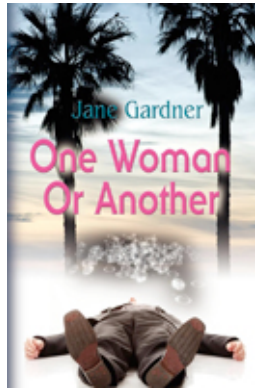




Jane Gardner

# One Woman Or Another



*When idolized Alfred Botts ends his preaching days on the floor of his bedroom, alone, police detective Jake Targell finds plenty of suspects among the unhappy women who have loved and lost the charismatic, high-living televangelist. The investigation is complicated by stolen diamonds, Mexican thugs and a voodoo doll. Jake discovers sordid secrets in unexpected places. For some, all's well that ends well. For others, not so good.*

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**Jane Gardner**

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## Chapter 1

Rob Kane tried to ignore his doorbell's ding-donging chime, but the tinny tune kept playing. *Please not another cute little moppet with missing teeth, selling two ounces of candy for fifteen bucks, or some die-hard optimist trying to save the world ten dollars at a time.*

He pushed aside the blind and spotted a good-looking man and an attractive blond in a light summer dress. Curious, he opened the door. The hot, dense summer air surged over his face.

The immaculate, sandy-haired man introduced himself with an engaging smile. "I'm Reverend Alfred Botts and this is Miss Vivianne Looper."

"Sorry, people, I gave at the office and I have no time to chat."

"We're here to talk about saving your soul."

"Well, my soul is kind of a personal thing with me and I've got a deadline to deal with."

"Perhaps judgment day is a more important deadline." Alfred Botts edged into the doorway so that his well-tailored body held open the screen door. "We won't take much of your time."

Rob recognized the man. "I've seen you before. Aren't you the sinner saver on TV?"

"You could put it like that." Botts chuckled. "I have a little show that raises money for our charity. Now you know who we are, what's the harm in a quick, friendly chat? We aren't asking for money, although we never turn it down."

Rob shrugged. What the hell, a TV personality and a good-looking blond. "Well, okay, it's too hot to stand here and since you're halfway in, come on in. I'll show you my voodoo doll and brew you some of my special tea." Rob grabbed the little, red voodoo doll from the hall table where he had dropped it on his return from Mexico. He thought they might think he was nuts and be put off, but Botts and Miss Vivianne Looper marched right in.

Rob eyed the reverend's suit and wondered what it cost to dress like that. Even his own mother would approve--well cut, light weight tan suit, long sleeved, starched white shirt, and a navy silk tie with a

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small pattern. Crisp looking, in a suit on a humid ninety degree Florida day, but as Botts entered the house, Rob saw him pull out a pristine white handkerchief and blot the perspiration from his forehead. Apparently Miss Looper in her cool green silk didn't sweat. Rob led them into the kitchen.

"I see by your toy doll there that you may have a longer way to salvation than some," commented the reverend with another charming smile.

Rob held up the doll. "Believe it or not, this doll is no toy. It has amazing powers. A pin in the precise spot will give your desired victim unsightly dandruff. Another spot, spindly legs. I've called on her only once, which resulted in a neighbor's hairy ears."

Botts laughed, reached out and took the doll. "Look at this. It tells you where to place the pins, but the doll can't spell. On the foot it says, 'toe fungus'. On the leg it says 'poor circulation'. How's it going to voodoo if it can't spell?"

Rob filled a sleek, steel teakettle with water, flipped on the gas burner and wiped his face with a paper towel. "Well, maybe the doll can't give you toe fungus, but it knows how to spell 'hang nails' and 'death'".

Alfred Botts chuckled. Rob pulled out a chair. "Have a seat--is it Miss Looper?"

"Just call me Vivi. Mama named me for my grandmaw, Vivianne, sorta like Vivien Leigh. Remember Scarlet O'Hara? But Granny always called me 'Vivi', you know, being two Vivianes in the same house." She repositioned herself in the chair, smoothing her skirt and checking her rosy fingernails.

Reverend Botts used the moment to clear his throat and seat himself next to her at the light wood kitchen table, still squeezing the doll.

Rob noticed the man's gleaming brown loafers. There were no wedding rings and he wondered whether they were sleeping together. The fan whirred softly. "Would you rather have your tea with ice?"

They both nodded.

"Do you write about spirits, Mr. Kane? You did say your name is Kane?"

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“I didn’t say, Mr. Botts. You seem to have special powers of your own. How do you know my name?”

“I’ve seen your picture on your books. Robbin Kane. How did you select that endeavor for your livelihood?”

“I was a cop for five years, then a private investigator. I still have a license, but I have a low tolerance for people trying to hurt me, so I started to write.” He wasn’t going to tell them the real reason—his dying love affair.

Rob filled a glass pitcher with ice. The hot tea crackled over it. He sliced a lemon and set out a sugar bowl and drinking glasses from the service station, free with the purchase of gasoline and decorated with Buccaneers decals, and then sat at the table with his guests. The immaculate Miss Looper smoothed her smooth skirt again and leaned away. Rob had the impression that she wouldn’t want him for her best friend. Maybe if he washed and shaved every hour.

Pepe la Pew’s little, black and white cat face appeared in the doorway. After examining the situation, she padded over to Rob and sprang onto his lap. Alfred Botts reached out to pat her head. With her ears back and a quick swipe, Pepe left a thin line of blood on the back of his hand.

“I’m so sorry. Pepe isn’t always cordial to strangers.” Rob picked her up and carried her into the bedroom, closing the door.

The victim pulled out his handkerchief and blotted his hand. “No problem.”

Botts was witty and pleasant and didn’t ask for money. Rob would like to invite him to his next party, if he ever had one, although the Rev kept talking about saving souls. Rob would rather have been alone with Miss Looper, not that it would have done him much good. When they finished their drinks, his guests stood to leave.

“We won’t take any more of your time, Mr. Kane.” Botts picked up the doll again and studied it. “This doll could be useful in my work. To represent the antithesis of my teaching, of course. Would you like to make it a donation?”

Rob noticed the Reverend’s hands trembling. “No, sorry, I’m a little attached to it.” He reached out and took back the black yarn-

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haired, rag doll, and as Botts stood hesitantly, Rob headed for the door, opened it and politely wished them good day.

*What the hell was that about?*

Police Detective Jake Targell had never witnessed an uglier scene than the eruptions from the victim's reaction to the poison and the nauseating stench. The mess led from the bed to the bathroom, and apparently, from the nasty trail of footprints, back into the bedroom. The corpse, naked except for sodden pajama pants twisted around one leg, was lying on the floor near the bed. Strangely there was no sign that the Reverend Alfred Botts had tried to call for help.

Jake slipped off his tie and used it to secure his handkerchief over his nose and mouth. His partner, Mannino was holding his against his nostrils and left the room to check the contents of the refrigerator. The gagging photographer lit a cigarette and held it between his lips, while he quickly snapped photos of the scene. He dragged on the smoke, flicked the ashes into his shirt pocket before they fell, and snapped some more.

Jake found nothing in the medicine cabinet but a razor, toothpaste, after shave and deodorant.

Mannino came back from the kitchen. "No used glasses or dishes. I wonder what the hell he had for dinner. Nothing in the fridge looks suspicious, but we'll want it bagged up."

Jake's voice was muffled. "This isn't just food poisoning. This is the real shit. Somebody wanted this guy dead fast. I gotta get some air."

The photographer beat Jake out the door. Mannino followed. "We can check the stuff in the cabinets after they get the fucker out of there. I'm staying out here until the M.E. comes."

Jake pulled off his cover-up. "We gotta look a little closer, but I don't see anybody broke in there, and there's nothing in the bathroom that he could have taken."

When the M.E. arrived, he took a leather bag from the car, briefly greeted those on the scene and entered the house, followed by the two detectives. "Whew! It stinks." He held his breath as he took



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some masks from his bag, fixed one over his nose and mouth, then passed two to Jake and Mannino.

He looked around for a minute. "I can tell you right off the bat--this ain't no tainted peanut butter, guys, but we'll soon find out what it is." He set to work on his inspection.

Holding the mask against his nose, Jake headed for the door. "We'll be outside, Doc. I hope we get some decent prints from someplace around here. So far it doesn't look like we got much else."

Mannino was close behind. "Where's a good, solid weapon when you need it?" He shook his head. "We got a long road ahead."

On Wednesday morning Rob's doorbell rang. Wearing only thin pajama bottoms, he ignored it. For the past two days he had been writing easily and didn't want to be interrupted, but the bell kept ringing. He looked out the window to see who was keeping the off-key jingle alive. It was his friend, Jake Targell with another police officer. "Just a minute," he called out, walked across the living room and opened the door. "Hey, Detective, good to see you. Come on in." Rob stepped back from the door, and led the way to the cool kitchen, darkened by closed blinds to keep out the sun.

"Rob, this is Officer Don Raleigh. We'd like to ask you some questions." Raleigh nodded.

Rob wondered where Raleigh got his hair cut—a place to stay away from, but he wasn't a bad-looking guy, except for the extra weight and the extra large olive green polo shirt. *Some people should never wear knits.* "Ask away, Jake."

"You're aware that Alfred Botts is dead?"

"You mean the evangelical Barnum? He was here just the other day. I hope his soul was up to snuff."

"You may be one of the last people to have seen him alive." Jake loosened the knot in his light blue tie, pulled it over his head and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Really? That was two days ago. Monday. Sorry, but why do I care?"

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“He was found yesterday.” Raleigh watched Rob’s face. “You haven’t heard about it? Made the papers and TV. He was pretty well known.”

“I’ve been here writing for the past two days. Haven’t picked up a paper or turned on the TV. What happened to him?”

“Somebody poisoned him.”

“Good God, poisoned?” Rob looked incredulously at his friend, then warily at Raleigh. “Why you telling me? I’ve seen the man once in my life.”

Raleigh popped his gum as if he were the only person in the room. “According to Miss Vivi Looper, after a rude greeting, you invited them in for tea.”

“I couldn’t get them off my doorstep, so I tried to scare them away with my personal brand of hospitality. Voodoo and hot tea on a hot day. Wouldn’t you know they both wanted ice.” Rob laughed and raked back his dark hair.

“Anything special in the tea?” asked Raleigh.

“Are you nuts?” Rob stared at him. “I’m a suspect? You’re kidding, right? For Christ sake, you couldn’t possibly suspect me.”

Raleigh pointed his finger at Rob’s face. “Miss Looper believes that you poisoned Botts with tea. She said your evil, black cat ferociously attacked Botts and you behaved very strange. Said you used a voodoo doll to give somebody hairy ears.”

“My seven pound cat? And I gave somebody hairy ears with a doll?” Rob snatched the doll off the table. “This doll is a stuffed rag. Look, Raleigh, I’ll stick a pin in her to give you a pot belly.” He looked at Raleigh’s gut bulging over his khakis. “Well, what do you know? It works.”

Raleigh sucked it in and adjusted his belt. “Very funny, but we have to take the doll and the tea.”

“You mean the tea I keep around in case I want to poison a stranger? The hell you will.” Rob crossed his arms over his chest.

“We can come back with a search warrant.”

Jake put his hand on his friend’s arm. “Rob, listen. These are high visibility people. You know the routine. She’s made an

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allegation in a murder investigation, and we have to move on it. Let me have the tea and the doll. We don't need a warrant."

Rob stood stiffly for a moment, then picked up the doll and dropped it into the open evidence bag in Raleigh's hand. Raleigh sealed it and made a note on it.

"Where's the tea?"

Rob glowered at Raleigh. "I assume that Miss Looper is alive and well after drinking from the same source." He reached into the corner cabinet and removed a box of tea.

"Put it in here." Raleigh didn't hold out the bag. "You got any more?"

Rob glared, but after a minute's hesitation and a nudge from Jake, he stepped forward and deposited the tea.

Jake patted his shoulder. "Thanks, Rob. This guy's followers are already making more noise than Bucs' fans after a bad call. We'll be on our way."

Raleigh tossed a receipt on the table and Rob watched the two men let themselves out—his friend, Jake, tall and fit, and the sloppy, offensive Raleigh. He almost dismissed the idea that he could be suspected of murder. It couldn't be a serious situation over something as laughable as a rag doll and tea. Ridiculous. But he had seen ridiculous charges before and had seen ridiculous charges stick. The idea made him consider himself and his existence.

Rob had little vanity, but he expected people to like him and most of them did, especially women. Luckily the face his grandmother had called "too beautiful to be a boy" had matured. He liked to think he looked rugged—a slight overlap of a tooth or two, crinkles at the corners of his green eyes from summers of sun on Lake George and the Chesapeake Bay, dark hair and the ever present five o'clock shadow.

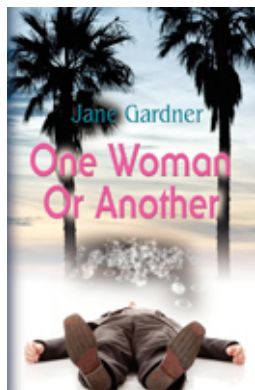
He fondly remembered choosing this house when he came to Florida after more than four years as a police officer in Washington, D.C. Sharon moved in with him and they furnished it together. Although she didn't care much about furniture and decorating, he did, and she always said he had the better taste. In college at Georgetown he had bought a small Miro print because it made him smile, then he

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started collecting the colorful paintings that brightened the walls now, some of them watercolors by his mother.

Later he had arranged one of the bedrooms for writing—a big table with drawers, computer, printer, shelves and the perfect desk chair, and he still had an extra bedroom. Everything he wanted except Sharon. He had believed they would be together forever.

On a few days he would almost succumb to his parents' pleas to move closer to their home and his brother in upstate New York. He thought of the crisp, cold air and new snow sparkling on trees and crunching and squeaking under his boots. He recalled sledding and snow men and his parents helping him and his brother shovel the long driveway. Then he remembered February, when the pristine snow lost its beauty to dirt and ice, and March, when the winds were chill and the days still short. Enough nostalgia. Time to work.



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