

St Valentine's Day, the Holocaust, it didn't make any difference to Gifford Doakes. He liked piled bodies. Most of us were involved in Real Murders for reasons that would probably bear the light of day; gosh, who doesn't read the articles about murders in the newspaper? But Gifford was another story. Maybe he'd joined our club with the idea that we swapped some sickening sort of bloody pornography, and he was only sticking with the club in the hope that soon we'd trust him enough to share with him. When he brought Reynaldo, we didn't know how to treat him. Was Reynaldo a guest, or Gifford's date? A shade of difference there, and one which had us all a little anxious, especially John Queensland, who felt it his duty as president to speak to everyone in the club.

And Mamie Wright wasn't anywhere in the room.

If Mamie had been here long enough to set up the chairs and make the coffee, and her car was still in the parking lot, then she must be here somewhere. Though I didn't like Mamie, her non-appearance was beginning to seem so strange that I felt obliged to pin down her whereabouts.

Just as I reached the door, Mamie's husband, Gerald, came in. He had his briefcase under his arm and he looked angry. Because he looked so irate, and because I felt stupid for being uneasy, I did a strange thing; though I was searching for his wife, I let him pass without speaking.

The hall seemed very quiet after the heavy door shut off the hum of conversation. The white-with-speckles linoleum and beige paint almost sparkled with cleanliness under the harsh fluorescent lights. I was praying the phone wouldn't ring again as I looked at the four doors on the other side of the hall. With a fleeting, absurd image of 'The Lady or the Tiger' I went to my right to open the door to the small

conference room. Sally had told me she'd already been in the room, but just to temporarily park the tray of cookies, so I checked the room carefully. Since there was practically nothing to examine except a table and chairs, that took seconds.

I opened the next door in the hall, the women's room, even though Sally had also been in there. Since there were only two stalls, she'd have been pretty sure to know of Mamie's presence. But I bent over to look under the doors. No feet. I opened both doors. Nothing.

I didn't quite have the guts to check the adjoining men's room, but since Arthur Smith entered it while I hesitated, I figured I'd hear about it soon if Mamie was in there.

I moved on, and out of all the glaring beigeness I caught a little glimpse of something different, so I looked down at the base of the door and saw a smear. It was red-brown.

The separate sources of my uneasiness suddenly coalesced into horror. I was holding my breath when my hand reached out to open that door to the last room, the little kitchen used for fixing the refreshments . . .

. . . and saw an empty turquoise shoe upright on its ridiculous high heel, right inside the door.

And then I saw the blood spattered everywhere on the shining beige enamel of the stove and refrigerator.

And the raincoat.

Finally I made myself look at Mamie. She was so dead. Her head was the wrong shape entirely. Her dyed black hair was matted with clots of her blood. I thought, the human body is supposed to be ninety percent water, not ninety percent blood. Then my ears were buzzing and I felt very weak, and though I knew I was alone in the hall, I felt the

presence of something horrible in that kitchen, something to dread. And it was not poor Mamie Wright.

I heard a door swoosh shut in the hall. I heard Arthur Smith's voice say, 'Miss Teagarden? Anything wrong?'

'It's Mamie,' I whispered, though I'd intended a normal voice. 'It's Mrs Wright.' I ruined the effect of all this formality by simply folding onto the floor. My knees seemed to have turned to faulty hinges.

He was behind me in an instant. He half bent to help me up but was frozen by what he saw over my head.

'Are you sure that's Mamie Wright?' he asked.

The working part of my brain told me Arthur Smith was quite right to ask. Perhaps coming on this unsuspecting, I would have wondered too. Her eye – oh my God, her eye.

'She's missing from the big room, but her car is outside. And that's her shoe.' I managed to say that with my fingers pressed to my mouth.

When Mamie had first worn them, I'd thought those shoes the most poisonous footwear I'd ever seen. I hate turquoise anyway. I let myself enjoy thinking about hating turquoise. It was a lot more pleasing than thinking about what was right in front of me.

The policeman stepped over me very carefully and squatted with even more care by the body. He put his fingers against her neck. I felt bile rise up in my throat – no pulse, of course. How ridiculous! Mamie was so dead.

'Can you stand up?' he asked after a moment. He dusted his fingers together as he rose.

'If you help.'

Without further ado, Arthur Smith hauled me to my feet and out the doorway in one motion. He was very strong. He kept one arm around me while he shut the door. He

leaned me against that door. Deep blue eyes looked at me consideringly. 'You're very light,' he said. 'You'll be all right for a few seconds. I'm going to use the phone right here on the wall.'

'Okay.' My voice sounded weird; light, tinny. I'd always wondered if I could keep my head if I found a body, and here I was, keeping my head, I told myself insanely as I watched him go down the hall to the pay phone. I was glad he didn't have to leave my sight. I might not be so level if I were standing in that hall alone, with a body behind me.

While Arthur muttered into the phone I kept my eyes on the door to the large room across the hall where John Queensland must be itching to open the meeting. I thought about what I'd just seen. I wasn't thinking about Mamie being dead, about the reality and finality of her death. I was thinking about the scene that had been staged, starring Mamie Wright as *the corpse*. The casting of the corpse had been deliberate, but the role of *the finder of the body* had by chance been taken by me. The whole thing was a scene deliberately staged by someone, and suddenly I knew what had been biting at me underneath the horror.

I thought faster than I'd ever thought before. I didn't feel sick anymore.

Arthur crossed the hall to the door of the large room and pushed it open just enough to insert his head in the gap. I could hear him address the other members of the club.

'Uh, folks, folks?' The voices stilled. 'There's been an accident,' he said with no emphasis. 'I'm going to have to ask you all to stay in this room for a little while, until we can get things under control out here.'

The situation, as far as I could see, was completely under control.

‘Where’s Roe Teagarden?’ John Queensland’s voice demanded.

Good old John. I’d have to tell Mother about that, she’d be touched.

‘She’s fine. I’ll be back with you in a minute.’

Gerald Wright’s thin voice. ‘Where’s my wife, Mr Smith?’

‘I’ll get back with all of you in a few minutes,’ repeated the policeman firmly, and shut the door behind him. He stood lost in thought. I wondered if this detective had ever been the first on the scene of a murder investigation. He seemed to be ticking steps off mentally, from the way he was wagging his fingers and staring into space.

I waited. Then my legs started trembling and I thought I might fold again. ‘Arthur,’ I said sharply. ‘Detective Smith.’

He jumped; he’d forgotten me. He took my arm solicitously.

I whacked at him with my free hand out of sheer aggravation. ‘I’m not trying to get you to help me, I want to tell you something!’

He steered me into a chair in the little conference room and put on a waiting face.

‘I was supposed to lecture tonight on the Wallace case, you remember? William Herbert Wallace and his wife, Julia, England, 1931?’

He nodded his curly pale head and I could see he was a million miles away. I felt like slapping him again. I knew I sounded like an idiot, but I was coming to the point. ‘I don’t know how much you remember about the Wallace case – if you don’t know anything, I can fill you in later.’ I waved my hands to show that was inconsequential, here came the real meat. ‘What I want to tell you, what’s important, is that

Mamie Wright's been killed exactly like Julia Wallace. She's been *arranged*.'

Bingo! That blue gaze was almost frighteningly intense now. I felt like a bug impaled on a pin. This was not a lightweight man.

'Point out a few comparisons before the lab guys get here, so I can have them photographed.'

I blew out a breath of relief. 'The raincoat under Mamie. It hasn't rained here in days. A raincoat was found under Julia Wallace. And Mamie's been placed by the little oven. Mrs Wallace was found by a gas fire. She was bludgeoned to death. Like Mamie, I think. Mr Wallace was an insurance salesman. So is Gerald Wright. I'll bet there's more I haven't thought of yet. Mamie's about the same age as Julia Wallace . . . There are just so many parallels I don't think I could've imagined them.'

Arthur stared at me thoughtfully for a few long seconds. 'Are there any photographs of the Wallace murder scene?' he asked.

The xeroxed pictures would have come in handy now, I thought.

'Yes, I've seen one, there may be more.'

'Was the husband, Wallace, arrested?'

'Yes, and convicted. But later the sentence was overturned somehow or other, and he was freed.'

'Okay. Come with me.'

'One more thing,' I said urgently. 'The phone rang when I got here tonight and it was someone asking for Julia Wallace.'