod a couple of times as if he agreed with something. Anyway, he didn’t *look* deaf.”

“Come on, Sally,” I scoffed. “How do you *look* deaf?”

“I can’t describe it,” she said. “Some deaf people do look

different, though. It's a different expression, sort of."

"Anyway, how do you know he wasn't lip-reading?" I said.

"That's easy. Mary was facing away from him when she said, 'Come on, Peter,' and he turned right toward her and got ready to leave.

"Now I think about it, I'd best leave as well. Brian will want his tea when he gets home." Sally climbed onto her boat, and I picked up my laundry bag and made for the washer and dryer.

For several days after that I checked out with my binoculars the cop activities at the white house across the canal. I'm sure I wasn't the only one, either. Most boat people own binoculars, and from time to time I spotted the gleam of another pair of them trained on the murder scene.

None of us found out much of anything, though, beyond the fact that the hurricane shutters—there were five of them, each about eight feet across—worked independently of each other.

I'd never seen them roll up and down other than synchronously before, but the police put them through their paces, opening and closing one, then another, over and over, until I felt sure that they'd gotten carried away and were simply playing with them. Finally even that activity ceased, and the house across the canal was still and silent again.

It was a week after our interview with officers Laurel and Hardy that the tall redhead knocked on the hull of my boat. She was nearly six feet tall, with long legs and the remnants of that willowy look that you see on the pages of *Elle* or *Cosmo*, but a glance at her hips showed that she'd begun to put it on a bit in the usual place.

She wore her coppery hair in a fashionable crop, or whatever you call it—you know, that lost-waif-of-the-Depression-years look that was popular at the time; parted on the side and frizzed out, then chopped off square below the ears. She was dressed in baggy green pants, high heels, and a long-sleeved white silk blouse.

What wasn't standard was the lost look on her chiseled face. Clearly she normally looked calm and self-assured; today her expression was one of uncertainty. When I stuck my head up through

the forward hatch and said, "May I help you?" she jumped as though she'd been goosed.

"Oh!" she said. "I wasn't expecting—I mean, are you Ms Ritchey?"

"Sorry about that. I guess the Jack-in-the-box bit *is* a little disconcerting. Would you like to come aboard?" I eyed the four-inch spike heels doubtfully.

"Well, not really," she said. "I'm not exactly dressed for it, am I? Could we talk somewhere else? Like, maybe over there?" She pointed at the concrete table next to the barbecue.

"Sure," I said. "Just hold on a minute while I get a notebook." I popped back down through the hatch, grabbed a spiral notebook off the pile I keep on top of the hanging locker, and levered myself out onto the dock.

When we were both seated at the table, I said, "Am I right in assuming that this is business?"

"Oh, yeah," she sighed. "A *bad* business. I'm Lolita Lovatt."

"Mrs. Lolita Lovatt, I assume?"

"Right. Win Lovatt's wife—widow, I should say. And right now I'm just about neck deep in hot water. I don't know if you—"

"Oh, yes, I know something about it," I said. "We had cops over here last week asking us if we saw anything."

"Saw—?" She followed my glance toward the house on the other side of the canal and started visibly.

"Is that my house?" she said. "Migod, it looks different from here. Somehow I didn't realize that you were right across from us. We never spent much time outside, see, except once, when we had a party...."

"Just out of curiosity and before we get started, why did you come to me?" I asked. "Was it the Yellow Pages, or what?"

"Oh, no. I used to be a model, see, before I got married," she explained.

Chalk up one to the old pattern recognition, I thought.

"And I met Beryl Weismann on a job. We both did sportswear, and it was one of those Sunday-supplement things for a discount

store.

"I forget if it was Kmart or Zayre or what. Anyway, we got to be friends, and she told me about you and that business about Davey Taylor and the lottery ticket. She thought you were the greatest thing since Sherlock Holmes.

"So when I found out what a horrible mess I was in, I called her up. She got married too, you know—about a month before I did."

"Yeah, she married Charlie Weston. And a good thing, too, all around. But that was only a little over six months ago—you must've been almost newlyweds, you and Win."

She made a wry face. "Yeah, well, we were. And I hate to say it, but it wasn't the bowl of cherries it's cracked up to be—not with us, anyway. I kept telling myself that we just hadn't got all the bugs worked out yet, you know? But sometimes I thought I didn't even *like* Win. Sometimes I thought, you know, that he was a real bastard."

I tried hard to think of some comforting words of wisdom, but except for my grandmother's tart maxim, "There's more to marriage than four bare legs in a bed," I was stumped; and I didn't think that one was appropriate just then, so I said nothing. She went on, anyway.

"That's why I wasn't there when he died, you know. We had this big knock-down-drag-out fight the night before. It was about money, as usual. He was a real tightwad about some things, Win was; especially about my clothes. But he didn't want me to work any more, either. He came all over macho when we got married, and insisted that I quit. I think maybe I was making more than he was.

"Anyway, we had these big yelling matches once a week, at least, but usually I gave in. That time I didn't. I got so mad I packed up and went home to Mother, just like in the comic strips."

"How did the cops find you?" I said. "When they were here they said they had no idea where you were."

"Oh, they didn't," she said. "I came back. I always intended to. Otherwise I would've taken more clothes with me, for Pete's sake. I figured I'd stay away long enough to make *him* start thinking for a

change.

“But I *did* expect him to call me,” she said wistfully. “He knew where I was going. So when he didn’t call and didn’t call, Mom said—”

“Hold on a minute,” I interrupted. “Two things. First off, where does your mother live?”

“Oh, up in Boca,” she said. “I used to call her every week, anyway. She kept telling me that you have to *make* a marriage work and giving me the old ‘stiff-upper-lip, stout-fella’ crap. But I finally just couldn’t—”

“Second question: how did you get there? Fly?”

“Good God, no. Fly that little distance? No, I drove. Why?”

“Oh, hell,” I said. “That’s too bad. Well, go on—what happened when you got back?”

“Well, I drove up under the carport—it’s one of those canvas awning things, really, like outside funeral homes—and the first thing I noticed was that the picture window was all boarded up.

“It turned out the cops had to break it to get in, but I didn’t know anything about that, then. And the place looked really deserted—sort of bleak, if you know what I mean—the grass was all frowzy because it hadn’t been mowed, and there were newspapers all over the front lawn.

“It was a real disaster area, and I couldn’t imagine what could’ve happened. For a while I just stood there, looking at it all. Then I went to unlock the door. I’d just stuck my key in the lock when this police car down the block started up and drove up in front of the house.

“Two cops got out of it, and they asked me my name. They were very polite, really, so I told them. And the next thing I knew, there I was in handcuffs, being taken down to the station.”

I wondered if it had been officers Laurel and Hardy. “For questioning?” I said aloud.

“Oh, yeah. I’d call it questioning, all right. Made the Spanish Inquisition look like a pop quiz. And I couldn’t imagine what was going on. I kept asking to call Win, and they kept telling me not to

be silly, that I knew better than that. It was a long time before I found out what happened.”

“What did you do when you found out?” I said. “Cry?”

“No. No, I’m not the crying sort. And anyway, I wouldn’t have given those cops the satisfaction—”

“Oboy,” I said. “Good thing I’m a P.I., not a lawyer. You really made things look bad, you know?”

“Oh, shit,” she said wearily. “You know, you’re right? Anyway, when I found out Win was dead, and they thought I’d killed him, I—”

“Hold on again. I missed a chapter there somewhere. The two cops who were here said Win had been shot, and that the house was all locked up tight—deadbolt drawn, and all—but they didn’t say why it couldn’t have been suicide. I mean, if you packed up and left, maybe he got depressed and—” She was shaking her head emphatically.

“*That* cat won’t fight,” she said. “I asked them the same thing, and they just looked at me pityingly and said, ‘Now you *know* he couldn’t have done that, ma’am...’ They were always so damn’ polite, you know? ‘...because there wasn’t a gun anywhere in the house. Can’t shoot yourself without a gun, can you?’ And that was the end of that.

“And on top of everything else,” she went on, “we’ve got this neighbor. He’s really a very nice little man, what I’ve seen of him, but he’s got these terrifically good ears, and he goes in for gardening. He told the cops all about the fights, even the last one. But did he see me leave?” she said bitterly. “Oh, *hell* no! That would’ve given me an alibi!”

“Yeah, and you can’t *prove* you went to your mother’s, either, I bet,” I said, rubbing it in. “Or that you couldn’t have come back during the night, or the next day, and shot him then.”

“Exactly,” she said gloomily. “I mean, Mom would be willing to swear I couldn’t have done it. When I got there, I was so wrought up I threw a hissy with a crêpe tail, and she spent half the night snapping me out of it. They don’t believe that. I mean, after all, she’s

my mother. Surely she'd say anything to get me off. They just don't know Mom, is all!"

"Well, okay," I said. "I guess you want me to take the case, is that it?"

"Wouldn't be here otherwise. Think you can do it?"

"Well, it stands to reason that if you didn't shoot him and he didn't shoot himself, somebody else did it, right? So all I've got to do is find out who, and we're home free."

"I've been thinking about that ever since I found out he'd been murdered," she said. "It's not as simple as it sounds. Win was no Mr. Nice Guy, Ms Ritchey. Oh, he could be a real charmer when he set his mind to it, but he didn't do that very often. You know what he did for a living, right?"

"Sure. He was a deejay," I said. "And he had a talk show. That's right, isn't it?"

"Didn't you ever hear him on the radio?" she said warily.

"Well, yeah, a couple of times," I said. "I used to tune my clock radio to his station in the mornings. Then when I found out I was getting more talk than music, I switched stations. I don't really *like* to wake up to satirical takeoffs on the President, whoever's in office."

"Yeah, but the talk show," she said. "Didn't you ever hear that?"

"Well, yes, once. But I don't like talk shows very much, and—"

"You weren't one of his fans, is what you're trying to say. Right?"

"No. Sorry, but no. Did he have fans?" I blurted before I could bite my tongue.

"Oh, yeah, he had fans. He was one of those guys you either swear at or swear by," she said. "No middle ground. I was just waiting for the day when his fans and his unfans got into it out in the station parking lot. Luckily it never happened.

"Anyway, there were a lot of people who just hated him, and they'd call up the station and make death threats and all. If they'd known where he lived...."

“They didn’t, though, huh?” I thought of George’s boat-painting man. *He* had known where Win Lovatt lived.

“Not mostly, no. We kept pretty much to ourselves. That was another thing we fought over. I wanted to go out—just once in a while, you know? But he was a regular old stick-in-the-mud. Come home and take his shoes off and watch Leno. That’s all he wanted to do. I managed to talk him into havin’ a party, once, but *that* was like pullin’ teeth.

“Anyway, the maid knew who he was, and the program director at the station knew where he lived. And the people that came to the party, of course. But there were only eight or ten of them.

“I guess it wasn’t a real big secret where he lived, but we had an unlisted phone number, and he sure didn’t give out any business cards with his home address on ‘em.”

“So okay, he had lots of enemies. Or at least lots of people who didn’t like him, which is different.”

“What I’m trying to get across, Ms Ritchey,” she said earnestly, “is that even Win’s *friends* didn’t like him very much.”

Chapter Three

The Demon DeeJay

Well, we talked it over some more, and I agreed to take the case. “But I’m going to need a lot of information,” I told Lolita, “and I don’t quite know what I’ll need to know yet. Where are you staying?”

“Nowhere, just yet,” she said. “I came here right from the police station. Well, actually I called Beryl first, to find out where you lived, but that was all. And I feel just *filthy*. I guess I’ll go home—over there, you know? I haven’t got any place else *to* go, except home to Mom again, and she sent me away convinced I’m a big girl now.

“I’ll give you my phone number,” she added. “I think I’m going to be home rather a lot for a couple, three weeks, till I can get my figure back.” She patted her gluteus maximus disapprovingly.

“Really put it on,” she said, “and all of it right on the ass, as usual. And I can’t go back to work till I get rid of it. But the first thing is to get somebody out to fix that window.”

She gave me her phone number and went out over the sundeck to the parking lot. I looked at my watch. It was nearly six o’clock, which explained the hollow feeling in the vicinity of my solar plexus. I eat dinner unfashionably early—seldom after six-thirty—and I usually don’t eat much of it.

Oh, on special occasions—birthdays, holidays of various sorts, and the like—I go out and gorge myself on turkey or steak or enchiladas or scampi, but I always regret it the next day. Anyway, I was hungry. I got aboard the boat.

I was just looking over my food supplies when the phone rang. It was Glenn Hagen, of course.

Glenn is—well, this is going to sound silly, coming from a fifty-four-year-old grandmother, but here goes, anyway. Glenn is my boyfriend. There. I said it. While you finish laughing, I'll tell you the rest of it.

I met Glenn during my first murder case. He runs a boatyard down on the South Fork of the New River, and when Tracy Kilbourne fled to Fort Lauderdale from her home in Gainesville in the summer of '88, she went to work in Glenn's boatyard.

Doris, Glenn's wife for nearly thirty years, had decided she disliked south Florida, hot weather, boatyards, and boats—not necessarily in that order—and that she wanted to go back to California, where they'd lived while Glenn plied his electrical engineering trade.

Glenn, on the other hand, wanted to stay in Florida, where he grew up, and mess about in boats as much as possible. So Doris filed for a no-fault divorce and headed west. It was all very amicable, you understand. The children were grown, and the two girls were married; but it left its scars on Glenn.

The upshot of all this was that Glenn and I got together. I had my own battle scars. I still hadn't gotten rid of the yawning gap left in my life by Steve's death. As far as that goes, I still wake up with that empty feeling in my gut from time to time, even now. You don't live with a man for more than half your life without some pretty tough effects when he dies.

Anyway, neither Glenn nor I felt like getting married again, and we still don't. But lovers? Ah, yes. Friends? You bet your buns. Sometimes I ask myself what's the difference between our relationship and being married, and I don't find any really good answer, so I shelve the question again.

"What's for dinner?" he said.

"Ham and yams," I said. "You coming over?"

"One of my favorite meals," he answered. "Be there in half an hour."

Half an hour was ample to slice and pan-broil half a one-pound canned ham and boil up a couple of sweet potatoes. I was just tossing the salad when he called from the dock, "Permission to come aboard, Cap'n?"

"Permission granted," I called back through the open forward hatch.

I watched him swing easily aboard, shoes in one hand, and went back to my salad-mixing. He was sitting in the cockpit when I carried up the plates and salad bowls.

"I've got another case," I announced. "Murder again."

"Don't tell me. Let me guess. Is it Win Lovatt?"

"Well, yes, it is, but I don't know how *you* knew. I know there hasn't been all that much about it in the papers, because I've been looking for it. These local newspapers don't seem to care a damn about murder unless it's a serial killer or something. Their front pages are all about the iniquities of the port authority, or whether or not the governor's going to raise taxes. Or abortions. They're always interested in abortions."

"True. But you did tell me about the cops coming and questioning all you yachties. About a week ago, wasn't it? And I don't know about any *other* murder that's happened recently. But how'd you get in on it? No, wait, I know. Inspector Lestrade came and begged your assistance, right?"

"That'll be the day," I said. "The local Lestrade's name is Lieutenant Leonard Offenbach, and I've been concentrating on keeping such a low profile that he doesn't even know I exist. And it wasn't Debbie Harper, either, although as I understand it she's finally been taken off the sex-solicitation squad and transferred to Homicide. No, it was the wife."

"Lovatt's wife?" he said. "Didn't know he had one. But then, I don't know much about the man, except what I heard on the radio. I caught Ellie, my new secretary, listening to his talk show one time, and heard enough of it to know I didn't like it or him."

"Anybody disagreed with him, he treated 'em like dirt. Like, 'How *dare* you call up and say a thing like that?' or, 'Oh, well, I

know *your* kind. *You* don't care if little children play with guns and get killed,' or whatever. I'm just surprised he didn't get his sooner."

"Was he really that bad?" I said. "I heard part of his show one time and hated it, but then I don't like talk shows anyway, so I'm biased from Square One. Anyway, yes, he had a wife. A former model—friend of Beryl Weston's—and they'd only been married about six months."

"But from what she said, the honeymoon was well and truly over. Big yelling matches once or twice a week, she said. Of course, the cops think she did it, and I think they'd arrest her tight now if they could figure out how she could have shot him and then gotten out, leaving the front door on the deadbolt and the hurricane shutters closed in back."

"Who does *she* think shot him?"

"Hasn't the first inkling," I said. "She says a lot of people disliked him, and nobody liked him very much, even her. She. Whatever. I don't think this is going to be easy."

"So where are you going to start looking?"

"Oh, down at the radio station, I guess. Then maybe I'll see somewhere to go from there. And I guess I'll have Lolita—that's the widow—give me the guest list from the party they threw over there. Why? Can you think of another way to start on it?"

"Nope. Sounds okay to me." He handed me his plate and glass, and I carried them below. "I don't even remember which station he was on," he said, following me down. "Wasn't WSHE, is all I know. Their only talk show host is a hostess—and a good thing, too, since the show's called *SHE Wants to Know*."

"I checked on that. It's the station that bills itself as The Information Capital of South Florida in the afternoons, but it's got a split personality; in the mornings and at night, they play—or at least purport to play—rock music. But even their wakeup show—it's called 'Don't You Just Lovatt?', and starred you-know-who—was too talky for me. I like to wake up to *music*."

I handed him a bucket. "If you really wanted to be helpful, you could take that up on the dock, fill it at the tap, and bring it back."

We kicked the Lovatt case around later on, over beer, but lack of information made it impossible to do anything but speculate, so we gravitated to other subjects.

I took a holiday on Tuesday, since it was the Fourth of July. Beyond the fact that Glenn and I sat in my cockpit and watched the fireworks till midnight, at which time we honked a boat horn and then went below and generated some private fireworks of our own, the day was uneventful.

The next day was Wednesday, and an exercise day for me. I carried my weights and the PVC pipe I use for a chin-up bar out onto the dock, heading for the disused shuffleboard court where I do my workout, and stopped short.

Somebody's dinghy was lying on the court, *patas arriba*, taking up the space I wanted to occupy. It wasn't a rubber dinghy, either. I could have moved one of those fairly easily, all by myself. No, the damned thing was fiberglass, about eight feet long, and covered with sharp, smelly barnacles, to boot.

I had almost exhausted my vocabulary of epithets, which is extensive, when someone behind me said, "What's the problem, then?" I almost sprained my neck turning to look at him.

"I'm sorry; I hope I didn't wake you up or anything," I said. "It's just that this damned dinghy is taking up the space where I usually do my workout.

"Oh! It's not yours, is it? If so, forget I called it a damned dinghy. This *dinghy*—"

"Not mine," said Peter. I had been wrong about him; he wasn't a deaf mute, or any other kind of mute. He could talk perfectly well. There was something about his accent, though....

"I could help you shift it, if you like," he said politely. "I think it belongs to the chap called George. I saw him and the other bloke—Irv, is it?—manhandle it over here yesterday afternoon. Shall we shift it?"

We shifted it. All the time we were moving it, and afterwards while I was doing headrolls and toe-touches, I pondered over his accent. It sounded like some sort of British Colonial—almost like

Australian, but not quite. Not even South Australian, which is very English-sounding. And not New Zealandish, either, nor yet Canadian.

I puzzled over his accent periodically for the whole hour and a quarter, until I finished exercising and took the chin-up bar down from the mango tree.

Peter appeared again miraculously. After he helped me heft the dinghy back onto the shuffleboard court, I thanked him kindly and went aboard *Blue Jasmine* to eat my breakfast, still trying to place that accent. I was still mulling it over while I girded up my loins in my best denim miniskirt, hopped on my bike, and made for the radio station.

Once in the parking lot, I tethered my bike to a sign that said VISITORS PARKING and went inside.

As is usual with public buildings in south Florida, the place was air-conditioned to the degree that puts any normal human being in danger of freezing off important parts of his/her anatomy. I gritted my chattering teeth and went up to the receptionist's desk.

"I'm a private investigator." I showed her the photostat of my license. "I'm working on Win Lovatt's murder. On behalf of his wife."

The receptionist, an elfin little girl with a black crewcut and silver stick-on fingernails, looked at me slantwise out of black-fringed blue eyes.

"Good think you said that," she said, "about representing Lolly, I mean. Otherwise, I would've just touted you off some way. In my book, the person that disposed of Win Lovatt did a public service, and ought to get one of those medals that says, 'Hero, First Class' on it. I s'pose the idiot cops suspect Lolly—is that it?"

"That's it," I said. "And unless I can find out who really did it, they're going to make her life a living hell."

"Hoo boy!" she said. "Have you got *your* work cut out for you! Do you have any *idea* how many hate phone calls Lovatt got per day? Not to mention the letters!"

"That bad, huh? What happened to them? The letters, I mean?"

“Jolly old Win tore ‘em up as soon as he got ‘em, for a while, there. Then there got to be so many he tried to rope *me* in on the disposal project, but I wasn’t buying. I don’t know what he did after that. Burned ‘em? Tossed ‘em in the trash? He sure didn’t ever answer ‘em, is all I know.”

“Too bad,” I said. “What about the phone calls? Those were while the talk show was in progress, I guess. That would’ve been taped, wouldn’t it?”

“Taped and edited,” she said. “Oh, just bleeping out the really naughty words, so it didn’t take long. Then they were put on the air, a minute or less afterwards. That meant a little delay in the program, but not enough for most people to notice, and the people who called in liked it, because then they could hear themselves on the radio. Why?”

“Would you still have the tapes?” I said hopefully.

“No. Well, I mean *I* wouldn’t, because I never had ‘em. The engineer—Bob McMasters—took care of all that, and he’d have all the tapes, too.”

“Could I talk to him, do you think?”

“Not without you talk to Jules Farthingale first,” she said. “He’s the program director. He’d have to give his okay for you to talk to *any* of the staff. Well, except me.”

“Well, okay,” I said. “Can I talk to him? The program director?”

She grinned impishly and said in a switchboard operator’s cooing accents, “Just a *moment* pullease, and I will see if he is *available*.” She punched the intercom button and an extension number on her phone.

“Mister Farthingale,” she cooed, “I have a lady to see you. Are you available?” Then, in a more normal tone, “No shit, Jules. It’s a lady P.I., and she’s looking into Win’s murder... Okay.” She looked up at me. “You’re to go right in. It’s the second door on the left.”

I went down the hall, past what was evidently a tape and compact-disc library, and entered the indicated office. Jules Farthingale didn’t get up as I approached the desk, but he did

extend a hand for me to shake.

It was a large hand, at the end of a very long arm, and the part of him that was visible above the desk indicated that he was well over six feet tall. In fact, he looked like a retired basketball player. He had close-cropped, graying, dark hair and the face of an amiable horse.

He grinned at me and said, "It's great to have a receptionist. Gives me time to get my feet off the desk. What can I do for you?"

I gave him the same spiel I'd given the receptionist, or rather, I started to. He stopped me about midway through it.

"Ordinarily, I'd turn you down, Ms Ritchey," he said. "I'd say I had great faith in the forces of law and order, and all that shit. But the police haven't so much as stuck their noses through the door here at the station—we haven't seen Cop One since Win was killed.

"And I don't think the murderer is likely to be found by winnowing through Win's private life because, strictly speaking, Win didn't *have* any private life. Or, well, unless you assume Lolly killed him. And I don't. So where do you want to start?"

"Well, the first thing I'd like to do is hear the tapes of his last three talk shows," I said. "Think I could do that?"

"Sure," he said. "I'll get it laid on for you. I really do want to see that bozo caught," he said. "Personally, I thought Win was a real bastard, but professionally, I'm going to have a hell of a time replacing him.

"He was a really marvelous talk-show host; had that real gritty, abrasive personality, and the man had an opinion—and not just an ordinary little opinion, but a real strong, *hidebound* opinion—on absolutely every issue.

"Why, I bet he even had an opinion about extraterrestrial diplomacy—or he would've, in ten seconds, if you'd mentioned the subject to him. You've no *idea* how invaluable a person like that is as a talk-show host."

"Funny," I said, "I would've thought a talk-show host should be impartial, and get other people to give *their* opinions. But then," I added, "what do *I* know?"

“That’s all very well, from an altruistic point of view,” he said, “but what you *really* want is somebody who makes half the listeners mad as hell, and the other half think, ‘Man, there’s a guy with the courage of his convictions!’”

“And *that’s* all very well,” I retorted, “but to me it looks as if you stand to lose a lot of talk-show hosts that way. If you make *some* people mad enough, they tend to get physical about it. Have you had any applicants for the job?”

He laughed. “You’re not going to believe this, but—yes, we’ve had two applications already. Unfortunately, neither of ‘em will do at all. Too mild-mannered. What we need is another bastard like Win, or a tremendously bitchy woman.”

“Well, good luck. Anyway, I’d like to hear those tapes,” I said, “and talk to some of the staff, if that’s okay.”

He said it was okay as long as I didn’t disrupt any of the programming, and of course I promised. He led me down the hall to a room containing a number of machines—Coke, coffee/soup, and snack—a microwave for heating lunches; and a number of little tables and chairs dotted around.

Several of the station personnel were sitting at the tables over their coffee breaks or late breakfasts. Farthingale guided me to a table in the corner at which sat, or rather sprawled, an exceedingly hairy person.

His dark-blond hair was fairly long, very curly, and extremely untidy. As far as facial hair was concerned, it was hard to tell where beard and mustache left off and eyebrows began.

“Bob,” Jules Farthingale said, “this is a lady detective, so watch your step or she’ll find out what you keep buried under all those piles of CDs in the studio.”

Bob emitted a rumbley chuckle. “I don’t know why she’d be interested in a cache of ancient green hamburgers and moldy fries,” he said, “but if so, she’s welcome to ‘em,. Place could use a good cleanout.”

He stood and extended a hairy paw for me to shake. “I’m Bob McMasters. Pleased to meet you.”

I shook the paw. "I'm Gin Ritchey," I said, "and no takers, Bob. I don't do windows, either."

"Ms Ritchey would like to hear the tapes of the last three broadcasts of *Face the Truth*, " said Farthingale. "Think you can find 'em for her?"

"Oh, we'll manage something," said Bob.

He turned to me. "Care to join me in a cup of coffee before we start? I'm not on duty till eleven, but I always come early to get some food. My cupboard's pretty bare."

"Yeah, of everything but beer," said Jules. "We know all about that." He waved a hand to us and went off to one of the snack machines.

Chapter Four

The Shaggy Engineer

“Well, how about it?” said Bob. “Coffee?”

I accepted with thanks, and he went and brought back two Styrofoam cups from the machine. I wanted to talk to him anyway, and I find that over coffee is one of the better ways to interview people.

When he sat down, I said, “I guess you know what I’m here for.”

“Old Win?” I nodded. “I wasn’t exactly one of his friends,” he said, “but I think I disliked him less than most. He never did anything to me but try to use me as a straight man a couple times when I was working the early show with him.

“But I’ve been in this business a long time—longer than he had, for sure—and I just kept my mouth shut. After about the second time he tried it, he decided to find somebody else to bounce his jokes off of.”

“The receptionist—” I began.

“Oh, Susie?” he said. “She had a real down on Win. I never did find out the rights of it, but it was obvious he really got her nanny some way, right from the start. Wouldn’t she talk to you?”

“Well, she was a little reluctant at first, but she loosened right up when I mentioned I was working for Mrs. Lovatt. Do you know her?”

“Oh, yeah, we all know Lolly. Wasn’t long after they got married that she badgered Win into letting her throw a party for the staff. Said she wanted to get to know us all. Yeah, Lolly’s okay. I

don't know how Win ever managed to get hold of a girl like that. Far as I know, he never went anywhere."

He took a swallow of his coffee. "Wait a minute," he said. "The cops giving Lolly a hard time?"

"You might call it that," I said. "She and Win had a quarrel the night before he was killed, and she ran home to Mama. The cops think she disposed of Win first."

"C'mon," he said. "Lolly's a nice girl. Sure, she's got a temper to go with that red hair of hers, but she's all talk and no action. It's sort of a safety valve, I think. She doesn't simmer in silence—she goes off POW!"

He broke off. "That reminds me. Win was shot, wasn't he?"

"That's what they tell me. Why?"

"Where's Lolly supposed to have gotten the gun?"

"Don't know. The cops don't tell me things, usually. Anyway, I haven't asked yet. All I know is they told her—Lolly—that they didn't find any gun in the house."

"Old Win wouldn't have had a gun on the place," he stated firmly. "He was a real nut on gun control. Had a whole show about it a while back, and really baited the NRA people that called him."

"Nope, if Lolly'd killed him—and I still say she wouldn't've—she'd have had to do it some other way. Stab him with a steak knife. Poison his spaghetti sauce. But she couldn't've shot him."

"Yeah...." I said thoughtfully. "Hadn't thought of that aspect of it. Listen, you want to start me off on those tapes now?" I could see he was looking at his watch.

"If you've got to go on at eleven, you could just give me the tapes and point me at the tape deck. If it's not too complicated to run."

He walked with me to the room I'd seen earlier and pegged as a tape/CD library. "I'll just get 'em out," he said. "They're over here in this file cabinet." He opened a drawer and thumbed through a number of tape reels, then lifted out three and brought them over to the table where I was sitting.

"These are the last three," he said. "You can listen to more if you want to, but there's three solid hours of *Face the Truth* there,

and if you can stand more'n that, you're better'n I am."

"Wow," I said dismally. "Listen, if I get up to here with these things before I'm done, can I come back tomorrow?"

"Sure," he said. "Be my guest." He showed me how to run the reel-to-reel tape machine, then went off to work. I laid out my notebook and pen, and put on the first tape.

Two hours later I was worn to a nubbin. I had listened to two of the tapes. The subject of one had been gun control, and the other concentrated on prayer in the schools. Win Lovatt had been strongly for the first, and as strongly against the second. He had been what I considered extremely abusive whenever anyone deviated the least bit from his point of view.

The calls he got on the gun-control show had varied from reasoned arguments by organizations—the anti-firearm group and the NRA—through angry protests at Lovatt's biased handling of the issue, to downright hate calls, some of them threatening, from angry individuals.

The program about prayer in the schools was even more explosive. True, there were reasoned arguments from church people, atheists, and strict constitutionalists, but those were in the minority.

By far the majority of the calls were from people who disagreed violently with Lovatt on the issue, and some of those people sounded downright hysterical. A few of them called him a minion of Satan, and one or two screamed "Antichrist!" at him. I wondered why they listened to his program, if they hated him so.

I got a refresher course in the reasons I *didn't* listen to his show, or any other like it. The main one is, I don't *like* getting all roiled up inside, and that's the *raison d'être* of shows like that, as far as I'm concerned—to roil people up. They don't call it sensationalism for nothing; what I figure is, there are sensations I like and sensations I don't like. Indignation is *not* one of the sensations I like.

By the time I finished the second tape, I decided I'd had it for the day. As it was, I was going to have to stop by Walgreen's for a packet of Peptid Complete and a bottle of aspirin to go. I stacked

the two tapes I'd heard on one side of the table and put the one I hadn't listened to on the other.

I found a cube of those little yellow sticky notes on one corner of the table, and wrote "HEARD THESE—G.R.." on one of them. This I peeled off the pad and stuck in the middle of the topmost of the two reels I'd heard. I wrote "COULDN'T HACK THIS—BACK TOMORROW." on another one, peeled it off, and stuck it to the tape I hadn't listened to. Then I headed for the nearest drugstore.

I got no farther than the station's parking lot. There was a shiny black pickup truck—one of those heavy-duty, four-wheel-drive jobs—parked next to the sign I'd tethered my bike to.

A beautiful, stocky, brown-and-black Rottweiler —come to think of it, I'm not sure they come in any other color combination—was pacing back and forth in the back of the truck. He was wearing a red bandana around his neck, and he looked friendly.

On the back bumper of the truck, next to the trailer hitch, there was a red sticker which said in white letters, MY KEYS ARE ON THE SEAT—NEXT TO MY ROTTWEILER.

I approached the truck, talking to the dog. "Hello, buddy," I said, holding out my hand for him to smell. "The boss leave you out here all alone?"

He sniffed politely at the hand and allowed me to scratch his raspy, short-furred back. We were having a fine time when a baritone voice behind me drawled, "Well, Rowdy, so you've made another conquest."

I looked around, startled. "Oh! I didn't hear you come up!" I said. "Is that his name? Rowdy?"

Rowdy pricked up his ears.

The speaker was a tall, well-built young man in tight jeans and an open-necked polo shirt. He had medium-length brown hair and a deep tan, and had OUTDOORS written all over him. I hadn't heard his approach because of the jogging shoes he wore and the lightness of his step.

"Yeah," he said. "It fit better when he was a pup, but I think it still suits him. You're a real rowdy character, aren't you, boy?"

Rowdy emitted a small “Wuff.”

The young man extended a hand to me and shook mine firmly. “I’m Russell Webster,” he said.

“Gin Ritchey,” I introduced myself. “Do you work here?”

“Well, I guess you could call it work,” he said. “Anyhow, it pays me enough so I can avoid any real serious labor. And the hours are just fine. I get time off in the middle of the day, so I can swim or go fishin’ or—”

“Sounds like you must be one of the jocks,” I said. “Right?”

“Right. I used to be only about half a jock—kind of a sorcerer’s apprentice. But now I’ve got my own show. Twice a day, even.”

“Hey, I thought I recognized your name,” I said. “Didn’t you use to be on the wakeup show with Lovatt?”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Don’t know if I’ll ever live that down or not. Maybe the new format’ll help. But all those stupid skits about the President, and the fake advertising jingles about Farquhar’s Baked Beans—that made it a lot more like work than I really like.”

“Work being defined as doing something you don’t like, for money? So why didn’t you quit?”

“Oh, I kept hopin’,” he said. “Hopin’ maybe some day old Lovatt’d get the idea that a deejay is supposed to play *music*. I sure told him that often enough. He just laughed at me, of course. And called me a ‘good ol’ boy.’”

“That was when he was pleased with me. Other times, I was a redneck, and he asked me where was my baseball cap. I told him it was in my pickup truck, and that shut him up—for a while.”

Somehow I got the impression that Russell Webster was not one of Win Lovatt’s long-lost fans. I said so.

“Oh, you worked that out, did you?” he said. “No, I thought he was—excuse my language—a fart. And an ignorant fart, at that. He didn’t even *like* music. He freely admitted it. I used to ask him why he became a jock, then, and he always said it beat workin’. Well, I couldn’t argue with that. But you,” he said. “You going to work here, are you?”

“No,” I said. “Not exactly. I’m a private detective. No shit,” I

said, seeing him start to grin. "Got a license and everything. You want to see it?"

"No, I believe you. I suppose you're trying to find the public-spirited citizen that settled Lovatt's hash—that right?"

"Right," I said. "The cops don't seem to be making much of a job of it, and Mrs. Lovatt hired me."

"What, to get 'em off her back? Are they hasslin' Lolly?" His easygoing expression had firmed up; now he looked stern.

"Yup," I said. "Well, they always suspect husbands or wives—spouses—first. This time they haven't found anyone else to suspect."

"You *got* to be kiddin'," he said. "There's all of Broward County out there. Millions of people that hated Win Lovatt. Hell, there's *me*. You heard what I said about him. How do you know *I* didn't kill him, so I could do the wakeup show the way I wanted to?"

"Are you going to? Get to do it the way you want to, I mean?"

"Yeah," he said, a trifle smugly. "That's what I'm doin' here in the middle of the day. I just spent an hour fast-talkin' Jules into the idea that people want to wake up to music. And a *variety* of music—not just that heavy metal and rap stuff Win played whenever he played anything. He finally said, 'Go to it!' and I mean to. I spent another hour choosin' tapes and discs for tomorrow's show, so I'm all set."

"Great!" I said. "You may have gained a fan right off the top. You *have* gained one, if you'll do one thing for me."

"Oh? What's that?" he said warily.

"Just tell the names of the recording artists—*after* the number's over. I know *I* don't always recognize them, even when it's somebody pretty recognizable like Aerosmith or Joan Jett—or even Tom Petty, and I listen a lot. Deal?"

"Deal," he said, and we shook on it. "Hey, I've gotta go," he said. "I've got a remote tonight at the Pickle Patch, and I think I better go get some sleep."

He got into the truck, and I unhooked my bike from the sign. I'd taken in just about all the information I could handle for one day. It was time to think it over.

Chapter Five.

The Impetuous Lover

I discarded the idea of Pepsid Complete and aspirin. Rowdy and his master had cured me of my reaction to the tapes, anyway. I would have lunch, instead. I headed for the Seventeenth-Street Burger King, a chicken sandwich, and a carton of milk.

Later on I sat in the glass-roofed solarium over a cup of coffee and opened my notebook to my notes on the program tapes. Then I changed my mind and leafed through till I found a clean sheet. I would start from scratch and write down what I knew about Win Lovatt and his mode of living. And dying. I'd start with the dying part.

1) June 24: Win Lovatt's body is found. Q: by whom? Why were they at his house? CHECK THIS
Has been shot. Q: what sort of gun? Pistol? Rifle?
Shotgun? And shot WHERE? FIND OUT

2.) House is closed up tight: front door is on the deadbolt, and back entrance is closed off by steel hurricane shutters. Q: what about other windows? Could anyone have gotten through them? Surely the cops checked this out, but don't take anything for granted, Gin. YOU check it out.

3.) Wife—Lolita, or Lolly, as everyone seems to call her—is missing. SHE says she went to her mother's and didn't come back until Monday, July 3. Better check that out, too, just to be sure.

I looked over what I'd written. As usual, I had found that there were more things I didn't know than things I did. Depressing. Okay, so make a list of things to find out. Then it will have at least the *appearance* of being finite, whether it is or not. Lessee:

- 1.) Who found Lovatt's body?
- 2.) In what circumstances?
- 3.) What sort of gun was the murder weapon?
- 4.) Where—in what part of his body—had he been shot?
- 5.) Look at house. What about side windows? Could somebody get out that way?
- 6.) Talk to Lolly's mother. Oh, hell. Who IS Lolly's mother? Talk to Lolly again.

Well, that settled what to do for the rest of the afternoon. I looked at my watch. It was two-thirty already. By the time I got home it would be after three, even if I rode like the wind. I picked up my tray, shot the debris into the garbage can, piled the tray on the stack, and left.

Sure enough, it was three-fifteen, give or take thirty seconds, when I got back to my boat. I took a few minutes to change into shorts and tank top, and then got out the dinghy.

That sounds simple enough, doesn't it? "I got out the dinghy." What really happened was this: I went and looked at my dinghy, which I keep tied up at the little landing just south of the dock where my boat lives. It was, of course, dead low tide. It always is when I want to use the dinghy, and I don't *like* jumping into it from six feet overhead. It tends to make sinking motions if you do that, and I prefer to take my swims intentionally, thank you.

So I uncled the lines from the dock and led the dinghy around to the port side of *Blue Jasmine*, tied her to the bow rail, and got in. The next few minutes were spent taking things out of the dinghy and piling them on the side deck of the boat: the landing net, the bailer, the big plastic bucket that I found floating down the canal one day, the plastic flowerpot ditto, the two teak boards Sally and

Brian had had left over from the new toe rail they put on their boat, and the Clorox bottle I'm going to cut up for a bailer when the current one gives out.

Then I settled myself on the center seat, popped the oarlocks into their sockets, unshipped the oars, and started off. That's what I meant when I said, "I got out the dinghy."

It took me less time to row over to Lolly's place than it did to get out the dinghy. I tied up to the iron ladder that depended from her dock, then tested it to see if it would take my weight. Some of those ladders are only held together by the rust. This one was firm, so I climbed it.

I'd noticed from across the way that the shutters were open, so there was a good chance Lolly was at home. I rapped on the back door.

While I waited for an answer, I noticed that I could hear music inside, with a voice-over saying things like "Up, down; up, down;" and "One, two, three, four." I thought I'd better knock a little harder, and had just raised my hand to do so when the door opened.

Lolita was in exercise clothes and, despite the air-conditioning, there was a sheen of sweat on her classical face. "Who—oh, hi, Ms Ritchey," she said. "How did *you* get here?"

"Well, in the first place, I'm Gin, not Ms Ritchey. Okay? And in the second place, I dinghied."

"Dinghied? What's—oh. You came over in a rowboat? Somehow I never thought of anyone doing that. Come on in. I'll shut off my tape—I'm really grateful for just about any excuse to do that, short of fires and explosions."

She went to the VCR and pushed the "off" button. The figure on the screen dwindled to a bright dot and disappeared, and the music stopped.

"You seem to be hard at it," I said. "How's the figure-reclamation project going?"

"Oh, real well," she said, plopping down on the couch. "I got disgustingly lazy, being an old married woman like that. It won't take long, now that I've gotten started."

"You know," she confessed, "in a way, Win's death was a relief. Either I wasn't cut out for this marriage business, or Win wasn't who I should have married, or something. You won't tell anybody I said that, will you?" she begged, a crease of worry appearing between her perfect brows. "They might not understand."

"They just might not," I agreed. "In fact, you'd better not even *think* of saying it again till all this is over."

"I won't," she promised. "But what can I do for you?"

"Two things," I said, sitting down in a big rattan chair facing the couch. "First, I've got a bunch of questions to ask you. I warned you I would when I thought of 'em. Ready?"

"Ready."

"What I want you to do first is tell me how you happened to marry Win Lovatt—where you met him, and all that stuff. Okay?"

"I've been thinking about that a lot lately," she said. "It seems like practically no time at all since I was Lolita—just another model, okay, but I had hopes. You know the kind of thing; like, someday I'd be on the cover of *Vogue* or *Vanity Fair* or something. I really didn't mean to get married for—oh, years and years. Nothing against men—I like 'em—but just, oh, I didn't want to get tied down yet."

"Anyway, there was this new restaurant that opened—must be almost a year ago, now—*La Soufflerie*, do you know it?"

"I've heard of it," I said. "It sounded like one of those places where lunch for one costs thirty-five dollars, and that's if you don't drink anything, so I just put it out of my mind. Anyway, it opened, and—"

"You're right about the prices. I could never afford to eat there, either. Anyway, they serve mostly soufflés and quiches and salads, and it's all very posh. Well, they had this big grand opening, and part of it was a lunchtime fashion show. I was in it, and so was Beryl, and a friend of hers named Boo—Barbara Moran, too. She was doing negligees and nighties. Do you know her?"

I grinned. "Yeah, I know Boobs. She's a good friend of mine. She always insists she doesn't mind the nickname, because she came by it honestly, so you don't have to be embarrassed about using' it. I

don't think anybody who ever heard it and saw her could put it out of his mind, do you?"

"God, no!" she said. "It's really impressive, that bosom. Anyway. Win was moonlighting—doing the commentary. He was restraining himself from being too terribly cutesy about it, but you could see it *was* a strain. I guess you never saw Win, did you?"

"No, I never even saw a picture of him. What did he look like?"

"Oh, he was an attractive bastard!! Tall, and thin; had dark hair and eyes, and hollow cheeks, and kind of hollow eyes, too—he could've played Hamlet, and no questions asked. Intense. That's it. He looked intense as all hell.

"Well, he saw me, and I guess I made some kind of an impression on him. He said afterward that I struck him all of a heap, whatever that means. Anyway, when I left the place he just handed the mike to a waiter and followed me. Didn't even wait to get paid, he said. It was, well, kind of romantic, you know?"

I could see that. "Gave you the impression he'd follow you to hell and back, barefoot, over broken glass?" I said.

"Somethin' like that. And he kept up the pressure; he would've taken me out every night, if I'd let him. Spent money like it was goin' out of style; flowers, the whole bit."

"Red roses?" I said, eying her coppery hair.

"Oh, no. Yellow flowers, always. Roses, chrysanthemums—once it was the *cutest* little yellow-and-brown orchids. He said they were called Spanish dancers, and they did look a lot like Spanish ladies in those ruffled dresses like they used to wear. He said yellow looked good with my hair, and he was right. Well, he kept after me to marry him—"

"What we used to call rushing you right off your feet, huh?"

"That's what Mom called it, too," she said. "I told her about him, and she said, take time to think about it, Lolly; you've got your whole life before you. She's always sayin' things like that, and the hell of it is, she's always right.

"Well, I didn't take enough time. I can see that now. Anyway, we were married by a Notary about six months ago. Mom stood up

with us, and one of the guys from the station—Bob McMasters, one of the engineers, it was. I guess he was the closest thing Win had to a friend, but I didn't know that, then. And—and, that's it." She waved a hand. "I don't know if it helps or not."

"Listen, Lolly," I said. "I don't want you to be offended or anything, but I'm not going to feel like I'm doing a real job of investigating if I don't talk to your—"

"Mom about my alibi, such as it is? Yeah, I was sort of expecting that. Listen, I'm going up to see her again Saturday, just for the afternoon. D'you want to come along? Will that be soon enough?"

"Sure. I think I've got enough to keep me occupied between now and then. Which reminds me," I said, standing up, "what I really came for was to look at the—well, the lie of the land, so to speak."

"You mean the scene of the crime," she corrected me. "That's okay. I'm not afraid of ghosts or dead things. I have two older brothers, and if I ever had been scared of stuff like that, I'd either be cured by now, or a blithering idiot in a strait jacket. What do you want to see first?"

She showed me where the body had been found. The house, except for the bedrooms and baths, was of open construction; essentially one big room, divided into areas by cupboards and counters, rather than walls. Win had, she told me, been found in the kitchen, between the breakfast table and the refrigerator.

There had been a chair pulled out from the table, she said, and he had been lying beside it, as if he'd been sitting in it when he was shot, and had fallen off it onto the floor.

"The cops told me all about that, with all the gory details," she said. "That was when they were trying' to get me to confess. They said it all looked real domestic to them, him being in the kitchen in his bathrobe."

I didn't think it necessarily followed, and said so. "It's just a step from the living room to the kitchen," I said. "I think they were making a big song and dance about nothing. Especially if he was the sort of guy

that would answer the door in his bathrobe. Was he?"

"He sure was," she said. "I don't know how many times I got on him about that. It embarrasses people, I told him. He just said that was a load of shit, and if they were that easily embarrassed, they deserved everything they got."

"What I really want to look at, though, is the windows," I said. "Could we do that?"

She led me into the master bedroom, and we peered earnestly at the window. It consisted of glass louvers that opened with a crank. It would've been dead easy to get out that way. You'd only have to take the screen off, bend the metal strips that held the louvers in their frame, take two or three of them out, climb out the window, replace the screen, replace the panes, bend up the strips again, and there you'd be.

I'd done it myself any number of times when I'd locked myself out of one or other of the houses we'd lived in. The metal bends quite easily if you've got something—a key, say—to pry with. There was only one catch. Outside the window were sturdy-looking wrought-iron bars, painted white, about six inches apart.

"Are there bars like that on all the windows?" I said. Lolly nodded vigorously.

"Yup. That was the first thing the real estate agent showed us when we looked at the house. Terrific security, she said. I thought it was funny; I mean, it's not as if we were Oprah or Bill Gates or somebody. The island is patrolled at night by two rent-a-cops, not to mention the man in the little gatehouse—the agent told us about them, too.

"But Win liked the idea. I razzed him about it; asked him if he thought we maybe should put a couple vats of boiling oil on the roof, just in case. He didn't think it was the least bit funny, and I guess it wasn't, really, what with all the hate calls and letters he got."

"Well, it sure didn't keep the murderer out—or in," I said. "What about the front of the house?"

"Come and look, if you want," she said. "There's the picture window in front, but it was two thicknesses of toughened glass with

a burglar-alarm strip in it. It's just ordinary plate glass now, since I got it replaced. And all the other small windows have bars, just like in the bedrooms. Even the bathroom windows have bars, and they're so small you couldn't get in or out that way, anyway."

"How are those bars fastened on?" I said hopefully.

"No luck there," she said. "They're bolted into the bricks with great big bolts. You can't shake or wiggle 'em at all. The agent showed us that, too."

Chapter Six.

The Blonde Policewoman

I thought about it after I had left and dinghied back home. I could think of any number of ways the murderer could have gotten in, all of them involving Win Lovatt's cooperation. Ringing the front doorbell would have done it, probably, particularly if the ringer was someone Lovatt knew. But how in the ruddy red *hell* could he or she have gotten out again after shooting him?

I was sitting at the table in the cabin with my head in my hands, trying to think of a way, when the phone rang. It was Glenn, of course; he wanted to know if I would look favorably upon a pepperoni pizza. I told him I would guarantee to look upon one with great favor if I only had one to look upon. He said he would see that I had one in the very near future, and hung up.

We varied the routine by sitting at the concrete table on the dock to consume the pizza. I told him about the problem with the windows, and he was sympathetic, but hardly helpful. "You know what you've got there, don't you?" he said. "You've got a classic locked-room problem. Didn't you ever read one of those books by what's-his-name? About the fat old geezer with the bald head and the big cigar?"

"Certainly," I said with dignity. "I cut my eyeteeth on Sir Henry Merrivale books.

"But, you know," I confessed, "I never *could* solve one of those locked-room things when John Dickson Carr challenged the reader. I *always* had to read his solution.

"It was always very ingenious; I remember once it was a bullet

hole in a window, and the killer ran a string over a thumbtack/pulley outside and through the bullet hole, and tied the string to the window catch so he could lock the window from outside.

“And one of the murderers sealed up a room with brown-paper tape, too—all the doors and windows. He saved the door for last, of course, and used a vacuum-cleaner to seal it from outside.

“Well, that’s all very well,” I sighed. “But there’s nothing like that here. No holes in the windows, no gimmicks like sealing it up with tape. Just a front door locked with a deadbolt—and you *can’t* do that from outside—six smallish windows with bars on ‘em; a big, tough-glass picture window with a burglar alarm strip in it; and five steel hurricane shutters closed over the glass walls in back.”

“Did Mrs. Lovatt show you how they worked, too?” he said.

She had showed me just before I left. “There’s this row of switches,” I said, “on the kitchen wall—one switch for each window or door, and a master switch that does all of them at once. One of the shutters covers the back door, did I tell you that?”

“But the switches are right in the middle of the wall, between the second and third windows, and not near the door at all, so you couldn’t do anything like closing all but one shutter, going outside through the back door, and then reaching in to flip the switch and slamming the door quick. It’s all very frustrating.”

“Are they three-position switches?” he said. “That’s what I’d have, if I were going to make a system like that. Up for ‘open’, down for ‘close’, and middle for ‘stop’.”

“That’s it,” I said. “Just like that. But it doesn’t get us anywhere, does it? I still don’t see any way you could get out through that door and then close the shutter, do you?”

He had to admit he couldn’t. I voted that we talk about something else for the rest of the evening. I’d had about all I could take of locked-room—or rather, locked-*house*—problems for one day.

The next morning—Thursday—I was at the radio station before ten o’clock, and went straight to the studio where I’d listened to tapes the day before. Bob McMasters had laid out the third tape of

Face the Truth for me on the console of the tape player and, heaving a sigh, I readied notebook and pen and started the tape.

This session was about a couple whose son had died of leukemia while refusing treatment on religious grounds. They belonged to a sect that believed in divine healing, and the boy had been fifteen years old. The parents had been tried—and convicted—on a charge of criminal negligence. Lovatt, predictably, took the position that the parents richly deserved anything they got. His listeners, or at least those who took the trouble to telephone, disagreed with him.

Some of them, as before, presented reasoned arguments. These were mainly the libertarians, who held that, one: the parents—and the son—had a constitutional right to freedom of religion; and two: that *anyone* had a right to refuse medical treatment for any reason; that the doctors' duty went just as far as making sure that everybody concerned knew the probable consequences of his actions, and no further.

The others who called were much more heated. There were more cries of "Antichrist!" and other religious epithets were hurled at Lovatt with a great deal of venom. When I emerged from the tape an hour later I was limp as a rag and sweating, despite the killer air conditioning of the studio. But I had the names of the people who had screamed epithets at Win Lovatt.

I took them home with me and, over a late lunch, compared the names of the epithet-screamers on this program with those of the people on the other two shows who had pelted Lovatt with terms of opprobrium.

Whatever you said about Win Lovatt, you had to admit that he had been very firm about getting the name of each caller—no name, no conversation. I tore the three sheets out of my notebook and laid them on the table, side by side; then I took the first name on the first list and scanned through the other two lists, mentally sorting for that name.

A computer could undoubtedly have done it in less time, and more efficiently. A couple of times I forgot what I was looking for,

and had to go back and start over. When I finished, though, I had a list of seven names; three of them were on two of the lists, and four were on all three. I thought that these latter might be some of the unfans Lolly had talked about.

The next step was to look them up in the phone book. The good news was that they all had phones of their own, and were listed in the phone book; but I guessed it figured that they would have. Making daily calls to a talk show from a pay phone or even a cell phone could get rather expensive.

The bad news was that they were all over the county: one way south in Dania, two way to hell and gone out west in Davie, one pretty far south on Southwest Ninth avenue, one on Atlantic Boulevard, over near the beach, and two way up north in Wilton Manors. It would take some doing to interview them all in any finite length of time, but I was determined to do it. Just for a minute there, I was tempted to use the phone, but I ditched that notion. I wanted to *see* them when I interviewed them. I had to talk to them face to face, and that was flat.

For a while I pored over the names and addresses, trying to work out some way that I could ride all over town on my bike in one day and do all the interviews. I had to give it up. I would talk to Glenn tonight, I decided, and ask if I could borrow one of his trucks for the day. Then I turned to the page in my notebook with the questions on it. I would see how many of them I had answered in my visit to Lolita Lovatt the day before.

I was very disappointed. Out of six questions, I had found the answers to one and a half: number five, which was, "Look at house. What about side windows? Could somebody get out that way?" I had answered.

The answer was NO.

Number six had been, "Talk to Lolly's mother. Oh, hell. Who IS Lolly's mother? Talk to Lolly again." Well, at least I'd made *arrangements* to talk to Lolly's mother. But the other four questions remained unanswered. I looked at them.

- 1.) *Who found Lovatt's body?* The police would know this.
- 2.) *In what circumstances?* ditto...ditto...ditto...ditto
- 3.) What sort of gun was the murder weapon? Again, ask a policeman.
- 4.) *Where—in what part of the body—had he been shot?* I would call Debbie Harper, that's what I'd do.

Debbie Harper is a police detective and a friend of Boobs Moran's. They'd met at their aerobics class a couple of years ago, and hit it off really well, I never did figure out why.

Debbie had been of inestimable help to me in a previous murder case.

Not that Debbie got nothing out of it herself, mind you. Before we packaged up the case and she presented it to Lieutenant Offenbach, she had been an extremely unwilling member of the Vice Squad.

Her blonde good looks, the squad's lieutenant thought, typecast her as one of those policewomen who dress up as prostitutes, walk the streets, and arrest the poor saps who try to solicit their services. She said she could see years of this stretching out before her. She was willing to bet she'd still be impersonating a hooker when she was a gray-haired old lady, and she hated every minute of it.

The murderer was convicted, Debbie put in for a transfer to Homicide. Lieutenant Offenbach took one look at her application and approved the transfer. So Debbie was grateful to me, as well she should have been. I figured she owed me one. I called her.

Turned out *she* figured she owed me, too, so that was okay. As a homicide detective, she had the access codes to all current cases. Nothing could be simpler, she said, than bringing Win Lovatt's murder up on the computer.

"Are you in this?" she asked me.

"I'm in this," I said. "I don't think Lovatt's wife killed him. As near as I can make out, half of Broward County was howling for his blood, and your Lennie—oop!—Lieutenant Offenbach—doesn't

seem to care.”

“He’s not *my* Lonnie, thank God,” she said. “I wouldn’t have him on a platter, with mashed potatoes spritzed all around him. What makes him think she did it, though, do you know? I mean, even he has to have *some* kind of a reason.”

“Oh, it’s partly the old suspect-the-spouse syndrome, I think. And then she *did* have a big argument with him the night before he was killed,” I admitted. “But—”

“Yeah, well, okay,” she said. “But if I killed everybody I argued with, the police station would be full of bodies stacked like cordwood. Anything else on her?”

“Not that I know of. And she *does* have an alibi of sorts.” I told her about Lolly’s classic flight home to mother. “And anyway, he—they—can’t figure out how she could have gotten *out* of the house after she killed him. Can’t figure out how *anybody* could have gotten out, for that matter, and neither can I—yet. Could you call it up on the computer for me?” I wheedled. “I’ve got a couple of questions.”

She could, and did. “Okay. Got it. Victim: Elwin Lovatt. That right?”

“Right. Now. Who found his body?”

“Officers Laurel and Hardy, it says here,” she answered without so much as the ghost of a chuckle. I wanted to ask her how the team had gotten together, but shelved it for the time being. Irrelevant.

“How did that happen? Was there a complaint?”

“Yeah. From the program director at the radio station—dude named Farthingale,” she said. “His statement says Lovatt didn’t show up for work at all on Saturday, and he’d telephoned till he was blue in the face, and no answer. Not even the answering machine. Says he drove out there on Saturday night, and the house was all shut up and dark. Looked in the carport, and Lovatt’s car was there—”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “His wife says she took the car to her mother’s in Boca. You say it was there Saturday night?”

“I said *Lovatt’s* car was there. Don’t know if they had two cars or not, but Stan and Ollie—oops, I mean Joe and Fred—say in their

report that it's a big double carport. One of those jazzy awning things. Shall I go on, or what?"

"Sorry," I said. "Yeah. Go on. Farthingale went over Saturday night and the house was dark and Lovatt's car was there."

"Wait. Yeah. He says Lovatt's car was there, but his wife's little Honda Civic was gone, so he figured maybe they'd gone somewhere in it. Says he was fit to be tied, because Lovatt had missed his special Saturday talk show, and they had to do a rerun.

"Hold on!" she said. "Was he *that* Lovatt? Win Lovatt, the Adolf Hitler of the air waves? Somehow I hadn't made the connection. Listen, are you *sure* you want to find out who killed that slimy bastard? I—"

"Why, Deborah Harper, I'm ashamed of you! Here you are, a minion of law and order, talking like that. Let's have a little less anarchy, and a little more 'justice will triumph' from you, my girl. Anyway, I don't see any way to get Offenbach off Lolly's back without finding out who actually did it.

"She says he's been bugging her—or Laurel and Hardy have—every day, ever since she got back from Boca. Now, can we get on with it? Farthingale says he was fit to be tied. So what did he do about it?"

"Um...lessee...Says he went back the next morning, after Lovatt did another no-show. Place was still locked up tighter than a jug. Said he walked around back, and the hurricane shutters were closed. Said there were two newspapers in the front yard, and he thought that looked bad."

"Yeah.. *Two* newspapers, huh? Interesting. Was that when he called in the police?"

"Well, almost," she said. "He said it looked damned fishy to him, and he thought something must have happened to Lovatt. A heart attack, maybe. And he wondered what had happened to the wife, too, he said. So he prowled around, looking in windows where he could. The drapes on the big picture window in front were partly open, he says.

"That was another thing made him think something was wrong.

So he went and looked through the gap, and he could see this foot and leg sticking out from under the kitchen table. There was a shoe on the foot, but no sock, and he couldn't see any pant leg. Just a hairy leg. That's when he called us in."

"So what happened then?"

"Well, they sent Joe and Fred, and—"

"Is that Laurel and Hardy? Sometime you've *got* to tell me how they got to be a team. Go on."

"They tried every way they could think of to get in, and finally they ended up heaving a big rock through the picture window. Their report—Joe and Fred's—says the burglar alarm went off, but Farthingale knew how to turn it off."

"I can see I'm going to have to talk to him again," I said. "I had no idea he was in this so deep. Okay. I'll get the rest of the details from Farthingale. But I've still got a couple other questions. I take it you've got the ballistics report there, too?"

"*Better* be here," she said. "Just a minute till I scroll it up. Mm...here it is. Okay. You want to know what kind of a gun the bullet came from, right?"

"Right."

"Says here there were two bullets; one in the head of the victim and one in the heart. The one in the head was fired at very close range—gun was probably touching, or nearly touching, his head, they say, from the powder marks. The other one was fired from farther away. They say the gun was a twenty-two pistol—prob'ly a Saturday night special. What else do you need to know?"

"You've just answered my other question, so that's all. Listen, thanks a lot, Debbie. You've really been a help. Let me know if I can ever do anything for you."

"Hey, I owed *you*," she said. "Let's just say we're quits, okay?"

"Okay. Anyway, thanks a lot." I hung up and looked at the notes I'd taken. Somebody had gotten into Lovatt's house, shot him twice, and then gotten out again, leaving the place locked up tight. Who? and how?

Oh, well. Maybe I'd find out something by interviewing those

hate-callers from the talk show. And I *would* talk to Farthingale again. Sounded like he could fill me in on a whole lot of things—like how come he knew how to turn off the burglar alarm.

Chapter Seven.

El Furioso With a Pickaxe

Peter helped me to move George's dinghy again the next morning. The barnacles and other little beasties that had been living on its bottom were well and truly dead now, and niffed to high heaven, but we averted our noses and shifted her, anyway.

Peter was certainly a pleasant young man, I thought, and so polite. I still hadn't placed his accent, though. Normally I would just have asked forthrightly, "Where you from?"

But—I don't know—there was something in his manner that put me off it. I decided I would ask Mary, next time I caught her without Peter in tow.

I rushed through my workout, ate a quick breakfast of chicken-flavored Ramen with an egg poached in it, an orange, and a cup of coffee, showered, dressed, and was on my bike heading for Hagen's boatyard by nine-thirty. If I had time that afternoon, I reminded myself, I'd better stop at Winn-Dixie. The grocery supply was getting pretty thin.

I like to go to boatyards. Anyone who likes boats must find them hard to resist, I think. I rode my bike along between the long rows of boats up on blocks, most of which were being worked on by their owners. People were scraping, sanding, caulking, painting, changing sacrificial zincs—all the tasks that must be performed every two or three years if you own a boat and keep her in the water.

Lying around the yard in various attitudes of boneless relaxation were a number of cats. I've never been able to get an exact count of the cats who occupy Hagen's boatyard, for two reasons. One is that

I can never be sure that I haven't counted some of 'em twice—they've got a nasty habit of shifting position when you're right in the middle of your census, and one black-and-white cat looks very much like another black-and-white cat, to me, anyway.

The other is that cats multiply like—well, cats, and that they are also nomadic by nature, so that the population shifts a good deal from one week to the next. I generally decide that I don't really care how many cats live there, after all.

Glenn's big yellow Lab, Bonzo, came bouncing up to greet me. He was carrying a blue rubber ball in his mouth, and he looked at me imploringly and dropped it at my feet. Of course I threw it for him. He went lolloping after it and caught it on the first bounce, then retired into the shade of an out-island ketch to chew on it a while.

I found Glenn in the workshop, talking to his foreman. He glanced up, noticed me, and reached in his pocket. "Here," he said, pulling out a keyring and tossing it my way. "The little pickup be okay?"

"Be *best*," I said, catching it neatly. "I'd feel like a bus driver in the big truck or the van. Thanks, Glenn. I'll bring her back intact."

"You better," he said in a tone of mock menace. "That's the one that's got the Mafia insurance on it. They don't pay damages—they just take out a contract on the wrecker."

I groaned dutifully and went to get the truck. I had already decided to start in Dania and work back north.

The first address proved to be a little house out near the beach. For a house in south Florida, where they regularly bulldoze buildings and start over again when the light bulbs burn out, it was an old house; it might have dated back as far as the forties.

The stucco walls were painted blue, the tiled roof was barn-red, and the trim was lime-green. It looked like something out of a child's picture book, even to the gaudily-painted plaster gnomes who sat on toadstools on the minuscule front lawn, gazing at the plastic flamingoes. Repressing a shudder, I went up the steps and rang the doorbell.

The three-note chimes reverberated through the house, and a

strident female voice yelled, "Just a minute!" I waited just a minute, and sure enough, the door opened.

For a moment there I thought it had opened itself; then I lowered my gaze. She was scarcely five feet tall from the wooden soles of her Dr. Scholl's sandals to the top of her tightly-curved gray hair, but she made up for it in voice power. If ever I heard a voice that would open an oyster at thirty paces, hers was it.

I remembered it from the tape, now, but it was much more impressive when I saw where it originated. She was wiping her hands on her Hawaiian-print apron, leaving floury trails on the pink orchids and black background.

"If you're selling something, I don't want any," she shrilled. "I've already got an encyclopedia and as many magazine subscriptions as I want."

I resisted the urge to cover my ears and said, "No, Mrs. Heinemann, I'm a private investigator, and I'm looking into Win Lovatt's death. If you could—"

She cackled loudly. "So he's dead, is he?" she crowed. "I knew he wasn't on the radio any more, but I didn't hardly dare to hope. What's to investigate? Somebody shoot the blasphemous atheist, did they?"

"Exactly," I said. "If I could—"

"Come in," she said, opening the screen door more widely. It had aluminum arabesques on it, I noticed absently.

"I've got something in the oven, anyway. Come on out to the kitchen."

I followed her through a spotlessly-clean living room crammed with furniture and bric-a-brac of various sorts. There were china figurines of elves on the mantel over the obviously-unused fireplace. I guessed that she would put an electric heater in it when the weather got cold; there was a handy plug set into one of the yellow bricks that lined the hearth.

Plaster religious plaques sprouted from the walls like fungi, ranging from "*Jesus is the Lamb of God*," illuminated with a blue-and-gold lamb, through "*I am the Resurrection and the Life*," with

an anemic-looking Messiah raising his hands in blessing, to a large green question mark with gold Gothic letters across it that proclaimed, "*Jesus Is the Answer.*" It didn't say what the question was.

There was more, but I had neither the time nor the inclination to take it all in. I followed her into the kitchen. The louvered windows were cranked all the way open, and a five-foot-tall electric fan with blue plastic blades oscillated in one corner of the room, but the heat of the oven was still palpable in the little kitchen. I sat down in the chair she pointed out, trying not to sweat.

She opened the oven door and checked on the key lime pie in the oven. "Almost done," she squawked. "Now. What can I do for you, Miss—?"

"Virginia Ritchey. I got your name from the tapes of two of Lovatt's radio shows. You seemed to be very angry with him."

"I've been furious at that man for the last two years. You could've got my name off about any one of his shows. He was the most ungodly man I ever heard tell of, and he flaunted it. Waved it in your face. So I'd call him up and tell him what I thought of him.

"But what's that to you?" she said over her shoulder as she lifted the pie out of the oven.

"I'm trying to find out who killed him," I said. "Seemed like the first place to look was among the people that liked him least."

She drew herself up to her full four feet, nine inches and shot me a steely glance. "Now, you listen to me, young lady."

I was probably no more than ten years younger than she, if that.

"If you've come here to accuse me of killing a man, you better think again. I don't hold with killin'. 'The Lord'll see to you in His own good time,' I told him over and over. And sure enough, He did, didn't He?"

"Somebody did," I said. "But I'm not altogether sure that the Lord had anything to do with it."

She set the pie carefully on a wire rack on the kitchen table, then stripped off the padded mittens she'd used to handle it. "Shows how much *you* know," she scoffed. "The Lord has to do with

everythin' that happens. Didn't you ever go to Sunday school? 'Not a sparrow shall fall—'“

“Maybe that would hold good if Lovatt had been struck by lightning, or even died of a stroke. I don't think I ever heard of the Lord using firearms before. But I didn't come here to argue theology, Mrs. Heinemann,” I hurried on as she opened her mouth for a retort. “If you'll just tell me how you spent Saturday and Sunday, I'll—”

“Well, I never in all my life!” she gasped in righteous indignation. “You really do think I'd kill a man, don't you? I think you'd better go on about your business, before I set the dog loose!”

I had unconsciously heard the shrill yapping of a small dog from the minute I had rung the doorbell. I noticed now that it seemed to come from behind a closed door which led to another room.

“Please don't. I like dogs, and I'd hate to have to scare yours. Anyway,” I went on persuasively, “what does it matter? You weren't doing anything to be ashamed of, were you?”

“I certainly was not!” she snapped. “My life is an open book—unlike some people's. Oh, all right. If I tell you what I was doing, will you go away? I've got work to do.”

I assured her I would leave just as soon as she told me her movements on the Saturday and Sunday.

“Well, that Saturday...that *was* the twenty-fourth of June you meant? I haven't heard that man on the radio for nearly two weeks, now you mention it. Well, they've been doing reruns of his old shows. I mean I haven't heard him *live*. That when you mean?”

“That's the day. And you were—”

“Oh, that Saturday I was working on the VFW float for the Fourth of July parade,” she said promptly. “Hermie was a VFW, and I was in the Ladies' Auxiliary. When he died, I...well, I know I was workin' in the float all day that day, because I helped with it all day every day for the two weeks before the Fourth. 'Cept Sunday, that is.” She gave me a birdlike glance from under her eyebrows.

“Yes?” I said. “Sunday?”

“Sunday I went to church,” she said triumphantly. I cursed

myself mentally for being such an easy setup. "Then Sunday afternoon, I went and—"

"Yeah, I know," I said sourly, "worked on the float some more. I suppose you've got witnesses for that *and* going to church too." Well, she had, of course. I took down names and addresses, but I didn't hold out much hope. I got back in the truck and headed for Davie.

Both of the addresses in Davie proved to be agricultural in nature: one was a horse farm, and one a citrus grove. I decided to try the horse farm first.

The pickup seemed right at home driving under the carved wooden sign that arched over the long drive. The sign read, "*Horse Heaven Ranch*," and a white-painted board that hung beneath it proclaimed in black letters, HORSEMANSHIP LESSONS. I drove past paddocks in which horses grazed placidly, and on up to the house.

When I got no response to my ringings and knockings, I followed a graveled path that led to stables and a corral. A tall, thin, bronzed woman in jeans was riding a palomino around and around a small track in the corral. Her straight blonde hair was tied back on her neck, and hung in a tail down her back. I went over and leaned on the fence.

"May I help you?" she said pleasantly.

"I was looking for a Mr. Kelly," I said. "Mr. Patrick Kelly."

"Oh, he's not here right now," she said, dismounting. "I'm Mrs. Kelly. Jan. What can I do for you?"

I explained what I wanted. When I got to the part about Win Lovatt's death, she broke in.

"I really do hate to say this about anyone, but I'm *so* glad he's dead," she said. "Now maybe Pat's blood pressure will get back to normal. My God, how he hated that man! I kept saying to him, for heaven's sake, Pat, I don't know why you don't just change the station.

"But he seemed to be fascinated, sort of. Kept calling up and giving him what for. And do you know, I don't think he really

disagreed with Lovatt about everything he phoned in about, but after he came out in favor of developing Davie into just another suburb, he—well, it makes *me* mad to think about it, and Pat's gut *such* a short fuse—”

“Yeah, I've listened to tapes of Lovatt's last three shows,” I said. “Your husband called in on every one of them, and by the time they'd bleeped out the bad words, it was hard to tell what he actually said. The only thing that was clear was that he didn't care for Lovatt at all.”

“Hated his guts, you mean. And you're investigating his death? What for? I mean, *who* for?”

“His wife,” I answered. “The police think she shot him. She says she didn't, and I'm inclined to believe her.”

“Wife? It's really hard to believe he *had* a wife,” she said incredulously. “I mean, who'd marry a man like that?”

“Apparently he didn't come on like that when he went a-wooing. What Lolly told me about his courtship methods sounded rather charming. Anyway, somebody killed him, and I'm checking out the people who made hate calls to the talk show. Er—your husband—what was he doing a week ago Saturday?”

She didn't get indignant. She looked thoughtful for a moment, then relieved. “Thank God he's out of it,” she said. “I don't *think* he'd kill anybody, but you never know. Anyway, there's no way he could've killed the man, because we were out of town all weekend. Left Friday night and drove over to Winter Haven to visit my folks; and I don't think he was out of sight of at least one of us the whole weekend.

“He likes my dad, and it's mutual. They drink beer and talk horses into the wee hours when we go over there, and when he finally falls into bed he's too pooped to—well, do anything,” she finished lamely. I noticed her tanned face was slightly flushed.

“Anyway,” she hurried on, “you'll probably want to check that, so I'll give you Mom and Dad's phone number. But I'm willing to swear he couldn't have done it.”

I took the name and phone number she gave me and climbed

back into the truck, mentally crossing Pat Kelly off my list. Then I headed for the citrus grove and Mrs. Ethel Broussard.

This time the driveway led between groves of citrus trees—grapefruit on the left, oranges on the right. I wondered idly if they ever cross-pollinated, and what happened if they did. I never found out.

Mr. Broussard answered the door. She was a huge woman, built along the general lines of a captive balloon, and the expression on her face was a living refutation of that old wives' tale about jolly fat people. She scowled at me when she saw me, and the scowl deepened when I stated my business.

"I heard the bastard was dead," she said in a breathy but vicious little voice. "And I don't want nothing to do with it. Let him lay. I figure he deserved anything he got, and more." She drew a wheezy breath and put her hand on her monstrous bosom in the general region of her heart. "Doctor says I didn't ought to have any excitement, so don't get me all wrought up."

She shifted from one bloated, slipper-clad foot to the other. "And don't keep me standin' out here in this heat, neither," she whined. "It's bad for me to be on my feet too long. Now, what was it you wanted?"

I told her as briefly as I could that I would like to know her whereabouts on the twenty-fourth and -fifth of June. "None of your damn' business," she wheezed. She took a long cigarette from the pocket of her voluminous cotton dress and lit it with a disposable lighter. "I didn't kill him, and that's all you need to know. Now, you get out of here before I call the dog."

I had seen the dog as I drove in. He was a good-sized dog—looked to be a collie-German shepherd cross—and he had been sleeping peacefully under a big Norfolk Island pine in the front yard. I doubted that he could be induced even to bark at me, much less bite. On the other hand, I also doubted that I would be able to extract any information from this woman. I gave it one last try.

"We could go inside and sit down in the air conditioning," I suggested. "It really wouldn't take long for you to give me the

information, and then I would go away and not have to bother you again."

"You didn't have to bother me in the first place," she pointed out, flicking the ash off her cigarette into the leggy poinsettia plant by the door. "No. I'm not gon' to do it, and that's final. If the police want to know, I'll tell 'em, but you aren't even a real cop."

I put a question mark after her name. That meant I wouldn't put it past her to murder somebody, if it wasn't too much trouble. On the whole, however, I found it hard to imagine her summoning up the energy to do anything more ambitious than dial a phone and wheeze insults, and she'd already done that.

I drove to the Wylberforces' house on Southwest Ninth Avenue. Nobody was home except the dog, and I apparently made his day by ringing the doorbell. I put "DA" on my list beside the name. I would telephone later.

The house on Atlantic Avenue was a little gem, from its white-tiled roof to the red-and-white impatiens clustered around the doorstep. A mild-looking old man in a wheelchair opened the door, and I looked again at my notebook, wondering if I'd gotten the wrong address. "Mr. Hallett?" I said tentatively.

"The same," he replied in a resonant baritone that was at least fifteen years younger than his face. "Come in, do."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Don't you want to know who I am and what I'm here for?"

"Nope," he said firmly. "It's not often I get company. It's less often that it's a good-looking lady." His smile was younger than he was, too. Positively boyish. "Now, come on in."

I went on in, feeling exceedingly puzzled. As well as I could remember, his was the voice I'd heard on two of the tapes, calling Win Lovatt everything from a dirty socialist atheist to son and heir to a mongrel BLEEP! It was hard to reconcile this gentle-seeming fellow with a twinkle in his eye with the rabid shouter on the tapes.

He preceded me into a beautifully-furnished but comfortable living room whose glass walls looked out onto a lush back garden. A ceiling fan turned lazily, circulating the air.

"Sit down," he said, smiling. "As you can see, I'm already seated." I chose a rattan chair upholstered in cool, leaf-patterned linen, and explained my business with him.

"Now, that's really interesting," he said. "The man *is* dead, then? I wasn't sure. They've been very low-key about it on the radio—noncommittal, even." He smiled delightedly. "And I'm a suspect, am I? That's the most exciting thing that's happened to me since my accident—and that was ten years ago."

"Tell me something, Mr. Hallett," I begged. "What's a man like you doing, calling up a radio talk show and yelling insults at its host?"

"Fighting boredom, mainly. So I really came off sounding as if I hated the man, did I? That's good. Terrific, even. Would you say—let's see—that I achieved a remarkable degree of verisimilitude? Or how about this: Mr. Hallett played the fanatic with a great deal of conviction. That sound about right?"

I was speechless for a moment—an unusual condition for me, as most of my friends and all of my enemies will tell you. "I know you!" I burst out finally. "But your first name isn't Thomas, it's Edmund. Edmund Hallett, the actor. Why are you listed under Thomas in the phone book?"

"Two reasons," he said with a wry little smile. "One is that it's my name—Thomas Edmund Hallett. The other is that my acting days are finished, I'm afraid. Or at least, the type of role that I could manage is so limited that I might as well just forget it. If they still did radio dramas, now, like in the old days—"

"So that's what you were doing," I said. "Radio drama. Interesting. So you're really not a suspect, after all."

"Ah, but how do you know I'm not acting *now*?" he smiled. "Perhaps it was my fury on the telephone that was real, and it's my present calm that's dissembled. Maybe I'm not really confined to this wheelchair at all, and will spring up when you've gone and do a little dance to celebrate the way I've fooled the detective. I don't think you can write me off yet. At least stay and have a cup of coffee with me."

Well, I did. I didn't believe for a minute that he was anything

but what he appeared to be—a once better-than-average actor who'd been paralyzed from the waist down in an auto accident. In fact, I remembered reading about the accident in the Sunday papers, years before.

But if it made him happy to be a suspect, well, a suspect he would be. Besides, it was one o'clock, I'd had no lunch, and he was taking a plate of sandwiches out of the refrigerator. Why not stay?

It was after two-thirty when I left, promising to keep in touch, and pointed the truck northward to Wilton Manors. Mrs. Jessie Cook opened the door of her slightly rundown cottage almost before I could take my finger off the bell-push.

She was a tall, gaunt woman with graying black hair in an untidy bun, and a pair of wild blue eyes. The cotton shift with the little pink roses looked incongruous on her rawboned frame. She should, I decided, have been wearing either flowing robes and a pointed hat or plate armor. "Who are you?" she said shrilly. "You're not a social worker, are you?"

I disclaimed any connection with authorities local, state, or national. "I'm a private detective—"

She tried to shut the door on my foot.

I talked fast. "I'm investigating Win Lovatt's murder. I'm talking to all the people who phoned his talk show, and your name—" That was as far as I got. She planted her hand on my chest, pushed sharply, and slammed the door in my face.

I heard the lock turn. All my subsequent ringing on the doorbell was without effect, except I heard her slamming doors and windows all over the house; preparing for a siege, I guessed.

As I'd left my battering ram in my other suit, I shrugged and left. Six down, one to go. After Jessie Cook's name I put an exclamation mark. The woman had looked capable of anything, up to and including axe murders. A little old shooting, I felt, would be a mere outing for her.

Albert Hazelwood was working in his yard. He was a tall man, balding and running to fat. The latter condition was made apparent by the fact that he wore no shirt. He was digging out a stump with a

pickaxe—lifting it high over his head and bringing it down with a rhythmic THOCK! THOCK! I didn't go too close.

"Mr. Hazelwood?" I said. He nodded briefly and swung the pick again THOCK! I explained my business. He went on swinging the pick.

When I reached the part about having gotten his name off the tapes of Lovatt's programs, he grounded the pick but kept it handy, leaning against his legs, while he mopped his streaming face with a large white handkerchief and examined me with furtive little eyes. He waited until I'd finished before he said anything.

"I've got nothing at all to tell you," he said in a tight voice. "But that Lovatt man deserved to die. He'll go straight to Hell, too—I told him he would. He was the Enemy. Hated all Christians. Offered them no mercy, and merited none himself. 'You'll burn forever,' I told him."

His voice was becoming louder and louder. I saw the blinds twitch aside in a window of the house next door, and a woman's face peered out anxiously.

"If you could just tell me your whereabouts on the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth of June—" I began.

"No!" he exploded. "I'll plead no alibis. If the Lord wants to punish me, He will. He has already, and He will again. I'll make no move to defend myself!" He raised the pick over his head again. From then on the only answers I got were THOCK!s.

I gave up and went back to the truck.

I only drove as far as the house next door, though. I thought perhaps the woman who'd looked out would know something about her neighbor. As I went up the walk, I noticed that a FOR SALE sign stood in a prominent position on the lawn.

I rang the bell, and the blinds did their twitching routine on the front window, this time. Apparently she decided I wasn't dangerous; she opened the door, anyway. "Yes?" she said.

She was an ordinary-looking woman somewhere in the middle years, wearing faded jeans and a red T-shirt. The only unusual thing about her was the scared expression on her face.

“Could I talk to you for a minute?” I said.

“Well, yeah, okay,” she said. “But for Pete’s sakes, come inside, will you? I don’t want him to see me.”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you about,” I said after I’d gotten inside and she had shut and locked the door. “Mr. Hazelwood. Is he really dangerous, do you think?”

“Yeah, *I think*,” she said. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be tryin’ to sell my house. Lived here for seventeen years,” she went on. “He’s been next door for ten, but he wasn’t near as freaky when they moved in. I think it was his wife dying that did it. She was sick a long time—two or three years. Cancer. Since then he’s been gettin’ nuttier and nuttier, and nervous? God, I can’t sit still. Only thing is, who’d buy my house if they knew about him?”

“He seemed particularly vehement about religion,” I said tentatively. “Is that—”

“He thinks Ella’s—his wife’s—death was a punishment from the Lord for his ungodly actions,” she explained. “Ever since the funeral, he’s been bendin’ everybody’s ear about it, if they’ll listen. Oh, I listened for a while—felt sorry for the poor guy—but he always gets so worked up about it, he just plain scares me shitless. And I’m not the only one, either.

“I thought it might help if his minister would talk to him—calm him down some, maybe convince him it wasn’t his fault. So I talked to him. He’s a real nice man, the preacher. I don’t even go to his church, but he said he’d be glad to talk to Albert, and maybe give him some comfort. Said, come to think of it, he hadn’t seen him at church since his wife died. So he came to talk to him.”

“I gather it didn’t help much,” I said.

“Help! I thought he was going to kill the poor man. There was all this yelling—it was all Albert, of course—and then poor Mr. Phillips came out the door. He wasn’t running, exactly, but he sure was walkin’ fast, and his face was bright red. Albert threw his hat out after him, but he didn’t even stop to pick it up. If it hadn’t been so sad, it would’ve been funny. So now I don’t talk to Albert *or* Mr. Phillips any more.”

“I don’t suppose you’d know whether or not Mr. Hazelwood was at home on the weekend of the twenty-fourth of June, would you?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” she said. “I spend as little time around here as possible, and on weekends I go visit with one of my daughters. They’re both married to real nice guys, and either one of ‘em would take me in if I’d let ‘em, but I know how that would turn out—tough on everybody. All I want is to sell my house and then maybe buy a condo, I don’t know. Anyhow, I wouldn’t know where Albert Hazelwood was on any weekend. Why? What’s he been up to?”

I told her I didn’t know for sure that he’d been up to anything except calling up talk shows and mouthing off, and I think I left her with the impression that I had something to do with the FCC, without actually saying so. Anyway, I managed to extricate myself without having to make a lot of explanations, and after a stop for groceries, went to return Glenn’s truck.

Chapter Eight.

The Indignant Yachtsman

It was fairly late when I got back to the boatyard, so Glenn just threw my bike into the back of the truck and drove me home, stopping at Taco Viva on the way to pick up a couple of Mexican dinners. When we walked out onto the sundeck, we could see a knot of boat people standing on the dock in excited discussion. Of course, I had to find out what was happening.

“What’s all the excitement about?” I asked Sally McDermott, who was standing on the edge of the group with her husband, Brian. “Had another murder, or what?”

“No,” she answered with a smile, “but I think there’s going to *be* one if Fat Al has his way about it. He came back in today and found his slip filled, and believe me, he was far from gruntled, as Plum Wodehouse used to put it. Said he was paid up until the end of July, and—”

“You know, I wondered about that when Mary told me they were in slip four,” I said. “I *thought* Al had just gone on a cruise over to the Islands, but he never said anything definite about it to me, so I—”

“Well, but this is it,” she said. “That’s exactly what *he* said, only somewhat louder. He was furious. But Becky wasn’t here, and none of us knew what to do. Anyway, there was Al, out there in the middle of the canal, and no place to put his boat.”

Becky is the new manager—or rather, half of the new manager—of Costa Brava Marina Apartments. The other half is her husband Tom, but he does marine carpentry work during the day at

one of the local boatyards, so Becky is left holding the fort. Or the bag—whichever comes first, she says.

Mary Frances Knoop spoke up just then. “I really feel just awful about it, Gin—I mean, like it’s my fault. After all, we’ve got his slip, and where’s the poor man supposed to go?”

“Where *did* he go?” I said. “I don’t see him out in the canal anywhere.”

“Said he’d get a slip for tonight over on Hendricks,” put in George. “Isn’t any head or shower over there, but he said he expects to be in here tomorrow, or *else*.”

“That’s *just* what I expect,” said a raspy voice from behind me. We all swiveled our heads like spectators at a tennis match. Fat Al was approaching over the sundeck with blood in his eye and a piece of paper in his hand. He wore a floppy white hat, a T-shirt which read I’D RATHER BE SAILING, and baggy, knee-length khaki shorts.

“Don’t know what Becky could’ve been thinking about,” he grumbled. “Car’s right out there in the parking lot where I left it. Did she think I’d leave it there if I was going away permanently?”

Al’s car was a 1975 Ford Fairlane with a big dent in the passenger-side door. While not exactly what you’d call a junker, it did not live up to the tone of the rental cars the tourists park there in the winter.

“Looks like if she’d thought that, she’d have had it towed,” I said. “This is all very confusing. By the way, Al, what is that paper you’ve got there?”

“The receipt for my July dockage, that’s what,” he said, waving it back and forth triumphantly. “I paid it up before I left, to avoid just this sort of thing. Just you wait till I see Becky!”

“Do I hear somebody taking my name in vain?” said Becky’s cheerful voice. Tall, slim, and elegant even in her faded jeans, she floated past the pool and toward our ever-increasing group on the dock. “What have we here? A party?”

“It’s going to be a lynch party if we don’t get this sorted out right away,” snarled Al, advancing to meet her. “Where’s my slip?”

"Oh, hello, Al," she said in a weak voice. "I wasn't expecting you till tomorrow or Sunday."

"Well, I got back two days early," he said apologetically. "We had this great east wind, and— Hey, wait a minute! What does that matter? My dockage is paid up, so I can come and go as I please! Now, just what the fuck is going on here?"

"Listen, Al, I can explain it all, if you'll just come into the office," said Becky.

"Hell with that! How about right here and now? I paid for my slip, and where is it?"

"Listen, Mr.—" said Mary in a small voice. "Mr. Al. It's our boat that's in your slip, and I really feel bad about—"

"Hush, Mary," I said. "None of this is your fault. You came in and paid your dockage like everybody else, and you didn't know anything about it being Al's slip. Now—"

"Will you all just *shut up* for a minute?" said Becky exasperatedly. "Okay, Al, we'll sort this out right here and now. You remember you said you'd like to have slip three—the one that's got the telephone hookup already installed? The one Jerry has?"

"Well, yeah, that's right. Jerry never even uses that phone hookup, since he's only here on weekends, anyway. What of it?"

"Well, Jerry's trying to sell his boat. But you knew that, didn't you?"

"Hell, half the people that own boats are tryin' to sell 'em to the other half," said Al scornfully. "I'd sell mine, if somebody offered me the right price. But if you think I'm going to wait till Jerry sells that boat to get into a slip, you're *way* out in left field. Shit, I'd be sittin' out in the middle of the canal till the year two thousand and twenty, and if you think the water police would—"

"Now, just hold on, Al, and let me get a word in edgewise. Jerry's decided to get serious about selling the boat, so he's going to take her downriver to a yacht broker at one of the boatyards—River Bend or Summerfield's or somewhere. *This weekend*. So, since I didn't expect you back till Sunday, I rented Mary your old slip, and you can have Jerry's number three slip. Okay? And I'll knock the two

days' wait off your next month's dockage. How does that grab you?"

Al was somewhat mollified. "Well, if you're sure he's *really* going out this weekend," he said. "But what if he doesn't?"

"Oh, he will," she said. "He was here all last weekend, getting her ready to go out this weekend. But look. If he doesn't get her out by Sunday night, I personally will go and *untie his dock lines*. Okay?"

That brought a general laugh. "Okay," said Al. "I'll put up over on Hendricks tonight and tomorrow night, and come in here on Sunday. And if there isn't an empty space," he added ominously, "I'll *make* one."

The excitement over, the group broke up into twos and threes. As Glenn and I headed for *Blue Jasmine*, he said, "My, you have a lot of excitement around here. Ever think of writing a book?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "About once a year I think of it, but that's about as far as I ever get. Unless you count the first two chapters of a detective novel I wrote in New Orleans, or the science-fiction short-short I wrote in Australia about the pub at Humpty Doo. Somehow I just can't settle down to it."

I put the Styrofoam containers of Mexican fast food on top of the Styrofoam cooler that sits in the cockpit, and went below for the salt. Living in a warm climate requires more salt than restaurateurs think is good for you. But then, they keep their air conditioners on all year round, and set them well down into the discomfort range, as far as I'm concerned.

Different strokes, I guess, but sometimes I wish people who like cold weather would stay up north where they can get plenty of it, and not come down here and complain about the heat. I dread the day when I wake up and find that they've domed and air conditioned all of south Florida. Probably that'll be the day after they finish paving it.

Saturday was the day on which I'd arranged with Lolita Lovatt to go and see her mother in Boca Raton. She came by in the Honda and picked me up, and I spent the trip filling her in on what I had found out in the past couple of days.

“You were certainly right about Win’s unfans,” I finished. “And I have the impression that there are unplumbed depths there, too. Hey, look out! That guy’s just hit the brakes!”

She hit hers in turn, and I stopped trying to push my right foot through the floorboards of the car. Lolly seemed to be a nice girl, but she certainly was a rotten driver. Tailgated like a fiend, and didn’t watch ahead very well, either. I fully expected that by the time she dropped me off at home I’d have to have my foot surgically removed from the floorboards.

Lolly’s mother, Laura Harkness, lived on a quiet residential street in Boca Raton. From what Lolita had told me, I was expecting a motherly little dumpling of a woman to answer the door, wiping her floury hands on a frilly apron.

Turned out that she was as tall as Lolly, and wore an air of authority that was almost palpable. She also wore Bermuda shorts and a sleeveless turtle-necked cotton jersey, and was wiping her dirty hands on a rag she took from her pocket, as she’d been working in the yard.

“This is Mrs. Ritchey that I told you about, Mom,” said Lolly. “Gin, this is my mother.”

“Laura Harkness,” Lolly’s mother finished for her, extending a now-clean hand for me to shake. “I’ve been worrying less about Lolita’s problems since she told me about you. One doesn’t want one’s only daughter to be sent to jail, particularly for something she didn’t do. Are the police still bothering you, Lo?”

“Only about every other day, now,” she answered with a resigned air. “I just get started on my workout, and the doorbell rings. I kind of expect it, now. It’s always the same two cops—you know, Laurel and Hardy. *Aren’t* those their names, Gin?” she appealed to me. “Mom won’t believe I’m not making it up.”

“Those really are their names,” I assured Mrs. Harkness earnestly. “Though I think it’s Joe Laurel and Fred Hardy. I think somebody with a malicious sense of humor must have teamed them up to begin with, and now they seem to be stuck with each other.” Mrs. Harkness led the way around the house to a big screened

Florida room.

"Just sit down, you two," she said. "I'll bring out lemonade and cookies." She strode purposefully into the house.

"Mom tends to be a little bit masterful," said Lolly apologetically. "It's mostly because of where she works. She's—"

"No, don't tell me," I said. "I think I can guess. She teaches, right?"

"Right," she said. "In—"

"High school, I bet," I finished her sentence. "And—let me see. Not English, I think, but some other subject that kids often don't like. Science? Math?"

"I teach mathematics *and* general science, as a matter of fact," said Mrs. Harkness. She put the trayful of glasses, pitcher, and a plate of cookies down on the glass-topped coffee table. "Did you deduce it, or what?"

"Well, actually, I cheated a little," I said modestly. "I recognized the manner right away. I used to teach English, myself. And then there's that stack of papers over there on the end table, with a gradebook on top of it. How could I miss?"

We settled down to the lemonade and cookies and a discussion of what I'd come for. "Gin wants to check on my alibi, Mom," said Lolly. "Like I told you on the phone."

"That's putting it pretty baldly," I protested, "but—yes, I do want to clear that away, so I can put my mind on other things. I hope you don't—"

"Lo always did put things baldly," said her mother fondly. "You were a funny child, you know. Nothing like your brothers."

"I know, Mom. You've told me often enough, after all." She turned to me. "One of my brothers teaches math at LSU, Gin, and the other one's a programmer for AT&T. They were always real Brains, but that didn't keep 'em from teasing the life out of me. I always sort of felt like I hatched out of a duck egg in a swan's nest."

"That's a funny way to look at it," I said. "I'd think it'd be the swan that would become a model, not the duck. I think you must have hatched out of a swan's egg in an owl's nest." I looked at Laura

Harkness in some caution. She was smiling, though, so it was all right.

“That’s very well put, Gin,” she said with a gracious air. “Now. About that alibi. Lolita arrived here at about eight-thirty on the evening of June twenty-third, and I must say she was in a State. It must have been nearly eleven by the time I got her calm enough to talk rationally.

“After that, we sat out here and talked the situation over until after midnight. After she went to bed, I caught up on some marking—I’m teaching summer classes this year, so of course I’ve got all the students with math problems—innumerate, they call them, nowadays—and grading their papers is just heartbreaking, sometimes.

“It was nearly two by the time I finished. I peeked in on Lolita to make sure she was all right. She was asleep, but thrashing around a bit and mumbling, which wasn’t surprising, I thought, in view of the situation.”

“I remember that,” Lolly said suddenly. “I dreamed about Win all night, and we were fighting the whole thing out over and over again. Really a foul dream.”

“Yes. Well, we did a lot more talking on Saturday and Sunday. Neither of us went anywhere on either day; I do my grocery shopping for the week on Friday afternoons, so that I at least have my weekends to myself.

“Lo helped me do some weeding and watering, and Sunday night we watched television for a while. I get the National Geographic channel on cable, and I find it very soothing to the nerves—at least, as long as they don’t tell me how fast the rainforests are being cut down.”

“I don’t watch TV any more,” I said, “but I used to watch PBS a lot before I moved onto the boat. Then even that began to get to me. As you said, every time I started to relax, looking at the cool green trees and all the nice birds and animals, they brought on the chainsaws. Painful.”

“It’s funny, though,” Lolly said. “There was a special—I think it

was only about elephants, though, wasn't it, Mom? And I don't remember a single chainsaw."

"Yes," she said, "that was a rerun of a show I saw several years ago, but I didn't mind watching it again. At any rate, Lo stayed with me all the next week, and didn't go home until Monday. That was July third, I think."

"I got really worried when Win didn't call," Lolly said. "I guess he never got the chance to, but I didn't know that, then. Anyway, that's the whole alibi. Satisfied?"

"Completely," I said. "I really didn't expect anything else, though." For the rest of the afternoon, we talked the Lovatt murder case into tatters, but none of us could think of a way to get out of that bolted and shuttered house while leaving it bolted and shuttered, much less *who* could have done it.

And when I got home, I spent half an hour massaging my aching right foot, resolving all the while never again to ride in a car driven by Lolita Lovatt.

Chapter Nine.

The Sweet Little Old Lady

I took the rest of the weekend off. On Sunday, Glenn and I drove down to the Everglades and spent the day walking the trails, looking at the wildlife, and slapping mosquitoes. It was a restful day for me; Glenn is a competent driver who doesn't tailgate, so I was able to enjoy the trip down and back, too.

We got back just in time for more excitement. It seemed to me we'd been having rather a lot of excitement lately, which is unusual for summertime. Normally, summer in Fort Lauderdale can be characterized as sleepy. Some even say torpid, but I don't agree with that.

What I call it is tranquil, with just that little bit of entertainment value that the Fourth brings, in the middle. The weather is warm and humid, and sitting outside in the evening is—well, idyllic is an overworked word, but I'm tempted to use it, anyway. You feel as if you're inside a soap bubble—sort of suspended and peaceful.

This year had been different. In April, the Management had decided to have an emergency water line installed, and I think they must have paid the workmen in advance, because they went about it in a *most* unworkmanlike manner—showing up for a couple of days, digging half the trench, and then disappearing for a week at a time—like that.

After they finally finished the digging, they did their disappearing act again, and the trench sat there through several subtropical downpours that had the dual effect of making a lovely breeding ground for mosquitoes and washing a lot of the piled-up

dirt back into the trench.

They came back in a couple of weeks and laid the pipe and installed the ridiculous, massive cast iron double check valve which is apparently required by the city, and the high-pressure fire hose that is the object of the exercise, and then went away again without filling in the trench. They didn't come back again for a month, at least.

All this had a terrible effect on all of us boat people. Boat people—liveaboards—are a lot like Dutch housewives are reputed to be, at the best of times. They wash down their boats at the dropping of a grackle. The loose dirt left by the workmen drove many of us virtually insane; I saw George one time out with a flashlight, washing his boat at one a.m. Now, that's dedication.

At the time I'm writing about, though, all that excitement had been over for a couple of weeks, and the St. Augustine grass had pretty nearly covered the remains of the earthworks again.

Then came the murder; but I told you about that. Most of the excitement on the part of the boat people had been confined to watching the activities of the police through binoculars and gathering in little groups to speculate about what was going on. That, too, had died down.

Then came Fat Al and the hassle about his slip. Everyone had been waiting with a good deal of interest to see whether or not Jerry would get out before Fat Al came in, and if not, what Al would do about it.

Fat Al came into the canal right after we got back from the Everglades. Glenn and I were sitting in the cockpit eating our beans and hot dogs when Glenn sighted Al's mast approaching from the north. We hurriedly finished eating and were out on the dock in time for the fun.

Naturally, we told ourselves—and each other—that we were merely waiting to see if Al would need a hand with his lines, but we both knew that was a lie. And anyway, wasn't the whole population of the dock standing around with the same excuse? How many hands would he need, anyway?

I was on the point of asking Sally this pertinent question when

she said, "Jerry isn't out yet, you know. I wonder what Al will do?"

"Does Jerry know about the hassle, and what Al said he'd do if there wasn't a slip to go into?"

"If he doesn't, he'd have to be deaf. I personally heard two people tell him, and one of them was George. In fact, that's probably the reason he's not out yet. You know what George is—kept poor Jerry talking, or rather listening, for a good twenty minutes. Finally Jerry said, 'Listen, George, I've got to get back to work,' and just walked off."

"Probably finally realized that, if he was moving downriver and going to sell his boat into the bargain, he didn't have to worry any more about offending George. But what on earth has he been *doing* all this time?"

"I don't really know," she said. "He spent a lot of time going back and forth between his boat and the car, carrying things. From the look of it, all the things he wanted in his boat were in the car, and vice versa. And then of course he had to run the vacuum below, and wash her topsides."

"It'll just get dirty again," I said. "Surely he could've waited for that till he got downriver." I paused as a ragged cheer went up from the dock, and craned my neck to see over George's head. Jerry had started his motor and was casting off his dock lines.

"Where's Al been all this time?" I said, peering down the canal.

"I suppose he went down to the south end to turn around," Sally said. "The tide's running up, and he'd want to have the current with him, going in. At least, *I* would. But there he is now."

I could see his mast. He was just south of his intended docking-place, as near dead in the water as a boat ever gets when there's any current. Jerry was backing out of his slip.

"Back off, Al!" George yelled. "Give him room to turn!"

We all waited breathlessly for Al's response. Would he refuse to give way? Would he yell something dirty, or just ram Jerry's boat?

"Ooh," said Mary. "He *is* backing off."

Peter laughed "You're bloody-minded, my girl. What did you want him to do? Start a war?"

The rest of us laughed with him, but I thought the laughter had a disappointed sound about it, too.

“You people have gotten too used to excitement,” Glenn said. “You’re becoming a lot of sensation seekers, if you ask me. Who’s going to help Al tie up?”

People dropped off by ones and twos, and soon nobody was left but Glenn and me. We went down to Al’s slip, caught the lines he threw us, and bent them around cleats.

When we’d finished, Glenn said, “Sally sure was wearing a funny expression when she left us. What’s eating her?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “but she got that expression when Peter made that remark about Mary being bloody-minded. I hope I can remember to ask her about it, next time I see her.”

Monday morning, I went down to the radio station as soon as I finished my workout.

Peter had helped me move George’s dinghy again. At least this time he had scraped off all the little dead beasties, so it didn’t reek quite so badly. Of course, all the sharp shell fragments were still scattered over the shuffleboard court where they had fallen.

Men are brought up to believe that things like that—cigarette stubs, drink cans, paint flakes, the whole bit—will eventually just disappear. And so they do. Women end up sweeping them up. So I swept them up, of course. Peter helped me with the dinghy when I finished exercising, too. I still hadn’t sorted out his accent.

When I reached the radio station Susan, the elfin station receptionist, who did not, however, have pointed ears—I checked—greeted me with an impish smile. “May I help you?” she said. She burlesqued the ritual phrase slightly.

“Probably,” I said. “I’d like to see Mr. Farthingale, if he’s available for viewing purposes.”

She checked it out via intercom and said, “You’re in luck. He’s on view in his office this very morning. Go right in.” I did so, resolving to have a talk with Susan some day about the reasons for her dislike of Win Lovatt.

Jules Farthingale did not bother, today, to take his feet off the

desk. I assumed that was a courtesy reserved for initial interviews. He waved a hand at me as I entered and said, "Good morning, Ms Ritchey. Did you get to listen to those tapes?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "Thanks for setting it up for me. But today I wanted to talk to you about finding Win Lovatt's body. You didn't tell me about that."

He thought about it for a moment. "No. No, I didn't, did I? I guess I really didn't want to think about it. Not that it was particularly shocking or sickening or anything. In fact, maybe that was *why* I didn't want to think about it—*because* it wasn't sickening or particularly shocking. Just sort of ordinary and sordid, like—like dirty socks."

"And death ought not to be like dirty socks?" Farthingale, I decided, was something of a romantic. I guess a lot of us are, before we lapse into cynicism—or philosophy. "Would you tell me about it anyway?"

"Oh, sure. One ought not to have sensibilities, in my business, at least, so whenever I find myself succumbing to them, I always make sure to rasp hell out of 'em and trample 'em into the dust."

He went on to recount the discovery of the body in much the same way—even in some of the same words—in which he had done so in his statement for the police. When he got to the part about the gap in the drapes, he looked rather uncomfortable.

"That was another one of the sensibilities," he said. "You don't like to walk around someone else's house, peering in windows. I guess parents drum that into you when you're very small, because I don't remember the process, but when it came down to it, I felt really embarrassed. It was almost a relief to see poor old Win's hairy legs sticking out from under the table. Silly, wasn't it?"

"Oh, I guess so," I said. "I expect I would have felt much the same. Anyway, do go on. So that was when you called the police?"

"That was when I hollered copper. I had a hell of a time finding a phone, too. I hadn't brought mine with me, and I had to go clear down to the Las Olas business district to find one. Hardly anyone has pay phones any more."

He went on with his story until I stopped him, this time at the point at which he turned off the burglar alarm.

"How did you know how to turn it off?" I said. "That's kind of an intimate bit of knowledge to have."

"It was at that party Win—well, Lolly, really—threw for the station personnel," he said. "Win got pretty well-oiled that night. I think he'd probably started well before the party, drinking to get his courage up. That was one of his problems, did you know? He was shy, so he overreacted by being obnoxious."

"That's about third-grade level, that reaction," I said. "Would you say he was a case of arrested development, or what?"

"Oh, yeah. But then most of us are, here at the station, one way or another. Anyhow, he got pretty thoroughly plotted—not enough to stagger or hiccup or any of the stock things like talking funny—just relaxed all to hell. He was telling us about the day he and Lolly first looked at the house. It was really very funny, the way he told it; I could never do it justice. He was at the top of his form that night, I remember—almost likable."

"By the *in vino veritas* rule, that should mean that, underneath all the thorns, there was a likable person trying to get out. But I guess we'll never know about that, now. Go on."

"Well, he said the real estate agent was pretty new to the game, and as Tennessee Ernie Ford used to put it, 'nervous as a long-tailed cat in a roomful of rockin' chairs.' She'd showed them a couple of other houses, but neither of them had registered on his meter, and that rattled her more than ever; so the first thing she did when she got out of the car was shut her skirt—it was one of those voluminous mid-calf things, he said—in the car door.

"This brought her up short, when she got out, of course; she nearly fell down. And then, while she was unlocking the car to get it out, she swore in a *most* unladylike manner. Well, he said she was in a regular state by the time she opened up the house, so of course she tripped the burglar alarm."

"They do that a lot over there, the real estate agents," I said. "I watched 'em show that house several times, and about one time out

of three, they'd set off the alarm. It always seemed to take 'em forever to turn it off, too."

"That's what Win said. He said, there was the alarm going BAAP! BAAP! BAAP! so you could hardly hear yourself think, and the agent was pawing madly through her shoulder bag, trying to find the piece of paper where she'd written down how to turn off the alarm.

"She knew where the off switch was, all right—in a black box inside one of the kitchen cupboards—but you had to punch the six buttons in the right order to turn it off, and she couldn't remember what the order was."

"Oh, was *that* the trouble? No wonder it took so long for them to turn it off. So what happened then?"

"That was the point of the story. Win had to demonstrate, and he was just sloshed enough to have no inhibitions about it. He set off the alarm to show us, and there it was, going, BAAP! BAAP! BAAP! like a particularly obnoxious busy signal; and furthermore, he said, every time it made that noise, a little red light was flashing down at the cop shop. Then he showed us the box with the buttons—they looked like a small telephone keypad—and challenged us to turn it off.

"Well, we couldn't, of course. Then he said, 'I was the one that figured it out when the agent couldn't do it. She was just kind of pushing buttons at random, but I figured it had to be a pattern of some sort, so I started trying out patterns, starting with 1-2-3-4-5-6, and so on.

"I got it on the third try. It's 6-1-5-2-4-3.' And he showed us. One of the stranger party games I've ever engaged in.. Anyway, I remembered the combination, and that's how I knew how to turn it off."

"Really, it could've been any combination of the six buttons," I said. "It was that he went at it systematically that did it, I expect. Okay, that answers that question."

"But I wanted to ask *you*," he said. "What did you learn from those tapes?"

“That a lot of people thought Win Lovatt was a little less likable than Attila the Hun,” I said. “And by the time I finished listening to the tapes, I agreed with ‘em. The man was appalling. And you say that was good?”

“From the ratings point of view, yes. They hated him, but they listened to the station because of him, and that’s the name of the game. Okay. So having found that out, what did you do about it?”

I told him about taking down the names, winnowing out the repeaters among them, and checking the addresses.

“And then I spent Friday interviewing them, if you could call it that. I found out that two of them had alibis, one was not at home when I called, three were so far out that they wouldn’t even tell me whether or *not* they had alibis, and the seventh was Edmund Hallett.”

“What! Edmund Hallett used to be one of my favorite actors. I never did know what happened to him. He just dropped out of sight.”

“He was injured in an automobile accident,” I said. “Lost the use of his legs. It turned out that he got bored, sitting around in his wheelchair, and called Lovatt’s show, projecting very believable fanaticism and fury. And when I talked to him, he tried to convince me he was a bona fide suspect.”

“Gee. Edmund Hallett. Remember that movie where he played the soldier of fortune? He did those swashbuckling things better than anybody since Doug Fairbanks, Jr. He was almost acrobatic, too—did all his own stunts, they said. It’s really ironic that he got hurt in a car wreck, isn’t it?”

“Ironic. And sad,” I said. “I went to all his movies when I was a kid. He had—oh, I don’t know. Verve. *Élan*. One of those things. He seemed to *enjoy* swinging from the chandelier and booting the villain in the solar plexus. And then to be paralyzed! But he’s still got hopes, and that’s good.”

“What—that he’ll get over it? Be able to walk again?”

“Oh, yes. He says his physical therapist comes three times a week and works him to a frazzle—but that’s good, he says. And he

thinks he's making progress. He moved two toes on his right foot last week, he said."

"That's terrific! I hope he makes it,"

"Actually, the reason he called Lovatt's talk show was that his therapist got sick and didn't show up for a whole week, just when he was beginning to think he was getting there, so he got bored and frustrated. I think some of that fury was probably real—he was taking his frustration out on Lovatt. Anyway, that's all a sideline."

"Well, sideline or not," he said firmly, "I want you to give me his phone number. That is, if he'd like company. I could take him some CDs, if I only knew what kind of music he likes."

"His number's in the book," I told him, "only it's under *Thomas Hallett*. But I'll give it to you before I leave. I've got it in my address book."

"Well, but what about all those other people that called the show? Think one of 'em's the murderer?"

"It's anybody's guess," I said. "Three of 'em are flaky enough to be capable of anything, and two of them—both women—flatly refused to talk to me. One of them—a Mrs. Cook—shoved me out of the way and slammed the door in my face. I almost fell on my okole."

"That's an interesting euphemism for ass," he said. "I never heard it before. What is it—Japanese?"

"No, Hawaiian. Comes in really useful when I want to do my lady imitation. Anyway, I think she'd be capable of it, all right. The other woman is so fat I can't see her moving off *her* ass, even if the house was on fire.

"The third one—a man—talked, all right, but I couldn't make any sense of it except that he thought Lovatt was an excrescence on the face of humanity, and that he—Mr. Hazelwood—thinks God has it in for him already, so he might have decided he hadn't anything to lose. Like I say, it's anybody's guess."

"So is how they got out of the house, whoever did it," he pointed out.

"I know," I agreed glumly. "I've been racking my brain over

that. I had Lolly show me through the house, and damned if I can see how anybody did it. Bars on the windows, deadbolt on the door, hurricane shutters closed—it's a nightmare. And I think the killer must have shot the deadbolt. I can't imagine anybody letting somebody in, then bolting the door—at least not in the daytime."

"Sort of seems like he's thumbing his nose at you and saying, 'Nyaah, nyaah, nyaah', doesn't it?"

"Yeah. 'Nyaah, nyaah, nyaah, *you* don't know how I *did* it!'" I singsonged. "If I ever find out who it is, I'll take *that* out of his hide, for sure." I was wrong about that. I found out when the time came that I'd lost all my vengeful feelings. But that's enough of the "had-I-but-known" crap. I promise I won't do it again.

"Listen, I said I wanted to talk to the station personnel," I said, "and I've talked to some of them, but it occurs to me that I don't know how many there are. Have you got a staff list, or something?"

"Sure. Hold on a sec while I dig through my file drawer. I'll have Susan make a copy of it for you, and—"

The door opened at that point, and a little old lady walked in. She had to be somebody's grandmother; her gray hair was short and curly and was obviously regularly blue-rinsed, her glasses were that pointy, pixie style that I thought went out with the Gibson-girl-blouse craze back in the fifties, with pearly blue plastic frames.

She wore a tailored navy-blue tunic-and-pants suit with pink trimmings, and white Reebok joggers. In her hand she carried a can with a slot in the top. The paper label wrapped around it said, MENTAL HEALTH.

She stopped short when she saw me. "Oh, excuse me," she said apologetically, "I didn't know you had a visitor, Mr. Farthingale. I've just come to take up my collection, like always." Her simile showed teeth so perfect they had to be false.

"Oh, hello, Alice," said Jules Farthingale cordially. "Is it that time again already?" He fumbled for his wallet, opened it, drew out a bill, folded it into a little packet, and slipped it through the slot in the can with practiced ease.

"This is Alice Camry, Ms Ritchey," he explained. "She comes

around once a month, collecting for mental health. I don't know if you'd like to..."

Alice was already holding the can out to me, while I unzipped my backpack and took out a bill. I folded it and slipped it into the can. Alice smiled brightly, said "Thank you" to both of us, and slipped out again.

"Now, where were we?" he said. "Oh, yeah. I was going to give you that list of station personnel, wasn't I?" He opened a deep file drawer in his desk and thumbed through the manila folders until he found the one he wanted.

"Here it is," he said, taking out a paper, "but it doesn't have the schedules on it. The jocks' and newscasters' schedules are pretty constant, but the engineers have a complicated rotation system. I'd have trouble remembering, otherwise, so one of 'em might get stuck with all the graveyard shifts and holidays. Sometimes I think they make it up as they go along, but it works, and if—"

"It ain't broke, don't fix it," I supplied. "Right. Maybe Susan would know about the schedules?"

"She's really the one that handles all that. Keeps telling me if we'd computerize, it would help her a lot—we could keep all that shit on a disc, and it would be a lot easier to shuffle it around. And I keep telling her that we just got that fancy electronic typewriter a little over a year ago, and she shouldn't get so greedy. Anyway. Would you take this to her and tell her I said to make you a copy, and tell you who's on at what times?"

"Sure," I said. "But don't you want Edmund Hallett's phone number first?" Of course he did, and I gave it to him before I went out.

Chapter Ten.

The Elfin Receptionist

Susan was tacking away at a rate of knots on the electronic typewriter Jules had mentioned.

“Hate to interrupt you when you’re so diligent,” I said, “but could you help me with this?” I handed her the staff list and explained what I wanted, and she bustled off to the copying machine with it.

“I decided to make two copies,” she said when she came back. “I kept one when I gave this one to Jules, but I can’t find the damned thing anywhere. I keep *telling* him, if we only—”

“Yeah, he told me,” I said in sympathy. “Once you’ve used a computer, everything else looks pretty sick, doesn’t it? Keep at him—maybe you’ll wear him down eventually.”

We pored over the list, heads together, while she wrote in shift times opposite the names. I was surprised how few people worked at the station, and said so.

“People always say that,” she said, “but we really don’t need all that many people. Let’s see—there are five non-broadcasting staff—that’s Jules and me and the three engineers—and five broadcasting—except there’s only four right now, without Lovatt, so they have to double up, and we do tapes sometimes to fill in. That’s a hassle, but it’s worth it. This station is a better place without that bastard, believe me.”

“That seems to be the general consensus,” I said, “but I think you’re a little more vehement about it than most. You really hated his guts, didn’t you?”

"Is it that obvious? I never made any secret of it, but— Yeah, I detested his intestines. *And* the rest of him. Didn't everybody?"

"Like I said, I think you're probably his biggest unfan around the station. Not that I've talked to everybody, by any means. Why? What did he do to you, particularly?"

"Oh, pretty much the usual," she said. "Thought he was God's gift to women, did Win Lovatt."

"What, sexual harassment? Somehow I didn't visualize him as one of those guys with hands in unexpected places."

"Oh, no, nothing like that," she said. "He just took it for granted that I was going to be his devoted slave. I told you about his hate mail. He wanted to just turn it over to me, and he did leave it on my desk a couple of times. I gave it back to him."

"But it was more subtle than that. He had this kind of—I don't know—*aura* of masculine superiority, and it always just made me grit my teeth. Talk to Della Forbes—she'll tell you the same thing, I bet."

She handed me the list, and I looked at it doubtfully. "Let's see... Would she be around now? I *would* like to talk to her, just to get another example of the feminine point of view."

"Yeah, she should be somewhere around," said Susan, tapping a front tooth with a fingernail. They were pale blue today, I noticed. I wondered if she had a whole wardrobe of different colored stickons, or if she had only one set and had to polish them herself.

"She did the news and weather on the wakeup show, and that's been over since ten; but she usually hangs around awhile afterwards. I've seen her sitting at Bob McMasters' table in the lunchroom as late as quarter to eleven."

"Tell you what," she said brightly. "Just let me attach the answering machine, and I'll go with you. I could use a transfusion, anyway."

When we entered the lunchroom, we could see that it was almost deserted. My watch said ten-twenty, still well within the normal coffee-break range for most offices, but I could see only three people sitting at the little tables.

Two of them, a girl and a boy, were sitting at the same table. I looked them over and recognized neither of them; nor did I recognize the dark-haired girl who sat alone at the corner table.

"Who are these people?" I muttered to Susan as we filled our coffee cups. "I don't know any of them."

"The two sitting together are Jimi Parsifal—he spells it J-I-M-I, á la Hendrix—and Nita Fancy. He's our latest acquisition; straight out of college, and fancies himself to be really hip. Or, as he'd no doubt put it, a real cool cat."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Who's he trying to kid? Even I know that term went out twenty years ago."

"Oh, he's an antiquarian, is all. Thinks the sixties and seventies were some kind of golden age or something. See how long his hair is?"

"I don't have any problem with that," I said, "the long hair, I mean. It's been coming back recently, hasn't it? It's his shirt I don't believe. I haven't seen a ruffled shirt like that since Mac Davis wore one with his faded jeans in about 1974, if it was that late. Must've been his father's. Okay, I believe you. What did you say the girl's name was?"

"Nita Fancy. I don't for a moment believe that's the name she was born with, but it's on her driver's license and her Social Security card, so who am I to doubt her?" she said, somewhat illogically.

"She's been doing fill-ins, mostly, up to now—you know, for people who are out sick or whatever, but she'd like to be on full time. She does the news on Jimi's show, which starts at ten-thirty. Do they look to you like they're cooking up something, or is it just my paranoia?"

"They do have that look about them, don't they? Want to go and break it up?" I suggested helpfully.

"Nah. Let 'em cook. Whatever it is, it's Jules' problem, not mine. The girl alone in the corner is the one I was telling you about. Della Forbes. She looks to me like she's waiting for someone."

"Well, I'm someone," I said. "Let's go talk to her."

Della Forbes looked up hopefully as we approached her table.

When she saw who we were, however, the hopeful look was replaced by one of forced politeness. It wasn't, I gathered, who we were that was the problem; it was who we weren't. "Hi, guys," she said apathetically. "How you doin'?"

"As well as can be expected," said Susan somewhat absently. "Listen, Della, this is Gin Ritchey. She's a—"

"Don't tell me—let me guess. Let's see; I see in my crystal ball a P.I.'s license, and a bloody corpse. The bloody corpse was, in life, a bloody deejay. Or should I say, a bloody awful deejay? Yes, I think I will." She smiled, turning a rather plain little face into an attractive one.

"Oh, well, so Bob filled you in already—right? So we can go on from there. Where were you on the night of—I forget. What was it the night of, Gin?"

"It wasn't just the night of," I said. "It's a whole night and day we've got to account for. Where were you on the *weekend* of June twenty-fourth? And, incidentally, where were *you*, Susan? You weren't one of Win Lovatt's most ardent fans."

"I've got my alibi all ready," she said. "I was over at Jules's house all Friday evening, and if you think he wasn't throwing fits about where was Win Lovatt, you're dead wrong."

She noticed Della's raised eyebrow and actually blushed. I hadn't thought she had it in her. "And don't you look at me that way, Della Forbes. You know as well as anybody that we were well chaperoned."

She turned to me. "I'm Jules's sister-in-law," she explained. "In case you don't know it, that means I get stuck with the babysitting. Jules and Charlie—that's my sister Charlotte—went to a party some friends were throwing, and I stayed with the kids."

"It's not really a very *good* alibi, though," she was tapping the tooth with the fingernail again. "Crystal and Christopher—they're twins, and little hellions, believe me—went to bed at about ten, so I was alone with the TV from then till two, when Jules and Charlie came back."

"Little hellions, and they went right to bed?" I said

incredulously.

“Well, no—it took about forty-five minutes of threats and bribery to get ‘em to stop popping up every five minutes,” she said.

“Anyway, Jules took me home at two-thirty or so. I live over in Sunrise, in an apartment. But my roommate stayed out all night, so nobody knows I didn’t leave again. And Saturday morning I slept in.”

“Might as well finish it up,” I said. “What did you do Saturday afternoon?”

“Oh, we went to the beach,” she said. “Ted—that’s my boyfriend—and me. And then we went to MacDonald’s for a salad, and went to my place and...watched TV.”

I remembered an ad on the old music TV channel in Gainesville, some years before. “You are watching Channel — TV,” said Cheech, of Cheech and Chong. “Wait a minute. *One* of you is watching Channel —. The other one is watching the *ceiling*.”

I let it pass, though. This had taken long enough already, and Della Forbes had lost interest again. *She* was watching the doorway.

“Okay. How about you, Della? Might as well get it over with.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry. I wasn’t paying attention. Friday night, the weekend Win Lovatt—may he rot—was killed?”

“Well, wait a minute. What did *you* have against him? His wife says he could be very charming when he wanted to.”

“Yeah, and damned arrogant any other time,” she said. “He was the original male chauvinist pig, was all. He thought female broadcasters were funny, and he used to pretend to think I was a secretary. A *secretary*!” she exploded.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Susan interjected hotly. “Just exactly what’s wrong with being a secretary, Della Forbes? It’s a damned important job, let me tell you. I’m the only one around here that knows where things are, and you dumb jocks would fall all to pieces if—”

“It’s a sex-stereotype, that’s what’s wrong with it. Where do you ever see any *male* secretaries? It’s a lot harder for a woman to get into broadcasting, even today, than it is to be a secretary. And

Win Lovatt—”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I get the picture. I suppose he was always asking you when you were going to quit and get married, too. I’ve known guys like that.”

“Exactly,” she said. “I told him it was none of his damn’ business, but if I ever did get married, I wasn’t about to stop working because of it, any more than he did. That’s when he would start talking about doing some poor fellow out of a job. He could always make me see red that way.”

“He sounds like a born stirrer,” I said.

“What’s that?” asked Susan. “Anything like a mixer? Because if—”

“Term I picked up in Australia,” I explained. “Means somebody who delights in stirring people up. Anyway, what about that alibi, Della?”

Her face lit up like Acapulco on New Year’s Eve. I followed her gaze—it was fixed on the door again—and recognized the hairy individual entering the room just as Della stood up and waved. “Hey, Bob! Over here!” she called happily. He changed course and approached our table.

“Hi,” I said to him. “I’m taking up alibis for Lovatt’s murder. You might as well give me yours, too.”

Della reached over with her foot and hooked a chair out from under the next table. “Here, sit down, Bob. You’re just in time to alibi me.”

“For when?” he said. “That was the weekend of the twenty-fourth, wasn’t it? I was on graveyard all that week, Del. Can’t do it.”

She pouted in a most unfeministic manner. “Well, you can alibi me up till ten o’clock Friday night, at least. Or don’t you remember that?” She gave him a sidewise look and dug him in the ribs with a sharp-looking elbow.

“Oh, was that the night we—” the portions of his face that were visible around and through his pelt had turned a dull red. *Another blush, as I live and breathe*, I thought *I thought it had gone completely out of style*. “—went to the movies?” he finished lamely.

“Sure. I can do that.”

“So you were working what?” I said. “Midnight till eight?”

“No, no,” he said. “The wakeup show comes on at half-past six, so that’s when the engineers used to change shift. Ten-thirty till six-thirty. Della drove me to work, so her alibi is good till ten-thirty.”

“If that’s the way the shifts run, how come you come on at eleven now?” I said. “That’s only three and a half hours between.”

“Well, we had this big meeting, see,” he said. “It was before that—the twenty-fourth—actually. Anyway, we decided to change the way the shifts ran, and we changed over on the first of the month.

“Now it goes three to eleven, eleven to seven, and seven to three. We all like it a lot better, but the changeover was hairy. Anyhow, I was on that night from ten-thirty till six-thirty. The custodian gave me a lift home in his truck—he lives near me—and I was sacked in till—oh, must’ve been three in the afternoon. But there’s no way to prove that, because I live alone.”

Della wrinkled her nose. “In squalor,” she said. “You should’ve seen his fridge, till I took pity and cleaned it. It was all full of green, furry items. I hope I didn’t damage any alien life forms.” She smiled blindingly at Bob.

“Okay,” I said. “What about you, after ten-thirty?”

“Oh, I drove home,” she said. “Happens my roommate was at home, so she’ll vouch for that. Trouble is, her boyfriend was there, too, and we have this agreement, so I went out again and sat around for a couple hours in MacDonald’s.

“It was the one over on Seventeenth street. They might remember me, because it wasn’t very busy just then, and I drank enough coffee to float the *QE2*. Then I went back and slept a couple of hours, and came to work for the wakeup show.”

“And you were on till what? Ten?” I said.

“Yeah. I do the Saturday wakeup all by myself. Win only had a talk show on Saturday afternoon and another show on Sunday morning called *Weekend Wrapup*, and he really didn’t want to do either of those.

"He was too good to work weekends," she finished bitterly. "Then I went home and logged some real sacktime—Brenda had gone to work, so I had the place all to myself. I didn't get up till five o'clock. But I can't prove it, of course."

"Well, I guess that covers it," I said. I shut my notebook and stood up, just as Alice Camry entered the room.

"Uh-oh," said Bob. "Here comes the demon collector, and I haven't got anything smaller than a twenty."

"Hey, Alice," he called. "Surely it hasn't been a month since you were here last, has it?"

"Sure has," she said cheerfully. "Funny how the time flies, isn't it?" She passed the can around.

Della pulled out her wallet. "I'll make donations for Bob and me both this time," she said. "I wasn't here when you came last time, anyway." She stuffed some bills through the slot. Alice thanked her and went away.

"Isn't it wonderful how she bears up?" Susan said in a sympathetic tone.

"How do you mean?" I said. "What's she bearing up under?"

"Oh, it's really very sad," she said in a hushed voice. "Her only grandson is in a mental institution. She told me about it one day when nobody else was around. He got in with this cult—demonology, or something—and they had these magic rituals with sacrifices and all, and—"

"Not *human* sacrifices?" said Della, looking shocked.

"Oh, no—none of that Manson business or anything. Just a black cock or something. It always sounded kind of silly to me, all that stuff, but I guess some people really get into it."

"How old was he when this happened?" I said.

"Oh, I don't know. In high school, anyway. Alice said he was on the student council and the gym team and sang in the chorus and all that shit, before he got in with those yahoos. A real wholesome type."

"Well, but why is he at the funny farm?" asked Bob. "Surely they didn't shut him up just for that. I mean, there's a coven of

witches in Louisiana keeps agitating about people defaming witchcraft—right out in the open, in the papers and all. It may not be respectable—kind of kinky, even—but to be stuck in an *asylum*—”

“Oh, that wasn’t the problem,” said Sue. “Or at least, not all of it. The rituals involved psychedelic drugs—magic mushrooms, datura—like that. And he—”

“Are people still using that stuff?” I said. “I thought psychedelics went out with flower children and Timothy Leary. Can you still get them, even?”

“Oh, sure,” said Della. “Magic mushrooms and peyote and datura are all natural substances. Peyote’s a cactus, I think, and it grows in Texas and Arizona and like that. Datura—”

“That’s angel’s trumpet, isn’t it? Really gorgeous flowers, and a really *yummy* smell. I saw some just the other day, but I can’t remember where.”

“Well, anyway,” Susan went on doggedly, “Alice’s grandson got into this psychedelic thing, and he was one of those people that just get flattened by it, I guess. He started having flashbacks, and tried to commit suicide a couple times, so they put him away.

“Alice says he still goes on hunger strikes, sometimes, and he looks just awful, she says—all hollow-cheeked and wildeyed. Says sometimes when she goes to see him he knows her, and sometimes he doesn’t. It’s very sad. So I always try to put a little something extra in the can.”

Bob looked at his watch and stood up. “Good lord!” he said. “I’m late! Kieran will have my hide in little strips if I don’t get in there right now. Goodbye, ladies. See you tonight, Del.”

Della jumped up in turn. “No, you won’t, Bob. I’ve got to work tonight, filling in for Lovatt. That’s why I was waiting....” her voice and their footsteps receded down the hall.

I was looking at the staff list for the station. “Kieran. That’s Kieran Allison, right?” I said. “He’s one of the engineers.”

“*She’s* one of the engineers,” corrected Susan. “Right. You haven’t talked to her, or to Brian Ethridge, either; he’s the other one.”

“Right,” I said. “Or to Jimi Parsifal or Nita Fancy. I did talk to Russell Webster, but I didn’t ask him about alibis. But you know, I think I’ll come back tomorrow and do all that. I’ve got something else I want to do this afternoon, and right now I’m starving. Do you eat lunch?”

She said she never did. “I found out if I ate lunch I gained *pounds*, all on the behind. And anyway, I’ve already had about an hour’s coffee break. I’d better get back on the phone before the answering machine explodes.”

Chapter Eleven.

The Stalwart Outdoorsman

I decided to go home for lunch, anyway. When I eat out, even at MacDonald's, I always eat more than I would at home, and I'd been noticing that it had been getting harder recently for me to button my Levi's 501s. So I shot home and heated up one of those soup-for-one cans of clam chowder and had that—the soup, not the can—and a couple of crackers, and a cup of coffee for lunch. And that was enough.

While I ate I caught up on the latest *Scientific American*. It pays to think about something other than the case you're working on, sometimes.

After my lunch hour I went through the tedious business of getting out the dinghy again, and rowed across the canal to Lolita Lovatt's house. As I knocked on the door, I heard voices inside the house—Lolly's and a male voice—raised in what I took to be argument.

I heard Lolita say, "Don't do me any favors, thank you just the same. I'm *all right*. Why *is* it that you men always want to protect me? I can take care of *myself*."

The masculine voice replied, "*Oh*, yeah. That's why you let yourself get married to that Lovatt bastard, I suppose. Well, let me tell *you*, Lolita Lovatt, that—" I knocked again, louder.

The argument broke off. "Somebody at the door," said Lolly. She opened the door.

"I thought it must be you, Gin," she said. "Nobody else uses the back door." I followed her inside.

Russell Webster stood on the white carpeting in front of the flower-print upholstery of the white rattan couch, looking out of place in his camouflage fatigues and half-Wellingtons.

"*You* tell her, Gin," he said. "She oughtn't to shut herself away in this house the way she's doing. It's not healthy, either physically or mentally."

"He thinks I'm a helpless female," she said in tragic tones. "They all do. *I* don't know why. Here I am, six feet tall, and they all want to treat me like some kind of fragile piece of china or something. Well, I don't—"

"Lolly Lovatt, you are the world's most exasperating woman," said Russell, doubling up his fists. "I don't think you're the least bit fragile. That's exactly why I want you to come fishing with me. I bet you even know how to clean a fish. Don't you?"

She stared at him blankly. "Fishing? Is that what you wanted? I haven't been fishing since I was sixteen."

She paused and thought about it awhile. "And you know, I miss it. Sure, I know how to clean a fish. My brothers always said, 'You catch 'em, you clean 'em;' and I've caught lots of fish. What kind of bait are—"

I interrupted. It looked like the only way to prevent them from going off together and leaving me standing there staring after them.

"I don't want to be a wet blanket or anything," I said, "but I'd really like to talk to both of you before you go haring off somewhere."

"Who, me?" Russell said. "You didn't even know I was going to be here, did you? What about?"

"I'm taking up alibis for Lovatt's murder. This'll save me having to chase you up tomorrow."

I sat down and took my little notebook and a pen out of my beltback. "So okay. Where were you on the weekend of the twenty-fourth? Starting with Friday night."

He sat down on the couch and crossed his right ankle over his left knee. "I was working Friday night," he said, "from six to ten. Brian Ethridge was the engineer that was on with me, so he can

confirm that. Then I drove home and took Rowdy for a long walk. I had something I wanted to think out, and he was rarin' to go, so we—"

"Where do you live?" I said. I was trying, with difficulty, to imagine Russell Webster living in a condo or an apartment or, in fact, anywhere but in a hut in the woods. Or a tent, maybe.

"In a trailer park," he grinned. "Where else?"

"What trailer park?" I said. "The one down on State Road 84?"

"Nope," he said. "I used to live down there, but when they started working on the Interstate, it got to be too noisy and dirty and inconvenient. Used to be nice down there—almost woodsy. But they sure put a stop to that, what with their machinery and all. No, it's right off Sunrise, my trailer park. Centrally located, but they still haven't gotten around to urbanizing that area."

"Bite your tongue!" I adjured him. "Every time I say something like that, they bring in the bulldozers. But listen—that's right next to the railroad tracks, isn't it? Must be pretty noisy there, too."

"I've got no quarrel with train noises," he said. "Kind of homey, I think. And the park's real nice. People have planted all kinds of trees and flowers and stuff in there. A little bit like back home in Lou'siana."

"Where in Louisiana?" I said, momentarily diverted. "I lived in Slidell for five years, and—"

"Then we were neighbors. I was born and raised in Covington. Slidell's all built up now."

"I know," I said sadly. "I went through there a couple years ago, on the way to Houston, and I wish I hadn't. It was all broken out in MacDonaldses and motels. You can't go home again. I've found that out, over and over. But we've gotten off the subject. You went for a walk on that Friday night, you said. Anybody see you?"

"Hell, I don't know. Wasn't much of anybody around, except down by MacDonald's, and we didn't go that way. There were the usual street people around. We went through the downtown area, and over to that little park back of the library, and—"

"You *did* take a long walk. Must've got a lot of thinking done."

"No, that's the hell of it. I didn't get a bit of thinking done. Mind just went round and round like a hamster on his little wheel. Oh, well. Doesn't matter now, anyway. Whole thing worked out by itself."

"Anyway, Saturday morning I went and got my boat and took her out. But aside from the fellows down at the marina where I keep her, and Rowdy—he went along as crew—no witnesses. Sorry about that."

"I'll check 'em out, down at the marina," I said. "What kind of boat have you got?"

"Twenty-six-foot Wellcraft. With a cuddy cabin and a galley and all. You could almost live on a boat like that," he added, looking at Lolita.

"You *could* live on it," I corrected, "if you didn't mind being a little bit crowded. My boat's only twenty-six feet."

"Yeah, but what beam?" he said. "Mine's only seven and a half foot."

"Well, mine's nine," I admitted. "That does make a difference."

"Listen, Lolly—what I really came over here about was something you said the other day. You remember what you said about your neighbor? The one that practices gardening and has excellent hearing? Which side does he live on?"

"Mr. Ellerby? Oh—on the north. Why?"

"It occurs to me that he might have seen or heard something at the relevant time," I said. "When Win was murdered, or shortly before or afterward. When the murderer was arriving—or leaving."

"Oh. You know, I hadn't thought of that. But I don't know if they're back yet or not. He told me, before all this happened, that they were going to visit their daughter in Philadelphia over the Fourth, and maybe stay a couple weeks. Anyway, you can try it."

"Yeah, it would be a shame if there was an actual witness around and you never found it out," said Russell. "But wouldn't they have told the cops if they knew anything?"

"They probably would have if they knew they knew it," I said.

“What’s that mean?” said Lolly. “How could they know something without knowing it? Oh. I get it!” She brightened visibly. “You mean they might know something and not know it was important. Right?”

“Right,” I said. “And in line with that, what about the people on the other side?”

“Oh, they’ve been gone since the first of June. Mr. Husband—honest, that’s his real name,” she said. “He said it was a good old Anglo-Saxon name, but I could tell he’s sensitive about it, ‘specially since he’s one of these little men with a great big wife—”

“A regular Thurber couple, huh?” I said.

“Who?” she said in bewilderment. “Ought I to know about that?”

“Oh, he’s dead now,” I said. “But James Thurber used to write these funny stories for the *New Yorker* about little meek men with big fat wives, and illustrate them with these lovely, kind of shaky line drawings. *You* know. He wrote ‘The Secret Life of Walter Mitty.’“

“Oh! I read that in high school. The teacher said it was supposed to be funny, but I felt sorry for him—the poor little man.”

I didn’t comment, but stowed her remark away for an article I plan to write for an educational journal one day, about the futility of inflicting humor on kids before they are ready for it. I remember reading *Tom Sawyer* with bated breath—particularly the part about the cat and the graveyard—when I was about twelve. I loved it, but I didn’t see anything the least bit funny about it. When I reread it years later, I couldn’t believe I’d missed all the funny bits.

“So what did Mr. Husband say?”

“Oh, he just said kind of wistfully that he’d like to spend the summer here, but his wife couldn’t stand the heat. And no wonder! The woman must weigh over three hundred pounds. Just a mass of blubber.

“So I asked him if they didn’t have air conditioning in their house, and he said, yes, but Hilda—that’s his wife—was dead set on spending the summer on Cape Cod, so that was what they were going to do. So they shut up the house and went to Cape Cod, and

they won't be back till September."

I crossed Mr. and Mrs. Husband off my mental list. "Okay," I said. "I'll go and see Mr. Ellerby, then, and leave you two to plan your fishing trip."

Of course I had to stop on the way and visit with Rowdy, who was standing guard in the back of Russell's truck. He thought at first that his guard duty in a strange place precluded fraternizing with the natives, but changed his mind after smelling my hand.

I was not a native, it turned out, but an old acquaintance. I gave him a good two-handed scratch up and down his broad back, then smoothed his fur, fondled his ears, and went on to the Ellerbys'.

I thought for a moment that they must still be in Philadelphia. I rang the front doorbell. It worked, because I could hear its chimes faintly from somewhere in the house. Nobody answered, though, and I began to look around for signs of occupancy—or otherwise. The first thing I saw was a beige Mercedes sitting in the driveway. The trunk lid was up, and there was a big bag of peat moss inside. That looked as though there might be somebody around pretty close.

I had just started to follow the path of concrete squares around the side of the house when I nearly collided with Mr. Ellerby, who was walking moderately quickly toward the car. We both did the "Oops! Pardon me!" ritual, and then he asked if he might help me, and I said I hoped so and was he Mr. Ellerby, and he said yes, and that took care of the preliminaries.

He picked up the peat moss, closed the trunk, and led me down the garden path to a group of PVC chairs, suggesting that I have a seat while he disposed of the bag. I waited while he opened one of those metal garden sheds that you get at Sears, and stacked the peat moss carefully on another full bag in the corner.

"Sale at the nursery," he explained briefly, dusting his hands. "They had a terrific price on these big bags of peat moss, and I knew I'd have a use for 'em sooner or later, so I bought a couple. Do you garden?"

"No, I more like pot," I said apologetically. "I live on a boat, so all my plants have to be portable."

"Say, I know you!" he said. "You live right across the way, at the marina, don't you? I've seen you around for—oh, must be nearly two years now." He sat down in the PVC chair opposite me.

"Oh, all of that," I agreed. "My name's Gin Ritchey, and I'm a private investigator. Right now, I'm working for Mrs. Lovatt, next door."

He leaned toward me confidentially. "You know," he said, "I've been feeling guilty ever since I talked to those two policemen. I didn't intend to tell them about the Lovatts' quarrel on the Friday night, but Josephine—that's my wife—was there, and she knew about the quarrel, and she insisted that I tell about it. She disliked Mrs. Lovatt on sight. Said she was sure she was one of those swingers she'd read about. Anyway, I really didn't want to—"

"We women don't have much mercy on each other, do we?" I said. "I notice that a lot. Anyway, maybe you could help her—Mrs. Lovatt—now. If I could just ask you a question or two?"

"Certainly," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Ask away."

"If you could just cast your mind back to Saturday, the twenty-fourth of June. Can you remember what you were doing that morning?"

"Oh, yes. That's easy. I was trimming the hibiscus hedge that morning. It's a big job, so I have to devote half a day to it, even when I haven't let it get past me the way I had that time."

I looked at the hedge that grew on the property line between his land and Lovatt's. It was a handsome one, all of eight feet tall, and perfectly clipped, horizontally and vertically. Brilliant red blossoms glowed among the shiny dark-green leaves.

"Looks like a major operation, all right," I said. "What do you use—a stepladder and a plumb-bob?"

"And an electric clipper and a spirit level," he concurred. "Anyway, I was at it all morning, and I didn't really notice much else. That is what you want to know about, isn't it?"

"Yes. Just about anything out of the ordinary that happened next door. Think back," I pleaded. "When you were on the ladder doing the top of the hedge—could you see over into their yard?"

“Oh, yes, but nothing was happening just then. Let’s see—that would have been about eleven or eleven-thirty, because I saved the top for last.”

“Were the hurricane shutters open or shut then?”

“Shut. I do remember that. I remember wondering if they weren’t up yet, over there. They kept rather strange hours.”

“So you didn’t see anyone moving around over there at all,” I said disappointedly. He shook his head. “Well, we’ll try another tack. Did you notice *anything* out of the ordinary, anywhere in the neighborhood?”

“Not to say out of the ordinary. There was the barge, of course. It went by while I was up on the ladder, and I watched it as far as I could see it. There are so many boats moored on both sides of the canal, and that barge—it’s the one they call the Pile Driver Express—is so big that—”

“I know. All of us boat people were watching it, too. I always expect it to take pieces off my boat, but so far it never has. I guess they get pretty good at piloting that thing around. You didn’t hear any—noises—then?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. The little boys across the street had been setting off firecrackers and cherry bombs all week. I kept telling them it wouldn’t be any fun when the Fourth finally did come around, but they don’t listen to old fuddy-duddies like me. I think I heard a few firecrackers, but, as I say, I’d gotten so used to them I hardly noticed them any more.

“And I think our doorbell rang once, but I was making so much noise with the clippers that I’m not sure. Josephine would know about that, but she’s not home just now. I think she said it was a sale at Burdine’s she was going to, but I’m not certain of that.”

Somehow he reminded me of a cartoon I’d seen once. It depicted an academic-looking man searching through a cluttered desk, while two policemen looked on. The caption said, “I’m positive I got a ransom note for my wife... It’s here somewhere.” I wondered if the otherwise acute Mr. Ellerby’s woolly attitude where his wife was concerned was in the nature of a protective blanket.

I stood up and extended a hand to him. "Well, if you ever do remember seeing or hearing anything unusual, would you please call me?" I said. "Here's one of my business cards, just in case. And thank you very much for your help."

"I just wish it had been more," he said regretfully as he walked with me to the front of the house. "Don't worry. If I think of anything, I'll let you know."

When I got back to the Lovatts', the truck was gone, and so were Russell, Lolita, and Rowdy. I shook my head, wondering if Lolly was in danger of being swept off her feet again. Then I decided that a fishing trip couldn't exactly be described as a big romantic rush, and shrugged it off. I went around back to the dock, untied my dinghy, and rowed home.

Chapter Twelve.

The Observant Neighbor

When I scrambled out onto the dock on the other side of the canal, I noticed that Sally was washing her boat, so I went over to watch. One of my favorite occupations is watching other people work, particularly when it's a job that I really should be doing myself. Suddenly I remembered the question I wanted to ask her.

"Sally, the other day when we were all watching Al bring his boat into the slip, I noticed you had a funny expression on your face," I said.

"Did I?" she said, spraying the deck with the pressure nozzle of the hose. "I don't really remember that. Could you perhaps be a little more specific about what was happening at the time?"

"Well, it was right after Peter made that remark about Mary being bloody-minded, if that tells you anything."

"Oh," she said. "I know what it was. I had just recognized the boy's accent, was all it was."

"*Did* you?" I said. "That accent has been bothering me for weeks. Well, ever since he first said anything, anyway. I had the impression it was British Colonial of some sort, but beyond that—"

She shot me an amused glance. "It's South African, of course," she said. "Brian and I went there on our honeymoon. Well, I mean, we stopped there in the course of sailing around the world. But we stayed there for several weeks, because our self-steering was playing up, and we had to send off for a part. I got to know the accent quite well."

"I wonder...." I said. "Could that be why he was so silent when

he first came in? White South Africans are not exactly tops on our popularity polls just now, particularly among students and journalists. Could the boy have been literally afraid to open his mouth?"

"I don't know," she said, "but I think it's shameful, if that's so. The South Africans I met were very nice people, most of them. But perhaps he's just the strong, silent type you read about in novels."

"Maybe," I said dubiously. "He seemed to talk readily enough when he was helping me move George's dinghy, though."

While I'd been at the station, George had finally finished scraping the bottom of his dink, painted it, and now had it back in the water. Beyond cleaning up the occasional blob of paint, the dinghy affair was history as far as I was concerned.

Sally smiled a wicked little smile. "Perhaps you remind him of his mum."

"Why, Sally McDermott! I never knew you to be catty before!" I paused to think about it. "You know, you could just be right. I'm certainly *old* enough to be his mother, if he's under thirty-five, and I'm sure he is. Anyway, enough of that. Have you talked to Fat Al yet?"

It was a standing joke among the boat people that Fat Al was smitten with Sally. She didn't deny it, exactly; just said that Al liked to talk to her because she was so unlike his ex-wife.

"Not at any length," she said. "Just 'good morning', and 'how ya doin'.' Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered how he was settling into his new slip. Has he been up the mast yet?"

That was another standing joke. You weren't really considered a member of the community at Costa Brava until you had seen Fat Al go up his mast. As he must have weighed three hundred pounds, it was truly an awesome sight to see him in a bos'n's chair, hauling himself up his tall mast by means of a complex system of blocks and tackle.

"No, not yet," she said. "I must remember to warn Mary and Peter to be on the alert for that. It would be a shame if they missed

it.”

I agreed and went aboard my boat to look over the food supply. I decided to do fried rice with ham chunks and snow peas for dinner, and was up to my metacarpals in rice and soy sauce when the phone rang.

I put the lid on the skillet, turned down the burner, wiped my hands, and picked up the phone. I thought briefly of saying, “Hello, Glenn,” when I answered it, but was glad I hadn’t when the caller turned out to be Mr. Ellerby.

“I just remembered something,” he said. “It’s not about anything at the Lovatts’, though. But while I was clipping the hedge, I noticed that there was a man—a very *large* man—up the mast of one of the boats over there.”

“Was it a wooden boat?”

“I never really noticed. I was so fascinated, seeing him go up and down like one of those monkey-on-a-stick toys they had when I was a boy, only much fatter, that I didn’t look at anything else.

“The thing was, though, that he was in an excellent position to see anything that went on in the Lovatts’ yard, if anything did. But I think he took his boat out the next day, and there’s someone else in his—er—parking space now, so maybe you won’t be able to find him.”

“I think I will. He came back, only he’s in another slip now. That’s very interesting,” I mused. “No doubt he *would* go up his mast to check out his rigging before he went for a cruise. Thank you *very* much for calling.”

After he hung up, I went and checked on the fried rice, wondering why Glenn hadn’t called. Then he knocked on the hull of the boat and called “Permission to come aboard, Cap’n?”

I called back through the open hatch, “Permission granted.”

“I did try to call,” he apologized, “but I got no answer the first time, and the line was busy the second, so I just came over on spec. What’s for dinner?”

“Oh, it’s okay,” I said. “Fried rice. But you know, it occurs to me that I didn’t put on the answering machine before I went over to

Lolly's. I remember checking for calls when I got back from the station, and then I totally forgot to attach it again."

"Now you'll never know if Donald Trump called you," he said. "And he'll have to find someone else to recover his stolen boat."

I giggled. "Wouldn't that be a lot like pinching the *QE2*? Only an utter fool—or maybe a college student—would think of it."

We were silent for a moment, contemplating the delightful picture of *Trump Princess*, all three hundred-odd feet of her, being spirited away from her dock.

"Anyway," I said, "he only comes here in December, for the boat parade. Anybody who steals her will have to go north to do it."

Over coffee, I told him of my talk with Mr. Ellerby, and his subsequent phone call.

"Who was it he saw up the mast?" he said.

"I forgot you've never seen Fat Al go up his mast," I said. "It's something that has to be seen to be believed."

"Wait a minute," he said. "Are you telling me *Fat Al* goes up his mast? And it doesn't bend over?"

"Fat Al goes up his mast. And nobody has been able to detect the mast bending in the slightest. Believe me, everyone here—except Peter and Mary, and they just got here—has observed the process from beginning to end at least once, so if the mast bent, we'd know it.

"Anyway, he certainly would have gone up to check that everything was okay—antenna, spreader lights, rigging—before he went out, because that's the way he is."

"How long did he stay up there?"

"I don't know, but he wouldn't have hurried about it. He doesn't seem to be bothered at all by heights, the way I am. I tried just once to climb my ratlines, and my knees got so shaky I wasn't sure whether I'd ever get down again or not."

He was sympathetic. "Well, a lot of people are like that. If you look down when you get high up there—"

"Yeah, but I was only up about five feet! It's ridiculous for a grown woman to be like that."

He pointed out that a grown person was a lot more likely to have acrophobia than a kid, and I had to agree with him. My boys climbed everything available from the time they could walk—particularly Chuck. I remember the day he called, “Mama, look at me!” and I looked up, and there he was, swaying in the top of a ninety-foot pine tree.

I did *not* have a heart attack, but it was touch and go there for a minute. He tells me now that he doesn’t even like to climb ladders any more.

“Anyway,” I said, “he could have been up there any length of time at all, depending on what he wanted to look at. And he could’ve seen anything that went on in the Lovatts’ yard. That’s if anything did happen while he was up there, and if he looked in that direction while it was happening. Pretty chancy.”

“No more chancy than asking Mr. Ellerby if he saw anything while he was up on his stepladder,” he said. “Maybe not *as* chancy, because if anybody *was* up to anything over there, likely he would see Mr. Ellerby and stop till he went away. Probably he wouldn’t even notice Fat Al.”

“True,” I said. “Well, I don’t know what we’re sitting here theorizing for. Let’s go ask him.”

We went down the dock and pounded on Fat Al’s hull and called, “Al! Are you there?” but he wasn’t.

“I should’ve realized when I saw his hatches weren’t open,” I said. “He must’ve gone out for the evening.”

“I only see two open hatches along the whole dock, “ he said, “yours, and Sally’s. Is everybody else out?”

“I take it that’s a rhetorical question. No, they’re not out. They’re all sitting below, with their stupid air conditioners going full blast. Surely you can hear the water coming out, can’t you?”

“Well, but doesn’t Fat Al have an air conditioner?”

“Nope. And he’s the only fat person I’ve ever known who didn’t bitch and moan about the heat all the time. No, he’s just flat not at home.”

I went and knocked on Mary and Peter’s hull, next door. There

was a rather long pause, and then they emerged, looking flushed and disheveled. I hoped I hadn't interrupted anything, but thought there was a pretty good chance that I had.

Oh, hell—too late now "Have you two seen anything of Fat Al today?" I said aloud.

"I saw him this morning," Mary said. "I got up kinda early, because I had an appointment at Miami University. I was just coming back from the shower when I saw him get off his boat, carrying a suitcase."

Glenn and I looked at each other. "Did he say where he was going?" I said.

"I didn't ask," she said. "I'm kind of numb for an hour or so after I get up, so I didn't think anything about it, until just now. Why?"

I explained. She was incredulous about Al's trips up the mast, but I finally convinced her.

"Maybe George would know," she said. "He seems to know all about everything."

"Yeah," I grumbled. "The only trouble is finding a way to keep him from telling you just that: all about everything, in addition to whatever it was you wanted to know. Still, this is important enough to take the risk, I guess."

I went and knocked on George's hull. As I had feared, he was at home.

"Come on below, where it's cool," he said.

I had expected just that, so I had my excuse ready. I gave up long ago telling people that I *like* hot weather and that I detest air conditioning. They either don't believe me or they think I'm crazy and ought to be saved from myself. Or both.

"We don't want to walk on your deck, George," I said. "It looks just beautiful, but new paint is so fragile for a week or two, isn't it? Come on out on the dock a minute, will you?"

He came out, stepping carefully on the newly-painted area. We sat down at one of the concrete tables the marina management so thoughtfully provides, and I asked my question.

“Do you have any idea where Fat Al went this morning?”

Well, of course he did. “Sure. Went home to Ohio,” he said. “Told me about it last night. ‘George,’ he said, ‘I’ve got to go—’”

I interrupted. If I hadn’t, we’d have been there yet. “Why did he do that? He didn’t say anything about it when he came in yesterday evening, did he, Glenn?”

“It was a pretty spur-of-the-moment thing,” said George, swinging into his narrative mode again. “While he was over on Hendricks, he called home from the pay phone over there, and his sister told him his Aunt Lizzie had died while he was out cruising, and he—”

It’s essential, when talking—I mean, listening—to George, that you don’t let him get the bit in his teeth. If you do, he’s off and away. I interrupted again ruthlessly. “Did he go home for the funeral, or what?”

“No, no,” he said impatiently. “Funeral’s been over for weeks. No, it turned out that Auntie left him a nice piece of property in her will—farmland, it was, good old cornbelt farmland. Not that I’d have a farm, myself, if you gave it to me, but—”

“Well, why *did* he go back to Ohio, then?” I pursued relentlessly.

“That’s what I was just *telling* you,” he said in an injured tone. “Al said *he* didn’t want farmland, either. Wouldn’t do to be an absentee landlord, he said, and there was no *way* he was going back to live in Ohio. So when his sister offered to buy him out—seems the old lady left *her* half the farm and some money, too, and Al the other half—he jumped at it. So he—”

“Is that what he went back for?” I said. “To see to the legal details?”

“I was just going to say, so he decided he wouldn’t try to do business long distance, he’d go up there and get it all set up in person. And I think he’s right. Takes too long to do things by mail, and you can’t—”

“Did he say how long he’d be gone?” Glenn did the interrupting for me, this time, having apparently caught onto the technique.

“Said he didn’t know, but he thought it’d probably be a week or so. Anyway, what do you want Fat Al for?”

“I think he was up his mast when the murder was committed across the canal,” I said. “Since he was gone when the cops came, he may not even know about the murder, so he—”

Now it was George’s turn to interrupt. “Oh, yes he does. I told him all about it.”

I just bet you did, I thought.

“Did you tell him when the murder was committed?” I asked.

“Well, no, not exactly,” he said defensively. “I told him it happened the weekend he went out, so he just missed all the excitement, but he didn’t seem too interested. Said he had to go below and pack, and went off before I even had time to—”

“I think I hear my phone ringing,” I said. “Don’t you, Glenn?”

I surreptitiously dug him in the ribs with my elbow. He cocked an ear toward *Blue Jasmine*.

“Yeah, sure enough, it’s ringing,” he said.

“Gotta go, George,” I said. “Thanks a lot for your help.” And we were off.

As we went down the dock, I heard him saying, “Listen, come back again later and I’ll tell you about the time I—”

“Whew,” I sighed, plopping down in one of the two aluminum garden chaises I keep in the cockpit, while Glenn sat in the other. “Well, we kept that fairly short.”

“Yeah, but the fact remains that it was bad news,” he said. “You don’t know when Al will be back, even.”

“I was sort of forgetting that, in the glow of satisfaction of having got the data out of George without taking all night about it. Oh, well—there’s nothing to be done. Get us out a couple of beers, would you?”

Chapter Thirteen.

The Nostalgia Buff

The next morning I was back at the radio station. The four people I hadn't yet interviewed about alibis were Brian Ethridge, Kieran Allison, Nita Fancy, and Jimi Parsifal. According to the schedule Susan had copied for me, Kieran Allison was doing the three-to-eleven shift as engineer that week, so she should be available at eleven and, if I lurked in the right place, I could probably catch her on her way out.

Parsifal and Fancy were supposed to be on from ten to two. Susan said Parsifal was doing a nostalgia show, and Fancy was supposed to be doing news and weather on it. Probably I would find both of them in the snack room sometime before then.

Brian Ethridge would have to wait till next week. He was on the graveyard shift—seven p.m. to three a.m.—and I wasn't about to turn out at three in the morning for anybody, or wait around till seven, either.

I got there at about nine-thirty and put coins in various slots, ending up with a cup of coffee, another of chicken bouillon, and a packet of those little cheese-cracker-and-peanut-butter sandwiches. The place was deserted except for me, but the amount of litter scattered about the room reassured me that living people had been there sometime that morning.

I sat down at a fairly centrally-located table and began to sip and munch slowly. Sipping slowly was no problem because, like every coffee machine I've ever run afoul of, this one had produced boiling-hot liquids—apparently on the theory that the natural state of

the roof of the human mouth is blistered. Susan came in to get a canned soft drink, waved to me, said, "Gotta run!" and did.

I had just about finished the peanut-butter crackers when Fancy and Parsifal arrived. They looked at me warily, as if they suspected me of spying on them or something, but I chose to be impervious to such hints. As soon as they sat down, I went over to their table.

Parsifal was resplendent in a green-velvet suit with bell-bottomed pants and wide sleeves, and he was wearing what I was almost certain was a different ruffled shirt from the one he'd had on the day before.

His dark-brown hair fell to his shoulders in Cavalier curls. Put a sword at his waist and Bess, the landlord's daughter, would surely take him for her boyfriend, the Highwayman. At least, she would until she noticed that he was wearing winkle-picker shoes rather than thigh-high boots.

Nita, a small girl with straight, blue-black hair and just a suggestion of an epicanthic fold about her heavily made-up green eyes, was dressed much more simply in tight faded jeans, a red silk shirt, and spike-heeled red shoes.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Gin Ritchey. If you don't mind, I'd like to talk to you about—"

"Hey, man," drawled Jimi Parsifal.

If there was one thing I deplored about the sixties and seventies, it was the tendency among the cooler individuals to address everybody, regardless of age or sex, as "man".

"Hey, man, you're a detective, aren't you? Groovy." He took a sip of his Dr. Pepper and attempted, without much success, to look bored, or maybe it was Existential that he was aiming for. "You want to know about our alibis, hey, baby?" That was just a notch better than "man", so I smiled at him.

"Right-a-rooney," I said. I figured that one ought to ring his chimes, and it did.

"Right-a-rooney!" he echoed blissfully. "Far freakin' out! She's hip, Nita!"

Nita smiled, but I could see she wasn't pleased. So okay, I was

old, but I was still female, and it was obvious that she would brook no female competition, however haggish its aspect.

“Wild,” she drawled unenthusiastically. “Is that how they talked in the olden days?”

Jimi was preparing an indignant retort, but I forestalled him. “Well, some people did, anyway.

“Listen, I don’t want to keep you cats too long—I know you’ve got a gig to do—so let’s get down to the nitty, okay?”

That was okay with Jimi, and Nita was prepared to follow suit. It really didn’t take long, either, as they had had the weekend of the murder off work, and had made their pilgrimage to Disney World.

“I don’t suppose you’ve still got the tickets or anything?” I said, not too hopefully. Well, of course they didn’t, but they had the next best thing—two live witnesses. They had taken along another couple to share expenses, and all four had stayed in the same hotel room. I suspected that only two of them had registered, but that was the hotel’s problem, not mine.

I sounded them out about Win Lovatt, anyway. They both considered him totally uninteresting. “He was old, man,” said Parsifal scornfully. “And he like thought he was cool, but he was totally square, man. He didn’t dig the Music.”

Well, Russell Webster had already told me that Lovatt didn’t like music, so that was no surprise. Nita’s assessment of him was along the same general lines, but subtly different.

“He was a dirty old man,” she said. To my certain knowledge, Lovatt had been thirty-two when he died. I wondered just how old Nita Fancy was.

“He was, like, always coming on with this shit like he was some kind of sexy hunk or something. And there he was, like old enough to be my father.”

I didn’t protest this assessment. I thanked them and went back to my table, and as soon as I did, their heads went together and they became conspiratorial again. I didn’t know what they were plotting, and I decided I didn’t really care. As Susan had said, let Jules worry about it if he wanted to.

At ten-forty-five I gathered up my empties, trashed them, and walked down the hall to Studio B. I stood propping up the wall to the right of the door and waited, and presently the door opened and Kieran Allison came out. Or at least, I assumed it was Kieran Allison; she was the only woman around the station that I hadn't yet met, and she was coming out of the right door. I asked her just to make sure, though, and she said she was.

At my suggestion, we went back to the coffee-room and I drew another cup of scalding black liquid. *A little more of this*, I thought, *and you'll have a splendid case of gastric butterflies*, *Gin Ritchey*. Still, it was in a good cause.

We sat at one of the tables and exchanged once-overs. Kieran was a tall blonde with frizzy, shoulder-length hair and a Roman nose. She wore baggy beige pants, a short-sleeved aqua cotton shirt, and white-and-aqua high tops.

She gave me a slow smile and said, "Well, will I do, do you think?"

"Oh, you'll do fine. I'm sorry if I was staring," I said. "I was just sort of thinking how many girls there are now who are taller than I am. Would you believe I was considered tall, back in high school?"

"Well, you're not exactly *short*," she said diplomatically. "Just sort of medium-size, I'd say. Have people gotten so much taller?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'm beginning to wonder if I grew up in a community of midgets, or something. Anyway, we might as well get on with it. Do you know what I want to know?"

"Sure. It's all over the station. You want to know where I was, the weekend of the twenty-fourth, and did I kill Win Lovatt. Right?"

"More or less," I said. "That'll do to be going on with, anyway. And where were you?"

"Well, I went out Friday night," she said. "But I had to be at work at six-thirty the next morning, so we started early, with happy hours. Then—"

"Who's we? Boyfriend? Husband? Roommate?"

"Boyfriend, roommate, and *her* boyfriend. Anyway, then we went on to Pizza Hut for dinner—that was about eight, I think—and

did a couple more bars; the ones along the beach—the Captain Hook and The Mad Admiral—and finished up at the Pickle Patch. That is, Norm and I finished up there. I think Mandy and Nick went on to City Limits, but it was after ten, and when you have to get up at four-thirty—”

“Kind of takes the edge off your evening, doesn’t it?” I said in sympathy. “So you went home?”

“Yup. Norm came in for a while, and then he left and I went to bed. Then I worked from six-thirty to two-thirty on Saturday, and Norm picked me up after work and we went to the beach, and Saturday night we drove down to Miami and went to a couple of places Rick knew of there. He thought they were really great, but I thought they were boring. Then Sunday—”

“I don’t think I’m going to worry about Sunday,” I said. “It’s pretty certain Lovatt was killed on Saturday—or maybe even Friday night. After all, his body was found on Sunday morning. So what did you think of Win Lovatt?”

“He was a shit,” she said promptly. “I had to work with him some—we all did. Shared the pain, you might say. Anyway, he’d try to use you any way he could—get you into his stupid skits and dialogues, and like that.

“I told him I didn’t do skits, and when he tried it, I just clammed. Bob McMasters put me onto that one, and it worked fine. Anyway, he was always trying to needle me. His favorite way was to ask me when I was going to get a nose job.”

“How utterly juvenile of him!” I gasped. “How did you restrain yourself from giving *him* an impromptu nose job?”

“Oh, I came to terms with my nose a long time ago,” she said placidly. “It’s been in the family a long time, or so my granny always said, and she had one just like mine. I was called ‘Beaky’ all the way up through school, and—what the hell—I got along okay.”

“That’s not the point, though,” I argued. “He *meant* to make you feel bad. What if you’d been a suicidal type, and desperately sensitive about your nose?”

“You know, I don’t think he’d’ve needled me about it if I had

been. He was a grade-A louse, was Win, but either not that much of a louse or else he had a healthy regard for his own skin. I never did know which.”

“And you never will, now,” I pointed out. I began gathering up my possessions. “Well, Kieran, that about covers it. You’re last on my list except for Brian Ethridge, and—”

“I don’t think you need to talk to him,” she said. “Brian only started work here a week before Lovatt was killed. The fellow he replaced—Mark Comerford—moved to New Orleans. So I don’t think Brian—”

“Well, but maybe he had reason to hate Lovatt *before* he came to work here,” I said. “Where’s he from?”

“Cincinnati,” she said. “Used to work at WKRP, and got tired of the cold weather. Well, you do what you like, but personally—”

“Yeah. Doesn’t sound like there’s much point in it, at that,” I agreed. “I’ll put him way down at the bottom of my list.” And I went home for lunch.

Afterward, I sat in the cockpit with my notebook and tried to assess the progress I’d made, if any. I don’t know about you, but I’m the original scatterbrain; if I want to get hold of a subject and really sort it out, I’ve got to do it with a pen and a sheet of paper. Otherwise, I forget what I’m supposed to be thinking about.

I picked up the notebook in which I’d written down the questions I wanted to answer, way back at the beginning of the case, and looked at them, one by one.

1) *Who found Lovatt’s body?* Well, technically, Officers Laurel and Hardy, but Jules Farthingale had been pretty sure that it *was* a body, and whose it was.

2.) *In what circumstances?* What I had meant by that question was, more of less, what had led the discoverer of the body to discover it? As program director of the station, Jules was responsible for the quality and quantity of the product transmitted over the airwaves. Naturally he had been disturbed when Lovatt didn’t show for work. I didn’t think that part of it was suspicious at all.

3.) *What sort of gun was the murder weapon?* A twenty-two

pistol—an ordinary old Saturday Night Special. Could've been anybody's.

4.) *In what part of the body was he shot?* Head and heart—both shots quite accurate, according to the M.E.'s report. Shot in the heart first, from a short distance away, and then the head wound from close up, just to make sure. A very methodical murderer.

5.) Could anybody get out of the house through the windows? A flat NO.

6.) Did Lolita Lovatt have an alibi? Yes. Did I believe it? Yes again.

Somehow I wasn't getting at the pattern of the problem I wanted to solve. I sat back and did the mind-blanking thing I do when I need to do pattern recognition. The trick is not to think of anything—especially not to think in words—but just sort of look at the shape of the problem.

Recognizing the pattern wasn't hard. Glenn had already pointed it out to me, but I hadn't wanted to think about it then, and I wasn't sure I did now, either. This was a Locked Room problem, and I still hadn't a clue what to do about it.

But the more I considered it, the surer I was that I'd been going at this from the wrong end. I needed to find out the *how* of it first. I had more than enough *whos* and not a single *how*. If I could get that, or at least some of the possibilities, it might point at the person who had done it.

I did some more mind-blanking, but without any luck this time, so I picked up my grocery list and headed for Winn-Dixie, instead.

Chapter Fourteen.

The Athletic Dog

I stopped by Hagen's boatyard on the way back, to cadge a lift the rest of the way home. I try not to make a habit of riding in motor vehicles. One of the main advantages of using a bike for transportation is the exercise you get riding long distances, and accepting lifts negates the whole idea. Once in a while, though, I give in to the temptation.

Bonzo was lying under the banyan tree in front of the office, chewing halfheartedly on a Frisbee. When he saw me, he jumped up and came over, carrying the Frisbee in his mouth, and plunked it down in front of me.

"Okay," I said. "I'll throw it for you, Bonzo, but only twice. Ready?" I made a couple of feints, then skimmed the saucer as far as I could down the driveway. Bonzo was off like a shot, outdistanced the Frisbee, waited, then leaped at the right moment, caught it with a *thunk!* and came trotting back to me, carrying it triumphantly.

I repeated the process. The only problem was how to stop. Dogs are natural-born jocks who love games of skill, and they either don't count too well or they rely on their natural persuasiveness to make you override any limits you set. I quit after four throws, but he would have gone on all night, if I would.

I had my hand on the office door when it opened in my face and Glenn came out. He stopped just short of bowling me over, said, "We've got to stop meeting like this," and gave me a quick kiss. "I see you brought your dinner with you," he said, nodding toward the bag of groceries in my bike basket. "How about we have it on board

Sailor's Wench, for a change?"

Sailor's Wench is Glenn's boat, a cutter-rigged Crocker sloop. If you're not a boat person, you probably don't know about Crockers, but owning one is rather like owning a Stutz Bearcat or a fifty-seven Chevy.

People you've never seen before will approach you and tell you about this friend of theirs who got a Crocker for five hundred dollars, restored her, and sailed her around the world—things like that. They're wooden boats, and most of them were built back in the thirties and forties. In the words of the late George Gobel, you don't hardly get that kind no more. Well, you don't *never* get that kind no more, because they stopped making them some sixty years ago.

I locked my bike to one of the porch pillars of the old cottage that serves as an office for the boatyard. Glenn picked up my groceries and carried them down to the boat. Bonzo followed us hopefully, carrying the Frisbee.

While we sat in the cockpit after dinner, drinking beer and watching the river traffic go by, I told Glenn what I had decided about the Lovatt case.

"I've talked to dozens of people who had no use for Win Lovatt," I said. "Well, *a* dozen, anyway. And I think I could probably find at least a hundred more who thought the man was a little lower than the average snake's belly, and that the world would be an infinitely better place without him. I can't see my way to making any more progress that way, no matter how many people I interview. It could be any one of the people I've talked to, or somebody completely unknown."

"Well, that's true," he said. "But isn't there any way you could sort of narrow the field? Like, maybe there's something the murderer would have had to know that other people wouldn't. Something like that."

"Oddly enough, I do know the sort of thing you mean, though you might have stated it better. You mean like who would have known where he lived, for instance, or when he'd be home alone, or whatever. Right?"

“Right,” he said. “Why wouldn’t that help?”

“Well, I thought of that. Apparently Lovatt didn’t go around telling people where he lived, all right; but everyone knew where he worked.”

“Oh, sure, everyone knew he worked at the radio station,” he said, “but how many people know where the station is? I don’t.”

“Well, you could, though, if you wanted to look it up in the Yellow Pages, under Radio Stations. That’s how I found out the address. And once you knew that, it’d be a simple matter to hang around outside the station till Lovatt came out, and then just simply follow him home. Nothing to it.”

“Wait a minute. It’s all very well to say, wait till Lovatt came out, but how do you know what he *looks* like? It’s radio, remember, not TV.”

“Oh, hell. I never thought of that. That puts us right back at square one.”

“Not really,” he said, taking up the stance of devil’s advocate, “I bet there have been pictures of him in the paper, or something. Trust the station to get as much publicity as possible for their talk show.”

“Ohh, yeah,” I said. “George’s boat painter was telling him Lovatt had been written up in *Sunshine* magazine. I forgot.”

“What’s *Sunshine* magazine? It sounds like something you used to get at Sunday School.”

“Close,” I said. “Very close. *Sunshine* magazine, my love, is the Sunday supplement of the local paper. You know, the one that tells you more than you want to know about which TV personality has just written his autobiography?”

“Ohh, yeah. Well, there it is, then. If he was written up in the Sunday supplement, surely there would have been pictures of him, headphones and all. I guess you’re right. It’d be duck soup to find out where he lived.”

Now I became devil’s advocate. “Okay, so you know where he lives. You’ve still got problems, though. One is, how would anyone have known he’d be home alone on a Saturday morning? I mean, he

and Lolly were only married about six months ago. / would have expected her to be there, wouldn't you?"

"True. I would have. Well, the same thing holds, though. All you'd have to do is park down the street and watch till you caught him alone. That's not hard."

"I hate to keep making difficulties," I said, "but that wouldn't be easy. One reason I get in my dinghy and row over there when I want to see Lolly is that she lives on Elysian Isle. You know—the one with the guard kiosk just north of the bridge?"

"You have to pass the kiosk even to get onto the street. And then, just to make it harder, they've got rent-a-cops who patrol at night. If you were parked on the street at night, you can bet they'd come and look in your car window, and if they saw you in there, they'd make you leave."

"Oh, hell. Well, obviously the killer found out that Lovatt was home alone, or just didn't care one way or the other. Maybe he would've killed Lolly, too, if she'd been there."

"Right. The fact remains that Lovatt *was* killed, and you probably wouldn't have to have any special knowledge to find out where he lived. The murderer got *in*, somehow. What I want to know is, how the flamin' 'ell did he get *out* again?"

Well, there we were, back at scenic Square One. "I've got just one more thing to say, and then let's talk about something else."

"I still think that what I need to do is change my angle of approach and concentrate on the mechanics of the thing, rather than the motives and opportunities of possible suspects. Right now, the latter subject seems to be infinite, and I don't think contemplating infinity is going to get me anywhere in a hurry."

I didn't go home until morning. One thing about being a middle aged widow is that you're probably freer than you've ever been in your life—if you know how to work it, anyway. I call to mind a joke that was current a few years ago; it went like this: A priest, an atheist, and a rabbi were discussing the controversial subject of When Life Begins.

"Life," said the priest, "begins at conception."

"No," said the atheist, "life begins at birth."

"You're both wrong," said the rabbi. "Life begins when all the children leave home and the dog dies."

All this is by way of saying that there was nobody waiting up for me at home. And I never did get that lift, either. I rode home on my bike in the early morning, chained the bike to the fence, and went below and changed clothes. Then I carried my gear out to the shuffleboard court and started my headrolls.

I had just gotten to the squat-jumps when Alice Camry came walking over the sundeck, her collection can in her hand. Welcoming any excuse for a breather—I *detest* squat-jumps—I walked over to meet her. "Hi, Alice," I said. "Opening up a new territory?"

She started visibly. "Oh! Hello, Mrs. Ritchey," she said. "I didn't see you over there behind the hibiscus bush. Do you live here?"

"Well, sort of," I said. "I live on that sailboat over there—the little one down at the end. Have you been collecting from the apartments here?"

"Not yet," she said. "It's too early to bother people yet. I always get places too early, these days. I think it's because I don't sleep very well any more. Old age, I guess."

"Well, that's a problem I haven't had yet," I said. "My waking-up-early syndrome has just caught up with the sleeping-late one I had in my youth, so I get up at sort of an average time."

"Sometimes," she said, "I have nightmares, too. That makes me *want* to wake up, but sometimes I can't."

"Now there I can empathize with you," I said. "For nearly a year after my husband died, I had nightmares. Some of them weren't really *bad* dreams; it was just that Steve was in them, and I'd wake up and remember he was dead, and then I'd cry."

"I didn't have them after Edgar died," she said. "He was sick so long, and felt so bad at the end, that it was a blessed relief for both of us. No, most of my bad dreams are about Eddie."

"Who's Eddie? Your son?" I was pretty sure it was her grandson she was referring to, but I wasn't supposed to know about

him.

Sure enough, Eddie was her grandson. She told me the same story Susan had told me down at the station, except that it was even more pathetic.

She described the boy before he got into the devil-worship cult. He had been beautiful, she said; tall and blond and well-built. “The girls just chased after him,” she said proudly. “But he hadn’t really gotten interested in girls yet.” He had been interested in history and athletics, she said.

“Then he started listenin’ to that hard-rock music—heavy metal, they call it, but I don’t know what it’s got to do with lead. And he got one of those loud disc players for Christmas that year—boom boxes, they call ‘em, and I could see why that was. God help me, *I* gave it to him. But it was all he said he wanted, and it *looked* harmless enough.”

“I think they usually are harmless,” I said. “Oh, there are people who talk about the younger generation growing up to have boilermakers’ deafness, but you know, they’ve been saying that for twenty years, and I don’t—”

“Didn’t hurt his hearing any,” she broke in. “But he got in with this real weird crowd. The boys all wore ponytails, and they were years out of style at the time. And the girls all looked—well, sort of witchy. And they played that music with their ceremonies.”

“I’ve seen those troops,” I said. “They try to make out how wicked they are, but you know, wickedness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. I can’t believe they’re really—”

“Maybe not,” she said, looking me in the eye. “Maybe it would’ve been just fun, if it hadn’t of been for the drugs. But we didn’t find out about them till later. They were usin’ psychedelics.

“I went to the library, when I found out, and read up as much as I could on ‘em. I hoped there was some kind of a cure. But there wasn’t. He was what they used to call freaked out, and the doctors are afraid he’ll stay that way for the rest of his life. He tries to kill himself a lot, so that may not be very long.”

Well, it was very sad. Okay, so Eddie Camry had had a weak

spot. Alice said the other kids had gradually come out of their freakiness and were growing up like other kids. Not Eddie. He had flashbacks, and they were as vivid as they were unreal. I did my best to express the way I felt about Eddie's problem, but my best was none too good. Alice, however, was apparently used to this.

"Well," she said, "I just try to forget it as much as possible, but you do see why I'm always collecting for Mental Health. They tell me the money goes for research into ways to cure people, and I'm all for that."

She looked at her watch. "I guess it's time I can knock on doors now," she said. "It's after nine."

"Good lord, is it?" I said. "I'd better get on with my workout, or I'll be out here till noon."

I was doing my pushups when I noticed George watching me from his cockpit. Oh, he was trying to pretend that he wasn't; when he saw me looking at him, he averted his gaze to some other feature of the landscape, but every time I looked up, there he was, watching me again. Finally, it was more than I could resist. "Care to join me, George?" I called. "Really good for the figure."

He came out on the dock and stood in front of me while he made his excuses. They were the usual thing: he said he worked so hard when he was sailing that he didn't need any other exercise. I carefully avoided looking at his burgeoning paunch while he talked, but I wondered what he saw when he looked in the mirror. The George of thirty years ago, maybe? I never have understood about that.

If it hadn't been for two things, I would have declared that Wednesday canceled on account of lack of interest. One of the things was that I got out the dinghy again and rowed over to see Lolly. I hadn't seen her since she and Russell and Rowdy had gone off on their fishing expedition on Monday.

I didn't have a lot to report. There was the bit about Fat Al's having been up his mast around about the time the murder must have taken place, but that was pretty inconclusive, in the absence of Fat Al himself. Still, it might make her feel better if she knew there

was a possible witness.

She answered the door wearing exercise clothes, as usual, but I didn't hear any "Up, downs" or "One, twos" coming from the TV.

"Hi, Gin," said Lolly. "Get you a cup of coffee?" I said yes, and she went into the kitchen area and poured a cup from the glass pot.

Laurel and Hardy sat side by side on the white rattan sofa, each of them holding a cup of coffee. A plate of granola-and-peanut-butter cookies sat on the coffee table in front of them. They both made standing-up motions when I came in, but I wasn't having any of that. "Sit down, boys," I said in my best English teacher voice.

They sat.

"I always make extra coffee," she said with a wicked grin as she handed me the cup, "because you never know when somebody will pop in."

I looked at two pairs of red ears—respectively, Hardy's and Laurel's, as they weren't sitting in the proper order—and grinned myself. "You must be old friends by now," I said.

"Oh, yes," said Lolly. "We're not on a first-name basis yet, but we're getting there. That is, I am, but they're not. Joe has a two-week-old baby at home, don't you, Joe?"

Officer Laurel smiled through his blushes. "Yes, ma'am," he said. "Cries all night, he does."

"He's just itchin' to show you his baby pictures," said Fred Hardy to Lolly. "Carries 'em with him all the time."

"Oh, yeah?" said Lolly. "How about that, Joe? Will you show 'em to us?"

She didn't have to ask twice. By the time she got out the word *us*, Joe Laurel had made a fast draw from a pocket somewhere and was holding a brown leatherette folder out to Lolly. She took it from him, looked at the photographs, eight of them, in four little vinyl sleeves. She oohed and aahed, and handed them on to me.

I was ready. I've seen a lot of newborns in my time, and as nearly as I can tell, they all look alike. Well, no, not *quite* all. I had a friend back in the sixties who had two little girls, two years apart, and they both looked like pixies at birth, even to the pointy ears.

Mostly, though, they're all the same—squalling creatures with red, wrinkled faces that only a mother could love. That's what Joe's little boy looked like. Still, I managed to do the ooh and aah bit quite creditably, I thought. But then, I have three grandchildren. I didn't know where Lolly got her expertise.

"My brother Chuck has two little girls," she volunteered. "I went to Louisiana to help out when they were born. They're a lot of trouble at first, Joe, but they get really cute in a hurry. Hang in there."

Joe said he would, finished his coffee, and stood up. Fred followed suit. "Well, time for us to go," he said. "I purely hate botherin' you all the time like this, ma'am, but Lenny—Lieutenant Offenbach—thinks up all these things for us to ask you, and—"

"Think nothing of it, Fred," she said. "Come around any time. I'd appreciate it if you could put it off till after three, though. Then I could finish my workout."

"We'll do that, ma'am," Joe Laurel assured her earnestly. "Won't we, Fred?"

"Sure." They went out the front door, escorted by Lolly.

I had taken the opportunity to get a full back view of her figure. "Hey, you're winning," I said as she came back. "The *bolsas de grasa* are going right down!"

"Is that Spanish or something?" she said. "What are *bolsas de*—whatever it was?"

"Oh—sorry," I said. "Hispanic TV channels have all these ads about what you do if you have *bolsas de grasa*. It translates roughly to 'bags of fat'—so descriptive, I always think."

"Descriptive, and just the kind of thing you need to make you hate 'em enough to get rid of 'em. Bags of fat—yuch!"

She sat down, and I told her about Fat Al's mast-climbing activities, and the hitch caused by his absence.

"So the only thing we can do is wait till he gets back," she said. "When did you say that would be?"

"Well, according to George, the first of next week. And he's usually right. I want to emphasize, though, that there's no guarantee

that Al actually *saw* anything. In the first place, there may've been nothing to see, just then. And in the second place, he might not've seen it if there was. He might've been so absorbed in his antennas and rigging and stuff that he never even looked in that direction."

"Or that barge you told me about. I bet if I was up *my* mast and a thing like that came by, I'd do nothing but hang on tight and shut my eyes. Brrrh!" she shuddered.

"Anyway, we'll just have to wait and hope. How was your fishing trip the other day?"

She gave me the usual enthusiastic fisherman's account of how many of what they had caught, and how big the various specimens were. "We even got some mullet—Russ has a net—and brought 'em back here and cooked 'em up that night. Delicious!"

"Funny," I said, "I always thought models just sat around and did nothing all day, for fear they'd break a fingernail or get a sunburn, or something."

"Well, I'm not a hand model, anyway. And even if I was, you can get stickons, now, any length you want. As for the sunburn, I have to use the really tough sunscreen. Redheads burn easily. But I've been doing that all my life."

* * * *

Glenn called me that evening at about the usual time, but he said he hoped I had something for dinner that would keep a while, because he might be late. And late he was. It was eight o'clock before he came walking down the dock and requested boarding permission.

"So what's for dinner?" he said. "I'm ravenous!"

"Spaghetti, and I should think you would be," I said. "What took you so long?"

"Oh, I had this salesman, and he was a real diehard. At first I didn't think I wanted what he was selling, and then he did a lot of talkin' to convince me I did. After that, we spent a lot of time climbin' ladders and taking measurements."

"What on earth for?"

“Oh, he convinced me I need remote-control doors on the workshop. I still can’t decide if I’ve been sold a pup, or not. What do you think?”

The workshop is a tall, broad building, capable of holding a good-sized boat set up on blocks. The end walls at the time were composed of creaky metal doors that opened by sliding upward until they were overhead. Rather like huge garage doors. Their unwieldiness made it a struggle either to open or close them, so they spent a lot more time open than Glenn would have liked.

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” I said. “Did he guarantee to make ‘em easy to open and close?”

“Nothin’ to it. In addition to the remote dingus you use when you’re outside, he said there would be switches on the wall inside. Rather like...” A Soul’s Awakening look lit up his blue eyes.

“Rather like the Lovatts’ hurricane shutters!” I exclaimed. “Listen, Glenn, could you use one of those gizmos on those shutters?”

“No, it wouldn’t work after all,” he said. “Sorry I got your hopes all up. Just one of those random associations I get now and then.”

“Well, but *why* wouldn’t it work?” I pleaded. “If you had one of those remote openers—”

“That’s just like saying, ‘if you had a key,’“ he explained. “It’d work if you had the *right* key, but just any old key wouldn’t do it. Those openers are transmitters, see? Tuned to a special frequency, and—I don’t know—maybe there’s a code incorporated in it; a pattern of different frequencies. You can see why it has to be that way, right?”

“Well... right,” I agreed reluctantly. “Suburban homeowners would be definitely displeased if they found out that Fred the Borrower’s remote gizmo opened *their* garage. Not to mention the fact that every reputable burglar would carry one in his tool kit. Okay. But, you know, it’s really hard to give up an idea like that, once you’ve got it. It sounded so *right*.”

“Well, there’s another thing,” he said. “You don’t even know if

the Lovatts' shutters are hooked up for a remote control or not. Do you?"

"Never thought of that. If the one end's a transmitter, there has to be a receiver to go with it, doesn't there? But what would one of those look like?"

"Oh, hell—I don't know. Just a black box, not too big, with maybe a couple of switches on it."

"Would you have to have one for every shutter?"

"No, just one for the whole system," he said. "Of course, then you couldn't open and close them independently of each other, but what do you want—egg in your beer?"

"I'm going to want to pick your brains some more on this," I said, "but right now I've run out of questions."

Glenn is my consultant on anything technological. He has a Ph. D. in Electrical Engineering from Georgia Tech and, unlike most guys his age, he's kept up on the state of the art in most of the multitude of fields covered by the term E.E.

He quit the electronics game in California, not because he didn't like electronics, but because he didn't—to put it excessively mildly—like administration and office politics. So I ask him about everything from computers to microwave ovens, and if he doesn't know the answer, which is rare, he knows where to look it up, and does. I quit badgering him about the electronic door opener, but I resolved to call Lolly just as soon as it was decent in the morning.

Chapter Fifteen.

The Sponging Snowbird

I got up early the next morning, not for any particular business reason, but just because it looked to be the start of a perfectly gorgeous day. So by seven o'clock I was sitting in the cockpit with a glass of instant nonfat dry milk and a cup of coffee, waiting for the sun to come up over the big avocado tree across the way.

The mockingbirds were tuning up in their various strongholds; one on the fruiting structure of a date palm on our side of the canal; another at the top of the mainmast of *Make Waves*, the big ketch moored across the canal.

Then a third mockingbird dove at the one on the palm tree, making a peculiar hissing *rackkk!*—the Bronx cheer of the bird world—and both flew away. As nearly as I can make out, that tree is the borderline of No Bird's Land, and any bird who tries to claim it as his territory is promptly notified of this fact by other birds.

A swirl of tiny wedge-shaped fins surfaced in the water of the canal, and I stood to look down through the surface of the water at them. Sure enough, it was a school of mullet, doing whatever it is mullet do for a living. I can only assume they strain algae and other microscopic animals and/or plants out of the water, but I really don't know.

Somebody told me once that they'll eat breadcrumbs, but I never tried feeding them. I just like to watch them; they're beautiful fish, if a trifle Disney for some people's taste. Me, I can admire good Disney the same as I can any other art form.

It was very peaceful in the cockpit for a while, but then people

started stirring around and spoiled it all. The fellow who looks after *Goodbye, Norma Jean* for her owner climbed aboard and started her motors, causing the usual unwelcome combination of loud noise and dense blue smoke. She stops making smoke a little while after her motors are started, but the first five minutes are hairy, especially if the wind is from the south, which it was. I muttered something mildly obscene and went below to wait it out.

While I was down there, I got out my notebook and did some rather aimless jottings about remote-control garage-door openers.

1.) Are the storm shutters at Lovatt's house fitted for use with a remote opener? *Ask Lolly*

2.) If they are, why didn't she say something? A lot of possible reasons for this, ranging from, "I didn't know," to "It might make me look guilty."

3.) Even if they are set up for use with an opener, how would anyone from outside know:

a. That the shutters were even there? (Can't be seen from the street) or

b. That they could be opened (and closed) by remote control?

c. Somebody who'd been in the house might know—check with Jules Farthingale about Lovatt's party.

And—

4.) Even if these questions can all be answered satisfactorily, so what? We still don't know *who*.

I sat there and chewed on my Paper-Mate for a while, but couldn't come up with anything else. At nine o'clock sharp I would start making phone calls. Right now I would have breakfast.

Promptly at nine, I dug the phone out from under a pile of paperbacks and dialed Lolly's number. She answered on the third ring, sounding a bit breathless. "Listen, Lolly," I said, "can you open those storm shutters with a remote-control gadget?"

There was a long silence. Finally she said, "You know, I don't have the least idea. Like a garage-door opener, you mean? My uncle

Vincent had one of those, when I was a little girl. The real estate agent didn't mention it, and I've never seen an opener here, but it just might be possible. How could you tell, though?"

I explained about the need for a receiver to get the signal from the opener, and told her what to look for.

She said, "Hold on a minute," put the phone down, and went away. She came back almost immediately. "It's there," she said excitedly. "Do you think the killer got out that way?"

"Well, that's the hell of it," I said. "I don't see how he could have, unless he had *your* opener. Glenn says they're at least as individual as car keys."

"Well, if the killer had our opener, he knew more about it than I do—or Win did, either. So far as I know, we never had one."

"Too bad," I said. "Unless the real estate agent's got it, and *she's* the murderer. Maybe I'd better check that out, just to be on the safe side. What agency was she with?"

She named a large real estate agency on Las Olas Boulevard and, after rummaging through her wallet for the business card, told me the agent's name.

"Emily Bronson," I muttered, scribbling the name and phone number on a handy paperback. "Okay, I'll check it out, but don't expect any miracles. This is probably the well-known blind alley."

Broad Acres Realty had never heard of Emily Bronson, or at least the girl who answered the phone had not. "But wait a minute," she said. "When did this transaction take place?"

I told her six months before, more or less.

"Oh. Well, that explains it," she said. "I've only been here since April. Let me ask Mr. Martinson." She put me on hold, and I listened to tinkly music for what seemed an eternity, but was probably more like five minutes.

"You're right," she said, "we did have a Mrs. Bronson at that time, but she left early in March. Her husband got transferred to Minnesota—he works for one of those big hotel chains—and she went with him, Mr. Martinson said. Is there anything I can help you with?"

Well, there wasn't, so I thanked her and hung up. Then I tried Jules Farthingale at the radio station. "He's not in just now," said Susan. "Who shall I say was calling?"

I told her who was calling. "Oh! Mrs. Ritchey! Well, is there anything I can help you with?"

This time I thought there might be. "Did you go to the party Win Lovatt had for the station staff?"

"You mean the party *Lolly* had," she said. "Sure. I never turn down free drinks, no matter who's passing them out. And it turned out I liked Lolly, anyway. Why?"

"Did Lovatt say anything about the hurricane shutters on his house?"

"Did he not! We were treated to a demonstration of them. He made 'em do everything but dance the Funky Chicken. First he ran each one up and down, separately, and then he hit the master switch and did 'em all at once. Spooky."

"Well, in theory they're not all that much different from car windows," I said, "but they *seem* different, somehow, don't they? Did he mention a remote controller?"

"What? You mean like for garage doors? No. And you can bet he would've, if he'd had one. He was really soaring by the time he started on the shutters. And after that we had the burglar alarm. Did Jules tell you about that?"

"Yeah. Well, okay. Just let me make sure I've got it straight. He put the shutters through their paces, but he didn't say anything about a remote control opener. Right?"

"Right," she agreed, and we hung up.

I called Lolly back. "Don't say I didn't warn you," I told her. "The real estate agent moved to Minnesota in March, so she's out. I really am sorry. It looked like such a good lead."

That brief flurry of excitement took place on Wednesday and Thursday. The rest of the week was a dead loss, as far as I was concerned. Fat Al's boat remained stubbornly buttoned up. I did tie up a couple of loose ends on Friday.

To begin with, I rode my bike down to the Wylberforce

residence on Southwest Ninth Avenue—the place where the dog had done his canine best to answer the door, remember?—and found Mrs. Wylberforce at home, this time. She was a small and sprightly septuagenarian, but other than in age and size, she resembled Mrs. Heinemann not at all.

Her white hair was shoulder length and tinted apricot, and she wore tight jeans, a pink tank top, and leather sandals. I thought she'd surely had at least one face lift.

"Down, Marauder!" she commanded as she opened the door. If Marauder paid any heed to her command, it was invisible to the naked eye. The little poodle continued to jump up and down and bark excitedly.

Finally she reached down, scooped him up with one hand, and placed him firmly under her arm, holding his mouth closed. "Sorry," she said. "What did you say?"

I really hadn't said anything yet, but I hastened to tell her who I was and what I wanted. "But it wasn't you I wanted to talk to," I said. "It was a *William* Wylberforce who called the talk—"

"Come in, Mrs. Ritchey," she invited, "and I'll tell you all about Bill." She led the way into a cheerful-looking living room whose sliding glass door overlooked a verdant back yard.

As soon as we were seated and she had offered, and I had declined, refreshment, she continued. "That was my brother-in-law," she said. "Bill. He was Jim, my late husband's, baby brother, and he had always been spoiled.

"I just moved down here last fall, and no sooner did I get settled in than people started to appear on my doorstep. People I hadn't seen for *years*. And some of them I would just as soon have never seen again, if you know what I mean." She smiled.

"Oh, yes," I said. "I know exactly what you mean. I found out about it first when we moved to New Orleans. You never know how many relatives you have until you move to New Orleans, I always used to say."

"Well, the same thing holds good for Fort Lauderdale," she said. "I had grandnieces and cousins and friends of the husbands of

nieces and Lord knows what-all, and I developed some pretty good strategies for dealing with ‘em, like making ‘em sleep on the sofa and forgetting how to cook very well. I didn’t come down here to run a tourist service; I’ve got other things to do with my time.

“Finally, about a month ago, Bill showed up, and I thought I’d *never* dislodge him.”

“Your measures didn’t work on him?”

“No,” she said. “Hide of a rhinoceros, Bill has, and the digestion of an ostrich. He positively *throve* on burnt toast and canned beans. And when I removed one of the circuit boards from the television—my friend, Mr. DeLancey, who runs a TV repair service, showed me how—he took to listening to the radio instead. And calling up that terrible talk show and shouting obscenities at that horrible man who was the master of ceremonies.

“You say someone did away with him? And you’re trying to track the murderer down? Well, *I* wouldn’t bother, but as my grandchildren used to say, ‘Whatever turns you on,’ I guess.”

I explained that the police had been, quite legally, harassing Lovatt’s widow, and she nodded understandingly.

“Well, anyway, that was the last straw, calling the talk show. I had been hiding the liquor. That was another part of my campaign. Mr. DeLancey and I put our heads together one day when Bill was out—in my car, mind you—annoying somebody else for a while, and we came up with a sure-fire scheme.

“Jim always said Bill had no head for liquor, so what we did was this: we bought a one-way ticket back to St. Paul in his name. Made the reservations and everything, for the next evening. Then I exerted all my expertise and produced a really magnificent dinner, if I do say so myself, and invited Mr. DeLancey over. My dear, the liquor flowed like— Well, like booze. And then—”

I laughed. “In short, you got him drunk and poured him aboard the plane. Right?”

“Right,” she said. “I just hope it’s a long time before he can scrape up the fare to come back. He lives on a fixed income, and it’s quite sufficient for his needs, as long as he doesn’t need to come to

Florida again.”

“What was the date when you sent him off, do you remember?” Might as well get all the information, however irrelevant it turned out to be.

“Let me see;” she said, counting on her slim, beringed fingers. “It was a Friday, I know, because I recall thinking how lucky we were to get a reservation. Does the twenty-third of June sound right to you, my dear?”

It sounded right. I stood up. “Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Wylberforce; I appreciate your help. I hope your plague of locusts holds off for a while.”

“So do I,” she said, “but I’m not holding my breath. The next person who drops in on me, however, is going to find that the air conditioner is broken, if I have to take a hatchet to it myself.”

I thanked her again and left, to the accompaniment of a crescendo of shrill barks, which I took to be a farewell until I saw the Friendly Checker Cab standing out front and the fat lady extricating herself with difficulty from the clutches of its back seat. *Perhaps Mrs. Wylberforce will starve this one out*, I thought.

The other loose end I tied up that day was Brian Ethridge, the third radio engineer down at the station. I had asked Susan for his home phone number when I called her about the hurricane shutters, and had subsequently called Ethridge for an appointment. It had been his idea to meet me at Summer’s On The Beach, though.

I took the scenic route up Southwest Ninth to Seventeenth Street, on northeast to the Seventeenth Street causeway, and up the Strip to Summer’s. It was a sunny afternoon, and the beach was fairly populous, from the picnic areas on the south and past the basketball courts to the areas strictly reserved for swimming and sunbathing farther north.

There seem to be a lot of people nowadays who know the Secret that enables them to start their weekends on Friday. I never discovered this secret when I was working forty-hour weeks—don’t know it yet, in fact. Maybe it’s simply, “Don’t work forty-hour weeks.”

I noticed a proliferation of cheeky bikinis, and smiled at the recollection of the expression on my daughter-in-law Sheila's face the first time she saw one from the rear.

Sheila is anything but straitlaced, mind you. It's just that you didn't see many cheeky bikinis in Dallas. Or so she said, anyway. Or, for that matter, probably, in Dubuque, or Cleveland, or New York. Anyway, she agreed with the *theory* of the cheeky bikini, but I noticed she didn't buy one to take back with her to Texas.

I arrived at Summer's at two-thirty on the dot, and chained my bike to a handy NO PARKING sign. Then I approached the sidewalk tables. I had no idea what Brian Ethridge looked like, and I couldn't think how he would know me from a bar of soap, either.

I needn't have worried. He was the only person sitting outside; everybody else was apparently either over on the beach catching rays, or inside the bar being slowly air conditioned to death. I walked over to his table and said, "Hi, I'm Gin Ritchey. I hope you're Brian Ethridge."

Ethridge was tall and muscular, with a deep tan, a Gold's Gym tank top, dark hair cut in a way that added two inches to his already considerable height, and four small gold studs in each ear. Of course he wore a gold chain, too.

He motioned me to a chair and said, "I hope we can keep this short, so I can get back over to the beach. Next week I'm on days again, so I'm getting in all the beach time I can, this week."

"No problem," I said. "I see you've already got a beer."

"Oh, this is for you," he said. "I won't have one till I'm done running, sunbathing, and swimming, but I didn't like to sit here without ordering something." He put the beer in front of me.

"Okay, I'll get on with it. Kieran Allison says you only started work here a few weeks ago. Did you get *all* that tan since then?"

"Every tiny particle of melanin," he said smugly "They'd never recognize me back in Cincy. Yeah, I started work here about a week before Lovatt got his."

"Did you work with him at all?"

"Oh, yeah, I was the New Boy, so I got the full initiation, and

that included the wakeup show. He was a thoroughgoing bastard, all right, and I've met a few in my time.

"I don't think I had time to get the full flavor of it, so to speak, but he gave me a pretty thorough heckling about being a dumb jock, working out at Gold's and all that shit. I just agreed. I mean, I *am* something of a jock—played left end for Penn State—and I *do* work out at Gold's. So what?"

"Where were you the weekend of his murder?"

"Right here at the beach," he said. "It was my first weekend in Fort Lauderdale, and it was really pretty weather, and I didn't have to work, so I spent it right here. I think I went home between the hours of two and eight on Saturday morning, and between three and nine on Sunday. I groove on beaches."

"What on *earth* were you doing in Cincinnati, then?" I said, mystified.

"Well, I *was* born there, after all," he said. "And for a long time, I didn't believe in Florida."

"What do you mean? Didn't approve of it?"

"No, no. Didn't believe it existed. I know that sounds silly, but—"

"Not so silly," I said. "I guess I was a little bit the same way, back in Illinois. But I was lucky. My husband Steve was stationed on Okinawa, during the Korean thing, and he told me about the tropics, or I might still be up there freezing my ass off. Well, thanks for the information." I got up and prepared to leave. "I'll let you get over to the beach now."

I didn't have to say it twice. He was across the street before I got my bike unlocked.

Chapter Sixteen.

The Stripper's Son

That evening, Glenn picked me up and we went over to Lolly's for dinner. She met us at the door, wearing a clinging jade-green jumpsuit and shoes to match. Rowdy, who helped her to greet us, spoiled the effect of casual elegance somewhat with waggings of his nonexistent tail and slurpy hand-lickings. Russ Webster took our drink orders, looking, I thought, very much at home.

While we ate our spaghetti marinara, I told them about Mrs. Wylberforce and her brother-in-law Bill. They thought the story was hilarious, particularly when I got to the kicker—the fat lady in the Friendly Checker cab.

“But did you find out anything more about the hurricane shutters?” Lolly said. “I just can't get them out of my head.”

Russell didn't know about the shutters, and had to be told in detail. After Glenn and I finished filling him in, he said, “Well, I hate to be a wet blanket, Lolly, but I don't see how it could be worked. Unless there was a remote-control gadget here in the house, and the murderer took it away with him. Did you ever see one?”

“No,” said Lolly. “Let's have our coffee in the living room, okay? Then I won't have to sit here and ignore all these dirty dishes.”

“Okay, but let's have a look around for that gadget when we've finished our coffee,” Russell said.

“Well, all right, but I don't think we'll find it. I've been all over this house, and if I haven't found it by now, I don't think I ever will.”

Of course, the men didn't believe that. They exchanged

indulgent glances, freely translatable as, “Oh, women can never find anything. They just don’t know how to look.” But when the search was over, and Lolly and I were replacing everything in the cabinets while the men took their ease in the living room, no remote-control device had been found.

“I bet the former owner took it away with him,” I said. “I’ve had extensive experience with moving, and nothing would be more likely. It’s probably still at the bottom of a box somewhere, or maybe the former owner found it when he unpacked, took one look at it, and threw it away.”

“*More* likely,” said Glenn, “his wife found it when she unpacked the kitchen stuff, and she stuck it up on a closet shelf because it was perfectly good. I wish I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard that phrase applied to a useless item.”

I think I blushed a bit at that. Glenn was talking about his ex-wife, not me, but I remembered using that phrase myself. I’d applied it to all sorts of useless things: keys to I knew not what, fiber washers that were the wrong size to fit anything, odd-sized wheels off children’s defunct toys. Finally, over the years, repeated moves cured me of my pack-rat tendencies, but I still remembered.

“Well, whatever,” Lolly said, replacing dish detergent and scouring powder in the under-sink cabinet, “It’s not here. I guess Russell’s right. But how *did* he get out?”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Maybe it’s the drinks or something, but we’re all thinking fuzzily. The fact that we can’t find the opener doesn’t mean the murderer didn’t find it and get out that way. In fact, it might mean just the opposite.”

“Yeah, I already thought of that,” said Glenn, “but I didn’t want to spoil your fun.”

“Anyway, it’s not so much how he got out that worries me,” I said, “as how did he manage to leave the place locked up when he did? But we’ve been over that ground till we’ve trampled it bare, and I still don’t know.”

“Well, I’m thoroughly sick of the whole subject,” said Russell. “How about some music, Lolly?”

We had some music, and after a while Glenn and I took our leave. I won't say that Russell and Lolly didn't notice our absence, but I do think that our presence or absence became increasingly irrelevant to them as the evening wore on. We told Rowdy goodbye and left.

* * * *

It was one of those balmy windless nights when everything seems to be enclosed in its own individual bubble of silence. Glenn and I carried lounge chairs from the sundeck to the grassy area on the south side of the building. We had just popped the tops on our beer cans when one of those big, blinding flashlights suddenly shone in our faces. Behind the light was a very young-looking Fort Lauderdale policeman.

"Do y'all live here?" he said.

"Yes, officer," I said. "I live on a sailboat in slip seven. What's up?"

"Well, I think y'all had better get back on your boat for a while. For your own safety."

Glenn and I looked at each other. "What's going on?" Glenn said. "Prowlers, or something?"

"Something," said the cop. "Now, if y'all—"

"Oh, all right," I grumbled. "I can't *imagine* what—"

We gathered up our beers and started to take the chairs back to the sundeck, but the cop waved us away.

"Don't worry about those," he said tensely. "Just go." We went. But only as far as the cockpit of *Blue Jasmine*, where we stood and looked over the cabin top at the activities of the lawmen.

"There's two of them, at least," I whispered. "I think that's the one we talked to, crouching over there behind the barbecue. Has he got a gun?"

"Yup. I saw it reflect the light when he came slinking along there. What do you reckon? They're acting like a SWAT team, or something."

"An *amateur* SWAT team," I said scornfully. "Maybe one in

training. But I can't see what they're looking for. I don't see anyone else. Oh, wait. Here comes somebody down the dock. I think it's George!"

It was George. He came strolling down the dock, smoking his pipe, and walked up behind the policeman who was crouched behind the barbecue.

"Scuse me, officer," he said in his normal tone. "Can I help you at all?"

The policeman jumped spasmodically. "Shh-shh!" he hissed. "You're right in the line of fire!"

"Line of fire?" said George. "I haven't heard any shooting."

"Well, you'd *be* in the line of fire if anybody was shooting," the policeman said, straightening up and clutching the small of his back. "We had a report—"

"If I were you, I think I'd massage my back with my other hand," said George, "or change that gun to the other hand, or something. Just a suggestion. You had a report? What about?"

"Lady called up and said there was a man with a gun outside her window," said the cop.

"Which window?" asked George.

"Apartment ten," said the other policeman, coming out from behind a hibiscus bush.

"Did you check with the people in ten when you got here?" asked George.

"Not just yet," said the policeman who had done the crouching. "We thought we'd better reconnoiter, first."

It was more than flesh and blood could stand. "Who lives in ten, George?" I called.

"Esmeralda and Timmy," he called back. "I don't think Emmy's home, though. Probably at work."

Esmeralda, otherwise known as Emily Brown, is our resident stripper. She works nights as the Golden G-String, and she's the single parent of an eight-year-old named Timmy. Timmy is an articulate, imaginative child and, according to some people, a regular young savage. I rather like him.

"Do you mean to say that there's no lady at home in apartment ten?" asked the cop incredulously.

"I don't mean to say anything of the kind," I said. I noticed with some surprise that I was now standing on the dock. "I think it would be a good idea if we checked it out, though."

"So do I," said George. "C'mon, officers." And he led the way to Emmy's flat.

"Who is it?" said a quavery voice as we knocked on the door. "Who's out there?"

"There, you see," said the policeman. "That's the little old lady, the one that called up the station, or I'm a monkey's uncle."

"I think I'd be a bit careful what I called myself," said Glenn. "That voice sure sounds familiar."

"Yeah, to me, too," I said. "Sounds a lot like the voice of the innocent child who knocked all the green mangoes off the tree, a while back." I knocked again, harder. "Timmy, I think you'd better let us in now," I said. "Game's over."

"Are you mad?" he said in his normal voice. "If you're mad, I won't open the door."

I sighed. "No, I'm not mad, Timmy. But I do want to talk to you."

"Uh-oh," he said. "That means you want to holler at me, doesn't it?"

"I promise not to holler if you let us in now. Come *on*, Timmy. Don't be a bad kid, okay?"

The door opened. "Come in, then," he said.

We went inside. Emmy's is a studio apartment—it has one big room which serves as living and bedroom, plus a bathroom, and a tiny kitchenette. Timmy was sitting on the Hide-A-Bed, now in its couch mode, where he slept at night. He was looking very stiff and proper, and also slightly embarrassed.

"Everybody sit down," I said. The company, which was beginning to look like rather a large crowd all to be confronting one very small boy, dispersed itself to various seating arrangements, and Timmy began to look somewhat less rigid.

“Okay, Tim,” I said. “What’s it all about?”

“Aw, shit,” he said. “I got kinda scared, was all. You know how the mango tree bangs against the downspout, sometimes, and it sounds like somebody maybe sneakin’ up to the window? Well, I *know* what it is, but somehow it scares hell out of me, anyhow.”

“Enough to call the police?” said Glenn looked at him sternly. “Where does that part come in?”

“Well, see, I got to thinkin’. What if it really *was* somebody sneakin’ up, and I called the cops and they didn’t get here till too late? And then they’d find my gory corpse on the floor,” he said with ghoulish relish. “And Mom would come home, and—”

“Yeah, well, skip the melodrama. So you got to wondering how fast the police could get here, is that it?”

“Yeah. An’ I decided I’d find out. So I called the number in the front of the phone book, and—”

“And pretended to be a little old lady, right? Why was that?”

“Well, I thought that might speed ‘em up some,” he said.

“How long *did* they take?” said George, getting to the heart of the matter.

“Seven minutes an’ forty-five seconds,” he said, holding up a small wrist which bore a large digital watch. From the look of it, it was one of those elaborate ones which tells the time in all the capitals of Europe, and probably on Mars as well, not to mention the date and whether or not it’s a holiday; and has a stopwatch function, to boot.

I forget what else they do, those watches, but I think they do it while standing on their heads and drinking a glass of water. Emmy makes good money, and nothing is too good for Timmy.

I looked at the policemen. They had curiously mixed expressions on their faces; I thought I detected a modicum of pride—excellent time from the starting block—a touch of indignation—being fooled by a mere child—more that a little sternness—making false-alarm calls to the police—and a soupçon of a rueful grin—after all, he *was* only an eight-year-old.

“Well, I guess you know you’re not supposed to call up the cops

and use ‘em for time trials,” I said. “What if there really *had* been somebody, and the cops were off on a wild-goose chase because some other kid called them? Hah?”

“Oh. Never thought of that,” said Timmy in a small voice.

One of the policemen, the youngest looking one, delivered a lecture which began with, “Now, you listen here, young man,” and continued through some five minutes to conclude with a threat to take Tim down to the station and book him if he did it again. A faint gleam in Tim’s eye convinced me that the threat was, to him, more on the order of a promise.

I stayed behind to deliver a threat of my own. “Tim,” I said, “I just want to say that if you ever do it again, I personally will tell Eddie Hirshheimer that you still sleep with your teddy bear.” His face fell.

“Okay,” he said. “I won’t do it again. But I think you’re mean.”

“Hey, I’ll show you mean, if you call the cops again,” was my exit line. “Now, for heaven’s sake, get to bed. It’s almost midnight.”

By comparison, the weekend was quiet. Glenn and I spent most of Sunday in Hugh Taylor Birch State Park, which boasts not only the usual picnic tables, but several huge banyan trees to shade them, and has a tunnel under A1A to its own segment of beach.

I got in a lot of relaxing that weekend. The sand was hot, the sun was bright, and there was very little wind. Glenn and I alternated between rocking on the warm surface of the water and dozing on towels in the soft sand. I have never been able to decide which I like best and, like that other decision—the choice between T-bone and sirloin—I’m content to spend the rest of my life evaluating it.

Chapter Seventeen.

The Gallant Sailor

Fat Al still hadn't come back when we got home Sunday night. I was beginning to wonder if maybe he *hadn't* decided to go back to Ohio and become a farmer. Probably Ohio looks pretty good in the summer. Illinois used to. I could just vaguely remember that.

The memory was vague because I hadn't been north of the Mason-Dixon line in twenty-five years, unless you counted a brief stopover at O'Hare on the way from Hawaii to south Florida, some seven years before. *I* didn't count it. It wasn't *my* idea.

When I got up Monday morning I glanced anxiously at Fat Al's boat, *et voilà!* His forward hatch was open. He must have arrived sometime in the wee hours, I told myself. I'd love to wake him up, but better let him sleep, I guess. He might get mad and refuse to talk at all.

So I puttered up to the yachties' communal bathroom, puttered back, got out my weights and chinup bar, and started exercising, keeping an eye on Al's boat all the while. It's a wonder I didn't pull a neck muscle doing that.

Finally I was rewarded by the sight of a tousled Al rising from his cockpit, if not exactly like Venus rising from the foam, then like a hippopotamus rising from a particularly succulent wallow. As he wore a towel slung about his neck and carried a soapdish, I conjectured that he might be on his way to take a shower.

While he was gone, I hurried through the rest of my workout, went below to comb my hair and wipe the sweat off my brow, and was lurking on the dock waiting for him when he came back.

“Al,” I said, “could I talk to you for a minute?”

“Mmph,” said Al.

Apart from stressful situations, such as the affair of the disappearing mooring, Al is not much of a conversationalist. He is at his worst when talking to women; “Mmph” is his standard reply to everything. And that’s if he *likes* you.

“A man who lives across the canal over there says you were up your mast on the day we think the murder was committed,” I began. “I wondered if—”

I thought he was going to say, “Mmph” again, but it came out more like “M-murder? What murder?”

“Didn’t George tell you? He *said* he did, and—”

“Very likely,” said Al. “George talks a lot. Don’t always listen.”

Wow. Three sentences. I wonder if that’s a record?

I told him about the murder, and about Laurel and Hardy coming to ask us if we’d seen anything. He actually laughed when I told him their names.

“But they came the day *after* you went out cruising,” I said. “So they missed the one person who might have seen something.”

“Which house is it?” he said.

I pointed out Lolly’s house. The shutters were open.

“Hard to remember,” said Al. “Been a long time.”

“The man said while you were up the mast, the barge went by.” I prodded. “You know, the Pile-Driver Exp—”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah. Watched the barge a while, but he was going dead slow. Sort of leaned back and looked around.”

Leaned back and looked around! Forty-five feet in the air, supported by a leather strap, a barge roiling up the water, and he leans back and looks around—all three hundred pounds of him! “Well, what did you see?”

“Funny thing, that was. Old lady came out of the house. Never saw her before. Had something in her hand. Looked like—”

“What? A gun?”

“Nah. Looked like one of those gadgets you open and shut garage doors with.”

“How could you tell that?” I objected. “It’s a long way off. Must be forty, fifty yards. It would look like a radio or a cordless phone or a TV remote or just about anything, from that far away.”

“Because that’s what she did with it. All the shutters but one were closed. She came out, shut the door, aimed the thing in her hand, and—bingo!—the other shutter came down.”

“But how could she—I mean, we just talked about that and decided it wouldn’t— Oh, to hell with it. A little old lady? What did she look like?”

“Don’t know. Little old lady. Standard issue, by the look of her. Gray hair. You know.”

“Had you ever seen her before?”

“Don’t know. Don’t think so. Little old ladies everywhere, though. Might have.”

“Would you know her if you saw her again?” I said, not too hopefully.

“Think so,” he answered surprisingly. “Wasn’t nondescript, if you know what I mean. Just can’t remember well enough to describe her.”

“Listen, Al,” I said with all the persuasiveness I could muster, “come over here and sit down, will you? I want to tell you a little story.”

I led him to one of the dockside tables, wound its umbrella open, and sat him down on one of the flimsy-looking wrought-iron chairs. It groaned a bit, but didn’t even bend, so I sat on another of them and began to talk.

I told him about Win Lovatt. He’d heard the talk show once, and hated it. It was touch and go there for a minute whether he would listen any further or not.

“Man was a world-class bastard,” he said. “Killer ought to get the Nobel Peace Prize.”

I told him about Lolly, laying on the Beauty in Distress theme with a trowel. The police would never let up, I said, while there was no one else to suspect.

“Plenty of people to suspect, surely? Why pick on the little

lady?"

I filed this term away for future reference. Lolly would, I was sure, love being referred to as "the little lady".

"Because she and her husband fought like cats and dogs," I admitted. Thinking of all I had heard of Al's ex-wife, I wondered if this would put him off Lolly entirely. He surprised me again, though.

"That's the way to do it," he said approvingly. "Have it all out. No silent treatment. No locked doors. Get it all out in the open. Festers if you don't. That why they think she killed him? Because they fought?"

"That, and because they always suspect husbands and wives more than anybody. He was found in the kitchen, too, wearing a bathrobe and a surprised look. There was that. But the kitchen is just part of the living area, and—"

"Figure I'd look surprised if a little old lady hauled off and shot me," he said. "Why would she?"

I told him about the talk show and the people I'd interviewed. "At least two of them could be classified as little old ladies," I said. "She wasn't—well, heavysset—was she?"

"Fat? No. Bones like a bird, looked like. Skinny old lady."

"Well, that lets out Mrs. Broussard, then. But it leaves in Mrs. Heinemann and Jessie Cook. Listen, Al—if I could get you a look at them, would you tell me if you recognized them?"

Well, he was reluctant, but I played him the Beauty in Distress theme again, this time with all the arpeggios and glissandi that I could muster, and he said yes, even when it became apparent that we'd have to use his car for the expedition.

I looked at my watch; it was after eleven. "Okay, Al, let's have an early lunch and try to start out before noon. I figure they're more likely to be home during the noon hour than they would be later on."

"Mmph," he said, reverting to type. "Don't know how you're going to work this. Do you?"

I was ready for that question. I had been nibbling around the edges of the twofold problem in my mind: 1) that both women knew who I was, and 2) that either of them was likely to slam the door in

my face. I figured Jessie Cook would certainly to send me on my way without my so much as setting foot across her doorstep.

"I've got a Plan," I said. "Bound to work," *I hope*. I crossed my fingers for luck. We went off to our several lunches.

At twelve-fifteen we were sitting in Al's car across the street from Mrs. Heinemann's house in Dania, and I was just finishing my explanation of what Al was to do. He'd reverted to being reluctant again, tending to lay his ears back, show the whites of his eyes, and dig in his heels, but I persevered.

"It's really not hard," I said coaxingly. "Just pretend you're a door-to-door salesman."

"Mmph," he said. "Sold vacuum cleaners when I was in college. Forgotten that. Okay. Give it here."

I handed him the worn gray-plastic shoulder bag I'd dug out of the shelf above the V-berth, to which I'd retired it when I bought my first backpack. I'd thought then that I might want to use it again, but the backpack was so satisfactory that I'd never looked back. "You know what to say, right?"

"Mmph. Tell her I found it on the sidewalk in front of her house, and ask if it's hers. Right?"

"Right. And don't forget that the object of the exercise is to get a good look at her and see if you recognize her.

"Now then," I said, resisting the urge to pat him on the fanny like a football coach, "off you go."

He opened the door and levered himself out onto the street, then lumbered across to the Heinemann house and rang the doorbell. I saw Mrs. Heinemann open the door and wipe her hands on her apron, a frilly job with pink flowers strewn over it, and make inquiring faces at Al, who, of course, had his broad back to me. Bad stagecraft, that, but fortunately there were no critics present.

He held out the purse, and she took it and examined it, shaking her head, then handed it back. They exchanged what appeared to be pleasantries, and Al lumbered back across the street while Mrs. Heinemann popped back inside and closed the door.

"Well?" I said. "Is she the one you saw?"

“Nope,” he said, tossing the purse onto the seat and insinuating his bulk under the wheel. “The little old lady I saw wasn’t *that* little. And she didn’t move the same.”

We drove to Jessie Cook’s address and repeated the procedure; parked the car across the street, where I waited while Al did his routine at the front door. This time he stood a little to one side, so I could see his expression as he tendered the purse to Jessie. She snatched it from him, snapped a couple of words, whirled inside, and slammed the door in his face.

His expression was a riot—ludicrous astonishment was written on every broad feature. He stood there for a minute looking—and I’m sure, feeling—extremely silly, then shrugged massively, turned, and trudged back across the street.

“Did you see that?” he said, almost loquacious in his amazement. “Did you see that? I asked her if it was hers, and she said, yes, it was, and snatched it away from me. Is she crazy, or what?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I said. “Crazy or not, though, she’ll get a surprise when she sees what’s in it.”

“What *is* in it?” he said. “I thought it felt pretty fat.”

“The wadded-up comic section out of last Sunday’s paper. Well, was she the one, or not?”

“Oh, I forgot all about that. No. Never saw her before. Hope I don’t again, either. Sure is a wild-eyed old witch. Well, and where does that leave us?”

“Up shit creek without a paddle,” I said glumly. “Could be any female in Broward County over the age of fifty, for all I know. Well, no; we’ve eliminated two.”

“Three,” he said. “Wasn’t you, either.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, we might as well go back to Costa Brava. I’ll see if I can come up with any more little old ladies for you to look at, but right now, I’m fresh out of candidates.”

At Costa Brava, we parted with scarcely a word, and all the way down the dock to *Blue Jasmine* I kept having a feeling of empathy with a sensitive Collie I once had, who used to skulk off with his tail

between his legs and hide under the house if you wouldn't play catch with him.

"So there it is," I said despondently to Glenn that evening. "Neither of them was the one he saw, and I'm two steps backward from where I was this time yesterday."

"Come on, Gin," he said. "That's just not true. You've got two facts that you didn't have yesterday, and that's a step in the right direction, by anybody's standards. You know there *was* a little old lady, and that she used a remote-control gadget to close the shutter."

"Well, but neither one of 'em does me the least little bit of good," I countered. "So there was a little old lady. How many little old ladies do you reckon there are in Fort Lauderdale and environs? Hah?"

"Well, not nearly as many this time of year as there would be in the winter," he pointed out. "In January you'd *really* be in trouble."

I thought about it. "You're right, you know," I said. "Why, on this very *street* there must be seventy-five little old ladies on any given day in January. Not that that helps us any. It's just a Pollyannaish way of minimizing the problem, is all.

"And the other problem is that damned door-opener. I thought you told me that wouldn't work?"

"Did I? I think I was way too definite about it, then. I should've said the odds were against it. That's *if* it wasn't Lovatt's own door-opener."

"I just don't see how it could've been," I said. "You heard what Lolly said about that. And if *she* hadn't found it after living in the house for six months, how could an unknown old lady have known where it was?"

"I can think of several scenarios to cover that one," he said, "but it's not really necessary. I think what I said was that it was as unlikely that, say, your door-opener would open somebody else's door as that the keys to your car would open someone else's car. And that's—"

"Pretty unlikely, right?" I interrupted. "I never heard of that

happening, did you?"

"Oh, yeah," he said. "I remember one time I was at a football game with a friend of mine. It was at the Orange Bowl, and you know what the parking lot was like there in the old days."

"Not really, but I've seen the parking lot at Tulane Stadium when there was a big game. People used to tie things to their radio antennas so they could find their cars. It got to be really competitive to think of something unusual and eye-catching that nobody else had thought of. There was this one guy who used to tie a big black swastika to his, but people kept tearing it down, and usually his antenna with it. Anyway—"

"Well, that's the idea, though," he said. "Acres of cars, and if you didn't remember your license number, it was damned hard to tell one blue Ford LTD from another. Or whatever. That was what Kenny had—a brand-new blue Ford LTD. Didn't even have permanent plates on it yet."

"Well, we found his car, and he unlocked it, and all six of us got in and drove away. About halfway home on the Turnpike, he said to me, 'Look in the glove compartment, will you, Glenn, and get out the can of quarters for the toll.' He always kept a tobacco can full of quarters in his glove compartment."

"Well, I opened the glove compartment, and I couldn't find the tobacco can. Not only that, but I said, 'When did you get the new camera, Ken? And whose panty hose are these?' Well, he took one look and turned around at the next ramp and headed back to the stadium. It was several hours before we got it sorted out and Ken got his car back and the other guy got his."

"Well, but that's just a wild coincidence, isn't it? I mean, like the bridge hand where east has all the hearts, south all the clubs, west all the diamonds, and north all the spades. I know that can happen, shuffle 'em as you will, because I've seen it. Once."

"It doesn't have to be quite that coincidental," he said. "They only make about ten key blanks for each make of car. It just doesn't happen all that often that you try your key on somebody else's door, is all. I mean, what for?"

“Well, but would that work with an electronic opener?” I said. “And even if it would, who would know that it would?”

“I think the odds would be just about the same. Maybe a little steeper against the door opener. But about who would know that—”

“Yeah, it sounds like some mad scientist from the old Fu Manchu books. Or a Madame X sort of chemist from Hercule Poirot. This diabolically clever old lady knows that the opener she’s got will work on Lovatt’s shutters, so she—”

“That cuts two ways, though. Either she was diabolically clever or abysmally ignorant. Personally I’d bet on the latter. She didn’t know it wouldn’t work, and it did. Who was it said, ‘Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever’?”

“I don’t know. Herrick or somebody, I think. Young girls used to embroider it in cross-stitch on samplers. My granny did, I know.

“Okay. We don’t know whether the lady knew too much or too little, but it worked out to be just enough, didn’t it? And my head is spinning.”

Chapter Eighteen.

The Depressed Detective

I spent a lot of time at the beach that week. I kept telling myself that this was because the surf temperature was eighty-eight, and the air temperature about the same, and that I was simply *aprovechando*, which is Spanish for making hay while the sun shines.

I kept telling myself it was only that, and not at all that I was feeling sore and defeated, and found the warm womb of the surf infinitely comforting. I didn't really believe myself, though.

The truth was that I was dodging the case and everything connected with it. How could I help Lolly Lovatt with the information that Win's murderer was a little old lady with a garage-door opener? Suppose I got Al to go down to the cop shop and make a statement?

And that's one big *suppose*, right there. I mean, I was sure Al was as public-spirited as the rest of us, but *could* he string together more than four consecutive sentences?

Anyway, say he went down and made a statement. And say Lennie Offenbach read that statement. And say—this is *really* stretching things—that Lennie Offenbach didn't burst into loud tenor guffaws, slap Al on the shoulder, and usher him out. What was there in Al's story that would induce Lennie to lay off Lolly?

No, it would have to be a lot more conclusive than that, and a lot more elaborate. First we had to find the lady, whoever she was, *wherever* she was, and then we had to pin the crime on her. Now, *that* was what I called tough. I burrowed into the warm sand and tried to sleep.

I didn't see much of anybody except Glenn. I steered clear of Al.

I didn't go and report to Lolly. I didn't go down to the station and talk to Jules Farthingale or Susan Blair. By the time Friday rolled around, I was very near to being the female hermit I'd set out to be right after Steve was killed.

Friday morning early, I went skulking up to the john. It's some measure of my withdrawal that I'd even been skipping my workouts that week, and ordinarily I'm a fanatic about them. I not only didn't want to see anybody, but I also didn't want them looking at *me*. Oh, *strangers* were okay. I just didn't want Al, or Lolly, or... Well, you see what I mean.

Anyway, I went skulking up to the yachties' john at about six-thirty on that Friday morning, and when I came back, Al waylaid me. I couldn't have been paying proper attention to my skulking, I guess, because he wasn't even lurking. He was just standing there on the dock, and as I went by, he reached out a hand, laid it on my arm, and detained me.

"Mmph," he said. "Gin. Got something to tell you."

"Hey, I don't know any more than I did, Al," I said. "Don't ask."

"Said, 'tell,' not 'ask'," said Al. "Found her yesterday."

"Found who? Miss Right?" I still wasn't thinking properly, much less listening.

"The old lady," he said patiently. "Siddown, okay?"

It was a good thing I was already standing in front of a chair, because I don't think I could have made it there before my knees buckled, otherwise.

"Found...the...old...lady," I said. "Al, if you're kidding me, I promise you I'll kill you with infinite variations of torture." I should have known better. Al has no sense of humor whatsoever. The word "kid" is not in his vocabulary.

"No shit," he said. "Found her yesterday."

I had so many questions I didn't know which one to start with. Finally I settled for "How?"

"Thought, where would I go, if I was an old lady," he said. "First thought was, church, but it was Monday. Second thought was,

shopping center. So I went to shopping centers.” This was a positive oration, compared with Al’s usual style, but I still had questions.

“Why?” I said. “I mean, why did you look for her?”

“Don’t know,” he said. “Just felt like it. Bothered me, seeing her come out and close that shutter. And poor Mrs. Lovatt—”

I was feeling like a real lowdown, dirty bitch. Here I’d been ducking my responsibilities all week, and Fat Al had been chivalrously hunting down the murderer.

“Looked for you,” he said. “Thought you’d want to go. Couldn’t find you, though.”

“Yeah, well, I had...other business,” I said weakly. “So what did you do—try to make all the shopping centers in town? That’s a tall order.”

“Started on northeast side,” he said. “Because it’s closest to here. Spent two days in Galt Ocean Mile. Lots of old ladies there. But not the right one.”

“What did you do in the shopping centers when you got there? Doesn’t look like you could use any real system.”

“Couldn’t. Just hung around. Bought magazines and things. Unsystematic as hell.”

“So what then? Did you give up on Galt Ocean Mile? Where did you go next?”

“Hung around down by Pantry Pride all day Wednesday,” he said. “Lot of old ladies there, too. Wrong ones, though. Then went to Southport—Seventeenth Street. Hung around there yesterday.”

“Is that where you found her?” I said.

“That’s it. Coming out of Publix with one of those shopping carts, folding kind. Then she went in Eckerd’s to pick up her prescription.”

“Did you find out her name?”

“Mmph. Nope. Couldn’t get close enough to hear when she gave it to the pharmacist. Prescription was all ready—guess she’d phoned ahead.”

“Damn!” I said. “Al, I think it’s great that you found her—don’t get me wrong—but we’ve pretty well got it all to do over again.

Would you do that?"

"Mmph. Sure. Take you with me, and you can track her down after I point her out. Okay?"

"Okay, Al," I said in profound gratitude. "Do you think we could wait till I shoot through my workout?" Suddenly, the world looked about forty percent better. No paradise yet, but certainly a place that it was possible to live in comfortably. Constant natural laws. Finite boundaries. Nothing like the Sisyphean hill I'd been imagining, complete with boulder: one; for the purpose of torturing Virginia Ritchey.

"Mmph. Sure," he said again. "I'll have breakfast. Just knock when you're ready."

I breezed through my exercises in record time, went below and ate something, went up and had a shower, and knocked on the hull of Al's boat at nine-thirty-eight. He was ready almost immediately. As we drove toward Southeast Seventeenth Street, I stated the problem as I saw it.

"One trouble," I said, "is that if she went grocery shopping yesterday, she won't need groceries again for several days, maybe even a week. That is, unless she forgot something. And even then, she'd be likely to pick it up at a Seven-Eleven or a Farm Store or something close to home.

"The second problem is, once you point her out to me, we've got to find out her name and where she lives. And that ain't easy. I mean, the pharmacist in Eckerd's would know, but I'll bet a cookie he wouldn't want to tell us, even if we could describe her well enough so he knew who we meant."

"She," he said. "Pharmacist's a she."

"Okay, so *she* knew who we meant. I mean, everybody's got these traditions of client confidentiality. I know, because I have, too. And I bet pharmacists do, too. Anyway, if she picked up her prescription yesterday, chances are she won't need to do that again for at least a couple of weeks—maybe even a month."

"Mmph," he said. "Not good."

"Well," I said with resignation, "we'll just have to wing it."

We found a place in the parking lot. I noticed that it was as near as possible to the shops; for all his chivalry, Al wasn't about to walk any farther than was absolutely essential. We sat on the bench in front of the big Publix store until noon, watching the passing shoppers.

For the dedicated girlwatcher, Southport shopping center is the second-best place in town. The best, of course, is the beach on a sunny Sunday afternoon. I'm omitting the nudie bars; the girlwatchers who go there are pros who pay to watch. I'm talking amateurs, here.

Ginches in all shapes, sizes, and colors paraded along the walkways, wearing everything from bikini tops and cheeky shorts to leather miniskirts and high-heeled boots. Now and then, when a particularly slightly specimen ankled by, I checked Al's reaction. Beyond a slightly glassy look about the eyes, he seemed to be bearing up well.

Once I went inside the grocery and bought us a couple of sustaining soft drinks, a root beer for him and a Dr. Pepper for me. We sipped them while watching the passing scene. The tricky bit, of course, was that we couldn't take it in shifts, because only Al knew what the lady looked like. So he was stuck with sitting and watching, whatever I did.

We lunched on chicken sandwiches from the deli section of the grocery store, and settled back to watch again. At five o'clock we gave up and went back to Costa Brava.

"I forgot to ask you, Al," I said. "What *time* yesterday did you spot her?"

"Oh, about one, one-thirty," he said. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing," I said. "There's probably some pattern in the way she goes about her shopping, but we don't have enough information to tell what it is."

We sat on that bloody bench right through the weekend. Glenn was beginning, he said, to regard Al as a dangerous rival. "You better not let his ex-wife find out about you, either," he said. "She'll jack up his alimony, for sure."

“No sweat,” I said. “She lives in Pittsburgh, Al says. I’ve found out all sorts of things about him while we’ve been playing Find the Lady.”

“Any of ‘em interesting?”

“Well, no, not very. The most interesting side of Al is the one everybody sees. I mean, like going up the mast and all that.”

“Oh. Too bad.” We tabled the subject for the rest of the evening.

Al and I were back in front of Publix on Monday. Another disadvantage of the partnership with Al was that you could forget about being unobtrusive. Al was such a mountainous individual that he attracted immediate attention. I wondered how he managed to live with it, and guessed that it just might be the reason he spent so much time cruising the islands singlehandedly.

Anyway, it was obvious that people recognized us after the first two days; some of the bolder individuals even spoke to us. I let Al do all the answering. “Mmph” is a very discouraging answer.

Eventually they went away, but a security guard seemed to be keeping a close eye on us. Maybe he suspected Al of shoplifting, I don’t know. Al certainly would’ve been a natural for that. With his voluminous shape, another lump or two—electric toaster, microwave oven—would go unnoticed. When Al stayed rooted to the bench, though, the rent-a-cop went away. You can’t shoplift if you don’t go into shops.

Monday turned into Tuesday, and still we hadn’t seen Al’s little old lady. I was beginning to think she must have gone to Dubuque or somewhere, to visit her grandchildren. Or died. I said as much to Al.

“Mmph. Doubt it. Not *that* old, and looked healthy enough.”

I had high hopes for Wednesday. It was nearly a week since Al had seen the old girl, and I thought maybe she’d feel the need to shop by Wednesday, but it was no bloody good. She didn’t show on Wednesday.

I had even higher hopes for Thursday, which would be exactly a week since Al’s discovery, but by two-thirty they were beginning to fade. “After all,” I said, “maybe she doesn’t always shop at Publix.

Or not at *this* Publix. Some people like to—”

“Shh! There she is!”

I looked around wildly. “Where?”

“Over there by Charlie’s Locker,” he said, moving his head slightly to point out the direction. “She’s just coming out of that little alcove, or whatever.”

“You sure must have good vision, Al,” I said, looking in the direction he had indicated. “Where is she? I don’t see anybody but that spectacular blonde.”

The blonde in question was studying the front window of the ice cream parlor on the corner. I wanted to advise her, “Have *at most* a single dip, sweetie; any more and you’ll burst your seams.”

She wore a tiny, overfilled bikini top and little white shorts she must’ve bought in the children’s department. In addition to being bar-taut everywhere, they only reached about halfway down her buns, giving an interesting half-moon effect. She topped—or bottomed, I should say—off this ensemble with high-heeled, electric-blue shoes.

“*That’s* surely not her, is it?” I said. “I’ve been looking all this time for an *old* lady, and now you—”

“Mmph. Here just a minute ago,” he said. “Must’ve ducked back into one of the shops for something. Sit tight.”

I sat tight. The blonde decided against even a single dip, and went, switching her bottom and tossing her curls, into Publix. I waited for the sound of breaking glass from inside the store, but it never came. I guess they get pretty blasé in that Publix.

“Sst!” hissed Al again. “Here she comes.”

I swiveled my head again, just in time to see a little old lady coming out of the alcove where Charlie’s Locker, the combination marine supply store and tourist trap, lurks. She was dressed in an emerald-green pantsuit with white embroidery trim, and she was towing a folding grocery cart behind her. It was Alice Camry.

“I don’t believe this,” I muttered to myself. But I did. Looking at Alice, I decided she could probably be every bit as bloody, bold, and resolute as Lady Macbeth, maybe even without the sleepwalking

routine. Although she *had* said something to me about having bad dreams, hadn't she?

"I know who she is, Al," I said. "I don't know where she lives, though. How will we find out?"

"Follow her home," he said reasonably. It sounded right. She had, it appeared, some more shopping to do, so we hung in there until she came out of Publix, a full bag of groceries in her cart, and trundled it out into the parking lot.

"Okay, Al," I said. "You go get the car, while I follow her to hers. Then you can pick me up, and we'll be on our way." He agreed and went to pick up the car.

I skulked, as best I could, around behind the next row of cars, keeping Alice in sight. She trundled her leisurely way through the parking lot, stopping at a well-worn but serviceable-looking blue Toyota Corolla.

Al was on the ball; he drove down the row and picked me up while Alice was still stowing away her groceries.

We followed her out of the parking lot and up Cordova Road, past the bike shop. She pulled up at a little house across from the old cemetery. The minuscule front yard was a riot of flowers—marigolds, periwinkles, impatiens, several kinds of euphorbia, different-colored Gerberas—with just a narrow path of pebbled concrete steppingstones leading through them to the front door. Alice pulled into the driveway and went inside.

We drove past slowly.

"Okay, Al," I said. "Stakeout's over at last. I want to thank you for your help. Couldn't have done it without you."

"Mmph. No, don't think you could." He smiled, then sobered. "What'll you do now?"

"Now comes the tough stuff," I said. "We haven't got anything but your eyewitness testimony to connect her with the murder. If I know Lennie Offenbach—and I know him well, if only at second hand—he'll never believe Alice is a murderess."

"Mmph. Wouldn't've, myself, 'f I hadn't seen her. Could be some mistake? Looks like a nice old gal."

“That’s the hell of it, Al, she is. And she’s had an awful lot of trouble in her life. I’m going to have to do a lot of thinking about this.”

“Well, if it’s her or Mrs. Lovatt—”

“It is, sort of,” I broke in. “They’ll never pin it on Lolly, though. She’s even made friends with Officers Laurel and Hardy, but I really don’t think she wants to adopt them. And that may be the only solution, unless I throw Alice to the wolves. Too hard.”

Chapter Nineteen.

The Pregnant Cyclist

I told Glenn about it that night, over BLTs and onion soup. He didn't know Alice, of course; I had to tell him her history and her grandson's.

"I just purely *hate* to turn her over to the cops," I said.

"Wouldn't do any good if you did, would it?" he said. "I mean, what kind of evidence have you got? Okay, so Al saw her close the shutter with a garage-door gadget, on what *might* have been the day of the murder. He didn't see her shoot Lovatt, though, did he?"

"No, and what's worse, he doesn't remember hearing a shot, even. Or rather, he remembers hearing too *many* noises that might've been shots. A twenty-two isn't very loud, anyway, and the atmosphere of gunpowder we'd been living in ever since the firework stands opened... Well, you see what I mean."

"Yeah. Well, listen, just a suggestion, but why don't you see if you can build a case that Inspector Lestrade, or Humperdinck, or whatever, would believe in, and then decide whether or not to use it. But she did kill a man, you know. Won't you have scruples?"

"My God, man, I've got seven different kinds of scruples, and they're all at war with each other," I said crossly. "That's the whole trouble. But if you're asking, don't I think murder is absolutely wrong in every instance, the answer is no. Sorry about that."

"Oh, you don't need to apologize to me," he said magnanimously. "I'm not long on scruples myself. I just thought that, as a detective, you might—"

"Well, I think I could contrive to live with myself if no one were

jailed for Lovatt's murder. In the first place, everyone I've talked to except Lolly—and that includes Detective Debbie Harper, mind you—has wanted to pin a medal on Lovatt's killer. Even Lolly was a bit doubtful about the tragic aspect of his demise.

"On the other hand, while I found his manner on his talk show extremely objectionable, I think there was probably some good in the man. No, if I'm going to mess about with scruples and ethics and all that ilk, this case will go right in the TOO HARD file. I'll take your advice and see if I can scrape together evidence enough to support a case."

I didn't tell him that I was going to begin by breaking into Alice's house just as soon as I caught her out of it. Probably he could have figured that out for himself, anyway, if he'd wanted to, and I didn't want to worry him unnecessarily. But I rode down to Cordova Road right after I finished my workout the next day.

Watching Alice's house was going to be a bitch, I discovered. There was nothing across the street but the old cemetery, and despite the fact that there were a lot of trees in there, they were almost all paperbark eucalypts and, if you know eucalyptus trees at all well, you know that a) they don't have very luxuriant foliage, and b) their trunks seldom get as thick as those of most other tall trees.

What I'm trying to say is that there just wasn't all that much cover in that graveyard. If I went dodging around behind trees and tombstones, I'd only attract attention by looking like a kid playing Indians.

I rode on down to the bike shop while I was thinking about it. It's a neighborhood shop that the owner, Frank James, runs out of his home, but it's extremely well-stocked.

Not only does he have bicycles of all sorts, from kids' twenty-inchers with training wheels, up through fifteen- and twenty-one-speed racers to road bikes, big tricycles, and the new laid-back speedsters, but once, at least, he had had a penny-farthing bike there, and at one time or another he has had unicycles and/or tandems.

I had made friends with him the year before, when I suffered a

flat on the way to the bank and limped in and asked him to fix it for me. We got talking bikes, and then it turned out he'd been in Australia at about the same time Steve and I were there, and we were off and away. Forget the fact that he'd been living in Fremantle while we were in Darwin, a distance of some two thousand miles as the galah flies. We were card-carrying members of the expatriates' club.

He was showing a kids' bike to a very pregnant young woman when I went in. "Really," he was saying, "I think if I were you, I'd wait till after the baby is born, Mrs. Jamison.

"I mean, if it's a girl, you might want to get her something like this," and he rolled out a bewitchingly feminine little pink bike with daisies on the handlegrips and a ruffled seat cover.

"Of course, it would never do for a little boy," he said craftily. "Besides, aren't you going to get the baby a tricycle to start on?"

While Frank continued to talk himself out of a sale, I withdrew tactfully and browsed through the bewildering variety of bicycle accessories that hung from hooks on the walls: bone wrenches, helmets of various shapes, packets of handlebar tape, spoke wrenches, tire pumps, tool kits, seat covers. Fascinating. Finally I heard the *beep!* as the door closed, and turned around.

"Giddy, mite," I said. He laughed.

"Ow yer gaowin', sheila?" he riposted, and we both laughed.

"I heard you refusing to sell that girl a bike," I said. "How are you ever going to pay your taxes if you never sell anything?"

"Oh, I just couldn't take advantage of the poor girl," he said. "Some women, pregnancy seems to go right to their heads, and when they come down nine months later, they're utterly appalled at things they did before the baby was born.

"She'll be thankful then that I didn't sell her a bike. And she's been a good customer—member of the Cycle Club, herself. It'd be bad for business if I let her swindle herself like that. As it is, she'll probably come back after the baby is born."

"How do you know she won't just go to some other shop today and get a bike?"

“Well, if she does, she does,” he said. “Anyway, *I’m* not going to sell her one.”

“Listen, Frank,” I said. “You know I’m a P.I., right?”

He said he knew that.

“Well, I’m on a case, a murder case, and I need to keep an eye on somebody’s house. Is there an alley behind your shop?”

Well, of course he was curious, and asked if it was someone in the neighborhood, and who had been murdered, and was I going to arrest somebody, and I don’t know what-all. I parried his questions by telling him it was confidential, that I personally couldn’t arrest anybody, and that I promised I would tell him what happened before it came out in the newspapers.

He led me out the back door to a sandy, unpaved alley that ran behind the houses. I made arrangements to leave my bike in his shop, made him promise not to sell it, and set off up the alley toward Alice’s house. He was all set to watch and see where I stopped, but a customer must have come into the shop just then, as he turned and hurried back inside.

I had counted houses on the way from Alice’s house to the cycle shop, and I counted again going up the alley, so I was pretty sure when I reached her house. However, pretty sure isn’t certain, and that was what I needed to be. I went up to the high board fence that backed on the alley, and peered through a crack.

The back yard was as jam-packed with vegetables—tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, eggplants, runner beans—as the front was with flowers. I figured it was Alice’s house, all right. What I couldn’t figure was how I was going to know when/if she left, which was the object of the exercise.

I cast my mind back to the preceding day. Alice had driven her Toyota into the carport on the north side of the house. I walked a bit farther north along the fence and applied my eye to another crack. Same vegetables; not much else. Farther north yet, I came to the end of the fence. Beyond it, the neighbors’ fence began. It was a simple cyclone fence, about three feet high. Apparently they couldn’t care less who looked into their back yard.

And hey! The fence between the two yards was the same sort of cyclone fence. So okay, it was overgrown with allemandas on one side, and tomato plants on the other. Still, no problem to see over it. I leaned against a convenient board fence on the other side of the alley and settled down to wait.

It was twelve-fifteen when I took up my station in the alley, and Alice didn't leave the house until after three. I wasn't disturbed in my vigil, though. Everybody seemed to be inside with the air conditioner going full blast, watching the TV. One time I heard the back door open in the house against whose fence I was leaning, and prepared to take evasive action. A little dog, a Scottie, I think, came running out and barked at me through the fence, but beyond yelling at the dog to shut up, his owner didn't react.

From my vantage point I had an excellent view of Alice's carport when she came out and started her car. She was wearing a different pantsuit today. This one was a dark red, almost black; and she looked tired and nervous. She put her big purse beside her on the seat and backed out into the street. I saw no sign of the shopping cart.

I waited five minutes after she left, then tried the back gate. Of course it wasn't locked. I don't know why people put up big fences like that one, but it surely can't be to keep people out.

Maybe it's to keep out dogs; though with the strict leash law that prevails in south Florida, the very few dogs who manage to escape and go for a solo run don't stay out long. Beats me. Anyway, the gate wasn't locked, so I just walked in as if I had a license and strolled up the path to the back door.

That was locked. I fished out the credit card I use least—no telling what the wear and tear of using it as a key would do to it—and forced back the latch. No problem. I was in.

I don't know about you, but searching someone else's house always makes me feel very apprehensive. I spend more time looking over my shoulder than I do searching, and I tend to sweat a lot.

If you wanted to get Freudian about it, you could probably make a case for my apprehension's originating in my childhood, when my

sister Jane used to whap me for reading her diary. Not that I didn't deserve it, mind you; I only *read* the damned thing because I knew it annoyed her. It was, I thought, a very *boring* diary.

Anyway, I searched Alice's house, battling the feeling of apprehension all the way. I'll spare you the details, and only say that I found a Saturday night special in the locked bottom drawer of her desk, and snuggling up to it was a remote-control door opener. As far as I was concerned, that tied it with a bow.

One or the other might have had nothing to do with Win Lovatt's death. Both together fairly screamed "Murderer!" I picked the gun up carefully in my handkerchief and checked it for empty chambers and/or the smell of cordite, but Alice was a tidy lady and had cleaned her gun.

I replaced it in the drawer and closed and relocked it with the key I'd found in the big drawer at the top of the desk. Well, where do *you* keep the key to *your* lockable drawer? That's if you haven't lost it yet.

Then I sat down in the desk chair and had a good think. I no longer felt nervous about being in Alice's house without her knowledge. The only question was, did I want to stay and confront her today, or wait till later?

I was fairly certain that I was going to confront her; it was only a question of when. I decided on later, checked to see if there was anything I needed to tidy up, and let myself out the back door, locking it after me. Then I headed for Frank's bike shop.

All the way home, the subject of what I was going to do about Alice kept trying to poke itself above the surface of my mind, but I kept pushing it down ruthlessly. There are a lot of people who drive cars while thinking of something else, and some of them never have an accident; but a car is a big, husky frame around your vulnerable bod. In addition it's pretty hard to damage a car by driving it through a pothole.

If you ride a bike, however, you'll know that it's actually possible to bend a wheel doing that, not to mention the likelihood that in the process you will fall upon the hard and raspy pavement

and remove several acres of valuable hide. There would be plenty of time to think about the case when I got home.

I settled myself in my cockpit with a cup of coffee and a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich in lieu of both lunch and coffee break, and proceeded to think. I ordered my thoughts in two columns in my spiral notebook. One was headed, "Why I should turn Alice in," and the other, "No, to hell with it."

The first column comprised things like, 1) Murder is against the law, 2) Police persecution of L. Lovatt, 3) Who knows who *else* Alice might take a dislike to? and 4) It's your job as a P.I. That was all I could think of for the *For* column.

The second column said, 1) I'm quite prepared to flout the law in a good cause, 2) Are the cops still giving Lolly trouble? Find out, 3) Find out *why* Alice killed him, and 4) See 1) above. I found, in short, that I hadn't enough information on which to base a decision. I made notes, on another page, of the information I needed.

Find out:

- 1) Why Alice shot Win Lovatt; and
- 2) If the police are keeping up the pressure on Lolly.

I decided to do the second one first, as Alice was not at home and Lolly probably was. And anyway, I wanted to talk to Lolly about Alice.

I dinghied over, tied up the boat, and pounded on Lolly's back door. She answered right away. She was wearing an apron over her tight, fashionably-tattered jeans, and she ushered me into the kitchen area, saying, "I've got something on the stove." A look at my watch told me it was after five o'clock.

"Sorry about barging in when you're cooking, Lolly. Somehow the time got away from me today." I paused, then announced bluntly, "I think I've found Win's murderer."

"Great!" she said over her shoulder. She went on beating eggs, though, I noticed.

"You don't seem terribly impressed," I said. "Don't you care any more, or what?"

She finished with the eggs and added other ingredients to them,

poured the whole razzoo into a quiche crust, and shot the pan into the oven. Then she came over and sat down.

“Well, you know, I’m really not sure how much I do care,” she said. “By the way, where have you been, these last two weeks? I haven’t seen hide nor hair of you. I tried to get you on the phone once or twice, left messages and like that, but you didn’t call back.”

How do you explain to a client that you’ve been dodging her because you couldn’t get to first base on her case? “I was dodging you because I couldn’t get to first base on your case. That was last week. All this week, Fat Al and I have been down at Southport shopping center, detecting.”

I told her about what Al had seen from his rigging, and about our abortive attempt to find the lady among the talk-show suspects. Then I told her about Al’s search of the shopping centers while I was over at the beach with my head in the sand.

“That dose of Damsel-in-Distress I gave him was more potent than I realized, I guess,” I told her. “Anyway, there he was, slogging away at my job while I was goofing off. I still feel like the world’s most profound shithead. So when he told me he’d found the little old lady he saw in your back yard with a door-opener in her hand, we went—”

Lolly had been sitting there looking amazed. “Wait a minute,” she said. “I still can’t take this all in. The person who shot Win was a little old *lady*? Whatever did she do it for?”

“Well, I don’t know yet, but I’m pretty sure it didn’t have anything to do with the talk show. Look, I’ve got an idea what she did it for, but I want to ask her before I—”

“You want to *what*? Ask the murderer why she did it? Just like that, you’re going to ask the murderer why she did it? What if she decides to shoot *you*, because you’re onto her?”

“I really don’t think she will,” I said. “Do you want to know who it is, or not?”

“I guess so. Is there any reason I would know her from... Well, from Eve?”

“I don’t know, but I think so. Have you ever met Alice Camry?”

"Alice Camry," she said. "Sure I've met Alice Camry. She was down at the station one time when I went to take Win's coffee thermos that he forgot.

"I was talking to Jules Farthingale in his office when she came in with her little collecting can, and he introduced me to her. And then later on, she came out here collecting. Two or three times, at least. You're not telling me Alice *Camry* shot Win, are you? That nice old girl? I don't believe it."

"Well, I didn't either, at first," I said. "But then I got to thinking... Did she ever tell you about her grandson?"

"I think she told everybody about her grandson. She told me, and she told Jules, and Susan said she told *her*. It seems to be just about the only thing she ever thinks about. Why? Win didn't have anything to do with her grandson, did he?"

"I'm not going to tell you any more, right now," I said. "I want to check with Alice, first. What I want from you is an update on the cop situation. Are Laurel and Hardy still dogging your footsteps?"

The oven timer went off with a *ping!* and she went to take out her quiche. "Not nearly as much as they were," she said. "I haven't seen 'em at all this week, now I come to think of it."

"If they stopped bugging you, would you care an awful lot if Win's killer wasn't, as they say, brought to justice?"

She sat down at the table and put her head in her hands. "Oh, wow!" she said. "Do you ever ask hard questions. I feel like I *ought* to care. What kind of a wife doesn't care if her husband's killer is punished or not? What if somebody found out I knew who killed him, and didn't care? What if my *mother* found out—"

"Yeah," I said. "What if your mother *did* find out? Do you think she'd want you to be vengeful, if the killer was an otherwise nice, if slightly loopy, old lady who'd had a hard life? I don't think she would.

"Your mother is a kind, reasonable person. A touch authoritarian, but then most of us teachers are. But we're getting away from the point. Really, now. If Alice Camry killed Win, and the cops weren't going to prosecute—or persecute—anybody for the

murder, would you turn her in?"

"No. No, dammit, no! I would not. So what do I do now?"

"Hang tough. You hired me to get to the bottom of this, and if I haven't quite touched bottom yet, I think I'm fairly close. After I find out for sure about the murder, I'll check with a source I have at the police station, and see if I can find out what Lennie Offenbach has in what, for want of a better term, I call his mind. Then, if everything comes out all right, I arrange things. Okay?"

"Okay. But what if what's-his-name—Offenbach?—gets a wild hair later and starts investigating again; then what?"

"That'll be part of the arrangement. Whatever happens, I think I can guarantee that they'll leave you alone. See, I don't think Alice has been feeling exactly good about killing a man. She looks kind of ghostly to me; but then, I never saw her before the murder, so I don't know. Maybe she always looked—"

"Ghostly? No. What you might call careworn, yes; 'specially when she talked about her grandson. But not anything you could call *ghostly*."

"Well, look. Can you leave it to me? I'll report back just as soon as I get it sorted out, and you can tell me then what you think of the arrangements. Okay?"

She said okay, and I left. As I went out the back door, I heard the front doorbell ring.

Chapter Twenty.

The Ethical Killer

Of course I talked it all over with Glenn, that night. He was all for my plan, but said, “I hope you can go into this without expecting miracles though. I wouldn’t like for you to be disappointed if it went wrong.”

“Hey, I’m a big girl now,” I protested. “Almost a senior citizen. I think I can hack it.”

“Well, maybe, but remember how you felt about Jerry,” he said. “If that wasn’t disappointment, I’ve never seen disappointment.”

“Yeah, well, you’re right,” I said. “I did feel bad about that, and Steve always used to say you should never feel bad about external things you can’t do anything about. Okay. I won’t get my hopes up. Just do what I can, and accept whatever happens.”

The next morning I called Debbie Harper at the police station. She didn’t answer her extension, so next I tried her boyfriend, Wes. He was there, but he said Debbie wasn’t working weekends that month; something about some esoteric rotation schedule that Offenbach’s office had come out with. I took his word for it, and called her at home.

“Listen, Debbie,” I began, “I don’t want to be a pest or anything, but do you know if Offenbach—”

That set her off. It seemed that she was taking the schedule change personally, and was pissed as hell about it.

“Lennie’s been making snide remarks about sexual relationships between police officers ever since he found out about Wes and me,” she said. “And I really believe that this whole schedule change is

purely and simply to make it harder for us to get together. The way it's set up, when he's on nights, I'm on days, and when I don't work weekends, he—"

Well, she went on for some time, but I finally attracted her attention by telling her I thought I knew who'd killed Win Lovatt.

"Oh, yeah? Who?" she said.

"I'm not going to tell you," I said. She started to protest, and I added hastily, "Not just yet, anyway. I want you to think about it first. Are you *sure* you want to know?"

"Oh. No, I'm not sure. Suppose you tell me what you called about first, and while you're doing that, I'll think about it and decide whether I want to know who killed him or not."

"Lolly—Mrs. Lovatt—says she hasn't seen Stan and Ollie for almost a week, now. Do you know why?"

"Sure I know why. There was one of those execution-style killings over on Sistrunk Boulevard. You know, the kind they always think are drug-related? And anything has to do with drugs, that's top priority with Lennie. So he stuck the Lovatt case in the TOO HARD file. Nobody seemed to give a damn about it, anyway. He pulled everybody off it and put 'em all on the 'Sistrunk Slaying', as the papers call it."

"Do you think he'll get back to the Lovatt thing when this is all over?"

"Well, I'd say the odds are all for NO. In the first place, Lennie has a very short memory for crimes that don't have press appeal; and in the second place, by then there'll be something else, for sure. Why are you asking me all this?"

"Tell you in a minute," I said. "Now. As I remember it, you once said words to the effect that you couldn't care less if the cops never caught Lovatt's murderer. Now, do you—"

"What I said was, if I remember correctly, 'Are you *sure* you want to find out who killed that slimy bastard?' and then you gave me a big lecture on law and order and anarchy and things like that."

"Well, do you still feel that way about it? I mean, do you think you could forget I said I found out who did the murder, if you tried

real hard?"

"Yeah, I think I could do that. So what?" she pressed the point, "you think you know who did it, and you don't want to turn him in. Is that it?" Debbie always was a great one for dotting i's and crossing t's.

I let the reference to *him* stand. "Something like that," I said. "But I plan to make provision in case Offenbach starts in on Lolly again. So you think you could forget I ever called you? Right?"

She said that was right, and we hung up. After that, I did some more sitting and thinking, and decided to put the whole thing on simmer for the rest of the weekend. After all, it had been nearly a month since Lovatt had been killed, and the fabric of the universe showed no signs of disintegration. A couple more days couldn't hurt.

Monday morning, though, right after my workout, I headed for Cordova Road. I could see as soon as I pulled up in front of the house that Alice was not at home. The blinds were closed, and her car was not in the carport.

What a letdown. There I was, all psyched up to talk turkey to a murderess, and no murderess. I rode on down to Seventeenth Street and stopped at the Burger King, where I ordered a Heath-bar Spooner and a cup of coffee. Then I sat there, alternately freezing my teeth with the Spooner and heating them up with the coffee, and tried to think what to do next.

What struck me was not exactly an epiphany, but I guess it could qualify as a moderately good idea. I left my Spooner and coffee on the table and went outside to the pay phone. A quick check of the white pages told me that "Camry, Alice" had a telephone. I would call first and make an appointment. Why hadn't I thought of that before?

I went back in and finished my Spooner and coffee, then went home via A1A, checking out the beach on the way. I counted seven cheeky bikinis as I went by. I don't know why I do this census thing. Maybe just because it's fun. Anyway, most of the girls wearing them looked good in them, and that's more than you can say for most articles of clothing.

It took me until five o'clock that afternoon to get hold of Alice Camry, and when I did, she said she had been planning to call me. I scratched my head a bit over that, but decided to leave it till I could talk to her face to face. I made an appointment to go to her house at ten o'clock the following morning.

At ten a.m. I was on Alice's doorstep, if not exactly with bells on, certainly wearing my best denim miniskirt and tank top. Alice answered the door while my finger was still on the bell. She had been watching for me, she said.

I took one look at her and was shocked. She looked every minute of her age, and more. The first time I'd seen her, she could have passed for a woman in her fifties—now she looked every bit of seventy-five. I checked her out again, and decided that the difference was in expression and carriage. Alice looked defeated and haggard.

She ushered me into the living room I'd searched the preceding Friday and offered me a chair. I sat down on the edge of it. "I wanted to talk—" we chorused. I shut up and let Alice continue.

"I wanted to talk with you about Win Lovatt's murder," she said. "I did it, but the police won't believe me when I tell them so. I thought maybe you could—"

This wasn't going at all the way I had scripted it in my head. In that script, I was telling Alice that I knew she'd killed Win Lovatt, but was willing to keep it from the police. All very magnanimous.

"Hey, wait a minute, Alice," I interrupted. "What do you want to turn yourself in for? The cops haven't got a clue who did it, and I don't think they care much any more."

"Well, if they don't, they ought to," she said indignantly. "What do we pay taxes for, for heaven's sake? I want to turn myself in because I committed a murder, and I think I ought to be punished for it. And because," she added a little defiantly, "I haven't got anything to lose any more. My grandson killed himself yesterday. With him gone—"

"What about your son and his wife? Don't they need you more than ever, now?"

“Ha! Eric and Sandra got a divorce less than a year after Eddie was institutionalized. They never had got along very well, and Eddie’s...problem just made it worse. They had these awful fights about whose fault it was.

“They’re both remarried now, to other people, and neither one has started another family. No, there isn’t anybody that needs me any more, and I’m tired. And I think maybe a little crazy, as well. Stop trying to talk me out of it, will you? I’ve been over and over it, and I want to take my medicine.”

“I guess you know they’d never give you the death penalty, don’t you? They’d only just send you to jail.”

“That’s all right,” she said. “Maybe I could do some good there. Who knows? Now, stop arguing. I need your help. How can I convince those dumb cops I committed the murder?”

“You’re absolutely *sure* you want to go ahead with this?” I said. “Because if I tell you how to get yourself convicted, there’s not going to be any going back. So you better be sure.”

She said she was sure. I told her that the first and best items of evidence were the gun and the door opener. “How did you know about those?” she gasped. “I was going to tell you, but—”

“I’ve been investigating this case since about a week after Lovatt was killed,” I explained. “I broke into your house on Friday and found the gun and the electronic gadget, but I knew they had to be here.

“Look, I’ll make a deal with you, Alice. I’ll help you convince the police you did it if you’ll tell me why you killed him. Did you ever listen to his talk show?”

“Not till after I decided I was going to kill him,” she said. “That just made it all the more imperative. He was such an all-out... Well, *son of a bitch* is the only term I know that fits.

“No, it was because of Eddie. Eddie used to listen to his show in the mornings before he went to school, and I really thought that was what got him in with that...that cult of devil-worshippers. Now I’m not so sure. I’m not even sure any more why I thought so at the time.

“Eddie used to swear by him, though. Lovatt. He thought he was the funniest thing going, he said, and had the best music of any morning DJ. I listened to his show several times because Eddie liked it so much, but I couldn’t understand what he saw in it.”

“No, I think what it was, was that Lovatt appealed to the adolescent mind. The *puerile* adolescent mind. Nothing against Eddie,” I said hastily. “We all go through it, more or less, at puberty or soon after—”

“Eddie was *such* a beautiful boy, Mrs. Ritchey. You just have no idea!” she burst out. “I babysat with him from when he was just a tiny little thing, and my, he loved his Nana. He used to come and stay with me in school vacations. When he got big he was a real help to me, too. He did all my digging for me when I planted my garden.

“Well, of course he got other interests in high school. I wouldn’t have wanted him to be tied to old Nana’s apron strings all his life. It wouldn’t be normal, would it?” She smiled unconvincingly, tears in her blue eyes.

“No, they all grow up,” I said. “That’s their job, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said eagerly. “But he still shared things with me. That’s why I listened to ‘Don’t You Just Lovatt?’ in the mornings. That man had no respect for anything or anybody. Religion, the President, our country. But Eddie thought he was just great. So when I found out about the devil-worship—”

“Was it a real Satanist cult, do you know, or were they just playing at it?” I said. “So many times they don’t really know anything about what they’re doing. They just want to be scary and go ‘Boo!’ and feel wicked.”

“I don’t know about the rest of the kids, except they were a scruffy lot. Eddie took it seriously, though, I think. But even that might’ve been okay,” she said sadly, “if it hadn’t been for the magic mushrooms. He never got over those.”

“Well, okay,” I said. “So you blamed Lovatt for Eddie’s trouble?”

“I did, yes. I can’t quite put my finger on the connection, now,” she said, “but it seemed so obvious, then.

"I started listening to his talk show. 'Face the Truth,' it was called. My God, but he was an awful man. But I never would have thought to kill him if it hadn't been for Eddie. If there's one thing I've learned in life, it's that there are all sorts of awful people around. Look at that Arafat, and that Ayatollah, and all the others. But they didn't concern me then, and they don't now. Him I wanted to kill."

"Well, okay, Alice," I said. "I guess I can understand that in a way. But how did you go about it? Did you make a lot of plans?"

"No," she said placidly. "I had Edgar's little gun, and the ammunition for it. I knew I could shoot it, because Edgar and I used to go out in the swamp on weekends and pot away at tin cans with it. And you don't forget how. It's like riding a bicycle. There's no place to practice any more, though," she mourned. "It's all built up out there now."

"There were all kinds of things I had to find out," she continued. "Like where he lived. I knew what he looked like from this."

She got up and went into the bedroom, where I could hear her opening drawers. Shortly she came back with a folded piece of slick paper. It was a page out of the Sunday magazine.

She handed it to me and I unfolded it. The paper was already yellowing, though it couldn't have been a year old. Win Lovatt looked out at me from under straight black brows, a Byronic expression on his long, thin face. Intense, Lolly had said. He *looked* intense.

"I looked up the radio station in the Yellow Pages," she said, "and found out the address. I was already collecting for Mental Health. Mostly just placing the cans in stores where they gave me permission to, at the time; but it gave me an idea. I took my little can and went down to the radio station and collected there. Most of those people were very kind."

"Yes, they're a weird lot," I said, "but basically kind. Most people are, I find."

"I went right in the studio, and collected from him while he was

on the air. I figured he owed me that.”

“Oh, Alice,” I said. “You collected money from the man, and then you killed him?”

“It sounds bad, when you put it like that. I guess it *was* bad, but I didn’t see it that way at the time.”

“And then what?” I said. “Did you follow him home?”

She had followed him home. “The young man at the little guard post stopped me when I drove in, but I showed him my collecting can, and he not only let me go onto the street, he gave me a donation.” She smiled, showing those perfect false teeth.

“When I got home I looked up Lovatt’s address on a city map. I could see when I drove by that it backed on a canal, and for a while I thought of getting there by water some way, but I don’t own a boat, so I had to give up that idea. But I took the water taxi down the canal and looked the house over from that side, anyway.”

The water taxis—there were ten of them—motored up and down the waterways of Fort Lauderdale. The fare was \$2.50 per person, one way, anywhere on the water.

“So that’s how you knew about the shutters. I wondered.”

“That’s how I knew about the shutters—and the wife. I saw her sitting by the pool. I thought she looked like too nice a girl to be married to a rotter like him. Is she happy to be rid of him?”

“Not altogether, no,” I said. “On the other hand, I have to admit she’s not exactly grieving inconsolably or anything like that. How did you know she wasn’t home the day you killed him?”

“Because I made a career of following him around, that’s why,” she said. “For a loner type of person, he was almost never by himself. And I didn’t want to bring anyone else into it. I didn’t have any quarrel with *them*.

“I made friends with both of the guards, the day and the night ones, and they let me in and out without any trouble at all. They’re both such *nice* young men. I wouldn’t want to get them in any trouble,” she said. “Do I have to tell the police about them?”

“Not unless they ask,” I promised. “We won’t put it in the statement.”

The interview had gotten away from me altogether at the outset, and I saw no way of recapturing any control. Alice was calm and outrageous, and the whole affair was beginning to assume a dreamlike quality; rather like the stories about that other Alice, and her friends the March Hare and the Mad Hatter.

“So you were there, on the street, when Lolly left?”

“Lolly? Is that her name? Yes, I was sitting in my car on the other side of the street. They’re building a house over there, you know, a big one, and at night, there’s no one there. The driveway is a very convenient place to park. I heard yelling inside the house, and then she came out carrying a suitcase, slammed the door after her, got in the car, and drove away. I thought it looked like she’d be gone a while.”

“So why didn’t you go in and shoot him right then?”

“It was too quiet. I decided to wait till in the morning. It’s always noisy in that neighborhood during the day.”

“I know,” I said. “I live right across the canal, remember? Oh! I just remembered. Were you trailing *me*, when you came collecting that day?”

She had the grace to blush at that. “Yes,” she said, and folded her hands primly in her lap. “Somebody down at the station—I forget who—told me you were investigating, and I got curious about how much you knew.”

“And what did you find out?” I said. Really, we might have been talking about the weather.

“Not much. But I thought you were a long way from finding out about me. Did you say you searched my house Friday? Why?”

“You were seen,” I said.

“No. I don’t believe that. When I looked outside after I shot him, I could see that anybody on the other side of the canal could see me if I went out then, so I waited. I was just about to give up and go out the front door—I’d have had to leave it unbolted, then, but never mind—when the barge came along. It was so wide and high, it gave me plenty of time to do my trick with the shutters and get away. *Nobody* could have seen me.”

“Not even the man next door, who was clipping his hedge?” I said.

“I saw *him*,” she said. “I didn’t come out till after I saw his head go down behind the hedge. *He* didn’t see me.”

“No. No, he didn’t. It was a man on my side of the canal, Alice. He was up his mast, inspecting his radio antenna.”

“On a *boat*? I never thought of that. But what could he see? Lovatt was already dead.”

“He saw you come out of the house and close the shutter after you.”

“But he didn’t know me, surely,” she said. “How did you know it was me?”

I told her, reflecting, meanwhile, on how much of this case had been a matter of luck. Mostly Alice’s luck. There was her good luck in having the barge come by at the right time, and her *incredible* luck with the electronic door opener. And now her bad luck in that Fat Al had found her in a finite length of time.

“Your luck failed you that time, Alice,” I said. “But you don’t know how much luck you had. What made you take along the garage-door gadget?”

“Oh, I knew, or anyway I was pretty sure, one of those would work on the shutters,” she said placidly. “They had this ad on the TV, the hurricane shutter people, and they showed this girl opening and closing them with one of those doohickeys.

“Though why she was wearing a bikini while she did it... Well, anyway, I remembered I had the one from our old house in Frostproof put away somewhere, so I rummaged it out, put in fresh batteries, and took it with me. And sure enough, it worked!”

I explained to her the phenomenal amount of pure, unadulterated fortuity that had gone into making her opener the one in a thousand or so that would close the shutter, and she was dumbfounded.

“You mean they aren’t all alike?” She settled back in her chair. “I never knew that!” For some reason, she didn’t look anywhere near as haggard as she had when I came in. Maybe confession *is*

good for the soul, after all.

“Still, it didn’t really matter. That business of having the place locked up on the inside was just a frill, after all. I could have gone out the front door, if I’d wanted to.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you didn’t,” I said. “I mean, it was a lot more inconvenient for me, but I think it’s the only reason in this world Lolita Lovatt isn’t sitting in a cell right now, awaiting trial. That and the absence of a gun, but I expect the cops would have gotten around that, some way.”

She agreed that it had been a good thing. “I got in by asking Lovatt for a special donation to the fund. He went and got his checkbook, and wrote me a check for fifty dollars. Of course, I couldn’t use it. It had the date on it, and everything. So I burned it when I got home.”

“*He* was a soft touch, wasn’t he?” I said. “A real soft touch, for such a bad guy. And after that, you shot him?”

“Oh, I told him why, first. But he was really surprised when I shot him. I put his checkbook and pen away in the desk drawer. That was another bit of luck; he never had time to write down the check number and amount on the counterfoil. I don’t know what I’d have done, if he had.”

Well, I asked her again to be absolutely *sure* she wanted to turn herself in to the police, and when she said yes, I set about building the case against her. I took down her statement and typed it up on the old Underwood upright that stood on the desk.

It was a bit cranky, but they built those suckers to last, and it worked pretty well. She read over the statement and signed it, and then we collected up the evidence—the gun and the door opener—locked up the house, and went down to the police station.

Debbie Harper was there. I told her what the situation was: that Alice had insisted, over my protests, on turning herself in for the crime. She read the statement, shaking her head in wonder several times, and examined exhibits A and B. They’d have to have Ballistics test the gun, she said, to make sure it was the right one. Would we be seated?

I was as fidgety as a student at a final exam, but Alice kept her cool. After what seemed a very long time, Debbie came back and said, "It checks." She picked up the statement, the ballistics report, and the two exhibits, and marched into Offenbach's office.

Chapter Twenty-One.

The Optimistic Program Director

They convicted her, of course. She only drew the minimum sentence, though, of twenty years. The people I asked gave me differing answers about when she could get parole; the lowest estimate was three years.

I figured that if good behavior had anything to do with it, she'd be out as soon as was legally possible. Her son came back from Mississippi, where he'd moved with his new wife, and arranged with a real estate agent to rent out Alice's house while she was in the slammer, so she would be earning money while she was a guest of the state.

Me? The case left me scratching my head. On thinking it over, I guessed I, or Fat Al, or Alice, or somebody, had prevented Lolita Lovatt's arrest for the murder of her husband.

I said as much to her, adding, "You don't have to pay me if you don't want to. I don't really feel that I solved much of anything, and I don't need the money. The royalties from Steve's ecology books support me quite nicely."

"Well, I certainly will pay you for your time," she said. "And I think you solved it. It's too bad Alice insisted on going to jail, though. But I never did understand why she shot Win."

I explained it again as best I could, about Eddie Camry and the Satanist cult and the magic mushrooms and the heavy metal music.

Then I said, "I really don't understand it very well myself, though, and what's more, I don't think Alice does, either. I think Win ended up being the focus for her resentment over her

grandson's trouble. *Somebody* had to be at fault, and Win was elected.

"There are some tribes in New Guinea," I mused, "in which, every time somebody dies for whatever reason—illness, accident, old age, what have you—the shaman goes to work. He ferrets out the culprit, the person who caused the death by ill-wishing the dead person, and punishes him.

"I've always thought the system had its advantages. It must be very satisfying to feel that you've found the trouble and eliminated it. On the other hand, if you lived in one of those tribes, you just better hope nobody died. You'd be as likely to be the designated scapegoat as anybody else."

"Well, there was a little more sense in it than *that*," Lolly said. "But I can't exactly put my finger on it right now."

I changed the subject. "So do you think you're going to get married again?"

She shook her red head vigorously. "No way. Not for a long time, anyway. I like Russell a lot, I really do; I think I might even be in love with him.

"But can't you just see me living in a trailer? I mean, I like the outdoors as well as anybody—*better* than most people—but I'm going back to modeling, and that's all there is to it. I've got a career to get on with."

"I do see what you mean," I said. "And I certainly can't see Russ moving in here to become Mr. Lolita, either."

"No, that's what he says, too. So we'll go on the way we are, for now, at least. A little bit like you and Glenn." We left it at that.

* * * * *

One day in September I rode my bike down to the radio station. I wanted to talk to Jules Farthingale about the way the case had come out. Susan Blair sat at the reception desk, doing about two hundred wpm on a brand-new computer. I leaned on the edge of the desk until she looked up.

"I see you got your wish," I said. "Constant dripping wears

away stone, right?”

“Right,” she grinned. “Or to put it another way, I just dinged at Jules till he put his hands over his ears and said, All right! All right! Call in the salesman for demos. So I did. Do you want to see the great man? Oh, by the way, I’m really down on you. Why did you turn Alice in to the cops?”

“Listen, if you knew how hard I tried to talk her *out* of it! But she was dead set on ‘taking her medicine’, whatever that means.”

“Have you heard from her at all?”

“Yeah, she seems to be living it up in the calaboose, from what I can get out of it. She’s been teaching the other prisoners how to knit and do macramé. And doing all kinds of reading on human biology. I was all set to feel sorry for her, but... I don’t know. She seems happier now than she did before Eddie killed himself.”

“Oh, did he?” she said in that hushed voice. “I didn’t know. Maybe that’s why she decided to go to jail.”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I said. “The complexities of the human psyche never fail to amaze me. Well, what about it? Do I get to see Mr. Farthingale?”

She said I should go right in, completely forgetting to alert Farthingale via intercom. That was why I caught him asleep, with his feet on the desk. *It could have been*, I reflected, *something much more embarrassing for both of us*. “I have a message from Alice,” I said without preamble. He sat up with a jerk.

“Who? What? Oh, hello, Ms Ritchey,” he said. “I suppose you wouldn’t believe me if I told you I was just resting my eyes.”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t believe my great-grandfather when he said that, either, and I was only five at the time. Out late last night?”

He grinned. “Yup. But that’s no excuse. Susan was out even later, because she babysat for us, and I bet you didn’t catch *her* napping. Did you say you had a message from Alice, or did I dream it?”

“I said it. She was particularly earnest about it. She wanted me to tell you—to *assure* you—that, even though her collecting here at the station was only an excuse she used to keep track of Win Lovatt,

all the money went straight to the Mental Health people.”

“Did she say she was sorry for depriving me of the best talk-show host I ever had?”

“No, that didn’t seem to worry her. Haven’t you got a replacement yet?”

“Not yet,” he said. “I’m dickering with this fellow in New Jersey, though. I think he may be what I’m looking for.”

“Sounds right. In my experience, people from New York and New Jersey are not only opinionated, but they’re positively eager to let you know about it. Is he into Tae Kwon Do, or karate, or any other self-defense?”

“Don’t know. He probably packs a rod. I’ll need to remember to check if he has a license for it. But I’ve got a message for *you*,” he said. “I was going to call you, but since you’re here—”

“For me? Who from? No, wait, don’t tell me-. It’s Donald Trump. The *Princess* has been stolen, and he wants me—” I didn’t think it was all *that* funny, but it broke him up.

“No, Trumpy hasn’t called yet,” he said when he’d finished laughing. “It’s Edmund Hallett. He wanted me to remind you that you promised you’d come back and tell him all about the murder case. Did you?”

“Probably. I’m always promising things like that,” I said. “But this time I’ll be glad to make good on it. Have you seen him recently? How is he?”

“Last week,” he said. “I took him CDs of some *concerti grossi*. He likes Barococo stuff. Bach and back, you know?”

“I didn’t know *he* did, but so do I. Vivaldi, Corelli, Purcell, and all those cats,” I said. “How is his therapy coming along?”

“Well, I’m not supposed to tell you—he wanted it to be a surprise—but he’s walking a little. With one of those aluminum frames, still, but...”

I said that was terrific, and promised that I would remember to be duly surprised when I saw him on his feet. We talked of this and that, and I left feeling better than when I’d arrived.

That’s not to say that I didn’t still feel depressed about Alice. I

told Glenn so that night, while we sat out in lawn chaises on the shuffleboard court and drank beer.

“It’s not so much that I mind about Alice being in jail,” I said. “Especially since it seemed to be what she wanted. It’s just that the whole case doesn’t seem to *mean* anything.

“I mean, it gives me that ‘what’s it all *for?*’ syndrome. She shot him dead, and now that she thinks about it, even *she’s* not sure why.

“And he went to what seemed to be a great deal of trouble to make himself as unpleasant as possible to the maximum number of people, but if you look at what he actually *did*, he doesn’t come off as such a bad guy, after all. So what does it all *mean?*”

“You know, I had to take a philosophy course when I was a sophomore,” he said. “Part of the general degree requirements. That was the first contact I had, well, except for English comp, with you liberal arts types and your incessant search for *meaning*. Me, I still don’t understand what meaning *is*. What is it?”

I thought about that for some time. “Beats *me* all to heck,” I said finally. Somehow I felt better.

THE END

About the Author

I was born some time back in Illinois and spent my first 18 years in a small town downstate. After the usual college career, I got an MA in English Lit. at UofI, and met my husband, a Korean War vet with a bad case of congenital itchy foot, there. While he finished his PhD in Engineering, I produced five kids and took various part-time jobs: everything from waitress to library asst. to clerk-typist.

We trailed the kids after us to Texas, Louisiana (New Orleans!), Queensland and the Northern Territory in Australia, and the Big Island of Hawaii. After that, with the kids all grown up and busily producing grandchildren, we moved to south Florida, where we lived on a 26-ft. sailboat for upwards of fifteen years. Now we live in an apartment (it's bigger than the boat, and has a refrigerator!) in Gainesville.

In addition to my addiction to writing, I've been: an English instructor, a high-school teacher, a word-processor operator in an Agronomy dept., a temp, an assistant to a bankruptcy trustee, dogsbody for a Mac-freak programmer and inventor manqué, and a mailroom employee in a mailing service.

* * * *

Uncial Press brings you extraordinary fiction, non-fiction and poetry. Put a world of reading in your pocket.

www.uncialpress.com