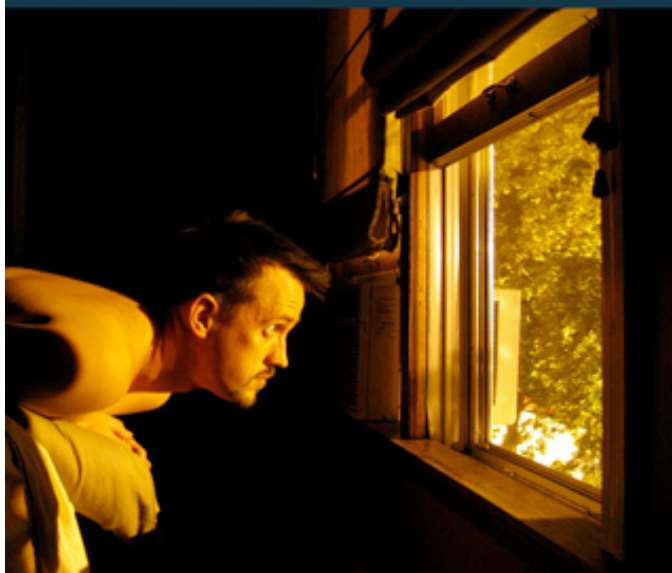


Tom Hoke

Murder in the Grand Manor



MURDER IN THE GRAND MANOR

by Tom Hoke

Chapter One

Jim Smith knew this was going to be a memorable trip when his headlights picked out the figure of a woman talking animatedly to a palmetto during a driving rain storm. Peering through the blur of water on his windshield, he found himself staring at gold opera pumps, a dripping outer garment of some shiny material hanging nearly to the ground, and two hats stuck squarely one upon the other on her head. Suddenly she turned, waved a gloved fist at his lights, and disappeared around the left side of the building.

In disbelief, he nosed the rental car closer to the looming building and a neon sign spelled out **G R A D M A O R**, with enough space to allow for the true name, which according to his directions, could only be Grand Manor. Three stories high, all but

obscured by dark, wet foliage, the hotel appeared scarcely grand and by no means a manor.

The attendant in the gas station back up the road had warned him. The attendant had showed some surprise when Jim asked how to find the Grand Manor Hotel. "That place is dead, even if it's still running. You won't like it." He started talking about a new casino hotel. "Look", Jim cut him off, "I want the Grand Manor. You DO know where it is?" Out of sheer curiosity, Jim added, "What's the matter with the Grand Manor?"

The attendant shrugged. "It used to be the town meeting place a few years ago. Everybody stopped at the bar sometime during the day. A guy always knew what was going on in town then. You know, *Rotary Club*, *Lion's Club*, and *Garden Club* luncheons, that sort of thing. And the bar always had at least a dozen people in it." He shook his head. "They put in a new bridge and a higher road separating the town from the old hotel. I guess that was the end. Nobody goes there no more."

Then he waxed philosophical, "The town fell apart in a way. Since it got divorced from the Grand Manor, Bay St. Louis ain't the same, just a bunch of houses scattered around. Without a central meeting place, there's nothing to hold the town together." He looked at Jim

curiously. "You got a friend staying there?" he asked.

Jim turned up his raincoat collar. "No," he said quite truthfully. "I don't have a friend staying there." Jerry Duprey was no friend of his, especially after this morning. However, a thousand bucks said he had to find Duprey and take him back to Fort Worth, Texas. Most of all, he wanted a word or two with Jerry Duprey.

Jim took a deep breath and slammed the car door as he ran for the unappealing entrance, shoes crunching on the crushed shell of the driveway. A single naked street light threw waving shadows of heavy Spanish moss in continuous motion across the face of the building. A wet strand dangling eerily from a long branch of an enormous live oak tree brushed his head. Ancient the Grand Manor might be, but dry it looked, and nothing else mattered at the moment.

The building must have been a hundred or more years old. There was a vestibule between the lobby and the cracked sidewalk outside. The vestibule was only three feet deep and as long as the inside lobby, with a ragged carpet and not one single stick of furniture for embellishment. The length of the vestibule had casement windows one could hardly see

through, which had nothing to do with the rain. The dampness and a strong smell of mildew hit him as he grabbed open the outside door. He could see through windows in the inner door. A wobbly ceiling fan turned jerkily as it dangled precariously from a ten foot ceiling. Several rickety floor lamps offered the lighting arrangement for the lobby.

Amazingly, just as he opened the outer door, a fat bellboy in a white coat a size too small, opened the inner door Jim was peering through as if on schedule. He glanced at Jim with little interest. His "You want a room?" nearly inspired Jim to an equally idiotic answer. He came within an ace of announcing he was looking for a fourth at bridge. Instead, Jim nodded shortly, his eyes running past the excess of rattan furniture to a desk in the right corner, and the key holding wooden cubbyholes. The desk was presided over by an anemic little guy with a triangular head and thick rimmed glasses. Straight ahead were a couple of French doors marked *Dining Room*. Another sign announced: *Closed*. He was glad he wasn't hungry.

Jim sloshed over to the desk. "Do you....?" he began, but the desk clerk interrupted with a nod. "Single and a bath down the hall, eighty dollars a day." His pasty face was expressionless.

Before Jim could come up with an appropriate response, a whistle split the damp atmosphere of the lobby, and came close to splitting his eardrums. He wheeled, as well as one can wheel in wet shoes. In the left corner of the room dripped the female he had seen chatting with the palmetto. She stood under a small, neat sign which made lots of sense: *BAR*. The sign cheered his heart, but he braced as she again stuck two fingers in her mouth and blasted the air. This time she punctuated the whistle with a bellow, "Annie! You have a visitor. Come on down and see who's here!" she yelled, staring at Jim across the lobby.

The desk clerk drew in his breath audibly. The fat one picked up a newspaper and challenged the bottom of a wicker chair with his weight. A dripping female strolled toward Jim unbuttoning her coat, without disturbing the balance of her two hats. One was pink and one was purple, as he could see now. They were somewhat the worse for water. She pulled off the coat, and he gave it a triple take. It was real mink, very good but somewhat old mink....inside, that is. The shiny stuff he had noted earlier was the lining. Mink in the middle of the summer on the Gulf Coast is head shrink material. Wrong side out, full length mink, anywhere, would have sent a reputable psychiatrist to the funny farm.

The woman was on a collision course with him, and Jim felt she might have walked through him if a skittering on the stairs hadn't stopped her. He followed her eyes to the staircase. Beside an antique cage elevator marked *Out of Order*, a small, white haired woman dressed in lime Capri pants and a maroon *BS* letter sweater, descended with all the dignity of the Queen Mother. She nodded regally three times as she hit the bottom step: once to the desk clerk, once to Jim, and once to the gal with the hats. The fat character didn't look up from his paper, so his presence was not acknowledged.

"ANNIE!" The lady in the hats shouted. "This is your nephew, Charlie! Put on your glasses!"

From somewhere in the recesses of her ample bosom, which was difficult to reach through the top of the letter sweater, Annie drew out a pair of pince-nez glasses on a purple cord, carefully adjusted them and moved closer to Jim. To his astonishment, she smiled broadly. "Why, it IS Charlie! How wonderful my dear boy!" She gave her friend a quizzical look, grabbed Jim by both arms, stood on tiptoe and planted a kiss in the region of his chin.

Jim felt the whole bit was getting out of hand, especially the appellation "boy". Thirty five summers and winters told him he was no

"boy", and neither was she his aunt. He leaned back weakly against the desk and inadvertently rested an elbow on the bell. This brought the fat bellboy from behind his paper. Aunt Annie's next words proved interesting.

"Mr. Leddon," she said imperiously, "Please open up the room next to mine for my nephew....the thirty dollar one with the shower. I shall want him near me, of course."

The desk clerk with the triangular face looked at the wet one trailing the wet mink, and then at Aunt Annie. He said a little too heartily, "Of course, Miss Gary, right away." He stared at Jim dubiously, realizing he had lost the game. "May I have your bag, sir?" Jim held out his keys to the bellboy. He was wet and tired, but the change in the room price interested him. The Grand Manor was where he wanted to be, and if this was the only way he could get a room without paying a small fortune, he could play along with it. For the moment he would have acknowledged being *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* to get out of his wet clothes. And Miss Annie Gary, if a bit addled, did not seem too formidable.

Against the suspicions on Leddon's face, he patted the little woman affectionately on the shoulder and made like Charlie.

"It has been a long time, Auntie," he allowed

heartily. His six-two frame blocked Leddon's view of Miss Annie, whose unexpected wink almost made Jim laugh.

She extended a regal hand to her wet friend, who came forward and took it, her black eyes riveted on Jim's face. "This is Lady Mantel, Charlie, whose eyes are certainly better than mine." Aunt Annie smiled. "You may not remember, but I think you met aboard her yacht in Gulfport years ago. Of course you were very young."

Jim was saved from replying by the arrival of the fat one with his bag. He managed to sideswipe Jim when he switched it from one hand to the other, muttering something about *rocks*. Jim tried on a bright smile for size. "Aunt Annie, I must get out of these wet clothes. Perhaps you and Lady Mantel will join me for lemonade in the bar in a few minutes?"

He could have made a fortune from one portrait of these two. Lady Mantel poked accurately at her top hat and gave Aunt Annie a meaningful look. Whatever that meant, Jim was soon to find out. Aunt Annie played with her pince-nez purple string like the glasses were a yo-yo. She looked at Jim and closed her eyes in sort of a disparaging gesture. Then she opened them and the two ladies exchanged raised eyebrows. Aunt Annie said kindly, "It

HAS been a long time, Charlie. Both of us are extremely allergic to lemons." They turned, crossed the lobby, and made a bee-line for the bar.

Leddon had his back to Jim, and there was nothing left to do but follow the bellboy up a creaky staircase. At the top of the first flight he went right. A stretch of high-ceilinged dark hall had one eight foot narrow window at the far end. Wheezing noisily from his effort, he fumbled a large key into the lock and introduced Jim to his quarters. Jim gave him a buck, closed the door on the silent scowl, and turned on the ceiling light to get the full effect.

If this was the thirty dollar room, it was overpriced. It was tired....the whole room was tired. Print drapes were limp, the wallpaper a startling potpourri of red roses peeled in spots. The bed sagged in despair under a mustard-colored chenille spread. There was a ceiling fan above the light. He found the switch, flipped it, and threw open the window. Clumps of wet shrubbery pushed against the screen. He hoped prayerfully if Jerry Duprey was under this roof, he had equally inviting quarters.

Jim needed more complications like he needed a hole in his head. Obviously the Grand Manor was not receptive to guests. He wondered why? What about the two old

dames, and where in the hell was Jerry Duprey? He decided on the oblique approach in the face of Leddon's jerking the welcome mat out from under him. And maybe, if they weren't completely insane, Aunt Annie and Lady Mantel could clue him in on the inhospitable reception from Management. At least he could get a drink downstairs. He looked at the pint in his bag and decided to save it.

The tiny bathroom with a shower drew his immediate attention. He draped wet clothes over the end of the iron bedstead and gave the shower a try. Then he climbed into slacks and a sport shirt and reluctantly added a coat to cover his shoulder holster, and headed out of the room, with the bar the only bright spot on the current horizon.

Leddon stared at him as he came down the stairs. "I assume you would like to register?" He pointed to the book in front of him which offered Jim a blank page, and Leddon kept his hand on it while Jim picked up the pen. "I can hardly wait," Jim assured him, and remembering his name was Charlie, signed Charlie Smith in his most dashing handwriting. The Smith was uninspired, but real at least. From the look Leddon flashed, he was not happy with the signature. Jim added "Chicago" and the arrival of two soaked salesmen let him off the hook. He crossed the

lobby fast and turned into the bar as he heard Leddon give them the eighty bucks a day routine. He didn't wait for their answer.

The Grand Manor bar was a cozy room twenty by forty-five feet. At the far end of the room was a large, lumpy man, whose jowls and fleshy nose were outlined by indirect lighting below. Obviously, the lighting was intended to be romantic, but struck Jim as plain spooky. A skinny little man with one foot on the bar railing nursed a can of beer, and a jukebox played music from the 80s.

He stood in the doorway until his eyes became accustomed to the dim lighting. The bartender didn't look up. Finally Jim found Aunt Annie and Lady Mantel, seated against the wall on a bench. They had their heads together and both were drinking some sort of concoction through straws from tall glasses.

The two old girls looked up expectantly as he slid into a chair across from them. The big bartender came around the bar and lumbered over. He didn't seem to be any happier to see Jim than the desk clerk had been. Before Jim could speak his piece, his newly acquired Auntie delivered an edict: "Another double Camille, George, for my nephew."

"Double WHAT?" Jim asked as he turned back to the bar.

Aunt Annie grinned. "Never mind, Charlie, you'll like it. I invented it." She sipped from her glass. "A jigger of cherry brandy and two of scotch," she announced proudly. "Soda water and a cherry and that's it! It's named after Hurricane Camille which hit here in 1969. It's a Force 5 drink!" Jim cringed at the concoction.

When he tasted it, he realized it was appropriately named. "You like it, Charlie?" Aunt Annie cocked her head to one side and peered at him.

"I'm crazy about it, Auntie," he answered as he managed to get his breath. Over his shoulder he called: "George, bring me a bourbon and water for a chaser!" He was crazy, all right. But he wasn't alone.

George brought the bourbon and water, slapped it down on the table and waddled off. Jim abandoned the Camille and took a long pull on the bourbon. He had drunk a lot better whiskey, but the bourbon was an improvement and his stomach began to get untied.

"Ladies, shall we dispense with the fun and games. Your act is great. But I seem to have marched into the middle of something most peculiar. And you do owe me an explanation." Jim leaned back and crossed his arms. The

severity of his expression was lost in the semi-darkness of the room. But the old dames were quite aware he was going to come up with a few questions. Lady Mantel pulled a fan out of the front of her dress and began fanning herself....let's say around the middle of her forehead, which kept her eyes away from his. Aunt Annie was staring at the jukebox, swinging her pince-nez in tune to the music as if he weren't there at all.

Jim slapped his hands down on their table. "Could I have your attention for a moment, please!" he offered sarcastically. The pince-nez swung to a slow stop. Lady Mantel's fan quit waving and lowered so he could see her eyes. They told him nothing at all. The two old gals looked at each other and then back at him. Aunt Annie tapped on the table with her index finger.

"Lena, Lady Mantel, thought it up. We are potted palms!" she added hastily as if she had read his mind. "The battier we are, the safer we are." She sighed. "You see, Charlie, there's something funny going on around here."

"You don't say!" Now here was an understatement if he had ever heard one.

They both nodded solemnly. Aunt Annie went back to twisting her pince-nez glasses on the purple velvet cord. Lena, Lady Mantel,

adjusted her hats and stared at him with black, opaque eyes. Aunt Annie leaned over the table and hissed, "There's something going on right here in this room, as a matter of fact. George has a gun on you, Charlie!"

With magnificent control, he glanced around the room. The skinny beer drinker was mumbling over his beer can. And Aunt Annie was absolutely right! George was glaring in his direction, and on the bar, almost covered by a newspaper, the business end of a thirty-eight was aimed, not at all casually, at him.

Chapter 2

Just to set the record straight, Jim wouldn't have picked the southern part of Mississippi for a jaunt in the middle of summer. He was geographically and historically ignorant about this part of the South, not to mention the mores of the people. But, while he loved to paint and would like to spend most of his hours painting portraits, there was always the matter of *MONEY*. This he had decided a long time ago, when he first thrust upon the world his virile portraits, and found he could only eat every other day on their proceeds. So, through trial and error, he became a detective. A painter gets to know faces and the things going on behind them. What's wrong with this for a detective?

He was about a thousand miles due south of Chicago, and less than half a block from getting wet in a bay emptying directly into the Gulf of Mexico, because minding somebody else's business was his business. Maybe he should have remained a portrait artist. If he had been inclined toward clairvoyance, he might have.

A dame had walked into his Chicago office, presented him with a good solid Chicago name he recognized, dropped five one hundred dollar bills and an airline ticket on his desk and

announced: "I want my husband back!" Just like that.

He reacted as a good detective should. "And where is your husband, Madame?" You never asked why they left, so as usual he asked where the guy had gone. It sometimes helped, although the wife usually didn't know.

This babe was brassy, shrill, expensively dressed, and premeditated in her actions. She narrowed her eyes, chewed on her left thumb nail, and instead of saying, "I don't know," she said precisely: "My husband is at the Lost Horizon Motel in San Antonio, Texas."

"Now that's appropriate," Jim thought to himself, "but why didn't she go get him?"

She told him quite firmly, "You will find him in Room 118. Tell him I'll make a stink in all the papers if he doesn't get his butt back here without his lady friend."

He guessed she had been reading too many spy thrillers, or she thought Jim would sell out to her husband. She was on the plane behind him as he bore down on Room 118. He hardly got a look at the guy when he opened the door, but he felt sorry for him immediately because apparently the only thing the wife wanted Jim to do was run cover for her. From what he could see as she burst into the room was three

naked guys wearing bunny ears sprawled in various indiscreet but compromising poses.

With his detective work finished, Jim had an open return ticket to Chicago and a pocket full of money, so he decided to stay a day or so and look around San Antonio. He had never seen this part of Texas before, and now was as good a time as any. He wandered through The Alamo, ate some enchiladas in the shade of a large tree along the *Riverwalk*, and then, as the Texas sun rose higher, he spent several hours in a large mall along the river. Apparently he was easy to spot as a tourist, and a passerby suggested he tour the zoo in Breckenridge Park. He came away from the zoo liking the lady hyena far better than his recent employer.

Jim always thought San Antonio would be unique, and it certainly was an odd mixture of two civilizations. Row upon row of smooth manicured yards with houses to match, and yet, the Spanish flavor constantly added touches of bright colors and a sense of excitement to everything. In the evening, as he wandered in the downtown area, the shadows grew longer and he found himself still trying to escape the memory of the unpleasant female with her good solid Chicago name.

According to the movies, he should have been out looking for a fight. He didn't look for it,

but he found it. In a questionable part of downtown, he turned a corner into a cul-de-sac. The dim light showed from the doorway to his left. A tall man stood against a two story whitewashed wall. His hands were outstretched in a protective stance, and his head was back. His attitude showed amazement rather than surprise. Three unsavory characters were advancing on him, and the leader of the trio had a wicked looking knife.

The scene was so obviously one-sided it got Jim's back up. He liked a good fight, but this one was going to be over shortly unless he got into the act. They didn't know Jim was behind them as they approached their intended victim. Jim put his lips together and gave them a very loud: "PSSSST!" All three turned as one in his direction. The 38 special in his right hand convinced them tonight was not their night. They took off past him in a dead heat with a single *carajo* vibrating in the damp night air. This left Jim with Beau Mitchell. That's what his card later indicated his name was. Maybe Jim should have walked out on this particular episode and let the muggers have him, but that's hindsight.

The guy had on a drab shirt and sweaty, rumpled pants. The stubble of beard didn't make him more attractive. He stood there for half a minute, shrugged, pulled out a

dilapidated pack of cigarettes and offered Jim one with a nod. Then he lit them both with amazingly steady fingers.

"I don't like double-crossers," he said slowly. Jim was sure he meant it from the steel in his voice. But he wasn't talking to Jim. He was talking to himself. He sucked in his breath and blew out smoke. "You're handy, friend," he drawled, "Let's get out of here before we have more visitors."

Jim followed the man around the corner and into a dark cafe. He sat down at a table in the corner and hunched in his chair looking at nothing. "Beer...that's all they've got," he advised. The waiter slouched over to them.

"Dos cervezas." Jim told the waiter, using up most of his Spanish vocabulary. The waiter brought the beers, and Jim drained his in a hurry. His companion drank slowly, his thoughts on another planet.

Jim had done his good deed for the day. He didn't want to take on this brilliant conversationalist to raise. Besides appearing intellectually bankrupt, the man was a sorry sight and his choice of cafes stunk. Jim paid for the beers, ordered the man another one and got to his feet. He tipped his hat to the back of his head. "See you later, chum," Jim told him.

The man's eyes focused on Jim. He reached into a shirt pocket and brought out a card.

"Thanks for the beers and the rest of it," he admitted grudgingly. "If you're ever in Fort Worth, stop in." Then he went back to his brooding. Jim got the hell out of there and started breathing fresh air like it was going out of style.

Afterwards all he could remember about the man was a straight length of black brows, and a shock of black hair which came within an inch of meeting the brows. He forgot all about the guy for the next two days as he continued his tour of San Antonio and the surrounding area. He had looked at the card: *Beau Mitchell, Enterprises*. Jim almost threw it away. If he had, he wouldn't have wound up in the Grand Manor Hotel with a houseful of semi-nuts.

His return flight to Chicago was canceled at DFW airport between Dallas and Fort Worth, something about a mechanical problem. He could have gone to Dallas. But he didn't. He had been in Dallas before. It looked like any other big city he had ever seen, and the only thing interesting was *Old Town*, downtown. So it wasn't any coincidence he chose Fort Worth: *Where the West Begins*. Compared to Dallas, Fort Worth was a country town. A few so-called skyscrapers and a sprawling downtown community with a rococo courthouse at the

head of Main Street were about it. He checked in at the first hotel where the limousine stopped. It was hotter than hell outside. One thing was sure: if Texans died and went to hell they wouldn't know the difference.

From what he had heard, summer in Texas was always like this. He called the bellboy and started emptying the pockets in his extra suit. He might as well have it cleaned. The bellboy was efficient. Out of his breast pocket, he pulled a card Jim had forgotten was there. It said: *Beau Mitchell, Enterprises*. He knew one person who lived in Fort Worth. Three cheers for his side. But he would never have looked Beau Mitchell up if he hadn't had an interest in western art.

The room clerk gave him directions, and he went out in the broiling sun, turned right on Seventh Street and then headed west. He walked until the street was two-way and picked up a taxi. The driver was a friendly guy who might as well have been hired by the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce. Between the Seventh Street bridge and The Museum of Western Art, a distance of probably three miles, Jim got a lecture on the Fat Stock Show and Rodeo, The Forest Park Zoo, how great the Texas Christian University football team was, and the exact population of *Cowtown*. He let Jim out at the museum, and Jim told him to come back in an hour.

He walked up the steps and through the glass doors into a large, cool room. To his right was a sign indicating the *Russell Exhibit* had been loaned to the San Antonio Museum! How ironic. The *Russells* were all he wanted to see in Fort Worth, which was why he had decided to stay an extra day in the first place, other than the simple fact he never got back on an airplane which may or may not be *fixed*. Underneath this sign was a notice for the next ten days the museum was honored to have a collection of local paintings. Maybe they were honored, but Jim wasn't. They weren't much, and he quickly viewed each one.

Before his taxi returned, he approached the guard at the entrance. "Look," he said. "I'm from Chicago, and I came to see the *Russells*. There must be some private collections in Fort Worth. Could you tell me if you know of any?"

The guard nodded understandingly. "Yep, A. R. Arondale's got seven on his ranch, but he's in Europe." Then he totally surprised Jim, "Beau Mitchell's got four *Russells*, two of them in his office downtown....best of the lot. He would be glad to show them to you. He also has some *Remington*'s. He's in the directory."

Jim took a look at the card the man in San Antonio had given him. "Seventeenth floor of the Barton Building?" he asked the guard. The

guard nodded in amazement. Jim still wasn't sure it was the Mitchell he had run into in San Antonio. But he was going to find out. He thanked the guard and took two steps at a time down to the waiting taxi.

When Jim saw the office building, he knew the guy he met in San Antonio was putting him on. He took a silent elevator to the seventeenth floor. The door whispered open, and he approached a fancy entryway which announced simply: *Mitchell Enterprises* in understated elegance. The *Russells* and curiosity led him to the entrance. A fine looking receptionist raised her pretty blue eyes from her computer and asked politely, "May I help you, Sir?"

Jim opened his mouth to speak, but a man stepped out of the inner office. It was the character with the brows, smoking a cigarette and watching him. The man had on a designer suit which must have run into four figures. The growth of beard was gone. So was most of his civility, if he ever had any.

"So, you did come to see me?" He stared at Jim for another moment and then added, "Come on in. I'll buy you a drink today." Without looking at the girl, he said curtly, "Get me some soda, Mimi. I'm out." Jim followed him into the office.

An oriental rug, which should have been on a wall in a museum, covered the floor almost from wall to wall. Two of the *Russells* he had come to see were on the wall. The whole room smacked of moolah. Jim kept his eyes on the paintings and sank into a chair across from Mitchell's executive desk, wondering what the hell went on with him.

The man pulled out a portable bar and came up with a bottle of twenty year old scotch and a couple of heavy crystal glasses. He poured quickly without benefit of jigger, then added ice. His thin sneer straightened Jim's spine.

"I suppose you want a job?" His eyes were chipped ice.

The phone rang. He reached for it and swiveled around so his back was to Jim before he could think up an answer. The man's voice changed abruptly. "I was trying to reach you. I've been waiting for you to call all week." His tone got as close to syrup as it could. "No. I didn't make the last deal. Somebody must have got there first. Who cares? There's always another one." He pulled at his ear while Jim stared at the back of his head. "Sure, come on in. You can paint the town. Good!" The man hung up and swung around. "Well?" he asked. The syrup was gone from his voice.

Jim reached over and took one of the glasses and turned it up. Then he deposited the glass on the fancy desk and got to his feet. "So, who the hell are you anyway? I came to see your *Russells* and I've seen them. You can be the King of Sweden as far as I'm concerned. I don't need a job. Thanks a lot for the drink, Buster!" Jim started making tracks.

About this time the door opened and Mimi and Jim juggled a tray of bottles trying to keep the rug from being splashed. The guy in back of him drawled: "Come on back. I'll put soda in the next one." He looked at Jim thoughtfully. "I guess I got it wrong." He waved the girl away after she set the tray down by the bar on his desk.

The man pulled out a cigarette, but Jim response was quick: "No, thanks, Junior, we are even. I'm heading north. I'm not just nuts about the climate here."

The syrup came back into the man's voice like you'd turn a faucet. "What's your name?" he asked, and then, "What do you do?"

Jim lit his own cigarette. "If it's any of your business, and I'm not sure it is, my name is Jim Smith, and I just returned from trying to send a most undeserving man back to his most undeserving wife. I didn't like it, but I like my

job, and maybe the next guy will be really away on business." Jim gave him a mock salute, and added: "So long!"

The man rose, filled the two glasses again with good scotch, added soda, and placed his hands flat on the desk. "No hard feelings, Smith. You may not need me, but I need you. I'll give you two thousand bucks plus expenses for two weeks of your time."

Jim folded his arms and eyed the man warily. "What's the catch?"

"There isn't any, really. Are you interested?"

Jim sat down in the chair he had left and picked up his glass. "What do I do for two weeks to earn two grand and expenses?" Jim asked, watching the man closely.

Mitchell swung around in his chair and looked at the ceiling. It struck Jim he wasn't meeting his eyes. "I'm leaving town. It's unavoidable. There's a man showing up here tomorrow night. His name is Jerry Duprey," he announced. "I owe him something." His tone raised Jim's eyebrows. The man flipped ashes into a fifty buck outsized brass ashtray beside the desk. "This guy gets the full treatment, the wining, the dining, and the nightclubs....whatever he wants. All I'm asking you to do is to see he's entertained. Let's say

he can get obnoxious on occasions, but you won't have any real trouble. You simply have to stay with him."

"Is that all", Jim asked, "for two thousand bucks?"

The man shook his head. "No, but it's almost all. I simply want him here when I return!" His mouth slit in what Jim supposed was a smile.

"It's easy if you can stand the late hours. The guy likes it here, but he likes his liquor and needs to be entertained. You and Jerry can have my guest house. Is it a deal?"

So this is the way they make a deal in Texas. Jim wondered if Mitchell thought he was stupid. He took out his identification and laid it on the desk facing him. Then he leaned back in his chair and shook his head.

"Sorry, I'm not starving. Why you want this character pinned down here is your business, if you want it that way. But I smell rats. If it is a deal, you'll have to arrange it my way. How do I know I'm not playing games with a homicidal maniac?"

Jim could see the wheels spinning. The man reached into his pocket and came out with a letter. He flapped it against the desk, took it

out of the envelope, and pitched it across to Jim.

"This is a letter to Jerry Duprey," he announced.

Jim placed reading other people's mail in the same category as writing names on the walls of a public restroom. He gave Mitchell a disgusted look and started to get to his feet.

Brother Mitchell rapped on the desk.

"Wait a minute, Smith. This was opened by mistake by that near sighted genius at the computer outside. It was slit open and laid on the desk with a dozen other letters. I read it, just as you would have under the circumstances."

In an almost illegible scrawl, the letter said: "Jerry, your aunt needs help....I found the markets." It was signed: "Edith".

Jim lit another cigarette and stared at Beau Mitchell who stared right back. Then Jim asked, "Where does Duprey live? And why don't you show him the letter if you're such buddy buddies? Why do you want me in the act?"

The man gave Jim a cynical smile. "Buddy buddies we are not. To answer your first

question, Mr. Duprey lives in Odessa, Texas. He is a superstitious guy who helped me some years ago. I consider we are even, except at the moment he owes me ten thousand bucks and is chiseling on the side. He poor mouthed it around here enough to make you cry in your beer." Mitchell pointed to the letter. "I had no idea he had a living relative, especially an aunt with money. You heard me say once before I hate double-crossers. I want to get one jump ahead of Duprey. That's why I want him here. Does that explain everything, Smith?"

Jim couldn't say it explained anything, but he hardly expected it would. He asked, "I assume Jerry Duprey works for you. What's the pitch?"

Mitchell was trying to be agreeable. "I have enterprises in three states, Smith, bowling alleys, restaurants, strip centers, that sort of thing. Jerry works for me. It's simple." He shrugged. Then he asked again: "Is it a deal?"

Jim looked around the plush office and back at Mitchell across the desk. "Yeah, deal." He answered shortly.

The man pulled out a block of checks. "Half now, and half when I return," he said.

"What if I take off with the thousand?"

Beau Mitchell didn't look up. "You won't," he said evenly. "You won't."

Chapter 3

Jim gave the *Russell's* another glance, turned on his heel and went down the green marble corridor to the elevator. Once outside he braced against the wind for a moment, then made it post haste to the bank. The teller scarcely looked at him as he counted out the thousand. So far so good, he thought.

When he returned to the hotel to pick up his bag and check out, if he had not had the money in his pocket, he might have gone north. But, he crawled into another taxi, this time with an unsociable driver, and went for a thirty minute ride. Fort Worth had more hills than he had supposed. South of town on a barren hill sat Beau Mitchell's house. It was a big, ranch style single story home sprawled across a lot of ground. A large swimming pool baked in the sun between it and the guest house some two hundred yards away. The driver let Jim out, eying him somewhat curiously.

Beau Mitchell's guest house had two bedrooms, two bathroom, two telephones, a well stocked kitchen including an ample liquor supply, and a large living room. It had been cleaned immaculately. There was not a speck of dust inside though there was more than enough outside. The key was in the door as Mitchell had indicated. Jim pitched it onto a

glass table top, put his stuff away, and built a drink loaded with ice cubes.

The guest house was done up in a masculine ranch oak. Even the wastebaskets and facilities in the bathroom were enclosed in ranch oak and trimmed with brown towels and a brown bath mat adorned with enormous gold letter Ms. It looked like some eager beaver in a very expensive western store had been given the green light on the decor.

As he stretched out on the couch, a telephone on the table beside him rang. He let it ring a couple of times, and then picked it up. He assumed it was tied into the main line at the big house because he heard a voice say "Hahlo", and he could hardly mistake Mitchell's voice when he started telling "Hahlo" what to do. It was commanding, and Jim hoped he wasn't going this route with him. He disliked commands, particularly in this tone. Mitchell directed a blue Cadillac be brought to the guest house, dinner at seven, and a ride to the airport at eight-thirty that night. "Hahlo" said "Yes", and Jim hung up. After all, the call wasn't for him.

"Hahlo" dropped off the blue Cadillac a few minutes later and announced Mitchell expected him for dinner at six-thirty, indicating "Hahlo" did not know he had heard the previous conversation. The man was sullen

and fierce all at the same time, and Jim couldn't guess his nationality. Southern European he supposed. He looked him over carefully because their eyes never seemed to meet. Jim decided he was about as harmless as a king cobra.

Jim showed up at the big house exactly at six-thirty and didn't get around to even pushing the doorbell. "Hahlo" opened the door before he could get his hand up. The big house tied in well for a guy who went for *Russells* and *Remingtons*.

A great living room was studded with expensive leather chairs, a flock of very good oriental rugs, some more *Russell's*, and a *Remington*. A couple of serapes were bright on the north wall. But, there was something wrong about the house. Mitchell's man pointed to a bar at the end of the room next to an enormous fireplace. Jim poured a drink, wondered if it ever got cold enough to use the fireplace here in hell, and tried to figure out what was missing.

Obviously Mitchell wasn't married. Certainly there were no little feminine loving-hands-at-home touches anywhere in the room. There was nothing personal except the large gold letter *M* that seemed to crop up everywhere. And then it dawned on him. There was not a single book anywhere in sight. It looked like

the lobby of a hotel in Yellowstone Park, devastatingly impersonal. He couldn't imagine a room without books. Not until now. Maybe Mitchell couldn't read.

"Hello!" He jumped. Mitchell had come in so quietly he had not heard his steps. Mitchell was frowning and abstract as he nodded at Jim and poured himself a drink. He got down to business in a hurry. "Meet Jerry's plane tomorrow night at Love Field in Dallas. Here's his picture and flight information so you won't miss him." Mitchell handed over a photo of a most unlikable man. He was round, short, wore glasses, and stared from the picture. Jim couldn't miss him....that he felt sure.

Mitchell's man rang a bell, and Jim followed Mitchell into the dining room. The massive table was set at each end. He needed a megaphone if Mitchell chose to converse. But he didn't. "Hahlo" and his boss seemed to be trying to win a *Golden Globe* award for taciturnity. The man was the only help Mitchell had. Anyway, the food was excellent, Angus steak, baked Idaho potatoes, and a green salad, accompanied by a choice Merlot. Jim was glad he liked his steak well done. That's the way he got it. After dinner, Mitchell rose abruptly, and Jim was dismissed. "I'm leaving in half an hour," Mitchell said. "I'll be in touch. Try the girl at the office in the morning to confirm the arrival time of Jerry's

plane." So, he wasn't inclined toward conversation. For two thousand bucks, Jim could take it. This was a guy he could do without. But there was the money and his damned curiosity.

Outside it was still hot and the wind pushed him back to the guest house. Who says Chicago has a monopoly on wind? Seventh Street in Fort Worth, Texas was a perfect wind tunnel, so he had found out. On the top of Beau Mitchell's bleak hill, the wind stung your eyes when you faced it, and tore at you when you walked away from it. Jim felt uneasy about this job. That was for openers.

He didn't sleep well in Mitchell's guest house. Later on he wished he had. Instead of counting proverbial sheep, he wondered why he had any compulsion to take this job. The money really wasn't that important. He didn't like Beau Mitchell. He was fairly sure he wouldn't like Jerry Duprey. It could only be curiosity. Mitchell was an enigma. He shuddered over a double bourbon and finally fell asleep.

When he went to meet Jerry Duprey, he almost missed him for two reasons. First, Duprey had a hat, and second he didn't have on glasses. Anyway, it just goes to prove a picture presents only one dimension. At first sight Jerry Duprey looked slightly stupid, but Jim

began to doubt it soon. And the picture didn't show how black his hair was or how black his eyes were behind the glasses in the picture.

Later Jim found out somewhere inside Duprey's portly exterior was a rather complex man. It was possible twenty-five years before he had been his mother's darling little roly-poly six year old uninhibited son. But Jim bet he wouldn't have liked the man even then. Jim didn't like children just because they are children. To him, as people grow older, they are more of whatever they were to begin with. On some it's becoming. Not on Jerry Duprey. Even at the first meeting he recognized something remotely curious about Duprey. Jim might have been more interested in him if he thought his role would be more than a playboy baby-sitter. Maybe this would teach him a lesson. But first impression indicated the guy was scared.

Duprey put on his glasses and took off his hat to mop his brow, and Jim caught up with him. "You Duprey?" he asked. The man turned around fast. "Yeah, who are you?" He stuck out his chin, but his voice didn't seem too firm.

"Name's Jim Smith, Mitchell sent me. He's out of town." Jim stuck out a fist and got a handful of limp fish and a trace of a grasp at the end of his fingers, along with a cold blank stare. He was going to love this guy. Duprey gave the

same big stupid smile Jim had noted in the picture, but his eyes were anything but stupid. "Beau's gone?" Jim nodded. This was finally getting through to him. Jim watched Duprey relax. Finally the man said: "You like night spots, Smith?"

Jim sighed. For two thousand bucks he was wild about night spots. "Yeah, sure, shall we eat first?" he asked hopefully. Duprey went for the meal idea, and Jim steered him to a good restaurant.

Their first meal together didn't enchant Jim. This guy was a taker. He took over everything at the table, including his salad, his first drink when he went to the restroom, and his desert. Duprey took everything but the check. He even took over too many drinks and got a little garrulous. Any sentence with over six words indicated he was garrulous. It didn't make much sense to Jim, but he was listening. Duprey had a broken record going on this one. "Just you wait, Smith. Just you wait! Beau too!" and he squinted at him until Jim could hardly see his eyes. Jim tried to make Duprey come up with more, but it was no use. He finally decided they had absolutely nothing in common. Maybe Jim was uncharitable, but this job didn't appear to be a cinch.

It wasn't. They did the town and Dallas too for the first few nights. Jim knocked off the liquor

except for a shot now and then to keep him going. Duprey accepted everything as if he deserved the red carpet treatment. When they hit the dumps, he would pick up some babe and take her off into a corner, feeding her drinks and chugalugging his own, leaving Jim the bill. Jim always got stuck with his girl friend's unwashed female companion, and he always got a giggler. Duprey managed to get drunk and a spot vindictive about two in the morning. Jim got to be a clock watcher. At least Duprey slept until noon every day. But, after a bunch of mad merry nights Duprey started to question where Mitchell was. This Jim couldn't answer because he had never heard back from their host.

On the fifth morning after Jerry's arrival, Jim was summoned to the main house, leaving Duprey snoring peacefully in bed. Mitchell's man answered the door and pointed to the telephone in the hall. "Mr. Mitchell wants to talk to you, Mr. Smith." He picked up the telephone. Mitchell must have been at the other end of the earth because the connection was lousy and his voice indistinct.

"How you doing, Smith," he asked.

"Peachy-dandy!" Jim replied sarcastically. "You should have upped it a thousand."

Mitchell ignored his reply. "Jerry still there, Smith?"

"Yeah," Jim said, "Sleeping it off."

Mitchell's voice crackled. "Keep him there, Smith. You just keep Duprey there!" He hung up.

Jim returned to the guest house to find Jerry rummaging in the kitchen for some breakfast. He let him have at it. Nursemaid he was, but nobody said he was to be a cook. Duprey came into the living room and plunked his short body in a chair and took a drink of tomato juice. For a guy who had little on his mind but his social activities, he came out with a question, looking at Jim shrewdly. "How did you get your job with Mitchell?" he asked.

"I ran into him in San Antonio a few weeks ago," Jim answered truthfully. Then, not so truthfully: "He needed a public relations man."

Jerry forgot him. "When's he coming home?" he asked for the nine hundredth time.

Jim was starting to catch the drift. "Any time, Duprey, you know how he is. How about hitting a new spot tonight? *The Stripper*", he suggested, but Duprey's mind for once seemed to be on something else.

Duprey stared at the telephone until Jim asked, "Shall I make a reservation, Duprey?" He frowned, still staring at the phone. He didn't catch the sarcasm in Jim's question, and Jim didn't repeat it. Duprey puzzled him, but not enough for his own good.

"Okay, *The Stripper*," he finally answered.

A few nights on the town must have dulled Jim's responses. He should have paid attention to Duprey's abstraction. He wished he had. That night they groped their way through an almost male audience and found a table. For once Jerry pulled out a bottle. Jim should have known better. It took only one drink to put him in the land of nod. It was a lousy drink, made up of two jiggers of booze and one Mickey. Jim woke up on a couch in the men's room, and Jerry was long gone.

The show was over and the janitor was cleaning up the place. He didn't seem surprised to see Jim. Nice place this one. Of course the car was gone too. But, as nobody had rolled Jim in his slumber, he still had a pocket full of Mitchell's money. So he called a cab. His watch said it was four in the morning.

He had the taxi driver let him out at the gate. After the taxi left, he circled the guest house. He didn't see a car in front, but that didn't

mean it wasn't in back. He looked around and then across at the big house and had the strangest feeling it was empty. Maybe Mitchell's man was having a night on the town. Jim fumbled open the back door to the guest house, which surprised him by being unlocked, and he switched on the light in the living room. The house was empty. He was right. How was he going to explain this to Beau Mitchell? Jerry's clothes and his bag were gone, and the room was a mess, with half-opened drawers, and a welter of papers in the wastebasket. Jim didn't find much until he reached the bottom of the basket, where a torn up Express Mail envelope attracted his attention. It was addressed to Mr. Jerry Duprey, as he found after difficulty in piecing it together. The return address was the Grand Manor Hotel, Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. It had been mailed two days before. He slipped it into a pocket. Maybe this was something to go on, slim as it was. He had to have a try at getting Duprey back before Mitchell returned. A small matter of a thousand bucks was very much at stake, along with some pride.

It had dawned on him on the way home from the strip joint, a little belatedly; that all Duprey had to do was to hear the conversation with Mitchell on the phone to get antsy. And all he had to do was pick up the phone in the guest house. Jim remembered Duprey's thoughtful glance at the telephone. Maybe he didn't like

to be confined. Maybe he didn't like the tone of Mitchell's voice. Jim didn't either. But he had to run Jerry down whether he liked it or not.

Jim called the garage at the airport and asked if a car had been left in the reserved parking spot. He used Mitchell's name to speed up the answer. He got it. The car was there. So, he called to make reservations for a flight to New Orleans. A look at the map showed Bay St. Louis, Mississippi was about fifty miles east of New Orleans on the Mississippi Gulf coast. He had to start somewhere. Jerry Duprey was probably taking off for New Orleans when he called. Jim booked a flight to New Orleans leaving at noon.

He slammed down the telephone and sank into a chair. His head felt like it had been pounded with a shovel. He had to make some kind of try to get Jerry Duprey back to Fort Worth. Maybe it was a matter of pride, but he had to. He packed in a hurry, and just for luck went out the door he had come in and carried his bag to the main house. There was one car in the garage with a key in it. He took it.

By the time he got to the airport, he was feeling better. It was a good thing, because from there on it was an obstacle race. The plane was late. After he landed in New Orleans in a pouring rain, he missed the limousine that runs along

the coast by five minutes. A funeral blocked his rental car even if he could have hurried through horizontal sheets of rain. And there was more rain.

Traffic crawled with him in and out of the city on the Chef Menteur highway. He stopped for a bite to eat at a roadside cafe. The food was lousy, and when he came out he had a flat tire. It certainly seemed everything and everybody conspired against his getting to Bay St. Louis. Maybe he should have heeded the conspiracy. He wished he had. Long before he crossed into Mississippi he was plain mad and fresh out of sense. By the time he reached Bay St. Louis, he was livid.

This was before he found the Grand Manor Hotel. And this was before he became Charlie Smith with a newly acquired Aunt Annie, and her nuttier friend, Lena Mantel, who had a taste for Camilles.

By this time everything seemed unreal. It seemed unreal until he took a look at George, the flabby bartender, whose thirty-eight was aimed at his head. He came to the party. THIS was real!

Chapter 4

His newly acquired Aunt Annie took her eyes from the bartender and raised them toward the ceiling. He followed suit. She said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Jim reflected on the thirty-eight. It did things to his scalp. Apparently the bartender didn't trust him any more than the desk clerk. He didn't like guns pointed at him, loaded or unloaded. But it also seemed quite obvious he was trying to throw a scare into Jim. The gun was there, all right, but hidden quite casually and clumsily.

Aunt Annie repeated her question as if he hadn't heard it. "Well, what are you going to do about it?" He lowered his chin as she lowered hers and looked her squarely in the eye. "Nothing, Aunt Annie," he said sweetly, "nothing at all. After all, he does have the drop on me, don't you think?"

Lena, Lady Mantel's voice was raised over the music which turned off suddenly. "Bring us another round, Garcon!" she shouted in the direction of the bar. The gun had disappeared, at least out of Jim's sight. Why the switch? He wondered. Why the gun, and why did he jerk it out of sight? There was the beer drinker, Aunt Annie, Lena, and Jim. He heard a

stirring in the doorway which might have answered the last part of the questions. George stared for a moment in the direction of the commotion, fiddled around the bar, and came over with two Camilles and a bourbon and water. He swabbed the table and moved the drinks before them with an unintelligible grunt. At least he had not brought another Camille for Jim. That showed some kind of intelligence. When George was out of hearing, Jim leaned over and said: "Are there any other guests in this establishment, ladies?"

They both came to attention and Lena's mouth dropped open. Jim was all set to lead to Jerry Duprey, but suddenly before he could pop the question, Lena pounded her gloved fist on the table and shouted: "I am never going into that barbershop again as long as I live!" Jim saw Aunt Annie's eyes flick to the doorway. Then she touched her friend on the shoulder. "Why not, Lena dear?" she asked anxiously, "Why on earth not?"

Jim crossed his legs and shifted his body so he could see the door. Sure enough, the desk clerk, Leddon, was standing there looking like a reasonable facsimile of an undertaker's assistant. Jim didn't wonder how long he'd been there.

Lena seemed completely unaware of him. She said sharply, "Why not, Annie? Do you know

that dunderhead refused to cut my hair unless I removed my hats?" Jim began to think Lena was carrying things a bit too far. She was far...far out. He felt like he was living in some sort of nightmare.

George reached up and turned out the bar lights. His beer customer weaved through a door at the far left which must have led to the outside. "The bar is closed for the night," George announced firmly.

Jim cringed as he watched the two old girls up-end their Camilles. Neither of them seemed the worse for Auntie's concoction when they rose with considerable dignity. He took his glass with him against George's frown. In the lobby, Brother Leddon was again planted behind the desk. He offered a smile which reminded Jim of the spread on the mouth of a hammer-head shark. "Are you staying with us long, Mr. Smith?" Leddon asked.

Jim decided to make him happy, but not too happy. "Not too long," he replied, trying to look properly undone. With this ambiguous remark, he followed Auntie and Lena up the stairs, wishing he could give Leddon a short right hook. But he had to find Jerry Duprey first, and there would be other opportunities, he was sure.

As they walked down the hall he managed to

get out half a question, "Where is....?" when the door across from Auntie's room opened. The light from inside outlined a bristle-haired man who filled the opening from side to side. What was with the watchdog bit? The man's appearance certainly stopped Jim's question in midair. He shrugged and opened Aunt Annie's door. She and Lena scuttled through the opening like a pair of Siamese twins, with Aunt Annie beckoning surreptitiously. "Shall we have a little visit before bed, Auntie?" he asked loudly and closed the door with a bang. A little of his growing annoyance was showing up.

Auntie's room was no more charming than his. True, the flowers on the wall were of a different hue than his, and the spread on the bed was faded lavender. But, below an ancient ceiling fan was a large ornate chandelier, a complete anachronism which would have dwarfed a banquet hall. He blinked as she flicked the switch bringing the prisms on the chandelier to life.

"Lena has the room on the other side of mine." Auntie was saying. She pointed to the chandelier, and Lena assumed a poetic stance directly beneath it and began humming loudly in a clear monotone. Auntie rolled her eyes and motioned for Jim to put his head down. She whispered in his ear: "The joint is bugged!" and pointed her finger at the heavy

chandelier. By this time Lena was beginning to get weary of humming. Jim turned his glass up and finished the drink. Maybe the Camilles hadn't affected Lena and Annie, but the Grand Manor Hotel and booze combined to make him feel as goofy as these two women acted.

Aunt Annie cocked one eyebrow. "Tell me, Charlie, where is your dear father? We've been so out of touch since your mother passed away."

Now, this was an interesting question, but one he could hardly answer since his father had been dead for twenty years. He could hardly tell a lady where he was certain his father might be. He leaned over and whispered, "Where can we talk?"

Aunt Annie mouthed, "Your room, later. I'll join you there."

He said loudly, "Tomorrow, Auntie, I'll tell you all the news. The Gulf air seems to have affected me. Suddenly I am very tired. Shall we have breakfast, all three of us in the morning? "

She winked. "Oh, of course you're tired. How about eight o'clock in the morning?" She saw Jim to the door. Lena flapped her hand in his direction and continued humming.

Jim sank on his bed and lit a cigarette. Why had the desk clerk been so hostile? And what about the firepower his pal George had displayed so awkwardly. Obviously, from the tone of Leddon's conversation with the two salesmen who had come in after Jim signed the register, it wasn't just him. It was anybody who wanted a room. What were these guys clearing the decks for and why?

Through the thin wall he could hear Lena still humming. Aunt Annie opened the door so quietly he jumped when he saw her standing there. He closed the door behind her and locked it, and Aunt Annie seated herself in the only chair. He squatted down beside her. It was time somebody made some sense.

"Would you mind telling me what's going on around here? Why did you claim me as your nephew?" he asked.

"Lena was afraid for both of us." The old girl shivered. "It's because of what happened to Mrs. Benning," she added.

Jim prayed for patience. "Who might I ask is Mrs. Benning?"

"Mrs. Benning owned the Grand Manor Hotel. She's dead. She was buried today." She stroked the letters on her sweater absently. Then she looked at Jim and her eyes were

bleak and entirely sane. "I think somebody killed Mrs. Benning!"

"Would you please begin at the beginning, Auntie?" Jim pleaded. He wondered if he could make any sense of it if she did.

Shedding any indication of flightiness, Aunt Annie gave him a rundown on the Grand Manor with surprising brevity.

Aunt Annie had struck up a friendship with Lena some years before, here at the Grand Manor. The hotel had been a small genteel hotel in its heyday. Lena had lived at the hotel and commuted to Gulfport when she was teaching. Aunt Annie was also a retired teacher from Detroit when she headed south. So, she and Lena had much in common (Jim suspected a leaning toward Camilles). Then Aunt Annie, being the more cosmopolitan of the two, drifted about the country for several years. A week before, she returned to the Grand Manor to find the hotel sadly deteriorated.

"Lena was the only guest!" Aunt Annie said shaking her head. "The old desk clerk was gone and Mr. Leddon seemed reluctant to register me until Lena intervened."

"Lena isn't really Lady Mantel," Aunt Annie announced. This hardly surprised him, but Jim

just squatted there patiently waiting for her to go on.

She switched the focus of the conversation. "You didn't just happen to arrive at the hotel, did you? Who are you?" she asked.

He decided to tell her. "My name is Jim Smith. I came here to find Jerry Duprey. He's short and fat and wears glasses. Do you know if he is in the hotel?"

She cocked an eyebrow at Jim and nodded, "Of course. He is upstairs in the room over mine. Unfortunately, by this time he is quite drunk."

She got a far away look in her eye and went back to Mrs. Benning. "When I first came here years ago, Mrs. Benning often invited Lena to dine with her in her rooms, where she took most meals. I suppose it's really my fault Lena and Mrs. Benning fell out. You see, Lena came from this part of the country. She was here at the Grand Manor long before I arrived." For a moment Annie looked coy. "After all, she is a wee bit older than me," she said. Aunt Annie's eyes twinkled momentarily. "When Mrs. Benning found out Lena and I liked our little toddy, it was the end of their beautiful friendship. Even after all the years they had known each other."

Little toddy! Jim shuddered, remembering

Aunt Annie's double drinks. "And Mrs. Benning preferred gin, I suppose?" Jim couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice. It seemed he was getting nowhere fast.

Aunt Annie's tone was a reprimand, "Mrs. Benning was a teetotaler, a rabid one. Lena told me Mrs. Benning said the tongue wags at both ends when one drinks. That's exactly why she and Lena fell out. Mrs. Benning couldn't even abide the smell of alcohol in any form."

Aunt Annie gave Jim a severe look. "She wouldn't take a mouthful of food containing vanilla extract. That's how temperate she was!"

Jim guessed he had better let her tell it her way. Maybe they might get back to Jerry Duprey.

"Well," she said, "things had gotten a little sticky around here and exceedingly dull. I didn't feel exactly wanted with that Leddon man glaring at me. Lena finally suggested we go somewhere else. Lena has always been most kind...." She stared into space, and Jim felt as if she were wandering into the attributes of her nutty friend. She did.

"You know, I have always felt Mrs. Benning could be quite spiteful at times. It must have

hurt Lena's feelings although she never said so."

"What do you mean, spiteful?"

"Actually, I think the woman was a bit unhinged. She wouldn't let anyone in her room all day. Lately, at night, she had the bellboy drive her out in the country and didn't come back until after we had gone to bed." Aunt Annie frowned. "If she ever came through the lobby, she passed by us with her nose in the air. Recently, Lena tried to speak to her several times, but the woman looked right at her and simply raised her eyebrows."

Aunt Annie folded her hands primly in her lap. "Yesterday Mr. Leddon told us Mrs. Benning had succumbed in her sleep." Aunt Annie unfolded her hands. "I might add, the woman seemed as rugged as an ox."

Jim wondered wearily when the conversation would get to Jerry Duprey. It did, quickly.

Aunt Annie went on: "And then, this morning, I just happened to be in the post office. It's in a corner of the drugstore, you know. Mrs. Anderson, who has a fax machine, called the hotel after receiving a fax. She has one of those resonant voices, so I could barely keep from hearing the message. It was to Mrs. Benning from the Duprey person. Apparently Mr.

Leddon took the message as there are no phones in the rooms." Aunt Annie closed her eyes. "It said, *Arrive by limousine from New Orleans this morning*. It was signed *Jerry*." Aunt Annie opened her eyes and frowned. "I was in the front parking lot of the Grand Manor when Jerry arrived."

Oh boy, Jim thought....Miss Nosy herself. "And why did you take it upon yourself to meet the limo?"

She caught his tone and her voice grew crisp. "I met the limo, Mr. Smith, because Mrs. Benning was dead when the fax came in. It was the only decent thing I could do. After all, Mr. Duprey was her nephew. How would you like to have that Leddon person tell you your Aunt was dead?"

She had a point. Jim could think of nothing he would have liked the desk clerk to tell him except 'Goodbye'. "I'm sorry," he conceded, and she went on. "Mr. Duprey seemed stunned when I told him. But he also was more surprised Mr. Leddon was the manager of the hotel." She sighed. "I don't like Mr. Duprey any more than I liked his aunt, even if she is dead."

Not knowing the late lamented Mrs. Benning, Jim couldn't agree with her. But on Jerry

Duprey, he could go along. Duprey was hardly a charmer.

Aunt Annie tucked a strand of white hair into the flat bun at the back of her neck. "When Duprey checked in, Mr. Leddon told Mr. Duprey he didn't know a thing about any fax. You may as well know, Mr. Leddon seldom leaves the desk. He even sleeps on a cot in a small room behind it. Also, he told Mr. Duprey he had just fired the bellboy who had probably taken the wire." She arched her brows. "The only bellboy in the place, and Duprey should have known it, is the fat one who has been here for years."

Aunt Annie continued, "Leddon told Duprey Mrs. Benning's remains were at the local undertakers in a sealed casket. He apologized saying he had taken care of arrangements because he had no idea she had any living relatives."

Jim lit a cigarette. "How did all this strike Duprey?"

"Well, he did seem shocked. But Leddon was most sympathetic. He even produced a bottle of scotch, compliments of the house. This was after Duprey indicated he did not share his late Aunt's views on temperance. They arranged to have the funeral tomorrow. That was the last I

saw of Duprey. Leddon was worried, though. Only a fool could miss his reaction."

By this time Jim was sure Aunt Annie was anything but a fool.

"So," she went on, "while Lena and I were taking our walk this afternoon, we decided to stop by."

"Stop by where?" he wasn't following her.

"Well, it was my idea. Lena didn't want to go. She tried to talk me out of it. I think she was really quite fond of Mrs. Benning. I told her it was her duty to pay her last respects and I would go with her."

Aunt Annie leaned forward and hissed: "We went to the undertakers, and the director said they had a quiet funeral an hour before with only that horrid fellow you saw across from my room attending. And now we can't go anywhere without him following us. Do you wonder we're worried? And there's Bertha to contend with."

The hell with whoever Bertha was. Jim had enough females to deal with. He wanted out of this mess. But he wished later he had sense enough to ask about Bertha. Whether he knew it or not, Bertha was going to be the one female

who could and would keep him at the Grand Manor.

Chapter 5

Jim looked at Aunt Annie and sighed. Far from finding Jerry Duprey, he was getting into further difficulties. It didn't make any sense to him, but it was going to.

He took Aunt Annie by the hand and led her to the door. "Do you remember Duprey's room number?" She nodded. "Three twenty-eight, the room over mine. I haven't heard a noise from there since he went up, but even if the walls are thin, the ceilings and floors are not," she whispered co-spiritedly into Jim's ear. "Maybe Mr. Duprey has disappeared?" She sounded hopeful.

Maybe Jerry HAD disappeared. For Jim's money Duprey could stay lost. He had cost Jim a grand because, after all, Mitchell said to keep the guy in Fort Worth. Jim could bet by now Mitchell knew Jerry wasn't in Texas. Bay St. Louis and Fort Worth were a couple of states apart. But there was something more curious about the present situation than Jim had imagined. He asked, "Is Leddon new on the job? What about George, the bartender?"

Aunt Annie frowned. "George came here with Leddon, or so Lena said. He isn't much of a bartender, is he?" Jim agreed he wasn't, then added, "But I'd make a bet he was a crack shot

with a thirty-eight. You say the bellboy's been here for years?" She nodded.

"Look," Jim said, "I have no idea why anything we say to each other is important, but I intend to find out what's going on around here. No use playing games with the guy across the way. Both you and Lena need to stay in your rooms tonight. That's an ORDER!"

"But Bertha?" she protested. Aunt Annie looked worn out. He escorted her to her door. "Forget Bertha and try the bed," he advised her. "You'll be o.k. I have something else to do."

The bristly one opened the door across the way and just stared at them. Jim gave him a salute, extracted Lena from Aunt Annie's room and heard them both lock their doors. The Grand Manor seemed less and less a seaside resort. There was something peculiarly sinister even in the looks of the place with its tall ceilings and damp dark halls.

He closed the door and waited five minutes before he turned off the light. In another five minutes, he heard the watchdog walk cautiously down the hall. The man might be back after he got the word from Leddon or George or whoever was in charge.

In the dark, Jim took off his shoes and put on tennis shoes and from a half light through the

window picked out a dark shirt. The truth be told, Jerry had less of his attention than Leddon and the thirty-eight George the bartender had trained on him to give him a scare. He thought he might as well find another way out of this joint. It seemed he might need it, although what he was going to do with Aunt Annie and Lena he didn't know. They had certainly made themselves his problem. For a minute he wondered again who Bertha was.

He walked down the hall to the back stairs and swung open the door under the light marked *Exit*. He started to stick his head out to survey the situation when he heard a creak on the stairs above. Half-closing the door, Jim looked up to the next landing. From the shape of the man in the dim light, it was Jerry Duprey.

Ordinarily he would have stopped Jerry as he went by. However, there were too many things about the Grand Manor he did not understand. So he let him go by, stepping back and flattening himself against the wall, just in case he would make a turn into the second floor door. But he didn't. As he creaked down the stairs, Jim could tell the man was not drunk, but secretive he was. Jim waited until the man made it around the next landing and then followed.

Rain streamed down the window on the door

at the bottom of the stairs, as it hung slightly open. He could look through it without being seen because of an outside light. Duprey stood talking to the fat character, the epitome of bellboys. The pantomime was perfect even if he couldn't hear because of the strengthening wind and rain. The fat character handed Jerry a bunch of keys and disappeared around the building. Jerry went the other way, and Jim slid along the wall and waited until he heard a car start. Then he dashed to the rental car.

He waited until Duprey got to the first turn, flipped on the headlights and followed him. On the straight road to Highway 90, Jim shut off the lights and cruised in blackness far behind. There were only two ways to go on 90, and Jim gave Duprey plenty of time because the headlights could tell which way he turned. He liked Jerry even less for dragging him out on such a night, but he kept finding a larger sized bone to pick with him as time went on, and whatever he was up to right now appealed to Jim's insatiable curiosity.

Jerry turned left on 90, heading toward New Orleans. One car bore down on him. Jim turned in back of it, and switched on his lights. He kept his eyes on Duprey's car and followed at a somewhat lesser speed, even when the car ahead passed Duprey and finally disappeared from view. Several more cars passed both of them. Jim was beginning to wonder if Jerry

had a little high life in New Orleans in mind when the car slowed and turned right. Where he was going Jim didn't have any idea, but he pulled off on the shoulder of 90 and waited. The side road Duprey took didn't look too inviting. However, after a few minutes Jim turned right and followed. He could see the lights far ahead on a straight, sandy road. Then the lights turned to the left. Jim turned off his lights and drove slowly, trying to keep in mind how far it was before the turn.

The road was a dilly, the original of the corduroy roads, and it was a good thing it ran straight as far as it did. Jim could hardly see. But he could feel the encroachment of tall, thick pines on either side of the road. Then, as the road turned slightly left it was open ground for probably a quarter of a mile. When he saw Jerry's lights, he stopped the car and squinted into darkness and rain. There were no houses with lights, and there were no lights anywhere because Jerry's lights suddenly turned off. For a moment the rain paused. To his left, along the glitter of a man-made canal revealed by half a moon that scudded out and then quickly into a cloud, he saw a sandy single-tracked path almost hidden by marsh grass. He drove the car a bit further down the main road from the highway, far enough so it couldn't be seen from the side road in case Duprey decided to leave suddenly.

Jim had been a lot of places, but there was a feeling about this particular spot that made him uneasy. Here he was, a mile or so from a main highway which crossed the southernmost part of the United States with a full compliment of traffic day and night, and there were no houses, no signs of humanity except for a deserted subdivision, Jerry, and his own damned curiosity, and more rain! It was as if somebody had turned the sky upside down. But there was no wind. The rain came straight down.

It was hot and humid, but he shivered as he crawled out of the car and closed the door quickly. After a couple of brushes with prickly palmettos, he came upon the side road and trudged down it in the direction Jerry had parked his car. Already soaking wet, he felt the rain run down his back as he sloughed through an inch of water. It didn't make him any happier with Jerry. If this was his idea of celebrating his Aunt's death, it didn't appeal to Jim.

He was almost on Dupery's car before he saw it outlined in a flash of lightning. The darkness worked both ways because Duprey couldn't see him either. He stepped to the side of the road and peered into the darkness. He saw the light, obviously a flashlight from the way it moved, about sixty yards ahead and fifty feet

to the left of the road. He squatted down on his haunches, wishing he had a cigarette, and watching the light move. It moved in a square, which seemed most odd. Duprey seemed to be searching for something, but from the frantic sweeping of the flashlight beam, he was not successful. Duprey returned to his car, switching off the flashlight as he opened the door.

Jim scrambled past several tall pines and flattened out on the ground which was unwholesomely soggy. He silently cursed Jerry unmercifully. Of course he was only talking about himself for following Duprey to this God-forsaken place. Duprey reached inside the car and then lit a cigarette. Jim could see him plainly because for a long time Duprey sat on the edge of the car seat, ignoring the rain, shielding the cigarette with the car roof, and leaning back now and again to take a drag. He seemed to be staring into the direction from which he had come. Wallowing in water, Jim wished Duprey would start the ignition and get the hell out of there. His wish came true.

All of a sudden Duprey retreated into the car, slammed the door, and switched on the ignition. There was something of fright in the way he backed up across the road, spun his wheels in the sand, and turned around. Jim was glad it wasn't his car Duprey was driving. Straightening it out, Duprey took off, bumping

down the road at about fifty, which was too fast for this kind of road. Jim watched until he was out of sight, got to his feet, took out his flashlight, and walked in the general direction of the place where Duprey had been searching.

The flashlight beam was straight ahead about three feet off the ground so he didn't get a load of the fence. Falling flat on his face, he growled a curse before he found the flashlight turned face into the mud. Right next to it was a grave marker. If he had cracked his head on it, he might still be there.

He flashed his light around a small 25 foot square graveyard! Once it had been surrounded by a fence, but it was part up and part down, mostly the latter. Maybe the graveyard was originally well populated, but not now. There was a cross in one corner, and another cockeyed grave marker in the middle, and pine needles all over the place. Turning the light on the grave markers, he could see nothing but two simple stone crosses. If there had been any markings, they were long since gone. The ground around the markers was rich and black.

Jerry Duprey was never his favorite person, but he conceded he was not stupid. Jim had to give this graveyard business a couple of thoughts. But, at the moment, he felt he could do better with the thoughts back in his car.

Again, as he sloshed back down the road, he marveled while he was a little more than a mile off Highway 90, he felt as if he were in a strange, remote world. He didn't like the feeling at all.

For a long time he sat in the car smoking one cigarette after another, watching patches of low fog billow along the road in the car lights. Jerry was up to something with determination. With equal determination he was going to find out about it. But now he decided he would rather be back in the hotel and in bed. This had been a long day, and he needed a little shuteye. He backed the car into the side road, and headed to the highway.

There was traffic, but he was glad for the company. People around him took the strangeness off his trek to the graveyard. When he left the highway and took the coast road to the Grand Manor, he felt almost human. He doused the lights and looked around. The place was spooky, but not as spooky as his last surroundings. If there were any lights in the building, he didn't see them. He intended to head for bed in short order.

According to the experts on such matters, your hair stands on end and you get a warning tingling of the spine or a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach cluing you in on imminent danger. That's a bunch of hogwash, because he

walked around the corner of the hotel and no such signals hit him. But something did, right square on the head.

When he came to, his nose was in the mud and the flashlight was broken. It was still pitch dark, and his head must have been harder than he thought because he had an idea he hadn't been out long. He felt like he had one swell hangover without the pleasure of the drinks. He picked himself up and wobbled to the back door. Pushing it open, Jim sat down on the first step. He used a lighter and looked at his watch, and he was right. He hadn't been out for more than a few minutes. He stood up, still holding out the watch, but it started to rotate. It trickled slowly through to him it wasn't the watch, but his head. So he sank down on the first step. He groped at the second step for balance and plunked his hand into a wet spot. Well, it was wet as opposed to dry, but it was sticky. Even in his befuddled state it didn't occur to him it was jelly. Another flick of the lighter said it was red, but it wasn't jelly. It was blood and a pretty good sized puddle.

He shook some sense into his head and raised the lighter. There was a trail all the way up the stairs. He held his hand out to keep his blood stained fingers off the wall and eased up the side of the staircase. At the second floor, he could see the puddles went on to the third.

On the top landing a dim light appeared from under the third floor door. He guessed he was sort of a nut to go on up there, but at least he had his revolver. The guy who conked him had not bothered to take it. There were no inside noises, no creaks, just absolute and somewhat discomfoting silence. And there was blood, but less of it than on the stairs. Somebody seemed to have started running out of whatever it is that keeps us going.

Jim opened the door and saw nothing but the threadbare carpet in the third floor hall. Walking quietly to the entrance from the front stairs, he started counting doors on Aunt Annie's side of the building. The light was too dim to show any numbers, and light he didn't need. Duprey's room was right over Aunt Annie's, so she said. Jim stood in front of the door for a minute and listened. There wasn't even a snore, if Jerry had time to hit the sack. In fact, it was deadly quiet, and he didn't like the sound of the adverb that came to mind. He turned the knob and pushed. The door opened. He didn't turn on the light, but he didn't have to.

Even the dim light from the hall was enough to show the bed. On it was a hulk of a body. It couldn't have been anything else. From the size and shape, he guessed he was saying goodbye to Jerry Duprey. There was a whisper

of a sound, like a sleeve scraping the wall. At least he had sense enough not to go into the room. He ducked and took off down the hall in record time.

Jim went down the front stairs, took a quick look at Lena and Aunt Annie's doors, slipped into his room and locked the door behind. He put a wooden chair under the knob just for fun. He had a lot of thinking to do, but he needed a drink, and he needed to do his thinking dry. Without turning on the light, he groped for the bottle and took a long drink. He towed his hair dry, wincing as he crossed the sore spot, pulled off his clothes, and stretched out on the bed. The bed was almost as uncomfortable as he had imagined.

The guy on the bed upstairs didn't bother him too much. From his acquaintance with him, he wondered how Durpey had lived so long. He supposed he could have rushed out through the downpour to announce the demise to the local police. It was most unethical not to do so. However, the body would keep. Well, after a fashion it would, and morning was already here. He wondered sleepily what the late lamented Jerry Duprey was doing out in the middle of no place, running up and down a deserted and half obliterated graveyard with a flashlight. Obviously he was searching for something. His association with Duprey said it

wasn't "hay"! Obviously, he could hardly ask Duprey now.

Within 24 hours Jim had indulged in a Mickey, traveled across a couple of states, taken on two half-zany females to protect, and been conked over the head. He had a few questions for Aunt Annie and Lena. But he had it for the day. He rolled over and went to sleep.

Chapter Six

A tapping noise on the wall woke Jim, and he opened his eyes to horrible wallpaper. He groaned as he turned over in the sunk-in-the-middle bed. It was daylight, but hardly sunny, so he was surprised to see it was almost 9. He didn't have to review the past hours. They came in a rush. The wheels started going around....from Mrs. Benning to Jerry and the graveyard. He wondered if any unlikely person had come upon Jerry's remains and decided not. Nobody in the joint was unlikely in his book.

Jim tapped back at Aunt Annie, pulled his way into pants and a sport shirt, and spread tepid water on his face. If he didn't have a rugged constitution he would never have gotten out of bed. There was a knock on the door.

He opened it and both Aunt Annie and Lena darted in. Aunt Annie had on pink slippers, a scarlet flowered shirt, and large, round, gold earrings. Lena was sumptuous in a flowing, unbelted garment of gold lame plus a Mexican hat saddled with purple lei wound twice around the hat, which gave a rather top-heavy appearance. Aunt Annie handed him something warmish in a paper napkin. Lena was teetering a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

Looking at Jim solemnly, Aunt Annie said: "There are two red flags out today, Charlie!" So here he was back in the wonderful world of idiocy. He shook his head to clear it and wished he hadn't. Then he opened the paper napkin to discover a slightly soggy sweet roll, and took the coffee out of Lena's hand. He said, "Where is everybody?" Aunt Annie shrugged. "They seem to be having a clambake in the kitchen. You missed your breakfast with us," she reproved. Lena looked at Jim dolefully and flicked ashes on the floor.

He wondered what they'd do if he provided a full report on his activities the night before, probably head for the bar. He pulled together a smile and said, "Thanks for the sweet roll and the coffee, ladies. I'm sorry about breakfast." He wasn't half as sorry about breakfast as he was about the mess he had gotten himself into by listening to Beau Mitchell in the first place.

Lena reached over and helped herself to one of his cigarettes on the dresser, lit it from her own, and put the first delicately in the one ashtray. "What are you going to do?" she demanded, staring at Jim.

He looked through the window half-covered with ivy at a dull gray sky. At least, he thought, it wasn't raining. With the recent

bash on the head, the body upstairs, and two unpredictable females waiting apparently with baited breath for his answer, he felt like saying, "Shoot myself....what else?" but decided against it. One of them might have handed him a gun. The first thing he had to do was go back to the graveyard. So he said, "I have to run an errand. In broad daylight you two ladies will be perfectly safe. When I come back we'll think about getting out of here."

Aunt Annie grabbed Lena's arm and started for the door. "But the two red flags?" she said with a question in her voice.

Jim tried to make his voice patient. "Now, never you mind about the flags, girls. Take a nice long walk on the beach. I'll get back as soon as I can." He shut the door on them.

Slipping his wallet into a back pocket, he picked up his keys and went down the front stairs to find a deserted lobby. Where was the ever present Leddon? Probably he was in the kitchen with the rest of the crew. "Lucky, I guess," he mused aloud as he went out into the humid dull day and slid into his car. Everything was calm, even the bay which looked like a bad watercolor because it almost matched the sky. There were a few cars speeding across the bridge and a couple of men pulling a skiff up to the road. They were shouting at each other and gesticulating

wildly, but were too far away for him to make out what they said. Just a couple more nuts, he thought, and headed for Highway 90.

Anywhere else he had ever been the rain soaks into the ground or runs off it, at least overnight. Not here. The ditches on either side of the road were full of water. Any more and they would flood the road which was hardly dry. But he had more on his mind than that. He cursed for not checking the mileage while he was chasing Jerry the night before. He made a couple of wrong turns before he found the road he had followed the previous evening.

The road went directly through the tall pines he had glimpsed last night and came to several man-made canals. A dilapidated sign indicated this was a subdivision, but it was minus houses with only a few tilted sticks to stake out what were supposed to be waterfront lots. The earth they had piled up to dig the canals was dead and bare. It would be a long time before lush green grass would take over these *choice* lots. And apparently somebody had come up with the idea of bulldozing down the trees that stood in the way of digging the canals. Cheaper, he guessed, but most unappetizing. He looked for the area where he parked the night before. He stopped when he saw it, and realized he had been parked on *Harbor Drive*, according to the sign which

seemed to have stood up to the weather better than the subdivision sign.

As he backtracked to the spot where Duprey had turned off, another sign proclaimed the place where he had turned was *Riviera Road*. He went on more slowly until he thought he was in line with the old cemetery. The road to the cemetery was *Durnvie Dell* road. The cemetery was off to the left. Unless you knew it was there, you would pass it up for sure.

Very depressing spot, he thought. Even for a cemetery. He got out of the car and looked up and down the road. Not a soul in sight. He walked over to the half-up, half-down fence and looked at the cemetery. What in the hell was Jerry doing out here in the middle of the night? Around the cemetery were half a dozen live oak trees which from their size dated back into the last century. Even in the daylight he could see no names on the grave markers. Slowly he walked back to the car.

This time he had a bright thought. He wondered about the land and about the graveyard. He could find out who owned the land, if he knew where he was. He started back to Highway 90, checking the mileage to the city limits of Bay St. Louis. He knew the size of the town, having checked it when he was getting ready to get on Duprey's trail. So, it had to be big enough for a courthouse.

A green and white sign said *Business District* to the right of the highway. He turned down a straight stretch of asphalt and sure enough, the street sign said *Main Street*. Main Street seemed a likely place for a courthouse. But the first few blocks didn't give much of an idea of the city. Just some more pines, until he came to a ballpark on the right side of the narrow road. This was encouraging. Houses were straggling out on both sides of the street, and he stopped before a house where a man was struggling to carry a large sheet of plywood through a gate. "Can you tell me where the courthouse is, sir?" he asked pleasantly enough. The man rested one corner of the plywood on the ground and frowned at him. "The flags is up!" he said belligerently. "I ain't got no time to talk, young man.....courthouse that way." He waved in the direction Jim was going, picked up the plywood again, and struggled to get it through the narrow gate.

The whole town's nuts, Jim thought. "Flags is up!" Aunt Annie had her mind on flags, too. But at least he learned the direction of the courthouse.....someplace between where he was and the direction he was headed. That was a help. And it wasn't too hard to find when he had gone half a dozen blocks. It looked strictly like any other courthouse in any other small town anywhere, except for embellishment of southern culture. Six white tall pillars, a bunch

of poplar trees, and the bars of a jail in the back. Jim actually found a parking place in front of the building. The street was deserted, probably due to the excessive heat of the day.

He entered the ancient building. Across the front on the floor in ceramic tile was engraved *Hancock County, Mississippi*. So that was where he was! The hall was deserted except for an ageless female seated on the edge of her chair at a desk near the front door. She jumped when he asked her where he could find a map of the county and the title records. She gave him a startled look, pointed to an inner room, and continued writing on a pad with her left hand. He opened the door and found himself alone, but he didn't need much help. All courthouses were more or less alike, and a computer is a computer.

He found a map of Hancock County and looked at it with interest. Judging from his mileage check he was looking for Section Eight, Township Four South, and Range Sixteen West. He typed in the required data and pushed the enter key. The computer screen was instantly filled with data from top to bottom. The most recent entries were at the bottom of the page, and the last Grantor listed was a certain Landis Dupree. The Grantee was Edith Dupree. As he checked back to the beginning of the file, he noticed the records went only as far back as 1861, the start of the

Civil War. The original Grantor was difficult to read, but the original Grantee was Jeanne Dupree, apparently a blood relative of Landis Dupree who came along much later. The cemetery and 60 acres surrounding it, belonged to Edith Dupree, whoever she was.

Two and two were beginning to come up to four. Jerry's name was Duprey, and Jim was willing to bet all the cotton in Mississippi there was a connection. Spell it Dupree or Duprey, pronounce it any old way, Jerry was definitely in the act.

He closed the file on the computer screen, and on his way out wondered who the original Grantor had been, why the land was sold to Jeanne Dupree, and why it was later transferred to Edith Dupree. Maybe Jeanne Dupree was a friend of the original owner. But what was the connection between Edith Dupree and Mrs. Benning? He hated to express his ignorance, but he had been raised in Chicago, and his high school history class didn't cover the Civil War, at least not from the southern viewpoint. He decided he had better find a library if Bay St. Louis had one, then he could return to the Grand Manor with his mind at peace. Well, almost at peace, except for all the crazy things happening.

The ageless female frowned in his direction. "Library, of course we have a library, if it's

open. One block down on the left, then first right. There's a BIG sign in front." The implication was not overlooked as he left. Apparently she didn't like his accent, didn't like men, or just didn't like anything or anyone.

An old house with a huge *LIBRARY* sign in front popped up just where it should have. A few books were in the bay window at his left, and inside he could see a shaded light spilling 60 watts onto some beautiful chestnut hair. The door jingled as he entered, and a woman rose to meet him. The sign on her desk said *Mrs. Wharton*, which switched off his mind. He didn't go for married dames.

A wad of hair done up neatly on top of her head was complimented by dark blue eyes and an uncompromising mouth. She said, "Yes?" and looked at him as if he were interfering with her nonexistent work schedule. The emptiness of her desk said so. However, he could see a paperback novel stuck in the half open top drawer, so maybe he was interfering. He went into his charm school act, giving her a most amiable smile.

"I am," he announced modestly, "an author. I am looking for background material on Hancock County, legendary stuff, something which might appeal to everyone. This is to be a historical novel," he added hastily.

She looked at him coldly. "Precisely what legend are you looking up in what era?"

Oh boy! She'd been reading up on how to be a librarian! Or maybe she hadn't been in the business long. He started over. "You have a Mississippi history shelf?" he asked, looking about the neatly tagged rows of books.

She moved regally to a shelf nearest the door. Her demeanor indicated she didn't think much of his profession as an author. "Here are the books on southern history, going back as far as the Civil War." Apparently she too had caught the Yankee accent, and from the tone in her voice she thought he must have caused the Civil War personally. "And general information which may help you," she added. Her voice intimated she didn't think there was anything that could help him. But she stared at him curiously. Jim didn't think he was such an oddity. Then she insisted, "Can I help you find any particular thing?" Sure, he thought. Why don't you give me the pitch on that abandoned graveyard in Section Eight, Township Four South, and Range Sixteen West, if you know it's there, and I bet you don't. Then she said in a compromising soft voice: "The legends about this county have been over-exploited for years Mr....?"

"Smith", he said hastily, knowing she didn't

believe him, and feeling like a heel for interrupting her paperback reading in the first place. He sounded properly apologetic, but turned his head so he could read the title of her book in the drawer. He wanted to laugh. Shame on you, Mrs. Wharton, he said to himself and found her blushing when she caught his look at the title. She slammed the drawer. Jim grinned at her.

"Very well, Mr. Smith," she dismissed him. "Let me know if I can be of any assistance to you." She abandoned the paperback and drew a sheaf of papers from the files, looking very professional.

So here he was with a couple of dozen books on southern and Civil War history and almost no place to start. He decided to start at the beginning by searching the indices at the back.

He was suddenly interrupted by Mrs. Wharton standing over him with her hands on her hips. She smelled nice, and she had a certain look not given to married females.

"Do you want a card?" she asked. "A library card," she explained when he looked blank. He thought about it and nodded. She pulled a card from her pocket and put it down on the table. "What is your first name, Mr. Smith, and where are you staying?"

Perhaps he was wrong about his first appraisal. All he could see now were fantastically long eyelashes. He might as well go along with Charlie. He gave her that and the Grand Manor and she said: "As an author, how do you feel about Artrand Bran's hitting the best seller list with his *Never the Day*? Her eyes widened in question. Jim had never heard of Artrand what's his name or his book, but he decided to be obliging. "Now there's a BOOK!" he exclaimed. His reply stemmed back to when he was obliged to look at somebody's baby and having not the least idea whether it was male or female, he decided the safest thing to say was, "Now there's a BABY!"

Mrs. Wharton nodded, apparently unable to match his remark. The telephone rang loudly. She picked it up and announced importantly, "Bay St. Louis Library, Mrs. Wharton." Then her voice changed. She sounded quite rattled. "Yes. YES! I'll close up now. I didn't have any idea, Mayor Boggs. Thank you."

She started locking drawers, looking flustered but suddenly prettier and more human. "Mr. Smith," she said, "the FLAGS are up!" She slammed the middle door shut, and added, "I have to close!"

More flags! "What do you mean the flags are

up? Everybody's got flags on their mind. What's with all the flags?"

Her eyes got wide. "It's Bertha!" she gasped. "That's what it is!"

"Bertha?" Jim repeated. Here we go again. "Who is Bertha?"

She looked at him with exasperation. "Bertha is a Category 3 hurricane!" Mrs. Wharton replied. "She's headed right at us! The flags are hurricane flags!"

Chapter 7

So, now he knew about Bertha! Bertha wasn't just another female of uncertain years for him to herd under his wing. Bertha was a dandy hurricane. He should have known. There was Aunt Annie's concern, the scowling man fighting the plywood on Main Street, the deserted downtown area, and the empty courthouse.

But he didn't get as steamed up over a hurricane as Mrs. Wharton. Not then he didn't. He just idly thought it was too bad Mrs. Wharton was married. He looked at her fumbling at the file drawer and she made him feel quite protective. Somehow she seemed to have come unglued, and it was becoming. He wondered what went on in Mrs. Wharton's head.

"Mrs. Wharton, don't forget your paperback. It might make good hurricane reading," he jibed, watching her rustle around. "Could I take out a couple of these history books?" he asked, raising his voice to get her attention. She gave an exasperated look. "Certainly, but why don't you close the mini blinds while you're at it?" Meekly, he closed and fastened them and took a couple of books. She didn't ask him to even sign his name. It wouldn't have mattered if he had taken the petty cash box too. He could

have trundled out the whole load of books. Mrs. Wharton had Bertha on her mind, not books. She hustled him out the door and he took the key from her wavering fingers, locked the door, and handed it back to her. "Can I take you home?" he asked. She started to nod "yes", and then shook her head decisively "no". "No thank you, Mr. Smith," she said and hurried off down the street. Neat figure, Mrs. Wharton, he mourned to himself, long legs and no swish-swish when she walked.

The streets of Bay St. Louis were narrow, and it was difficult for two cars to pass at a time. But today he had no trouble pulling over on the sidewalk to let a big truck go by. On a busy day this must have slowed down the tempo. Not a bad idea if it needed slowing. But the pace really wasn't slowed today despite the lack of traffic. Quickly and grimly the store owners were boarding up windows facing the bay. Anyone could tell they had done it before, and they would do it again. They hardly gave Jim a glance.

As he drove toward the bay, the day seemed duller and the wind had picked up a little but not alarmingly. When he got to where Main Street intersected with Beach Road, he looked to the right and there were the flags! They were flying over what must have been the local yacht club. The flags were square and red as blood, with a black square inside. Later

somebody clued him in. One flag with the black squares indicated gale warnings. Two flags with the black squares meant "Look out kids! Here she comes!" in anybody's language.

He crossed the highway where traffic had picked up considerably and returned to the Grand Manor Hotel. To his surprise, there were three other cars lined up in front of the hotel. Out of habit he checked the plates and discovered the Grand Manor all of a sudden was hosting a wide range of clientele. The small red sports car had a Louisiana plate and was decked out in *Just Married* signs. Another, older car, had a California tag. The last one was from Iowa.

Some people had more sense than Jim where hurricanes were concerned. When he opened the door into the lobby, there were five distraught newcomers crowding the desk. Leddon, looking utterly deranged, was perspiring behind it. Aunt Annie and Lena were making like hostesses at a PTA meeting. The excitement seemed to have kindled their spirits. He hoped it wasn't booze at this hour of the day.

A young, obviously newly-married couple were bracketing Leddon. "This IS the highest ground?" the young man kept asking with his arm about his wife's eighteen inch waist. She was bedraggled, but extremely pretty. She

looked like one of those southern gals who managed an appearance of helplessness, but could probably clean the entire hotel on her hands and knees, cook a meal for forty people, and handle a hurricane with a martini in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Jim had met a few of them in his life, and he had learned never to sell them short.

Aunt Annie answered for Leddon, "Of course, young man! The Grand Manor is on a piece of ground thirty feet high....never got touched, even in forty-seven....I mean, by water, that is. There were a few branches down, but what can you expect?" She addressed Leddon. "Well?"

Leddon seemed to be trying to make the best of a bad situation. He looked scared stiff, but whether it was the impending hurricane or the body upstairs, or what, Jim couldn't figure out. Leddon finally found his tongue. "I'll give you 104," he told the bridegroom. "But you'll have to carry your own bags. That's just for a night or two," he explained hastily. "We have a convention arriving in a couple of days." Convention! The only convention that would headquarter at the Grand Manor would be an Undertaker's Meeting. Leddon reluctantly handed the young man the key to 104, and he and his bride went looking for it after signing the register. Jim leaned over the counter and read the bridegroom's handwriting. *Mr. and Mrs. Thad Collson, Baton Rouge, La.*

"Why don't they simply go back to Baton Rouge?" Jim asked Aunt Annie, interrupting her conversation with a thin perspiring man in shorts who seemed rather fond of his skinny, hairy legs. "No time," Aunt Annie explained patiently. "By now the roads north are bumper to bumper with cars and we are safer right here. Unfortunately there are some bayous that flood if we get any particularly high tides, and that stops everything." Aunt Annie seemed to have taken over public relations for the Grand Manor. "No sense in leaving," she assured the man in shorts. "Highway 90 will soon be half under water whichever way you go." She again addressed Leddon. "Give this man a room, immediately!"

Leddon seemed to go for direction at this point. He handed over another key. Aunt Annie swallowed a couple of times. "Is George in the bar?" she asked. The desk clerk hesitated. Then he said, "Yes, but he's the only help we have left in the entire hotel. The kitchen help and the maid went home to take care of their possessions." He didn't seem to be as impressed by Bertha as the rest of the assembled company. He offered the trim man in shorts a key and turned to the remaining man dressed in a rumpled seersucker suit.

Aunt Annie and Lena slipped out of the room and headed for the bar. About this time the

front door blew open and in came a couple of salesmen, obviously jovial. They must have made a few stops along the way to fortify themselves. They approached the desk after Leddon had the latest refugee located. Leddon paused, then indignantly handed them each a key. All the keys he'd handed out were on the first floor. This proved he wasn't totally stupid.

The tall salesman leaned over and whispered. At least, he thought he whispered, but it was the loudest whisper ever heard. "Say, where are the girls, bud?" The short one looked eager. They were going to have a grand old time with this hurricane. Jim guessed he misjudged Leddon. The man had one iota of humor: "In the bar!" he whispered back suggestively, and waggled his thumb in the right direction, adding a wink to cinch the statement.

The two salesmen almost clicked their heels together. They pitched their bags in a corner and stumbled across the lobby toward the bar. Jim was right behind them. As far as he knew the only *girls* in the bar were Aunt Annie and Lena, and he wanted to see their faces when they located the *girls*.

It was too dark in the bar to get your bearings in a hurry, especially if you were already sloshed. Getting their bearings would be

difficult no matter how they went about it. They tried peering around, and then decided to go straight to the bar where George was mixing something with his usual disgust. The unholy light didn't make his square face more interesting. I supposed the concoctions were Camilles for my lady friends.

"Hello!" The short one greeted George with the ease of a man who had spent many a night enjoying conviviality in some such surroundings. His tall pal put a foot on the railing and said, "How about a couple of bar bourbons and water, huh?" He jingled money in his pocket. They looked like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza from where Jim stood in the doorway.

George didn't look up. "All right," he managed to growl. "Gimme a chance to make these drinks." They were Camilles. He brought them around the bar to Aunt Annie and Lena who were seated at their usual table. The salesmen turned in unison and watched him. Their eyes, now accustomed to the darkened room, found Aunt Annie and Lena. The tall one nudged the short one who emitted a weak but audible "WHEE!" Jim went to sit with the girls, not to protect them, but to get a little juice in him. "George, how about a bourbon and water after you serve the customers?" he asked. George nodded and went back to the bar.

"My, my," Jim chided Aunt Annie and Lena. "Shouldn't we be boiling water or something with the hurricane on its way?"

Aunt Annie took a firm grip on her glass. She wrinkled her brow furiously and gave him a scathing glance. "Young man, you are being impertinent! Boiling water is entirely unnecessary at the moment, and you know it." She sipped from her glass. "Of course, if the water becomes polluted later, we may have to boil it. At the moment Lena and I are fortifying ourselves. We are the only people in the place who are up on hurricanes. Obviously, someone must take command." She cocked her head to one side. "At least we seem to be rid of our watchdog. In fact, even the fat bellboy is missing. According to my weather radio, we have four hours before Bertha moves onshore. After we have consumed our drinks we will go immediately to the kitchen and check the food. Then we will gather the guests together in the lobby."

George brought Jim a much needed drink and turned back to the salesmen, who were whispering and puttering over their booze.

Hurricane or no hurricane, Jim needed some answers before the ladies went to the kitchen. He still wasn't up-to-date on hurricanes. He might have laughed if somebody had told him

the next twenty-four hours would scare the pants off him. He said conversationally, "What about the dear departed Mrs. Benning, the gal who owned the hotel? What was her maiden name? Was she tall or short? Did she have any money? Did she dye her hair and drive a Rolls Royce?" Now he was being cute. But he was exasperated. With Jerry Duprey lying in state upstairs, he had only these two sources of information and they were elusive.

Lena, who had seemed to be the leader of the two before had taken a back seat. She gazed quizzically at the ceiling with her mouth firmly shut.

Aunt Annie folded her arms. "I don't think Mrs. Benning had much money, only the hotel. Her husband left it to her when he died some years ago." Her voice became waspish. "Mrs. Benning was small and didn't need to dye her hair. It was coal black. And, as I told you, she didn't drive at all, especially a Rolls Royce. The bellboy drove her for groceries and to the country. Lately he would take her out there and leave her and pick her up later. Now, don't ask me where they went. I don't know." Then Aunt Annie added, "Young man, you must have gotten out of the wrong side of the bed this morning."

This was fascinating because the bed was jammed into a corner of the room. The wrong

side must have been the only side one could get out of in the morning or any other time. Aunt Annie continued, "Lena can tell you more about Mrs. Benning than I can. She's known her for a much longer time. I told you she used to have long conversations with her before....before toddies," she explained. She addressed Lena. "Do you know, Lena, I bet she used to go for those toddies way back. She was so violently opposed to them."

Lena ignored the last remark. Then she said reluctantly, "Mrs. Benning lost her husband fifteen years ago. He came from somewhere in the east."

Jim asked, "Did she come with him?" He already knew the answer.

"No....," Lena glanced at Aunt Annie. Jim guessed she had a lousy memory, because it took her so long to come up with the answer. "No, she came from around here," Lena finally said, waving her arm vaguely. "Her maiden name was Dupree. Edith Dupree." She acted like Jim was dragging it out of her. "Edith Dupree?" he said, trying to put one and one together, and she nodded. Lena's accent was different, but he had the connection for a long time. A child of seven could have come up with it. "How do you spell it?" She told him. So Jerry's last name was Duprey and what was the difference. A little French dressing!

"Mrs. Benning was of French extraction?"

Lena looked at Annie. She seemed surprised. "Well, I guess partly," she allowed. "Annie, we have to go to the kitchen!" She finished her drink hurriedly and rose. Annie looked at Jim. "There's a painting of Mrs. Benning in her living room. But this is hardly the time for running it down. We have things to do. You have things to do. We will meet you in the lobby in thirty minutes, Charlie."

Lena, looking somewhat relieved, led the way out. Jim guessed the old girl had a soft spot in her heart for Edith Dupree Benning. He stared at his drink. He wanted to have a look at that painting. Probably because Lena hadn't mentioned it and didn't seem too crazy to have him see it. Then he picked up his two history books and went through the deserted lobby. He could hear Leddon whispering, probably to himself, in the little room back of the desk.

He creaked up the stairs and went to his room, noticing the wind had picked up and was beginning to batter the window at the end of the hall. He stuck his key in the lock and opened the door, flipping on the light.

There, stretched out on his bed was Jerry Duprey, a very much alive Jerry, who shifted

his weight to look at him. Jim closed the door hard with his foot and locked it.

Chapter Eight

It took only one glance to realize Jerry Duprey was polluted, plastered, stoned, crooked, and totally smashed. He was also scared stupid. Beside him on the floor was half a bottle of dubious whiskey. Considering his contours, it was hardly a feat of great detection to realize the guy whose remains graced the room upstairs must have been the fat bellboy instead of Duprey.

Duprey looked like he'd been dropped from a bungee jump without a cord. "Hello" says the man Jim had chased from Fort Worth, Texas to Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Now this was an understated salutation, considering the situation. Then he said something far more interesting. "It's there....it really is. I know she found the marker!" He was staring at the wall, talking to himself.

Jim leaned over him and said soothingly, "Found what, Jerry?"

"The graveyard....the marker....like Aunt Edith said." Then he looked at Jim craftily. Jim decided to change the subject.

He pointed to the ceiling. "The bellboy?" he asked, sitting astraddle the chair. Jerry's face crumpled like he might burst into tears. "They

hit him....thought it was me....they had to kill him. That's why I came to your room.

"How did you know I was here?"

"Heard them talking about you," Jerry announced, nodding his head.

"Who?"

"Never mind who. Never mind." He reached over the side of the bed with some difficulty, picked off the bottle of whiskey and concentrated on opening it.

"Wait a minute before you take another slug." Jerry's brow puckered into a most unbecoming frown. Jerry's eyes looked puzzled. He opened the bottle and asked, "Drink?"

Jim took another tack. "So now you own the hotel. What are you celebrating? It's a liability. And what happened to your Aunt, Jerry?"

"They musta killed her," he mumbled. Then he waved the bottle. "Aunt Edith wouldn't talk....they might have known that. She had guts, plain old guts. I didn't like her, but she had guts." He grabbed at Jim's shirt with one hand. "She wrote me! I ain't afraid of what she was afraid of, but they want me because they think I know and nobody else does. They'll kill

me too! After I tell them what I know....they'll kill me. Hide me, Jim....hide me!"

"What do you know?"

He upended the bottle and leered at Jim. "I won't tell." He looked at the bottle and back at him in surprise. Jim came out of his chair and shook Jerry. "Where are your Aunt's rooms, Jerry? Where?" Duprey sank back on the pillow and his eyes glazed over, but he pointed to the ceiling. He spoke a couple of unintelligible words and conked out.

Jim looked at him in exasperation. Just where did he think he could hide him? If he went wandering about the hotel dragging Jerry after him, because he couldn't carry him over his shoulder, he would run into almost anybody. And almost anybody was apparently already searching for Jerry Duprey.

Jim went through Jerry's pockets and came up with nothing he could use. So Aunt Edith wouldn't tell, but Jerry would! Just what would he tell? How would Jim know? It was small satisfaction to him if somebody picked Duprey off. What he knew about the Grand Manor, except for the back stairs, the room over Aunt Annie's, and the bar, was nothing.

He rolled Jerry under his bed. Even this took a bit of doing. Jim pushed the inert body until

Duprey was up against the far wall. As a kind gesture, he rolled up the bath mat, crawled under the bed, and stuck the mat under Duprey's head. A missing pillow might give whoever *they* were an idea. For once Jerry wasn't snoring. However it wouldn't have mattered much because the sudden wild wind tearing at the ivy around the window would have drowned him out.

Jim made up the bed carefully. Then he sat down, wondering why he had ever thought of stopping the characters that had Beau Mitchell cornered in San Antonio.

The whole mess hinged on Aunt Edith's letter to Jerry. Jim was hot, sweating, disgusted, and curious. Here he was in the middle of a hurricane with a dead body upstairs, the question of the quick dispatch of Mrs. Benning, two zany females who had adopted him, and Jerry Duprey. He remembered Jerry had cost him a grand. But he was not so disgusted his eye didn't catch the turning of the doorknob.

He gave the doorknob his undivided attention. It turned to the right and to the left. Jim had heard no footsteps, but who could with all the noise outside? Jerry, even under the bed, didn't need a visitor. Neither did Jim. He promised himself he had first dibs on Duprey when he came out of his stupor. There were a couple of million answers he needed from him.

Jim began to whistle loudly and stepped into the bathroom and turned on the shower hard. The doorknob stopped turning. Switching off the light, he unlocked the door and stuck his head out into the hall. There was nobody in the grim uncarpeted length.

He locked the door of his room and went quickly to the back stairs. Aunt Annie had given him thirty minutes, and he was running out of time. But he wanted to have a look at Mrs. Benning's quarters. Why had the girls acted so strange over his sarcastic description of the late Mrs. Benning? Among other things, he wanted to see if the recently deceased bellboy was still in the room over Aunt Annie's.

The last was easy. There was no body and nobody in the room where he had seen the body the night before. Getting rid of him must have been quite a chore, he thought, as he went on down the hall.

It stood to reason Mrs. Benning, being the owner of the Grand Manor, would have the pick of the crop, if there was such a thing. Her rooms were at the front of the hotel overlooking the bay. He stopped and tried the door. It wasn't locked, but it wouldn't have mattered. Jim's key would have fit the lock, just as it probably would every room in the

hotel. That's why there was another deadbolt lock on the inside.

For once he hit the jackpot as he entered, closed the door, and took a step forward reaching for the light switch. It was Edith Benning's parlor. He stumbled over something on the floor. The stark, center light changed his mind about giving it a swift kick. He discovered he had fallen over a good old-fashioned solid doorstop about the size of a brick and weighing at least a ton from the way his foot felt. Limping over to a scarred veneer table loaded with bric-a-brac, he pulled the ornate cord of the heavily beaded lamp with less wattage than the center light. He limped back to the door and turned off the center light. Then he looked around and winced.

Jim knew an antique dealer who would go stark, raving insane at the conglomeration of furniture in Mrs. Benning's parlor. He also knew enough to spot the only really valuable piece of furniture in the room, a walnut Queen Anne chair that had to go back to the early seventeen hundreds stood out like a sore thumb. He drew a deep breath, wishing it belonged to him. Jerry would never appreciate it.

In this room the Queen Anne chair was desecrated by rococo tables of various sizes, all loaded down with unappealing dusty ferns in

overly large pots. He shuddered over a lumpy unstable couch covered with small pillows adorned with names of various states and long fringes. Antimacassars were pinned to the arms and backs of the divan and the hideous chairs, except for one, the Queen Anne. Aunt Edith must have been doorstep happy. They were all over the place, holding down stacks and stacks of newspapers, holding back the doors to the next room. There was even one set on top of the out-dated magazines on the table. They looked like a bunch of bricks rolled up in dirty brown carpeting. But he forgave Aunt Edith all her atrocities. The Queen Anne chair was beautiful.

There was only one picture on the west wall. It was a large religious painting, if you could call it that, made up of burnt match sticks! He cringed as he glanced at it, looked longingly at the Queen Anne chair, and went into the next room.

The next room was an office. An open door to the left showed a small bathroom. Someone had really torn up Mrs. Benning's office. The filing cabinet beside an old oak desk had been emptied on the floor. The drawers of the desk had been pulled out. The swivel chair was tipped over against a closet door. Jim righted it and looked in the closet. It was lined with shelves. It had the treatment too. He didn't give this room much of his time. No use in

trying to find something when he didn't know what he was after in the first place, especially since someone else had already beaten him to it.

He glanced at his watch. Aunt Annie and Lena would be looking for him. But he had to see Aunt Edith's bedroom. There were no pictures in the office, and more than anything, he wanted to see the portrait of Mrs. Edith Benning. He stepped into the next room. It was heavy with massive furniture. The four posters of the mahogany single bed reached to the ceiling. To the left of the bed was a great, ugly monstrosity of a dresser, with the drawers opened and clothing dumped out on the floor. A large box of candy with the lid half-off and a hairbrush were the only items left on the top of the dresser.

His eyes went to the right of the bed. An enormous gilt frame hung askew. That was all there was, one gilt frame without a picture! The portrait, if it was of Mrs. Benning, had been whacked out carelessly and in a hurry with a sharp knife.

He turned back to the door he had entered, and there was another gilt frame. This one held a portrait. But the portrait was slashed at and shredded viciously. It was so completely destroyed it would never resemble anyone again. Was this Mrs. Benning's portrait, and

why were the pictures either removed or destroyed? There was something in the destruction that took his breath. It made him leave Mrs. Benning's domain with a queasy feeling in his stomach. Something particularly evil was going on in the Grand Manor.

Outside the rooms he rushed toward the front stairs. At the top it dawned on him he had left a light on in Mrs. Benning's parlor. He thought about returning to switch it off, but it was too late. The blast of Lena's whistle came up the stairs. It would have pierced a steel vault. Certainly it pierced Bertha.

He took the steps two at a time wondering how long it would take for Jerry Duprey to recover. On the first floor landing stood Lena with her arms folded. Naturally she had on a hat, only one this time. She seemed to be waiting for someone or something. Jim hardly needed to guess. Aunt Annie came gasping up the stairs to stand beside her friend. Even at this distance he could see Aunt Annie was inspired with great determination. She looked up at him.

"What have you been doing, Charlie? We need you in the lobby."

Lena gave him a black stare. "Where have you been?"

He said, "I was just checking upstairs. There's nobody on the third floor." He was exactly right. Meekly he followed the two ladies down to the lobby.

The occupants of the hotel, except for Duprey and the remains of the bellboy and the watchdog, who seemed to also have disappeared, were assembled in the lobby. Leddon seemed spellbound by Aunt Annie's dictatorial manner. He stood woodenly behind the desk, looking gloomily over the guests' heads.

Just inside the door stood two new arrivals, both dressed in identical no nonsense raincoats hanging almost to the floor. Throwing back their hoods, they were treated to a male and female probably in their sixties who were more excited than frightened by the antics outdoors.

Aunt Annie took over. She marched up to them, had a few words, and introduced everyone to them as though we were all involved in nothing so much as a tea party.

"Mr. and Mrs. Tribble," she announced, waving her hand around the lobby, "we are all victims of the hurricane."

Jim never did know what their first names were. Mr. Tribble addressed his wife as 'Love',

and apparently that was his name too, because she said quite excitedly: "Lover and I saw the most unusual bird over the beach. We've never seen one like it before!"

Aunt Annie was trying to make the Tribbles feel at home. She acted like she was President of the Bird Watcher's Society. "My goodness!" she said brightly, ignoring the hurricane, "What sort of bird did you see, Lover....I mean Mrs. Tribble?"

"Well, it had a scissor tail and was big and black and had long wings."

Lena said ominously: "Man-o-war birds. Mrs. Tribble. They live in the Florida Keys and throughout the tropic oceans. We almost never see them unless there is a major hurricane!"

Her words had a chilling effect on a room growing chillier in spite of the steamy mildewed heat. Mrs. Tribble blinked and grew silent.

Lena's ominous tone brought Aunt Annie back to her responsibilities. "Hear. Hear!" she said, clapping her hands. The bride and groom didn't hear. They were staring into each other's eyes. The man in the seersucker suit cocked his head and looked at Aunt Annie wonderingly. George simply looked at the ceiling.

"Lena and I have carried food into the bar," Aunt Annie announced. Of course the most likely place Aunt Annie could think of for the food was near the booze. As it happened, it was the best idea she'd had yet. "We will need all our strength," she went on firmly. "I suggest you help yourselves before too long. It's not fancy, but it will have to do."

Bertha must have destroyed even the Tribble's appetites. Nobody moved.

Aunt Annie did a slight-of-hand trick and came up with a kerosene lamp. She showed it to us lovingly, as if it were an antique of unmentionable value. Then she cleared her throat. "Perhaps we will feel more like eating later," she said kindly. She raised the lamp. "This may be useful."

Aunt Annie certainly had the floor. "First," she said imposingly, "we will fill all bathtubs on this floor with water." She raised her eyebrows at Jim. "Not boiling water, Charlie!" she said scathingly. "The ladies will search for candles." This meant Lena and 'Lover' and the new bride and herself. Leddon is not acquainted well enough with the hotel to tell us where they might be. Lena and Mrs. Tribble, try the dining room buffets for candles. You are on candle duty!" Then she turned to the bride. "It might be wise to fill up the pots in the kitchen

with water too. The drinking water might become polluted." She pointed toward the kitchen. "You might fill the pots, Mrs. Collson."

Her bombardment of words had temporarily stopped everyone in their tracks. Aunt Annie went on with her monologue. "I think we'll get the northeast quadrant of the hurricane, don't you, Lena?" Lena nodded solemnly, wagging her hat dangerously. Aunt Annie went on. "In any case, we will probably be without lights before the night is over. Try to find some kerosene on the back porch." This order she directed to the man in shorts.

The bride gave her new husband a thwarted look and followed the guy in the shorts toward the kitchen. The door into the dining room was open and dimly lit by some sort of sconce on the inner wall. It was two steps down, and Jim would have bet a couple of bucks somebody would stumble over them before the night were over. The bride maneuvered the steps gracefully.

Lena led Mrs. Tibble into the dining room, where they began rummaging in the drawers of a couple of ancient sideboards. The two salesmen wandered toward the long L of the building muttering something about *water* with a questionable distaste in their voices. The rest of the men followed close behind. The groom

said something about putting plugs in the bathtubs. He seemed to think the two salesmen needed direction.

Aunt Annie stood in the middle of the lobby looking noble. Jim tapped her on the shoulder. "What are YOU going to do?" he asked curiously.

"My dear boy," she said brusquely. "I am in charge. Somebody has to be, you know." She gave the motionless Leddon a pitying glance. Then she came up with a fine idea. "Why don't you check the outdoor furniture, Charlie?" Jim could hardly protest inasmuch as something rather formidable slapped the side of the building.

He looked down at Aunt Annie. "All right....all right, I'm going. But look here, Miss Annie Gary....I'm going to go out into the elements and endanger my life. But you know and I know there's more going on in this place than one measly hurricane." He should never have underrated Bertha. "Would you please answer one question before I go. Have you ever been in Mrs. Benning's rooms?"

Aunt Annie looked everywhere but at him. "I guess I'm just nosy, Charlie. I had never been in her rooms until after she died. But yesterday, I went up there. Lena said it was a

very good likeness of Mrs. Benning," she added brightly.

Jim replied: "So it WAS a very good likeness. Come now, you didn't see it at all. It wasn't there. But what about the portrait beside the door, was that Mrs. Benning's portrait?"

She shook her head. "No. Lena said Mrs. Benning's portrait was on the east wall." She brought her eyes back to Jim. Then she said slowly, "That was a bit nasty, don't you think?"

He nodded. "Yes, it was a bit nasty. Do you know whose portrait it was?"

"I've never been in her rooms before. I don't know. You'll have to ask Lena."

He turned toward the dining room, but Aunt Annie grabbed his arm. "Not now Charlie. You'll have to ask her later. That yard furniture will be through the front windows if you don't hurry up!"

Chapter 9

If Jim were to have the dubious pleasure of renaming this particular hurricane, he would abandon the usual pattern. He could think of nothing more apropos than *EXASPERATION*. There were any number of questions which might be answered if it hadn't been for this Act of God called Bertha.

His association with Aunt Annie told him he could never give her credit for stupidity. She had a wide-awake non-stop curiosity. Who was trying to fool whom, removing Mrs. Benning's portrait from the gilt frame? It had to do with temporary urgency. Was Mrs. Benning alive? Perhaps someone didn't want him to know what Mrs. Benning looked like. It also had to do with the reason Jerry Duprey hot-footed it to Bay St. Louis in the first place.

Lena certainly knew about the slashed portrait. If it weren't for Bertha, he could corner the old girl and find out whose portrait was so outrageously destroyed. It was just possible he was being given the run-around, aided and abetted by Bertha.

With all this kaleidoscoping through his mind, he slammed out the front doors of the Grand Manor at Aunt Annie's command. Aunt Annie was right. He conceded Bertha would be quite

a problem as the wind picked up. The wild Texas winds plus the gales blowing off Lake Michigan seemed like summer breezes compared to this blow.

The bay was dirty and angry and great with whitecaps. Water came in with a roar against the seawall, beyond the road separating the lawn of the hotel from the road and the beach. Yesterday it was a beach. Today the beach was non-existent. It was almost dark. He wished it were dark enough to block out that water. It looked alive, vicious, and mean. He began to wonder, despite Aunt Annie's assurance to the contrary, if the water might rise and slowly cover the hotel like it had covered the beach.

A canvas chair flew by and he picked it out of the air and tried dodging a couple more of the same. Opening the outside door of the hotel, he thrust the chair and a small table that landed beside him into the narrow space separating the outside door from the lobby. Now he could see why the double door protection. Grabbing a hunk of canvas around a shattered wooden frame, which must have originally been some sort of chaise lounge, he stuck it inside too. Then he turned as he heard a shout from the direction of the water.

Two men were pushing toward him with the wind. He looked up over their heads and saw the Man-o'-war birds swooping above. The

Tribbles were right. They had scissor tails and were solid black. Lena was right too. They looked ominous. But what she hadn't said was these birds had a seven foot wing span!

Jim braced and went to meet the men. Behind them, on the road, was an amphibious *duck*. Salt spray leapt at his face as he leaned into the wind.

One of the men looked like a tugboat captain. He was short and squat, with a deeply sunburned face and graying windblown hair. The other was taller and younger, with great muscular shoulders and bright blue eyes. Tattoos ran up and down his arms. His hair was long and wild and black. The older man's shirt was plastered to his body. The younger one was barefoot and shirtless.

"Everything all right here?" one of them shouted. They weren't talking about him, personally. He got that in a hurry. They were looking at the hotel. Jim looked back at it too and should have given it a double-take. But that's twenty-twenty hindsight. He turned to them and nodded. It seemed hardly worthwhile to waste his breath against the wind.

"I see you've got company," the older one yelled, pointing at the cars in front of the hotel. "I thought the place was abandoned. It's

around town....doctor says Mrs. Benning died. How many people are in the joint?"

Jim tried to come up with a reasonable answer, "About ten, I guess," he shouted back. This might or might not be true. "Who are you?" he countered.

"Civil Defense," the younger man yelled. "You're high here. Keep them inside or they might get hurt! We got to get a bunch of diehards off the point into the school building. They never learn. We'll try to check with you later. You won't get water in the hotel, but we'll be getting the outer winds soon. Look out for the snakes tomorrow." They backed away, but the older man cupped his hands and shouted, "You better get those cars around back and away from the trees." They turned and struggled toward the road.

If these weren't the outer winds, Jim could scarcely wait until they arrived. What was it with the snakes?

Tiles began raining off the roof. A huge limb tore loose from a live oak tree and crashed onto the roof of a car. Jim hoped it belonged to the two salesmen and not the Tribbles. He hadn't seen this car when he had come in earlier. That limb turned a hardtop into a convertible in nothing flat. Civil Defense had something on

the ball. The front part of the hotel was not exactly the place to leave a car.

Crawling into his rental car, he drove along the south side of the hotel past the door of the bar. He remembered the shed he had seen the night before and drove the car behind it. He wasn't the only one with the same idea. He parked behind the shed next to the car Jerry Duprey had driven the night before.

Jim fumbled his way to the back door of the long side of the hotel and went into the first floor hall. As luck would have it, he ran into Aunt Annie near the lobby. She solved a problem.

"Get their car keys," he said breathlessly. "I want to move those cars to the back of the hotel as fast as I can right now." She nodded and scurried away. There was no time to explain to each owner, or discuss the fate of the smashed car. He went into the lobby.

Leddon was still anchored to the desk. Mrs. Tribble was scrambling through a drawer in the dining room. Jim lit up a cigarette and leaned against the elevator cage wondering why he had to be a hero. Aunt Annie rushed into the lobby with the groom right behind her. "Mr. Collson will help you with the cars, Charlie. He has the keys". Then she added, "Wait a minute," and ran toward the kitchen

and came back with one more set of keys. Obviously these belonged to the man in the shorts. "His is the green Chevy," she said. "Be careful boys."

The groom looked disgusted. "It was my idea to come south," he allowed. "And now I'm a parking lot attendant. I guess it's better than bathroom duty with those two salesmen."

"Well, let's get it over with," Jim suggested. "I'll move the green Chevy, and you get the right keys in the right cars. I might as well tell you somebody's out one car. Follow me around the south side of the hotel and park them back of the shed. It's more or less out of the wind and away from the trees."

Jim left him sorting keys and moved the Chevy. He switched on the radio and wished he had not done so. "Expecting winds of one hundred and fifty in the bay area....," the radio announced. He turned the radio off and parked the car beside his. He groped his way back to the front of the hotel and leaned in the car window where the groom was turning the key in an outdated Oldsmobile. "You take two, and I'll take the rest. Leave the keys in the locks in case we have to get out of the hotel. There's a back door in the middle of the hotel." No use in giving him the pitch on the wind. Maybe they might do well to keep the able-bodied males able.

The groom nodded and drove off. Jim followed and waited for him to bring the next car. Then he pointed toward the back door. Jim had a reason for getting the guy inside beside his health. There was a light he had not seen before in the small window of the shed. It was dimmed by the dust on the glass, and he was sure the groom hadn't noticed it. He took off for the back door, and Jim gave him a few minutes before he looked through the window.

He wondered who in the world would pick this shed for a hurricane buffer. He found out. In the middle of the unpainted shed was the guy who had played watchdog across from Aunt Annie's room. He had a lantern beside him on an old crate. It threw a big burly shadow against the side of the shed. Half the room was blocked off by another room with the door closed. This must have kept him from hearing them move the cars. He was methodically digging up the ground that formed the floor of the shed.

Suddenly he leaned on the shovel and looked toward Jim. Jim drew back from the window and watched. The man's lips were moving, but he wasn't talking to anyone. Jim made out a door to the left of the window. He was talking to someone Jim couldn't see, someone just inside the door. The man nodded, wiped sweat from his face, and went back to digging.

The door opened, and Jim slipped back of the shed. Peering out he saw no one. Darkness and a beginning splatter of rain shrouded whoever had left the shed.

He had more cars to move. The watchdog would have to dig by himself. At least he couldn't get far away in the middle of a hurricane.

The back of the hotel was bleak and bare with only a small light at the corner of the building. It didn't offer much. Jim felt his way, seeing a rush of car lights on the highway heading east across the bridge. He wondered what the guy was digging for as he headed around the side of the hotel again. Then the wind hit him, trying to flatten him out against the front of the building. Bertha took precedence over the digging, the destruction of Mrs. Benning's property, and Jerry Duprey.

After he moved the last car, he rechecked the front of the hotel, dragged open the front door, and shoved it closed with all his strength. For once he had a break. He leaned against the inside door and heard the rain lash at the windows behind him. This was no little blow. It was the real thing.

Aunt Annie had changed into a more suitable garb for hurricanes, some sort of a jumpsuit, a nice dark green. She looked up, nodded, and

continued unrolling streamers of masking tape. Cutting the masking tape into foot long pieces, she was fastening them at one end to the edge of the desk. Leddon was helping her, but his movements were unnaturally awkward. Jim looked at him, wondering how an arrogant, insulting room clerk could turn into a robot in such a short time. Everything he did was purely mechanical.

Jim's eyes went to the dining room. Mrs. Tribble was routing out candles which she dumped on a table. Lena must have done a quick switch, because she rushed down the stairs dressed in blue striped overalls, embellished with a red and white checkered shirt. Now she had a pith helmet, which did make some sense. The ladies had unearthed candles that ran the gamut from pale pink to light green, probably for Easter, to dark red and green, no doubt for Christmas. They all had been burned to various lengths.

Then, over the roaring wind and lashing rain came a series of involuntary screams, raising the hair on the back of his neck. They were high pitched and hysterical, and they came from the kitchen. Apparently the bride had run into difficulties. Lena and Mrs. Tribble looked like they were playing *statue* when the screams hit them.

Jim took the dining room steps in one leap,

slipped and recovered. Dashing past the candle hunters into the kitchen, he saw the guy with the shorts standing at the back door with a large can in his hand. He was apparently as frozen as Lena and Mrs. Tribble.

Pots of all shapes and sizes were filled with water on the sink board. So far the bride had done her work well. Jim found her in the big old fashioned pantry. She had stopped her involuntary screaming, but he could hear an "Ahhhh" from the corner of the room. She was staring down into a deep freeze with both hands holding up the lid. Her face was white and she seemed to be struggling for control. But her hands were unable to let go of the deep freeze door.

Jim had always resisted buying a deep freeze such as this one, because to him, they resembled a coffin. This one was. He stood beside the bride and looked down into the freezer. It was empty of food, but it was filled with the revolting body of the fat bellboy with a bullet hole in his neck.

Hurricanes Jim did not and would never understand. But bodies cropped up every so often in his trade. He took the girl's hands firmly off the lid and let the door swing down. Then he closed the lock on it and turned to the bride.

A little color came into her face. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Just as he thought, she had stamina. But brides and bodies are not exactly compatible. She jammed her hands into the pockets of her dress and bit her lip.

Jim said quickly, "Forget it, Mrs. Collson. I'll explain later. Keep it quiet."

The guy in the shorts tore into the pantry and grabbed her shoulder. He had been a little slow in answering her screams. It so happened this was a good thing. He seemed to like the feel of her shoulder.

"What's the matter, babe?" he gasped.

Jim shook his head at her, and she gave him a small nod although her pupils were still dilated with fright. "A mouse!" she explained to the new arrival. "I'm deadly afraid of them!" She tried to smile. "May I have a cigarette?" This was for Jim.

Jim put two cigarettes in his mouth, lit them, and handed her one. She took it with fingers that scarcely trembled.

About this time Aunt Annie and Mrs. Tribble rushed into the pantry neck and neck. Aunt Annie, still holding the roll of masking tape,

stopped just inside the door. She drew herself up and addressed the man in the shorts sharply.

"Unhand that girl, young man!" she commanded. "A fine time you chose to attack a defenseless girl!" Jim's better instincts told him Mrs. Collson was anything but defenseless. "What's going on around here?" Aunt Annie asked. She took a step toward the freezer.

The guy in the shorts turned scarlet, which proved what was going on in his mind. He took his hand off the girl's shoulder as if it scorched his fingers. Jim leaned on the freezer. The girl came though nicely. "A mouse, that's all. I'm scared to death of them. I'm sorry about the screaming." A mouse wouldn't have turned a hair on her blonde head. But a dead body would, and that's fairly understandable.

By this time the whole lot had joined them, except for George, who was probably guarding the bar. Counting noses, Jim realized Leddon, in his apathetic state was still in the lobby, but there was a fair turnout in the pantry. The groom pushed his way through and demanded an explanation. When his brand new bride explained about the mouse, he glared at Jim as if he had invented it and shooed it in her direction. He stood stalwartly beside his newly acquired helpmate who managed to look helpless. That's a woman for you.

Aunt Annie was still in charge. "This is perfectly ridiculous! There is a lot to be done." Lena nodded in accordance. Aunt Annie frowned at the man in the shorts. "Go and unlock the back door, young man, and LEAVE IT OPEN! Tie it. I don't care how you do it. Do you want the whole place to cave in on us? Go right now!" She stamped her foot. He sneaked out like a third grader caught with the teacher's apple. Aunt Annie waved the masking tape. "Everybody to the lobby immediately!" she said.

She strode off in the direction of the lobby, with everyone trooping after her. The two salesmen didn't have far to go. They had just made it to the kitchen door during this latest conclave.

Mr. and Mrs. Tribble exchanged a troubled look. The man in the seersucker suit, for some reason or other, began to take on dimension. He seemed to be looking over the motley crew, holding back a question. Maybe all the characters that chose the Grand Manor didn't just happen into its doors for shelter.

Lena brought up the rear guard. Jim tapped her on the shoulder. "Could I have a word with you?" he said into her ear. She faced him and nodded. "Yes?" Suddenly he felt she was very much on guard.

"You knew Mrs. Benning pretty well, didn't you?"

She shrugged. "I suppose so, but that was years ago. She hasn't had much to do with me for some time."

"What about the picture in Mrs. Benning's room, Lena, the one on the east wall?"

"I think it's a very good likeness of Edith Benning," she asserted firmly in exactly Aunt Annie's words. "You've seen it?" she asked, staring at Jim.

"Let's get on with the plural. I've seen THEM," Jim said erroneously. "There's another portrait in Mrs. Benning's room beside the door. What about it?"

She frowned. "Oh. Maybe that's a portrait of her late husband. I wouldn't know." But who would want to destroy Mr. Benning's portrait? If it was all that bad, somebody should have done it long before.

Lena's voice showed her impatience. "We have windows to tape." She grabbed up half a dozen candles from the table and marched to the lobby. Jim followed without an answer.

Aunt Annie was peering at her weather radio in astonishment. "I am sorry to say my radio is

out of batteries. It isn't the kind you can plug in," she said apologetically. "Pure carelessness on my part, but I will call the local weather bureau immediately. Then we can learn exactly where Bertha is going to make landfall." She moved with majesty to the desk. Her radio wasn't the only thing on the blink. The telephone was also definitely out of order.

Aunt Annie rallied bravely. "Lena, hand out the masking tape. We haven't a minute to lose." She turned to say something to Leddon, who was still standing resignedly behind the desk, when Jim caught up with her. He led her protesting away from the desk to a corner.

He could have mentioned Jerry Duprey, whom he hoped was still hidden under his bed, the bellboy parked in the deep freeze, or the guy digging up the floor of the shed. However, Aunt Annie looked a little too frail for such a barrage. He only said, "I understand a doctor declared Mrs. Benning was dead. It must have been of natural causes or he would have called for an autopsy?"

She took her eyes away from the occupants of the lobby. "My dear Charlie, the only available doctor at the time was old, quite blind, and has been known to take on spirits even in the morning. Does that answer your question?" Jim must have looked surprised, because she added, "The other two doctors in this

community were attending ladies who took it upon themselves to produce babies at that time."

Jim had one answer, but it didn't make him feel happy. He came up with another question before she took off. "The only thing I do understand is Mrs. Edith Benning had one healthy sweet tooth. Did it ever occur to you somebody or other poisoned the lady with candy? There was a large box on the dresser in her room."

Aunt Annie didn't have to answer. Lena arrived at her side and announced, "Somebody left the candy on her dresser, Charlie. But it was somebody who didn't know Edith Benning."

"What do you mean?" Jim asked.

Lena set her pith helmet straight on her head. "My dear Charlie, Edith Benning was a diabetic. She couldn't touch anything sweet!"

The man in the seersucker suit took on more dimension. He ceased to be negligible right at that moment. Suddenly he was standing at Jim's elbow staring at Aunt Annie and Lena.

"You are saying Mrs. Benning WAS a diabetic! I asked the gentleman at the desk for an

appointment with her. He said nothing about her....her demise. Is Mrs. Benning dead?"

Both of the old girls nodded their heads. Aunt Annie, who seemed to know everyone's name said gently, "Mrs. Benning died a few days ago, quite suddenly, Mr. Reese."

He blinked. "But I had correspondence with her. I had business with her," he blurted. "Unseemly as it may be, did she have any heirs?"

So Reese just didn't happen to arrive to seek shelter. Jim had surmised as much. He was part of the picture puzzle growing more complicated by the hour. He could have answered his question in one sentence. "One heir, Jerry Duprey, parked under my bed!" but he thought it better to hold his tongue.

Aunt Annie looked at Lena, then volunteered an answer, "Mrs. Benning does have one heir, a nephew." She didn't explain further because she didn't have time. Suddenly, every light in the hotel went out!

Chapter 10

As the lights went out, a great deal of Aunt Annie's determination went with them. She was too flustered to answer any more questions. And Reese was too flustered to care. Aunt Annie's voice sounded a little quivery for the first time.

She said, "Lena, reach over on the desk and find a candle and light it." She was trying to sound firm. Lena, of course, announced she had a candle but no match. Jim flicked on his lighter, groped over to Lena who was holding up her candle, and lit it.

Leadership was changing hands fast. He guessed he was self-elected. Nobody else showed any signs of wanting to head up the hurricane detail in the Grand Manor. A look at the groom showed he had ideas, but not about hurricanes. Obviously he was willing to take charge...of his wife, that is. Jim lit a couple more candles, stuck them on the desk, and eyed the bride. Until now she hadn't had a chance to tell her husband about the body in the freezer. He had to think up a good answer for that one when she told him. But now he was the General!

"Where's the lantern, Aunt Annie?" She looked relieved to give up her job, and pointed to the

lantern on the floor behind a chair. "I put it there to keep it from being knocked off the desk," she replied. He nodded and Aunt Annie picked up the lantern, took a newly discovered book of matches from Lena, and lit it.

As long as boiling water was out, there were always the windows to tape. Jim was not so sure taping windows didn't fall into the category of boiling water....keeping everybody busy. He was for it after he stalked through the inner doors into the vestibule and peered through the windows.

What was going on outside their shaky old refuge was unbelievable. Sure it had stood up to the forty-seven storm. That was all very well, but what about now? He wouldn't have believed it before, and he hardly believed it now. The wires on the poles outside were flapping against each other in the crazy gusting wind, putting on a show of fireworks unequalled by any Fourth of July celebration anywhere. Water was dashing up on the lawn of the Grand Manor. He turned back into the lobby.

The lantern light eerily illuminated everybody in the room. The man in the shorts seemed to have shrunk. The newest part of the puzzle, Reese, still appeared to be dumbfounded. Mr. and Mrs. Tribble were holding hands. George,

the bartender, acted like he was guarding his premises, holding a tall glass in his hand, which was probably NOT a soft drink. The bride and groom were holding hands too. Jim bet hers were icy. The salesmen had sunk into a wobbly couch. Apparently they were sobering up and not too happy about it. Leddon seemed to be looking for something, perhaps a way out. Lena and Aunt Annie stood at attention bravely. They acted like they were facing an advancing enemy. They were, and there was not a sound out of any of them.

Suddenly the outer door flew open and somebody began beating on the inner door. Whoever wanted in had a problem, because Jim had locked the inner door to keep it from opening. Nobody in the room made a move. You'd have thought Dracula, thirsting for blood, was hounding the inmates of the hotel.

A couple of steps took Jim to the door. He yelled, "Hold on before you break the glass!" and turned the key in the lock. Things were looking up.

Far from Dracula, it was a female, a very wet female who entered the lobby in a pair of tight, cutoff, blue jean shorts. She had on a man's white shirt which was plastered to her admirable body, almost covering the shorts. Her wind blown hair was dripping water.

Jim's eyes finally followed her legs to her feet. She was barefoot.

She pushed her hair back and said coldly, "Who do you think you are, Mr. Smith, keeping me out in the rain?" He pushed the door shut, panted against it, and gave her another look. It was Mrs. Wharton, librarian of the Bay St. Louis Library. He should have known by the legs.

She smelled young and must have had on some sort of waterproof perfume, on which he wished he had a patent. She stood indignantly with her hands on her hips, dripping small puddles all around. In that dripping wet outfit, she had a non-stop build. Married or not, discounting the bride and groom, Jim felt less like the superintendent of an Old Folks Home.

"How do you do, I'm sure," he said, looking at her nicely tanned legs. "My, my, what brought you here Mrs. Wharton?"

"They brought me. Men with the Civil Defense," she said breathlessly. "I thought I could stay in the cottage, but there's water on the floor!" She sounded amazed. Then she said haughtily, "My overnight bag is just outside the door you closed."

Jim retrieved it, wondering what had

happened to Mr. Wharton. Maybe she was under water? He pointed to a chair and she sat down obediently and began to shiver. "I hope you brought a change of clothing, Mrs. Wharton?" Jim questioned pleasantly. She stared at him and shook her head. "No....no, I didn't, I don't know why. I just brought pajamas and some pieces of jewelry and a book." She colored. "Not the one you're thinking of, Mr. Smith."

Jim looked over at George. "Will you be kind enough to bring Mrs. Wharton a drink, a strong one, *pronto!*" George flashed a surly look and using a small flashlight he pulled from his pocket, disappeared into the bar.

Flashlight...light...the words brought Jim's twenty-twenty hindsight to life and he thought about when he had been passing the time of day with the two Civil Defense guys, and they looked over the hotel. He had noticed a light was shining through the vines over the window of his second floor room. He didn't leave a light on. It was a little late to be wondering what went on in his room with Jerry Duprey stretched out under the bed. But he had to get upstairs. Looking at Mrs. Wharton, he had a reason.

He turned to Aunt Annie. "Do you have a dress and perhaps a sweater you could loan Mrs. Wharton? I don't know much about

women's clothes, but you appear to be the same size."

She said, "Of course," and started toward the stairs. He said hastily, "You better take charge here. Tell me what to get and I'll bring them down. Mrs. Wharton can change in the ladies room, wherever that is. It's safer on the first floor anyway," he added.

Aunt Annie handed Jim her key. "The purple shift hanging in my closet, and perhaps the orange sweater would be nice. It's on the chair." She looked at Mrs. Wharton's feet. "Bring the white sandals too. They'll do."

Lena broke in, pointing at Mrs. Wharton inelegantly. "How do you know her name, Charlie?" George brought in a drink and handed it to the girl. Jim started for the stairs and called over his shoulder: "I managed to pop into the library today, Lena. Mrs. Wharton is the librarian."

At the foot of the stairs he decided to be a little firm before he went upstairs. He turned and faced them. He had their full attention.

"According to Aunt Annie and those seasoned gentlemen with Civil Defense, we are going to get the northeast quadrant which is the dirty side of the hurricane. As little as I know about hurricanes, I do know the winds are

counterclockwise. With all those little casement windows on the east of the lobby, I suggest you get on with the window taping. Introduce yourselves, if you must, but let's get on with the windows."

He hurried up the stairs and went quickly to his room. Well, as quickly as anyone can by candlelight. Holding the candle high, he took a look at the same kind of destruction he had witnessed in Mrs. Benning's rooms. It looked like Bertha had turned his room inside out. The covers were torn off the bed, his bag was turned upside down, and the faded lamp shade was more cockeyed than usual. His bottle of bourbon was empty and tossed into a corner. A cigarette had been stamped out on the floor. There was rage here! He wondered if it were unrequited.

He was sure he was too late, but he dropped to his knees and looked under the bed. To his surprise, there was Jerry Duprey over in the corner still out. He stuck the candle to the floor, reached under the bed and prodded Duprey. No response. Then he grabbed the candle and went out of the room, locking the door behind him in a reflex action. At least, whoever was looking for Jerry wouldn't try his room again. He had to get back downstairs as quickly as possible.

Rushing into Aunt Annie's room, he found the

purple shift in the closet, collected the orange sweater and the white sandals, and started down the hall. The candle threw a wicked shadow as he went toward the stairs. He gawked at the outline of a tall man who disappeared in the direction of the back stairs.

Jim wished the little salesman had enough sense to keep his playmate with him. He expected the man to fall downstairs at any moment. The way the wind tore at the hotel made Jim wonder what kept them from simply blowing away. In exasperation he yelled down the hall: "Get on downstairs, you idiot!" and went down the front stairs to the lobby.

He handed Mrs. Wharton the clothes, and she took off for the ladies room. Aunt Annie seemed revived. The taping was going very well, he guessed. Having come out of her blue funk, Aunt Annie was explaining carefully, "Cross the strips of tape. This keeps the glass from shattering if the windows break." Aunt Annie's instructions were news to Jim. Before this night was over he was going to learn a lot.

Mrs. Wharton reappeared. What a difference! He grabbed a roll of tape and moved in her direction. Mrs. Wharton didn't look as formidable now. It was becoming. She had combed out her windblown hair which hung about her shoulders and curled upwards at the ends. She looked up at him. Her eyes were

almost navy in the light of the kerosene lamp. Aunt Annie's purple shift was certainly enhanced by Mrs. Wharton's figure.

The question automatically came out of his mouth, "Where is Mr. Wharton?" She certainly wouldn't have left him in her cottage with water lapping at his feet. He spun the roll of masking tape around a finger and looked down at her.

The corners of her mouth turned up in a very attractive smile. She cupped her hands around her mouth and he leaned over. "There IS no Mr. Wharton, Mr. Smith. How do you like that?"

Jim liked it. "But why?" he asked.

"They wanted a married woman for the librarian job. I invented Mr. Wharton just for them. He is supposed to be overseas." She was innocence personified. "It was a very touching wedding, practically at dockside." Then she said frowning, "If there is a library left after this storm, this happy news would cost me my job. That is, if you tell."

He looked at her gravely. "Your story has reached my tender heart, Mrs. Wharton. I grieve for you. Your secret will never pass my lips."

Right in the middle of their little tête-à-tête, Lena showed up bearing down on them with strands of masking tape hanging from her fingers. Unkindly, Jim found himself comparing her to one of Shakespeare's witches as she approached with her hands flung wide and her pith helmet pushed forward on her head. He grinned at Mrs. Wharton. "Fear not, Toots." Then he said loudly, "Mrs. Wharton, I think you had better help Lena, Lady Mantel. She seems to be in difficulties." He pitched the gal a wink and she grinned back, then winked a reply. Already he was feeling much better. Looking at *Mrs. Wharton* walking away, he almost forgot the hurricane.

Everybody seemed busy with the taping but George and the two salesmen. Jim thought he knew where the tall salesman was. George and the short one could only be in the bar. The tall one was probably meandering about the hotel. However Jim was not his keeper. It was an effort on his part to keep his eyes off Mrs. Wharton. Never a believer in coincidence, he had some questions for her, too. Maybe he would get a straight answer before the night was over. There was also the live bomb under his bed, Jerry Duprey. Jim hoped Duprey would remain there until he could get the pitch on the Grand Manor.

The last thought took him back to his ex-

employer, Beau Mitchell. Jim still didn't like the man, but he had more than earned his keep. He thought maybe he had also earned the other grand by spending too many hours with Jerry Duprey, getting the Mickey treatment and the brush-off. Someone wanted Jerry Duprey alive for conversational purposes. After Duprey had skipped Fort Worth, Jim's purpose had been served, he guessed. It was just possible somebody thought Jerry had done too much talking. So here Jim was at a ramshackle hotel on the gulf coast. Because of a stubborn streak, if he didn't get swept away tonight, here he was going to stay until he had the answers. Also, to be realistic, how could he get out of the damn place?

He stopped reminiscing when he glanced at the kerosene lamp. His mind went to the pantry. With the electricity off, the deep freeze would start to defrost. This was not exactly a happy thought. He judged the defrosting would take all night and another day, but he was a fool not to have thought about locking the pantry door. There was no use throwing the rest of the refugees into a panic. A peep into that deep freeze was a dead sure hell raiser. He took a look at the bride and groom. There were two things to be done fast, locking the pantry door, if it had a lock, and having diplomatic conversation with the bride and groom.

Leddon had finally been pressed into service as a window taper. He was doing an unorthodox job of taping under Aunt Annie's direction. By now, the whole east side of the lobby looked like a window in a kindergarten room made by five year olds for Halloween. Leddon was so busy with his own depressing thoughts, he jumped like a deaf dog when Jim tapped him on the shoulder.

"Keys?" he asked, mumbling something about the pantry door banging, as if anybody could hear it, or could care less with the increasing velocity of the wind. Either he knew what was in the freezer or he was too scared to care. Jim had a hunch it wasn't the hurricane bothering Leddon. Then he saw the pupils of his eyes! The guy was really hopped-up. This explained a lot, but made his job with the keys easier. He wondered where he'd gotten the dope or whatever it was he was stoned on. "Keys!" he demanded again. Leddon fumbled around and handed him a bunch of keys. Leddon was on cloud nine, but he wasn't in the way, which was a big help. After presenting Jim with the keys, he gave up on the taping and sank into a chair with his mind somewhere in outer space. Jim forgot his grudge against the guy. By now Leddon was at the end of the line.

Jim turned his back on the window taping, took a candle and went into the kitchen. The

back door was open, just as Aunt Annie had demanded. Outside he saw the outline of the same tall man he had seen upstairs. Jim's mind was working overtime. "Hey, you'll get yourself killed out there!" he yelled. The man must have heard him because he disappeared from the doorway into the dark.

The door to the pantry did have a lock on it. The keys Leddon had surrendered were not like the hotel room keys. They were respectable Schledge keys to fit respectable Schledge locks, and one of them would fit the lock on the pantry door. But, locating the right key was another thing. Jim found a plate on a shelf, softened the bottom of the candle with his lighter, and stuck it on the plate. By a process of deduction, he came upon the right key after eight tries. Then he opened the freezer to be sure the fat one was there. He was. The freezer didn't show any signs of defrosting yet. He locked the door, took the key off the chain, and put it in his pocket. Before he left the kitchen, Jim propped a chair against the back door.

He had other things to tend to. They might prove enlightening. What had Civil Defense commented, something about taking the diehards to the schoolhouse? But who showed up at the Grand Manor? *Mrs. Wharton*. This babe had not fallen desperately in love with him at first sight in the library. At the time, if

anything, she was belligerent. Curious, maybe, but his curiosity beat hers. Come to think of it, who would splatter sexy perfume all over for a dash through a hurricane?

When he returned to the lobby, he could tell the bride had given her husband the pitch on the contents of the freezer.

Timing is everything, and this was the time to have a word with them. He was improvising mentally as he went over to them. The groom gave a suspicious look and opened his mouth. Jim cut him off before anything came out. "Look", he said, "I've locked the pantry door. Let's not get the rest of them in a panic." Then he came up with a good, believable lie. "Sorry you had to look in the freezer, lady. It was a suicide, and I guess they'll have to have an inquest when this hurricane gets on its way." Jim nodded soberly. "I put the...decedent in the freezer. Hate to mess up your honeymoon just because you happened to lift that lid. Certainly wish you could stay out of it. "

This got their attention. Jim guessed their marriage would be a success. He could see their wheels go round. They came up with the same answer at the same time. The groom glared at him and took over the conversation. "We don't want to be mixed up in any part of this thing, Mister. Miss...I mean my wife, didn't see a thing, did you honey?" She shook

her head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Well, that was that, one hurdle. Jim nodded gravely. "Well, you-all are off the hook." The girl smiled at him. Her husband moved closer to her. Jim could see he wasn't going to let her out of his sight again, not in the present surroundings. He could see why. The gal had what it takes.

Next on his list was a visit to the bar. As long as he was still unofficially directing traffic, he could satisfy himself about one more thing. He stuck his head into George's territory. George was still partaking of his own special medicine. He had a candle sputtering in the middle of the bar. The small salesman had his foot on the rail and was leaning precariously against the bar. He needed all the help he could get. Jim needed a drink.

Leddon was supposed to scare him off by overcharging for the room. George had played a silly game with a gun, also intended to send him on his way. Somebody was giving the orders. Neither of them could find the missing number between one and three. Leddon was on a one way trip, and George was well on his way on another sort of trip.

Jim marched over to the bar, went behind it, and picked off a bottle of bourbon. Splashing a

couple of fingers in a glass, he downed it straight. Everyone just stared at him owlshly.

Jim pointed at the little man. "You, where's your friend?"

He squinted at Jim. Then he and George looked at each other.

"Where's your friend," Jim repeated, "trying to get himself killed?"

The little man pushed himself away from the bar and carefully took his foot off the rail. With some difficulty he stood upright. Then he said, "You are insulting my dearest friend. He is not trying to get himself killed!" Then he shook his head, almost lost his balance, and steadied himself against the bar. A horrified look came over his face. "Oh, no," he shouted, as he stumbled over to the bench along the south wall of the room. He leaned over.

"You ain't dead, are you, Ed?" he said beseechingly, poking at a figure lying on the bench.

The guy moved. He was far from dead. Jim had not seen him because he was not looking for him. There he lay, drunk as a loon, the long tall salesman was stretched out on the bench with his mouth unappetizingly open.

Chapter 11

Jim had hoped it was the long, tall salesman whom he had seen dodging about upstairs and outside the kitchen door. Now he knew better. It was a futile hope, and here was the proof.

He could still hear Beau Mitchell's voice, "I don't like double-crossers." Jim could see him standing in that cul-de-sac in San Antonio with his hands outstretched. He recalled the amazement on Mitchell's face. And he could remember too well the pleasant tone when Mitchell talked to Jerry Duprey on the telephone from his office. Jim could have dealt with Duprey on his home grounds with no trouble at all. But there was more to it. Beau Mitchell had stumbled quite recently into something that really held his attention. Jim guessed the answer was concerned with the Grand Manor. He sensed Beau Mitchell was in the hotel, but he couldn't quite see Leddon and George as his henchmen.

If he had kept Jerry Duprey in Fort Worth, he would never have known the difference. But, not only was Duprey in a mess of trouble, so was Jim. The whole bit spelled money, but he didn't have a single answer. Maybe, if anyone could bless a hurricane, he guessed he could, at

least for a moment. Bertha gave him time to find some answers.

Mrs. Benning had owned the hotel for years. The question kept repeating in his mind. Why now? Why now? What drew Jerry Duprey here now, and why had Mrs. Benning been removed right at this particular time. Here's where Reese came into the picture, the quiet little man in the seersucker suit. Reese had blurted out something about correspondence with Mrs. Benning. He had come to see her and was quite upset by her death. He, at least, was available for questioning. And Jim had one trump card, Mrs. Benning's heir.

The short salesman was still poking at his recumbent friend. George was smiling slyly at Jim over the bar. He ignored him, took a couple of glasses and a bottle from the shelf behind him, and started for the lobby without protest from either of them.

In the lobby things had changed. There was not one more window to tape. This left a bunch of frightened people huddled around speechless in wobbly rattan chairs. They were in little groups as if they didn't know the rest were there. Aunt Annie and Lena were seated close together. In another corner, the bride and groom were seated closer together. The Tribbles had retired to the dining room where she had put her head down on her arm on a

table. Reese sat alone staring at the east wall as if it would collapse at any moment. Leddon leaned on the desk, but he was still definitely *gone*. They all looked like they were waiting for doomsday. Maybe this was it. How would they know?

Jim looked for Mrs. Wharton and found her sitting on the second step of the stairs. She was smoking a cigarette, leaning against the wall, and staring at the ceiling. Of all of them, she was quite composed. He walked across the lobby, and put the bottle and the glasses beside her. "I'll be back shortly," he said. "I want to have a word with Reese." Jim nodded in his direction. She shrugged and he picked up a chair and descended on the man in the seersucker suit. Reese seemed quite aloof. This might be hard sledding, but Jim had to have a go at it.

"Mr. Reese, you said you had correspondence with Mrs. Benning?"

Reese gave a long, cool stare from under colorless brows and lashes. Finally he nodded. This was going to be rough, just as Jim predicted, unless he got Jerry Duprey into the act right now. "You are looking for Mrs. Benning's heir?" Jim asked. Reese nodded again, but his mouth tightened. Jim came up with a small lie. "I represent Mrs. Benning's

nephew. Is your business with him of great importance?"

Dryly he replied: "Yes, my business is of GREAT importance. Do you know where Mrs. Benning's nephew is, sir?" Before Jim could answer, he asked another question and made a comment Jim had not expected. "By what authority do you represent her heir? You do have a name?" He looked Jim straight in the eye and added, "I am a numismatist."

"My name is Jim Smith, and I am connected with a firm of private investigators in Chicago. I have been hired to take charge of Mr. Duprey, Mrs. Benning's nephew." This was no lie, but it did indicate incompetence where Jerry was concerned. "The man is completely sane, but inclined toward the bottle."

Reese looked over at the bottle Jim had set beside Mrs. Wharton. His eyebrows went up eloquently. Jim said quickly, "If you choose to tell me of your correspondence with Mrs. Benning, the matter will go no further. It is strictly a matter of ethics." He took out his wallet and handed Reese his credentials before Reese could get around to asking for them.

"You know where Mrs. Benning's nephew is?" Reese asked again. Jim said, "Yes", hoping he was right as to Jerry's whereabouts.

He must have sounded sincere. Reese mopped his forehead with an immaculate handkerchief and leaned toward him. "You will, I trust, put me in touch with this Mr. Duprey as soon as possible?" Jim nodded.

Reese didn't appear to be quite as stern. He said, "Mrs. Benning wanted to discuss a coin she said she had found. She sent me a picture of it. I was shocked by what she sent." He eyed Jim cautiously.

"I don't know much about coins," Jim replied, leading him into the discussion with practiced skill.

"She sent me this photo." Reese took out a picture of a gold coin. "Do you know what this is?" he questioned in a voice rising with excitement. Without waiting for a reply he said, "It's an 1861-O double eagle in *uncirculated* condition!"

"So, what's the big deal over one measly coin?" Jim asked with interest.

"Because" Reese replied intensely "there are no known 1861-O \$20 gold pieces in this condition. Look at how perfect the date 1861 appears in the picture. Every coin in existence today shows a dropout in the bottom part of the date, especially in the 8 and the 6. There

were three sets of dies sent in December, 1860 to the New Orleans mint. The \$20 gold pieces produced in January, 1861 by the United States Government must have been perfect, like this coin. Those in existence today must have been made after the State of Louisiana took over the mint in February, 1861."

He paused to let this sink into Jim's skull. "This coin is worth a minimum of \$10,000, and probably a whole lot more."

"So you came all the way down here to buy this coin?" Jim asked quickly.

"I came for three reasons" Reese replied. "First, to see if this coin was real and not a counterfeit, second, to discuss the purchase of the coin, and third to talk to Mrs. Benning about where she found the coin."

"Why?" Jim asked bluntly. "Did she have more than one?"

Reese stopped and looked at him sternly, then managed to completely evade the question.

Jim had learned all he wanted to know from Reese. Also he had to play fair with him. He said, "I will take you to Mrs. Benning's nephew as soon as this hurricane lets up. He is close and available. Why don't you go into the bar

and have a drink. We will simply have to wait out the storm."

Reese rose, nodded in Jim's direction, and went toward George's department. Jim walked across the lobby and sat down on the step next to Mrs. Wharton. She was the neat type. She had an ashtray beside her on the third step and a drink in her hand. He poured one and stretched out his legs. Aunt Annie and Lena showed no interest in the booze, which proved how completely undone they were. The wind seemed to be getting under everybody's hide but Leddon. Lucky guy!

Jim leaned over and put his mouth next to Mrs. Wharton's ear. "Let's talk about why you are really here."

She flashed a wary look, and then she realized he knew she had come to the Grand Manor for a reason. "I don't make much money as a Librarian Mr. Smith", she said softly. "When you stopped by earlier today and you said you were writing about Mississippi history and you asked about legends, I thought to myself just maybe I could help you and maybe make some money on the side. Of course I didn't want to do it on company time!" She looked through him.

"There are several legends in Hancock County

which could be useful to you. But this might take all night to explain."

So what? They had all night, if the hotel didn't crash down about their ears or get inundated. Jim trusted Aunt Annie where the last was concerned. He had to. Mrs. Wharton smelled good, she was very pretty, and she knew a lot of things which might prove useful.

He glanced over at Aunt Annie and Lena. They looked shrunken and spiritless. He hated to see them like this, so he came up with an idea. Turning to Mrs. Wharton, he asked, "What's your given name, Toots?"

"No, Janet," she replied without missing a beat. She raised her eyebrows. "Surely yours isn't really *Charlie* Smith? There is no such name." He grinned at her. "As far as I know you are half right. Really, it's Jim, but the last name is Smith."

He rose. "Those two old gals insisted on calling me *Charlie*, so I went along with them. They need therapy." He looked down at her. "We've got a long, long wait. After I dream up something to bring them back to life, we'll have a talk, huh? What else is there to do?" He had a few good ideas, but they seemed impractical at the time. "I need a good old-fashioned history lesson, and I'm not kidding."

He crossed into the dining room, picked up a small serving table and set it between the two old ladies. "Aunt Annie, why don't you and Lena try a couple of hands of double solitaire? Where are the cards? There must be some someplace."

Aunt Annie looked at him and her backbone stiffened.

"Solitaire!" she shouted. Her tone was scandalized. "Of course I know where the cards are." Then she added gently, "Charlie, you bring us both a Camille. Lena and I can play a snappy game of gin at two bits a game?" He started for the bar, relieved. Aunt Annie went over to a shelf at the end of the room and picked up a pack of dog-eared cards from the second shelf.

Jim had to make the Camilles. George was in no mood. Reese was smoking a cigar over a tall glass. When Jim went back into the lobby with the drinks, Lena was protesting. He moved the lantern so they could see the cards more easily. "Four bits a game," Lena was insisting.

He looked around the room. The man in the shorts had somehow managed to fall asleep in his chair, and was making small snoring noises. Mr. and Mrs. Tribble were making an

attempt to sleep in the dining room. Leddon had apparently retired to the little room back of the desk.

About this time the groom came up with a notion. He seemed quite firm about it. His bride looked helplessly receptive. He picked up a candle, put his arm around his bride and announced loudly, which was unnecessary because Jim was the only one listening, "I think we will retire." They marched self-consciously past the desk and disappeared into the long side of the hotel. Now there was a guy with a great idea!

Jim hurried back to Janet Wharton and settled a little closer to her than he had before. She noticed. "Hurricanes demand companionship, so how about the history lesson and the legends of Hancock County?" Jim suggested.

Something came down with a great clumping noise just outside the front door. He was glad it was dark outside. It was just as well they couldn't see the havoc. The noise didn't disturb Janet. She just looked at him with a question in her eyes. He obliged her. "When this wasn't Mississippi, what was it and when?" he asked.

She took another swallow of whiskey, smiled at him from under those terrific eyelashes and asked, "Which legend do you want to hear, the

one about Napoleon's gold or the one about Buried Treasure?" She smiled a provocative smile as he decided.

"Napoleon's gold might be interesting," he offered, "but personally I would prefer to hear about Buried Treasure."

She lit a cigarette. "The Southeastern States, way back when, were known as The Independent Nation of West Florida. The Spanish, the French, the English, and just plain Americans all had a hand in settling The Independent Nation of West Florida." She seemed quite earnest.

"Where does the buried treasure come in?" he interrupted.

"Wait. In 1822 Mississippi was finally under the jurisdiction of the United States Government. The land was given, over prior claims, to the settlers who lived on it and worked it." She paused for effect, then continued. "Many of the early settlers were Americans who settled up and down the Pearl River, just to the west of here. She sipped her whiskey like it was lemonade and mused, "The early settlers were hardy characters, because this whole area was packed with privateers, thieves, and killers. The only accessible path was The Old Spanish Trail, part of which is Highway 90 now. All the rest was wilderness.

Believe me, the whole Gulf of Mexico was a pirate's dream."

Right now, it didn't look like things had changed much. Whatever it had been, the Grand Manor was scarcely a deluxe spot on the Riviera. It seemed to still be a hideout for thieves and killers. It wasn't hard to imagine the way it must have been early in the last century.

"At the beginning of the Civil War, there was a family of Choctaw Indians living on one of the bayous west of here and north of Highway 90. One rainy night in the middle of March, a wagon came from the Old Spanish Trail. The wagon was driven by a uniformed Confederate officer. Two black slaves were in the back." She looked to see if Jim was paying attention. He was.

"The Confederate officer stopped the wagon, had the two slaves dig a deep hole, and once it was dug he had them unload the wagon into the hole. They worked quite awhile unloading before they realized they were never going to get out alive. One of them tried to hit the Confederate officer with a shovel, but he was shot in mid-swing. Then the officer shot the other black man too." Mrs. Wharton stopped.

"And how do you know this actually happened?" Jim asked in anticipation.

"I know because there was a Choctaw Indian boy hiding in the woods when it happened. In 1954 when he was 99 and blind, he told this story to a newspaper reporter who wanted to know what he attributed his old age to. Apparently the old man was barely 6 years old when the incident took place, but he remembered it like yesterday." Janet glanced at Jim to make sure he was listening.

"So, why didn't he dig up what was buried?" Jim asked quietly.

"Because the Indians felt it was an *evil* spot and the spirits were *bad* in that particular area. The Indians wouldn't go anyplace near there because of the two murders. "

"So, what was buried by the Confederate officer?" Jim questioned.

"Well, that's the hard part. No one really knows. In those years when something was buried, the person who buried it always left a marker near the top of the site to identify what was below." Janet was talking a bit louder.

This was a mistake because it brought the Tribbles to life. Jim got a disapproving glance from Aunt Annie. Lena yelled "GIN!" Mr. Tribble helped his wife to her feet and up the steps from the dining room as they

approached. At least Jim looked like he was running the ship.

"Sorry to bother you, young man," said Mr. Tribble kindly. "We were not given a room. It seems ridiculous to sit out this storm. We either blow away or we don't." He turned to his wife. "Isn't that right, Lover?" She nodded agreement, "Yes, Lover." He smiled and asked, "Can you give us a room?"

Jim pushed himself to his feet and went behind the desk and looked in the cubbyholes holding keys. "How about 110?" he asked, sounding quite professional. He looked for the registration book in vain. Leddon must have taken it to bed with him. Jim wished he had thought of it sooner. He handed Mr. Tribble a key. Tribble went to pick up two bags in the corner of the room, and Mrs. Tribble followed with a candle into the corridor looking for 110. Jim did catch Mr. Tribble throwing an admiring glance in the direction of his history teacher, so Jim returned to class.

You've either got it or you haven't. Janet had it. It wasn't just those legs. She looked healthy, and there was more. She had a certain spark one gal in a thousand showed. Jim had to get back in her good graces and keep his mind on her story.

"What do you think about the story?" he asked,

trying to get her going again. "Do you think it's true?"

"I've researched the subject intensely," she replied. She raised her eyebrows slightly and then captured his full attention, "In 1861 the Civil War started. The only link to New Orleans, except by water, was along the Old Spanish Trail. The wagon came from New Orleans. I studied the microfilm files from the *Times Picayune*, and apparently the New Orleans mint was in a state of confusion because the State of Louisiana was about to take over, and the Confederate government also wanted the mint. The New Orleans Mint history records indicate there was the possibility the mint was *robbed* because there were three funds which were supposed to be turned over to the Louisiana Government, and at the same time the United States Government wanted the mint funds returned to them. The Superintendent of the Mint refused to turn over the funds to the United States Government or the Louisiana Government." Janet glanced up to see if he was still paying attention.

She continued. "The Superintendent of the Mint managed to stall both the United States Government and the Louisiana Government, and with the mint and the entire city in a state of chaos, the 5,000 \$20 gold pieces and 330,000 silver half dollars minted in January, 1861 by

the United States Government were never turned over. Mint records showed all of the gold and lots of the silver was traded for British gold sovereigns and then deposited into Citizens Bank in New Orleans. On March 15, 1861, those 5,000 double-eagles minted by the U. S. Government and some 330,000 silver half dollars were turned over to the Confederate States of America by the Citizens Bank." Janet looked at him for relief.

"So the mint wasn't really robbed, but all the newly minted gold was exchanged legally for British gold sovereigns?" He asked, watching her move a strand of hair from her face.

"And what did the Confederate States of America do with the gold?" He smiled the question at her.

"My story is real, Mr. Smith. Believe it or not I think the money taken from the New Orleans Mint in 1861 was buried just outside Bay St. Louis, and I think the Confederate officer who buried the gold was an employee of the mint. Janet took another long pull on her drink, and then she added: "I also think he had a friend named Jeane Dupree.

Chapter 12

Jim might have arrived at the ancestors of Jerry Duprey with one question, but he was sure of one thing. Jeane Dupree had apparently inherited her land, so perhaps Janet was right on target and didn't even realize it. Chances were too Janet was going to take her own sweet time in telling the rest of the story. So far she had proved coincidence can exist.

Suddenly Janet's voice trailed off, and then she looked into his eyes and said bluntly: "Smith, if you're an author, I'm the Statue of Liberty!" Her eyes had little lights snapping in them. "In the library I asked you about a book that has never been written by an author who never was. Before we go on with your history lesson, why don't you try answering my question. Who the hell are you?"

Caught off guard, he thought it wise to keep his thoughts about her glib recital to himself. She was reeling it off far too well, and he needed more of the history lesson, but the only way he could keep it coming his way was to give her a good, believable answer: the truth.

"My name is really Jim Smith," he said. "I come from Chicago. You are correct. I am not an author. As I told Mr. Reese awhile ago, I work for a firm of private investigators. Besides

walking into one large hurricane, I tramped into a big fat mystery in the Grand Manor, while looking for the heir to said hotel."

He gave her his most earnest look. "You would never believe how I got from Chicago to Bay St. Louis, unless I went into every sordid little detail. I will at length later, if you insist. All this is beside the point. Whatever goes on here is probably related to something you know, especially since you have researched the buried treasure legend. I could probably find out a lot more if I had time to ramble through a couple of dozen books, but I don't have the time and I do have you."

Janet gave a questioning look, then nodded, seemingly satisfied with the truth. Then she said, "I understand Mrs. Benning who owned the hotel is dead." Jim moved his head in agreement.

"She just plain died of old age?" Janet asked.

He shook his head. "I would say she did not, but that's only supposition. You'll have to take my word for it. That's another reason I am trying to find out what has been going on here."

"Mrs. Benning was one of my customers recently," Janet added factually. "She stopped by last week and asked if I had any books on

United States coins. She checked out an edition of *Coin Collector's Guide*, but she never returned it. I was hoping to get it back from her before I heard she had died."

Jim interrupted, "Your name is really Wharton?"

She nodded. "My father was Sam Wharton. He came here from Boston in the early 1950s." Then she smiled. "He probably robbed a bank in Boston before he left. He was a crusty character with a will of his own."

"I can believe that!" Jim announced, looking at her firm chin.

Janet started to speak again, when suddenly Lena and Aunt Annie were at their side. Aunt Annie had fully recovered her faculties. She put her hand on his shoulder before he could get up. "Now, Charlie," she said, "There is no use in getting hysterical. In a few hours the hurricane will go north." Lena nodded her head. "Yes, in a few hours the hurricane will go north." Just like a parrot, except she emphasized the word *north*, as if she disliked the thought of anything going in that direction. But a parrot would hardly reach for the bottle and drink without batting an eye. This she did and passed the bottle to Aunt Annie who, it seemed, could drink straight whiskey as well

as Camilles. Aunt Annie HAD recovered her faculties.

Lena looked coyly at Janet and then at Jim. "My, my, hurricanes make strange friends. What on earth have you two been talking about?"

He didn't have to answer because the front door blew in just as she finished the last word of her question.

The rattan furniture took off into the dining room, and the table and cards followed. Jim yelled, "Get into the bar, all of you", and grabbed the lantern before it took flight with the furniture. The lobby was empty before the words were out of his mouth. Hurricanes not only make strange friends, but they put wings on feet.

All very well for everyone except him. Much as he disliked the man, he had to deal with Mr. Leddon. Dodging a chaise lounge, he ducked behind the desk, which seemed firmly anchored to the floor. Keeping the lantern reasonably upright, he looked into the little room back of the desk, expecting to have to carry Leddon out. Leddon was nowhere in sight. Probably out the back door at the back of his room. Jim didn't blame him. The room looked like a cell. A sagging cot and a chair were the only furniture.

He gave up on Leddon for two reasons: he couldn't chase the man down, and he didn't have suicidal traits. Jim raced across the lobby toward the bar and somebody's hunk of tin roofing sailed through the front door of the hotel just behind him. If he had been a second later, half of him would be gone one way and half the other. Bertha won his total respect at that particular moment. She'd been close before.

The Tribbles and the bride and groom probably were safer in their bedrooms, separated from the bar by one hurricane. The Tribbles had each other. The bride and groom had each other. Jim had the whole goofy crew, except for the elusive Beau Mitchell, Jerry Duprey, and Leddon. At the moment he could get along very well without them.

East of the bar was what used to be called a sun porch. It had windows on the south, but the east wall was solid which formed protection for the bar. The bar, he hoped wouldn't get the pilings and branches, or a boat that might have been left on the beach. There was a door between the sun porch and the lobby. He yelled at his crew, and it took all of them to close it. Then everybody trooped silently into the bar. He followed and looked them over.

He had a captive audience. They were all standing there acting like he was going to lead them in *Onward Christian Soldiers* or *Nearer My God to Thee* just before the ship was sinking to the bottom of the ocean. Even George didn't look too tough. He was blowing and going from pushing shut the door.

Instead of bursting into song, Jim waved at the table laden with bread, beans, and cheese. "Eat, drink, and ..." he started to say, and changed his mind. It didn't seem tactful. "Drinks are on the house," he announced pleasantly. "We have some waiting to do. At the moment I would say we are relatively safe." He wasn't so sure about that, but it sounded good.

His crew relaxed. Apparently they trusted him. Aunt Annie sighed. Lena echoed her sigh, you could hear them both over the wind. The drunk on the bench had raised his head when they came in. Now he flopped back and went to sleep, happily unaware of Bertha's rising anger. Jim envied him. But, somehow he was comparing bucking a hurricane with getting used to driving a nitroglycerin truck. You could get used to a hurricane the same way.

Anyway, he did have something on his mind beside Bertha. He had been listening avidly to

all the fancy history of the Gulf Coast, and admiring Janet Wharton's eyelashes. She had said, "But...but..." about the time Aunt Annie and Lena moved in on them and the whole lobby took off. He wanted to know where she was going from there, but that wasn't all. Her recital was very well done, too well done for him.

He found Janet Wharton sitting in a corner by herself. Just the way he wanted her. He set the lantern on the bar, walked over to Janet, leaned over, and whispered in her ear, "Think up a good answer, Sis, in about twenty seconds! That's while I get us a drink. You had it all down pat. Why?" She gave him a half scared look and he relented. "I just want the rest of it, o.k.?"

Everybody in the room seemed to have finally resigned themselves to waiting out the storm. Aunt Annie curled up on the bench across from the long, tall drunk. Lena sat next to her, staring into space. Jim carried two glasses over to the corner where Janet sat. For some reason she seemed amused. She gave him a wide-eyed, innocent look, and then had the grace to look away.

"Now" he said, plunking himself down beside her. "Give me the poop, Lady. I know there must be something you haven't told me yet. I can feel it in my private investigator bones.

Let's stop playing games. Maybe the waves were lapping at your feet. Maybe they weren't. But, how come you arrived at the hotel? The Civil Defense guys said they were moving the diehards to the schoolhouse. And don't tell me you were just coming after your library book."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he stopped her with his hand over her mouth. "Before you fill me in, I want you to know your speech sounded like it had been recently recited. It sounded like it came out of the local history book or newspaper. Could it be possible somebody else provided your story??"

She stared at him. "How did you know?" Then she said, "All this didn't come out of a history book. A lot of it came from my father. He was my source for legends. "

"What about the waves lapping at your feet?"

"They WERE lapping at my feet, really. The men with Civil Defense were quite annoyed. They suggested I look for shelter elsewhere. So I did. But I came here because I am naturally curious. You gave me that author routine. I could hardly swallow that." She looked around the room. "Also, this is supposed to be the highest spot for miles. Everyone knows this place survived hurricanes before." She sounded dubious about the present.

She hadn't answered entirely, but he knew she would get to the point eventually. "Did you know Mrs. Benning personally, other than just as a library visitor?" She shook her head. "Before I spoke of him, did you ever hear of Jerry Duprey?" Again, she shook her head, but a light flickered in her eyes.

"I guess I should have said Jerome Duprey, because I assume that is his name. Of course he is the rightful heir to this charming establishment, or what's left of it. You started to tell me something when Bertha took over the lobby. There must be more to your story, something is missing." He looked at her intensely.

She had been holding out on him. She replied quickly, "My father was a newspaperman. He worked as a stringer for the *Times Picayune*. It was my father who did all the original research about the New Orleans Mint. It was also my father who spent literally years putting the story together. And it was my father who had his story entitled *How the Mint Was Robbed* published in the newspaper.

Janet paused, and then dropping her eyes toward the floor, she added: "He was also the reporter who interviewed the old Choctaw Indian who had witnessed two killings in 1861. My father knew both stories were linked. He

knew the mint was robbed, and he also knew where the money was buried. He only published the first story. The other he kept for me!"

Chapter 13

At last they were getting somewhere. But, instead of introducing the graveyard, Jim explained, "In the Hancock County Courthouse I discovered the last grantee to a piece of land to the west of here was Mrs. Benning. To put everything into perspective, I also found out the piece of land she inherited was originally granted to Jeane Dupree."

"An employee of the mint, buried the gold and silver coins on Mrs. Benning's property?" An understanding smile spread across Janet's attractive face. Apparently she was well aware of where Mrs. Benning's property was located.

There was a long moment while they listened to a great thumping on the roof. Then she said conversationally, "You are thinking along the same track as I am. Maybe Mrs. Benning found the site where the mint money was buried, and someone killed her trying to find out."

"What did Mrs. Benning look like?" he asked, knowing Janet had seen her recently, and she obviously kept a detailed photographic image of everyone.

"She was short, and she didn't need to dye her hair. It was coal black," she commented.

"Did Edith Benning have any Choctaw blood in her?" Jim asked.

"Sure she did, but if you must know Mr. Jim *Charlie* Smith, I happen to have Indian blood in me too. So what's the matter with that?"

"Look," he responded hastily, "there's nothing the matter with that. For all I know I'm an eighth Cherokee. Who cares? But my stomach says *eat*. I'm going to gather up some food. You gun up on the Choctaws, Janet, while I forage for food."

By this time George had abandoned his bar tendering. He and the short salesman and the man in the shorts were slumped in chairs around a table. Lena had stretched out and joined Aunt Annie in slumber. Mr. Reese sat patiently at another table alone with his hands folded. He had no expression on his face and no glass in front of him. He did not crave the company of anyone.

Jim walked around the bar and picked off four packs of potato chips, grabbed a plate of cheese from the table, and took his goodies to where Janet Wharton was sitting cross-legged. It occurred to him the wind was losing strength,

or maybe he was just getting used to it. He walked to the door to the lobby and looked through the small window at the top. The wind spun the spokes of the ceiling fan round and round over nothing. Even the well anchored desk was gone. As he looked, a piling came through the front door. It slammed against something which must have been the rear wall of the dining room. If the back of the hotel was still around, it was a barricade of desks and chairs. He hoped it was.

He returned to Janet Wharton who had pulled open a sack of potato chips and was making a meal of them. She pointed to her glass. "Can I have a little water for a change, Jim?" she asked softly. He found a pitcher back of the bar.

Janet licked her fingers. She had stopped looking haughty. Instead she verged on sarcasm. "You do know Indians inhabited this land before the white man came here. I mean the whole United States?"

Indians! What did he know about Indians. His association with them was connected with a picture of Custer's last stand at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in a history book. He grinned at her. "Yes, you might say I do know that much." Apparently she needed the water.

"The Indians did not refer to themselves as

Indians." She was giving the first grade treatment. "They were the Shawnee, the Navajo, and so on. In the West Florida States there were a number of tribes, but in what is now known as Mississippi and Alabama, there were a great number of the Choctaw Tribe." She pointed a finger at me. "And, of all of them, the Choctaw's were probably the most superstitious. For your information, most of the descendants of the people who settled in this area have a smidgen of Choctaw blood in them." She helped herself to a piece of cheese. "Maybe that's why I'm superstitious." She shrugged. "Oh, I don't go for the whole bit....not enough Choctaw, I guess."

"Superstitious? I suppose you won't walk under a ladder, and a black cat scares you to death?" Jim suggested.

"Pooh! Those fancy superstitions must have come over on the *Mayflower*. Have you ever heard of sheep jumping out of the ground, or sudden wild winds that spring from nowhere to protect Choctaw *hallowed ground*?"

"No!" he said without proper respect for her remarks on superstition. Then he yelled "NO!" so loud it should have brought everybody to their feet, if it hadn't been for the wind. He got his voice down. "And what did the Choctaws regard as *hallowed ground*?"

"Burying grounds....cemeteries....for one," she said. "I know you won't believe it, but a bunch of us went into an Indian cemetery when I was in high school. This was up near Picayune. There was a sudden wild wind that sprang up from nowhere. It scared us half to death. We got out of there in a hurry, and we didn't go back."

He looked to see if she smiled when she said it. She was in deadly earnest.

Jim's mind went back to following Jerry Duprey to an abandoned graveyard on property belonging to his aunt. He had remarked to himself at the time Duprey took off from that spot almost in terror. For Jim there was no *wild wind*, but for a Choctaw, the superstition might be so embedded, imagination might have played tricks with his mind, as it had with Janet's. Jim supposed, under the circumstances, it must have taken more courage than he had ever thought to go out to a cemetery in the middle of the night.

He looked at Janet. "Let's go back to a question that needs answering. Who recently got your curiosity up concerning the Dupree family, Janet. Come now, you didn't have it on the tip of your tongue, not all of it. Some of it, yes, but the whole thing, no! Who has been gracing

your library with questions about the Dupree land?"

She gave a mischievous smile. "Which one do you want me to start with, Jim?" She twirled a lock of her hair. Her eyes watched his face.

He looked at her in exasperation. "Oh, just start off wherever you want. I'll follow."

She frowned. "Lately, a tall thin man, who started skipping through the history books about like you did."

"And you, of course, immediately gave him the fascinating history of Mississippi and your legends?"

She ignored his sarcasm. "No. He didn't ask about the mint being robbed. He seemed to know about that." She rested her chin in the palm of her hand. " He was looking for a map."

"What did he look like, besides being tall and thin? And how did he find out about the mint being robbed, and what map was he trying to find?"

Janet put her hands across her brows. "Eyebrows from here to here, black headed, mean." She had pegged Beau Mitchell down to a *T*. "The mint robbery is alluded to in several

books. But more than likely he found a copy of the original article my father wrote. It was the best account and the most realistic. The story is not really a secret, but where the money might be buried is something else. He told me a woman in the courthouse referred him to me for an early map of this area.

"Did you have a map like that in the library?" Jim's voice rose in excitement.

"Yes," she replied, then shook her head, anticipating the next question. "No, he didn't take it. It was on the east wall in the corner of the library, just tacked on the wall, unframed. It had been there for years based on the looks of it. After the man scanned a couple of books, he went over and looked at the map. He stood looking at it for a long time. Then he jingled some change in his pocket, smiled and said, "Well, well...Jerome!"

"He acted as if I weren't there at all, then he stalked out without another word. "

"You said the map WAS there. He didn't take it, but it isn't there now. Explain." Jim watched her squirm.

"Day before yesterday the map disappeared. I went across the street for a cup of coffee. We don't have much happening anyway in the library. I wasn't being negligent. There's

hardly anything worth stealing in the place. I was gone about ten minutes. When I returned, the map was gone. I didn't notice it until lunch time."

"O. K., so you had another visitor before the map disappeared. Who was it? Stop playing games!" He waited for her explanation.

Janet twirled the glass in her hands. Then she leaned over and whispered in his ear. "Just before I went out for coffee, a woman came into the library. She browsed through Mississippi history and asked me a bunch of questions. She's here in this room." She nodded toward his old gal friends. His eyes went with hers to Aunt Annie, curled up sleeping innocently on the bench. "That's the one," she said.

Aunt Annie! Dear old Aunt Annie from Detroit, who appealed to him for protection! It was Aunt Annie who claimed him as her nephew with the able assistance of Lena. She took charge of getting him a room in the Grand Manor. She handed him all that chatter about the demise of Jerry Duprey's Aunt Edith! It was she who told him her room was bugged. It was Aunt Annie who managed to slip into his room to get the story on his activities. Maybe Jerry had warned her. Somebody had.

He looked sorrowfully at Lena asleep beside

her friend. He supposed Lena wanted to get Aunt Annie out of the hotel safely. She knew something was wrong. So, she announced he was the long-lost nephew and played right into Aunt Annie's hands. Except Aunt Annie didn't know he was running after Jerry Duprey. What was the old girl after? And what did the map have to do with it? It might tell him the one thing he wanted to know. He didn't automatically believe all the stories of buried treasure, but the possibilities were interesting.

He turned toward Janet and asked, "What can you tell me about the map? Was it very old?"

She nodded. "Yes. It was hand drawn in the late 1850s. It had always been on the library wall. It added perspective to the development of the Bay St. Louis area. You could see where the city developed, and you could see all the way along the Old Spanish Trail to New Orleans to the west and to Mobile to the east. It seemed to be well drawn." She blinked her lashes at him.

The Old Spanish Trail was now Highway 90. There was no bridge back in the 1850s, so probably Highway 90 had run north of Bay St. Louis on land, perhaps where Highway 12 now flowed both ways. Jim wished he could see the map.

He looked at Janet Wharton. "Wind or no

wind, I have to get to the other part of the hotel. I would like it if you came with me, but it's up to you. You can stay here and be relatively safe or come along with me?"

Chapter 14

Jim finished his drink slowly, but his mind covered a lot of ground while Janet looked at him questioningly.

With all the pieces coming together, he was beginning to believe the legend of the stolen mint money could actually be true. But what had Edith Benning found beside the one coin? And who had bumped her off? Who had killed the fat bellboy and why? How did Beau Mitchell fit into the equation? Maybe the letter he had intercepted was the key. Jim vividly remembered his enjoyment in reading the hastily scrolled letter from the late Mrs. Benning. What had it said, something about "finding the markets?" How involved was Aunt Annie, and had she really stolen the map from the library wall? Maybe Janet was trying to lead him astray, but at least so far she had been honest and apparently very truthful. He remembered uneasily the expression *appearances are deceiving*. No, Janet was beyond questioning. The person he really needed to talk to was Mrs. Benning's only heir, Jerry Duprey, and by this time he might be long gone. Jim had to get to the other side of the hotel, and now was his chance.

He put down his glass and gave Janet his full attention. "I have changed my mind. I doubt if

you will be safer here. Whether you like it or not, Janet, you are going with me to the other part of the hotel. Maybe you have to powder your nose. We can't go through the lobby, so we'll go through the south door of the bar and around the back of the hotel. We'll get wet, but we won't get as much wind there. Try looking anxious!" He should tell her!

The south door of the bar was hinged open, probably due to Aunt Annie's orders. Jim looked around the room. The wind had taken over, whining and growling and throwing branches past the door. His ears hurt with the pressure. He doubted this was a hundred and fifty miles an hour. It had to be more.

Aunt Annie was asleep. The rest of them had joined her or were simply apathetic. Janet rose unsteadily to her feet. He put an arm around her. She dropped her head against his shoulder and they made their way toward the door. The air was thick and sticky, but an occasional gust swirled through the door, cooling things off a little.

Aunt Annie was snoring. He could tell from the movement of her lips. He felt Lena's eyes on them. Janet felt them too because she put her arm around him and snuggled closer. He gave Lena a realistic leer and dragged Janet over to her and whispered, "Mrs. Wharton has to....powder her nose." Lena just stared at him

with a blank expression on her face. Her hat slid over her forehead. Maybe she slept with her eyes open.

He felt the warmth of Janet as they made the door. What a way to go, he thought, as he reached for George's flashlight. There were plenty of candles on the bar for the others.

If the wind or a falling tree didn't get them, Beau or the bristly one might. He couldn't figure their association, but Beau Mitchell was mean enough by nature to tackle anything. Jim couldn't discount him, wherever he was. And he couldn't ignore Jerry Duprey. He could only hope he was too scared to venture out from under the bed, if he had come to yet.

He said to Janet, "The corner of the hotel is about three or four yards to the right as we go out the door. Then we'll be behind the hotel and partially out of the big wind. If I lose you, stand next to the building. There's an overhang there which will protect you a little." She nodded and they stepped out of the door and into the wind. He didn't lose her. She hung onto his arm for dear life. They stumbled over branches, made it to the corner of the hotel with the wind shoving them, and turned the corner, flattening their bodies against the back of the building.

In the darkness the random sounds of butane

tanks exploding was eerie. A spot of fireworks cracked over their heads and Jim saw the shed with the door swung open. He decided on a detour and pointed at the shed yelling, "Let's go!", which probably saved their necks. A live wire cut loose and dangled close to where they had been standing. They groped and fumbled their way through the rain and wind to the shed and ducked inside. Jim shut the door behind them and turned the flashlight on Janet. She was breathing heavily and wringing out her hair.

Finally she got her breath. "My, isn't this a cozy little nest?" she said, looking about the shed. "Are we going to set up housekeeping here?"

Jim didn't answer. He was playing the flashlight about the dilapidated building. The dirt floor had not been restored to whatever its original condition might have been. It had been well dug up. The guy hadn't missed an inch. Footprints were all over the place. To the right, on rickety shelves, were stacks of paper toweling and bars of soap. On top of them was a long roll of what appeared to be linoleum, half wrapped in paper. This was squashed down on the toweling. The shovel his foreign friend had been so industrious with, was pitched into the middle of the dirt floor. It did not indicate his digging had been fruitful.

Jim sloshed over to the wall and pulled at the paper on the long roll. Something was bugging him. But it wasn't coming through. He called to Janet who was standing beside the door, "Let's try the inside room." He turned the light on the inside door at the back of the shed.

There was a step up to this room at the end of the shed. Above was wooden flooring and pieces of carpeting spread around in a pitiful attempt to make the room more appealing. There were a couple of kitchen chairs and a scarred table holding old magazines. A few girlie pictures had been tacked up on the walls. Along the east wall was a rack, and on it hung a few white coats. From the looks of them, this had been the sanctuary of the late, lamented bellboy. For the first time he felt a little sorry for the guy.

A cot and old dresser made up the rest of the furnishings. The mattress on the cot had been turned over and the dresser drawers hung half open. The mess in the room said the guy with the shovel hadn't missed this room while he rooted around the shed.

On the west wall of the room all sorts of tools hung on pegs. There were wire cutters, hedge clippers, and even a chain saw. In the far corner was a row of shelves, and a board

covering the bottom shelf had been torn loose by the wind which was pouring through a gaping hole in the shed. When Jim saw the contents of the bottom shelf he caught his breath. Stacked there were five boxes, identical to the one he had seen in Mrs. Benning's room on her dresser....candy boxes. The top one had been pulled out and the contents dumped on the floor. "Candy boxes! Somebody was nuts about sweets." Janet said, "I wonder whose room this is?"

"Was, my sweet," he corrected her. "The guy came up dead." He leaned over and looked at the contents of the box. They were all silver-wrapped, but they were not candy. He could have told her: You are now looking at a shipment of heroin wrapped to resemble candy. But he didn't.

Now he knew where Leddon had gotten juiced up. He wondered what Mrs. Benning thought when she discovered the heroin. She must have found a box in the bellboy's room and taken it to her own.

There was a lot of heroin in those boxes. If Beau Mitchell traded in dope, and well he might, wouldn't he consider whoever had hooked it a double-crosser. What was it he had said under his breath in San Antonio right before Jim saved his tail? An outside wrapping paper in a wastebasket gave him the

answer. Nobody had ever told him the bellboy's name was Al Burrows, but it couldn't be anything else. And the return address was J. D., and a box number in San Antonio, Texas.

Maybe Beau Mitchell had cottoned onto the gold while chasing down the double-crosser. But here was the dope, except for the box in Mrs. Benning's bedroom. And where was Beau?

Jim dumped the silver-wrapped junk into the box and put all the boxes under the cot, and replaced the mattress. It was the best he could do. He couldn't just run around the hotel in a hurricane with boxes of candy under his arm. He gave the room one more look. There was nothing more to see but a long hunk of square drain pipe lying against the wall, and a broken pitcher beside the dresser.

He took Janet's arm. She was shivering. He said, as lightly as he could, "I don't think this establishment is for us. Now pay attention! The square root of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. The hypotenuse is the shortest way to the other side of the hotel."

He accomplished his motive. She grinned. "It IS? You certainly are well versed in trigonometry. She smoothed her wet dress. "Shall we hypotenuse away, my friend?"

Something was ringing bells in his head. But, standing in a mildewed shed didn't hand him the answer. He led Janet to the door and they took off for the hotel. A quick look at the back of the building told him all the debris from the lobby must have wound up in the dining room or kitchen, plus a few odds and ends from the beach. The back of the hotel seemed solid. There were no rattan items between them and the door.

He didn't have to guess this door was the one to the sleeping side of the hotel. He had been through it several times already. He thought about his first entry after the bash on the head. Then he thought about the two people who had been in the shed when he looked through the window earlier. He tried to remember the setting when he went back into the hotel through the front door after he had watched through the window and put up the cars. It didn't make much difference because he had been gone too long. Anybody could have made it back into the hotel while he buffeted his way to the front. It occurred to him perhaps it was Beau Mitchell who had stood in the shed beyond his sight. He would have to catch up with Mitchell to find out. And that he fully intended to do.

Now he was sorry he had brought Janet Wharton with him. But she did know about

the map, and maybe she was better off under his wing. The back door of the hotel was open, swinging wildly in the wind. He pointed up the back stairs with the flashlight. Then he started ahead of her, holding the flashlight down on the steps. The staircase creaked with their weight. The whole building creaked and shuddered. Bertha's fury was relentless.

He stopped Janet at the second floor and motioned to the entrance. He opened the door to an empty hall. They could hear nothing but the cursed wind and rain. He put out his hand and took Janet's firmly in his. It was hot in the hall, and Janet's hand was wet. It didn't matter. So was his. They went quickly to Aunt Annie's room and he opened the door. Closing the door on the empty hall, he turned the flashlight on the bed. "Where would a maiden lady hide anything as large as a map?" he asked Janet. "That is, if she followed the usual procedure?"

She smiled, "Under the mattress, of course, my dear Watson."

They moved toward the bed together and he lifted the mattress. Bingo! There it was, a map three feet square, faded and so thin you could almost see through it. Janet lifted it out gently and put it on the dresser. But he had seen something else. Underneath it was a portrait. There was no doubt it was of the late Mrs.

Benning. He stared at the portrait and Mrs. Benning stared right back at him coldly from black eyes. The ebony coils of her hair were wound around her head in a braid. Except for the mouth which was completely uncompromising, and the difference in sex, she resembled Jerry Duprey, whom Jim hoped was still hidden under his bed.

Duprey had been right, even in his drunken state. This woman was proud, formidable, and stern. She would die before she told anybody anything against her will. And she had.

"What are you doing in my room?"

Aunt Annie's voice came from the door. Instinctively Jim put his hand on his gun and wheeled around. But she held nothing more dangerous in her hand than a candle which was still sputtering from getting wet. It was hard to be firm with her. She looked wet, bedraggled, and very frail.

Jim pointed to the dresser. "What are you doing with that map? And I might add, what is this portrait doing under your mattress?"

"My goodness, how did you ever find it? I mean the map." Aunt Annie was stalling. Janet hid a smile. She lit a cigarette from a candle. For a minute Jim wondered where she got it. After all, they were both still dripping

wet. But he didn't have to ask. There was a dry pack at the back of the dresser.

"Come now, Aunt Annie," he said sternly. "You cut out the picture and you took the map from the local library, didn't you? Why?"

Aunt Annie cocked her head. She didn't look much like a thief. She even had a twinkle in her eye. "I borrowed the map, Charlie. I wanted to see where Mrs. Benning was going every day. You see I checked the speedometer on the bellboy's car." She frowned. "I didn't put the picture under the mattress." She finally found an answer to that one. "I've been framed!" she announced.

"So, you've been framed. And you wanted to see where Mrs. Benning went every day. Speedometer! Why didn't you go to the courthouse as well as the library?" Jim watched her face.

"I did...." She looked abashed. Then she said hurriedly, "I couldn't take the map back to the library in the middle of a hurricane, could I?"

"Sit right down in that chair!" Jim ordered. She sank into it. "Now Charlie, I really was framed." She fell silent.

Jim turned to the map. He could see immediately the route of the Old Spanish Trail.

It ran north of Bay St. Louis as he had supposed, and it turned a little to the south and then went straight west to New Orleans. He knew it did not follow the present day Highway 90 which went due west from the bridge. According to his calculations, Highway 90 was considerably south of the Old Spanish Trail marked on the map. He found the bayou with the man-made canals he had paralleled when he chased Jerry through the rain. He was right. His best guess was the Old Spanish Trail originally crossed the bayou on Jeane Dupree's land.

"They could do it!" He said aloud.

"Do what?" Janet and Aunt Annie asked in unison.

"Never mind, I think it would be a good idea to round up Jerry Duprey." He looked at the portrait of Mrs. Benning. "So you were framed, Aunt Annie?" Jim shook his head.

Janet put out her cigarette and Aunt Annie came out of her chair slowly. They followed him into the hall obediently.

Bertha was heading north. And so was Jim if he ever got out of this mess. He stopped in the hall and turned to Aunt Annie. "How did you get to this side of the hotel?"

"The way you did, around the back," she snapped. Aunt Annie was herself again. She answered his next question before he could ask it. "They are all asleep," she announced, "even George."

Without a word Jim led them into his room. He looked under the bed. Jerry Duprey was among those missing.

"I thought you were looking for Jerry Duprey?" Janet offered.

"I still am." Jim rose. "Ladies, shall we go?"

If Jerry went of his own free will or was forcibly removed, there was only one place to find him. Jim stalked down the dreary hall to the back stairs. They followed him up to Mrs. Benning's rooms. He opened the door softly.

From Mrs. Benning's inner bedroom a weak light showed. Jim switched off the flashlight, put one of Aunt Annie's hands in Janet's and took the other. Walking quietly through the middle of the room they reached the half open door of Mrs. Benning's bedroom.

Chapter 15

The candlelight from Mrs. Benning's boudoir flickered on a gruesome scene. Lying on the bare mattress with each hand and foot tied to the four posters of the bed with heavy rope cutting into his flesh was Beau Mitchell. Or what was left of Beau Mitchell.

Jerry Duprey stood over Mitchell, holding a bloody knife in his hand. Sweat ran down his face. He was completely unaware of their presence.

Beau Mitchell wasn't dead yet, but he was going to be very soon. He had been cut up good, crossways and up and down, and the bed was saturated with his blood. Even though he must have known his number was up, he was ferociously contemptuous of death. His eyes were focused on Jerry Duprey. He struggled to get words out. Blood came with them.

"You double-crossed me on that candy shipment, Duprey. How many others came here?" he whispered. He tried to laugh, but his mouth was a grimace of blood. Then the guy was dead.

Looking through the open doorway at his ex-employer, Mitchell wasn't anymore appealing

dead than alive. But nobody should have cut up Beau Mitchell like that. It wasn't sane!

Aunt Annie and Janet were rooted to the doorway barely breathing, their eyes wide with horror. Jim let go of Janet's hand and slid silently into the room with his gun in hand and groped his way into the closet, never taking his eyes from Jerry's back. He could see Aunt Annie and Janet through the opening and Jerry through the crack between the hinges of the door.

Jerry dropped the knife when he realized Mitchell was dead, and he stared at the blood on his palm. Then he turned and became aware of the women who were transfixed in the doorway. Jim didn't have time to concern himself with their feelings. He was dealing with insanity wherever it was. Both women took their eyes from Beau Mitchell and stared at Jerry Duprey.

The wind was gone. There was only the rain from Bertha's outer bands. Jerry's voice was a scream, "I didn't do it. I didn't do it!" he kept mouthing. "I had the shipment sent here....," he pointed to the candy box on the dresser, but his eyes were on the door. "Someone took it." He looked dazed with shock. "I didn't kill him!" he kept on burbling. Then suddenly he backed against the wall. "I didn't tell him. I

didn't tell Mitchell." His voice had changed to stark terror.

Janet's head started to turn. Then she went rigid. Aunt Annie leaned weakly against the sill, but her head was up and turned toward Jim. Her eyes were trying to tell him something and her mouth worked in her white face. Then all hell broke loose!

Behind the two women in the doorway was Lena, her hat awry, her eyes wild. But the pistol in her hand meant business. Beside her was the bristly watchdog. She spoke to him in French, but her tone was to that of a dog. She pushed the two women ahead of her into the room. The watchdog's hand held a knife, a twin to the one Jerry had dropped. Apparently he had used them both on Beau Mitchell.

Lena had her eyes on Jerry Duprey, the insane, crafty opaque black eyes of a fanatic lunatic. Annie and Janet were out of sight.

Sweat streamed down Jim's face. He could have shot Lena then, but he had to listen to her words to complete the puzzle.

"You are a fool Jerome Duprey!" She spat at him. "But you are not a brave fool like Edith Benning." Her voice rose. "Tell me where the shipment is, or I'll have Emile cut you to pieces like he did your friend on the bed!"

Jerry groveled against the wall. "Don't kill me. I don't know! I don't know!" His voice matched her scream.

"Tell me where it is," she commanded, ignoring his words. "I know Edith found it and hid it. She almost told me. But in the end she wouldn't tell that one on the bed either. She said she would rather die first. She did."

Aunt Annie interrupted her. Now there was a woman with true guts. "I have known you for years, Lena. Put that gun down. You need to rest." Aunt Annie's voice was quavering. What a way to run a bluff!

Lena didn't turn her head. She said without emotion, "I tried to get you to leave. It's too late now. You are a fool too. You have *never* known me!"

Lena drew herself up. "I am a Corsican. I have used up my patience. You will all die. I killed the fat bellboy and the man on the bed. What is one more body?" Then she suggested, "Perhaps this will be best. If I shoot the two women, Duprey, you will know I intend to have the shipment NOW! I will have Emile slash you as I had him slash Edith Benning's portrait of Napoleon. Then you will tell me!"

Jim knew she was completely insane as she

looked suspiciously around the room. "Where is he Annie? Where is your nephew. Where is he?" She had finally gotten around to missing him.

Janet answered before Aunt Annie could. "He's dead. A hot wire dangled from the power lines in back!" She put her all into that speech, but it was a waste of time. Lena was too far gone. Lena and her cohort were standing inside the doorway.

Duprey was whining, "I don't know where it is. I don't know! It's someplace in the hotel. I'll help you find it!"

Lena turned her gun to the left. Now she was laughing hysterically. She couldn't be aiming for anyone but Janet. Jim was counting on her making a mistake. She did. She took a step forward, stumbled over one of Edith Benning's doorstops, and trying to regain her footing, she fell. He opened the door fast and saw her head hit the solid wood of the bed. The gun she held flew out of her hand to the left. Jim let her bristly friend have one round in the leg. Dropping the knife, he pitched forward and withered on the floor screaming in agony. Jim dove on Lena's prostrate form, but it wasn't necessary. Janet had quickly picked up Lena's gun, and Lena was out cold.

He put Lena's hands behind her and Aunt

Annie knelt over her and calmly roped her hands with the purple cord from her pince-nez glasses.

Duprey didn't seem to clue in on all that had happened. His hysterical voice filled the room. "I don't know where they hid the shipment. I thought my Aunt had it in the cemetery. She said something about *markers*."

All the bells in Jim's head went off at once. He had thought the letter from Mrs. Benning had said *markets* because her handwriting was so poor. It actually had said *markers*. The funny thing was, she was not even talking about the shipment of dope!

He stood. "Shut up, Duprey," he yelled. "Maybe you don't know where the shipment is, but I do!" Duprey's mouth stayed open as he stared at Jim. "Janet and I found it in the shed when the storm tore away a piece of the wall. It looks like Mrs. Benning and the bellboy did a good job of hiding it from everyone."

The hurricane was over outside and inside the Grand Manor. He noticed out one of the windows the Numismatist, Mr. Reese, had jumped into his rental car and sped off. He must have found out about the bellboy's corpse in the freezer downstairs and decided it was time to depart, especially since all the hotel records had disappeared in the storm.

Apparently other guests had the same idea, and the hotel emptied quickly.

Jim pulled a clear out-to-lunch Lena to her feet. "Let's get out of here. I need to parlay with the law. You go first, Duprey."

Janet spotted the little red coin book Edith Benning had checked out of the library several days before she died. She slipped it into her purse.

Jerry Duprey walked with a shudder past the dead man, followed by a silent Aunt Annie. Jim pushed Lena ahead, along with her wounded companion, and he put one arm around Janet's waist, and left the room without turning around.

Chapter 16

After the Bay St. Louis police finished their questioning and carted away Jerry Duprey, Lena, her friend, assorted bodies, and the remainder of the shipment of heroin, Jim was alone at last with Janet.

"Well toots," that was kind of wild but fun, don't you think?"

She held up a twenty dollar gold piece for him to admire. "This was in the coin book. This was the *marker* Edith Benning was referring to in her letter to the coin dealer. She was talking about *two markers*, and this was one of them. The other must have been at the grave site you visited." She paused and let him examine the stunning gold coin dated 1861. He noticed the entire date was full and clear, not like the coins Mr. Reese said were in existence today with a flaw at the bottom of the 8 and 6. This had apparently been minted in January, 1861 and was one of the original 5,000 which were exchanged for British sovereigns before they disappeared.

"I'll bet the other marker is the gravestone that was twisted downward. It looked like someone sat on it," he suggested.

"Are you thinking what I am?" Janet looked at him with a broadening smile on her sweet face.

"Edith Benning located the treasure and she never told anyone even though she tried to tell Duprey." He looked at Janet in astonishment.

"If that's true, then the rest of the treasure must be buried beneath the grave marker. Let's go!" Janet ran for his car with Jim giving chase.

Three weeks later in Chicago, a black Chevrolet Camaro pulled up to a parking meter one block before *Coin World's* numismatic headquarters. A little old lady in a bright yellow dress stepped out and made her way up the street to the entrance. She was buzzed through the dimly lit door by someone on the inside.

"Hello! Can you help me? I have some coins that have been in my family for generations, and I would like to sell them if they have any value." She looked at the fat man with a beard who approached her.

"Maybe you can tell me what these coins are worth," she announced hesitantly, as she unceremoniously dumped a small faded bag onto the counter for the owner to examine. "I

hope you won't cheat me," she admonished him softly with a wink.

"We are registered coin dealers, madam. We don't cheat anybody."

After examining the coins, with one hand over his heart he offered: "Honestly, these coins are in beautiful condition, but they will be hard to sell. I'll give you \$7,000 for the 1861-O \$20 gold pieces, and I'll give you \$500 for each of the 1861-O silver half dollars. That's the best I can do." With practiced patience he watched her squirm.

"I have a coin book here", she replied with a firm set to her voice. The dealer easily noticed the red book she held in her hand was printed four years earlier. Also, he noticed it said: "Property of the Bay St. Louis Library" in bold black letters stamped on the inside front cover.

"And what does your coin book show?" asked the salesman.

"It indicates right here the gold coins I have are worth \$10,000 each, and the silver half dollars are worth \$1,000 each. Now what do you say to that?" She glared at him.

"O.K., I'll give you \$9,000 for each of the gold coins and \$900 for the silver half dollars. The best thing is I will give you cash right now.

You won't even have to register your social security number, pay taxes, or anything." The coin man had her now.

"Well, young man, I want you to know I will take the cash, but I *always* pay taxes, and I want to give you a social security number just for the records so I won't get in any trouble later." With that she gave him the social security number, signed the receipt, picked up the cash, and left. Walking quickly back to the Camaro, she eagerly entered the wide-open back door.

"How did it go Aunt Annie?" Janet Wharton and Jim Smith asked in unison.

"Well, I'm getting better at selling because this time I got a higher price, but I have a lot to learn, don't I?" She laughed as she added the money to the almost full box in the back seat.

"O.K. gang, now we have four more coin dealers to see today, so let's get cracking!" Aunt Annie smiled as she filled her little bag again, then added, "Once they discover Lena's social security number leads them to a Mississippi prison they may want their money back!"