

## Sample Chapters from *Orange as Marmalade*

### Chapter 1

*There had definitely not been a body on the second floor landing when I'd run upstairs to the attic earlier in the evening. But there definitely was a body, and a rather messy one at that, as I sauntered downstairs after a leisurely snack. I've never been very squeamish, but I do admit to pausing a moment before I stepped gingerly over the leg that jutted out awkwardly on the hardwood floor where the stairway turned down to the left.*

*The blood was just beginning to congeal. Now, did that mean he'd been dead only a moment or two? An hour, maybe? How long had I been upstairs? Most of my experience with blood involved rather fresh stuff, and I'd always cleaned it up right away. I am meticulous about such things.*

*You may not think of blondes as being able to deal with blood, but actually I'm not really a blonde. I tend more toward the brassy tones. And I do admit to having patches of white here and there. While we're on the subject I might as well tell you, I'm on the tall side. My hair is short. My nails are long. My voice is perfectly silky. I love my job. And my name suits me well.*

*Where was I? Oh yes, the body. Youngish adult. Male. Human. Sandy blonde hair, parted on the left. He looked like a man who over-exercised a lot. You know the type. Proud of his biceps. Flexes them every time he sees himself in a mirror. Yecch! Already I didn't like him. But, since he was dead, it hardly mattered what I thought.*

*I have a keen sense of smell. Usually that's a good thing, but in this case, I didn't want to stick around smelling the faintest whiff of motor oil that I picked up. Most people wouldn't have smelled it at all. Of course, most people are not like me. I took one more sniff as I walked over him, though, and noticed a woody earthy foresty smell. How did that go with motor oil? Ahhh, the oil was in the background, but this man had been in the woods recently. I'm not opposed to changing my mind about someone. I was liking him more. Too bad he was very, very dead.*

*Good clothes. Probably did all his shopping in the city. Deerskin vest, but this man wasn't a hunter. He had a very interesting medicine pouch around his neck. I could tell it held a little piece of antler that he must have found in the woods. I told you I have a very keen sense of smell. Well, his luck had certainly run out. There was a big knife handle sticking out of his middle.*

*I couldn't figure out how he'd gotten inside. He couldn't have been in the building when the doors were locked, because I'd made my usual rounds right after closing. Did I tell you I'm the night watcher here? Very important position because of the damage that could be done by intruders. I've been on the job for a year now, and we haven't lost a single asset in the last ten months. It took me a while to get rid of all the bad ones right at first. I've probably killed two hundred of them all told, most of them in the first month or two. I didn't eat all of them, of course. Only thirty-seven of them.*

*But, at the time of that dead body I'd been there a month and a half. I was just getting used to the new staff person. Not that I didn't like her from the start. No, we've been good friends all along. But she didn't have my – well – routines down. Sometimes she used to check the same places I'd already looked, in case there were lost kids. Or sleepers. Or hiders.*

*At that time there were still a lot of the intruders that I had to take care of. I started bringing them to her as I killed them and leaving them beside her desk. But this one was just too big a body for me to handle, so I left it lying there. Anyway, I hadn't killed this one. I never take credit for work I haven't done myself. It's a matter of pride.*

Saturday, April 20, 1996

There had definitely not been a body on the second floor landing when I'd closed up the library that Friday night. It was last year. April 28, 1995, to be exact. I always locked the doors and then took a final look around the stacks so I wouldn't miss a kid who was hiding out or someone who'd fallen asleep in the comfy old armchairs.

Being librarian in a small town was never my major goal in life. I have to admit, though, that I love the job, although finding that body last year wasn't fun at all.

Actually, I suppose Marmalade found it. Nowadays I leave the final check-up to her because she's so good at it. She found the little Armitage girl once when the child hid under a desk in the research area. Led her down to my desk as if to say, "Look what we have here, and what are you going to do about it?"

Marmalade is the rather tubby library cat.

*Tubby??? You think I'm tubby???*

She's something of a legend around here. When Miss Millicent died in late 1994 and left all her books and her old Victorian mansion, with its crannies and gingerbread and turrets and gables, to the town council with the stipulation that it be used as a *fine town library*, they took her at her word. They sold most of the excess furniture at an estate auction, and tried to set up the library themselves. But they had no clue how to do it, so they hired me in April of 1995 to repair their mistakes. I wasn't even really a librarian then, although I'd taken a few courses, but I was the only applicant.

The house, one of the oldest in Martinsville, Georgia, had been overrun with mice for a long time, and the little critters had chewed up a number of fine old volumes. Maybe they liked the bookbinding glue.

*Yes, and they use the paper to line their nests.*

. . . Come to think of it, maybe they tore the paper up for their nests. Anyway, one day about three weeks before I was hired, Marmalade came strolling in off the street through the open front door and started killing mice as if she'd been hired to do it. The town council decided they'd just saved the price of an exterminator. Poor Marmalade had to catch her own dinners.

*Mice all taste alike. It gets boring after a while.*

The first day I walked into the place, a year ago this month, I saw her at work. I'd hate to be one of those mice. After a day or two, she started bringing dead mice almost like offerings of peace and leaving them in little piles beside my desk. What a sweetheart. She's a gorgeous yellow-orange, with white tummy and feet and chin. She's always been perfectly polite to me, never showing her claws, but I know they're very long and very sharp.

Now, dead mice are not my favorite presents. I much prefer forsythia, daffodils and a branch of wild cherry blossoms in the spring. Goldenrod in the fall, mixed with some sweet autumn clematis. In the summer, bring me zinnias and marigolds, pungent and prickly-looking. Winter is the time for a bouquet of dried grasses, with a little frost still on them. My husband Sol used to bring me the loveliest little bouquets, just gatherings of roadside flowers, really, but he seemed to have put his heart into the gathering of them.

*He sounds nice. Did he like cats?*

Sorry, I just got sidetracked. We were talking about that body. Well, this little town was in a buzz, believe me. They don't even have parking meters – and here was a murder. It was the first dead body I'd ever seen, except for funerals. The very first dead person I ever saw was Miss Harkness, who died when I was ten and Grandma Martelson dragged me to the funeral home where she kissed the body of that woman she hadn't even liked in real life, which made the undertaker lady cringe. Even I could tell grandma was messing up all the work it had taken to make that shriveled-up cranky woman look pudgy and peaceable.

This body, however, which looked like a very surprised young man, didn't seem like it would cause any trouble for the undertaker. I remember it clearly. He was quite good-looking, even dead. He had a rather Roman nose. Actually, I thought he looked a bit like a handsome camel, with his prominent nose and longish face. But he was untidy-looking as a body. His left arm was pointing off toward Biographies, while his head was hanging sideways over the edge of the staircase and his right foot sprawled in the general direction of Histories. There was an amulet bag around his neck that must have gotten twisted around in back of him as he fell. I could see the edge of it poking out from under his very well developed shoulder. The bag was a light grayish leather, . . .

*Mouse-skin, obviously.*

. . . with some beadwork on it. The beads were as orange as Marmalade. We found out later it held some small stones and the tip of an antler.

The knife was easy to spot. The handle looked like a big hunting knife, and it was sticking up at an angle through a leather vest that probably cost an arm and a leg. I have a problem with deerskin vests. When *Bambi* first came out, I was very young and very impressionable. Then, when my son wanted to learn to hunt when he was still pretty young, I rented the video to show him what happens when you kill a mommy deer. Of course, I know full well that the whole movie was wildly imaginative; papa stag and young son would have fought it out instead of that Hollywood-ish magnificent abdication at the end. But I felt better not having a son running around the woods with a gun. We started him on rock-climbing lessons instead, and he practiced on the big cliffs near here.

I have to admit I felt a little funny about having a body in my library. Actually, I suppose I'm sounding too calm about it. Keep in mind though, that it's been a full year since the murder. Everybody in Keagan County was talking about it, and some people even started locking their doors at night. We

discussed everything we knew and quite a bit that people made up or guessed at. Of course, since I was new to the town, some folks thought I might have done it, although Bob never thought so. The detectives who were called in questioned me (and everybody else) thoroughly. One of them sat asking questions, and the other one took notes. Even though I was innocent, I remember feeling like a deer caught in the headlights.

*Or a mouse in my sights.*

You see, I'm a reasonably flexible person, but murder wasn't a part of my usual vocabulary at that time. I've led almost fifty years of a fairly quiet life, after all. My long ash-brown hair is liberally sprinkled with gray. I have a slightly rounded tummy, and a bustline that used to be a lot higher. I was widowed five years ago, after almost twenty years of reasonably happy marriage. Three kids, but they're all grown up now. All three of my kids were born in February, three years in a row. Karla Michaels, my best friend from grade school, who ended up living next door to Sol and me (until she got a divorce and moved to Phoenix), made a number of not-so-oblique references to "what went on around the Brandy house every May." I figured it was just the result of all those springtime scents in the air. That and simply loving the man I'd married. And now I have two grandkids and one on the way. I don't believe in hanging onto kids as they grow. Let them blossom their own way. Raise 'em right as you can, feed them enough, give them room, and see what they turn into. Like gardening, you can get a wonderful harvest that way.

Speaking of gardening, I'm in pretty good shape because I do *heavy* gardening. I'm talking wheelbarrows and shredder and weeding by hand. Built my own three-bin compost pile. It's not fancy woodworking, but I can sure wield a hammer. Anyway, when I took this job I had no real strings attached to me except the yard I loved at the old house in Braetonburg. My daughter's taking good care of it though.

Sol's financial sense had left me with a modest income for life, and the Braetonburg Women's Investment Club I helped start twenty-one years ago has really paid off. So my finances are secure, but I wanted more than just staying at home, more than just volunteering on various committees. The library job had sounded ideal. Why, you might ask, didn't I just drive down the valley the five miles from home each day? Good question. I wanted a change. You see, the old house I had shared with Sol still felt lonely to me. I wanted new horizons.

Working here in the Martinsville Library sure kept me busy at first. It took a lot of effort those first few months to set it up, but now it's just Monday, Wednesday, Friday on the job, plus Saturday from ten till two. Tiny salary, but a new town to get to know. Stretch my wings. Wonderful.

Running up and down those stairs in the library helps keep me active, too. Three floors and an attic, but only the bottom two floors are used for the public. Library records and office stuff take up part of the third floor. The rest is pretty much unused. The town council wanted to lock all the upper doors, but I reminded them that Marmalade needed to have access to the entire place to keep down the rodent population, so they just put up some "KEEP OUT – STAFF ONLY" signs at the bottom of the stairs to the third floor. Effective enough for a small town where nothing ever happened.

I'd like to turn the place into a haunted house for Halloween some year, but the trustees who hired me aren't ready for that yet. They're a stodgy lot. Can you believe, they almost didn't hire me because of my name? Too unusual, they said. Didn't sound like a librarian. I was just a woman from the next town with too much time on my hands. Could I help it if my mother was a potter and named me Bisque after the unglazed ceramic ware that she loved?

Of course, once I was in grade school I became Biscuit, and that's what I've been called ever since, Biscuit McKee. My first husband's last name was Brandy, and long before the wedding I told him I absolutely refused to change to Biscuit Brandy. It sounded like a snack and a shot, so I kept McKee at a time when women didn't routinely do that. At least not women from around here. But Sol never minded, and it was just our business after all. The kids decided not to bother with all the hyphens and such, so they all three grew up as Brandies.

Next week, I'll still be Biscuit McKee, even though I'll be marrying for the second time. Bob said he thought my name fitted me. Nice guy.

*Yes, he is.*

Marmalade seems to like him a lot, too. Anyway... I say 'anyway' a lot, don't I? It's a good word, though. As I was saying, the knife was obvious, but there was a lot less blood than I would have expected. Oh, there was blood all right, a few splashes and a small puddle on the hardwood floor. But most of it seemed to be confined to the front of his all cotton shirt. That Banana store, maybe? She, Marmalade that is, had met me at the front door that morning and marched me right up the stairs. There was no misunderstanding her instructions. She seemed to expect me to know what to do. After one quick

look I hurried downstairs to my desk and dialed the number for the police station. I didn't want to alert the volunteer fire fighters, so I didn't call 911.

Funny that a little town like Martinsville, Georgia, has access to that nine-one-one number for emergencies. It was only a couple of decades ago that all the towns along the Metoochie River, which is really more of a large creek, were upgraded to individual phone lines. Before that, everyone was on party lines. Now, if you've never experienced a party line, you just haven't lived. At home in Braetonburg when I was growing up, our phone line was shared by four other families whose rings we heard, and five families whose rings we *didn't* hear. How did we know who the phone was ringing for? Simple. It was sort of like a Morse code, or like audible Braille. When the call was for us, we heard one long ring followed by two short rings. Karla, my best friend, had one long, one short. The grocery store was three short. Mr. Johnson was one long. Auntie Blue's ring was two short. If you wanted to make a phone call, you had to listen first to see if anybody else was talking. Of course, some people just listened all the time regardless. It's very hard to have a secret in a small town.

From the Statement of Bisque McKee  
to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation  
Saturday, April 29, 1995

Yes, I found the body when I came in to work this morning. . . . About 8:30. . . . No, I didn't. I could tell he was dead. . . . Because he *looked* dead. . . . No, I did not. I went only about half-way up there, then I called the police station. . . . Last night? I went to bed about 10:00. . . . I wear size 8½ medium, Why? . . . No, I'd never seen him before. . . . No, I don't know why he was here in the library.

## Chapter 2

Saturday, April 1, 1995

Harlan paused a moment, then gently pressed the button on his Nikon F-1. The anole didn't even blink as the camera gave out a barely discernible click. Perfect. He eased back from where he had been leaning over the edge of a stone outcropping and ran his hand through his sandy blonde hair – at which movement the six-inch lizard turned a questioning glance in his direction. “Sorry, little friend,” Harlan whispered, and the breeze carried his words to a female goldfinch perched on the newly leafing-out tulip poplar tree that grew at the base of the small hill. The bird fluffed up her feathers, suddenly looking twice her diminutive size.

What the bird saw was a young adult male human with a head full of medium-length dark blonde hair. His long jaws were clean-shaven, but even now, soon after dawn, a wide shadow under his high cheekbones showed that his beard would come in darker than his hair. He wore khaki hiking shorts that exposed his muscled legs. Those legs, stretched out now before him in the early morning sunlight that was fitfully shining between hazy clouds, sported a light feathering of curly hair. His sturdy gray boots, laced up above the ankle, were of good quality and were obviously well-used.

A bird the size of the little finch could have made a dozen nests in the pockets that covered the khaki vest the man wore over a plain beige short-sleeved cotton shirt. Chirruping softly, the bird launched herself into the morning light, as Harlan shifted carefully into a more comfortable position, turning to lean back against an already sun-warmed rock.

‘Weather is funny,’ he thought. ‘Three years ago about this time there was an ice storm raging through Georgia.’ He balanced his well-loved Nikon next to his left side, not expecting another shot to present itself. He'd had a chance to buy a used Nikon F-5, which was the absolute top of the line for the nature photography he did. But he'd chosen to stay with his tried and true F-1. He still got great pictures from it, and he didn't need all the fancy gewgaws. Just a couple of lenses, and he was happy.

Just over a year ago he'd driven to the High Museum in Atlanta for an exhibition of the early work of Ansel Adams. The first photo that pioneer of nature photography had ever taken, with a little box camera, was of a windswept landscape. One tree on a hill with a mountain range in the background. That simple image, called *Wind*, sepia-toned with old age, had shown clearly the incredible eye for composition that the young Adams already possessed. Harlan had already studied every book he could find about Adams' photos, determined to show the soul of nature through his lens.

He loved this area. It was isolated, and he hoped it stayed that way. He'd seen too many communities succumb to the sprawl that had enveloped Atlanta and Athens, and was threatening Asheville and the western Carolinas. Luckily, his hometown of Garner Creek, even though it was the Keagan County seat, with a little courthouse on a tree-lined square, was nestled far enough into the valley not to be too noticeable to folks who were looking for a suitable vacation spot or a site for ‘development.’ Harlan had often thought that *change* was not necessarily synonymous with *progress*.

He was getting ready to reach into one of his myriad pockets for the flask of water he always carried, when off to his right, three deer stepped quietly from a small copse of white-trunked river birch. They paused on the edge of the small meadow that stretched from the knoll where Harlan sat, to the pine woods fifty yards northwest of him. The late spring grasses of the meadow waved gently toward Harlan. ‘Good,’ he thought. ‘I'm downwind from them.’

It was sheer luck that he had been using his 70-210 lens to get macro shots of the lizard. Now, even at this distance, he'd be able to capture the translucent ears of the first doe, if he could just have a little bit more light.

Slowly and without discernible movement, he reached for his Nikon, all the time watching the two females with the gangly-legged fawn. Then, as he raised the camera ever so slowly into position, a second fawn poked her dainty head from behind the farther doe. ‘Move a tiny fraction forward, little one,’ he urged her mentally. ‘And, please, I need a sunbeam.’

Harlan Schneider had been photographing animals for fourteen years. He'd always been a big boy, tall and strong for his age, with shoulders that broadened out early. Some of his friends had been hunting for three or four years, with guns their dads had given them. But Harlan hadn't been interested. Instead, he had spent hours practicing with the bow that had once belonged to his great-grandfather. His grandmother had given it to him on his tenth birthday, when he was almost strong enough to bend it and string it.

By the time he turned thirteen, he could place his arrows in the bull's-eye of the target seven out of every eight shots. His father had finally insisted that he put his skill to "real use," which meant killing something. That first kill had been his last. As he lifted the lolling head of the six-point buck, he noticed the play of light and shadow across its lower jawline. His own face was already lengthening into its adult shape that would remind many people of an Arabian stallion because of the prominent aquiline nose he had inherited from his father's Austrian ancestors. His well defined cheekbones came from his Indian grandmother. They held the same kinds of shadows as the small buck, but his were the shadows of life rather than of death.

His mother, who was half Cherokee, and his grandmother had tanned the deerskin for him and had made him a vest that embarrassed him at first because it was too big for him. "I'm making it for the man you will become," his grandmother had told him, and now he appreciated her far-seeing plans.

His father mounted the six-point rack and hung it in the living room proudly. One night about a month later, Harlan snuck downstairs, took the rack from the wall, and carried it out into the forest, snapped it off its backing, and left it to be consumed by the tiny forest animals, mice and shrews and such. But first, he broke off a two-inch tip from the longest prong, and put it in the medicine pouch he always wore around his sturdy neck.

It was still there, on this early April morning, the pouch holding the bit of antler as well as some stones he had gathered to remind him of special events in his life. As he breathed quietly, he could feel the weight of the pouch against his chest. His grandmother had decorated the little gray pouch, which she had made from the skins of four large mice, with beads made of the red Georgia clay. They had lightened when she fired them in the kiln in her back yard, so now they were more orange than red. Mice stood for scrutiny in the animal totem, an ability to pay close attention to detail. His grandmother had seen that ability in Harlan even when he was a baby, lifting his head to peer at the ribbon in her braided hair.

The day after he shot the deer, Harlan walked down to the Garner Creek General Store, a wonderful conglomeration of groceries, hardware, knick-knacks, gifts, clothing, postcards, hunting apparatus, and – what Harlan wanted – cameras. He bought himself a basic Kodak 35mm, paying for it with money he had earned working in the small auto-repair shop that his father and his uncle ran next to his uncle's house.

After a day of cleaning carburetors and gapping spark plugs, changing oil and rotating tires, the young Harlan would escape to the wooded hills behind his family's house, and spend the rest of the daylight hours teaching himself about light and shadow, always hoping to capture on film the grace, the agony, the grandeur that he had first seen in that stag's final breath.

He spent entire weekends camping out in the woods, leaving his family's good-natured bickering behind. He photographed ants and squirrels on tree bark, feral cats in sunlit tall grass and house cats balancing on fences, frogs in misty early morning marshes and snakes on sun-dappled fallen leaves, dragonflies on bright swamp lilies and finches perched in fluttering disarray on tree branches at dawn.

He learned through trial and error. He studied old copies of National Geographic. He spent most of his wages on buying film and having it developed. He named every photo he took, having found a photography book once at the school library in which almost every photo was called *Untitled*. He thought that showed very little imagination on the part of the photographers.

The year he got his first camera, he started saving to buy his own darkroom equipment. In the meantime, the county high school had a photography class, and he managed, while he was still in eighth grade, to weasel his way into the Photo Club so he could use the high school's darkroom after school. He was still proud of that accomplishment. The first picture he created start to finish was of an anole lizard squatting on a rotting log, arching its neck as it investigated a nest of mealybugs. Somehow or other, Harlan, at age fourteen, had shown the lizard's dignity. That photo was his monumental apology to the stag he had killed before its time.

After almost a decade and a half, Harlan was still fascinated with the process of taking a moment in the life of an animal, and turning it into a statement of truth. He always had been able to wait patiently for the exact detail, for the precise moment. This April morning he was waiting again. Then a cloud shifted just as the second fawn took a delicate step toward her playmate, who was looking back over his shoulder as if to call her to romp a bit in the long grass. The asked-for sunbeam illuminated the first fawn, but left the little female in a shadow of indecision. Click. Perfect. Harlan's mind was already deciding ways he could take that negative and turn it into a story in and of itself. He would probably call it *Invitation to Play* – no. *Friends* – no again. *Invitation* period. Perfect.

From the Statement of Emily Snow Schneider (Mrs. Paul Schneider)  
to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation  
Saturday, April 29, 1995

No statement is available. Mrs. Schneider just sat and looked at the floor in her house. When we finally gave up on asking her things, she stood, turned, walked out the door into her back yard, and sat down under a tree next to her mother, Snowfeather Freeman (Mrs. Ian Freeman). She never said even one word.

Wednesday, April 17, 1996

Now that the murder was more than a year old, I found myself thinking back as I waited for my sister to arrive, remembering the details of those days. Even now, as I knelt next to the mounds of zucchini vines in my sun-drenched garden, with Marmalade sniffing the ground beside me, my mind wandered back twelve months, and I clearly recalled the first words I ever heard from Bob.

“Martinsville Police Station. Bob Sheffield. May I help you?”

I remember thinking, ‘What a soft-spoken man.’ His voice reminded me of the *Stachys byzantina* I’d grown in the border near the front porch, so the kids could play with the woolly leaves. *Stachys* was my son Scott’s first real word. He had crawled over to me one day, pulled on my pants leg and said “Say kiss.” So I’d bent down to kiss him, praising him for speaking not just a word, but a sentence. He’d squirmed away from me, and it took his older sister’s interpretation for me to understand. “Mommy, he wants to touch the lamb’s ears.” I taught all three of my kids the botanical names of plants right from the start. There’s something so sweet about a three-year-old saying “*Cortaderia selloana*” when she wants to wave a Pampas Grass plume as she marches around the yard.

“May I help you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I found a body here in the library, and I don’t know what to do with it.”

“A body? Who am I speaking with?”

“I’m Biscuit McKee, the new librarian, and I found a dead man with a knife sticking out of his chest on the stairs when I got here a few minutes ago.”

“Leave the library right now. Walk out the front door and wait by the street. I’ll be there in about two minutes.”

I took an extra moment to scoop up Marmalade, but then, as it occurred to me that whoever had killed that man might still be in the library, I rushed outside. Once there I stopped to catch my breath, and hadn’t waited more than half a minute when the dark blue Martinsville police car drove up. Out stepped my lamb’s ear voice. How could I have lived here three weeks, in a little town like this, and not met him yet? Of course, I’d spent most of those three weeks inside the library. He stood there, with his hand still on the car door, just looking at me. He was probably wondering if I was the murderer.

He was taller than I was by half a head. Black hair, liberally sprinkled with silvery gray. A nose that must have been broken once or twice, since it had a crook in the middle of it. His ears stuck out a bit, and his mouth had laugh lines around it. Gray-blue eyes behind no-nonsense glasses. He kept watching me as he closed the car door.

Bob Sheffield was the town’s only police officer. He walked forward, introduced himself, and asked me to stay outside while he looked around the library. As we shook hands, I saw that he had clean fingernails. By this time I was sure that if anyone had still been inside the library, Marmalade would have known it. So I followed Bob up the walk telling him that theory. Surprisingly, he seemed to accept it, and we walked in together.

I set Marmalade down and led Bob toward the stairs, answering his simple questions as I went. What time had I arrived, did I see anyone near the library, did anything seem out of place, and so on.

The man must have been in the library somewhere before it closed. Or else he had broken in after closing. I hadn’t even thought to throw a towel or anything over his face, and there he sprawled, his half-open eyes looking up at the ceiling. When Bob first saw the body, he bounded up the twelve stairs, crying

out as he went, "No! Not Harlan!" I was so startled by his outburst, I stopped at the bottom and simply watched as he bent down and lightly touched the young man's shoulder. It hadn't occurred to me that he might know the person, but he obviously did.

I could see the moment when Bob suddenly remembered my presence. Or maybe he was just remembering that he was a cop, as well as a friend. He straightened up, shifted from his left foot to his right, pushed his glasses up higher onto the bridge of his bent nose, turned to look down the stairway at me, and said, "Thanks for not covering this up. You might have disturbed some evidence. How close did you get to the body?"

"Just to there," I said, indicating the third or fourth step down from the landing. "I didn't want to get any closer." I'm not particularly squeamish, but I hadn't liked smelling the blood that had made trails down his clothing and dripped onto the floor. We didn't have any air conditioning in the library at that time, and you know what late April weather can be like around here. Also, my stomach was objecting.

I didn't want to hang around close to the body, but I didn't want to get too far away from Bob either. At that moment I really didn't care how the guy had gotten into my library. I just wanted him out of it.

Bob must have realized that I was beginning to feel really unnerved, so he suggested that we go downstairs while he called the doctor. Of course, a little town like Martinsville didn't have an official medical examiner, but Bob explained that Dr. Nathan could make out a death certificate. On the way down, Bob asked me if I'd ever considered that in movies people were always killing a person here and dumping the body there, carting it around as if it didn't have urine running all over everything. It was an unusual topic for a first conversation.

When we joined Marmalade, she was pawing at the papers on my desk. I moved her aside and pushed the phone over toward Bob. Not knowing what to do, I simply leaned against the edge of the old rolltop desk. The pigeonholes were still stuffed with papers that had been left behind by the Millicents. Someday I'd get around to sorting through them.

"The people who go to those movies..." Bob was rambling. Why would a cop be nervous? "...want to see blood and guts, and they think what they're seeing is exactly like the real thing. Even though I've been the town cop for twenty years, and I've seen lots of dead bodies, they've mostly been car accidents or people who died after long illnesses. This is the first time I've seen a newly murdered body." Maybe he was simply trying to keep me calm. It was working. I found myself watching the play of sunlight that came in from the east window in the Children's Books section, and spilled across the slightly raised blue veins on the back of his left hand.

"I took over this job when my dad died of a heart attack. He was writing a speeding ticket at the time. I was thirty-four years old, working with my brother part time, so I just moved in and ran the station until they could find someone to replace him. That was twenty years ago, and mostly what I've done is write a few tickets and figure out who painted Mrs. Hoskin's mailbox purple. It's usually Tom Parkman's nephew, Roger, or some of his friends. I know all the kids in town, and they know I care about them. They also know I'm watching. Of course, I know all the parents, too, and all the stories. But this is the first murder here in modern times."

"Who is this guy, anyway? I don't think I've seen him in town."

Bob took a deep breath, almost as if he didn't want to put the thought into words. "His name is Harlan Schneider. He was here only for a couple of days. He lives and works..." Another deep breath. "...lived and worked in Hastings as an auto mechanic, but he was house-sitting for Matthew Olsen, next door to Mrs. Hoskins and her mailbox."

I knew Matthew Olsen. He came to the library once a week, and we usually chatted for a while. He told me all about his pet parakeet, Mr. Fogarty. And Buddy, his son. Each week Mr. Olsen checked out a biography. Margaret Mead. Jonas Salk. I love biographies, too. The week before he left on his trip, he checked out *Truman*. Good reading. It won the Pulitzer prize a couple of years ago. But LONG! It'll keep him busy for a while. I looked up into Officer Sheffield's eyes and almost lost my train of thought. Again.

"Why would Mr. Olsen get a mechanic to house sit?"

"His son Buddy was baby-sitting the parakeet..." He paused when Marmalade jumped from my end of the desk and landed right in front of him, meowing loudly.

*You have to baby-sit a parakeet?*

He idly scratched the back of her head and went on with his sentence. "...while Matthew drove to Ohio for a couple of weeks to visit his daughter."

“Why do you have to baby-sit a parakeet?”

“Because pet parakeets are supposed to be handled every day. And Mr. Fogarty seems to like the attention.”

Thoughts of the dead body up the stairs kept me determined to keep talking. That way I wouldn't have to think about the blood that I didn't know how I was going to clean up. “You mentioned Ohio. Is the family really spread out?”

“For a while.” Bob glanced out the window, obviously looking for the doctor. “Buddy's sister married a local boy who joined the Air Force. He was transferred to Wright Patterson Air Base in Ohio last year. No telling where they'll go next.”

“What does this have to do with Harlan?” My mind wandered back to that dead face. It looked like alabaster. Surprised alabaster.

“Buddy met Harlan when they were in boot camp almost ten years ago, right out of high school. In fact, that's when Matthew bought the parakeet – to keep him company while Buddy was gone. Buddy and Harlan became really good friends. When Buddy was called out of town on business yesterday, he asked Harlan to come over and stay with the parakeet. It was just going to be a day or two, since Matthew was due to come home yesterday or today.”

“How would you know all that?”

“Buddy called me to let me know Harlan would be there. People in town usually check in with me when they're going to be gone for awhile.”

“What a horrible homecoming, to find that your son's friend has been murdered.”

“It's worse than that. Matthew often said that Harlan was like a second son to him. I'll hate to be the one to tell him. Harlan had everything going for him. He was a great mechanic and a gifted photographer. He was well liked. He told me once that he had a girlfriend, but she had to get a little older before they could date. He was willing to wait, apparently.”

“Who was she?”

“No idea. He never said.”

Bob withdrew into himself for a moment. I could sense the wheels turning. When he spoke, it was almost as if he'd forgotten I was there. “I don't know why he was killed. I don't know who in this town would do such a rotten thing. And,” he added under his breath, “I don't know how to find out.”

“You might consider just asking everybody questions. Isn't someone liable to know something?” Was that strident voice coming from me? “What do the police manuals say to do?”

“Ms. McKee, the police manuals weren't written with small towns like this in mind. Sure I know how to gather evidence, but I live here with these folks. I'll be calling in the GBI to handle the investigation.”

Officer Sheffield was being patently patient with me, but I couldn't keep my mouth shut. I'd like to think it was just nerves that made me blurt out, “Can't you do your own murder investigation?”

We heard a car pull up outside, and as the young doctor walked up to the front door, Marmalade was purring like an old steam train. If I didn't know better, I would have thought she was saying “Watch your mouth, girl.”

*That's right.*