

Inspector Pepper

by Patric Peake

Iguana Murder

(Aruba – Caribbean Resort Island off the coast of Venuezela)

On the surface, Gerald Pepper, former police investigator, seemed the least likely man to be involved with murder, yet murder followed him like his loyal pooch, Othello, the black lab, and never failed to land him right in the middle of some gruesome investigation.

He was a medium man, medium build, medium length brown hair, medium brown eyes, a medium age of 45 and a medium life which included one dog, and a quaint little cottage on the outskirts of Crookfield, California. His only distinctive feature was a deep scar below his right eye that continued as a distinct dent in the bridge of his nose.

Just as he had sat at his favorite table at the Pizza Palace, toasting himself for getting out of the game of investigating murders, Eloise, the police chief's fifteen-year-old daughter, came in gleaming at him in the reflection of the computer tablet screen shining on her face as she marched to his table, announcing to Pepper that they would be going worldwide with his investigations via the internet.

With two murders solved in the database of Pepper's website, Eloise was certain she had him back in the game, bigtime. She had built the website for her friend, Gerald along with a great business plan. After all, he never need leave the comfort of his Pizza Palace table and could sip on his diet cola with the slice of lemon all day long.

"Really, Eloise? Another one. What's the point of all this?" Pepper stared into his cola as if he might find the meaning of life somewhere in the dark bubbling liquid. He felt a bit like goldfish who'd been placed in a bowl of motor oil and expected to swim and be happy about it. Used motor oil. Sludge.

"Try to contain your enthusiasm, Gerald," Eloise ignored the wrinkled face and set her computer tablet on the table in front of him. "This one's from Aruba."

Pepper saw a single brownish-yellow eye blinking at him from the side of a bright, green head with spines on top.

It spoke: "Hello. I am Geraldo the iguana. Pleased to meet you."

Gerald found no humor in either the animal, or the irreverent theft of his name. He pushed the tablet across the table back to Eloise.

“Senora Soto,” Eloise spoke to the screen. “Are you there?”

“Get away from the computer, Josephina! Scat! And take Geraldo with you!”

Eloise pushed the tablet back to Pepper.

“Inspector Pepper?” A woman in her late twenties appeared on the screen. “Gracios de Dios! My little nephew, Alfonso, I think he’s been murdered!”

“I am sorry.” Pepper meant that as: *Sorry he couldn’t help since after a murder, the rewards of discovering the culprit leave one feeling like a squished snail.* Pepper’s own discovery of his wife’s murderer, only deepened his despair leaving him with both an exterior and interior scar.

“But no one will show me his body. And the murderer? He is on a yacht back to whatever country he came from. It’s hopeless, totally, hopeless!” The woman began sobbing uncontrollable as four sets of little hands came around her arms and shoulders and head to comfort the woman.”

“She has four children of her own, Gerald. She adopted Alfonso when his mom died of a rare cancer. The boy’s father hopped a boat to Venezuela as a crewman when Alfonso was little.” Eloise spoke to the screen. “Imelda? Show him the picture and text.”

Pepper looked at the screen filled with a picture of Alfonso standing in front of a huge, white yacht with his arm around a tall wealthy-looking man dressed in white with a patch over one eye. The text said, “No worry, Auntie. Got job. Work on man’s boat. Like dad did.” The picture looked to be one of those “selfies” that the young people do the coffee shop in Crutchfield to show to their friends who are right across the table from them.

Imelda came back on the screen. “But when I contacted the port authority to check out this man with the patch, Alfonso was nowhere on the craft and the man said it was just a little fun for the boy to play with his cell phone. But that was two weeks ago! And no Alfonso.”

Pepper frowned and took a sip of cola. Eloise caught the look of resignation on his face and glared intently until she had his eyes. Pepper decided to avoid the sermon that usually followed this look. “Is it possible the boy just ran away?”

“Aruba is a small island, Inspector. Besides, Alfonso would never leave behind his pet Iguana, Geraldo. The lizard has been with him since he was a little boy living with his mother and father.”

“How old is Alfonso now?”

“Fifteen.”

Pepper began shaking his head and chuckling until he felt a sharp pain on his shin from Eloise's kick.

Pepper closed his eyes and groaned in pain as he spoke, "Ma'am may I please speak to the iguana again.

"Inspector?"

"I believe his name is Geraldo."

Geraldo was placed in front of the camera of the laptop by a pair of small feminine hands.

"Geraldo."

"Yes." Geraldo spoke with the voice of a young girl.

"What is Alfonso's girlfriend's name?"

"Marta."

Pepper could tell by the silence that followed from the screen and the look on Eloise's face like she'd just seen a flying dog, that he'd managed to surprise everyone. Everyone except, little cousin, Josephina.

"Geraldo," Pepper asked. "Have you seen Alfonso lately?"

"Yes?"

"When?"

"Every night. He comes to visit Geraldo and me and tell me romantic stories about him and Marta swimming in the moonlight."

"Josephina, why didn't you tell me! My god, I was worried sick."

"I promised."

As Gerald Pepper picked up a piece of driftwood from the little creek out behind his cottage in Crutchfield to throw it for Othello, he couldn't help but notice its startling resemblance to the shape of an iguana. He chuckled. "Anything to say for yourself?" he asked the inanimate object and thought for an instant, he could almost hear Josephina's voice.

But, alas! No. Just a short *woof* from his dog. He tossed the piece of driftwood for his loyal friend, the one friend who didn't care if he ever solved another murder mystery.

