

A Cold Case of Killing

Chapter 1

Blockade

Two yellow sawhorses supporting a weathered wooden sign that said "ROAD CLOSED POLICE" in black stenciled letters stood across the middle of the street, stopping us half a block from our destination. Looking down the block beyond the barrier, we could see so many flashing blue and red lights that it looked like Christmas in July.

Al parked the blue Ford Focus with the St. Paul Daily Dispatch logo at the curb, with the bumper almost touching the end of the sawhorse on the right. We got out and started walking toward the flashing lights, Al with his camera slung over his shoulder and me with my reporter's notebook in my left hand.

Al is Alan Jeffrey, the Daily Dispatch's best photographer. I am Warren Mitchell, better known as Mitch, and I think of myself as the paper's best investigative reporter whether anyone else does or not. We had been sent to East Geranium Street on St. Paul's East Side by our city editor, Don O'Rourke, when a subscriber called to report a flurry of police activity at the house next door to hers.

"The place is swarming with cops," the caller had said. We found her description to be accurate when we reached the scene and encountered more yellow, this time in the form of a ribbon of plastic tape encircling the property line of a modest two-story frame house. On the street, I counted six marked squad cars and two unmarked black sedans, all with lights flashing. I expected to see an ambulance, but instead I saw a hearse parked on the opposite side of the street. Okay, that meant they expected to be bringing out a body, not a patient.

I was pleased to see that no television crews and no other reporters were on the scene as yet. It's always an advantage to be first. As we approached, a uniformed officer who looked like he spent all his breaks in a doughnut shop moved toward the yellow tape and held up his right hand like a stop sign. "You don't come no further," he said as we arrived at the tape.

"What's going on, officer?" I asked as Al raised his camera and began shooting photos of the vehicles and the house.

"I ain't authorized to say nothin' to the press," the officer said. "You'll have to wait till one of the detectives comes out to ask any questions." Behind him, two uniformed officers came out the front door. Each carried a large cardboard box.

"Who all is in there? Can you ask one of them to come out?"

"I ain't authorized to say who's in there and my job is to stay out here and make sure nobody crashes the tape." The two uniforms loaded their boxes into the trunk of the nearest squad car.

"I know most of the detectives. Couldn't you just duck in for a minute and tell somebody that Mitch from the Daily Dispatch is here?" The two uniforms returned to the house.

"My job is to stay right here," the cop said. "You're just gonna have to wait till one of those detectives that you say you know comes out on his own." He backed away from the tape and took a more relaxed position with his back against the trunk of a large oak tree at the front corner of the lawn.

As I watched the door for a familiar face, I heard the roar of an engine behind the house. Al heard it, too, and we both started walking just outside the tape line toward the backyard.

“Funny time to be mowing the lawn,” Al said.

“I’m betting it’s an excavation, not a clip job,” I said.

“I dig that.”

The cop stepped away from the tree. “Hey!” he yelled. “You guys are trespassin’ on that neighbor’s lawn. Get outta there.”

“We’re outside the tape,” Al said. “We’ll get off the grass if the neighbor complains.” The dividing line between the two lots was a four-foot-high white picket fence on which the yellow tape was strung. On our side was grass; the other side was lined with a multi-colored patchwork of flowering plants.

The cop’s face turned as red as some of the blossoms in the flowerbed and he walked toward us with his hand on the butt of his nightstick. By the time he caught up to us we had gone far enough to see a small backhoe lower its scoop into a much bigger rose garden that stretched across the entire width of the backyard about thirty feet from the house. The chrome yellow of the backhoe stood out in stark contrast to the red, white, pink and salmon colored blossoms covering the plants about to be torn out by the roots. Two men wearing hard hats and holding shovels were watching the backhoe, along with two more uniformed policemen.

Al shot a series of photos as the backhoe driver raised the scoop, ripping up a cluster of rose bushes, and backed away, leaving a furrow about three feet deep. The machine sat with the engine idling while the men with shovels moved in and began probing the scraped area.

“Are they digging up a body?” I asked our red-faced pursuer.

“I ain’t authorized to tell you nothin’,” he said. “Now get offa that guy’s lawn.”

“It’s all right, officer,” said a female voice behind us. “I’m the one that called the press to come here.”

I turned and saw a woman wearing a blue St. Paul Saints T-shirt and baggy knee-length red shorts walking toward us. She looked to be in her fifties, with curly salt-and-pepper hair and a few extra pounds on her breasts and belly. Although it was mid-July, her skin was mid-March white. If she was truly a Saints fan she apparently only attended night games.

“Hi, I’m Donna,” she said, grabbing my right hand and shaking it until I thought it would rattle. “Donna Waldner. I called your Tipster Line.” The Daily Dispatch rewards Tipster Line callers whose tips turn into stories with fifty-dollar checks.

“Thanks for calling,” I said. “I’m Mitch and this is Al.”

“Nice to meet you,” Donna said. She reached for Al’s hand but it was holding a camera so she settled for a pat on his wrist.

“Do you know what’s going on here?” I asked Donna.

“Not a clue. Just all of a sudden a whole bunch of cop cars show up and some of them go into the house and the others go out to the backyard. And then a truck with a Bobcat pulls in and the Bobcat goes back and starts diggin’ up the Andersons’ beautiful rose garden. It’s a shame what they’re doin’.”

We had walked pasta flatbed trailer hitched to a parked pickup truck but I hadn’t connected it to the police action.

“You said ‘Andersons’ house.’ Is that the name of people who live here?”

“Yah,” Donna said. “Jack and Jill, would you believe. Nice people. You’d never expect the cops to be tearin’ up their place like this.”

“You’ve known them a long time?” I asked.

“Yah. We’ve lived here ten years now and Andersons were here when we moved in. Jill brought over a hot dish the first night we slept here. I think they’ve been livin’ in that house for a real long time.”

“They’re an older couple?”

“Yah, they’re somewhere in their sixties. Jack just retired this spring so he’s got to be at least sixty-five.”

“And you say they’ve been good neighbors?”

“Oh, yah, very good. Nice and quiet. They pretty much keep to themselves but they’re friendly enough when you see them. Jill spends most of her summer workin’ on all those gardens.” She pointed toward the Andersons’ backyard, where several smaller patches of flowers augmented the space where the Bobcat was churning up buckets of soil and rosebushes. I couldn’t help wondering what their water bill must be.

“Do you socialize with them at all? Cookouts or card games or anything like that?”

“No, not really,” Donna said. “They don’t seem to be into that kind of thing. I mean we said they should come over for dinner some time when she brought the hot dish, and she said okay, but when we’d try to set a time they could never make it. They never seemed to go anywhere else either, so after a while we kind of got the message. Like I said, she spends all her time putterin’ in her gardens, which is a lot more ambition than I’ve got. I don’t know what Jack does with himself now that he’s retired.”

“What kind of work did Jack do?” I asked.

“He worked at the Mall of America out in Bloomington but I don’t really know what he did there. Fred might know. I could ask him when he comes home and call you.”

“Fred is your husband?”

“Yah. He works at the 3M office on the Hudson Road. Security guard.”

I handed her my card. “Okay, you ask Fred and give me a call. If I’m not there you can leave a message.”

Donna took the card, pulled down the neckline of her T-shirt and tucked the card into the top of her bra. “Anything else I can tell you?” she asked.

“Do the Andersons have any children?”

“Not that I’ve ever seen visit them or heard them talk about.”

“I guess that’s it then, unless you have some idea of what the cops are looking for,” I said.

“Like I said, not a clue. This is the last place in the world I expected to see this kind of thing goin’ on.”

“Thanks for your help,” I said. “And I’ll see that you get your fifty dollars.”

“Yah, that would be nice,” Donna said. “Nice talkin’ to you guys. Hope you find out what the heck this mess is all about.” She turned, walked to her house and went in the back door.

While we’d been talking to Donna, our red-faced police shadow had returned to the shade of the oak tree. We watched the backhoe rip out another bucketful of roses, then walked back to the street to wait for somebody in plain clothes to come out of the house.

“Oh, look at that,” Al said. “We’ve got company.”