

Ford Wyatt was the only one outside of whoever actually strangled Barbara Cruz that knew he was innocent of the murder. Obviously, that person wasn't going to give Wyatt an alibi. . .



Ford Wyatt could see that he was number one suspect in this case . . .

THE VOICE OF BARBARA CRUZ

A FORD WYATT STORY

by **Wade B. Rubottom**

THE LARK was highballing south from San Francisco when Ford Wyatt heard the voice of Barbara Cruz. It had been a long time; it had been five years since Barbara's rich, sultry

voice had last caressed his ears.

He ignored her words to the porter near his open compartment door and let her lovely cadence convince him: this chance meeting would be different from

the one they had arranged five years ago. . . . It could hardly be worse.

When the porter—rolling with the rock of the train—passed, Ford stepped into the corridor. The door next to his compartment was just closing. With his knock it opened again. And he looked into the depths of Barbara's black eyes. .

"Ford Wyatt! . . . Darling, come in."

With a lurch of the train, he found himself inside with her in his arms. He found she hadn't forgotten how to kiss; she hadn't changed.

A knock on the compartment door separated them. It was the porter—come to make up her berth, as she had asked.

"In the meantime," Ford suggested, "how about joining me for a drink in the club car?"

"That would be nice."

Following her through the train, he saw that: Barbara still wore her nylon seams straight. She had retained her figure and her flair for wearing clothes. Her navy blue gabardine suit had cost a lot of dough; on her it was worth it.

In the club car he found that brown hair framed her still-lovely face, and suntan still made a perfect setting for the mysteries lurking in her black eyes.

As Ford opened a matchbook, Barbara snapped her cigaret lighter. When she set it on the ashtray-table, he noticed that it was no ordinary lighter. One side held a silver and turquoise mounting of a design he had never seen before. It was definitely American Indian, probably Zuni. Because it was curious and he was curious, Ford picked it up. "This is something! But what is it?"

"It's a Zuni good-luck piece. It belongs to Ben. He's superstitious; when he lost it, about six months ago, he acted as if the world had reached its predicted end. The fact that he hasn't landed a new road

building contract since hasn't improved his charm."

In Ford's opinion, her husband had always been a cagey screwball.

"I found it on this trip in the lining of my overnight bag—can't imagine how it got there." She stubbed out the cigaret she'd just lit. "Ben thinks more of that good-luck piece than he does of me."

Ford set the lighter on the table. "How are you and Ben?" he asked, not wanting to talk about Ben at all. He wanted all he had missed five years ago.

"Oh, Ben still wants a divorce," Barbara said easily. "He can have it on my terms. When he sees I have his good-luck piece, he'll probably agree to any terms. The thing is an obsession with him; I hope my having had it mounted on this cigaret lighter in San Francisco doesn't send him into a minor rage."

Her smile assured Ford that she wasn't worried about Ben; she had already forgotten him. Her smile and the mysterious depths of her black eyes assured him that this meeting would be different.

THE WAITER, making room for their drinks, moved Barbara's cigaret lighter. He looked at it in the open palm of his hand. "Seems like anyone who carried this would be lucky," he said admiringly.

"Hope I'm lucky enough not to mislay it," Barbara smiled. Then she turned to Ford, "Tell me, what have you been up to?"

"The usual—except that I quit civil engineering; I'm a private investigator now."

Barbara's black eyes widened. "You mean one of those hard-boiled, women-chasing, whiskey-swilling characters who people like to read about? Charming, but why?"

Ford grinned and rubbed the dimplelike scar on his left cheek. "Why not? It's a way of life."

"From what I read, it's a way of death." As she raised her glass, there was nothing about her smile that suggested death. "Here's to the present—may it last."

After the toast, Ford said, "The present reminds me of the past: this is our second trip on a train—more or less together. Remember?"

"Could I forget?"

"Sure your husband won't join us again—unexpectedly?"

"Ben's safe in Los Angeles." She added, petulantly, "Must we talk about Ben?"

"This car is too crowded for intimate conversation."

The ice and mix he'd ordered reached Ford's compartment seconds after they did. He broke out his traveling bottle.

As he poured scotch, Barbara lit two cigarettes. Drink and talk slowly rubbed away time's patina of strangeness.

When Ford started to pour the second refill, Barbara put her hand on his. "I promised myself that I'd get to bed early—"

"I hate people who break promises. . . to themselves."

"What did you promise yourself?"

"Nothing. When I heard your voice, I wished that I had sent you another Western Union Kiddiegram. I even remember the number, 1394:

*Brush your teeth,
Comb your hair,
Hurry to bed and say your prayer;
Before you know it I'll be there.*

While he'd recited, she'd stared at him through half-closed eyes. Her lips were

moist and slightly parted. "You dog! I'd hate you if you had forgotten that!"

"It's still a good telegram!"

"Oh. . ."

"Isn't it?"

"Oh, yes!" she said in her provocative, forthright way.

THE NEXT morning Ford raised his window shade as *The Lark* slowed in the Los Angeles Terminal yard.

He'd awakened with a conviction that he'd been bad last night—good and bad. The good was in telling his hostess that he'd had a nice time; he'd bet that she'd fallen asleep before he'd closed her door.

A glance in the mirror suggested that he could skip shaving. He dressed hurriedly.

Fifteen minutes later, he found Barbara's door still closed. His gentle knock got no answer. Quietly he turned the knob and stepped into the dark compartment. A chill prickled his spine. Something was wrong: With the snap of the light switch, he gasped.

Barbara Cruz's black eyes, staring without luster, held another mystery. Her lovely body lay ugly on the berth. Nude—except for one nylon stocking twisted around her neck.

Ford paced the compartment, exhaling audibly. Her eyes, like painted eyes on a portrait, seemed to follow his movements.

He rang for the porter to fetch the conductor.

The Lark wasn't late, but its passengers were. Before they had disembarked, homicide's big, Irish-faced Det. Lt. Tim McQuinn—who looked like the dissipated remnants of an advertising account executive, which he was—had the names and addresses of every passenger and every crewman. And he had one suspect: Ford Wyatt.

Shadows of the iron bars on the window hit the worn asphalt tile floor and the side of McQuinn's cluttered desk. He sat with his feet on the pullout desk board and his intense blue eyes on Ford, seated in front of his desk. He growled: "For the first time in my career, I get suspects by carloads. And I end up with one who had a motive—you!"

"The luck of the Irish." Ford rubbed the white dimple-like scar on his left cheek. McQuinn wasn't kidding. "What would my motive be?"

"Sex—until I find a better one."

"Pull your mind up to sea level, Mac."

"Shamus, I can't understand a man with your experience killing so crudely. Something must have gone wrong. What?"

"Look," Ford snapped, "I've told you before and I'll tell you now: I didn't kill Barbara Cruz. You can put me in that white-hot Interrogation Room of yours—you can drive red-hot bamboo splinters under my fingernails, you can indulge sadistic tastes in any unusual manner and I'll continue to tell you that I did not kill Barbara Cruz."

"Take a deep breath," McQuinn said softly, as he folded a fresh stick of gum into his mouth, "and stop using such long sentences. I lose your trend of thought. I'm still under the impression that you killed Barbara Cruz. *Why?*"

The force of McQuinn's question almost lifted Ford out of his chair.

"That's my question. *Why* would I have killed Barbara Cruz?"

"Sex. The medical examiner will know if she was—"

"Raped? Don't be a fool," he sneered, trying not to look as uncomfortable as he felt.

"Well, let's say you didn't have a motive in the usual sense—something just came over you. You tell me what happened. I'll find a motive—"

"You're no Columbus; you're a low grade Edison."

"—Stick to the facts, make it short and interesting."

"I didn't kill Barbara Cruz."

"You lying son! I said stick to the facts; I said to make it interesting." McQuinn dropped his feet off the desk and the palm of his hand to the desk. Its loud whamm jarred an in-and-outgoing stand to the floor. "Give me your story."

FORD MADE his story factual and brief. If it was interesting, McQuinn gave no sign. He went to the water cooler and gulped three cupfuls of water then returned to his feet-on-desk position. His voice came file-smooth: "Last night on *The Lark*, you met Barbara Cruz—a girl you hadn't seen for five years—you say. How did your compartments happen to be adjacent? Did you buy the tickets that way?" He didn't wait for an answer. "The porter saw you in her compartment when he came to make up her berth. Several passengers and two waiters identified you as the man with her in the club car. Another waiter delivering ice and a mixer to your compartment found you together. The porter found you with her body in her compartment this morning—"

"I told you that *I* rang for the porter and told him to fetch the conductor."

"You ask me to believe that you didn't kill her. You offer no proof."

"You offer no proof that I did."

"I will," McQuinn said acidly.

Ford jammed his briar pipe into his oiled-silk tobacco pouch. He pulled it out loaded and struck a match. Wyatt thought better when he smoked, and he needed first quality thought now. "The killer must have had a motive."

"You're the only one who admits knowing her."

"Could it have been," Ford felt like a

drowning man, “a case of mistaken identity?”

“Don’t give me that, Wyatt.” His intense blue eyes bored into Ford’s. “No matter how you separate what we know, or how you examine it and juggle it together again, it always fingers you as the killer. It’s an open and shut case.”

“Yeah.” Ford knocked the tasteless tobacco out of his pipe.

The phone, jangling on McQuinn’s desk, plopped his feet to the floor and pulled his hand to the receiver. “McQuinn. . . . Sure, send him in.”

Ford hardly recognized the man who entered. His clothes looked prosperous; his face looked like a hangover from the great depression. In five years, Ben Cruz had aged more than seemed normal. His features had sharpened; his brown eyes had retreated into their sockets and lost some of their color. He looked as if he really thought the world’s predicted end had arrived.

In addition to a grey flannel suit, he wore his right arm in a black sling. Its bony fingers were rapidly manipulating a silver dollar.

Cruz introduced himself to McQuinn and added, “I’ve met Wyatt.” He caught Ford staring at his right hand. “I’m not nervous, Wyatt. My doctor suggested that I do this to flex the muscles and increase the circulation. I’m due to discard this sling soon.”

“Who’s your doctor, Ben?”

“Dr. Dale Slater—why?”

“Just curious, in case I need medical advice.”

FROM THE chair McQuinn offered, Cruz said, “Lt. McQuinn, what have you done about my wife’s murder?”

“We’re marshalling our facts, Mr. Cruz; it’s a little soon to have done anything definite.”

“The outstanding fact, lieutenant, is that Wyatt occupied the compartment next to my wife’s last night. He found the body this morning. He killed her.”

“Why?” McQuinn demanded.

“Why? I don’t know why! She probably resisted his advances—in anger he killed her. It happens every day.”

“Yes,” McQuinn admitted, “it does happen every day—so do mistakes. We can’t risk making a mistake—a trip through the gas chamber is a one-way passage.”

“So is murder; your only suspect sits in your office and you do nothing about it.”

“Our only suspect!” McQuinn barked. “We got carloads of suspects. What we don’t have is motive—what would you suggest?”

“It was a sex crime. Barbara was beautiful—men were always chasing her. Ford Wyatt’s a chaser; he followed her on *The Lark* last night; he killed her. My attorney will go to the district attorney if an arrest isn’t made this afternoon.”

“An arrest is easy—suppose we arrest you?”

Cruz grinned sheepishly. “Of course, I’m being ridiculous. I’m so upset about Barbara’s death that I—I expect the impossible. Although I’m sure Wyatt is guilty, I can understand *your* wanting to be sure.”

He rose. “You know where to reach me—I want to be the first to know when Wyatt is behind bars. I might be the next on his murder list.”

“Wyatt,” McQuinn said, “wait in the outer office, I have a few questions I want to ask Mr. Cruz.”

The outer office was occupied by Jeff Durrod, a tall, bony detective. He gave the impression of having the durability and strength of stainless steel. He must have been warned as a child that a gaping boy

catches flies, because he never gaped and he rarely opened his mouth to speak.

Ford got a drink of water and took a chair. He loaded his pipe again, hoping the tobacco would taste better.

In a few minutes McQuinn's door opened. Cruz came out, jauntily lighting a cigaret. His face looked as if it had recovered a little from the great depression. McQuinn beckoned Ford.

Until he again faced McQuinn across the desk, Ford wondered what had eased Cruz's expression.

McQUINN smiled mirthlessly, "Wyatt, I'm a lazy son; I've got a murderer and a waiting cell. Let's—"

"Sure. I should be scared black. But you're also a proud son, out to keep your record tops. I'm counting on that to save me from the gas chamber."

"Don't count high." Slowly McQuinn's expression changed to something that could have been worn by a liar or a sincere man. Ford wasn't sure which. With it, McQuinn could jump either way—it must have been a leftover from his advertising-agency days.

"Let's try this," Ford said, "for size: suppose the murderer boarded *The Lark* at Glendale. He—"

"*The Lark* doesn't take on passengers at Glendale. No one boarded, the porters say." "He might have slipped a porter a sawbuck—if you were that porter, what would you say?"

McQuinn slapped the sheets on his clip-board, "Which name on this list do you pick?"

"It's not that easy; his name's not on that list. The killer dropped off as *The Lark* slowed in the L. A. Terminal yard."

"Motive? . . ." McQuinn snapped. "You don't know! And I don't know why I'm listening to you."

"Suppose," Ford said, as if thinking aloud, "suppose you haul Cruz in again. You—"

"Do you think sly, indirect accusation against Cruz will direct suspicion away from you?"

"I'm not accusing Cruz—not yet. I've always considered him a cagey screwball. His behavior today isn't normal; he shows no shock at his wife's murder." Ford let that sink in briefly while he coaxed a thought from a recess of his mind.

"Let's give it a try. Bring him in then charge *me* with murder—let the guy relax. Maybe something will turn up; maybe we'll get a break."

"Something like what? . . . You don't know." McQuinn shook his head. "I told you I was a lazy son."

The thought Ford coaxed jumped at him: "You want motive. Ben Cruz had motive; he wanted his wife to divorce him, but he didn't like her terms."

McQuinn's feet plopped to the floor. "Far-fetched, but I'll go along only because I can't understand how you could pull such a crude killing." Again his face wore that advertising-agency expression. "I had Cruz wait outside, because he wanted to be the first to know you were behind bars."

BEN CRUZ entered, manipulating the silver dollar in his right hand. Was it because of nervousness or, as he had said, because of his doctor's orders?

"Mr. Cruz," McQuinn said, "I know you'll like to hear." He went on in a convincing-cop voice: "This is it; Wyatt, I'm booking you for the murder of Barbara Cruz."

Cruz stopped manipulating the silver dollar.

To Ford's taste McQuinn was overputting Cruz at his ease. . . . He

suspected the guy was serious. “What is this, Lieutenant?”

“It’s like I said, I’m booking you. In my shoes, what would you do?”

Ford gave him a long stare.

“Well, what would you do?”

Slowly Ford said, “If I knew no more about this case than *you* know, I’d charge Ford Wyatt with murder. But *I* know more about *this* case than you do.”

“What?”

It was a simple, one-word question—easy to answer and seemingly impossible to prove. “*I* know Ford Wyatt did not kill Barbara Cruz.”

“Can you prove it?”

“Not yet, but—”

Cruz shifted his eyes from Ford to the silver dollar in his right hand. He put it in his pocket with his left hand and fished a cigaret from another pocket. He leaned forward for a match book on McQuinn’s cluttered desk. Awkwardly he struck a match with his left hand. Then he looked as if smoke-filled lungs gave life’s greatest pleasure.

The guy was too calm. As he crossed his legs, Ford saw more than the sole of one shoe; he saw something that would start Cruz’s fingers to manipulating that silver dollar again. He had a hunch that this was the break.

Quickly he jotted down a few notes on a pad, handed it to McQuinn. Cruz watched without interest.

After reading the notes, McQuinn mumbled briefly into the phone—too low to be understood. He cradled the phone, put his feet back on the deskboard, and jammed a fresh stick of gum into his mouth. He balled the wrapper and aimed it marble-shooter fashion at the wastebasket. Failure brought a wry grin to his lips.

Ford knew if his hunch didn’t pay off, McQuinn would clamp him in a cell.

In a few minutes, Jeff Durrod entered,

handed Mac a typed note. He took a chair near the door—a little to one side of Ford and behind Cruz.

McQuinn glanced at Ford’s notes. He said, “Mr. Cruz, I want you to take off your shoes.”

Completely surprised, Cruz stared; finally he mumbled, “Lieutenant, what is this?”

“Routine; before I book a man I always humor him. Wouldn’t you like the same treatment if I were booking you for murder?”

“Yeah, sure.” He took off his shoes.

“Jeff, spread a newspaper on the floor for Mr. Cruz to stand on. . . . Now, Mr. Cruz, turn down your trouser cuffs.”

With his left hand fingers in a trouser cuff, Cruz’s face paled. He came erect. “This is ridiculous! Asking a man with his arm in a sling to humor a known killer.”

“Sure,” Jeff said, “let me help.” From the turned-down cuffs a few peas of oiled gravel fell to the newspaper.

McQUINN examined the soles of Cruz’s polished shoes, then passed them to Ford. Oil-stained bits of gravel were embedded in the nail depressions of the rubber heels. The soles were scratched. A few scratches showed through the fresh polish.

“Now what?” Cruz demanded, his tone dripped sarcasm.

“Oh, we’ve humored Wyatt enough. Let’s get on with the booking; I’m charging you with the murder of your wife.”

“What!” There was genuine surprise in Cruz’s voice now.

“You spell it out, Wyatt.” McQuinn handed him the notes and the paper Jeff had brought in.

“Sure—for the record. Mr. Cruz: *The Lark* doesn’t take on passengers at Glendale, but you got aboard and strangled

your wife. When the train slowed in the Los Angeles Terminal yard, you dropped off. You probably had parked your car in the nearby industrial area before going to Glendale this morning. You drove to the station, cleaned up in the washroom, and had your shoes shined. Then you, like others, went to see why the passengers on *The Lark* were being detained.”

“I appreciate an active imagination, Mr. Wyatt. But not when it’s used to slander innocent people. You’ll hear from my lawyer.” His was a casual, good-morning tone.

“You’ll hear from the D. A.,” Ford promised.

“Tell me, would a man with his arm in a sling willingly risk hopping off a moving train?”

“I wouldn’t think so.” Ford glanced at the sheet Fred had brought in. “Why didn’t you discard that sling two days ago, as Dr. Dale Slater advised?”

“I’m a cautious man.”

“Not cautious enough. You made several mistakes. The first was murder; the second was trying to pin it on me. Others were: not changing shoes and not cleaning gravel from your trouser cuffs. The crime lab—”

Cruz turned a convincing laugh to McQuinn, “Lieutenant, are you going to believe this yarnster?”

“Soon as the crime lab verifies his statements.”

“Bits of oil-stained gravel embedded in rubber heels and in trouser cuffs might be damaging evidence against some people. But against me, it’s like finding grease under the fingernails of an auto mechanic. I’m a road-building contractor.”

BARBARA’S murder had really upset the routine of Ford’s mind; he had completely forgotten that... and probably much more. He had hoped to start Cruz’s

right hand fingers working again, nervously. He had hoped!

Instead, with every passing second the man seemed more calm. Again he fished a cigaret from his pack.

Ford’s eyes popped at sight of the lighter he took from his pocket! The brazen son. How calm could a guy be?

“Perhaps,” Ford demanded, “you can explain how you got that cigaret lighter?”

Without even looking at it Cruz said calmly, “My wife mailed it to me from San Francisco.” He said it as if it were true.

It might just as well have been true—Ford could think of no way to prove that it wasn’t true. All evidence in this case seemed to slip through his fingers like fine sand and settle at his own feet.

“That does it, Wyatt.” This time McQuinn meant business. He stood up. “I’m booking you for the murder of Barbara Cruz.”

His words affected Ford like mention of fat pork affects a queasy person on a rough sea.. Quickly he shifted his eyes back to Cruz.

From him he got an easy grin. Then Cruz gave his full attention to his good-luck piece in the open palm of his right hand.

Something in the gesture flashed a demand to Ford’s morgue-like mind. Quickly it flashed back a picture that showed Cruz had convicted himself with a lie. Ford knew how to solve this case now. He repeated, “Mr. Cruz, you’ll hear from the D. A.”

Cruz didn’t even bother to look up from his good-luck piece.

Ford examined the picture his mind had flashed back—it showed that lighter in another hand. A dark brown hand in a talking picture: “*Seems like anyone who carried this would be lucky.*”

“Lt. McQuinn,” Ford said, rubbing the

dimple-like scar on his left cheek, “one of the club car waiters admired that cigaret lighter last night; he’ll remember it.”

Cruz sucked air, as if he’d taken a belly blow, “Huh!”

McQuinn stopped chewing gum. “Fred, bring in all the waiters from the club car.”

Fred ignored the order. His eyes were on Cruz.

Cruz jumped to his feet. His grin was a grimace of hatred now; his fear-sick eyes shuttled among them. He backed away, shouting defiantly: “You lice are out to frame me!”

His right arm slipped from its sling. With it came a short-barreled .38.

Ford stepped in with an upward swing of his left arm; a slug plowed through the clutter on McQuinn’s desk. Ford followed his left with an upswinging, fisted right; a second slug went wild.

His right had connected with Cruz’s pointed chin. It slammed him against the wall. . . . Slowly like a glassy-eyed zombie, he slumped to a sitting position. His head bent downward toward his outstretched left hand.

His good-luck piece lay in its open palm.