



A PARANORMAL MYSTERY BY

Prudy
Taylor
Board

It was
the officials at
Base where
reporters reported that
body was found, reported
a suicide. Officers in
are withholding official
comment, citing national
security issues. One anonymous
source reports the
incident may be related to the
recent crash of a B-25
bomber during a training
flight, where eight crewmen
were killed.

A Grave Injustice

A Paranormal Mystery

By

PRUDY TAYLOR BOARD

A Grave Injustice

A Novel by

PRUDY TAYLOR BOARD

Copyright © 2007 by Prudy Taylor Board

ISBN: 1-59507-186-5

ArcheBooks Publishing Incorporated

www.archebooks.com

9101 W. Sahara Ave.

Suite 105-112

Las Vegas, NV 89117

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information about this book, please contact ArcheBooks at publisher@ArcheBooks.com.

This book is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents depicted herein are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



ArcheBooks Publishing

Dedication

This book is dedicated with enduring love to my son and daughter—Byron Foster Taylor and Jennifer Taylor and to the cherished memory of my father Byron M. Foster and my mother Louise H. Hingson.

Author's Note

The fire in *A Grave Injustice* that tragically gutted the historic Coca Cola Bottling plant on US 41 in downtown Fort Myers is based on an actual event that took place in April 1996. The author took liberty with the date.

A Grave Injustice

The shackles of an old love straitened him,
His honor rooted in dishonor stood,
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.

Idylls of the King
Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Prologue

In the rec room at Buckingham Flexible Gunnery Training School, three soldiers huddled around a fourth who was on his knees on the floor. Behind them, the bright red and green lights of a battered jukebox blinked and a black vinyl record spun, playing, “*Comin’ in on a wing and a prayer.*” The air was blue with smoke and the floor was littered with cigarette butts and crumpled Wings and Pall Mall packs. Through the window, the bulky silhouettes of AT-6 training planes cast dark shadows on the tarmac.

A Grave Injustice

On the wall hung two posters. One bore the caption “Loose Lips Sink Ships,” featuring caricatures of Hitler, Hirohito, and Mussolini with elephant-sized ears. The second depicted a wounded GI staggering up a tropical beachhead with a caption reading, “Careless talk got there first.” A signed black and white photo of a bathing-suit clad blonde movie star was thumb-tacked to the wall. The signature read Betty Grable and the words “Woo woo” and “Hubba hubba” had been scrawled in pencil along the margins of the picture.

The young soldier on the floor sobbed, his voice hoarse from protesting his innocence for hours, “I’m no spy. I don’t know where that stuff on the Norden bombsight came from. I didn’t put it there. I swear.” But his protests were weakening as he realized the futility of his words. “Why would I keep it in my footlocker where it could be found so easily?”

“Cause y’all is a stupid Nazi son of a bitch, that’s why.” The speaker, a private first class, maybe five eight and chunky, leaned against the wall.

“I’m no Nazi, you’ve got to believe me,” the soldier pled. “I’m an American. A good American.”

“Yeah, we heard that Heinie lingo you talk with your Nazi momma and daddy,” the second soldier accused. “We saw all those notes y’all scribble all the time. You’re a Nazi spy and you thought you’d tell the Krauts how to build a Norden bomb-sight and be a big shit. Well, we got news for you.”

“Why don’t we just turn him in?” the smallest of the three soldiers, a buck private, urged. “Let the brass deal with him.”

The big GI, and he was very big, at least six four and weigh-

Prudy Taylor Board

ing at least 250, glanced around the room as if looking for something, his eyes mean. “No. *We* found this fuckin’ spy and we’ll take care of him.”

The soldier on the floor looked up at him. His blue eyes were wild. “What...what are you going to do?”

The big soldier laughed. It was a cruel sound, no humor, more of a snarl. “Get his belt,” he demanded and the second soldier nodded.

“Hold him,” the PFC ordered, bending down, but the other private backed away.

“No,” the buck private replied. “I don’t know what you’re gonna do, but I don’t want to have nothin’ to do with it.”

“You won’t get away with this. You’ll get caught. Please. Think what you’re doing.” The soldier tried to rise, but the big soldier held him down.

The PFC moved closer and undid the woven khaki belt of the GI’s uniform. He passed it over to the big soldier who formed a loop with the buckle and wrapped it around the soldier’s neck.

“Damn you! Rot in hell,” the soldier cursed, struggling to free himself. But the big man ignored his curses. He put his knee in the middle of the soldier’s back and tightened the noose. The soldier’s eyes widened. He gasped for breath. His face grew red and he struggled, kicking helplessly. His boots made sad little scabbling noises against the wooden floor.

Gagging, the private turned away.

“Aw shit,” the second soldier said. “If you’re gonna upchuck, go outside and do it.” He turned back and watched as the

A Grave Injustice

big GI tightened the noose and the soldier's kicks became weaker and weaker.

“Goddamn, these Krauts are hard to kill.” With one final jerk of the belt, the big guy let go and the lifeless body slid to the floor.

As the final darkness clouded his mind, rage sent the blood surging through the young soldier's dying body. He couldn't speak—the pressure of the belt had crushed his larynx, but one word echoed through the corridors of his mind. It wasn't Mom, although he loved her dearly. And it wasn't Dad nor America nor God.

It was *Revenge*.

1

Terminated.

Corey Harris stared at the word as it appeared on the personnel form on the desk in front of her. The form really was pink, she thought with detached surprise. This was new information since she'd never been fired before. She barely heard what the *Miami Chronicle's* Human Resources Director was saying, but automatically unclipped her ID badge and removed her press credentials from her purse.

“The personal items will be removed from your desk and cubicle. They will be boxed and delivered or shipped to your

A Grave Injustice

home.”

“What about my exit interview?”

“None required for terminated employees. You may provide a written statement to be included in your personnel file, if you wish.”

At that, Corey laughed, a harsh, strangled sound. Interviews were the lifeblood of any newspaper, except, apparently, when you were an employee being canned.

Five minutes later, the uniformed security officer escorted her out of the building. He threw her a half salute at the door. “Sorry, Corey,” he said and she knew he was sincere. She and Joe had been buds since her early days at the paper.

The fierce July sun beat down on her back as, security guard watching, she trekked across the *Chronicle’s* parking lot to her car. She unlocked the door and slid into the driver’s seat.

Stunned and disbelieving, she sat motionless, then rested her forehead on the steering wheel for a moment. Gathering herself together, she straightened, put the key in the ignition and started the car.

On the way to Sean’s condo on Brickell Avenue, she thought about the strange series of events that had led to today’s debacle. As a police reporter, she’d uncovered evidence tampering on the part of one of the detectives. She’d done the story. The cop was fired and charges were dismissed against a drug dealer the cops really wanted off the street. That had been maybe six weeks ago. She’d thought nothing more about it. Yes, her sources in the police department dried up, but she figured they’d get over it. Besides, she’d never depended totally on po-

Prudy Taylor Board

lice sources for her tips and leads. Then two nights ago, she'd been driving from a crime scene. It was early, around 3:00 AM, when she'd been pulled over on the other side of MacArthur Causeway. Undercover narcs searched her car and found two pounds of marijuana in the trunk.

But it wasn't hers.

She knew it wouldn't do any good to protest her innocence to the narcs because they'd planted the grass. Although she'd never been able to prove it, she knew the routine. Narcs often held out a little extra grass or whatever drugs they confiscated during a raid. They'd lock them away until they arrested somebody they had a hard on for and then, if the person didn't have a sufficient quantity to make it a felony as opposed to a misdemeanor, the narcs added some from their personal stash. This usually meant jail time for the perp.

She even knew why the narcs had done it: Revenge. But they'd been smart; she'd give them that. They'd let enough time elapse so that it looked legit. However, the cops didn't really want her in jail. They just wanted her gone. So they'd made a deal. They wouldn't file charges if the paper would fire her, saving the *Chronicle* from the embarrassment of having its police reporter arrested on drug charges.

The streets were surprisingly quiet, but it was mid-afternoon, she reasoned, as she drove out of the Miami sunlight into the darkened parking garage. She punched the security code into the pad by the elevator and was soon in the sanctuary of the condo. It was cool, dim and deserted, because Sean was still at his law office. Glancing around for Hummer and Tyler,

A Grave Injustice

her twin tiger toms, she spotted them, curled up together, asleep on the sun porch. She crossed to the leather-padded bar in the rec room and poured herself a drink, then sat down on the white-leather sofa and put her feet up on the chrome and glass coffee table.

What am I going to do?

True, she didn't need to worry about money. She inherited some money when her grandmother had died a few months earlier. Also Sean made a bundle as a successful corporate trial attorney and he was more than generous. He might even be relieved. He'd made it clear that he wasn't crazy about the fact that his significant other was a police reporter dealing with elements of society he considered beneath them both.

The really bad news was that even though Miami was a big city, the news community was small and close knit. The story would get out and she'd find it hard to get a decent job. And the *Chronicle* was the only gig in town for a police reporter. Unbidden tears forged a trail down her cheeks. A throbbing pain began to beat in her temple. *Oh, God. Not a migraine. Not now.* She had to think.

Corey was still sitting there an hour later when she heard the sound of Sean's key in the lock. She roused herself, went into the bathroom and washed her face. By the time Sean walked in, she'd dabbed on a little powder and, in the dim light, it would be difficult for him to notice that she'd been crying. Except that he immediately flicked the lights on.

Since he hadn't scheduled any court appearances, he was wearing his meticulously pressed stonewashed jeans, a pale blue

Prudy Taylor Board

silk polo shirt open to show gold chains. Every hair of his hundred-and-four-dollar haircut was in place. And although it was the end of the day, he looked as fresh as he had when he'd walked out of the building this morning.

He studied her. "Rough day?"

She nodded. "You could say that."

"What's wrong?"

She shrugged.

"Shit, Corey, now what have I done? I hate it when you pout and refuse to talk to me." He put his briefcase down on the table in the foyer and went into the rec room. "Want a drink?"

She shook her head. "It has nothing to do with you."

"It's Tiffany, isn't it? She called or something. I told you that was over months ago. And that's the only time I've strayed." He formed his full mouth and perfect white teeth into the hundred-thousand-dollar smile that charmed juries and clients alike.

Corey knew the affair with Tiffany was over. Tiffany had been a waitress at one of their favorite spots, Pistachio Pete's, and Sean explained that she had come onto him. Corey believed that. Sean was handsome, moneyed, and exuded power. She knew women found him attractive, to say the least, but she was neither stupid nor besotted to the point where she believed he would be any straighter with her in the future. What Corey found hard to understand was why she'd stayed. Her therapist had told her years ago that because her parents died when she was so young, she might find it hard to let people go because she

A Grave Injustice

was afraid of being abandoned again. But Sean had betrayed their relationship and her trust.

“Well, if it’s not Tiffany, then what is it?” he persisted, walking back into the living room carrying his Beefeater’s martini. “You didn’t want a drink, did you?”

She shook her head again. “I was fired,” she said at last.

He looked at her blankly for a moment, as he comprehended the news. Then he said, “Because of that grass?” He smiled. “Well, that’s not the end of the world, now is it? And they didn’t file charges.”

“But I was set up. You know that grass wasn’t mine. The paper had no right—”

“Corey, you’re a smart woman. You know how the world works.”

“Dammit, Sean. I lost my job.”

He came closer and tried to put his arm around her shoulder, but she shrugged it off.

“Look at it from the paper’s point of view. The cops did catch you with all that grass and the paper’s in a tough spot. One of their most visible reporters gets caught...”

Surprised and hurt, she backed away from him until she felt the wall, solid and reassuring behind her. That one moment, that flicker of time when he finally revealed he wasn’t certain she had been set up and when he took the paper’s side, that one moment was finally the killing blow. Without a word, she turned and strode into the bedroom they shared. She was piling clothes into suitcases when he followed her, stopping first to refresh his drink.

Prudy Taylor Board

“Now what do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

“Leaving.”

“But—”

“There’s nothing more to say. We’re over and I’m leaving. It’s that simple.” She reached into the bureau drawer, but he pulled her arm away so that she had to face him.

She’d watched him in court and she watched him now, his russet eyes narrowing unconsciously as he sized her up as if she were a jury. What approach, what ploy would work? Gold chains clinking, he hunched his shoulders thoughtfully, posited his hands on his hips. She knew him so well she could almost read his mind. He was deciding whether he should portray outraged indignation and rail at her inconstancy. Perhaps he should remind her that she was a fair, objective person who could see that he was doing his best to rectify a one-time-only mistake. Or perhaps he should play to her sense of guilt at abandoning their relationship. Perhaps he should dazzle her with the thunderbolt of his verbal and emotional pyrotechnics. It worked in court, and it had worked with her before.

Apparently sensing those tactics wouldn’t work this time, he said simply, “Look, I’ll get my PI to investigate. We’ll sue the department for filing the false report and the paper for firing you without due process. That should set the record straight and assuage your pride.” He paused, then said, “Frankly, I’m relieved. You didn’t belong there. Those aren’t our kind of people, Corey, and I’d just as soon you didn’t work.”

“You never did understand, Sean,” she said softly, returning to her packing.

A Grave Injustice

He didn't plead with her—that wasn't his way, but he didn't give up either. He finally said, "You need space. I understand that. But where are you going to go?"

"I'm going home," she said, and wished she really could. But home meant more than Fort Myers. It meant Emma, her grandmother. But Emma had died three months earlier and Corey missed her terribly. And not just because they were so close. Emma was very much the realist. Talking with her would have helped Corey work through her anger and frustration so that she could figure out what to do.

"Dammit, Corey, you *are* home."

"I mean Fort Myers."

He snorted. "That hick town? I give you two weeks. A month at the most."

Corey couldn't remember the rest of the conversation; just grateful the headache has eased off, she got the cat carriers down from the shelf in the walk-in closet. Within an hour, she had packed her clothes, herded the cats into their carriers, and, with Sean's help, loaded her car. She felt his eyes on her as she drove out of the parking garage. Maneuvering through the five o'clock traffic, she drove north on I-95 to Alligator Alley.

As Corey headed west, dark clouds drifted across the face of the setting sun. The sky was painted with hues of orange and maroon. She surveyed the desolate Florida Everglades and felt lost in her own private swamp of grief, confusion, anger and frustration. She hated the idea of going home. Every time she drove down First Street, she was reminded of the toy store where her parents had been murdered by a crazed employee

Prudy Taylor Board

who'd been fired. It housed a court-reporting service now, but she never forgot what happened and cringed inside whenever she passed by.

Now she was headed to an empty home—disgraced, out of work and broken up with her boyfriend. She dreaded every mile of asphalt that brought her closer to Fort Myers and uncertainty overwhelmed her when she thought of what lay ahead.

2

*Ain't no use in going home
Jody's got your girl and gone
Gonna get a three-day pass
Just to kick old Jody's ass.
Sound off.
One two.
Sound off
Three four. . .*

Prudy Taylor Board

Corey Harris looked up from the box of kitchen utensils she was unpacking at the sound of men's voices and made it to the front door just in time to see a company of khaki-clad soldiers march four abreast down Gunnery Lane. She was surprised. She knew the house she'd inherited from her grandmother had been built on the site of Buckingham Gunnery School, which trained aerial gunners in World War II. However, she found it curious that Buckingham had been reactivated. Maybe it had to do with the war in Iraq.

But the sound of the soldiers marching in cadence was a pleasant intermission in what had been a tough day. She'd slogged into and out of bursts of lemon yellow sunshine and slate gray rainstorms. It was the day when she swiveled between the uncertainty of her first day on a new job and the fear that she had no future in the career she loved. She'd fled the big city where things were happening, where reporters covered the stories that earned Pulitzer and Penney-Missouri prizes, to settle for life in a backwater town where political corruption and white-collar crime were so rampant and so common, that no one even noticed any more.

Now, in early evening, Corey paused in the middle of the cluttered living room of the two-story frame home she'd inherited as her grandmother's sole heir. She clutched a cardboard box filled with kitchen towels and condiments. Six weeks had passed and she was still unpacking boxes, still settling in. The ruffles of the blue sheer Priscilla curtains rustled in response to a whiffet of air from the wall AC unit. Tyler and Hummer picked a path through the chaos, tails held high to indicate their

A Grave Injustice

disapproval.

The heat and atmospheric pressure weighed heavy. Sweat at the roots of her hair made her head feel hot and sticky. The monotonous drone of the cranky old air conditioning unit didn't quite drown the sounds of crickets and katydids chirping outside.

On her CD player, Mariah Carey was belting out a song about a dream lover, beckoning her lover to come rescue her. The lyrics were mundane, but the melody reminded her of college proms and frat dances, rhythms of a life that was long ended. Lingering in the air was the greasy, oregano-laden aroma of pepperoni pizza, the order-in dinner she'd wolfed down last night.

Corey slumped on the floor and stared at the boxes, piles of clothing and cartons of books that made the living room impassable.

At thirty, she should have her life under control. When her mother had been only twenty-six, she was happily married, pregnant with Corey and working as a draftsman in an architect's office with a view toward having her own firm one day.

Corey hoisted a box packed with *Roget's Thesaurus*, *Rodale's The Synonym Finder* and skinny reporters' notebooks to carry into the den off the kitchen, which she planned to use as her office. She wiped her sweaty hands on her shorts before placing the AP Stylebook, dictionaries and her copy of Florida's Government in the Sunshine Act on the desk next to her antiquated but still perfectly adequate Classic II Mac computer.

Her reverie was interrupted by the sound of the front

Prudy Taylor Board

doorbell. “Damn,” she grouched aloud. Who could it be? It couldn’t be Sean—the ex-significant other, the defense attorney from hell—and her neighbors weren’t the kind to just drop by.

No way Sean would come back so soon. Just last week she’d driven home from the supermarket and spotted Sean’s Cessna four-seater parked on the runway two streets over. He’d been standing on her front steps, staring with amused disbelief at her new home which she’d admit was a far cry from the high-rise on Brickell where she’d lived with him in Miami.

He had, he informed her imperiously, flown over from Miami to point out what a serious mistake she was making and also to convince her it was important to them both that she give him a second chance. He told her he’d assigned his firm’s investigator to look into her “situation.” They argued, which was all they’d done since she’d left Miami. Finally, she’d watched him climb into the Cessna and take off with a surprising sense of relief considering how passionately she loved him such a short time ago. Sometimes she wondered if she fastened onto Sean thinking he could give her a sense of being safe and belonging, something even Emma, with all her love and wisdom and sensitivity, had not been able to restore.

The doorbell jangled again, breaking into her thoughts. Then again. Insistently. The sound belonged to someone accustomed to getting his or her way.

Corey stood erect and rolled her shoulders. Her green eyes, red-rimmed and dark-circled from fatigue, smarted. She rubbed them, then brushed dusty, mussed strands of auburn hair off her forehead and reluctantly made her way to the front door.

A Grave Injustice

Standing in the yellow porch light was a gray-haired man who looked to be in his mid to late sixties. Tall, ruggedly fit with a cultivated tan, he wore an expensive, well-tailored business suit. The rays from the porch light glinted off his bifocals, a massive diamond lodge ring on his little finger and the bottle of champagne he carried. Money, she thought.

She opened the door leaving the chain in place. Not that he looked like a killer, but big city habits died hard. Besides she didn't want to be bothered.

He smiled and his teeth were big and white and false. "Corey?"

"Yes?"

He extended the bottle of champagne. It was chilled and beads of moisture were forming. "Henry Dane." His tone was unctuous with just a tinge of preacher from the suburbs, the preacher who sermonized against evil on Sunday and used the church's sales tax exempt number to buy a camcorder for his kid on Monday. "I was a friend of your grandmother's," the stranger was saying. "I've come to welcome you home."

"My grandmother?" She reverted to the half-forgotten role of granddaughter, immediately regretting her bare feet, ragged denim cutoffs and tube top. Her grandmother, always fastidious in her appearance, was likely turning in her grave. Corey studied the man standing before her. The name triggered a faint memory.

"I loved your grandmother, Corey," the stranger said. "There was a time when I'd hoped..." He caught himself mid-memory. "We were always very good friends."

Prudy Taylor Board

Mentally, Corey apologized to Emma for disappointing her, while slowly undoing the chain. “The house is a mess.”

He laughed and it was a hearty sound coming from deep in his stomach. “I didn’t come to see the house, Corey. Please don’t worry.”

She paused to take his measure then led him through the living room into the country kitchen.

“Watch your step,” she cautioned as he followed. She ushered him to the golden oak captain’s table adorned with its basket of cheerful silk daisies in front of the white brick fireplace. “This is my favorite room,” she said, gesturing for him to sit in the captain’s chair.

He smiled and sat. “It was your grandmother’s, too, as I recall. Many an evening we sat here, sipped Beaujolais and discussed the problems of the world. As well as those of a young college coed named Corey.”

Slipping into the mate’s chair opposite him, Corey twisted the corners of her mouth into a smile, but the ever-present memories surfaced. Emma. She’d raised Corey, a 10-year-old, stepping in when Corey’s parents were killed in a random shooting. But somehow Corey couldn’t see Emma—tiny, feisty Emma who had to stretch to measure four foot eleven—sitting in this kitchen with this giant of a man. And yet even Emma, widowed at forty, must surely have been lonely sometimes.

“How about the champagne?” Henry Dane was saying.

She scrambled to her feet, the chair scraping—a brittle sound against the tile floor. “We’ll have to use paper cups.”

Later, after they had toasted her new home, her new job

A Grave Injustice

and her new life, she asked him how he'd met Emma.

"It's simple," he said, finishing his drink. "Sand in my shoes, as the saying goes. I was stationed here during World War II. After the war, I went to college, got my law degree, returned and started my practice. Then in 1965, I ran for the state legislature—it was a bet made during a poker game in the backroom of the Elks Lodge on Hendry.

"To my everlasting amazement, I won," he said, putting his empty cup on the table. "Your grandmother and I met at a meeting of a local Democratic club where I was giving a talk. There were only a handful of Republicans in Lee County then. Not like today. She helped in my campaign because of my stand on the environment. Emma cared a lot about protecting the environment, but then you know that."

He paused and his eyes twinkled. "We didn't always agree, but I respected her opinions. My, how Emma missed you. But she was proud you were making a life on your own. And she had her garden and her hobbies."

"More champagne, Mr. Dane?" she asked after a while and he interrupted to say, "Henry, please, but no more champagne. I have a very full day tomorrow."

Corey started to re-cork the champagne, but Dane took the bottle and poured the last few ounces into her cup. "It'll go flat." He looked around the kitchen, a pleasant smile tweaking the corner of his mouth. "Such a homey place. And Emma was always good about keeping things in repair." He paused thoughtfully. "Corey, is there anything you need?"

"No," she said. "But I have a question." Gesturing toward

Prudy Taylor Board

the window where their reflections moved like actors in a silent movie, she pointed to the dark clearing beyond while she sipped the last of the champagne. “All the years I was growing up in this house, I never understood that barren spot in the yard. Birds still don’t nest in those trees, at least I never hear them singing. And there’s not a single blade of grass. Why do you suppose Emma never seeded or planted that section with grass plugs? Was there a chemical spill there of some sort?”

Henry frowned and leaned forward. She noticed idly that he filled the captain’s chair. “Emma could coax a cactus to bloom out of season, but even she couldn’t get anything to grow there,” he was saying.

Corey nodded.

“Tell you what,” he said, twisting his wrist so he could see his watch, “I’ll talk to the county agent. He’s an old friend. Corey,” he extended his hand as he rose, “I’m going to leave you to your work.”

He glanced around the living room as he made his way to the front door, taking in not only the disarray but Emma’s possessions which Corey cherished—the paintings her mother had done of the Everglades, the photographs that her father, Emma’s son, had taken of the flowers and the wildlife in the backyard, huge hibiscus blossoms, dewy gardenias, squirrels, raccoons, possums. Even a century plant in bloom.

Dane tripped over the gadget bag, which contained her own Canon digital camera and extra lenses, but recovered his balance by supporting himself against the doorjamb. “No time at all and you’ll be settled in.”

A Grave Injustice

Grimacing at the thought of the housework that lay ahead, she opened the screen door for him. “By the way,” she said standing on the porch and glancing out to the dark lane, “I know there was a military base here during World War II, but I didn’t realize soldiers were still billeted in the area.”

Foot poised on the top step, he turned and stared at her. A puzzled expression crossed his rotund face. “Corey, there aren’t any soldiers stationed here.”

“I saw them. Just this morning. I was unpacking when a company of soldiers marched down the road right past the house.”

He shook his head. “Buckingham Army Air Field was deactivated in 1945 or 1946. You’re mistaken. Either that or you’re seeing ghosts.”

“But I saw them. They wore khaki uniforms and shoulder patches bearing the words Training Command in orange letters on a navy blue background.”

An expression of irritation formed around his steel gray eyes. “Nonsense,” he said. “That was the shoulder patch of the gunners training at Buckingham during World War II. There haven’t been any soldiers around here for more than sixty years. You’re imagining things.”

She didn’t argue, but as she watched him climb into his black Lincoln Town car, she muttered, “I saw soldiers marching down this road.” Hands on her slim hips, she tarried on the porch until his taillights, blood red eyes they seemed to her, disappeared into the dark night.

3

C orey cleaned the kitchen, throwing out the empty champagne bottle and making sure the cats had food and water. By eleven o'clock, she had most of her books and files and plaques stashed in the den. They weren't in order, but they were out from underfoot. She managed to move the boxes in the living room enough so she could curl up in her grandmother's Morris chair to watch the eleven o'clock news.

The NBC affiliate's lead story was exactly what would lead the front page in the morning, a story about a traffic fatality in Lehigh Acres in which two teenagers had been killed. She'd

A Grave Injustice

done the hard news story today; tomorrow she'd follow up with interviews with the grieving parents, then the county commissioners to see why sidewalks weren't being built in that nice middle-class neighborhood. A tropical storm was building in the Atlantic, a \$200 million incinerator would cost \$400 million if you added interest and the Chamber of Commerce was predicting a banner tourist season—especially if the winter in the north was as brutal as projected in the *Farmer's Almanac*. And, of course, it was Labor Day. Thank God she hadn't had to cover any of the standard holiday fare. Even Crawford, the executive editor didn't have big enough balls to expect her to cover that stuff.

When the newscast was over, she rose, stretched and climbed the stairs to her grandmother's bedroom. The room she'd used as a child was down the hall, but she felt closer to Emma here. The bay window overlooking the path leading to the front door had a window seat made from golden oak and, as a child, she'd spent hours curled up there, reading Nancy Drew mysteries, playing with her Barbies, thinking, watching the birds—the Mockingbirds, Quail, Blue Jays—trying to figure out what she was going to be when she grew up. Now it smelled of fresh paint, for she'd spent the weekend covering the Emma's rose walls with robins' egg blue.

Kneeling on the cushioned window seat, she glanced down Gunnery Lane. A bank of clouds hovered in the southeast promising a late night shower. The street, lined with oak, Australian pine, and Malaleuca trees, had once been the main road into the gunnery training school, which the Army had built and

Prudy Taylor Board

operated during World War II. Now the air base was used as the headquarters of the Lee County Mosquito Control District. Its fleet of planes was parked on one of the old runways. Large plats of land that formerly housed other base buildings had been transformed into a subdivision catering to young “just about got theirs” couples who owned private planes. All the newcomers erected expensive, architect-designed homes with hangars attached like over-sized garages. The base’s grid of concrete runways made the area a natural for this type of development. Her grandmother’s house, constructed in the late 1940’s, squatted on the edge of the former airbase, an anachronistic remnant from another era.

Corey watched the twinkling lights of the nearby homes. Boughs of pine trees dipped and waved in the breeze. A sickle moon hung heavy in the sky like a pendant. The birds that sang in the day were mute, their songs replaced by that of a lone Whippoorwill. She drew a deep breath and relaxed. She was adapting well to the slower pace of Florida’s west coast.

But there was that situation at work.

Damn that Ben Crawford. He’d drawn the battle lines. As executive editor, he was boss and he made it clear he was not impressed.

“Harris,” he had directed, his surprisingly blue eyes grim, “there’s a signal four with two signal sevens on Homestead Road in Lehigh Acres.” When she hesitated a second, he said, “Move! I’m using it in tomorrow’s paper, not next week’s.”

That SOB! When she’d gotten back from covering the car wreck with two fatalities, he’d leaned forward, hands flat on the

A Grave Injustice

desk, a lock of black hair flopping into his eyes and said in a quiet, impersonal voice, “I know you were hot stuff at the *Miami Chronicle*. I know all about your awards, and I can’t believe you’re going to be happy in a backwater town like this.” She hadn’t responded because she wasn’t so sure herself.

He was about five ten, not much taller than she was at five eight. He looked her straight in the eyes and concluded by saying, “So until you decide where you’re going from here, I’ll be watching you, because you’re not going to screw up my newsroom.”

She was still fighting to repress the anger that unconsciously formed her hands into fists and turned her jaws into millstones. She’d covered the police beat for six years. She loved it, and was damned good at it. Metro-Dade cops, some of the toughest in the nation, respected her, made room for her at crime scenes, gave her tips. Until that asshole Jernigan had discovered she was investigating him for evidence tampering and his buddies had set her up, planting grass in her car.

After informing Crawford that his attitude was both negative and prehistoric, she’d left the newsroom, carefully hiding the fact that she was furious. She knew this coast wasn’t as sophisticated and progressive as the East Coast, but Ben Crawford had an excellent reputation statewide as an editor. To think she’d actually looked forward to working for him.

She’d noticed a tiny nick in his neck. Cut himself shaving, had he? She smiled. At least he had blood in his veins. That meant he was human. Which meant he was vulnerable—to something. And she’d find out what. If she could get past that

Prudy Taylor Board

idiot Vecchio, the desk sergeant at the third district in Miami, she could figure a way to cope with Ben Crawford.

A quiet meow drew her attention and she turned to see Tyler and Hummer standing in the open bedroom door. At least the cats were happy. In Miami, she'd kept them indoors, not only to protect them from the traffic, but also to keep them from ending up as an animal sacrifice in some Santeria rite. But here, thanks to the pet door she'd had installed in the kitchen, they could come and go as they pleased. She delighted in watching them playfully dodging in and out of the Areca palm trees in the yard, chasing squirrels which they never caught, climbing the huge oak trees. Letting them outdoors was also a lot easier on the furniture since she was too chicken to have them declawed.

"Okay, fellows," she said, rising from the window seat. "I get the message. It's bedtime."

She slipped into the extra large Miami Dolphins tee shirt she used as a nightgown and eased between the sheets. Tyler took his position on the headboard and Hummer stretched out by her feet. Sighing, she rolled over and reached to turn out the snail-shaped ceramic lamp on the nightstand.

Going to sleep was always a problem. Her restless mind hated to shut down, to relinquish control. And then there was the possibility she would dream.

Beams of the streetlight filtered through the slatted blinds and bathed the bedchamber in stripes that camouflaged the hard edges of the furniture. Her grandmother's bureau stood in the corner, bulky and solid, like a sentinel. The rack that held

A Grave Injustice

the wedding ring quilt Emma had made stood next to it, close at hand for cold weather.

The white wicker rocker near the far window brought back memories of her childhood. Night after night, Emma rocked her to sleep in that chair, rocked away the tears, the horror of being splashed with her dying father's blood. Being held in Emma's loving arms eased the despair, the confusion, the sense of loss, the grinding anger she'd felt knowing she'd never see her parents again. And the guilt. She agonized over the possibility that her parents died because they had gone downtown specifically to buy the new Barbie doll she had to have.

To this day, loud, sharp noises sent her into a state of panic, although she'd become much better at hiding it. And, thank God, they were rare, but she still experienced terrifying flashbacks of that moment when the man had burst through the doors of the toy store and started shooting.

Emma. Corey felt the pain of the memories and her loss. She'd taught Corey so much, the importance of being a writer, of being honest, of accepting responsibility for her actions and decisions. And Emma taught her the best way—she didn't preach, Emma lived it.

Corey punched her pillow. Whether it was aftermath of the physical labor involved in moving or the emotional stress at the newspaper or breaking up with Sean she would never know, but she was relieved as she felt the welcoming fingers of sleep massage her fretful mind into blankness. But sleep didn't bring the hoped-for peace.

This time Emma, not her long-dead parents, invaded her

Prudy Taylor Board

dreams, inhabiting a shifting landscape of ugly hues—gelid blues, bloody reds and whitish gray, the color of the brain matter that had spewed from her mother’s skull. In her dream, Corey and Emma were walking down a curving, tree-lined avenue. Townspeople crowded the street, but their faces melted and re-formed as they neared so that she never knew who they really were. Disconcerted, she asked, “Who are you?” But they smiled cruel, angular smiles and strode past without replying. Tears of frustration blinded her and she stumbled on the uneven brick sidewalk. Emma reached out to steady her, but when she turned it wasn’t Emma. It was that bastard Ben Crawford. Then Sean. But, no, it was Henry Dane.

A door opened and she was dragged inside and surrounded by cops. They towered over her, their faces those of animals—wolves, wild boars with horned snouts, and mad dogs. Froth mingled with vivid red blood encircling their mouths. They held blackjacks poised to strike, but they weren’t hitting her, they were pointing their fingers at her. Through it all, she heard Emma whispering to her. One word. Over and over.

“Louder,” she begged. Then, “Speak louder. Please, Emma. I can’t hear you.” But Emma wouldn’t speak louder and Corey drifted into a deeper sleep where only dread and fear remained—a fear that nothing was what it seemed.

4

In his law office fronting on First Street, Henry Dane paced restlessly that Tuesday morning, anxious for the workday to begin. He glanced out the heavy plate glass window to the street beyond, then down at his gold Rolex. Eight thirty. He didn't like unstructured time. Already the day was scorching; the sky was pale. The air was so still the branches of the olive trees lining the sidewalks stood motionless like rows of soldiers at attention.

In the 1970's when the population sprawled south and his peers in the legal business had followed the path of develop-

Prudy Taylor Board

ment, he remained downtown. When they built their own buildings, he quietly purchased the block where he had rented office space since 1957. The block once contained a hotel, which he remodeled and marketed as townhouses and offices. A deli, a sidewalk café, a bookstore and various other small shops were his tenants now.

As Dane watched, Twyla, his secretary, maneuvered her way through the morning crowd, her tight permed gray curls bobbing. She wore her office uniform—straight skirt, tailored jacket, white blouse, pearl earrings and necklace. She could have been a 1950's ad for the Katharine Gibbs Secretarial School. Twyla paused in front of the office, plumbed her purse's depth seeking the key, found it and slipped it into the lock, jerking the door, which had a tendency to stick. The overhead sign announcing "Henry Dane, Lawyer" in gold leaf letters flapped back and forth.

"Morning, Mr. Dane," she called without looking, trusting he would already be in his office as was his custom.

"Morning, Twyla," he responded.

In the beginning, she'd been a sloe-eyed, buxom blonde with curves only a benign god could have designed, curves only a saint could have kept his hands away from. And Henry was certainly no saint. At the time, he was married and a state senator.

As if summoned, Twyla appeared in the doorway, a file folder in her hands. "Don't forget, you've got the Stein closing at ten. Don't know what Lee County's coming to, letting in developers of," she paused dramatically, "other religious persua-

A Grave Injustice

sions. You'd better check the contracts," she said crossing the office. The ancient brown shag rug muted the sounds of her footsteps. "I scheduled an appointment for you with Commissioner Blanton for 2:00 o'clock this afternoon at the courthouse to discuss the paperwork, the DRI for that development in South County...you know the one."

"Panther Glade."

"That one. And you've got a hearing before Judge Schumacher this afternoon. That drug case."

"You got the papers on it?"

"In front of you."

He picked up the folder, skimmed through it and laughed. "Yeah, this is a good one. Jurisdiction. Sheriff Whitesell's boys picked up my client with a load of pot. Forgot to check their maps, I guess, and arrested him in Collier, not Lee County. Shouldn't take long."

She didn't say anything, but her body language spoke volumes. It told him, once again, how much she didn't approve of his clients. He reached across the desk and lifted the lid of the leather humidor and removed a cigar, surveying his office. The white stuccoed walls were adorned with visible trophies—championship cups and plaques from local golf and tennis tournaments, the Kiwanis Club plaque for sponsoring the Big Brothers' Fishing tournaments ten years in a row, the Good Neighbor Award from WBBH, the local NBC television station. There was more—the photos with the politicians including the newly seated Republican governor, and the laminated newspaper articles marking his success in many high-

Prudy Taylor Board

profile cases.

“Humph. And don’t forget,” Twyla instructed, pointing with her forefinger to the stogie, “Dr. Sam says you can only have two of those a day.”

Twyla bent forward and placed the folder precisely in the center of his green desk pad. He would check the documents carefully, although there was no need. What Twyla lacked in humor and creativity, she more than compensated for when it came to detail. She was indispensable. Otherwise he would have let her go when the pall of their physical relationship had become stifling. Fortunately, about that time, Jud Thompson had come into her life offering all the things he never intended—the gold ring, the home with the white picket fence, everything but children. Jud could not give her children.

Lurlene. China blue eyes, wheat blonde hair, porcelain skin. Studying her photo on the mahogany credenza behind the desk, he acknowledged he still missed her even though their marriage had been rife with disagreements. They’d agreed on little, but they loved each other. They just didn’t like one another. In the final years of their marriage, they’d even taken separate vacations. He’d been home when she’d died of a massive heart attack in an airport in Bangkok just before Easter eight years earlier.

He snipped the end of the cigar and lit it with the gold lighter emblazoned with an alligator wearing a blue and orange sweater, a gift from his University of Florida Alum Club. He stared out the window. The streets were empty now. In a wisp of time, the drones had returned to the hive. He leaned into the

A Grave Injustice

padded arms of his white leather chair and unbuttoned his navy blue Armani jacket and patted his stomach. A touch of dyspepsia, he wondered as a tide of acid rose in his throat. He'd eaten heavily the night before, end cut of roast beef, baked potato slathered in butter.

He focused his attention on the Stein papers, scanning the lease option, the closing statement, the title documents. "Perfect as usual," he approved as Twyla reappeared carrying a steaming mug of freshly brewed coffee, which she placed along with a pressed white linen napkin on the corner of the desk.

"What was that note on my desk to call the County Agent about?"

For a moment, he stared at her trying to remember, then recollection swirled into focus. "Get George what's his name to go out to Emma Harris' place and take a soil sample. Flowers won't grow."

She laughed, a tinkling sound he'd always liked.

"Since when, Mr. Dane," she asked, "are you interested in horticulture?"

"I promised Emma Harris' granddaughter. She's got a dead spot in her yard where she can't grow anything. Remind what's his name, that George Perry, that he owes me a favor so I want it done quickly."

"Yes, well, I'll call him when I get time."

"Twyla," he called her back.

"Yes," her dark eyes, now couched in pads of puffy flesh, opened wider in mild curiosity.

"What response are we getting for the 717th reunion? How

Prudy Taylor Board

many are coming so far?”

“I’ll check.”

“I don’t need an exact count, just an estimate.”

She pursed her full mouth thoughtfully. “About eighty.”

Disquieted, he puffed on his cigar, straightened the lapels of his jacket and turned his attention once again to First Street. “Ten years ago there were close to two hundred,” he said returning to his desk, discomfited by the reminder of his mortality. “Twyla,” he said pensively, “have you heard anything about any military maneuvers in Lee County? Seen anything in the paper I might have missed? Talked to anybody at the National Guard Armory? Jud’s still got friends in the Guard, hasn’t he?”

“Military maneuvers?”

He nodded. “Have you?”

She shook her head and left his office.

He leaned his elbows on the desk and cupped his chin in his hands. In his mind’s eye, he saw Fort Myers as it was when he’d first arrived to take the five-week gunners’ course at Buckingham.

The air had been laced with the brackish scents of river water and sweet orange blossoms. Cars angle parked along First Street. He could still see the boxlike Fords and Hudsons and Packards parked in front of Kate Jeffcott’s real estate office, the Arcade movie theatre, the severe granite façade of the First National Bank and the Fort Myers Secretarial School where Twyla had been a student.

The sky over the Caloosahatchee River had been crowded

A Grave Injustice

with gray, noisy blankets of B-17s, B-24s, AT-6s.. Even B-29s. On Saturday nights, the town was packed with GIs and reverberated with twangy country music played on the jukeboxes of local joints like the Rendezvous, Town Hall Club, North Shore Club. Fights erupted for every conceivable reason and for no reason at all. Town cops and MPs just separated the brawlers and even looked the other way unless the fight got bloody.

He remembered it well. Like every other GI, he'd come into the small, crowded town on 24-hour passes. Dane thought back to his conversation the previous night with Emma's granddaughter. Marching soldiers indeed. And with the Training Command shoulder patch. Em had never mentioned her granddaughter was so fanciful. Maybe the girl was on drugs. So many young people were these days. The girl looked normal; her eyes were clear and her speech was normal.

Twyla reappeared in the doorway. "Don't forget," she said primly. "You're to have lunch at The Verandah with Senator Saltner. He wants to discuss your hosting a testimonial dinner, a fund raiser."

He grinned. "Charlie wants a lot, doesn't he?"

Twyla shrugged. "He might remind you that he got you a million dollars from the State Department of Environmental Protection so you could build that Vietnam War Memorial on the site of the old city gas plant."

He chuckled. "We couldn't let a toxic waste dump sit idle. And the rent—a dollar a year—was certainly reasonable. Additionally, it made the mayor look good, helping a veterans' organization establish a war memorial. Plus, the city didn't have

Prudy Taylor Board

to spend three million dollars during his administration to clean it up. All in all, good old Charlie made a wise investment of state money.”

Twyla pursed her lips and the puppet lines on either side of her mouth drew together, sheathing her lips in a parenthesis that wordlessly expressed her disapproval. Shaking her head, she turned and left the office.

The dyspepsia returned. He wasn't sure whether it was because he'd over eaten the night before or because of Emma's granddaughter. Why would Corey Harris think she'd seen a platoon of soldiers wearing the Training Command shoulder patch?

He reached down and pulled open his bottom desk drawer. He removed the bottle of Stoli and poured himself a stiff drink. It was the only antidote that shooed away the poisonous parade of phantoms.

If you enjoyed this sample, it can also be purchased in hardcover or the full eBook. Please visit www.archebooks.com for more information.

