

Praise for Mrs. Gulliver

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Kirkus starred review

More praise for Valerie Martin

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Mrs. Gulliver

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Mrs. Gulliver



A NOVEL



Valerie Martin



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So shall you share all that he doth possess,
By having him, making yourself no less.

*

Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied,
And vice sometime by action dignified.

*

'Tis true, and therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are
ever thrust to the wall. . . .

Romeo and Juliet, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Verona Island

1954

Our clients are professionals: doctors, lawyers, bankers, politicians (we've served a few mayors over the years), and, because our city is wrapped around the largest port on the island, a steady supply of seagoing men. My rule is: officers only. Discretion is what we offer. Except for the address in wrought-iron numbers, the front door is unmarked and never used; clients enter via a side door behind a tall hedge, so it can't be seen from the street; a password is required at all times. As the password doesn't change, this is the mildest of security measures. Our clients are encouraged to share it with interested friends or acquaintances. It creates a kind of network, with the charm of inclusion in a select society. Boys love passwords.

In the last few years, bad weather and blight have played havoc with the local economy, particularly among the rice farmers on the windward side of the island. A few of their prettier daughters have made their way to the city seeking honest labor and, failing that, turned up at my door. By that time, they are desperate, hungry, and frightened, and their best option is a charity organization run by nuns in a little town up in the hills. I refer them there. I've taken one or two to work, but they're seldom up to my standard for the house. Occasionally, my sympathy overrules my judgment and I employ a girl who presents

what I know will be a challenge. This may be shrewdness on my part, as I would not have been successful in my business were it not for a sixth sense I have about some quality in an applicant that will appeal to certain of my clients. Carità was such a girl.

That summer morning, a hot and humid day with rain, as usual, in the forecast, my majordomo, Brutus (aptly named), came to my office, which is also the kitchen, and planted himself squarely in the door frame. "There's an odd couple asking to see you in the drawing room," he announced. "I don't know what they want. They look like beggars, but they know the password."

"Did you tell them we don't open until noon?"

"They're country girls, Lila," he said. "They're looking for employment, is my guess."

I rose from the table. "Then how did they get the password?" I mused. Brutus stepped aside and I sauntered down the hall.

They sat facing each other, one in a leather chair, the other perched on the edge of the red silk upholstered divan, her back straight and sandaled feet drawn in. They were dressed in plain cotton sleeveless shifts that came to the calf, worn but clean. Two destitute girls, one fair and portly, the other an elfin creature, small-boned, emaciated but not boyish. Even in her unflattering dress I could see she had a shapely figure: long waist, full breasts, excellent posture—that's always the first thing I notice. Her hair was an uncombed thick black mop that fell to the center of her back and partially covered her face.

The blonde looked up as I entered the room, her innocent face flushed with hope. Her friend didn't move, her head slightly bowed and turned away from me.

"How do you come to know the password here?" I asked sharply.

"My uncle gave it to me," she said. "His name was Peter Rizzo. He said you might not remember him, because he only came here once, with a friend."

"Who was the friend?"

"I don't know that," the girl replied. "It was when he came to town. He was a rice farmer. Or he was until the blight came. Now he's dead, and the bank took the farm."

"Where are your parents?" I asked.

"Our parents are dead," she said candidly, with no more emphasis than you might use to make a trivial factual observation—for example, *That door is closed*.

"So . . . you're sisters," I observed. "And you've come to the city looking for work."

"That's right," she said. "My name is Bessie Bercy, and this is Carità. I've already got a job. I'm signed up to shuck oysters at the market restaurant on the wharf. The man there showed me how it's done and then gave me a test, and right off he said I was faster than the two boys he's already got put together."

"Good for you," I said. "That shows enterprise."

"Yes, ma'am," she said. "But Carità won't do that kind of work, so now I need to find a place for her, because I can't leave her on her own and I won't make enough for us both. My uncle said he thought she might be useful to you."

At this her dark sister chuckled. "That's not exactly how he put it, Bessie," she said. Her voice, deep and breathy, vibrated through my chest like a cat purring in my lap. As she spoke, she turned toward me, and I could make out through the screen of her hair that her eyes, half closed, were very light. "What he said," she continued, "was that I'd be better off here than with the goddamned lesbian nuns."

How can I describe the rich velvet of her voice? She could have been a countess or an actress, delivering a scene-clinching line. There was an archness as well, distant and amused, deflecting the crudeness of the information she had just so succinctly passed along. She made me smile in spite of myself.

"Carità," her sister said, "don't talk like that."

"I don't think Mrs. Gulliver is shocked," the girl replied. Again, the deep vibration and archness of tone caressed my ears.

"Would you push your hair back so I can see your face?" I said.

She pressed her palms against her temples, pulling back the curtain of hair.

I caught my breath. Her face was beautiful, a creamy complexion with a natural blush, like an English beauty, her nose straight, her lips full and soft, her chin squarish and firm. But it was her eyes that startled me, heavy-lidded and half closed, with thick dark lashes, and irises like blue glass, the perfectly translucent blue of a glacier. Beneath the dark bird-wings of her brows, her eyes glittered enchantingly. I studied her. Something was very odd about those eyes.

"She's nineteen years old," Bessie said. Carità inclined her

head toward her sister's voice, but the eyes didn't move. "She's blind from birth."

I raised my hand to my heart; my brain was racing. A blind prostitute, I thought. What would my clients think? I gazed at Carità, who appeared perfectly comfortable perched on the settee, with her straight spine and her hands folded in her lap. There was something pert, almost willful about her. She listened attentively while her sister sang her praises, as if she might make a correction or addition if some asset was overlooked.

"She's real smart," Bessie continued. "When we had money, my uncle brought in a teacher from the mainland, and she pretty much raised Carità. She taught her to take care of herself, she's very independent, and she can read Braille. She's read a lot. She can memorize fast. She can play the piano. Once she knows her way around a house, she can do pretty much anything a seeing person can do. She can even cook."

"If smart alecks don't put sugar in the saltshaker," Carità said. Then she laughed, revealing her teeth.

Two missing on the top right, behind the canine. Businesswoman that I am, my brain began running a cost analysis of potential revenue versus dental outlay. I gave my dentist so much traffic I had a standing discount.

"We'd have to do something about those teeth," I said. Carità closed her lips tightly and shook her hair back over her face.

"Yes, ma'am," Bessie said.

The fact was, I'd lost a girl a few weeks earlier. Her name was Lottie, and she'd been with me full-time at the house for two years. She was popular, blonde and blowsy, an easygoing

good-time girl as simple as a post and lazy as sin. She had a poor sick son who lived with her mother; all her money went to support them. About a year after she came to me, the boy died, and she went right down the alcohol chute. She was weepy and hysterical by turns, the clients got sick of her, and she was draining my coffers. I was about to let her go when her mother showed up at the door to say a relative had died and left them a little money and a house, so she'd come to take Lottie home. A happy ending. My hands were shaking with relief as I helped them pack up Lottie's things and get into the taxi.

So I had Lottie's empty room, and I had the clients. Three of my girls lived out and worked evening shifts, from six until closing. But desire doesn't sleep, and lunch appointments weren't uncommon, so I needed two girls for the noon-to-four slot. At night, the in-house girls come on at seven or so. They also rotated Sundays off every other week. The house was closed on Mondays.

"She'd have to live here all the time," I said to Bessie.

Bessie nodded. "Could I come on Sunday mornings to take her out? She likes to walk outdoors."

This touched me, but it also made me think I was about to make a decision that required careful consideration. "I haven't said she can stay," I said.

"Yes, ma'am," Bessie said, looking down at her rough hands, folded in her lap.

"I want to have my colleague advise me," I said. "I'll go ask him to join us."

"Yes, ma'am," Bessie said again. I glanced at Carità, who

was silent, sitting very still, her chin slightly lifted, listening closely.

"I'll only be a moment," I said to Bessie. "Mr. Ruby is in the office." Then I went out—leaving the door ajar—and down the hall to the kitchen, where Brutus sat at the table, perusing the racing pages.

"I want you to come take a closer look at this girl," I said. He folded the paper. "Is it those beggar girls?"

"Yes." I said nothing to him about Carità's blindness. I wanted to see an honest male reaction to the surprise.

He followed me down the hall into the room where the two women sat. As we entered, Bessie looked up, her plain face aglow with hope. Carità had not moved. "Ladies," I said, "I want to introduce you to Mr. Ruby, who is my trusted colleague." I motioned Brutus toward Bessie. "This is Bessie," I said.

Bessie stood up, her hand outstretched. "Pleased to meet you," she said confidently.

Brutus closed her hand in his own and nodded. "Likewise," he said.

I turned to Carità. She rose to her feet in that slow and curiously regal way I would come to know, proffering her hand palm-down, as if expecting a soft press of lips. "And this is Carità," I said.

Brutus took her hand, casting a quick questioning glance at me.

"A pleasure," Carità said, leaning away from him as if he'd caught her unawares.

"The gentleman can't see your face," I said. "Please pull your hair aside."

She smiled, keeping her lips carefully closed, swept her hair back with one hand, and held it in place so that her hairline was exposed. She had a shallow widow's peak, a smooth, unlined forehead. Her strange jewellike eyes seemed to contemplate the lapel of Brutus's jacket. I studied the effect upon him. His brow lifted; his nostrils inflated over a quick intake of air. An expression of pleasant mystification pursed his lips. He was a confident man, big enough to look down on his fellow humans, and, I knew from experience, capable of both cruelty and sympathy. He had a rough, often lewd sense of humor, which suited his profession. His eyes searched Carità's face, shifting between pleasure and calculation, just as I had done. "Your face is your fortune," he said, releasing her hand.

What about the rest of her? I thought. That's money in the bank, too.

"My uncle used to say that," Carità said, giving him the benefit of her caressing voice.

"That's true," Bessie put in. "He did say that. But her face didn't keep her from being as poor as a dog in the street, and just as much abused."

Carità stretched one hand behind her until her fingers grazed the sofa cushion, lowered herself to the seat, and drew her feet in beneath her. She performed this action smoothly; no one who didn't know why she'd made that swift probing gesture with her hand would have noticed. "We weren't always poor," Carità reminded her sister.

Brutus stood gazing down at our applicant, who sat on the

edge of the cushion, leaning forward with her hands resting on her thighs. He brought his palm to the side of her face, near her right ear but not touching her. She turned her head toward the hand; her eyes didn't move.

"She's blind," Brutus said flatly.

"Yes," I said.

He drew his hand away and wrapped his fingers around his chin, rubbing the heavy stubble in a gesture of wonderment. His eyes met mine, and we exchanged a look charged with our knowledge of each other and the exigencies of our mutual endeavor.

I turned to Bessie. "I'll just need to have a few words in private with Mr. Ruby," I said.

"Sure," Bessie replied. "We're not expected anywhere."

Brutus followed me to the kitchen. "What do you think?" I asked, closing the door behind us.

"She's totally blind?" he said.

"From birth. But she can take care of herself."

"Does she know what she'd be doing here?" he asked.

"It seems her uncle told her what to expect."

Brutus wrinkled his brows, pulling in his chin. "He sent her here?"

"He was here once as a client, and, evidently, he liked the operation. When he went broke, he thought this would be as good a place as any for his niece."

"What a bastard!"

"Maybe," I said. "But think about it. What are her options? She could wind up begging in the streets, or in some government home, half starved and neglected. Her sister is shucking

oysters for a living; she won't be able to look after her. She'd be safe here, and she'd earn money to put away."

"A blind prostitute," Brutus said. "I never heard of such a thing."

"That's what I'm thinking. Not you or any man on this island has heard of such a thing."

"But can she do the work?" Brutus said.

I knew what he meant. It takes a strong personality to do the kind of work our girls do, day in and day out. My prices are high, and the men who avail themselves of our services expect to be treated with interest, even enthusiasm. Personally, I think it's a gift to be able to do this. It's like acting; you must throw your heart and soul—and, especially, your body—into a role that keeps changing and has little to do with your ordinary life.

"I think you should give her a trial run," I said. "Then we'll know what we've got."

He laughed. "I surely wouldn't mind that," he said. "Would she be willing?"

"I don't know why not. I'll pay her, of course. I'll go ask her."

"You mean right now?"

"Are you up for it?" I asked, teasing him. Brutus was pretty much always up for it.

"Where should we go?"

"Use Lottie's old room. It's all made up. I'll bring her to you in a few minutes."



Back in the drawing room, I found the sisters waiting patiently, evidently enjoying the coolness of the shuttered room. I pulled up a straight-backed chair and seated myself between them. "I have a few questions of a personal nature to ask," I said to Bessie.

"Yes, ma'am," she said, giving me her full attention.

"Is your sister a virgin?"

Carità gave a snort of laughter, while her sister blushed to the roots of her hair. "No, ma'am," she said. "She is not."

"Does she use any method of birth control?"

Bessie cast a frightened glance at her sister, then back at me. "As soon as she had her period, my uncle took her to the doctor and he did something."

"Something," I said. "What did he do?"

Bessie ducked her head, wringing her hands in her lap.

"He clipped something," Carità said informatively. "Right up inside me. I don't feel it, and I still get my period, but I can't ever have a baby."

This uncle, I thought, was a cautious bastard.

"That's fine, then," I said. "Now, before I say you can stay here, I need to know that you'll be able to perform the service we offer. It's not an easy job, by any means. I've asked Mr. Ruby to give you a trial run, if you'll excuse the expression."

Bessie looked mystified, but Carità nodded firmly. "An audition," she said.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Bessie offered.

Carità turned to her and spoke patiently, as if to a child. "You had to take a test to shuck oysters," she said. "What if

you'd been really bad at it? Mrs. Gulliver just wants to know if I can do the job." Then she turned to me. "I think it's an excellent plan."

I gazed at her, frankly impressed. "Good," I said. "If all goes well, I will give you twenty-five dollars and you will be employed here. If, for some reason, Mr. Ruby determines that you're not suited to this work, then you may keep the twenty-five dollars and pursue employment elsewhere."

Carità smiled so broadly that I was put in mind of the dental bill. "That sounds fine to me," she said.

But the baldness of this proposal struck poor Bessie with such force—perhaps she grasped at last the true desperation of her sister's situation—that she burst into tears.

"She always cries," Carità observed.

"I just want to go home," Bessie sobbed.

"You're a good girl," I said to Bessie. "I know you're trying to do the best you can for your sister." I took up the box of tissues on the side table, and she reached out, pulled a sheet free, and applied it to her eyes.

"I never wanted to live in the city," Bessie continued. "She always did, ever since she was a child. Uncle Peter always brought back presents when he went, and he talked about how lively it was."

Carità put her hand over her mouth and sneezed.

"Bless you," I said.

She nodded, then spoke from behind her hand. "Could you pass me one of those tissues?" she said.

Without thinking, I offered the box to her. She stretched out her hand, missing it slightly. I moved it toward her fingers,

they connected, and she snatched a sheet. How did she know it was a box of tissues I was offering? I thought. And then I answered my own question: she'd heard the sound when Bessie took one, that soft, innocuous sound of thin paper against cardboard.

In unison, the sisters blew their noses.

"You've nothing to fear," I said to Bessie. "Brutus is a good man. He makes sure no harm comes to any of the girls who work here."

"Yes, ma'am," Bessie murmured; she folded the tissue and dabbed her eyes.

I turned to Carità. "He's waiting for you in a room upstairs. I'll take you there now. You'll be with him about half an hour. If you have any questions for him at any point, feel free to ask him. He can tell you what to expect."

Carità rose from the chair and stood attentively, without moving. "Should I brush my hair?" she asked. Her voice had a blithe coquettishness that charmed me, as it would many others.

"You're fine," I said, approaching her. Should I lead her by the hand? Her fingers found my arm at once, and she slipped her hand inside my elbow, turning in the direction I was facing.

"How many steps are there?" she asked as I guided her to the staircase.

"I've never counted them," I admitted. "But there's a landing halfway."

She ascended the steps slowly but without hesitation. I said, "We're at the landing," and then, "This is the last step."

"Fourteen steps," she said when we reached the top. "Landing halfway." I led her along the hall to Lottie's old room. "Just

so you know,” she added, meaning the steps. Oddly, I’ve never forgotten it—fourteen steps, landing halfway.

“We’re at the door,” I said, rapping on the wood with my free hand. Brutus opened at once and stood smiling in the frame. Carità released my arm and stepped forward, holding one hand out before her, the elbow bent. This hand found Brutus, rested softly and briefly on his torso, then pulled back. “Oh, excuse me,” she said, smiling to herself.

Brutus met my eyes over her head, his expression bemused. He took her hand in his own, drawing her into the room. “First, I’ll show you where everything is in here,” he said.

“That would help,” she replied cheerfully. As he turned her toward the bed, he pushed the door closed behind him.

I stood on the carpet feeling strangely bereft. Is this a good idea? I thought. The businesswoman in my brain, who is ever on the alert, replied, “Oh, shut up.” I made my way back down the stairs to the drawing room, where Bessie sat looking as miserable as a wet cat. “Why don’t you come to the kitchen with me, and I’ll fix you a cup of tea,” I said.

Her face brightened. “Yes, ma’am,” she said. “I’d like that very much.”

“Good,” I said. “I want to ask you a lot of questions about your sister.”

Half an hour later, when we heard Brutus and Carità on the back staircase, Bessie was on her second cup of tea and her third vanilla wafer, and I was in receipt of the story of her life: the feckless father, dead in an auto accident; the Italian mother, who died after delivering a blind daughter into the world. (“She lived long enough to name her Carità,” Bessie said. “It means

‘mercy.’”) The rich uncle, a confirmed bachelor, absorbed in his rice plantation, who agreed to take in the girls and treated them as his own. He had a big library and a lot of ideas. He brought in teachers; in Bessie’s case, she was sad to report, nothing stuck, whereas Carità had a prodigious memory and was interested in everything. She read Braille books at a rapid pace; her teacher ordered them from the mainland. She adored music and learned to play the piano. They had everything they could want: nice clothes, a cook and a maid, two dogs and a house cat; Bessie had a bicycle she rode to the country store to buy sweets for them both.

Three years ago, when the sheath blight came, the uncle thought he could weather it, but the following season, just as the crop was heading, a tropical storm passed through and wiped it out a second time.

“That changed him,” Bessie confided. “He became a bitter man. He believed our family was under a curse. Carità was just one more blighted thing in his life.”

When the bank foreclosed, the uncle found a job on a farm on the mainland. He would be forced to work another man’s land, to live in another man’s quarters. The bank auctioned off everything he owned. He despaired of caring for his nieces. He gave Bessie fifty dollars, the password to my house, and two bus tickets to the city.

Then he took his best pistol, went out to the empty barn, and shot himself.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Two weeks,” she said. “I was looking for work, and I left Carità at the hotel. It wasn’t a good place for her, not a safe

place. A mean woman there pushed her on the staircase, and she fell all the way down. Then she found a man in the room going through our bag, and she hit him with a lamp. The manager was mad and wanted us to pay for the lamp. We were about out of money, so Carità said, 'It's time to use that password.'

"I see," I said.

"And here we are."

We heard footsteps on the staircase; then Carità stood in the doorway. "Oh," she said. "It's a kitchen." She took a step into the room, holding her hands out before her.

Bessie jumped up and guided her to the table. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Oh yes," Carità said. She had a pleased expression, as if she'd just accomplished a feat.

"How did you know this is a kitchen?" I asked.

"Kitchens have a very distinct feel," she said. Bessie was patting her on the arm anxiously. "It was fine," she assured her sister. "Brutus showed me everything. This is a big house."

I looked at Brutus, who was standing by the door with a dazed expression on his face.

"How did it go?" I asked.

He brought one hand to his neck to rub the flesh just below his ear, his lips parted and his brow furrowed. "We need to talk," he said.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

Bessie, who had pulled out a chair for her sister and was standing behind her, cast Brutus a wary look but didn't speak.

"No," Brutus said. "Not at all."

"Then I'll stay here," Carità said, turning her ear toward me.

Brutus nodded.

"Yes," I said.

"And I've earned twenty-five dollars," she said, sounding pleased with herself.

"That's right," I said. "And the room you were in will be yours."

"It's bigger than our hotel room," Carità informed her sister. "And it has a sink, a wardrobe, a bed, and a comfortable chair."

"Why don't you take Bessie and show it to her?" I said. "You can wash up a bit and brush your hair. There's a brush in the wardrobe. The other girls will be arriving soon. They'll help you find a dress you can wear tonight. I think Vivien is about your size."

Bessie nodded, looking tense. Carità stood up at once, pushed her chair under the table, and turned to her sister, who led her back to the staircase. "There's a ceiling fan," she told Bessie. "It makes a nice breeze. I won't be so hot at night."

Brutus went to the stove and poured himself a cup of coffee. He drank coffee all day and whiskey all night.

"So how did it go?" I asked again.

He took a sip from the cup, his dark eyes fixed on mine over the edge. "It was about the strangest experience I've ever had," he said.

"But you liked it."

He nodded. "I did. Yes, very much."

"What did you like?"

"Well, you know, she can't see you. But you can see her."

"And that's appealing."

"It's not like she's blindfolded," he mused. "You can look right into her eyes."

"Her eyes are very strange," I observed.

"They are," he agreed. "I found myself just staring into them, and it didn't matter, because she didn't know I was staring."

"So that's what you did? You stared into her eyes?"

"When we were in bed. Yes. Before that, we talked a bit. I led her around the room; she touched everything, and after that she knew exactly how to get around without help. I showed her the sink and how to wash the gentleman's penis. That made her laugh."

"She laughed at your prick?"

"Not loud, just a giggle. She thinks sex is funny."

"Did she say that?"

"No, but she's playful. She checked out the mattress by bouncing on it. She could barely wait to get her dress off, because she wanted to feel the fan breeze on her bare skin."

"How's the body?"

He took a swallow of coffee and set the cup on the counter. "She's beautiful all the way down," he said. "Creamy skin, beautiful breasts, fantastic ass."

"And she's willing."

He nodded, passing his hand through his hair. "She wants to please and she's curious. After we were done, she asked me if she could feel my face; if I wouldn't mind. So I said sure, and we sat on the side of the bed, and she felt my face, just very gently tapping her fingers from my forehead to my chin, then my ears and the back of my neck."

“What did she say?”

He looked away while a blush crept up his neck to his cheeks. “She said I have a strong face.”

I rested my chin on my hand, studying my old comrade closely. He turned toward me but couldn’t meet my eyes.

“I will be damned,” I said. “You fell like a tree.”

“It’s the novelty of the thing,” he said.

“You fell like a tree,” I repeated.

It was no surprise, I thought, that Carità had a fine time with Brutus—he was an attractive man with a lovely cock, and he liked women—but how would she feel about some of our less savory clients, and, most important, how would they feel about her? “She’s not going to appeal to everyone,” I said.

Brutus nodded. “I was thinking of Dr. Minton,” he said, and we both burst out laughing.

“I can see her flailing his little whip around the room while he tries to get his sad old bottom in her way,” I said.

Brutus wagged his buttocks, muttering, “Here, you idiot, hit me here.”

What a vision! We teared up with laughter. But when we calmed down, Brutus seemed subdued and thoughtful. “She’s strong,” he said. “But she’s small. Some jerk could get rough with her.”

“Did you show her the buzzer?”

“I did,” he said. “And I told her to push it if she felt frightened at all. Even just a little. Just push the buzzer: help is on the way.”

“That’s good,” I said.

The sound of women’s voices drifted in from the yard, one

complaining, one commiserating. Then Vivien's sharp-featured face appeared at the screen in the back door, and she pushed into the room, followed closely by Sally. It was time to open the bar and get ready for work. "We have a new colleague," I told them. "She's upstairs. You should go and welcome her."

"What's her name?" Sally asked. She immediately charged up the back stairs.

"Carità," I called out.

Vivien pulled out a chair and flopped down in it. "I need to cool down a minute," she said. "The bus was packed with sweating humanity." She opened her purse, took out a lacy handkerchief, and patted her upper lip.



Late that night, when our last client was gone, when Jack, our bartender, had washed all the glasses and locked the liquor in the cabinet, when three girls were home with their families and two were asleep upstairs, I prepared myself a cup of chamomile tea and sat at the table, going over the receipts for the week. Business was good. The liquor consumption was definitely up, and there was no shortage of clients.

Most of them were regulars, arriving separately and scattered over the hours. They knew what and whom they wanted, but no one was in a hurry, and as it was a hot night and my drawing room one of the coolest in town, they soon had the champagne cocktails flowing.

I hadn't allowed Carità to accept a date, as it was her first night and she was new to the business. Sally and Mimi had done

her up like a doll, arranged her hair, put on makeup, dressed her in a flowered silk slip, a matching peignoir, and a pair of feather mules they found somewhere. They are good-hearted girls, and Carità frankly appreciated their attentions. They escorted her downstairs and seated her on a leather chair near the bar. And there she sat, looking ethereal and exotic, the whole night long.

As I sipped my tea and looked over the string of numbers I'd entered on my sturdy calculator, I had a sense of peace and accomplishment. The only sounds were the soft whir of the ceiling fan and the rustle of leaves in the evening breeze that made nights in the city so soothing, even restorative. I stood up, opened the screen, and stepped out onto the wide veranda. I couldn't see the sky; it was a dark blotch among branches. I went down the few steps, across the garden, and out the gate to the sidewalk, where I could see the moon. It was a waning sliver of white, fading in the west. I looked back at the house. The lights were off upstairs. Mimi and now this new girl, Carità, were asleep in their beds. It was my house, a thought that filled me with pride. And all around me the streets of San Alfonso sprawled out from the bay, some of its citizens still awake, no doubt, either up to no good, or heading home after a job, or drinking that first cup of coffee to start another day of work. It was my city. I had a place in it, and if you knew the right people, they could direct you to my door.



San Alfonso is my home, but I wasn't born here. I grew up on the windward side of the island, in a poor village nestled on