

MURDER BY COFFEE

By Glenn Ickler

Chapter 1

Sorrow on Sunday

The jangling of my bedside phone snapped me out of the sweet, semi-conscious reverie that follows a completely satisfying act of love.

In the days of Bogie and Bacall, Martha Todd and I would have been sitting back, enjoying a post-orgasm cigarette, but nobody smokes any more. Instead, I was flat on my back, floating in a fluffy never-never land. Martha was half draped over me, with one brown leg across my hips, one bare breast resting on my chest and one slender arm flung across my shoulders. Our breathing was slow, soft and smooth.

"Don't answer it," Martha said in a dreamy, faraway voice. "It's Sunday morning, for God's sake."

"I have to answer it," I said. "I'm on call today."

I'm Warren Mitchell, known to everyone except my mother and her mother as "Mitch," and I work as a general assignment reporter for the St. Paul Daily Dispatch. General assignment means I get to cover all kinds of stories and interview all kinds of people - from actuaries to zoologists. It also means that every fourth Sunday I must be available to grab an assignment if there aren't enough reporters on hand in the newsroom.

As I reached for the phone, I sent up a silent prayer that it would not be the city editor calling to curtail my mid-morning lovemaking. My prayer was not answered, which wasn't surprising since I hadn't been inside a church for at least seven years.

"Hi, Mitch, this is Gordy Holmberg," said the Sunday city editor. "I hate to take you away from whatever you're doing, but we've got an emergency out in Afton and I'm fresh out of reporters."

"No problem," I said, with all the sincerity of a man torn from the arms of his lover. "What's up in Afton?"

"A whole bunch of people got sick in the Unitarian Universalist church there this morning," he said. "There's all kinds of ambulances and police cruisers at the church, and I need somebody to go out there and get in the way of the TV cameras. You seem like the best guy to send because you know Afton so well."

He would remember that. My memories of Afton were not universally happy.

Gordon Holmberg rattled on. "Your Siamese twin is on the way downtown to get a staff car. He can pick you up and then jump on the freeway from your place."

My so-called Siamese twin is Alan Jeffrey, a photographer and longtime friend, who frequently works with me on news and feature stories. The Siamese-twins tag was hung on us by our weekday city editor, Don O'Rourke. I once heard Don tell a visiting dignitary that he was about to be interviewed by a reporter and photographer who were "joined at the funny bone - only in their case that's the skull." Such is the price Al and I pay for occasionally trying to lighten the load of our labors with a little levity.

"Do we know how sick these people are?" I asked.

"We think at least one of them is dead," said Gordon.

"That's sick enough to get my attention. I'll be ready to go when Al gets here."

"Thanks, Mitch. I knew I could count on you."

"No problem," I said again as I hung up, although I could see from the look in Martha Todd's brown eyes that there was a problem.

"Okay, what is it?" she asked. She had propped her naked torso up against a pillow at the head of the bed with her arms crossed beneath her coffee-with-cream-colored breasts. Martha is part Cape Verdean, and she has a perfect permanent tan all over her provocative body.

I repeated what Gordy Holmberg had told me, leaned over and kissed both of her cocoa brown nipples, and headed for the shower. When I returned to the bedroom, Martha had slid down onto her back and was engrossed in a petting session with Sherlock Holmes, who was stretched out on her bare tummy.

Lucky Sherlock, I thought as I pulled on my skivvies. This particular Sherlock Holmes is a large black-and-white tomcat that adopted me a couple years ago. I live in a ground-floor apartment at the rear of a two-story brick building on Grand Avenue, and the cat kept hanging around the back door until I fed him. Next thing I knew, he was my full-time roommate. The name Sherlock Holmes was suggested by Al's wife, Carol, as being appropriate for the companion of a writer who had just won an award for investigative reporting.

"How long will you be gone?" Martha asked while I was tying my sneakers.

"Who knows?" I said. "This is one of those stories that could be wrapped up in a couple of hours or it could take all day. The deadline for the first run of tomorrow morning's paper is 10:30 tonight, but I'm sure I'll be home long before that."

"Call me if you're going to be late for supper," she said, scratching Sherlock's left ear with a long, slender forefinger. "I'm cooking at my place." Her place was an apartment at the front of the building. We were sharing beds and most evening meals while maintaining separate living quarters about a hundred feet apart.

"I will. You have a good time snuggling with Sherlock."

"I'd a lot rather be snuggling with you."

"Me, too," I said. This time I kissed her on the lips before I turned away. I had barely closed the bedroom door behind me when the bell at the front door rang.

"Morning, Sunshine. Did Gordy get you up?" asked Alan Jeffrey when I opened the door.

"I had already been up once, and I was hoping to get up again before we got out of bed," I said.

"Ah, what poor Martha is missing," he said.

"At least she has Sherlock Holmes to comfort her," I said. "All I got is you."

"Carol says I'm the cat's meow, if that helps you any."

"Sorry, pal, but as far as I'm concerned, you're a long way from the purr-fect bedroom companion."

"Sorry you're feline that way," he said. Al always tries to get the last word.

The ramp onto I-94 is only a few blocks north of Grand Avenue, so we were soon eastbound on the freeway. The sky reflected the way we both felt about being called out on what was supposed to be a day off. The unbroken layer of low-hanging clouds was the color that we, as ex-Navy air crewmen, called aircraft carrier gray, and the chill, damp air felt more like November than early September.

"What were you and Carol doing when you got the call to action?" I asked.

"Not what you and Martha were doing, that's for sure," he said. "With two kids in the house, you don't play around in the bedroom all Sunday morning. You get up and feed them." The kids in question were Kristin, who had just turned thirteen, and Kevin, who was eleven.

I turned on the radio and flipped through the dial, hoping to catch some breaking news on the situation in Afton. However, none of the stations deemed the event worthy of interrupting their morning broadcasts of pipe organ music, Lutheran sermons or call-in right-wing political blather. I turned the radio off and we watched the roadside shopping malls go by in silence. One of the many things Al and I agree on is that conversation should be minimal until a decent time of day, which means we both speak only when spoken to in the hours between breakfast and lunch.

The exit that leads to Afton is the last one before I-94 crosses the bridge into Wisconsin. Al cruised down the ramp and turned south on a blacktop county road that used to be Minnesota Highway 95. The state highway had been rerouted away from what passes for a downtown shopping area several years previously so that hundreds of cars headed for a popular ski area south of Afton wouldn't have to slow down to thirty miles an hour.

Within minutes of leaving the interstate, we met two fast-moving ambulances with their lights flashing.

"Must be some of our victims," Al said. "I hope they're not all gone by the time we get there."

Afton is a rural community of approximately 2,200 souls located on the St. Croix River, twenty miles east of downtown St. Paul. My vast knowledge of this suburban Shangri-La was gained through falling in love with one of those 2,200, a woman with soft brown curls, baby blue eyes and boobs like Dolly Parton. Said woman dumped me for her old high school sweetheart on the day I planned to propose. I had not visited Afton in the two years that had passed since I bade this lady a broken-hearted farewell.

The small St. Croix Valley congregation of Unitarian Universalists had taken over an abandoned Methodist church about a block west of Afton's main street. We got there a few minutes after eleven o'clock and found the roadside and the small parking lot filled with a jumble of sheriff's cruisers, fire department rescue vehicles, TV camera trucks from three channels and cars that we assumed belonged to parishioners. There wasn't an ambulance in sight, which meant Al wouldn't be getting any action shots of victims being wheeled away by EMTs.

We parked almost a block away and trotted to the church. A sagging ribbon of yellow crime scene tape was stretched across the front steps, and the TV camera bearers and reporters were milling about trying to question every law officer, EMT and parishioner who walked past. Nobody was stopping to chat.

Al and I walked around the building, looking for another way to get in. At the back door, we spotted a Washington County deputy sheriff named Harold Iverson, who just happened to be Al's cousin. We said "hi," and Al asked him what was going on.

"They were having some kind of a board meeting before the Sunday service and all of a sudden some of the people got real sick," said Deputy Iverson. "One of them - an older guy, maybe in his seventies, I ain't sure - wasn't responding when they loaded him into the ambulance."

"What kind of sickness is it?" I asked.

"From what I heard, it sounded like real bad stomach cramps, with everybody tossing their cookies. One old fart - uh, one older guy - said it was the people drinking coffee that got sick. But jeez, Mitch, don't write that I told you that. The sheriff will be all over my ass for blabbing to the press."

"Don't sweat it, Harold. I'll keep your name out of the story. Did the guy say why the coffee might have made them sick?"

"Not that I heard. The sheriff thinks maybe there was something bad in the water. Anyway, they're going to analyze it back at the lab."

"How many sick people were there?"

"I ain't sure," he said. "At least half a dozen."

"Where'd they take the guy who wasn't responding?" I asked.

"Hudson. It's the closest emergency room." Hudson is about six miles from Afton, at the Wisconsin end of the I-94 bridge across the St. Croix.

As I started to ask another question, a second deputy appeared. He shouted that the minister was about to make an announcement from the front steps, so we hustled around to that side.

A tall, slender woman, who looked to be in her late thirties or early forties, was standing at the top of the steps. She wore a tailored navy blue pants suit set off by a white scarf and wide white belt. Al and I elbowed our way through the TV crews and he started shooting pictures. The TV reporters were yelling questions and the woman raised her arms in an effort to shut them up.

When the hubbub died down to a rumble, the woman said, "Thank you. I'm the Reverend Margaret Hayes, and I'm the minister of this church. I can't tell you much about what happened here this morning except to say that our church family has been victimized by a terrible and puzzling accident."

Noticing a shortage of R's in such words as "Mahgaret" and "ministah," I decided this woman had been transplanted to Minnesota from somewhere in the northeast - possibly the Boston area.

"At this point, no one knows what caused several members of our official board to become extremely ill," the minister said. "We're hoping that the sheriff will have some answers for us - and for you - very soon. Meanwhile, our members must begin to deal with this shocking event. We're going to gather together for a service in five minutes, but it will be much different than what I had planned for our regular eleven o'clock worship service. We ask that only members and friends of our church attend, and that the media not disturb us in this hour of anguish. Sheriff Anderson has kindly volunteered to make certain that this request is honored."

The TV rowdies started yelling questions again as Reverend Margaret Hayes turned and went into the church. Sheriff Arne Anderson took her place on the steps and raised his arms for silence. When the uproar died down, Sheriff Anderson said that seven people - four female and three male - suddenly had become ill at a meeting of the church's official board, that three people, including the critically ill man, had been transported to the hospital in Hudson, and that the other four had been taken to the hospital in Stillwater, twelve miles north of Afton.

"What kind of illness?" I asked. "What were their symptoms?"

"Nausea, stomach pain, some vomiting," he said.

"What made them sick?" yelled a woman from Channel Four.

"I can't comment on that at this time," said the sheriff.

No mention of the coffee. I was one up on the TV guys on that score.

"Wasn't one of them dead?" yelled a man from Channel Five.

"One gentleman collapsed after complaining of chest pains. He was not responding to resuscitation efforts when he was placed in the ambulance," said Sheriff Anderson. "Whether or not he was revived after leaving here, I cannot say."

"Do you have the victims' names?" asked Channel Four.

"The names of the persons taken ill will not be released until their families have been notified," the sheriff said.

"Do you suspect foul play?" asked a woman with frizzy hair.

"I'm not taking any more questions at this time," he said. "I'll schedule a press conference and notify you when we have further information. Meanwhile, I suggest you leave the members of this church in peace, at least until they've finished this morning's service. Two of my deputies will be standing by to monitor your response to this suggestion."

"The sheriff's one slick son of a bitch," said Al as we walked toward our car. "In one breath, he blew off the question about foul play and made it very clear that his boys aren't letting any reporters or cameras inside during the service."

I nodded, and suggested that we find a cup of non-lethal coffee somewhere close enough for us to return after the TV trucks were gone. "We can check the hospitals after that," I said. "I'd really like to talk to Reverend 'Mahgaret' Hayes."

"Only talk?" Al said. "She's a good-looking lady. Maybe she's single and has a thing for guys with mustaches."

"If you're referring to the lure of my facial finery, forget it," I said. "There's no way I'm getting mixed up with a minister."

"Just because she's holier than thou?"

"I wouldn't have a prayer with a woman like that."