

Unjustly accused by her brother, Anna Wells is banished from her home in bitterly cold Michigan and set adrift to paradise. St. Augustine, Florida greets her with a new home, scarlet bougainvillea, Spanish moss, deception, art theft, assassins and murder.

A BONE IN HER TEETH

By Ann McAllister Clark

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A ST. AUGUSTINE MYSTERY

A BONE IN HER TEETH



ANN McALLISTER CLARK

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ONE

Cappitina Conroy stepped out of the cabin of her 28-foot sloop, onto the cockpit deck and into the blazing midafternoon sun of St. Augustine, Florida. She checked the humidity gage attached to the cabin door. Not believing the high percentage, she flicked the casing twice with her finger. She looked skyward hoping to read the promise of rain in the few clouds drifting from the direction of the ocean. The breeze was only a whisper but tiny waves slapped on the sides of the boat. A lone gull, silent and white as a paper origami bird, glided on differing levels of wind currents. Its cry high above sounded impotent and yearning.

Cappy turned for no particular reason and looked down the main dock. It was then she saw the four men in business suit pants and short-sleeved white shirts accented with dark ties. Accustomed to the usually casual garb of the marina, she took notice. Detectives. She looked over to see if Danny was on his aft deck. The *Kaleidoscope* was vacant as far as she could tell—

rigging all carefully packed under green canvas coverings and the fore and aft hatches closed tight. Danny was a meticulous mate.

Looking back again she could not hear the commotion, but observed as six police officers did their work at the far end of the dock. *Another one*, she thought.

She took one step back down into the cabin, enough to watch without being seen. She didn't want to go through that again. The yellow plastic crime ribbons twisted and fought against the ocean sea breeze. They were twined as before, around the stainless-steel railings of two of her neighboring live-aboard boats.

She rubbed the remnants of hand cream over her hands, looking down and absentmindedly hoping the age spots on the tops of her hands would fade. She wiped some of the cream over her forehead and cheeks. She flipped the bilge pump switch, knowing she had already emptied any excess water in the bilge that morning. With no water left, the pump hummed its high protest a few seconds before she flipped the switch off.

Cappy's fingers were swollen with alcohol edema and she fanned them out while wondering if a bright coat of red polish on the nails would help or merely accent the puffiness. She rubbed her hands down over her hips, wide with unattended excess. She looked into the small, round mirror on the cabin door and fiddled with her earrings before she tried to push her white-streaked blond hair, now dry with years of exposure to sun and sea air, away from her weathered face. She'd recently passed the sixty-year mark but was still comfortable with her looks. I've got a few good years left. Her light-blue eyes were feathered with blond-white lashes. She reapplied clear cherry-tasting lip balm to her sunburned lips before stepping up again to watch the scene not one hundred feet away.

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Turning away and then not being able to ignore them, she quickly cut her eyes back again to watch as the divers pulled up a dripping body in a black diver's wet suit onto the dock. She could see a knife protruding from the back of the body. *How many people will be affected by that death? A mother? A father?*

She had taken another step down when Freddy Zee, barefoot and unshaven, walked by. It was useless to avoid any of the close neighbors in the small marina. One could only hope for the unsaid rule of privacy to prevail.

He stopped at the side of her boat and asked, "Another one?"

"Yes."

Cappy didn't want to talk to anyone, especially the perpetually cheery Freddy with the dark brown eyes behind thick, round glasses, who never seemed to suffer the glaring sunlight. She resented his ease of life. With his long, articulate fingers he held a large stainless steel coffee mug. She guessed the mug sloshed with cheap whiskey.

"They know who it is?" He picked at a long eyetooth with a varnish-stained fingernail while he watched the drama a few yards away.

He lit up a cigarette by digging his thumbnail over the head of a wooden matchstick and then leaned his long-legged, slender frame onto a piling that jutted up from the low-tide water at the bow end of her boat. He wore a yellowed sailor's cap with the front turned up and the back turned down to protect his reddened neck from the incessant sun's burning rays.

"One of the university students again, I expect," she answered, hating the stench of cigarette smoke and wishing he would leave her to her own silence.

“Damn! They ought not to let those kids come over here alone like that. Not with all that’s happened.” He flung the mug’s contents into the water.

The body, still in its wetsuit, was zipped face down into a heavy, black plastic body bag, with the knife wobbling obscenely from the diver’s back. Then the officers placed the body bag on a wheeled stretcher. Two men lifted the stretcher until its legs snapped into place. They pulled their burden carefully along the dock, up the gangplank, and through the small covered deck where a few residents usually gathered on benches and plastic chairs for conversation. The stretcher was bumpily pulled on to the gravel parking lot and to the waiting gray coroner’s van.

The deck was uncharacteristically empty of visitors now. Three white plastic chairs stood empty, as was the bench. The marina was quiet except for the faint swish of traffic over the nearby bridge. Even the traffic seemed slow moving.

“It’s a good thing bodies float or nobody would ever find ’em. A body could hide down in that murky river water and there ain’t no way anybody would ever be able to find ’em.”

“Shut up, Freddy. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It’s true,” he said. “You know that current could easily just grab hold’a ’em and off they’d go.”

“You’ve been sniffin’ that shit again. Once an addict, always an addict.” She was immediately disappointed in her meanness to an old friend. She gathered a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Freddy.” She looked up at him for forgiveness.

With two fingers he snapped his cigarette into the water and then wiped his hands on the thighs of his paint-stained, bleached-out denim shorts. “Damn hot for February, ain’t it,” he said, not really wanting an answer. Sweat rolled down his

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temples while speckles of it glistened through his tightly pony-tailed brown hair. He turned and walked back to his beloved old 40-foot wood trawler.

She was amused at his bouncing, long stride and his arms and hands that seemed to be too long for his body. *I'm sorry, Freddy.*

Above the city's historic cathedral, the ancient bronze bell, old as the tower it was hanging in, rang out its announcement of 12:00 noon Saturday Mass, reflecting four hundred years of Christianity in the city. A dozen or so sailors, tourists, and hometown St. Augustinians filed in through the tall, heavy double doors on their way to redemption and needed rest from their daily lives.

Cappy stepped down into her cabin and lit a stick of sandalwood incense, poking it into a sand-filled votive cup. The thin string of smoke twisted and turned, filling the cabin with one of her favorite aromas. She finished off the remaining ounce of warm beer in the red paper picnic cup that had been sitting on the table. The liquid was slightly bitter and filled her mouth with a foamy essence that rolled down her throat.

She pulled the plastic ice cube tray from the small refrigerator and twisted the container until the cubes loosened. She took one cube and returned the rest to the freezer compartment. She tilted her head back and ran the small chunk of ice up and down her neck, behind her ears, and down between her breasts until it melted in cooling water down over her belly, leaving a dark streak on the front of her red-and-white striped tank top. She picked up a round wooden ring on which a dozen clear glass jewels strung with fishing line were suspended like slender fingers. She hung the circle of crystals on the brass hook over the door. The little glass prisms turned and clinked in

the breeze. She nipped out the incense with her fingers and then kicked off her rubber sandals and shoved them under the table. She went back to her V-berth, wound the overhead hatch open, and lay down on her bunk to sleep away the hot subtropical afternoon.

When an evening Atlantic high tide seeks the many inlets of St. Augustine, Florida, it washes a slow, undulating torrent of briny water up into the San Sebastian River and turns the backwater marshes deep and dark with eons-old mysteries. Six hours later, at ebb tide, the waters flow back into the ocean, leaving behind ponds and pockets rich with the salty evolution of plants and animals. The vegetation, mollusks, silt, and sea creatures nearly glow, yet hide their murky secrets and life-force activities. Then, a stillness—a waiting for the return of the voyager, the sailor back from the sea—until the quickening of flood tide, sea breezes, and the pull of the Earth's moon cause the entire cycle to happen again.

On just such a warm early spring evening, after the tide rolled in and the gentle southeastern winds filled the Florida sea breeze with dusky aromas of far-off Mediterranean spices, the waves began to rock Anna Wells's vessel beneath her as a kind mother might do to comfort her child. Yet the displaced woman felt no comfort and did not recognize the reassurance of nature and thus began her deep-breathing exercises in an effort to calm her increasing panic. The familiar feeling was rising as her own approaching tide from the pit of her stomach, up past her throat until it threatened a scream. She swallowed it down. How had she come to this place, this hot, humid place?

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Snow again: sheets of the stuff blowing in from the lake. Dry, furious winds howled and swept up and over the 15-foot Lake Michigan ice floes that stood frozen solid at the edge of the beach—signs of the endless final thrusts of yet another Western Michigan blizzard. The mountains of ice gave no hint of the relief spring would give in the months ahead.

Anna Wells could feel the slushy snow melting from her black leather boots, making a puddle on the muted red and gingery orange natural dyes of his fine oriental rug. She didn't care. She rubbed the tops of her red, chapped hands. She knew her frozen red nose was going to run as soon as she warmed up. Anna hoped he wouldn't misunderstand, although he always did. Her warmed fingers gripped the curved claw ends of the chair arms. She stroked her fingertips over the carved wood, feeling the smooth finish and wondered how many others had left their sweat and humiliation on these chairs.

She took a slow, deep breath trying to find whatever fortitude she could muster and tipped her head to affect a learned, submissive attitude. *No—I'm doing it again. Breathe in. Breathe out. Take your time.* Reaching her hand toward him across the desk, she knew it would be useless. It was hopeless when he had made up his mind. She let her fingers rest on the finely beveled edge, feeling the thick lacquer that covered the rich wood. The surface felt cool. She looked up at him with unspoken supplication, a pleading for even a mist of sympathy that in truth she didn't need and didn't want.

Attorney Harold Green sat in his large, blood-red leather chair, looking at her across the huge, glass-covered mahogany desk. His navy-blue suit jacket of imported virgin wool was

hanging from a signature wooden hanger on the mahogany coat post. His dark-blue suspenders with gold fasteners were tight against a brilliant white shirt, generous with expense and centered by a crimson, silk tie with tiny, golden lion head icons. The lion's head was repeated in the golden circles of his cufflinks.

The wall behind him was cut with a large window. Tiny ice crystals made a clicking sound as they pelted against the glass. The window opening was surrounded by shelving stacked tightly with his father's law books. The smell of richness, of leather, and fine textiles was palpable.

Attorney Green rested his elbows on the chair arms and he held his perfectly manicured fingers in a tent shape, bobbing them against his lips. The diamond set in his thick, gold wedding ring caught her eye. He lifted his heavy, dark brows and looked at Anna, with his black eyes peering over gold-rimmed reading glasses perched low on his long nose. A bit of hair was about to fall onto his forehead. She couldn't help but think of it as an affectation. The whole picture struck her as a revolting cliché.

"You will do this," he said, eyes narrowing. He nodded his head and his eyebrows rose. "You will. You hear me? You will do this and within hours you will be gone from this town."

Anna's father and grandfather had been lawyers dedicated to the ideals of the law. They were both good and honest men, and she had learned early in her formative years that most lawyers were not to be reviled or feared. And yet, Harold Green, Esq., was intimidating her with sheer meanness. She knew her father must be cringing in his grave. He would hate the attitude Green was taking. She swallowed and held her posture firm and her chin up in an attempt to face adversity with a modicum of

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dignity. After all, Harold had no right to intimidate Anna. He was her brother.

Harold had always held his size and familial placement over his sister. For as long as she could remember he claimed the favored spot of firstborn in a family of two children. Since he and Anna were the only ones left of that family, he heavily exercised his self-appointed position of the proverbial master of their house, all the while complaining of the burden.

As to why she would allow it now, in her early forties, she could only assume weakness on her part: the sudden and traumatizing deaths of her husband and daughter, the fact that Harold held the purse strings and she now barely held poverty at bay. Aside from that, he was a stingy, rich bastard lacking any understanding or compassion for his sister.

Anna looked over his shoulder, past his ear, to the window behind him. The city's elegant turn-of-the-century buildings of neoclassic style stood tall and dark in the snowy and fading afternoon light. On the top cornerstone of one sat a snow-powdered, cement gray gargoyle guarding the building ... from what? From the evil of vanishing spirits flying around the cornices and trying to get into the city building? It had missed the evil in this office.

The snow fell heavy and wet. The late winter in Michigan was tired, while still beautiful in its graceful waterfall of a cold blanket of snow covering the ground, leafless trees, building roofs, and wet city streets.

She remembered the times as children when they caught flakes on their red mittens and marveled at the intricate designs, wondering as they looked up to the sky what great beings must be up there forming the lacy, geometric, tiny stars. She remembered the cool, wet feel when they stuck their tongues out

to catch the silvery-white flecks. She loved her brother then. She had held him in such high childish esteem. Their mother had said that there were never two snowflakes the same, as with her children. *Mother*. Just the word conjured up so many memories. Anna blinked before tears could form. She looked back at her brother.

Harold turned to look out the window. “What the hell are you looking at? Can’t you pay at least five minutes’ attention to the conversation? You’re like a little kid.”

Anna thought for an instant that she could will the little gargoyle to fly to her side and protect her from this mean-spirited brother. “I just noticed the statues on the city building over there. I never noticed them before.”

“Yeah, well I had to study them in art class 101. They’ve been here for Listen, Greta.”

He had used her hated middle name.

“I don’t want to be too wretched, but Rita and I have had it with you. The last straw was that little incident last week.”

Anna was furious and impatient with his stupidity, complete insensitivity, and lack of insight. She felt her saliva thickening and her stomach tumble.

“I did not steal anything of hers. I never did any of the things she said!” Anna got up from the chair and leaned over his desk. “And furthermore, you know it. Don’t you? Admit it.”

“Sit down!” he bellowed. “I’m not through yet.”

She sat down. Tears of anger rimmed her eyes but she knew if she spilled even one, he’d see it as fragile and weak—just the characteristics he had always used to suck away her self-esteem. She looked out the window again and fantasized that she was sitting on that ledge dangling her legs off the edge, with an arm

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around the cement monkey, a dissipater of evil. Her toes began to hurt as they defrosted inside her boots.

“Listen, Gret.” He moved his neck within his collar as if trying to compose himself and clasped his big hands and massaged the muscles of his fingers.

“Anna,” she corrected. How could she get out of there? What was chaining her to this place?

“I know you’ve had a tough time in the last eight years, but you can’t ride that train of tragedy forever.”

She felt her throat constricting and the sweat on her hot palms. She realized that she had been clutching her hands, the nails digging into her skin.

The phone rang. He answered and swiveled his chair to face the window. She could see only the top of his head, thick with the glossy, dark hair they had inherited from their mother. He also got their father’s blue eyes. She didn’t. Hers were the green of their Irish mother’s heritage. She saw the interruption as an escape and stood up again and walked toward the door.

“Stop!” he yelled, flashing those blue eyes. He hung up the phone and said, “I have a little something for you before you go.”

“Go? Go where? Where do you think I can go?” She had never hated her brother more than at that moment.

He pulled open his desk drawer. “Sit down.”

She reluctantly sat again. He pulled a large manila envelope from the drawer and began to remove what looked to be several documents and a colorful brochure.

“Do you remember Aunt Martha? Mom’s sister?” He lifted his half-glasses and put them right back in place again.

“The one in Florida?” she asked. “The one we met once when we were little kids at Mom’s funeral?”

Two little kids, one fourteen, the other barely eleven years old, stood at the side of their mother's coffin, hoping she would wake up and take them home. Anna remembered the scent of pink and white carnations ... flowers belonging at a wedding yet surrounding their mother's coffin. She remembered the day as clearly as the outline of the black iron fence against a snow-covered family graveyard.

"Yes." He swiped his hand over his mouth as if preparing for an opening statement. "She and Mom had some long-lasting quarrel and she moved south, breaking all contact with Mom. She died last month. Eighty-six years old."

Looking down at her plaid wool skirt Anna smoothed out a wrinkle. She was sorry to hear the news, having hoped to find her aunt someday. Now she was dead.

"OK. So?"

"I haven't told you about this because I thought you'd squander it," he said in the condescending, paternal manner she had become accustomed to hearing. He held a brochure in his hand and shook it at her to make his point. "But I'm going to tell you about it now because you are going to leave town and try to make something of yourself somewhere else."

"Right. And how am I supposed to make a living anywhere else? I haven't got any money. You know that." Feeling a sting of bile coming up her throat, she said, "You've sold all my books—even the signed Robert Frost Dad left me. You know he gave that to me. You had no right to sell off those books. You even took the set of Harvard Classics with Dad's signature in all of them. They couldn't have been worth much. But they were mine."

"You owed too much. I had to make it good with Rita."

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“I didn’t owe her anything. I told you I didn’t do any of those things. I am not a thief!”

He was in classic denial. If he thought carefully about it, he’d know who the real thief was. But Anna would never betray her.

“Be that as it may, Margaret, you are leaving. Today.” He held up what looked to be a ticket of some kind. “Miss Renford is waiting for you in the reception room and she’ll drive you to the airport, where you’ll be flying out in ...”—he looked at his watch— “about four hours, to your new home in Florida. Rita has packed your stuff into five boxes and they are in the backseat and the trunk of Miss Renford’s car.”

“What!”

“I have here a deed Aunt Martha left to us kids. I’m quitting it to you. In other words, I am signing the deed over to you. It’s a house. I think I’m being extraordinarily generous. You might think about thanking me.”

“A house in Florida? I don’t know a thing about Florida. Where in the hell is it?”

“The house? Or Florida?”

“Take your pick.”

The snowflakes falling behind him were becoming a thick white curtain. The gargoyle was getting a cap of white. She willed her body to levitate and float through the glass to that freezing city hall ledge.

“This ticket will take you to Jacksonville, Florida. You can hire a ride 50 miles south, down to St. Augustine where the house is located.” He opened the now-wrinkled brochure. “St. Augustine, Florida—the Oldest City in America—a coastal town. Historic. You might like it.”

“And the house?”

“Well, it says in this document that it’s on the San Sebastian River. Can’t be all that bad. I’ll send you the legal paperwork after you get there.”

“And how am I supposed to make a living?”

“You and Franklyn owned a bookstore for years. You can find a bookstore in which to work.” He leaned back in his chair, bouncing against the back. He slipped his thumbs under his suspenders. He looked like a pretentious snob.

Anna tried not to think of the little shop she and her husband had owned and loved. Yet the thoughts of the many-paned front windows framed with dark wood, lit up with twinkle lights, the cozy front office area, and the back room where their daughter did her homework each night until closing time, swirled around her like a warm aura. Thoughts of Franklyn—his hands, his eyes, and the way he smelled after a long day in the autumn sun—always slipping into her memory when she needed comfort. My daughter. She escaped for a moment, thinking of her dead husband, but as always could not think of Liza for more than a second. Harold’s voice droned on and pulled her from her private thoughts.

“I’ll give you a recommendation of sorts. At least enough to get you a position that probably won’t require a background check. And” He slid a white business envelope across the desk.

She picked it up and looked at the paper’s whiteness and felt cautious enough to be afraid to open the flap.

“I have written you a check to get you started. I’ll box up whatever Rita missed of your things and send them to you. All charges against you have been expunged. I only ask that you never again call Rita or make any contact with her.”

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That wouldn't be hard, she thought while carefully opening the envelope. Her sister-in-law, Rita, the woman she had chosen as her maid of honor twenty years earlier, had charged her with grand larceny.

“And don't even think of calling Lucy,” he said.

Just the mention of Anna's sixteen-year-old niece's name filled her with anger—directed at her brother and sister-in-law.

Inside the envelope, Harold had placed a personal check made out to Anna for \$15,000.

“You're buying me out of your life?”

“Basically, yes. A Florida house on the river and fifteen grand ain't bad.”

Anna felt that old pit in her stomach she had experienced every time he had insulted her while they were growing up without parents. He was a teenager and she an eleven-year-old adolescent. They lived in the family home, with only a few family friends stopping in weekly to see that they had what they needed. The refrigerator and cupboards were kept filled and their clothes closets were always hung with what they needed. No one offered love, a basic concept that Anna seemed to need far more than Harold.

Standing up, Anna turned toward the door without speaking and made sure she shuffled her boots dry on the thick carpeting. She could see the word PRIVATE in backwards letters showing through the frosted glass door. She could hear him push his chair back and stand up.

He said, “Well, goodbye and good luck, Margaret.”

She held the doorknob long enough to imagine his expectation for her gratitude. She turned the cold brass knob, pulled the door open, and left without looking back, thinking, *I was named after my mother. My name is Anna.*

TWO

Anna Wells had left Michigan under duress and anger. However, she did begin to relax on the Delta flight to Jacksonville International Airport. The glass of wine on the Atlanta stopover helped. As the pilot approached land over Florida, Anna leaned into her window and saw water, only water. Soon she could make out the white-capped waves on the shoreline. She was surprised at the evergreen pine forests and the early spring brown of the marshes. Anna regarded it all as foreign, a temporary exile, somewhere to light for awhile, a place she would use to begin her life again—wherever that may take her.

She hailed a shuttle van from the airport to St. Augustine. An hour later she and her luggage were dropped at the Casa Monica Hotel's outdoor café to wait for a taxi ride to her new home.

America's Oldest City—the oldest permanent European settlement on the North American continent—St. Augustine, Florida, was founded forty-two years before the English colony

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at Jamestown, Virginia, and fifty-five years before the Pilgrims even landed on Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts. Today it still exhibits a clear Spanish influence of red-tiled roofs, flowering subtropical vines and old wrought-iron gates.

Fine restaurants employing award-winning chefs and small cafes with excellent menus are tucked between age-old foundation walls built by Spanish soldiers from coquina stone quarried near the ocean shore. Small, local taverns and American shops of convenience and familiarity mix with a blend of international boutiques filled with exported goods, clothing, and jewelry. Many spoken languages add to the mysterious lull of history that permeates the city's walls. Lovely sightseeing horse-drawn carriages, whose steeds hang their heads in dreamlike reveries of their stables and grain, traverse the old, red-bricked streets. The metal-shoed hoofs echo out the familiar clip-clop-clop as they amble over the bricks.

The Crumb sisters, Bess and Heleen, drove two of these coaches. The women wore Victorian costumes of long, purple sateen dresses and wide-brimmed black straw hats festooned with fresh flowers.

While Bess calmly snapped her reins on the glistening haunches of her horse, Heleen drove her own steed with irritability and impatience, grinding her teeth in anticipation of the nightly chaos that awaited her after work. She noticed a woman sitting alone on the Casa Monica balcony. When the woman gave her a smile, Heleen waved and then rolled past.

Later, while the Crumb sisters rested and watered their horses at the park's edge, they did not speak. Bess noticed her sister's addition of thick makeup around a newly black-and-blue eye. Although she had tried to help in the past, Bess now refused

to join in her sister's continuing drama. Change was just not going to happen.

Anna was tired and decided to order a cool drink before calling for a cab. She took a few minutes to acclimate herself and ordered a tall glass of peach tea, something she had never heard of in Michigan. While quaint carriages decorated with ropes of flowers rolled past, she rested awhile on the terrace of the King Street first-floor balcony of the Casa Monica. One of the drivers waved at her.

Looking eastward she could see the multicolored flags lining the Bridge of Lions. The structure arched over the Matanzas Bay in the Intracoastal Waterway, where balmy breezes flow across from the Atlantic Ocean. She imagined that marinas on the bay shores probably hosted opulent yachts, magnificent sailing vessels, and flashy sportfishing boats.

Across the narrow street she watched the town square fill with tourists and locals waiting on the lawn for a performance in the gazebo. She looked up the street again, toward the bridge, and saw a row of carriages waiting in line for riders.

A half-dozen used bookstores were scattered around the town, along with shops of antiques and art, common souvenirs, and ice cream. In Thoberry's Bookshop, down narrow Aviles Street, proprietor Thomas Thoberry turned on his old desk lamp and bent his head over his daily books to worry the numbers into a sense of balance. A white tuft of hair fell over his forehead and he absentmindedly pushed it back behind his ear. Although he was a man of pessimistic outlook, he still hoped he might someday be able to understand the mysteries of his green account books.

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Westward up King Street, behind the shaded, glowing windows of the four-story turrets and towers of Flagler College, students were studying for the next day's instruction.

Finally growing weary, Anna asked for help in finding the way to her new Florida home. The concierge returned with a paper of directions for her.

"Go up King Street a few blocks," he instructed. "Past the winery and just the other side of the King Street Bridge and you'll see a sign that says 'Krill Avenue.' Make a right there. Not left. That's another marina. Your home is down the road, to the right." He smiled and added, "Welcome to paradise."

Anna's hopes rose for the first time since the Delta jet had left the snowy, cold Michigan airport.

The Florida evening air was soft and pleasantly spring-like. The gazebo in the park was covered with twinkle lights and striking pink exotic flowers hanging lush and heavy with perfume. Several ancient oak trees shaded the park, and their far-reaching limbs dripped with Spanish moss. Anna drew in a deep breath of all the beauty and turned toward her new life in paradise.



Anna asked for a cab; it was getting dark and she didn't want to walk the few blocks with her luggage. It was closer than she thought as the cabbie turned right onto a gravel road. He stopped at the sign before the open gate of a chainlink fence that read, SAFETY HARBOR MARINA.

“This is it, miss. Safety Harbor Marina.”

“Marina? But it can’t be.” She implored him to look again at the address.

“This is the place.”

“But I thought it was a house.”

“Yeah,” he said. “There are some houses in there. Just stop at the business office and ask Billy to show you where your house is located.”

It was getting darker. She paid the man and got out of the cab, then dragged her suitcase across the gravel and into what looked to be a parking lot. She left her boxes on the side of the drive, figuring she could find someone to help with them, and walked toward a small building showing much wear and tear. There was a glow of a lamp in the window.

She entered to find a man sitting behind a desk. A lazy golden retriever had his snout resting on the man’s foot. When the man looked up, she saw that one of his eyes was cloudy. The other focused clearly on her as he got up to greet her. The dog stood, stretched, and then wagged his tail as he watched her. She petted his silky head and he turned dark, wistful eyes to her.

The man said, “This here’s Popeye.” The dog sat and amicably tilted his head back and forth between them as if he enjoyed the conversation. “Been with me for eight years now. We’re growing old together, huh boy.”

The man spent a minute scratching behind the dog’s ears before looking back at Anna.

“Help you?” he asked as he pulled up his jeans and thoughtfully stroked his unruly beard.

She noticed dark circles under his eyes and deep lines across his forehead. He spoke with a slight accent she didn’t recognize.

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She handed him her address and told him about her Aunt Martha and the house Anna had inherited.

“Ah.” He smiled and seemed to understand. “Marty’s house. It’s a mighty fine one now and we’ll be sure glad to see it occupied again. We all had a special feeling for your aunt.”

Nodding as if remembering a personal story, he pulled a key from a board of hooks on the wall and grabbed a large propane light. As he passed her, she smelled a stale, smoky odor mixed with fresh alcohol.

“My name’s Billy ... Billy Peace. Let me help you with that suitcase.”

“I’ve got several boxes out there on the drive.”

“We’ll take care of ’em for ya.”

Anna followed Popeye, who followed Billy down a wooden ramp to a metal dock that rocked with their weight.

Within minutes she was standing in the twilight on a marina dock and gazing at the most forlorn-looking boat among dozens of other boats tied at the dock.

Anna didn’t know a thing about boats but she knew this one looked bad. The dock seemed to be moving beneath their feet. Billy noticed her confusion.

“These are floatin’ docks. You’ll get used to ’em. ... This here is Mart’s houseboat. Your new home, I guess.” He looked at the square heap and proclaimed, “Ain’t it a beaut? A 1956 outfitted barge. They don’t make ’em like this anymore.”

In the dusk she could make out a lot of rust and a dark interior. She didn’t want to go anywhere near the thing. The small sailboat next to it was green, with pretty little windows glowing through white curtains. To the other side was a yacht that looked more like a boat to her. Its windows were also curtained and glowing with light.

“Come on now,” he said as he hefted the heavy suitcase onto the deck. The boat began to rock. “Here, give me your hand.”

Anna felt sick. She could not believe her brother had sent her to this. Billy pulled open a sliding wooden door with two triangle cuts of glass. They both stepped into a dark, small room. Popeye sat on the deck and refused to come in with them. There were no furnishings except a folding chair and a few packages around the floor. Pete lit the surprisingly bright propane lantern.

“Sit there,” he said. “I’ll be right back.” He stepped out the door and then leaned back in, smiling and squinting his bad eye. Through teeth gripping his pipe stem, he said, “Welcome aboard. Glad you’re here.”

She pulled the gray metal folding chair away from the wall and placed it in the center of the small room. She sat down feeling numb and more alone than she had ever felt in her life. A breeze rocked the boat just enough so that she knew she was on water. She heard the clanging of other boats—she didn’t know what the sounds were and she hoped this rocking was ordinary. And then she didn’t care. She was too damned deadened with exhaustion and fear and loneliness to care.

Anna’s eyes filled with tears. The boat continued to rock enough for her to realize a certain comfort to the rhythm. She listened to the sounds that to her sounded like mournful music calling a warning. Of what? She listened and let the tears fall.

Finally, she looked around at the room. The walls and ceiling were covered with dark paneling. There were navy-blue curtains made of some sort of burlap hanging heavy with dust and cobwebs and grime at the several windows along each side of the room. The countertops were covered with white sheets. She stiffened as she first heard, and then saw, scampering tiny

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things race across the stained and grimy burlap. She could feel the hairs rise on her neck. How would she manage? How could she even find a place to put her head to rest, let alone actually sleep in this thing?

Anna pulled her knees up to her chest, her feet on the edge of the chair and buried her face so as not to see. Not to see the creatures on the floor again. Not to see her brother's cruel face again, and she tried hard not to see her husband's and daughter's headstones covered with the Michigan snow. The lantern sputtered and went out.

"Ahoy, on the *Captain Jack!*" a man's voice cut through her thoughts.

She didn't move and didn't know exactly what "ahoy" meant. Was she to get up and greet someone?

"Permission to board?" he called.

Anna still didn't move. She felt him, though. As he—whoever "he" was—stepped on the boat deck, the darn thing tilted even more. Was it to sink right now? She was ready to dart for the door and swim. But the boat righted itself almost immediately. A knock came at the door. She couldn't avoid it any longer and got up to open the sliding door to "hope" sent to a stranded woman.

"Whatcha sittin' here in the dark for?" he said in a crisp New England voice.

She wondered what a New Englander was doing here in the South.

"Billy sent me down here. Said you might be needing a little help."

"I didn't realize it was getting dark," she said, sitting back down and again lifting her feet. "And I don't have a flashlight. The lantern seems to have run out of juice."

He stepped into the cabin and took one step across the floor to the counter, where he switched on a tiny light in the shape of a lighthouse.

“Marty bought this little thing at the craft show uptown,” he said without looking at her. “Billy’s got’chur ’lectric hooked up already.” He held a large-handled flashlight. “I’ll leave you with this light in case you need it tonight.”

Looking around the little cabin, he said, “She covered everything up with the sails we gave her before she went to the hospital. There’s some good stuff under there.” He turned to Anna and stiffened, saying, “What’s the matter? You hurt?”

Immediately on the offensive, she said, “No, I am not hurt.”

“Then what?”

Anna pressed her lips tight, realizing she couldn’t explain the last seven years to this intruder, this stranger. She didn’t say a word.

He nodded with a hint of a smile. “Yup. You got the look of the runaway.”

“What are you talking about?” She put her feet on the floor and rearranged herself. Who was this guy? He was a little too forward for her comfort.

“Your voice says you’re a northerner, your singleness says you don’t have a partner, and your eyes are wide as a gator lookin’ up.” He leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms, his head barely missing the low ceiling. “You got the look of the runaway from life. No insult intended. A lot of us got that look at one time or another.”

Along with being tall, he was lanky, as if his bones were held together loosely beneath his blue T-shirt and baggy, paint-stained khaki pants. His head tilted as he spoke, reminding her

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of a bobblehead doll—it seemed more like a defect or disability than an affectation. His eyes were covered by thick round glasses and his dry hair, the color of weak tea, was stuffed under a much-washed and worn sailor’s hat.

She noticed a pea-green stovetop beside him and behind his legs a little green refrigerator was recessed under the countertop. With his long bony fingers, he wiped some tiny speck off the stovetop.

“This boat yours now?”

“Until I can find a way to sell it.”

“Whoops!” He laughed as a mouse ran across his scuffed tennis shoe. “You need a visit from Big Black Belle. I’ll get her. She’ll fix you right up. Hold on, I’ll be right back.”

He stepped out the door and then poked his head back in and smiled. “By the way, my name’s Fred. Around here, most call me Freddy. But please don’t call me Fredrick. My granny called me that and never in a nice way.” He gave Anna a toothy grin and stepped off the boat. She had to balance herself, with the boat rocking again.

Sitting there wondering where she would sleep and how she could get a taxi back to town as soon as possible, Anna focused on the little lighthouse lamp. Then slowly, she began to glance around at what few decorations her aunt had left. There were three shelves hung over the counter, filled with the detritus of boat life: plastic cups with colorful fish embossed on the sides, a few small tools, and a beautiful polished brass clock along with a red-and-white fishing bobber attached to a ring filled with several keys. A manila folder jammed with pages of papers lay on the top shelf and next to it was a large book titled *Piloting*.

Braver now, she looked around at what else was in the room that wasn’t covered with the sails, while assiduously

avoiding inspection of the floor. A colorful plaster parrot perched on a crossbar hung from a grommet in the ceiling. It seemed as if the exotic red, yellow, and blue bird was watching. Its little beady eyes seemed to be expecting something of her. Anna noticed a large pilot's wheel at the front of the boat with what looked to be a radio hanging over it.

She became curious about the paper-filled folder. Could it contain something about her aunt and this silly boat of hers? Stomping her feet to scatter anything nearby, Anna got up and reached up for the folder, spilling some of the papers onto the floor. The front of the folder had large red letters written across the top: PRIVATE PAPERS OF MARTHA LAUNIERE. With a quick glance Anna noticed some of the wordage on the first page. PRIVATE, and PERSONAL PAPERS OF #####. Why would she have X'd out her name on the paper when it was clearly on the front of the folder? Penciled on the top of one typewritten page was: "Notes taken on the problems of security and influence and/or interference with the investigation." And "What library materials might provoke an investigation?"

Then, curiously, there was a page torn from the *Yellow Pages* book that contained listings of law offices in St. Augustine and Jacksonville. One of the listings was circled in red pen: Thomas Jamison and Associates, Specialists in Criminal Law. Clipped to the page was a sales slip with only the letters "MJL" and the price of \$58.82—hardly enough for even a one-time visit to a lawyer's office. Anna gathered the papers up, deciding they might be something her aunt Martha might want her to keep away from prying eyes.

She felt the boat rock again and held the paper-stuffed folder to her chest. With a tapping on the door, Freddy stepped inside. Behind him a woman carrying a huge, longhaired black

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cat stood, waiting to enter. With the marina lights behind her the woman's hair was a halo of blond with white-streaked tresses flying out as if she were in a windstorm.

"You mind if Belle comes in?" Freddy smiled, polite and quiet. "And this is my friend, Cappy."

The woman cut her eyes sidewise at Anna and then bent and let the cat down. She handed Anna a bottle of wine.

"The cat's Belle. I'm Cappy. I've got the pink sloop down the dock—that is, the boat with the wide pink stripe," she said. "You can't miss her. She's the prettiest boat here, with white sails and flags. Lots of doodads hanging about."

The cat crouched as if stalking something, then darted forward, disappearing down steps to the rear of the boat.

"Belle will clean the place up for ya quick as lightning." Cappy leaned toward Anna to shake her hand. "Welcome."

Anna noticed her skin was dry and rough.

"Is this boat supposed to be tipping like this?" Anna asked her.

Cappy looked at Freddy, but did not smile though he was grinning ear to ear. Looking back at Anna she said, "You don't know boats, I take it?"

"No. I've never been on a boat other than a canoe and that was on the Au Sable River in Michigan."

"We'll take care of that in time," Cappy said. "First thing you ought to know is that yes, the boat is rocking as she pleases. She—the boat. Boats are feminine, like hurricanes used to be. When you face the bow—the front of the boat, the side to your left, is the port side and to the right is the starboard."

Freddy began to chuckle.

"Fred, you get the hell out of here, will ya?" With an audacious air of authority, she pointed to the doorway.

Freddy left obediently.

“Now I’ll help you learn a lot more, but you first might want to find a bunk and go to sleep. We’ll put order to all this chaos in the morning.” She stepped out the door saying, “I’m stepping onto the gunnels and walking up to the foredeck. If you need me for anything, remember the boat with the pink stripe. You can’t miss it.”

Anna was alone again except for the cat. She couldn’t see Belle but guessed that the feline was crawling around somewhere below, in the bowels of the boat, doing unspeakable things to the mice. Anna was irritated with the woman’s instructions in boat terminology. She didn’t want to have anything to do with these people who looked more like ragtags of society than rich boat owners.

She never would have thought a marina or the people on the boats in that marina would look like this. She had thought boat people were all rich and spoiled. She had seen a marina near the bridge that looked like what she assumed a marina should look like, with huge, triple-deck yachts.

The boat rocked again to the left—port, as the woman had instructed. Anna got up, thinking Freddy might have returned but no one was on the boat or the dock. She held the flashlight in her left hand but did not turn it on. Everything was quiet. Looking down the row of boats she could see that several were occupied, with glowing lights behind their curtains, and on one, the flicker of a television set blinked behind its windows though she could not hear it.

The silence gave her an eerie and lonely feeling. Oddly, she could barely see a small red flag with a white stripe floating and bobbing out on the river, illuminated by the sliver of the small moon. She stood on not much more than twelve inches of walk

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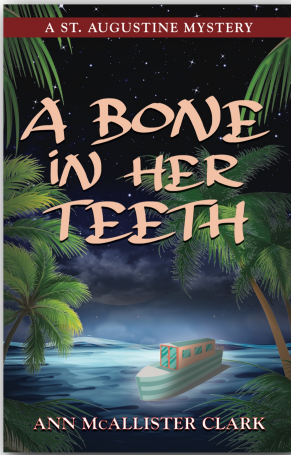
space outside the door. There was a dim slant of orange halogen glow from a nearby light post up next to the dock master's building. The sulfur smell from the water was strong, but a small breeze came up, causing many of the riggings on the boat masts to clang and clatter in their music.

She looked down along the side of the boat. A noise, sort of a bumping on the bottom of the boat, not loud but definite, caught her attention. She looked down at the black, murky water and thought she could see something. She clicked the flashlight on and, holding the stainless-steel bar railing, she leaned over as far as she dared, to see better.

The object was floating close to the surface, with bubbles rising. She bent to see—a turtle, maybe? She squatted to get closer to the water, pointing the light at the object.

Anna tipped her head, trying to get a focus on what it was. And then, within inches of her face and as if loosened and exploding from a deep underwater grave, up shot a deadly white-gray, puffy, watery face surrounded completely by a black hood that tightly encircled the entire ghostly head. The eyes popped open, glassy and blank, unfocused.

Anna felt that her heart stopped. She choked back a scream, terrified by the unexpected emergence of a body. She ran forward, toward the bow of the boat, tripping as she clumsily climbed onto the dock. She got up and ran down dockside looking for the pink stripe on the boat with the white flags.



Unjustly accused by her brother, Anna Wells is banished from her home in bitterly cold Michigan and set adrift to paradise. St. Augustine, Florida greets her with a new home, scarlet bougainvillea, Spanish moss, deception, art theft, assassins and murder.

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