



THE BLUE DEATH by JOAN BRADY

Chapter One

MISSISSIPPI RIVER: The first day in June

'David.' She didn't get up. She didn't turn.

'You expecting somebody else?'

'I'd know your step anywhere. Are you in your tux?'

'Of course.'

She sat cross-legged on the ground facing the Mississippi. Water disappeared over the horizon in front of her and off to either side: an ocean with a southerly current. 'Hello, my love.'

David Marion studied her back a moment. Brown hair. Blonde streaks in it. Expensive.

He walked up behind her, crouched, pulled her body against his, let her nestle there a moment, then slipped his hands up under her ears. Meadowlarks make a haunting, liquid sound, unknown outside the prairies; he could hear one in the distance. As for the word carotid, it comes from the Greek for 'deep sleep'. An ancient, largely painless method: abrupt pressure on the arteries in the neck. Even her cry was muffled; she sagged forward in his arms.

Usually the earth around here is so boggy that getting to the river itself takes a pier; the earliest summer – and already the driest one – in Midwest history had changed all that. Earth throughout Illinois baked and cracked. Trees dried into blackened skeletons. Dust devils swirled along roads. He couldn't have buried her if he wanted to. The joke of it was that she'd chosen the spot herself. Nothing daunts the Mississippi, and coroners along stretches of its route get a fee per body. If the coroner at Hannibal fished her out first, he'd pronounce her dead by drowning, stick her back in the river and telephone the coroner downstream at Gilead that she was on the way. Aloysia Gonzaga, named for a saint, had prided herself on her unpredictable life. She might make it all the way to the Gulf of Mexico before anybody realized she was missing.

Only the last few yards to the river were the usual bog. He sank into mud up to his ankles, carried her out into the water until he could feel an undercurrent, held her head under until she stopped breathing, let her go.

After a drought like this, the first rain smells of vomit. Big drops began to fall as he slogged his way back through the mud. By the time he reached his car, water bucketed out of the sky.

The weather forecast had used the word 'monsoon'. Illinois doesn't have monsoons.