



Chapter 1

Wednesday Afternoon

My mother wasn't sure that she'd heard me right.

"Did you say you're going up north fishing on Mother's Day?" she asked, raising her voice to a level that caused me to move the phone an inch farther from my ear.

"It's the governor's fishing opener," I said. "It's a very big deal. Al and I have been assigned to cover it." Al is St. Paul Daily Dispatch staff photographer Alan Jeffrey, who has been my best friend since our freshman year at the University of Minnesota, and I'm staff writer Warren "Mitch" Mitchell.

"But you always come to visit your grandmother and me on Mother's Day," my mother said. She and her mother, both widowed, live on a farm near the small city of Harmony, about 100 miles south of St. Paul.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that this year," I said. "This is my job; I have to go where my editor sends me. And you and Grandma Goodie will be seeing us at the wedding the next weekend." By us, I meant my gorgeous Cape Verdean lover, Martha Todd, and me. We were scheduled to tie the marriage knot the following Saturday afternoon.

"Well, I think your editor should know better than to send people away from their family on Mother's Day," my mother said.

"Somebody has to cover the governor's fishing opener every year, Mom. This year it's Al's and my turn." The assignment, which is not always the plum it would seem to be, is rotated annually among the staff reporters and photographers.

"Darn foolishness if you ask me," Mom said. "I'll let you tell your grandmother the wonderful news." I groaned as I heard her pass the phone to Grandma Goodie, whose full last name is Goodrich.

"Warnie Baby, what's going on?" Grandma Goodie asked. I've been Warnie Baby to her since the day I was born, forty-two years and ten months ago.

I explained that Al and I had been assigned to cover the governor's fishing opener, which, as it almost always does, coincided with the Mother's Day weekend. "This is the opening of the walleye season and it's a very big deal for

Minnesota fishermen and the whole tourist industry,” I said. “Martha and I will see you the following weekend at our wedding.”

“Never heard of the governor’s fishing opener,” she said. “Is this something new?”

“No, it’s older than I am. It was started back in 1958 by a governor named Rolvaag. I can’t believe you’ve never heard of it.”

“Sounds like a lot of nonsense to me. And so what if we’ll see you at the wedding? Mother’s Day is special.”

“I know it is, but so is my job.”

“I certainly hope they’ll give you time off from fishing to go to church on Sunday.”

“I’m sure they will,” I said. I was also sure that I’d use that time for something more palatable, like sleeping-in. The last time I’d been inside a church was when she and Mom persuaded me to visit their tiny Methodist congregation the previous fall after a religious hiatus of many years. It had not been a comfortable experience.

“Well, see that you do get yourself to church, Warnie Baby,” she said. “The salvation of your soul comes before any silly old fishing trip.” Grandma Goodie worries constantly about the status of my soul, which saves me the trouble.

“I’ll do my best. I’ll talk to you next week before you come up for the wedding. Bye now.” I put down the phone and sighed.

“Sounds like you got the reaction you expected,” said Martha Todd, who was sitting next to me in the living room of our rented half of a Lincoln Avenue duplex. We had moved there from a cramped one-bedroom apartment in anticipation of our wedding. The ceremony would be the culmination of seven years of hemming and hawing, during which both of us were struggling to dump baggage from previous traumatic marriages and shattered romances.

Our landlady, a widow named Zhoumaya Jones, occupies the other half. She is a middle-aged, high-energy native of Nigeria who lives in a motorized wheelchair because of a motorcycle accident that killed her husband and left her paralyzed from the waist down.

“Exactly,” I said. “The fact that they’ll be with us the following weekend for the wedding means nothing. Mother’s Day is bigger than Christmas to those two.”

“Well, Warnie Baby, you’re all they’ve got for male next of kin.” That’s true; I’m an only child and my mother has two sisters but no brothers.

“Lucky them,” I said. “I almost said we’d see them next Mother’s Day, but I remembered how Grandma Goodie always says she might not be here next year and starts running down her list of medical problems. I sure didn’t want to get into that.”

“No way. Do you think we’ll be like that when we’re in our eighties?”

“Probably,” I said. “It’s an easy way to manipulate people who love you.”

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The day after my conversation with Mom and Grandma Goodie, Al was driving and I was riding shotgun in a blue Ford Focus with a Daily Dispatch logo. We have teamed up on so many stories that our city editor, Don O’Rourke, calls us the Siamese twins, even though we look nothing alike. I am six-feet-two and slender, with light brown hair and a matching moustache, while Al is five-ten and stocky, with a dark brown beard and hair. Don says we are joined at the funny bone, which in our case he identifies as the skull.

On this assignment we were headed north on Highway 169, a colorless flat road flanked by long stretches of tall skinny pines on both sides. Our destination was Madrigal’s Lodge on Gull Lake near the city of Brainerd, about 140 miles north of St. Paul. Al had no difficulty with the job taking us away from home on Mother’s Day weekend because his mother had moved to Florida and wasn’t expecting a visit. He planned to celebrate the day with his wife, Carol, and their two teenage children when he got home Sunday night.

It was Thursday, the ninth of May, but the car windows were up and the heater was on. The dashboard thermometer was showing the outside air temperature at thirty-nine degrees as we came in view of the southern end of Mille Lacs, one of the largest of the state’s much ballyhooed 10,000 lakes. The winter had been longer and colder than normal and the early spring warm-up hadn’t been able to force its way in. We’d heard that there was still ice on portions of the lake where we’d be fishing.

As I’d told Mom and Grandma Goodie, the Governor’s Fishing Opener, officially written with upper case letters, is a very big deal in Minnesota. It marks the start of the summer’s pursuit of the wily walleye, which is the official state fish and the species most prized for its gustatory quality. As a fighting fish in the water, the sluggish walleye ranks below everything but its much smaller cousin, the yellow perch. As a broiled or batter-fried fish on the dinner plate, the scrumptious walleye stands fins and gills above anything else pulled from the state’s lakes and rivers.

The opening weekend was first labeled the Governor’s Fishing Party by its founder, Governor Karl Rolvaag. This governor had been a man who thoroughly enjoyed his liquor, according to more senior Daily Dispatch staff members who’d known him. Many of Rolvaag’s guests shared his passion for

alcohol and the governor's party quickly acquired an image of heavy drinking and rowdy behavior. In the mid-1960s, Al Quie, a soft-spoken, conservative governor, renamed the event, substituting the word "opener" for "party," and instigated a more dignified atmosphere, although the booze continued to flow.

"You know what's wrong with the sport of fishing?" I asked, breaking a thirty-mile silence.

"I can think of several things," Al said. "What do you have in mind?"

"It starts too damn early in the morning," I said. I was looking at the weekend schedule of events. "You should see this schedule. Live radio broadcasts start at 5:00 a.m. tomorrow. Breakfast starts at 5:30."

"Two more reasons to be glad you're not a radio announcer or a fisherman."

"Or a fish. Imagine getting hooked before six o'clock in the morning."

"Depends on the hooker," Al said.

"Surely you don't expect to encounter any practitioners of that historic trade this weekend."

"Oh, of course not. Who could imagine finding scarlet women at a large gathering of men loaded with booze and testosterone?"

"I've heard stories about hustlers knocking on the doors of fishermen's shacks during the ice fishing season. Do you suppose they'll be knocking on cabin doors this weekend?"

"Don't worry, old buddy," Al said. "If there's a knock on our door I'll keep you safe and pure for your lovely bride-to-be. You won't see any knockers in our cabin."

"Martha would be pleased to know that you're guarding my virtue with such diligence," I said.

The wedding was set for Saturday, May 18, only nine days away—long after I'd be home from the Governor's Fishing Opener on Gull Lake. Although neither of us could be classified as religious, Martha and I had yielded to family pressure (most heavily applied by Grandma Goodie) and contracted with a church—Unitarian-Universalist no less—as a venue for the ceremony.

Al and I drove on between two never-ending walls of tall, straight pines, with only an occasional billboard to break the monotony. My eyes were glazing over and the world had become a blur when Al said, "Hey, there's a place to stop." He was pointing at a billboard advertising a roadside nightclub. Beneath the

establishment's name, in large letters, it said: "Dancers and Booze! What more can we say?"

That challenging question brought me back to consciousness for a few miles and I tried to think of an answer. What more could be said to entice men who'd left their women behind in order to spend a chilly weekend sitting in a boat on a windswept lake? Having found no answer by the time we passed the Grand Casino, where Mille Lacs area Indians collect recompense for the white man's wrongful treatment of their ancestors, I tilted my seat back and closed my eyes. I thought about a relaxing weekend at a beautiful resort, with nothing to report on but happy people having a wonderful time. I pictured myself far from the city, in a northern paradise of lakes and pine trees where there would be nothing unpleasant to write about, no crimes to solve, no killers to pursue. Ignorance truly is bliss.