

Hard Days in Paradise
A Rod Montgomery Mystery Novel

By

William Hallstead

© 2009 BluewaterPress, LLC
Saint Augustine FL

All rights reserved. No part of this book shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means without the written permission of the author or the publisher.

International Standard Book Number 13: 978-1-60452-027-9
International Standard Book Number 10: 1-60452-027-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009933504

BluewaterPress LLC
52 Tuscan Way Ste 202-309
Saint Augustine FL 32092
<http://bluewaterpress.com>

This book may be purchased online at -

<http://bluewaterpress.com/paradise>
or through
amazon.com

I heard Wally yell. The airboat's engine began to turn over.
Whump...whump...whump...
With a sudden flash and bang, it backfired. Something snapped past my ear. That hadn't been a backfire! Wally was doing what he'd brought me here to do. He had fired his .45 at me...

1.

I'd been sitting here an hour, nursing my drink, making wet circles on the vinyl. I tried to picture myself as Bogart, trench coat collar turned up, bourbon in the glass, with Sinatra making melancholy on the juke box...

"Dammit," some guy shouted, "I said a Big Mac!"

No bar here. I was hunched over a plastic table.

The music was an Elvis mutant, yowling on a stringy-haired kid's boombox. The drink was McDonald's version of Diet Coke. I hoped it would settle my stomach. With only a paper-thin separation between me and fifty, I'd given up smoking, fat, sugar, salt and drinking hard stuff. The only difference I could detect was a feeling of deprivation.

I also had a feeling of profound depression. So would you if you knew the IRS was making a personal call at 3 p.m. this very day-- and that was the lesser of my two problems.

The other, the real twitcher, had come up at eight this morning. I hate early morning phone calls, and eight a.m. is early for me.

"Mr. Montgomery? Elrod Montgomery?" a woman's voice, not shaky client like, but flat businesslike.

I had allowed as I was Montgomery. Rod, not Elrod. I hate Elrod.

"You are a private investigator?"

"May I ask who this is?"

"My name is Irene Hutchins. I'm an attorney in Fort Bristol. I represent Stanley McKance."

She couldn't have startled me more if she'd told me she'd just heard from Amelia Earhart.

"You gotta be kidding, Ms. Hutchins!"

"I'm not calling from Southwest Florida to kid you, Mr. Montgomery." She had the steely voice of a prison matron. "I'm calling because Mr. McKance insists that you are the only person he can count on to help him."

Jesus! A rancid rebound from the wretched past. "Where is that son of a bitch? Did he tell you what happened up here?"

"I'm not concerned with that. His current problem is a lot bigger than the falling-out you two seem to have had. He's in jail."

A "falling out?" My ex-partner Stanley McKance had robbed me blind and faded from view. I'd wondered-- a lot-- about where he had gone. And I also wondered how the hell he would explain what he'd done if we ever met again. "Look, Counselor, I said. "I don't know what I can tell you that might... You said jail?"

"Mr. McKance is under indictment for murder."

"Murder? Stanley? And you are--"

"I am the public defender assigned by the court to represent him."

So my money had run out. Stanley had skunked me two years back. Of course the money had run out, and it sounded as if he hadn't scored very high since.

"His trial is scheduled to begin in just fifteen days, Mr. Montgomery. He wants you to come down here."

"He does? Unbelievable. Why?"

"He insists he's the victim of a frame."

"He's a victim? Not the Stanley I know."

Silence from Fort Bristol.

"What do you think?" I finally said, though this whole thing was failing to appeal to me.

"I'm paid by the public to defend him," she answered, which was no answer at all.

"He's broke?"

"Just about. He's had me buy you a ticket on Delta. Flight 1119 leaves Philadelphia International at 8:05 tomorrow a.m. Change in Orlando, arrive here at 11:45. The ticket's already at check-in up there."

"Wait a minute!"

"And you can stay in his house over in Point Citrus. He's not using it at the moment."

"No bail?"

"Denied."

"Great." I didn't want to get involved with Stanley McKance ever again. Yet... Yet I wondered how slick Stanley had managed to get himself charged with murder, of all raps. With major trepidation, I heard myself say, "You want to fill me in?"

"When you get here."

"Well now, that's quite an assumption, Counselor."

"If he's telling the truth-- and as his attorney, I can't rule out that possibility-- I can really use an investigator, Mr. Montgomery."

Cute, Ms. Hutchins. I pictured her sitting at her hopelessly littered government-issue desk in some decrepit office building, gray hair in a bun, rimless glasses down her nose, fiftyish, squatty, checking off a note about her promise to call me.

"What's your current case load?" I asked her.

"At the moment, forty-seven. But it's the off-season."

God, Stanley, good luck. His being client number whatever in a public defender's case load of forty-seven was a touch of justice in itself. But a murder indictment? He had cleaned out our till; even took the coin collection. But I'd never pictured him as a potential killer. Hadn't pictured him as a potential embezzler, either, had I? Not until he did a fast fade with our joint bank account cash and our stash of old silver dollars. Snookered me good.

Yet there was something, uh, touching about Stanley begging-- well, begging might be a bit strong-- about that sticky-fingered bastard seeking help from the guy he'd robbed.

"I'll think about it," I had finally said to distant Irene Hutchins, Esq.

Now here I maundered in MacDonald's plastic settee. The IRS probe was now the lesser of two deplorable situations I faced. At least I had a plan for that one.

I glanced at my Timex. Two-fifteen already! I raked together my wrappings, chucked the litter in the door side bin and trotted across the sun-struck macadam to my old Dodge. If it was this hot in Philadelphia's western suburbs, what would it be like down in the Florida tropics?

Precisely at three, the doorbell bing-bonged. I opened up on a tan-

haired man with Pee-Wee Herman's body but Ben Gazzara's scowl. Everything about him was tan. Tan suit, tan tie, tan shoes. Not exactly the fearsome representative of Uncle Tapeworm I was expecting, though his gaze was blinkless.

"Agent Renfrew, IRS. We have a three o'clock appointment, I believe."

He knew goddamned well we did. I stepped aside and he walked in.

"Nice development, Orchard Glade," he said in a sour tone I'd heard a doctor use when he'd discovered a rectal polyp. Renfrew had a point, though. The developer had bulldozed every last apple tree into toothpicks. And there was no glade. All seventy-five split-levels were perched on the side of a rocky hill.

Agent Renfrew peered around like a heron stalking prey. Discount Decor had handled my interior decorating after Leahla had walked out with my worldly goods. The savvy home office taxpayer will not invite the IRS in for a desk side chat, but I had only clearance sale furnishings.

Renfrew's visual appraisal left him downcast.

"Living room, kitchen on this level," I told him. "Two bedrooms upstairs, office next level down."

"Uh huh. It's the home office I'm concerned about."

Which was why he'd insisted on this on-site confab.

But I was ready for him. "Be my guest," I offered, and we descended to where I wanted him.

I had converted this family room into my office post-McKance then post-Leahla. After his fiscal looting then her inventorial confiscation, working cases from home and being my own accountant was all I could afford.

I motioned to an armless and notably uncomfortable chair I had placed in front of my desk. I sat in the squeaky swivel behind it. Renfrew zipped open his tan briefcase and extracted a file folder.

"What we are interested in is your Form 8829, depreciation of a portion of the home used for business. I presume this is your home office?"

"Obviously."

"Do you do anything here of a non-business-related nature?"

"Of course not."

"Umm hmm. No household bill paying, no personal letters?"

"I can't answer that."

His tan eyebrows shot up. "You can't? Why not?"

"Because it's a non-business-related question. If you would care to go back upstairs or out that door there to the garage, I will answer it up there or out there."

Renfrew shot me a hard look. "Let me rephrase it, then. Everything you do down here is business-related. Is that correct?"

"That is correct."

"And that business is, according to your Schedule C return, private investigator. That sounds quite, heh, heh, glamorous."

"If you call surveilling wandering spouses, checking out insurance fakers and--"

The phone on the desk jangled. I picked up the receiver. "Montgomery Investigations."

"Mr. Montgomery? I'm calling for Global Cruise Charters. We have a terrific--"

"Hold on a minute," I interrupted. "Renfrew, this is non-business. I'll have to take it upstairs."

I jogged up to the kitchen, picked up the phone in there. "Not interested," I told the telemarketer, hung up, jogged back down to hang up the desk phone.

Renfrew gave me a cocked eyebrow. "The concern here is--"

The phone rang again. This time it was the answering service call I'd requested. The first call had been a bonus. "Wait a moment, please," I said, rushed back upstairs, grabbed the phone there. "Call back in three minutes," I quietly told the perplexed service woman, rushed back down, hung up the desk phone.

This time both of Renfrew's sandy eyebrows were aloft. "You do that all the time?"

"Whenever it's non-business. And I unplug that copier over there and lug it upstairs for non-business copying. Drag my calculator upstairs for personal stuff, unplug the fax here and set it up in the living room when a non-business--"

"But that's ridiculous!"

"Isn't it? But that's what Form 8829 requires." The phone rang again. "Hello?" I said into the handset.

"Mr. Montgomery?" Woman's voice. Answering service, right on the dot.

"Just a sec," I told her, shrugged at Renfrew and started my third run for the kitchen.

He grabbed my arm. "Mr. Montgomery."

"Yeah?"

"Either you are one of the nation's greatest put-ons, or you're the most conscientious taxpayer I've ever met."

"It's your decision, Renfrew."

"You used to be a cop, right?"

"Is that a business-related question?"

"Oh, sh--sugar, Montgomery! Yes, I declare it to be business-related."

"Yeah, I was one of Philadelphia's finest for eighteen years. Then I quit, went into the private gumshoe business, and here we are." No need to tell him why I quit. Besides, it wasn't business-related.

"I believe I can assume a former police officer has an inbred sense of honesty."

I wondered how long he'd been with the IRS. "I'm needed up in the kitchen," I reminded him. "My non-business caller is waiting."

Renfrew held up his hand. "Consider it a business call, Montgomery. Please." He threw the file back in his briefcase, zipped it. "I'll see myself out."

I gave him a warm smile and picked up the phone. "Thanks for the service, honey--"

"Exactly what service, Mr. Montgomery?" Hell, now I recognized Irene Hutchins's crisp alto.

"Sorry," I said. "Thought you were--"

"My client has instructed me to tell you that in addition to the air fare and lodging, he will provide five hundred dollars in expense money. And the ticket is round trip with the return date your decision."

"I thought he was broke."

"I just sold his coin collection."

Our coin collection. A cash-short client had paid us with that set of extinct silver dollars. They'd been half Stanley's-- but half mine, too.

Into my long pause, Ms. Hutchins said, "He actually may be innocent, Mr. Montgomery. I'm just not equipped to prove it."

Caseload wise, it was off-season here. I let out a long breath. "Oh, hell, Counselor. What time did you say that plane leaves?"

2.

Southbound aboard Delta Flight 1119, thirty thousand feet over Virginia in mid-July's brilliant sky-- with my ear-ringed, pony-tailed, jeans-and-tank-topped seatmate mercifully zonked out-- I realized there were two ways to look at this. Either I wanted to get my hands on Stanley McKance and enjoy strangling him. Or I couldn't resist the exhilarating ego boost of his pleading-by-proxy to come save his miserable butt. Maybe both. Or maybe it was because, thieving bastard though he was, I just couldn't see McKance as a murderer.

In suddenly bumpy air over the Carolinas, it hit me that none of the foregoing was the real reason I was on this probable goose chase. If McKance had been unjustly accused, as Attorney Hutchins had sort of hinted, then I was caught up in an echo of my own past. The "Schuykill Scandal" the Philly papers had called it. Innocent by law but guilty in the press. I had resigned from Philadelphia's Police Department in disgust.

Stanley McKance had come on the scene then. He was an insurance claims adjuster yearning to strike out on his own. We had pooled fragile resources and set up M & McK Investigations. A year into it, with an amazing twenty grand in our partnership bank account, he had turned up missing, as the saying goes.

Concurrently, so had our bank balance. All of it.

I still had some friendly contacts with the Brotherly Love PD, but their discreet inquiries found not a single rock my con artist ex-partner might be hiding under. He had slipped the surly bonds of Pennsylvania earth and was no-one-knew-where. Until yesterday's call from Attorney Irene.

But murder? Given enough provocation, anyone can turn lethal. Yet as I ruminated in my airborne perch over Georgia, Stanley McKance just hadn't seemed to be killing-prone.

The green jungles and silver lakes of the peninsular tropics grew larger as we sloped into Southwest Florida's major airport. Everything I'd brought with me was in the overhead, so after I shuffled up the exit ramp, I could by-pass the baggage retrieval mob. What I needed now was a woman. A tall one, she had said, somewhat torpedoing my long distance assumptions. "Wearing blue slacks, a cream blouse, and I'll be carrying a red leather briefcase."

As I rode down the escalator, there she stood at one of the exit doors, waving.

"Mr. Montgomery? I'm Irene Hutchins." Not fiftyish. More like late thirtyish. No lipstick on the thin-lipped mouth, but some eye shadow-- no, that was not eye shadow. She had the sunken, smoky eyes of the workaholic. Her mahogany hair was cropped an inch higher than collar length. Lean jaw, strong chin-- and a crooked smile as if she didn't smile often and wasn't sure about doing it now. Definitely not my preconceived Madeleine Albright with a bun. She was more like Sigourney Weaver, and a mere inch below my six feet one.

We shook hands; She had a solid, dry grip.

"How'd you pick me out so fast?" I asked her.

"Dark business suit; white shirt and red tie among aloha shirts and armhole Ts. You stand out like an undertaker at a circus. How was the flight?"

"Fast."

Outside, the heat hit me like a pillowy wall. Instant sweat. I shucked off my jacket. Through the slits of my reflex squint, I saw Hutchins slap on a pair of shades.

I'd expected a bare-boner sedan but we stepped aboard a metallic red Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo, a six-cylinder, air-conditioned sports utility vehicle equipped with stereo radio, tape deck and CD player.

"Public defenderism pays well," I said, possibly a tad snidely. I'd been up since dawn.

"Public defenderism doesn't pay squat, Mr. Montgomery." She twisted the key and her socially acceptable truck began to purr. "What paid well was real estate until I just couldn't saddle one more young couple with a thirty-year mortgage for a tract home worth half of what I was selling it for."

A Realtor with a conscience?

She zipped the Jeep through the terminal's traffic and raced us outbound through flatland with lakes. "I took my winnings and ran-- to law school. Now I'm atoning for past sins."

Through all of that, she never once took her eyes off the road.

"You want me to drive you out to McKance's house? You could pick up his car there, have your own wheels."

"I came down here to do what I can for your client, Ms. Hutchins. Why don't we go directly to jail?"

The crooked smile reappeared. "I was hoping you'd say that. And 'Irene' will be fine."

"So will 'Rod,' Irene." I was beginning to like this lanky, wry-on-the-rocks civil servant. Blessed with foresight of coming events, I would have made a token reconnoiter and gotten the hell out of town. Instead, I sat there bedazzled by the tropical sun, the Jeep-- and its driver. And I said, "Consider me on staff."

Quantrill County jail was a blockhouse of blinding white concrete on the outskirts of Fort Bristol, the county seat. Irene swerved her SUV into a slot marked ATTY. The sidewalk split a lawn of what looked to me like impeccably tended crabgrass. I'd left my suit coat in her truck, but in the crushing heat my long-sleeved shirt began to cook me.

The entrance was flanked by two towering palm trees, their fronds adroop in the sun-blast. We stepped through a double door of bleached wood into a small lobby with air conditioning so icy that in two steps I'd traveled from the Amazon to Alaska. The barren lobby smelled of Lysol, sweat and desperation.

With a jowl-flapping nod, a bloodhound-faced sergeant behind bullet-proof glass recognized Irene. But he scowled at me and asked if I was carrying any weapons.

I disappointed him. My kind of PI work called for binoculars and cameras. I hadn't carried a gun in years. We were cleared into a near-naked conference room down the hall. Scum-green walls with a vertical slit of a window, cement floor, vinyl-topped metal table,

steel chairs without arms, recessed ceiling florescents glaring. We sat amid a smell of raw concrete. And waited.

Five minutes later, through a door opposite the one we had used, in strode Stanley McKance accompanied by a stone-faced guard. An unimposing five-foot six, grayer and balder than when I had last seen him, Stanley wore that oh-so-familiar little grin on his doughy face. When he smiled, the corners of his wide mouth compressed and gave him the look of a smirking guppy.

"I knew you'd come, Rod."

The smile irritated the hell out of me, but I stuck out my hand. He took it in both of his, a show of warmth that surprised me until I realized he was cuffed. The guard produced a key and unshackled him.

"You look good in orange," I told him as the guard slipped out and the three of us sat around the table.

Then I couldn't hold back any longer. "You son of a bitch! You stole my twenty grand!"

Maddeningly unperturbed, Stanley again flashed his smirk. "Rod, Rod. I knew you'd misunderstand."

"Misunderstand! When I went to the bank, the cupboard was bare. And you bugged out with our coin collection, to boot. What in hell is there to misunderstand?"

"Let me explain it to you," he said like a patient professor to an obtuse student. "We were equal partners, right?"

I nodded. Reluctantly.

"So half of that money was mine. I simply took what I already owned."

"You took the whole twenty Gs, damn it! And the coins."

"Let me finish, Rod. You are now in business, I understand, as 'Montgomery Investigations.' Correct?" I nodded.

"In other words, you now own the entire operation that you and I established together."

"So?" I challenged, but with fading conviction. I could see the other ten Gs sinking into the murk of tortured rationalization.

"So the other ten thousand was my quitclaim settlement."

"Your what?"

"My compensation for relinquishing my half of the business. Ergo, making possible your sole proprietorship."

"You-- Are you-- Jesus!" I shot Irene an incredulous look. She was grinning.

"As for the damned coins," he went on, "Irene sold them for one thousand dollars. Five hundred of that, you are about to receive."

"My own money used as a bribe to get me down here."

"And," Stanley said with a shrug, "here you are."

I was afraid to open my mouth. All that would come out would be splutter.

"So let's concentrate on the matter at hand," Stanley suggested. "This utterly fallacious murder indictment."

"We'll see about that," I finally managed to mumble. I hadn't even begun to recover from Stanley's incredible justification of his walking off with what I'd considered my bank account. Well, with my half of our bank account. I hated to admit it, but he had a point on that score. It was the other half of the score that bothered me now. Plus the coin collection diddle.

"Did you give him the envelope?" he asked Irene, who seemed highly amused by the conversation so far. She rooted in her flame-red briefcase, extracted a bulky business envelope and handed it to me.

"Expense money," she said. "As promised."

Therein were five hundred in fifties. Reimbursement for half a scam. Better than nothing at all. I'd already blown thirty bucks in cab fare to Philadelphia International. I pocketed the wad of cash. Stanley still owed me twenty thousand. Or ten thousand. Or nothing. Depending on the viewpoint.

"All right, I'm committed," I said. Conned was more like it. "Tell me about it."

"It's simple," said Stanley McKance, under indictment for murder one. "I didn't do it."

"Facts, Stanley. Not opinion."

"That is a fact." Eely as ever.

I shrugged. "Okay, particulars then."

Now Stanley shrugged. "I get a phone call to meet this guy--"

"What guy?"

"Daniel Bauer. He was pretty damned wrought up. I could tell that from his voice."

"Meet you where?"

"Moccasin Creek, out in the boondocks. He said it was rough out there so I'd better use the Tracker."

"So you went out there? What time of day was this?"

"Time of night, Rod. It was after eleven."

"Hell, Stanley. You get a call to meet this guy, Bauer, out in the weeds late at night, and off you go? You sure it was his voice? Who the hell was Bauer, by the way?"

"He was my accountant. He says what he has to tell me is so confidential that he doesn't want to meet me anywhere there was the slightest possibility of our even being seen, let alone heard."

I stared at him. So far, I put all this at about a 5 veracity level. Right in the middle.

"He sounds scared. Says since I was a detective once, he needs my input."

"Jeez, Stanley." Down to a 3.

"He says he's being watched, followed, bugged. He was one paranoid CPA, Rod."

I turned to Irene. "Your client told you all this?"

"I thought you'd want to hear it directly from him."

"I'm not sure I want to hear it at all."

"You took the five hundred bucks, Rod."

"I spoke through clenched teeth. "I can give it back, Stanley."

"And you used the airline ticket."

"Yeah, okay. So now I'm on the case." I settled back in the metal chair. "When you got out there on this idiot after-hours rendezvous, what did you find?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I wait about a half-hour, then I drive back home and go to bed. In the morning, Quantrill County's finest are banging on the door. They'd found Bauer's body out where I was supposed to meet him. And here I am."

3.

“That can’t possibly be all there is to it,” I grumped more or less to myself as Irene drove me west out of Fort Bristol.

“That’s his story. Got a call, drove to Moccasin Creek. He waited a half-hour. Bauer didn’t show, so McKance drove back home.” Her eyes were glued to the road.

“Dumb bastard. He’s so sure of himself he falls for a fake call.” I snorted. “A con man conned by an oddball phone call.” His story had a sinister aspect, though, and it gave me a chilly little skin ripple.

Her socially acceptable truck rumbled north over the long Miccosukee River bridge and into the south end of the New City (so said the sign) of Point Citrus. We rolled along a northbound divided highway flanked by concrete commerce. None of it was more than two stories high.

“What’s so new about Point Citrus? Looks like it’s been long-discovered by Fast Food Fred and a whole generation of ma and pa business owners.”

“You’re looking at downtown, Rod. Thirty years of commercial deals. Between here and the bay to the west, there are fifty thousand people. Between here and the east city line-- well, you’ll see.”

At mid-clutter, we swung off Mango Boulevard into eastbound Avocado Avenue. Then we rolled through an area of modest

business enterprises and neat one-story homes with manicured lawns. Here and there, REELECT CROWNMILLER FOR SHERIFF signs lurked among the tropical plantings. Then, to our left, we passed an impressive five-story building set well back on a lavishly landscaped lawn. I couldn't see why the grounds needed even more work, but a crew was hard at it near a truck with COUNTYWIDE LANDSCAPE lettering.

"A hotel?" I asked. "Out here in the boonies?"

"That's Tranquility House. A retirement home. One of our area's fancier non-profits."

A half-mile further, traffic and civilization dwindled. Then we rolled along on the four-lane median-divided macadam. It arrowed through miles of sun-scorched sandy turf, all laid out in a grid of streets with barely a sign of humanity. This was like driving on a map.

"Am I looking at a monument to a developer gone broke?"

"You're looking at Florida land boom success. This whole area was mangrove wetlands. The trees were bulldozed off, the marsh was drained, the land was sub-divided into dinky building lots and sold to anyone with a yen to invest in a piece of paradise."

"I remember seeing the ads. Buy today, sell for a profit tomorrow."

"Except when you buy at top dollar, it's hard to find anyone to top you. So here sits a field of sixth-of-an-acre dreams for resale with no takers."

"I do see a house here and there." I pointed out a couple of isolated stucco islands in the sea of scruff. Off to our left, a row of cumulus had built up along the flat horizon, but the lowering sun had no mercy.

"And one of those up here in the wilderness is the residence of Stanley McKance."

At a steady sixty, we rushed on through flat nothing. Never took her eyes off the macadam.

After a mute mile, I said, "Has McKance told me the whole story?"

"He told you as much as he's told me."

"There has to be more."

"That's why you're down here. Oh, this is it." She let up on the gas.

We turned left through a break in the median. I squinted through the sun-dazzled windshield. A tan stucco one-story with an orange tile roof had materialized a quarter-mile down this side

street named-- oh, yes, there were blue and white street signs in place everywhere-- named Lemon Lane. Aptly, I thought.

Irene pulled onto the driveway's twin concrete strips. We debarked into the late afternoon heat wave. On the narrow walk, I could feel the hot concrete through the soles of my out-of-place black leather shoes. She unlocked the front door and in we went.

"Down here you have to keep the A/C running," she said. "Otherwise humidity will eat up your worldly goods."

Even so, the dark interior smelled musty.

"Feels as if it's set in the eighties," Irene said like the real estate agent she used to be. She darted about raising a blind here, flicking a switch there. I heard a thump and a hum, then cool air flooded in from vents high on the wall of the living room. Great room, she called it. "In Florida, the living room is the 'great room.'"

I surveyed my temporary digs. Two bedrooms off to the left, kitchen and dining alcove to the right. Fairly big, uh, great room. The house had been built on a concrete slab disguised with gold wall-to-wall carpeting everywhere except the kitchen. Tan vinyl floor in there. The great room had cream walls with a couple of framed tropical prints, a particle-board bookcase of paperbacks, TV on a tubular metal stand with a VCR underneath, and a maple gun rack above an old wooden trunk Stanley was using as a too-low table. I stepped closer to the gun rack. Its pegs held a mean-looking black 12 gauge Remington Model 870 pump shotgun and a Mossberg .22. I didn't think I'd need them-- which at that point showed how naive I was about this whole situation.

Through the kitchen's rear window, I looked across a stretch of weeds and crab grass to a distant stand of trees. Beyond the low trees, the horizon was ominously darkening. There was not another house in screaming distance.

"I've stocked the refridge with basics, and I've set the A/C on seventy-four," Irene said. "You've got electricity and water. Yesterday, I asked the phone company to resume service."

She picked up the receiver on the ledge between the kitchen and the great room. "It's working. Didn't bother with mail delivery, though."

"I'm not expecting any."

"Then you're all set."

"My home away from home."

"Oh, got something here for you." Irene, all business, dug in the briefcase she had carted in with her. I hadn't seen a handbag and guessed the briefcase was all-purpose. "Here are the keys to Stanley's Nissan. His Tracker has been impounded as evidence."

"He said he was driving the Tracker on that dumb-ass rendezvous. Tire impressions?"

"Very good, Detective." Again from the briefcase, she extracted a manila folder. "These are copies of various and sundry. A little evening reading. My home number's there in case you need any further information."

"You have any?"

She gave me a little twitch of a smile. "Probably not." She stood there by the front door, tall, slim and pensive, looking upward.

"What?" I asked her.

The roof suddenly began to roar.

"What the hell--?"

"This is the rainy season, Rod. Almost every afternoon."

The row of cloud puffs I'd spotted on the way out here had graduated to monsoon status. Lightning flared, thunder banged, and the whole house shook. "You want to wait this out?" I asked her. "Maybe there's some beer in the fridge."

"Thanks no." She held up the briefcase. "I've got other cases that need attention."

"What was that hard-eyed stare for?"

"Your habiliment."

"My who?"

"Raiment, wearing apparel. Your damn northern mourning suit. Everybody you try to talk to is going to focus in on that alien garb."

"First thing tomorrow," I promised her, "I'm going to buy a local disguise."

"Don't forget shoes and socks."

"What about shoes and socks?"

"Even in shorts, black socks and leather shoes are going to tag you a snowbird from Grand Rapids." She stepped into the deluge and was instantly sodden. "This is why I wear only plastic," she called over her shoulder. "Let me know when you have something."

"You're an optimist," I shouted after her. She made it to the Jeep in six lopes, swiveled in neatly for a leggy lady, and drove off in a cloud of spray.

While feasting on a Chicken Cajun TV dinner I found in Stanley's freezer, I opened the file Irene had given me. I made some notes. I got a headache. I set the file and notes aside, flipped on the TV and got three grainy network channels. Cable hadn't yet wended its way to the outback. The audio sounded like fingernails on sandpaper. Couldn't make out a word. Stanley did have the VCR, though, and an impressive collection of Columbo videotapes. I selected one, sat immobile for an hour and a half, then showered and hit the sack. Went to sleep in an instant and dreamed... A bewildering confusion of Stanley hightailing it from a body, yelling, "I didn't see it, I didn't see it!" Irene saying, "How can you not see it?" Me saying, "I have a plane to catch--" I jolted awake.

The rain had quit. When the thermostat cut the A/C off for a few minutes, I heard absolutely nothing at all. Zip. That was more eerie than the stupid dream.

A little before 9:00 a.m., I cajoled the reluctant Nissan into starting, sorted through its radio's Spanish, rock and country stations to find something I could endure. Found a morning talk show, and I set out for downtown Point Citrus.

Irene was right. My suit, tie and black city shoes weren't going to cut it down here in tropical vacationland so laid back it was close to supine. An hour later, I was virtually vibrating in a palm frond aloha shirt, lime slacks, emerald socks and tan plastic mesh shoes. Disarming, I hoped. As I walked back to the car with my Yankee uniform in a shopping bag, I blended right in with the sidewalk strollers. Just another lettuce leaf in the Florida fashion salad.

I had also acquired a pair of shades, clapped them on and at last was able to open my eyes all the way in daylight. When I opened the Nissan's door, a bubble of heat ballooned around me. I twisted the key and set the A/C on Nome.

After the outfitting session at Min and Jake's Point Citrus Haberdashery ("We're originally from Dayton. Retired here in eighty-eight then couldn't hack it on Social Security."), my second call of the morning was the Sheriff's Department.

Colonel Arnold Crownmiller, incumbent Sheriff of Quantrill County and candidate for re-election, was one hell of an imposing bastion of local law enforcement.

At six-foot-four-- my conservative guess-- he looked almost as wide as he pushed out his executive chair. The impact of his size

was enhanced by his uniform, powder blue slacks with a gold stripe, slate blue blouse with gleaming gold hardware.

With a forefinger, he jabbed his amber-tinted aviator's glasses back to the bridge of his nose. Then he glanced at his Rolex. "I've got a speaking engagement in exactly twenty-nine minutes."

Sheriff Arnold Crownmiller had a satiny voice tone that sounded like evil old Vincent Price at his suavest.

"Rod Montgomery," I said as I grasped his huge mitt. It was surprisingly warm and soft. "I've been asked to look into the Stanley McKance situation."

"At the request of his attorney, Miz Hutchins." He said that conversationally, but the message was: I know what goes on in my county.

Somewhere beneath my thinning pate a little caution bell jangled. "That's correct, Sheriff."

"Have a seat." He indicated a low slung chair in front of his desk and sank back into his own pillowy throne.

"I'm told you're from Philadelphia, Montgomery."

"Call me Rod," I offered, but there was no reciprocating, call me Arnold.

"A Philadelphia private eye. But at least," he added, "you started out as a cop."

I studied his broad, time-punished face. Once a boxer?

Maybe still, to stay in shape. A heavyweight getting heavier.

"But you resigned, Montgomery, and under something of a cloud, I understand."

The son of a bitch was playing with me. I'd been in town not even twenty-four hours, and he'd already had me checked out. Here came that chilly little skin ripple again.

"None of that past history has anything to do with why I'm here, Sheriff." I tried to match cool with cool.

"It may not." He sat back, tented his Oscar Mayer fingers. "It may not," he repeated. "So just what do you know about the McKance case?"

I wasn't about to announce: He says he's innocent. Crownmiller would counter with: They all say they're innocent. And we would still be nowhere.

"He conned me out of twenty grand- I wouldn't put murder past him."

Crownmiller's bristly eyebrows popped up. "Now you're making me wonder if Irene has brought in the right boy."

"She was only the messenger. The message came from McKance. He claims a frame."

"The fella screws you out of twenty thousand then asks you to come down here and get him out of a murder charge?"

I flashed him what I hoped would pass for a smile. This was a sheriff who did a whole lot of homework.

"If I could talk with the arresting deputy, I could shortly be on my way back to the Keystone State." I hoped he was buying all this because I had sensed that another agenda lurked here.

The sheriff checked his watch again and let out a long breath. "All right, you can talk to him. But I'll tell you this. If push comes to shove, I'll clamp this department down tighter than a Florida clam."

He punched a button on a desk speaker. "Julie, is Sergeant Horgen in the office?"

"In the squad room, I believe, Colonel."

"Tell him to get in here."

4.

Sheriff's Sgt. Maynard Horgen arrived a bit winded, it seemed to me, for so young a man. In his mid-twenties, he was medium height, and by the looks of the biceps bulging his short khaki sleeves, an iron pumper. The sheriff got the glorious blues. The troops wore drab work-a-day suntans. What was even more outstanding than Horgen's wrestler arms was his single eyebrow, as verdant across the bridge of his chunk nose as it was over his deep-set glowering eyes.

"Sergeant, this is Elrod Montgomery, a PI from Philadelphia."

"Gladda meetcha." By his accent no son of the flatland south, Horgen had a grip like a mountain gorilla.

"The Bronx or Queens?" I asked him.

That prompted a toothy simian smile. "Yonkers."

"Close enough."

"Before you two get overly chummy," Crownmiller said, "I want to remind Montgomery here that we don't take kindly to outsiders telling us how to run our business."

I'd figured he would inevitably make that little speech, and I was ready.

"You should know all about that, Sheriff, since you're an outsider yourself. From Maryland, right? The Eastern Shore."

Crownmiller's "poosh" and a couple more accented syllables had

clued me in. He looked properly taken aback. Then he indicated his supplicant chairs.

Instinct told me to interview the sergeant out of his chief's range. "You're a busy man," I told Crownmiller as I herded Horgen toward the door. "I've taken enough of your time."

"How 'bout a cuppa coffee?" Horgen asked when we were back in the bull pen. I followed him through a double row of khaki-occupied desks to a vending machine alcove behind a door with a glass panel at eye level.

"I'll buy." I dug out my wallet. It was a dollar machine.

"Trying to bribe an officer?" A grin played at the corners of his wide mouth.

There were no chairs in here. I leaned against the wall. With an extended arm, he braced himself against a huge Coke machine opposite me.

"The McKance case," I prompted. "I'm told you were the arresting officer." I'd read that in the photocopies Irene had given me last night.

"Yeah."

"You also were first on the crime scene."

"Yeah."

Oh, fine. Now he was reacting more like a New Englander than a New Yorker. "How did you happen to be first on the scene?" I asked. Let's see you come back with a Yeah on that one, Sarge.

"Around eleven that night I was patrolling out on Conch Shell Road for kid speeders. They use the road for drag racing." He took a gulp of coffee.

"And?" This was like prying gravel out of concrete.

"And I got a call."

"A call?"

"Yeah. From the dispatcher. Somebody called in that a body was out at The Nook."

"What's that, some night club?"

"Huh uh. It's a little clearing in the scrub brush along Moccasin Creek off Conch Shell Road. The kids used to go there to make out. Since we began checking, though, they go somewhere else. But it's still called The Nook, and we have jurisdiction in the unincorporated areas of the county-- like where The Nook is."

"The creek runs along the road?"

"Huh-uh. It runs at right angles to it. There's a big field there, used to be a pasture. Now it's just a field."

"Fallow."

"Huh?"

"Full of weeds," I said.

"Yeah. With a sort of lane along the creek side. The Nook is about a quarter mile in."

"You didn't see anyone out there?"

"Huh uh. Except for the stiff."

"Wasn't that sort of peculiar?"

Horgen pushed away from the machine then leaned backward against it. "Why?"

"You get a call there's a body out there where no one can see it from the road. But whoever makes the call isn't there to show you the location. You have caller ID on the department phones?"

"Yeah. The call came from a pay phone. I knew where to go. He said the body was at The Nook."

Which told me the tipster was probably a local. The cement floor was tough on my new plastic casuals. I crossed my feet the other way. "You say the kids don't park out there anymore? How would some passer-by spot a body in the dark a quarter-mile off the road?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

Or just killed him, I guessed. A picture was emerging. "So, okay, you drive out there, your headlights find a body along the creek. Then what?"

"I stop, get out with my flash and walk over to it." "Straight to it."

"No. I walk way over to one side, then back along the canal bank."

"Why?"

"The Nook is sandy. It rained in the afternoon, and there's tracks in the wet sand. I could see them in the headlights."

"Tire tracks?"

"Tire tracks and footprints that lead about twenty feet from the tire tracks to the body at the edge of the creek. I call that in, they call the district ME, I wait out there 'til him and the forensics van get there."

"They took casts, of course."

"Yeah, took photos and made plaster casts."

"And the tire treads were those used on Geo Trackers."

"Uh huh."

"Let me guess. You didn't have to go to the computer files to check every Tracker owner in Southwest Florida, right?"

"We got another phone tip."

Of course. "Sent you straight to Stanley McKance's Tracker."

"Yeah, it did. The castings showed a V-shaped cut on one of the tires. There it was on McKance's front right. Had to be his Tracker made them tracks at The Nook. So we took him in."

"What about the footprints?"

"They came from rubbers."

"Overshoes?"

"Yeah. McKance said he didn't have any." Horgen took a drag of coffee. Mine was cold by now. "But we got a search warrant and found a pair behind some old paint cans on a shelf in his carport. Hard to get a good cast of rubbers in that sand, but they matched."

"Because one of them had a cut in it. Maybe V-shaped?"

Horgen's head bobbed up. "How'd you know that? It wasn't V-shaped though. Just one slash across the heel of one of them. We figured he wore the rubbers to disguise his shoe prints, but he was a little slack about getting rid of them afterward."

"You find any shoe prints made by the victim?"

"Huh uh. Figured McKance carried the body from the Tracker to where we found it."

If that was the case, Stanley had been a lot tidier than I would have been. I'd have just rolled the body out of the car and gotten the hell out of there. The prints, though, according to Irene's file and now corroborated by Horgen, showed that Stanley carried the body twenty feet from the car to set it on the creek bank.

I sipped the cold coffee. It had a medicinal tang. To do all that, Stanley slipped on a pair of rubbers to hide his shoe prints? Rubbers with a slashed heel-- and he'd forgotten to get rid of them after the fact? Sure.

"So you find one dead CPA. Strangled." So had said the copy of the autopsy report included in the file Irene had given me.

"Yeah. The cord's around his neck."

"And it matches a ball of twine your detective team finds in McKance's carport the next day." Irene's file had been pretty damned discouraging.

"That's what forensics told us."

"You find out who called in the tip about the body?" I asked Horgen.

"Huh uh. Just some guy wandering around out there, I guess."

Just some guy casually ambling about in the dark a quarter mile off the road? I offered Horgen another cup--which he turned down--took a couple more stabs at priming his pump, but I felt that he'd told me all he knew. Or wanted to tell me. Or had been told to tell me?

"You do any follow-up on the victim" I asked him.

"Interviewed his partner, everybody else at all connected. Nobody knew anything."

"Was Bauer married?"

"He was divorced. Ex-wife lives in California, hasn't been east in four years."

"Any kids?"

"No kids."

Horgen looked as blank as I felt. Nobody knew anything, except that Stanley did it.

I thanked the lumpish Sgt. Horgen and walked back through the realm of the desk-bound. As I passed Crownmiller's door, I gave him a little wave. He didn't wave back.

I went to jail.

5.

Without Irene present, I hoped I might be able to have a more personal discussion with scamming Stan. His glib shrug-off of grand larceny back in Philadelphia still rankled, but I forced myself to think past that as I stepped through the big grey door of the county lock-up.

I was on the approved visitor list now, so access to Stanley was no problem. I signed in, and the jowly sarge behind his thick glass shield didn't even hint at a strip search.

Stanley was ushered into the bare-bones conference room and unshackled. The guard left, and the prisoner gave me his peculiar little grin. He sat. I paced.

"Accomodations okay?" he asked.

"Can't beat the price. Lousy TV, though. I had to watch a Columbo tape from back when his raincoat was clean."

"I've got every Columbo ever made," Stanley announced proudly. "I'm looking forward to Alzheimer's so I can enjoy them all over again." His creepy little grin faded.

"You got a progress report for me?"

"First, damn it, I want to know why you did it."

"I didn't do it."

"I mean your Philadelphia caper."

He sighed and sat back, linking his fingers behind his head. "Oh,