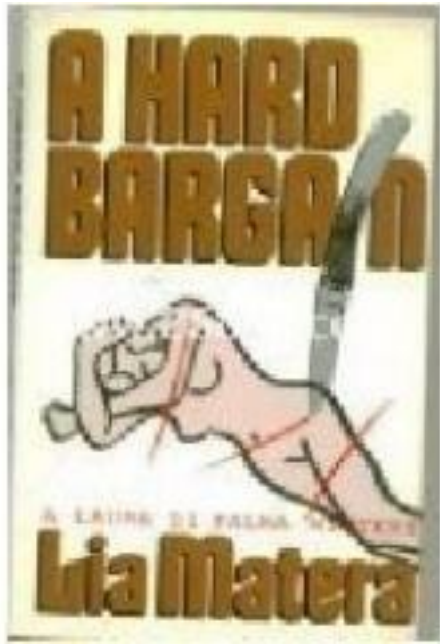


A Hard Bargain



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After solving her first big murder case in the small town of Celosia, North Carolina, Madeline Maclin hopes at last to be taken seriously as a private investigator. She's opened an office in the home of her best friend Jerry Fairweather, a man haunted by his past who enjoys running harmless scams. Jerry doesn't feel worthy of anyone's love--bad news for Madeline--although she thinks Jerry's sister Harriet knows more about the accident that killed their parents than she'll say. Madeline is hired to find Kirby Willet, an eccentric inventor who left boxes of his belongings, including one filled with money, at Frannie Thomas house. Meanwhile Voltage Films director, Josh Gaskins, is in town and thinks Jerry's old house will be perfect for his horror film, "Curse of the Mantis Man," about Celosia's mythical beast. Is this monster actually real? Celosia is also hopping with the Pageantoids, rabid fans from Madeline's days as a

beauty queen, who have come to Celosia to produce more pageants. And then there's Rick Rialto, one of Jerry's shady con artist friends. When Gaskins is murdered, Madeline uncovers several suspects and is forced to make--and investigate--some hard bargains. At least one of which is with Jerry.

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