

Along the Garden Path

PART TWO

By Darby Patterson
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Gina rose slowly from her knees and looked over the bed of spring annuals she'd just planted. As always, the rewards of a few hours in the garden were more than satisfying - they were inspiring, fortifying. They were, in fact, a reason to live.

Over the sixty-some years of her life, Gina had seen more than her share of darkness. Always at the hands of other people who somehow meant her harm. A plant had never disappointed or frightened her. Even when they died away she was not saddened because it was a natural order that fed the soil and gave birth to more beauty.

Gina had lived on three acres in the middle of an urban zone on the flat, hard-pan earth in a Central California city for her entire life, except for a few months as a young child when her mother had taken up with a truck driver. Then, Gina vaguely recalled sleeping on a hard seat high

up in the cab of a truck and looking silently out a window as endless miles of highway rolled by taking her to nowhere and back again. Funny, Gina mused as she wiped her wrinkled hands on her gardening apron, that she hadn't remembered much of that early-on time until now, when she was an old woman. Now she recalled lots of things from childhood that she would just as soon forget.

Like how her flaxen hair, the color of the hillsides of the great valley from May to November fell in natural ringlets around her face. Her mother had been very proud of Gina's hair, commenting on it to the boyfriends who moved in and out of their lives like hungry strays.

Gina still liked her eyes, which were a radiant lapis blue on a field of bright white. As her once doll-like face changed with age, the color of her eyes remained the same.

She'd retained her youthful complexion well into her 50s. This Gina credited to never having polluted her face with make-up. For decades her skin breathed pure air, her pores free of chemicals. But eventually gravity won and her youthful beauty faded into a vague memory.

Gina looked down. A big calico cat wove between her feet and sacheted over to Blossom the mutt who laid sleeping in the shade of an oleander bush. Gina once had dozens of cats. Every stray that could make it across busy Blackstone Avenue seemed to find her place, creating a haven for unwanted felines. Gina once thought of it as her "cathouse" but knew the nasty implication was unworthy of her.

She'd gone through extreme measures to accommodate those cats. Built special fences to keep them inside her compound, little greenhouses to keep them outside of her herb beds which had once claimed the life of Virtue, her favorite black cat.

Now, all she had left was Pansy the calico and that pesky dog - more of a necessity than a pet - thanks to that busybody woman from the Mexican restaurant in the shopping center that backed up to her property. What did they expect, Gina thought, remembering the event nearly a decade ago. Throw perfectly good food out the back door. Pile meat and fish scraps in open garbage cans. What self respecting cat isn't going to take advantage of a meal like that?

The woman had hollered over the fence, picked up a scraggly orange tabby and flung it like litter through the bushes back onto Gina's property. Wanting to avoid attention, Gina had done everything humanly possible to keep the cats on her side of the fence. She fed them canned food, strung chicken wire on loose parts of the fence, sprayed "Cat-Away" along the border but, of course, the smell of crab and chicken, carne asada and ceviche wafting from the food piles was more powerful than her preventative measures. The woman continued to launch cats over the fence like they were cannonballs, screaming some words in Spanish that Gina couldn't understand.

Then, one day, the cat crisis reached a climax. Gina was working on her roses, lovingly removing the aphids from the young buds with a soapy solution, when the woman screeched like a banshee. She started yelling in Spanish and then switched to English. "Hijola, los gatos! Ayudame. Cinco gatos! I know you hear me ober there," she shouted across the fence. "You are there and you jus leesen to me. I hab five gatos at my door. Cinco! I yam going to march right over to your house right now an give you a beeg piece of my mind!"

Gina dropped her spray bottle and sponge. She ran straight to the front of her property and stood to the side of the six-foot high gate that protected her fortress from outsiders. She had no

intention of letting the woman in and wondered how to make the whole situation go away.

Within ten minutes there was a banging on the gate and Gina froze. "Ees me, from the restaurant. I know you hear me. Eef you don' open up and talk to me bout thees, I will call police. You shoose."

Gina could picture the woman standing there in the brutal afternoon sun with her arms folded across her chest and jaw set with determination.

The last thing, beside nosey neighbors, that Gina wanted was the police on her property. She couldn't let that happen. Gina opened the gate slightly. The woman, portly and short, with a brightly colored scarf tied around her head and a face flush with heat and anger stood anchored to the spot.

"Well. What you gonna do? You gonna get rid of those cats? They make beeg mess at my place where I work. The boss, he gets mad at me. Well!?"

Gina found her voice and politely told the woman she would take the cats to the shelter the coming week. There were so many, she explained, it would take a few trips.

Gina, of course, had no intention of taking the cats anywhere. She didn't even own a car much less have the desire to hand her cats over to strangers who would probably treat them cruelly.

"Let me tell you. You don' hab them gone by thees weekend, we gonna call the police. I am bery serious. I don' wan to lose my job for no gatos."

The woman glanced past Gina into the yard. "Nothin' personal," she added as a sort of apology. "You got some pretty flowers there."

The plan came to Gina like ants to honey. "I understand," Gina said. "I really am sorry for trouble the cats might have caused you. Why don't you just step inside and let me give you a few flowers to take back. As a peace offering?"

"Well, that would be nice," the woman said stepping through the gate and onto the stone path that meandered past the tiny house and through the acres of flowers. "Ees not I don like cats. One, two cats, hokay. Unnerstan?"

"I understand perfectly," Gina answered and moved slowly down the path. "How about some yellow daises and some of that baby's breath around a few roses?"

"Thas nice, but please don' be thinkin' I change my mind about the cats. The jeffe, he be very mad with me when he see the mess they make in the back. He fire me eef it happen again." The woman's anger seemed to have softened but Gina had no choice. The stranger was in her garden. She'd threatened to call the police. Gina picked up the short handled shovel she used for planting shrubs and leaned on it like a cane.

"You won't have to worry about the cats any more, I promise," she said to the woman. "Would you mind handing me those gardening shears by your feet?"

"Sure," the woman answered bending down for the blue handled snippers. "Ees not personal theeng weeth me, I"

Her sentence, filled with the timber of apology ended with a ringing thud as Gina brought the flat blade of the shovel down on the woman's head. She fell unconscious into the bed of euronymous daises, bending the bright flowering branches of one plant to the ground. Gina quickly rolled the body off the plant and onto bare dirt, rescuing the damaged branches. She then

pulled the scarf from the woman's head before dealing two more blows. If she wasn't already dead, she would be helpless long enough for Gina to dig an appropriate grave. Then, she'd make sure to finish the job with the pointed end of the shovel.

It was early evening when Gina was completely done. With a bed of mature Mexican Heather transplanted from other parts of her garden, it would soon be impossible to tell that the area had been recently disturbed.

Later that night, Gina left her compound carrying an old canvas bag over her shoulder and walked around the block to the shopping center where cars still filled the parking lot. Near the corral where customers left their shopping carts, not too far from the restaurant, she dropped the bag to the ground, removed the colored scarf and stuffed it inside one of the carts. No one had bothered to watch because Gina was very practiced at being inconspicuous - a drab older woman as nondescript as any. Having studied people from a distance, she knew that beggars and street people, down-and-outers collecting cans and bottles, made shoppers uncomfortable. In fact, they purposefully avoided making eye contact with those who lived on the frayed margins of civility.

Gina pretended to pick up what she had dropped, cast a glance around her and was quite satisfied she'd drawn no one's attention. For a moment, she entertained the idea of actually going into the supermarket to buy the cans of cat food she needed but decided that would be foolish. She'd return the following day wearing more mainstream attire to do the shopping. It was a trip she was dreading and she cursed the woman under the heather for making it necessary.

But then, Gina understood that life was hard. She had learned very early that fairy tales existed only on the pages of books with fanciful illustrations. Yes, there was the one time, when

she'd let herself believe in a knight on a white horse - in her case it had been a singer with a guitar - but that ending had turned out nothing like the story books she once read before she understood. Sometimes, she laughed at how well it had actually ended. Unlike so many other women, she at least had something to show for her dedication and devotion. She had the splendid blue rose which produced prodigiously three, sometimes four, times a year. And, she'd chosen the variety carefully. Unlike most blue roses (which were actually a lavender color) this one emitted a lovely scent which she enjoyed in a vase placed strategically next to her bed.

From Gary, she had learned a lesson that guided the rest of her life. Trust no one, question all feelings, protect yourself, be prepared for disappointment. All these realizations were not new. She had been training to accept them throughout her childhood and adolescence. Her mother and her mother's boyfriends had been her instructors for an advanced degree. Only, for a few months, she'd forgotten and let herself fall in love with Gary.

Gary with the hypnotic voice and fingers that made music as beautiful as nature herself. The man who glanced right at her during his performances and knew, even though she'd only approached him through unsigned poetry written just for him, knew that Gina his destiny. That was, of course, until those women with crimson lips and fingernails lured him in. Played on his weakness - the weakness of all males - and Gina had to stop him from going down that path. Better for him to be growing more beautiful, year after year in her garden, than to become like other men. Mama's men. She could still see Gary, sitting on the brocade chair in her dark living room, sipping the special herbal tea and holding the valuable guitar she'd promised to give him. He'd fallen asleep peacefully, with little visible pain. Monkshood was like that. It was much more

humane than the Palma Christi she'd used on Mama and the cactus faced boyfriend. She'd learned from that.

And, in her garden, they all had become far more enjoyable than they'd once been, although she had missed Gary's music for a very long time. The Bird of Paradise which marked her mother's resting place was complex, exotic, beautiful, yet dangerous with its pointed petals and leaves. The boyfriend grew into a prickly pear cactus which bloomed a single, short-lived flower just once a year and Gary, well, Gary was her prize blue rose.

There were others who had come to her garden since then. Regrettable necessities to protect the sanctuary she'd built over the many years. Unlike the first three to be interred, there had been nothing personal - or creative, really - about their transformations. They had, however, been more complicated since one had left a car parked not far from her property.

A profuse bed of Impatiens marked the resting place of that persistent real estate agent who just wouldn't leave Gina alone, wouldn't take `no' for an answer. When the valuable piece of urban land had passed from her mother's estate into her hands, Gina had been inundated with offers from realtors. Strangely, as she refused to sell the last large piece of property in the largely retail district, the offers had become more generous. Enough for Gina to be a wealthy woman. But, money meant nothing to her and the sanctuary meant everything - her past, her future, her present, her freedom.

This particular real estate agent just wouldn't quit. Gina had at first ignored the constant business cards left on her gate and in her mailbox. Then, the woman started banging on the gate with her fist and, even though Gina was rude to her, returned every few days. Finally, there was

the act that forced Gina to cut short the woman's career in real estate. Gina had been digging a pond for water plants and Koi fish when the woman simply walked into the yard. The gate had been open so that Gina could haul yard waste to the curb and the agent couldn't resist the opportunity.

To compensate for her rude intrusion, the agent bubbled with good cheer as Gina seethed with anger. It hadn't been hard for Gina to get the woman, who was more than eager to please, to stoop down over the newly dug pond to help lay a sheet of black plastic inside the hole. One swipe with the wide end of the pick ax was all it took.

Gina forever resented the loss of her Koi pond and hadn't been able to muster up the enthusiasm to do it all over again. The perfect place was taken. And, the woman had left her Mercedes parked in front of Gina's place. Since she didn't drive, Gina had arranged for someone else to take it away.

She waited until after dark and wearing her gardening gloves, cracked open the window and simply left the keys in the ignition. Car theft in the valley was a major industry. By morning, the Mercedes was gone and stripped to a shell, abandoned in an irrigation ditch behind a raisin processing plant.

The Saint, as Gina had come to think of her, had been far easier. Why some people chose to make her a personal project, she never understood, but the Saint was dedicated to Gina's salvation. One Sunday after the next for a period of many weeks, the Saint came calling with her Bible tucked between her right arm and pillowy breast. She wore silly hats and carried an upholstered bag brimming with religious literature over one shoulder and a simulated leather

handbag slung on her wrist. Gina pictured her as some sort of mahogany, human hall-tree.

The Saint would wave her Bible over her head like a red flag for Gina to see. She'd spout scripture, shouting sections from Luke that spoke of brotherly love. That last day, she'd stationed herself outside the gate for a long session. "You'll come speak the word of the Lord with me today, my friend," she'd shouted. "Ah am prepared to send my songs of praise to you throughout this glorious day that GOD HAS GIVEN!"

It happened on a day that Gina needed all her concentration to transplant several delicate Queen of the Niles. Transplanting was like surgery and the traumatized plants needed critical handling and a positive atmosphere. This did not, according to Gina, include the voice of a bad soprano warbling "Bringing in the Sheep," - the Saint's first selection for the day. Of course, all that bellowing also threatened to attract unwanted attention. Gina decided to dig the bed about three feet deeper than she had originally planned.

The Saint had launched into "The Old Rugged Cross" when Gina unlocked the gate and invited her in. For many months after, when Gina looked at the bright orange blossoms of the lilies, she recalled the expression on the Saint's face when the gate opened. "Praise the Lord," she had said. "The Lord has heard my prayers and opened the gates. Bless you sister!"

After Gina explained she would have to keep working, the Saint dropped her load of books and brochures and cassette tapes on the ground and pitched in to dig with a garden trowel, all the while talking, preaching. It had been too easy, almost regrettable. The Saint now nurtured a lovely bed of yellow daisies.

Not regrettable was the scallywag who apparently thought Gina's house held treasures he

might like to have for himself. The intruder had climbed the chain link fence at night, pushed his way through the thick barrier of oleander and broke a window in the living room. It was his misfortune to shatter the glass right over the little wooden table where the long haired orange cat slept. Poppy, startled and incensed, bolted from the table and leapt onto Gina's chest as she slept in her bed. Gina knew immediately that something was wrong but never once considered calling the police. She quietly slipped out of bed and peered into the shadowy living room where she saw the man carefully easing himself through the broken shards of glass that framed the window.

"Fool," Gina thought and slipped out of her bedroom in a low crouch, to the kitchen and into the mudroom. There, she grabbed the short handled pitchfork she used for mulching and a can of Black Flag Insect Spray that she only used in emergencies. Gina tried to be as organic as possible in her handling of garden pests.

Peeking into the living room, she watched as the skinny form of the burglar moved toward the sideboard in the dining area. He quietly pulled open the beveled glass doors and began rummaging through the contents. His invasion of her sanctuary filled Gina with fury. Some miserable, emaciated, unethical scrap of humanity was touching her things. She was poised to act when he picked up a delicate centerpiece Gina had ordered from a catalog - a cascade of colorful roses formed in fine china. She quietly watched as he stuffed the piece in a bag he slung over his shoulder. Once confident she could save the piece from destruction, Gina noiselessly crept up behind the burglar and, when close enough to feel the nervous heat from his body said, "Excuse me!"

He spun around and Gina quickly sprayed a blast of Black Flag in his face, aiming

directly at his eyes. As she anticipated, he raised his hands in defense and, as he did, Gina deftly relieved him of the bag holding her cherished china roses. As he began to cough and gag and double over, Gina put an end to his misery with the pitch fork. "Not even suitable for compost," she muttered, knowing there was no better place in her garden for the sorry intruder than deep beneath a compost bin.

Until the cat-hating hysterical woman from the restaurant, Gina had experienced no more trouble. Her garden grew in variety and beauty, bringing her profound pleasure and something she thought of as peace. However, the cat-hater had upset the calm. The restaurant had continued to operate even though the owner was missing. The owner, not some underling as she'd portrayed herself to Gina. Other family members had taken over, hoping that someday the woman would be found. They carried on the tradition of throwing food scraps in the uncovered back bins and the cats continued to jump the fence.

The police had found the scarf in the shopping center parking lot and suspected kidnapping. For a while, the case got lots of attention - something Gina didn't need. The foraging cats at the restaurant could bring it.

She had euthanized fifteen cats as humanely as possible. She'd spared Pansy, the calico, who appeared to be too stupid to jump the fence. The Jimson Weed had come from her garden and simply been added to their wet food. They just went quietly to sleep, no contortions or pain. The hard part had been gathering up the bodies littered over the three acres. She'd lined her Tuffy Wheelbarrow with a satin comforter and solemnly collected the cats.

Gina reverently lowered them into a common grave along the perimeter of the fence

adjacent to the restaurant that had killed them. She planted broad leaf ivy that proliferated and grew over the fence, onto the ground behind the restaurant where it attracted snails and spiders. Gina felt satisfaction when she heard the workers cursing the slimy snails and swatting at the spiders which included more than a few Black Widows. Nonetheless, Gina had nightmares that involved matted fur and creatures with fangs and dirt up their noses.

The event had also inspired her to adopt a white dog with a black patch over one eye and on the tip of his tail. Blossom patrolled the perimeter of the property with a bark worthy a dog twice his size, effectively keeping cats out of her yard. Gina guessed Blossom to be mix of Boxer and Bulldog. She eventually came to accept his presence, but knew she'd never feel the affection she'd had for the cats. She fed him regularly but never bothered to actually pet Blossom or scratch him behind his upright ears. She never called him by name. In fact, the only words she had for the dog were reprimands and warnings about wandering into her flower beds.

For company, Blossom had naturally gravitated toward Pansy who seemed perfectly happy to rub up against his legs or join him in an afternoon nap. Blossom had lately taken to lounging around the cool corners of the property where the compost heap was constantly cooking. He'd been busy there throughout the morning when he heard Gina's voice in the distance, along with a new voice that he hadn't heard before. But Blossom's senses were engaged in an interesting project in the compost heap and she easily resisted the urge to **investigate**.

Gina didn't ordinarily respond to commotion at her front gate, but this time there was an unusual urgency to the banging and rattling and she stood inside, listening.

"Miss Mandrake, we need to talk to you on an urgent matter," the deep voice shouted.

"We're police officers. Please unlock your gate."

Gina felt her body flash freeze from the inside out. She stood paralyzed as options bounced around her head like ping pong balls in a wind tunnel. What could they want? What could they know, suspect? Should she hide? Where?

"Miss Mandrake, it's vital we talk. You may be in danger. Please open up the gate or we'll have to do it ourselves."

Danger? What could they mean, danger? Rational thought fought for its place in her mind. The visit could have nothing to do with her garden.

"Miss Mandrake, if you are there, please, don't be scared. We are here to protect you. Open the gate, please."

Gina felt the blood melting to her limbs and self-control returning. The smart thing to do was to open the gate. Be polite. They'd go away.

"Just a minute, I'm looking for the key," she hollered. "It's in my apron pocket ... someplace - silly me," she feigned a laugh. "I get so wrapped up in my flowers ... here it is."

Gina put the key in the padlock that secured the gate from the inside. The heavy wooden door swung open and two uniformed city police officers faced her.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. Sorry to disturb you. I'm Officer Rick Delgado and this is Officer Joanne Peterson. Let's just step inside here so we can give you some information."

Delgado was a dark skinned, husky young man with eyes the color of tobacco and his partner, a fair haired young woman wearing no makeup at all. Gina approved and took a cautious liking to the female officer.

Just a few feet inside her gate, standing on the stone path that led to her garden, Officer Peterson handed Gina a flyer on white paper.

"This is a police artist's sketch, Miss Mandrake, of the pair who has been working scams on the elderly in town. They target folks who own property and pretty much strip them of their equity."

Officer Delgado cast a quick glance around Gina's immense yard. "Looks to me like this place would attract these guys," he said. "They find their victims through county records and you've got to be sitting on some value here."

"I have no idea what it's worth to other people, officer," Gina said brightly, "but let me assure you, I'm not a likely victim. I am a very private person."

"We're just here to alert you, ma'am," Officer Peterson said with a kind smile that warmed Gina's heart. Yes, the young woman did remind Gina of herself so many decades ago. Natural, unpainted, quietly pretty.

"A lot of people have tried to worm in here, you know, but I won't tolerate it," Gina confided, her innate confidence returning.

"Our information says you live here alone," the Officer added. "You're not frightened, backed up to the shopping center and all, no neighbors?"

"Nope. Not scared. Never have been," Gina responded, shaking her head and sticking out her chin.

Officer Delgado again let his eyes drift over the profusion of blossoms - gladiolus, daises,

California Poppies, countless varieties of roses. "It's pretty impressive, what you've done here," he said, thumbs hooked to the heavy leather belt around his waist. "My dad's a gardener. I know what kind of time something like this takes."

Gina heard in that statement a hint that he'd like to look around. And, unusual as it was, she felt the urge to show the polite pair her botanical treasure - her lifetime work. Especially the young woman for whom Gina felt an inexplicable trust.

"Yes, well, it's pretty much all I do," she answered. "If you like, I'll show you my rose garden. Everything is in full bloom this time of year. The rest isn't ready for visitors." A look at the roses and she'd escort them back to the gate and out of her life.

The main rose bed was a broad strip about 20 feet wide and nearly twice as long. Surrounded by redwood chips and a stone walkway laid on dry mortar, it received full sun for most of the day and sat as the crown jewel of her efforts. Spread before them was a rainbow of carefully planned fist-sized blossoms of pink, crimson, white, peach with hearts of gold and cream petals tipped with blazing orange. Nestled in between like dark shadows were long stemmed, blood-red roses. Deep beauty with a nearly intoxicating sweet scent. Only the blue rose stood alone, in a special spot near her house.

"I've never seen anything like this," the woman cop said. "It's just beautiful."

"You should open this place up to the public," Officer Delgado said. "This is a showplace!"

Joanne Peterson seemed to understand. "I think Miss Mandrake values her privacy," she said. "But you do have an unusual way with living things."

"Well, yes, I am a bit of a recluse," she answered, grateful to the young woman. "I have everything I need right here." Gina picked up her shovel. " Now, if you don't mind, I'd better get back to work. Need to make use of the daylight."

The officers turned toward the gate. "Somehow I'd feel better knowing you had some protection, ma'am," Officer Delgado said, turning back to face her. "An alarm system. Something to alert you to intruders."

"Oh, but I do!" Gina said brightly, guiding the pair toward the gate. "I have Blossom. He's a good sized dog with good loud bark." She looked over her yard. "In fact, I can't figure why he wasn't barking when you first came up. He's very protective about me."

"Hope nothing is wrong. Want me to take a look around for him?" Officer Delgado offered.

"No"! Gina responded too quickly, sensing that old feeling of alarm creep up her spine. "No, that's not necessary. He's probably just off with the cat somewhere."

"It's no trouble," he insisted and Gina realized what a mistake it had been to part with so much personal information. Her roses. That dog. She decided to get it over with.

"I'll call him. Wait, he'll come," Gina said and inhaled deeply. "Blossom! Blossom, boy. Comehere!"

Back by the compost bin, Blossom heard unintelligible shouting. "Blossom ..blah, blah...come." But since he was unused to being called and didn't know his name, he remained engaged with enticing smells wafting from the large cage of decomposing garbage and garden cuttings.

Pansy, accustomed to Gina's voice, did come. She tip-toed up, arching her back and rubbed Gina's ankles.

"Well, there's the cat," Officer Peterson observed. "Pretty thing." And she bent to scratch its back.

"I'm not feeling right about leaving you, ma'am," Officer Delgado said. "We at least need to know your dog's all right."

"Really, it's fine," Gina protested. "It's just a lazy dog. He'll show up."

"I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight," he assured her. "Let's take a quick walk. See if we can scare him up."

Gina knew there was really nothing to fear. All her special plantings were mature. Still, she kept the shovel in her hand as she reluctantly led them down the garden path, periodically calling, "Blossom" and silently cursing the dog. She kept up a good pace, not giving her escorts time to drink in the stunning beauty that surrounded them.

"I just have so much to do," Gina muttered, "that I hate to waste my time on that dog."

"I understand," Officer Delgado said. "One look around and we'll be out of here."

"Well, I do appreciate your concern, specially about the scammers," Gina said, trying to soften her voice. "I don't mean to seem ungrateful. It's just that I'm really in no danger - you have to believe me on that - and I have so much to do."

They walked over the smooth, cool stones on the path, passing wild yellow daisies surrounded by a border of deep purple pansies. They moved into the shaded area where ferns and spider plants with shoots like fireworks were thriving despite the valley heat.

"Amazing," Officer Delgado would say every now and again. "I wish my dad could have seen this." Gina heard the past-tense and was grateful the old gardener was already dead. But still, the hair on her neck bristled and she began to calculate what she would have to do insure her future privacy.

Just past a panoramic display of pink and white Azaleas, they reached a corner of the property and Officer Peterson stopped dead in her tracks. "What's that I see over there?" she said, pointing toward the compost heap. "That looks like one dirty dog to me." The young woman smiled and looked at Gina who couldn't help but think how pretty the officer was.

Blossom looked up, unsure of what was expected of him. The instinct to stay in his smelly cache held him half buried in a hole he'd dug next to under the bin.

"Blossom! Bad dog, bad dog!" Gina shouted, trying to shoo the dog away. Not understanding, he didn't budge.

"Looks scared," Officer Peterson said. Gina was touched that the officer was, obviously, an animal lover.

"Probably protecting his favorite bone," Officer Delgado added. Which was, indeed, the case. When the young cops approached the dog, however, it cowered and slinked away, back to Gina, who stood in the path clutching her pointed shovel with both hands, thinking how she'd use it on the dog, first chance.

The officers looked into the hole that Blossom had excavated throughout the day. "There, there's his bone," Officer Delgado laughed and pointed. "Looks like Blossom's been a busy boy!"

Officer Peterson gently placed her hand on her partner's arm. She looked directly into his

eyes and nodded toward the hole. They both saw the raw bones of the ribcage and simultaneously recognized the adult femur laying on top of the pile where Blossom had apparently tossed it.

Gina caught the look that had passed between them. "Try as I might, I can't keep him out of the garbage ..."

There was a moment of dead silence. "So," Gina said, "just let me show you out now that we've found him. I'm sure we all have better things to do." She turned as if her body was a magnet that would pull the young people along with her. It was too much to hope, she knew, but it was also too unthinkable to accept the other possibility half-buried alongside the compost pile. It had been years since she'd planted the no-good burglar far under the floor of the bin.

The officers stood fast, the man with his jaw dropped slightly open and eyes moving from the dirt to Gina's face.

It was the young woman who spoke. "I'm afraid we have a little problem here, Miss Mandrake. It looks like your dog got hold of more than a beef bone. The ones I see here are human."

"What?!" Gina shrieked and stopped in her tracks. "Why that's ridiculous!"

"Maybe so ma'am, but that's what we've got," Officer Peterson responded and turned to her partner. "Better call the M.E. and let the captain know."

"Oh, my!" Gina gasped and clutched her heart.

As Delgado snapped the radio off his belt, Peterson moved to Gina's side. "Maybe you'd better sit down, ma'am. I know what a shock this must be."

"Yes, .. I think I will," Gina murmured and moved down the path to her house, her mind

searching the garden for answers it had always held in the past. She paused by her bed of herbs and leaned on the handle of the pointed shovel. "I think I might have a cup of tea."

"I'll come with you," Officer Peterson said.

"Yes, I suppose," Gina muttered having chosen her only option.

In the kitchen she filled a tarnished copper tea kettle and put it on the old Wedgewood stove. Gina said very little and shuffled about the tiny space where late afternoon sunlight made shadows dance like ghosts on the wall.

Joanne Peterson leaned against the pantry door that had been painted a pale green, her arms folded across her chest. "Can I help you with that?" she offered. Gina declined with a shake of her head.

As the water simmered Gina scooped herbs from a sealed container, added a pinch of *Palmas christi* seeds and placed the mix into a silver tea ball. She marveled to herself that she was not angry with the young woman as she might have been. After all, her sanctuary would soon be crawling with people digging up her garden. She put the tea ball directly into the kettle and shut off the gas flame. "I'd offer you a cup," she said to the officer, "but this is medicinal ... to calm my nerves."

Officer Peterson responded that she was none too fond of tea having been hooked on coffee at the precinct and thanked Gina, anyway. As Gina poured her tea into a flowered cup and sat down at the round breakfast table, she wondered at the young woman's calm. It was not every day, she reasoned, that they found a grave in someone's garden. She sipped her tea and let her thoughts drift. There was no question about her being taken away from her home, of course. It

would not be possible for her live anywhere but in the sanctuary she'd planted and nurtured. She was like the plants, herself. Rooted there.

As the tea began to dull Gina's mind, the young officer made a comment or two, but Gina didn't have the energy to answer. The dizziness was almost pleasant, although she knew her final moments might bring some anguish. A flash of mama's brief contortions entered her mind. No matter.

Like a distant echo, Gina heard the screen door slam and saw Officer Delgado float into the kitchen, moving in exaggerated slow motion.

He spoke as if from a tunnel. "Mystery solved," he said. "I called it into the M.E. and he said to look close at the bones. Seems they dig up old Gold Rush burials around here. Said when they built the shopping center, they had a heck of a time with the historians. Anyway, I checked out the remains like he said and, sure enough, they look to be real old - more than a hundred years, at least."

"And you could tell this how?" the woman asked.

"The amount of calcium that gets replaced in the bone," he said. "It's real obvious when you know what to look for. Anyway, he said to bring those couple of bones in but not to make a fuss. Miss Mandrake here would have the preservationists all over her place and we wouldn't want that, would we Miss Mandrake?"

Gina felt the tightness around her heart as if vines of ivy wove through her chest, pulling at the arteries, constricting the vessels. A sharp stab, like from the thorn of the boyfriend cactus pierced her back and filled her body with pain. Still, she sat expressionless, hands folded against

her chest as if in prayer, eyes closed. It was a long, still minute before Joanne Peterson realized that Gina was dead.