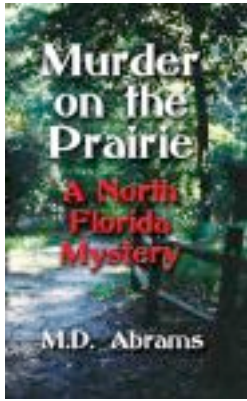




**Murder
on the
Prairie**

**A North
Florida
Mystery**

M.D. Abrams



When the dean of Alachua County's environmental groups dies suddenly, the Sierra Club office is ransacked, and her activist ex-husband is shot. Actress Lorelei Crane embarks on a dangerous trail of old passions, threats, scandal, and murder.

Mystery, ecology, and romance: a captivating first novel.

Murder on the Prairie

by M.D. Abrams

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A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

Murder on the Prairie

A North Florida Mystery

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

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A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

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MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

For Dorie, my muse and greatest fan!
In memory of Audrey and Al, always in my heart.

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

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Choosing to write a north Florida eco-mystery evolved from an appreciation of the region's fragile natural beauty gained from working with Florida Defenders of the Environment under Marjorie Carr. My focus on Paynes Prairie was inspired by Lars Andersen's book: *Paynes Prairie: A History of the Great Savanna* (Pineapple Press, 2001). Thanks to preserve biologist, Jim Weimer; former park manager, Jim Gillian; staff at the Visitor's Center; and poet Stetson Kennedy's permission to use his poem, *Paine's Prairie*. The Alachua County's Matheson Museum and Joanne Gillikin enhanced my research. I hope those who know the Prairie will forgive dramatic liberties taken in describing some of the area's specific locales.

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Gainesville, Florida
February 2005

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

Chapter One

The Prairie marsh basin had flooded. Water was lapping over one lane of Highway 441, and there were a dozen or so alligators lined up at the road's edge. Cars and trucks crawled along as drivers gawked at the prehistoric reptiles and the vast flooded marsh. It was only the first of the day's extraordinary events.

I had never seen Paynes Prairie like that before, though some north Florida old timers still called it Alachua Lake. The appearance of the alligators was even more astonishing. Apparently, the cold-blooded creatures had been forced by the high water to do their warming on the dry surface of the road.

I shuddered as I passed them, and irrationally powered my car windows halfway up as I, just as irrationally, whispered "Go Gators!" It was the mantra of University of Florida football fans and used so ubiquitously, it tended to seep into one's DNA.

I continued into Gainesville past the old Brown Derby Restaurant. It was the former scene of so many celebratory and clandestine meetings, and ironically, I thought, was now an Islamic Center. As I drive by, I occasionally have the flicker of a memory of Jeffrey, and a dark, uneasy feeling. Jeffrey, my former husband and I, would often rendezvous at the Brown Derby. Sometimes, I'd even stop there for a drink alone—until the murder.

A young woman college student who also may have stopped by for a drink, or to meet someone, was beaten to death. Her car was in the Derby parking lot. Her battered nude body was found, across the street, in a shallow grave. It gave me the creeps when a friend asked me to go hiking with her in that area. I refused. Not like I was afraid of ghosts, but...

My close encounter with the alligators, and the white-washed serenity of the once notorious restaurant somehow felt connected. Cold-blooded gators. Cold-blooded murder. I shivered at the thought.

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

As I drove up 13th Street near the University, I was once again caught in a snarl of traffic. Cars, mopeds, bikes, and sandal-footed, head-phone wearing students, all in a hurried jumble. In Gainesville, it is not the weather but the tide of thousands of students that signals the change of seasons. Fall semester was beginning.

Though I was more than twenty years from my own undergrad days, I could still feel the air prickle with the excitement of fresh starts. I flirted with the appealing idea that the day might bring me something new and exciting. Little did I suspect it was a wish I would come to regret.

I stepped into our office, the Center for Earth Options, and announced, “Hey, can you believe it? I just saw a dozen alligators sitting roadside on the Prairie. The whole place is flooded. It’s an amazing sight.”

My boss, Diana Demeter, gave me a quick anxious glance before bringing her hands up to her mouth, and shaking her head. Her large-brown rimmed glasses gave her an owl-like look, and her severely tailored appearance reminded me of my elementary school librarian.

Dropping her hands, she said, “This just can’t happen. Heaven knows, we cannot let it happen!”

“What’s up?” I asked, and walked further into the office. “What can’t happen?”

I looked at Diana and then at Becky, our office manager, who sat behind the reception desk. Diana gave me a wan smile. Becky sat erect, and was tapping her pencil back and forth on the desk. She looked as though she would burst into tears at any moment.

Diana finally explained, “Apparently the south Florida Valdez Development Company has plans to build a high rise housing project on the rim of the Prairie.”

I was stunned by the news. “But how can they get a permit? I mean, what about the county’s land use plan, for God’s sake? Isn’t the Prairie rim on preservation status or something? There are single family homes out there, but... surely they can’t allow a whole damn high rise development, can they?”

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

Becky responded, “That’s what we thought, but Dr. Ames, from the Sierra Club, just called and told Diana that Valdez has an old permit. And,” she paused, her heavy dark eyebrows shooting up dramatically, “it has no expiration date. They’re basically good to go.”

“Dalton said they are already on the agenda for the next County Commission meeting. They’re really moving fast,” Diana added, touching Becky’s hand to stop her repetitive tapping.

“Jesus,” I said, walking over to my desk and plopping down in the chair. “I can’t believe it!”

“Neither did we—at first,” Diana said, giving me a sympathetic look. “We were devastated by the news.”

I sat in stunned silence, and watched as the two women hovered over Becky’s desk, murmuring to one another, and shuffling through various papers. I thought about the diverse backgrounds that had somehow landed us together.

There was twenty-something Becky, fast-talking, and filled with zeal over many issues. Her family lived in Boston. And, Diana, a soft-spoken widow in her forties with a son she described as a “troubled teenager.” I looked at her, and felt a wave of affection as I recalled our first meeting, my job interview. We clicked right away, and shared some of our personal history. She and her husband had been Georgia farmers until he was killed in a farming accident. She said it made her into a “steel magnolia.” And then there was me—living out my mother’s dream to be an actress—raised as an only child, in south Florida, by a mother and father who owned an orange grove.

How comical it would be if Becky, Diana, and I were lined up together? I’d be the tallest, Becky the squarest, and Diana slender and petite. Yet, despite all of our differences, it was certain that the news of the Valdez plan would ignite our shared passion to preserve this wild land.

After several minutes, Diana sat down and started to speak to us in her slow Georgia drawl. “I think you should know something about who we’re up against,” she said. “Valdez is run by two old University buddies: Jimmy Valdez and Crawford Keezer. I first met them at an Environmental Permitting Conference in Sanibel a couple of years

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

ago. Those two boys couldn't be more different from one another, but both of them are pretty slick in their own way. They build developments big as a whole town, and they start out by just scraping the land of everything on it. If they do get this thing going, I guess we can expect the same." She shook her head sadly and looked away from us.

Becky suddenly jumped from her chair. As she began speaking, her long wiry brown hair seemed to bristle with the intensity of her tone.

"But that's not going to happen," she said, and pounded her fist on the desk. "That's why we're here. Right, Diana? And I've got lots of other friends who'll know how to stop this thing, too."

I guessed Becky was referring to the rag-tag group of grad students she hung out with. They were all members of a radical environmental group called EcoSave!.

"Okay," I said, and sat down again. I put up my hands in a gesture that signified I had heard enough. "We obviously need to stop their project. Diana, how can we get the County Commission to overturn the permit?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "So far, Dalton says that there's not much the Commission can do since the permit is still valid."

My anger flared thinking about some of the other fights we'd had with our largely pro-development Commission.

"Or won't do if Commissioner Judson Sparks and his friends are in on it," I said.

"Well, you can be certain of one thing, ladies; we'll give them one heck of a good fight." Diana stood up, and faced us with renewed confidence.

"Becky, please get me all the old coalition files. We're going to call an emergency board meeting and round up the faithful."

Becky headed to the file cabinets that lined one whole wall of the office.

Diana stood up, straightened her back, put her hands on her hips, and said, "We'll get something going pretty quickly. I just hope we can head them off before deals get firmed-up. And you're right about Judson Sparks, Lorelei. We'll need to keep our eye on him. I heard

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

that Sparks, Valdez, and Keezer all belonged to the same fraternity in college.”

“What can I do?” I asked.

She looked at me for a moment, “How about preparing an action alert to email to our members? And also a news release. Something about an environmental coalition forming under Dalton Ames direction. I’m sure he’ll approve it.”

Without awaiting a response, Diana walked back into her office. I felt emotionally jarred, and aware that my neck and shoulders ached. As soon as Diana went back in her office, Becky stopped rifling through the files, and turned to me as I leaned back in my chair for a long stretch. Her mouth was working as though she wanted to say something but hadn’t decided how.

Finally, she announced, in a whisper, “I think we need to get Jeff Waterman up here.” She looked from me to Diana’s office door and back.

I broke my stretch at the sound of Jeffrey’s name. How weird; I thought, I had been thinking of him again, on the drive in. Remembering the times we sat at the Brown Derby bar. The same bar where the murdered girl had sat.

Becky rushed over to my desk. She bent down, and said very quietly, “Remember how good he was at organizing the whole Jonesville protest? What do you think, Lorelei? I know you could talk Diana into asking him.”

Ask Jeffrey to come back here from Orlando? What an outrageous idea, I thought. “Why do you even think he’d be interested?” I asked and realized my mouth had gone dry. “He’s been gone so many years.”

“Oh, we’re still in touch. Of course he’d want to be involved. He loves the Prairie.”

“I don’t know, Becky.” I appeared to give the idea some consideration. “Bringing Jeffrey Waterman up here would make things more stressful than they already are.” Now that’s an understatement, I thought, and I found my heart beating rapidly at the mere thought of seeing him again.

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

Diana stood at her office door and glared at Becky. “Did I hear Jeff Waterman’s name? That loose cannon? Forgive me, Lorelei, but thank goodness he’s not around to declare war.”

I shrugged, seeming to be indifferent to her comment.

She said, “I’m still trying to overcome the damage he did our reputation because of his tactics at Jonesville. Where are those files, Becky? We need to get going.”

Looking defeated, Becky returned to the file cabinet.

“I’m going home to work. I need some fresh air and time to think about all of this,” I said gathering my mail and stuffing it into my handbag. “Keep me posted if you hear anything else.”

I approached Becky on my way out the door, and whispered, “Becky, you’ll just get Diana more riled up if you call Jeffrey in on this. Really, like I said, it would complicate things right now. Please. Just don’t do it.”

Becky didn’t look up from the files, and gave me a non-committal grunt as I left the office.

I drove back home on automatic pilot. I was reflecting on Valdez, and on the threat to my peace if Becky failed to heed my warning about calling Jeffrey. Micanopy is just 10 miles south of Gainesville, and I soon re-crossed the Prairie basin. The gators had withdrawn or the Park Rangers had somehow managed to get them off the road, and the traffic was moving more quickly.

My feelings began shifting as I took a deep breath, and was calmed by sight of the tall pines, moss draped oaks, and dense shrubs that shaded both sides of the highway. I lowered my car windows to experience the forested air made fresher by the tropical storm that had touched the Gulf coast and crossed the North Florida peninsula.

“Lorelei, whatever will you do if Jeffrey shows up?” I said, sighing deeply.

I recalled Bill’s question, before we went to sleep last night. He had asked, “Honey, how are we going to celebrate our 10th anniversary? You know it’s coming up next month.”

I had put him off. Celebrate? I thought. What’s to celebrate? A house, a cat, and occasional love-making? That’s all we’d come to share as Bill’s professorial life and my so-called career as an actress

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

had caused our schedules, and our lives to diverge. And now, I worried, what impact would Jeffrey have if he were to suddenly appear on the scene?

Chapter 2

Two hours of yoga helped me to get centered, and push back my tangle of thoughts about Bill, Jeffrey, and Valdez. I took my laptop out on to the screened patio that adjoined our kitchen, and spent the afternoon working on press releases and an email campaign.

The whirr of the ceiling fan and the warm air made me drowsy as I paused to study the beauty of the woods, and the yellow sulfur butterflies that flitted among the shrubs. As I was envying their lightness of being, I experienced a stab of dread. It felt like a premonition of something terrible—something that would arise from the morning’s events.

After a light supper, I went upstairs and spent the night in bed. I distracted myself by studying a book of Chekhov plays in preparation for our upcoming production. I was already asleep when I felt Bill crawl into the bed beside me.

“Long first day of classes,” he murmured in my ear. He lightly kissed my shoulder, and turned over to his side of the bed.

By Tuesday morning, the feeling of dread had subsided. I headed out the door still preoccupied with thoughts about Jeffrey and about the Prairie development, and I stumbled over our calico cat, who Bill had named “Maynard” after the economist, John Maynard Keynes. Maynard let out a protesting squeal and fled toward the kitchen before I could pick him up and apologize.

On the drive in, the threat of a ruinous development on the Prairie’s edge made me slow down to inspect the basin more closely. It was a sheet of water dotted with intermittent patches of tall shrubs and small trees. The sun bounced off of it with quick flashes of light. The water apparently was draining back into the Alachua Sink, the opening to the aquifer on the other side of the basin.

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

Yesterday's flooding made it easy to imagine its colorful history as a lake with boats and steamboat traffic when it was plugged up as recently as the late 1870's and 80's. Harder to grasp was that the Prairie basin was a more than 17,000 acre giant sinkhole caused by the collapse of underground limestone caverns, and that this geo-hydrologic activity was still continuing. What a unique place, I thought, and how worthy of our fight to preserve it.

I parked the car and entered the Center office.

"Diana's not in yet this morning. At the Sheriff's office," Becky replied, without her customary cheerful greeting.

"Oh no," I said. "Is it her son, Hank, again?"

"Dunno," she said, without looking up.

Okay, I thought, as I moved toward my desk. Becky's in a mood and Diana's going to be distressed. Gloom ahead. Definitely a Chekhovian day.

"Is that the one and only Lorelei Waterman? The famous actress?"

My head jerked up in the direction of the voice, and I felt a shock wave slam into my body. There he was: lean build, long straight black hair covered by a baseball cap, and the familiar cocky smile on his tanned face. He bowed, with his arms outstretched, and rose to complete the theatrical cliché with a "Ta Da!"

He started walking toward me and said, "Hey, babe. Surprised to see me?"

"Jeffrey? What are you doing here?" My low pitched, almost raspy voice came out sounding shrill.

"Didn't Becky tell you?" He stopped and turned to look at Becky.

I shot her an angry look, but her head was down. She was carefully ignoring both of us.

"I left Orlando last night," he said. "After I talked with her. Sounded like you guys needed some help." He moved closer, sat on the edge of an empty desk, and folded his arms across his chest as he looked down at me with a self-satisfied grin.

I noted the wisps of gray in his sideburns. "In case your brain has failed you, my married name is Crane. Lorelei *Woodington* Crane."

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

His appearance still had me stunned. Despite his still youthful good looks there was something dissipated about his face, and he looked thinner than I remembered him. He was dressed in hiking boots, cargo shorts, and a faded t-shirt that said “Don’t Worry; Be Hopi.”

“I know. I know,” he said. “Just wanted to get your attention...in case you didn’t remember me.” He gave me his fakey boyish look, but I resisted responding to it. “So, aren’t you glad to see me? It’s been quite a while.”

“Of course, I’m surprised to see you.” It was a lie, and I glared at Becky. Yet, at some level I had fully expected to see him, maybe ever since I had thought of him yesterday morning. “Bill asks me, from time to time, if I’ve heard from you.”

“I’ll bet,” he said. “How is the great professor? Still training kids to run the corporate kingdom?”

I ignored his taunt. I tried to regain control of my labored breathing and hoped he didn’t notice it.

“How did you manage to leave Orlando so quickly? Aren’t you working?” I asked.

He made no reply, and walked around the area as if he were looking for something. He picked up items from each of the desks, studied them for a moment, and then dropped them back in place. I followed his movements with fascination, and remembered how much kinetic energy he possessed. He never could sit still.

Finally, he faced me and said, “You didn’t answer my question.”

“And you didn’t answer mine,” I replied sharply.

“Fair enough,” he said. “First mine. How are you and Billy boy? Becky keeps me up-to-date with my Gainesville buddies but...”

“Bill and I are doing just fine,” I said. Saying Bill’s name made me relax a little. I took a couple of deep breaths and my heartbeat slowed down to almost normal. “He travels a lot but...”

“And leaves you all alone?” He gave me an appreciative glance and said, “You still look like the hottest old lady I’ve ever met.”

“Cut the old lady stuff, Jeffrey. You’re only six years younger than me. And frankly, you look like you’re catching up fast.”

He shrugged.

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

“It’s my turn now, why are you really here?”

“I had to come,” he said. “You know how I feel about the Prairie. I couldn’t resist. Just the thought of the two of us in the good fight again. We were great together, you know.” He gave me a meaningful look and moved to the side of my desk.

I stood up defensively, stepped behind my chair, and held onto it. At 5’7”, I was only a couple of inches shorter than he. We stood facing each other with the chair as a buffer. My breathing had become shallow, and my bravado quickly faded. I became swept up by the fragrance of his favorite bath soap, and the soulful look in his large black eyes.

“What are you so nervous about, Lor?” he said softly. “It’s just me.” He gave me a sweet smile, but a hint of sadness crept into his eyes.

I gripped the chair back more tightly, took another deep breath, and searched for something to say that would break the spell between us.

“So you’re here to pull another Jonesville stunt?” I said it harshly, as a taunt. “Things are different now.” I looked down to see that my knuckles were white and my hands felt clammy.

“Okay, I get the picture.” He raised his hands in surrender, giving up more quickly than I had expected. The moment of intimacy had been shattered.

He stepped back, leaned against a desk, and eyed me before saying in a lighter tone. “How about let’s start with lunch and you can fill me in? Where can we get a slice of pizza and a cold brew? I haven’t had good pizza since I left Gainesville—what, 8-9 years ago?” He looked over to Becky for confirmation. She was still working as though she was alone in the office—playing like the proverbial three monkeys.

I sat back down, put on my glasses, and started to rifle through the mail. “Pizza and beer? I swear, Jeffrey. You still haven’t grown up, have you?”

“I’ve just kept the boyish charm you used to like so much,” he said.

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

I rolled my eyes and sighed, “Get serious. This Valdez thing is huge. I’d pretty much do anything, short of murder, to stop them. Correction, I think I could commit murder...I’m so damn mad at the thought of it. So, as long as you’re here, I hope you have some brilliant ideas to put into the pot.”

“Speaking of pot, Red, any good “Gainesville Green” still around?” I blushed at his use of this familiar name. He was the only one, since my childhood, who called me by my hair color.

Becky and I both giggled at his question as the front door opened and Diana walked in. She didn’t seem to notice Jeffrey.

“I have to take Hank to Teen Court,” she said in a flat tone, as she checked the in-box on Becky’s desk for phone messages. “He got caught with marijuana at school and maybe worse. I don’t know yet. He’s not talking much.” She was speaking to Becky, who had finally looked up from her computer. Then Diana turned and paused a moment as she gave me and Jeffrey a look of disbelief.

“Jeff Waterman? What are you doing here?” Diana stood rigid, placed her hands on her hips, her disbelief turning to anger. “Not in my wildest dreams did I think you’d have the nerve to show your face in my office again. I want you out of here. Right now!”

She slammed her hand flat down on Becky’s desk knocking over a pen holder. Becky immediately crouched down to pick up the scattered pens and pencils, leaving me and Jeffrey in Diana’s line of fire.

Now, wait a minute, Diana.” Jeffrey hunched over in a placating stance and slowly approached her. “I know I have some explaining, apologizing even...”

“Explain? Apologize? Indeed. How do you explain completely derailing my negotiations with those Jonesville developers? It took me a long time to rebuild the respect our organization has always enjoyed.”

“Okay. Point taken. Me and my buddies—yes, we pulled some dirty tricks—messed up their construction site, and things got out of hand. But at least it put the issue and the Center in the news. You’ve got to admit...”

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

“No. It wasn’t sensational publicity, but the persistent efforts of our Board of Directors and volunteers that finally won that battle. Not you and your hooligan friends in EcoSave!”

Jeffrey looked down for a moment, folded his hands contritely, and glanced from me to Becky as if trying to enlist our assistance.

Finally he said, “Please. That was almost a decade ago. I’ve changed. I think I can really help you now. And you know I have a special feeling for the Prairie. Hell, I don’t want to see it ruined.”

“Oh, really?” She said. “And just how do you think you can help?”

Her face was set in a scowl.

Jeffrey turned again, and looked pleadingly at me. But I averted my eyes, and sat back down at my desk. This was between the two of them, and I felt relieved by the break from his intensity and my own unruly emotions.

“Diana, I think I know a way to beat back Valdez. It’s why I came up here.”

Diana paused and eyed him suspiciously. “And just what might that be?”

“There have been some serious rumors about Valdez in Orlando.” Jeffrey started to pace back and forth while he talked. “Well, more specifically, about their financial situation. And of course, they’re still notorious for the big fracas in Miami. But this time...”

“Rumors? How do you think rumors will help us?” Diana asked.

“What if we could pin them down, and dig up some serious shit—I mean dirt—wouldn’t that be to our advantage? To totally discredit them?” He stopped pacing and looked at the three of us.

“Yes, it could give us some leverage,” Diana conceded. I saw her considering the idea. Her body relaxed, and she gave Jeffrey an interested look.

“So, what do you think? Can I work with you guys on this?” Jeffrey asked.

Diana paused before responding. She looked him over, and I wondered if she too was noticing the ways in which he had aged.

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

“Okay,” she said. “But it must be our way: with facts not...dirty tricks. Do you understand?”

Jeffrey ducked his head at her reference. “Yes. Your way,” he said. “I want to rebuild the trust we had, and maybe pay you back for the trouble I caused.”

“I sure hope you have changed. We have built good working relationships with the development community. For the most part, our local developers are sensitive to ecological issues. And when you and your EcoSave! gang pulled those stunts at Jonesville...”

“I’ll have to go back down to Orlando to do a little snooping around,” Jeffrey said as he rested his elbow on a nearby file cabinet. “For starters, I have a very good friend who works at the water management district.

“Swift-Mud?” Becky said.

“What?” Diana asked. She looked like she was already absorbed in the implications of Jeffrey’s plan.

“Our little joke,” Jeffrey replied. “The Southwest Florida Water Management District...we call it Swift-Mud.”

“Yes, of course,” Diana said absently.

“Anyway,” Jeffrey continued, “my friend Louisa is the one who told me about the rumors. I’ll call her now. Is there a phone in that little office?” He pointed to our storage area cum office at the back of the room.

Becky nodded, but Jeffrey looked to Diana for approval.

“Go ahead, you can use it,” she said.

When Jeffrey left to make his call, Diana said, “You know, if Jeff can come up with something really serious, it might give the Commission a basis to revoke their permit.”

The phone rang. Becky answered and handed it over to Diana, “It’s Dr. Ames.”

Diana took the phone. “Hello, Dalton, any news?” She listened, nodding in agreement.

After she hung up, she looked squarely at Becky and me, smoothed the waist of her skirt, and announced in her business-like voice, “That’s it. Dalton says that Crawford Keezer is scheduled to make a presentation tomorrow afternoon at the County Commission

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

meeting. He suggested that we pack the meeting room with our people. He wants the Commission to know that we're watching this thing very closely."

"Why would Keezer even go before the Commission if he already has a permit?" I asked.

"Probably because he knows this project is a public relations nightmare and he's trying to do damage control up front." Jeffrey reentered the room as he spoke. "Anyway, I couldn't find my friend. She's at some meeting in Tallahassee and not answering her cell. I'll try her again tonight."

Diana started to make some notes at Becky's desk.

"Jeffrey, you mentioned something about Valdez in Miami. I don't think I ever heard the particulars," I said.

Jeffrey rubbed his hands together, took a deep breath, and said, "Here's the short story: It seems that the Sierra Club and some allied groups created a publicity campaign to stop Valdez from getting a land use variance for a pet project of theirs. The land was at the edge of the Everglades. Sierra got a bit too passionate, and printed some personal stuff that made Jimmy Valdez look bad. Sierra also got some high powered attorneys who ultimately succeeded in stopping the project. Valdez retaliated with a law suit for slander, etcetera, etcetera."

"And tell her about the fire," Becky said.

"Oh yeah, a couple of months after the whole thing had settled down, the Sierra Club's office was burned to the ground. It was arson, but they never proved who did it."

"Wow," I said. "Sounds like the Valdez Company is scarier than I thought."

Diana looked up and made a dismissive gesture. "Some of that's nothing more than rumor. In any case," she turned to Jeffrey, "we need your information quickly. Keezer only has to meet with the County's Development Resources Committee before Valdez begins major land clearing. That's only a week or two away." She went into her office.

"So, Red..." Jeffrey walked over to me.

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

“Look, Jeffrey. Unlike you, who apparently is not currently employed, I have a job to do here. And I’ve got to leave in about a half an hour to get over to the theater. So please, just do whatever it is you do, and leave me alone. And you, you little twerp,” I said, pointing at Becky. She appeared genuinely contrite.

“Lorelei, I promise you. I didn’t tell him to come. I only...”

“We’ll talk about this later,” I cut her off and turned to my computer screen, ignoring both of them.

“Anyway, about lunch?” Jeffrey asked. “I really could use a beer right now.”

“Not with me. Not today,” I said and started to close down my computer.

He looked disappointed, and turned to Becky. “How about you, Beck? You do get unchained for lunch, don’t you?”

Becky stopped working, leaned back in her chair and stretched out her arms and legs. As she jumped to her feet she said, “Definitely, Jeff. Cool. Let’s go over to Charley’s. Some of your old buds will probably be there around now.”

Becky stood by her desk, and completed her stretching. She was dressed in her usual attire: clunky shoes, hip hugger jeans, and a short blousy top. When she bent down, you could see a scroll of flowery body tattoos across the base of her spine.

“Lorelei, will you tell Diana I’ve gone?” Becky said, waving her hand toward me as the two of them left the office. I realized how hungry I was, as I rifled through my desk drawers until I found a stale bag of salted peanuts. I ate the peanuts, but resolved to bring better snacks into work.

I gathered my stuff to go, and on my way out, I stopped in Diana’s office. She was talking on the telephone, staring out the window with her back to me, and unaware of my presence. I scribbled a note on her desk and left.

Driving back to Micanopy, I inadvertently turned off onto Archer Road and found myself in Shands Hospital traffic. My mind was spinning with memories of Jeffrey. We had lived in a townhouse off of Archer near the University until I got pregnant.

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

I pulled onto a side street and parked the car to regain my composure. Dammit, I thought, what's he doing back in my life? When Jeffrey first appeared at the office, I had the same excited feeling as when I first met him at an environmental rally a hundred years before.

“Get a grip, Lorelei.” I said aloud, and I turned back onto SW 13th street. I made a quick stop at the theater to pick up the Chekhov script, and headed for home. On the way, I reviewed my plan of attack in studying the play, and pushed back thoughts of Jeffrey. I reasoned that, with any luck, I wouldn't be in the office often enough to run into him.

Chapter 3

There was a line of traffic backed up at the southbound entrance to the Prairie basin. I saw the whirling lights atop Sheriff's cars and the yellow crime scene tape. Someone attacked by a gator? Or maybe even a suicide. The Prairie was known as the site for all sorts of dramatic events. It was so wild and vast, and so easy to hide anything. As I drew nearer to the scene, I let my window down to talk with a Deputy who was directing traffic.

"What's going on, Officer?" I asked.

"Some joker robbed a bank in town," he replied. "We gave him a chase and he threw his weapon out the window here before we caught up with him. Our dive team is going down to look for it."

"What about alligators? Is it safe down there?" Gators were always my first concern on the Prairie.

"Safe as can be," he replied. "It's their job." He motioned me to move ahead and directed the car behind to follow me.

At home, I walked into the dark kitchen, and just as I switched on the light, the phone rang.

"Honey?" It was Bill. "I'm glad I caught you. I won't be home until after nine, maybe later. I agreed to meet with some doc students after class tonight and..."

"Oh, Bill. I'm so glad to hear your voice. You won't believe what happened today."

He sound rushed as he continued, "Just wanted to let you know. We'll talk later. The Department budget meeting's starting, and it's really important. Bye, sweetheart."

"But, Bill..." The phone was dead.

What a life, I thought, as I finished opening a can of cat food and placed it in Maynard's bowl.

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

“Thank God, we have only you, dear Maynard. What if we did have children? We simply wouldn’t have time for them.” *Jeffrey*, I thought. No, don’t go there, I warned myself.

I popped a Lean Cuisine into the microwave. Maynard jumped into the wooden bowl on the oak table and began to wash himself. I started making a salad.

“Can you believe it, Maynard? Jeffrey just showing up like that? Ouch!” I cried, stared at the blood spurt from my finger, and dropped the paring knife. “Dammit, Lorelei, how can you be so clumsy?” I rushed to the sink, ran cold water on my hand, and pressed the cut until it stopped bleeding.

I read *The New York Times* theater section while I ate dinner. Afterwards, I called my young fellow actress, Cassie Woodruff. We agreed to meet for a quick lunch the next day since I had to come into town for the County Commission meeting. I grabbed some fruit and went upstairs to read the script revisions I’d picked up at the theater.

Bill got home about 10:30. I told him about the Valdez project, and Jeffrey’s unexpected appearance.

“So Waterman showed up, like the Calvary, huh? Interesting. It’s been a lot of years since we’ve heard from him, right?” He looked at me, waiting to judge my response.

“C’mon, Bill. You know Jeffrey was passionate about Paynes Prairie. I should have expected him to be here.”

“Well, I hope that’s the only passion he’s arrived with,” Bill said, as he got up and entered our large walk-in closet to undress.

I was taken aback by this hint of jealousy, and a bit pleased to hear it.

“We have a real crisis on our hands. Diana says...”

“Crisis? A little dramatic, isn’t it?” Bill returned, buttoning his pajama top, and sat down on my side of the bed. “Look at it from a different angle. Everyone knows we need more housing here. The whole state’s population just goes on growing. What is it now? About a thousand people a day moving into Florida? It’s inevitable that developers will want to build on whatever land they can buy at a decent price. What’s wrong with that?”

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

“Save the business rationale for your students! We’re talking about the rim of Paynes Prairie—not just some piece of property. It’s a place that’s unique in the entire world.”

For a moment, Bill looked shocked by the intensity of my response. He didn’t reply, but impassively shrugged his shoulders, got up, and walked into the bathroom. I followed him in, and we stood, side by side, in front of the mirror at our double sinks.

“Lorelei, remember when you first came here, and we took a tour of the Prairie? The guide told us it had been a cattle ranch for hundreds of years until the State bought most of it in 1970, and started to restore it as a historic marshland. A few buildings sitting at the edge isn’t going to change anything so much is it?” He started brushing his teeth.

“You still don’t understand, do you?” I asked.

“Honey, really, I’m not trying to make light of your concern. I just think you should lighten up a bit. You make everything sound so—well, so dramatic.”

“Well, I am an actress you know,” I said, my anger dissipating. I teasingly bumped him with my hip. “You said my dramatic flair was exciting when you seduced me in New York. You proposed only three weeks later.”

I saw his lips curl into a smile. “I guess I did find that part of you pretty attractive. Still do,” he added, with a wink.

As I creamed my face, I studied him in the mirror. Bill was just over six feet tall and a bit flabby—he thought exercise a waste of time. His handsome squarish face, broad forehead, and perpetually thoughtful look gave visible truth to his student’s nickname for him, “Cranium Crane.” A lock of blonde hair hung over his forehead, distracting from his receding hairline and making him, at 54 years old, still appear oddly boyish.

“What?” Bill asked, pushing the hair back off his forehead.

“Do you still find me attractive?” I asked, staring at my own reflection with satisfaction—almond shaped hazel eyes, a youthful complexion, and shoulder length red hair hung in shaggy layers around my face.

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

He moved behind me, rubbed his hands up the sides of my nightgown, and rested them on my shoulders. “Honey, you look as good to me as any of those glamorous stars on the award shows you always watch on TV.”

“Right answer,” I said.

“So, will you be working with him?” Bill was watching my reflection in the mirror. His face became suddenly serious.

“Jeffrey? I shouldn’t have too much to do with him. I work away from the office most of the time. Really, darling, don’t worry.”

I returned to the bedroom, and propped myself up in bed waiting for him to join me. As he left the bathroom, I said, “Naturally, I can’t help thinking about what happened between me and Jeffrey all those years ago. But then it did turn out for the best, didn’t it? If not for that last terrible year, I might never have had the courage to go to New York and...”

“We might never have met,” Bill replied.

“Yes, of course.” But I was thinking more about the chance it gave me to try out the life of a professional actress.

“And, of course, there was your career,” he said, as if reading my mind. He picked up a stack of business journals from the floor, and sat down on his side of the bed.

I studied him, in his characteristically rapt attention, as he reviewed the contents of each journal, and carefully inserted post-it notes in the articles he wanted to read.

I remembered how he had come into my life at just the time when I was desperately trying to survive as an actress in New York. It was my third year there, and I felt increasingly alone as most of the friends I made through acting class had already given up and returned home. The darkness of the winter days had become unbearable, I started to have flashbacks to the accident, and later began to experience panic attacks.

Bill and I met at an Academy of Management conference. I was working as a temp at the registration table. We dated every night during the conference. He seemed fascinated by everything about the theatrical world. When he returned to Gainesville, we talked on the

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

phone every day, and in three weeks he flew back to New York and proposed.

I found Bill attractive, even sexy in a way. Although my overwhelming feeling toward him was gratitude. He became my childhood knight in shining armor who would carry me back to sunny Florida, and to a stable married life. If Jeffrey had been immature and impulsive, Bill was his opposite. He was older, established, and predictable to a comforting degree.

“Ready to turn off the light?” he asked, breaking into my reverie.

“Yes, darling,” I replied, snuggling close to him.

“You will tell me if Jeff starts coming on to you, won’t you?”

“Yes, darling,” I said.

“Good,” he said, as we both turned off our lights.

I lay in Bill’s arms, and already felt trapped in a lie about Jeffrey. The past couple of days had taken such weird and improbable turns—all the startling events on the Prairie, the threat posed by the Valdez Company, Jeffrey’s reappearance in my life, and in a final ironic twist, our production of *The Cherry Orchard*—a play about cutting down trees. Life imitating art imitating life? It all felt so crazy, I thought, as I drifted into sleep.

Wednesday morning, I got an early start at Gainesville Health and Fitness. After my workout, I showered and changed into a pair of black slacks and my favorite Chico’s emerald green striped shirt with a matching jacket. I drove downtown, parked in the garage, and made my way to the new Asian restaurant where I was meeting Cassie.

She waved to me from a small table in the corner of the dimly lit room. As I approached, her beautiful classic face broke into a dimpled smile. Cassie could have been a cosmetics model. She had lustrous blonde hair, blue eyes, and a complexion women spent fortunes to achieve. Yet, despite her beauty, there was something childlike about her. She was modest and unfailingly kind, two traits said to be a rarity in our competitive profession.

I bent down and gave her a hug before seating myself at the table.

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

"I've just come from the gym, and I'm famished," I said.

"Here, Lor, have some of my salad," she shoved the dish toward me, and motioned for the waiter. I took a few bites before he came for my order.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said. "I've been a wreck about this play. I don't know if I can do it. I mean I've never done anything as serious as Chekhov."

"Yes, I'm a bit intimidated myself," I said. "There is something terrifying about doing a classic. Everyone has their own idea as to what it should be like."

"But, you've done major roles, even Shakespeare. I've always played the ingénue. I mean frothy little roles, you know?"

"Hey, don't complain," I said. "You'll still be getting parts when I'll be lucky to play an occasional granny. Did you ever see Julie Harris?" She looked at me blankly. "A great actress with looks like yours. And she still got roles as young women when she was in her 50's."

"Okay, I get the point. But still it frustrates me that—well, here's *The Cherry Orchard*. Guess what they're going to give me?"

"Any, of course," I replied. "You're a natural for it."

"Right, the young daughter—self-centered, frivolous—the usual. See what I mean?"

"You'll be wonderful," I said, and looked up to see the waiter serve the ginger tofu stir-fry I ordered. "And it's a major role. Imagine! Meryl only got to play the maid when she did *The Cherry Orchard* in New York."

Both Cassie and I adored Meryl Streep.

Cassie smiled. "The part isn't my real concern. I'm used to being type-cast." She poked her fork in the air to make the point, "it's with Chekhov—he's so damn morbid, and the characters are always so bored with their lives. Who's going to want to see a play about the Russian revolution, the aristocracy, serfs, and all that period stuff?"

"We'll see," I said. "The play notes say some directors stage it as a farce...you know, the heavy sighs and long pauses. In fact, Chekhov himself thought it was a comedy. It'll be interesting to see Renee's concept."

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

We speculated further on the casting, and agreed I would probably get the role of Cassie's mother, Lyubov Ranevsky, owner of the estate. I had been given leading roles in the last couple of productions.

After lunch, Cassie and I parted with promises to meet again after Sunday's first read thru. I walked over to the County Courthouse for the commission meeting, and met Diana and Jeffrey at the elevator.

We entered the commission chamber, and nodded greetings to a number of fellow environmentalists already seated on the long polished wooden benches that lined the room. We found seats on an aisle in the middle row. I sat next to Diana and Jeffrey climbed over the two of us in order to sit next to me.

It was the first time I had been to a commission meeting. I looked around the dimly lit wood paneled room with its raised platform where the commissioners sat. There was a buzz of conversations, people being greeted as they entered the chamber and some simply standing and talking to one another. It reminded me of a courtroom before the judge appeared.

"I hope more people show up," I whispered to Diana as I pulled my jacket closed. "At least it would warm the place up. Why do public buildings have to be so cold?"

"To keep the commissioners awake," Jeffrey quipped.

"Did you reach your friend at Swift-Mud, as you call it?" Diana asked leaning toward Jeffrey.

He shook his head and said, "I'll keep trying."

He leaned back, and put his arm on the bench behind me. I gave him a look, but his attention was innocently focused on the podium.

Diana got up to greet Dalton Ames at the door. He was a short, muscular man with heavy dark eyebrows that always appeared to be knit into a frown. He reminded me of a gentle gnome. Dr. Dalton Ames, a retired distinguished professor who established the Center for Environmental Policy, was the charismatic dean of the environmental community.

"So, what was Bill's reaction to me being in town and working with you?" Jeffrey asked, as he moved closer to me.

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

“Bill? Oh, he’s fine with the idea,” I said, and felt the warmth of Jeffrey’s body next to mine. “By the way, where are you staying while you’re here? You never said.”

“With Becky,” he replied. “She has the room and invited me for the duration. Why?”

I felt my face flush, and I moved slightly away from him, hoping he wouldn’t notice my reaction. Fortunately, at that moment the seven commissioners and staff filed in to take their seats, and the conversations diminished to a murmur.

Diana returned to her seat, and I slid back against Jeffrey to make room for her. As I did so I felt his body tense, and I glanced sideways at him. His attention was riveted on the dais. He looked as though something had grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him straight up in his seat.

Chairman Sparks struck his gavel. He was a wiry looking man with a black goatee. His face wore an anxious look as he peered out at the crowd, and he fidgeted with papers until there was silence.

The meeting began with an open forum for public comments. Several people went to the speaker’s podium to present ideas or request the commission’s action on one thing and another. There were knowing laughs from the audience when one of the petitioners announced he wanted the commission to revoke all the rental permits from student houses in his neighborhood.

“These kids act like they were raised in a barn,” he said. “There’s garbage and broken furniture in the front yards, and on the weekends the whole block reeks of beer. Talking to them does no good. They have no respect.”

The chairman referred him to his neighborhood association for advice, and moved the agenda to the scheduled speakers.

Another half hour passed before Crawford Keezer was called up. I turned to see him as he strode to the podium from the rear of the room. I could almost feel the air vibrate with energy as he passed our row of seats, and I caught the strong aroma of a musky men’s cologne. Keezer was about 6’2” with the build of a football player. He had salt and pepper white hair that was long in the back, and he wore chino slacks and a casual tan jacket.

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

“Mr. Chairman, my name is Crawford Keezer, and I’m here for the Valdez Construction Company of Boca Raton.” His voice was deep with an appealing Southern drawl.

Diana poked me in the ribs and whispered, “Now, remember what I told you: Keezer and Sparks were college fraternity brothers. Let’s see what shenanigans they’re going to pull.”

“Oh grand,” I said, and nudged Jeffrey, “we’re about to have a bit of theater.” But when I turned to him he just nodded, and kept staring at the platform.

“Mr. Chairman and Commissioners,” Keezer continued. “As you probably know, some of you being in the real estate business, the Valdez Company owns a large parcel of land here for which we have long held a building permit.”

Judson Sparks nodded absently, but the other commissioners were paying close attention.

“We are ready to activate that permit,” said Keezer.

Some members of the audience let out a low hissing sound, and Mr. Sparks hit his gavel to quell it.

Keezer continued. “Now I realize we really don’t need the commission’s approval to get started, but...” he paused and turned to face the audience. He had a wide bent looking nose and thick white mustache that narrowed at the edge of his lips. He flashed an engaging smile at the audience before turning back to face the platform.

“As I said, we could begin building pretty soon, but we came here today to let you and the community...” He stressed the word, and paused for emphasis as he spread his arms out in an embracing gesture, “We want all y’all to know what our intentions are with this project. We think you’ll be very pleased with what you hear.”

“Yes, but please be brief. We have a long agenda.” Sparks sounded inexplicably irritated, and began to bite on a hang nail as he listened to Keezer’s pitch.

“Now this here is going to be a model low to medium income housing development,” he said.

There were snickers in the audience at the word model.

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

“We’ve applied for a federal grant, and are following some projects that have already been successful in California.”

A heckler from the rear shouted, “Bet they didn’t build ‘em in their state parks.”

The Chair rapped his gavel, “Please, give Mr. Keezer a chance to tell us about his project.”

There was more talking in the audience, but everyone finally quieted down.

“As I was saying...well, let me tell you about some of the features. First of all, we’re making it easy for folks to move in, there’ll be flexible leasing agreements, and furniture rental. Next, we’ll have supervised recreation for teens, including a state of the art computer lab so students have a place to do their homework. For the young’uns there’ll be a low-cost on-site day care center.”

“Sounds too good to be true,” said one of the people sitting on the front row.

Keezer continued, “But it is true. And here’s the last innovation I want you to know about: the development will have a resident chef and catering department to prepare take-out lunches for the children and dinners that can be purchased by families. Now, they do that in California,” he said, turning to look at the audience. “And ain’t that something we’d all like to have? This is going to be a truly caring community.”

“Too good to be true usually isn’t either,” said a woman in the front row who stood up to face Keezer. “Your so-called caring community will destroy one of the most pristine places in all Florida.”

“Madam,” Keezer said, unperturbed by her comment. “Valdez assures you that this will be an exemplary development in every way. That means we will protect the fragile environment, and may even improve it.”

“What a snow job,” Jeffrey finally turned to Diana and me, “It makes me want to puke.” He sat back, took a deep breath, and finally seemed to awaken from his silent watch.

“Excuse me, Commissioner Sparks, but I have a question for our county manager.” It was the newly elected commissioner who spoke.

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

“How is it possible for the Valdez Company to exercise a building permit on land that is now a state preserve?”

There was a buzz of approval in the room as the question lingered in the air for several moments. All eyes turned to the county manager. He cast a worried glance at Sparks, and slowly replied that the permit had been granted with no expiration, and thus, he said, took precedence over the state’s designation.

The commissioner who raised the question said to Sparks, “I’m not convinced he’s right. And, I think this is of sufficient importance to warrant further investigation by the manager and our attorney.”

Several commissioners nodded their heads in agreement, and the audience broke into applause.

Sparks rapped his gavel, glared at the audience, but finally gave his approval for the investigation.

“The county manager is instructed to report back to this commission, in no later than two weeks’ time, affirming the legitimacy of the Valdez permit,” he said. He then turned to Keezer. “Thank you for coming here today, Mr. Keezer. Your project does indeed sound like a needed addition to our housing community. I’m certain the matter of your permit will be resolved quickly. In the meantime, you will, of course, be clearing all of your plans with the appropriate county boards.” He hit his gavel, and called for a 10 minute break.

Keezer immediately approached the podium, and engaged in an animated conversation with Sparks as the other commissioners filed out for the break. The room began to empty.

“You see that?” Diana said to Dalton Ames who was now standing next to us. “I think that’s in violation of the Sunshine Law. They shouldn’t be talking privately like that.”

Dalton nodded agreement, and took a small notebook from his pocket to write in. “Well, no need to hang around now,” he said. “At least we know how they plan to lure the community into supporting their plan. Model development, indeed. I’d be surprised if they provided half of what he’s described.”

“You’re right, Dalton. We’ve got to stop them,” Diana said.

“It’s an ecological disaster in the making,” Jeffrey added.

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

Dalton reached out and pressed Diana's hand in his. "We'll do it. Don't you worry," he said, and gave her a quick smile before moving away to talk with other activists in the back of the room.

Diana, Jeffrey, and I began to leave the chamber, and I looked back to see that neither Sparks nor Keezer were still in the room. When we reached the elevator area I saw Sparks walking down the hallway in the opposite direction from us. Diana called out to him. Sparks turned and, instead of looking at her, stared directly at Jeffrey. At first he looked puzzled, and then frightened. He quickly lowered his head and pushed through the crowd into the commission's private offices.

How strange, I thought, and turned to see Jeffrey's reaction.

"What was that about?" I asked him. "Do you know Sparks?"

Jeffrey paused before responding. He frowned, and his face took on a cold, closed look. It was one I had never before seen on him. "Well...not really," he replied. "He just reminds me of someone, that's all."

I didn't believe him.

Diana chuckled and said, "Sparks probably was scared off at the sight of three environmentalists closing in on him. I was going to dig him about his conversation with Keezer. But we'll catch up with him another time. I need to get back to the office and ready for tomorrow's board meeting."

The three of us walked together to the parking garage. Jeffrey and I stopped at his truck, and Diana continued up the ramp to her car.

Jeffrey said, "How about going for a drink with me, Lor? We could beat the crowd at Lillian's."

"Sorry, Jeffrey, but I've got some errands to run, and then I'm meeting Bill. He's working late tonight and..."

"Are you avoiding being alone with me, Lor? That's the message I'm starting to get. If it's true, I'll just stop asking." He stood so close to me that I could feel his breath on my face.

"No, no, really." I said, stepping back from him. "It's just that I'm busy. Honestly, Jeffrey." He didn't look convinced, but I wasn't

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

ready to be alone with him. “I’ll take a rain check, but I’ve got to go now. Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow—at the office.”

I started walking to my car, expecting he would be persistent and follow me. Instead, when I turned, he was still standing in place. His shoulders drooped, and he had a half sad, half confused look on his face. I raised my arm and waved, and quickly walked on without turning again.

Once inside my car, I turned on the ignition, and the air conditioner shot out a blast of cold air that bathed my face and shocked away the tears that had begun to well up in my eyes. What is happening to me, and what am I going to do about you, Jeffrey? I took several deep breaths.

I was startled to hear the tinny musical phrase coming from the cell phone buried in my handbag. I searched for the phone and answered. It was Bill.

“Hi, sweetheart. How was the meeting? Anything earthshaking?”

“Oh, hi, Bill. I’ll tell you about it when I see you. We’re still meeting downtown at Starbucks, right?”

“I’m afraid I can’t make it today, sweetheart. My grad assistant is here and we’re still working on my conference presentation. You know I leave for the coast on Friday.”

“Right,” I said, and hit the end button on the phone.

Grad assistant, again? I thought. Sometimes Bill seemed to spend more time with them than me, his wife. And I had forgotten the trip to San Francisco that he’d marked on our kitchen calendar.

I tossed the phone back into my bag. I hated the damn thing, and often pretended not to own one when people asked for my number. I only carried it because Bill insisted. He worried about me driving home from the theater late at night.

I pulled out of the garage, and headed for home. There was so much to think about—the afternoon’s commission meeting, and Jeffrey’s strange reaction. His encounter with Sparks was an enigma. I tried to think why Jeffrey would lie about knowing Sparks, and why Sparks looked so fearful seeing Jeffrey. I realized I really didn’t know much about Jeffrey’s life since he left Gainesville, and I decided that it might be time for us to have that luncheon date after all.

Chapter 4

“**A**bsolutely not, Jeffrey. I will not go out with you to the Valdez site. It’ll be wet and mucky, and...there’s gators crawling all around. No way.”

It was mid morning and I was standing in the office kitchen, a hot mug of Chai tea in hand, when Jeffrey and Becky approached me with the idea.

Jeffrey frowned. He said, “Really, Lor, for someone who said she’d do anything—even murder—to stop this development, don’t you even want to go out there to see what you’re saving?” He struck a disbelieving pose before turning to fill a paper cup with water from the cooler.

“C’mon, Lorelei,” Becky said, picking up the sales pitch. “It’ll be okay. Gators are shy as long as you don’t actually step on them. Their mating season is over so even the bull gators won’t be aggressive.” She gave me a once over, and added, “You do have other shoes in the car, don’t you?”

“Oh, all right,” I conceded. “I’ll go with you. But no tricks, you hear? No scaring Lorelei, just for fun. Promise?”

They nodded. Jeffrey looked barely able to conceal his amusement at my response.

“Okay, it’s set. We’ll leave in about an hour,” he said. “Afterwards, we can pick up some hoagies and eat at the park pavilion.”

“Count me out, guys,” Becky said. “I have to get back here, and prepare for this afternoon’s board meeting.”

“How about you, Red. Join me? I haven’t been on the Prairie in so long.”

I was unsettled at the idea of lunch alone with him in an isolated setting. “Are you sure you can’t have lunch with us, Becky?” I asked, stalling as I tried to imagine how it might go.

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

“No, I really can’t. I’ll drive my own car out to the Valdez site. The two of you can ride together.”

Her suggestion made me wonder if Becky’s lunch excuse had been pre-arranged.

“Then it’s a date,” Jeffrey said, looking pleased. He rubbed his hands together, and returned to his small office before I could protest.

I started checking the news releases on my desk, and thought Jeffrey might not be so pleased if he knew the only reason I accepted his lunch plans was to learn more about his life. I especially wanted to know why he lied about Judson Sparks.

“Becky is everything arranged for the board meeting?”

“Everything’s under control,” she said. “Do you mind if I go to the Valdez property with Jeff and Lorelei? I’ll be back in plenty of time for the meeting.”

Diana looked surprised. “Lorelei, you’re going onto their site?”

“It was Jeffrey’s idea,” I said. “He thought I should see it before the board meeting. Do you want to come with us?”

“No, Dalton and I have hiked around there many times. It just wouldn’t have occurred to me that...” She smiled.

“That I’d get my feet dirty?” I said. “Well, you know me, Diana, I love the earth; I just don’t like getting it all over me.”

“I’m glad you’re going.” Diana said, and she returned to her office.

I was used to the reactions I got from the three of them. I was the odd ball in the office and often the butt of good natured jokes. After all, who would expect to find someone in the Center for Earth Options who didn’t hike, camp, bird watch, or do any of the outdoorsy things environmentalists like to do? My adventures were confined strictly to the stage.”

“Lorelei, can we talk?” Becky said, sitting down at my desk.

“Sure, Becky, what’s up?”

“Well, I just want to apologize.”

“Apologize?”

She glanced at the small room where Jeffrey was, and said softly, “For Jeff. His coming up and all. After you told me not to call him. You definitely made it clear you didn’t want him here.”

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

“I’ll admit I was royally strung-out when he just appeared. And quite angry at you, by the way.”

She dropped her head and nodded contritely.

I patted her hand. “But I’ve gotten over it, I guess,” I said, with more ease than I felt.

“I really didn’t tell him to come up. He just—you know Jeff, Lorelei.”

Oh, yes, I thought. It was also obvious Becky had a crush on him. His name appeared on her job references, and I guessed she had been one of his protégés while she was an undergrad. She obviously remained in touch with him though she had never mentioned it to me.

Becky continued, “He didn’t give me a chance to tell him not to come. In fact, he reacted so fast, it was like he was almost waiting for something, you know?”

“Hmm,” I said. “What’s he been doing in Orlando?” I couldn’t resist prying just a little.

She made a non-committal shrug. “Something with developers, but he’s not been happy there,” she said. “He told me he wanted to come back to Gainesville—to start over.”

“Start over what?” I asked. “Never mind. It’s fine with me, Becky. Please don’t worry. No one has control over Jeffrey’s actions, and I’m sure he would have found out about Valdez from another of his buddies.”

“So, you’re not mad at me anymore?”

“No, Becky. We’re okay.”

“Thanks, Lor. You’re so cool,” she said, getting up to return to her desk.

Cool? I thought, and shivered. It’s freezing in here. As I slid my arms into the sweater on the back of my chair, I shouted, to no one in particular, “Can’t we turn down the damn air conditioning?”

Becky didn’t even look up at my habitual complaint, and I returned my attention to the news releases. I wasn’t able to concentrate. I kept thinking about our trip to the Valdez property and lunch with Jeffrey. I opened my email, and stared at the screen as I tried to listen in on Jeffrey’s phone conversation in the other room. His voice was muffled by the noise of the air-conditioner.

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

Finally, it was time to leave. I went out to my car to change into my athletic shoes, and recalled that when I first met Jeffrey, he used to spend most weekends camping and hiking with his buddies. Early in our relationship, I tried several camping trips with him, but they always seemed to be a disaster. It either rained, was bitter cold, or something unpleasant happened, like the final outing when I acquired a long lasting case of chiggers. That put an end to it for me.

Jeffrey and Becky came out the front door, and he called to me, “Okay, let’s get going and take a look at what the bastards think they’re going to destroy.”

We drove down 13th Street, past the University, and out of town. Despite the fact the car windows were down, the interior of Jeffrey’s camper truck had the unpleasant aroma of French fries and stale beer. The back was piled with camping gear, and an assortment of containers that made it look like he lived out of his vehicle. Before getting into the truck, I had noticed the rear window plastered with travel decals, and a bumper sticker proclaiming, “Not all who wander are lost.”

We didn’t talk much on the way to the Prairie. He asked me a few questions about the plays I had appeared in. I asked him about his travels out west. Now that we were alone, there was an air of formality between us.

At the approach to the Prairie basin, Becky was standing on the roadside waving to us as Jeffrey made a u-turn across the median and parked. There were several other vehicles parked along the roadside.

“Well, this’ll be interesting,” he said, as we got out of the truck. “I’ll bet they’re not expecting company.”

He inspected the large silver Hummer with a grunt of disgust. There were also a couple of trucks parked nearby. One of them had the name “Gator Security Service” on the door of the cab.

“Maybe we shouldn’t go out there right now,” I suggested.

“Hell no,” Jeffrey said. “We’ve got a right.”

He motioned Becky to follow as we started marching into the moss-draped live oak forest. The path was strewn with broken limbs and crushed underbrush as though a heavy vehicle had driven through. Large saw palmetto palms lined the sandy pathway. It felt

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

significantly cooler, and my nostrils were filled with the pleasant woodsy aroma. Becky and I hurried along the path trying to keep pace with Jeffrey. The only sound was the crunching of forest debris underfoot. Then a plaintive bleating of a crow in the trees above was followed by the loud chilling whine of chain saws cranking up.

“God dammit,” Jeff muttered. “They’re already taking down trees.” He quickened his pace, and Becky and I half-ran to keep up with him.

We approached a small clearing in which a large red truck was parked. Three men were standing facing the open back hatch. Two of the men seemed to be arguing. One of them was Crawford Keezer. A third man, dressed in fatigues and wearing a Florida Gator cap, stood by and watched. Large sheets of construction plans were lying scattered on the open hatch. The men looked up when they became aware of Jeffrey heading toward them.

“Good morning, gentlemen, cutting a little firewood?” I heard Jeffrey call out in a loud voice.

“What the hell?” exclaimed Keezer. He turned to face Jeffrey, and barked, “Y’all looking for something? This here’s private land.”

The man in fatigues started toward us, but Keezer motioned him back.

“Well, that may be,” Jeffrey said coolly, standing with his hands on his hips and his legs planted wide apart. “But you aren’t permitted to begin clearing this land just yet.” Jeffrey pointed in the direction of two workers with the chainsaws. “Tell your men to stop cutting, or I’ll call the Park Ranger.” He took a cell phone from his pants pocket.

Keezer stepped up to within inches of Jeffrey, and demanded, “And just who in hell are you, son?”

“I’m the environmental consultant for the Center for Earth Options, and these ladies are my associates,” he said. “We know for a fact that your permit to build on this land is under review. Now stop the damn chainsaws.” He held the cell phone up as a threat.

There was a moment of silence as Keezer looked back to the man with whom he had been arguing. The man was about five nine, dressed in dark slacks and a short-sleeved embroidered white shirt with a tuft of gray chest hair sticking out at the neck. He appraised us,

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

smoothed his fingers over his pencil thin mustache, and walked forward. He wore black alligator shoes that were dusted by the sand.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but this land is owned by the Valdez Company. I’m Jimmy Valdez. It’s my company.” He extended his hand to Jeffrey who ignored the gesture by pocketing his cell phone instead. Valdez shrugged and continued, “We’re only making a bit of a clearing here. And we’re in the middle of a meeting. I would appreciate it if you and your friends would leave.”

“We’re not leaving until the damn chainsaws stop,” Jeffrey said.

Jimmy Valdez glanced at his expensive looking watch, and looked up at us with a fixed smile. The sinister look in his eyes gave me chills. He reminded me of a description I’d read about the actor Jack Nicholson—eyes like a cobra and a dazzling smile, or something like that. Valdez had those eyes, but not the smile.

Becky moved closer to me, and whispered, “Did you check out the muscle guy. What a hunk.”

I did. He wore a tight tee shirt with a Gator logo and his company’s name. Despite his ice blue eyes, and menacing gaze, Becky was right; he had good looks worth staring at. His hair, showing under his cap, was salt and pepper gray, and I guessed he was in his forties.

Valdez studied Jeffrey for a moment, nodded to the man in fatigues, who walked back toward the chainsaw gang.

Keezer said, “Are you satisfied now?”

“No. Not by a long shot,” Jeffrey replied. His face was set, and he was staring defiantly at Keezer. It looked like a stand-off scene from an old western movie. “This is still a state preserve. You damn well know that what you’re doing is illegal.”

Keezer pointed his finger within inches of Jeffrey’s face and shouted, “That’s it. I’ve heard enough from you, boy. Now just get out of here or else...”

The security man came running back, and stopped next to Keezer. “You heard the man, buster. Shove off before you have some real trouble.”

“Like hell,” Jeffrey persisted, ignoring both of their threats. He looked at Keezer and Valdez. “We know what you guys are doing,

A NORTH FLORIDA MYSTERY

and I know your reputation. Shoddy construction. Payoffs to sub-contractors. The whole nine yards. I'm sure we'll find even more dirt when we look around a bit."

"Jeffrey, let's go," I said, grabbing his arm. He jerked away from my grasp. I hated it when he got so stupidly belligerent.

Valdez gave the security man a look. The guy, who looked much taller and stronger than Jeffrey, grabbed Jeffrey by the shoulders, spun him around, and gave him a shove. "On your way, amigo," he said.

"Wait a minute," Becky yelled, trying to help Jeffrey as he stumbled. "You can't do that."

"Becky, Jeffrey, let's just go!" I said, walking back toward the path.

I felt relieved as Jeffrey began following me. Then he stopped at the edge of the clearing, and turned back. "You mark my words," he yelled. "We'll make you guys crawl out of town before you get a chance to put your crappy housing on this land."

"Enough, Jeffrey," I said, trying to pull him along with me, and motioning Becky to grab his other arm.

"Save your threats," Keezer shouted back. "We've dealt with you tree-huggers before. Now you get off this land directly, or I'll treat you like a damn trespasser." He jumped onto the running board of his truck, and reached up to the back window. I noticed it held a full rifle rack.

"Jeffrey, c'mon." This time it was Becky's plea.

He pointed a finger at Keezer, and said, "Don't worry, you old Geezer. We're gonna stop you all right."

Keezer stood on the running board of the cab and glared at Jeffrey. His hand rested on one of the rifles. The security man watched us as he cracked his knuckles. Valdez walked to the back of the truck, and the harsh din of the chain saws had stopped.

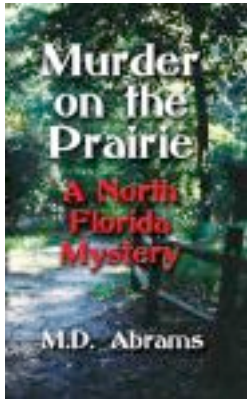
We retreated from the clearing. Becky and I urged Jeffrey to hurry, but he resisted and mumbled, "Assholes. We're going to blow them out of the water. You'll see."

MURDER ON THE PRAIRIE

I said, “Oh, yes, we’ve seen, haven’t we, Becky? Now, you understand why I didn’t want him up here. He hasn’t changed a bit. He’s still the hot-head he always was.”

Jeffrey’s breathing was labored, and he grunted at my words.

Becky looked dazed. She may not ever have seen Jeffrey in his full plumage of righteousness, but I already knew this encounter would come back to haunt us.



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