



A CARNIVAL OF KILLING, by Glenn Ickler©

Chapter 1

Body on Ice

It's never good news when the phone rings before sunup.

Publishers Clearinghouse does not call at 5:46 a.m. to inform you that you're a millionaire. The IRS does not call to tell you that there's been a gigantic tax error in your favor. Your attorney does not call to say that a distant and unknown uncle has died and willed you a five-bedroom, beachfront home on Maui.

Who does call at that hour is my boss, City Editor Don O'Rourke of the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch*. And, as previously noted, it's never good news.

When the bedside phone rang on this particular late January morning, I groaned and tried to roll over and grab the receiver. However, Martha Todd and I had been working our way through a book called "101 Positions That Lovers Will Love," by Swami Sumi Something-or-other, and we had fallen asleep still locked in the 57th position, with my right arm pinned beneath Martha's left hip.

"You gotta roll off," I muttered, pushing against her right hip with my left hand. She mumbled something similar to "moomph," untangled her right foot from behind my knees and rolled away. I rolled the opposite way, groaned at the numbers I saw glowing on my digital clock, picked up the receiver and mumbled something similar to "hullo."

Don never wastes time with such formalities as a greeting. "The cops have a female body in a driveway on Mississippi River Boulevard," he said. "Your Siamese twin is already on the way." He gave me a house number and the nearest cross street, and I said I'd be there in twenty minutes.

"Make it fifteen," Don said. "And dress warm. It's 25 below out and the wind chill is minus 40."

"Thanks for the warning," I said, but he'd already hung up. The temperature did not surprise me. The St. Paul Winter Carnival had begun, and this celebration almost always ushers in the coldest twelve days of the year.

"What's happening?" Martha asked.

"A woman's body in a driveway on Mississippi River Boulevard," I said. "And the temperature is 25 below with a wind chill of 40 below."

“Call Don and tell him you’ve got the flu and come back to bed,” Martha said in a muffled voice. I turned and saw that she’d pulled the covers over her head to escape the chilly bedroom air.

“I can’t do that,” I said. “Al’s on his way and I have to be with him.”

“Would you go with Al if he jumped off a bridge?”

“He wouldn’t risk breaking his camera.”

I’m Warren “Mitch” Mitchell and, thanks to Al’s help, I’m a reporter for the *Daily Dispatch*. Al is Alan Jeffrey, the paper’s best photographer and my best friend since our college days. Ten years ago he dragged me out of a bottomless pit of alcoholism, where I’d sunk after my wife and baby died in a car crash, and hauled me to the Hazelden treatment center. When I returned to the real world, Al helped me find an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter and slide into a reporting job.

Because Al and I work and play together frequently, Don has labeled us the Siamese Twins. He says we’re joined at the funny bone, which in our case is the skull.

Noting that one of my allotted fifteen minutes had already gone by, I shuffled into the bathroom, peed and brushed my teeth as rapidly as possible and examined my face in the mirror. A shadow of stubble covered the whisker-friendly areas not encompassed by my sand-brown mustache but I decided to leave shaving for another time. I’d already used up five minutes.

“I hope that poor woman isn’t nude,” Martha said as I pulled on my woolen long johns. “Tell me that Don didn’t say she was nude.”

“Martha, the woman is dead. She can’t feel the cold.”

Martha, who really was nude, sat up and let the sheet slide off her breasts, a stimulating sight even in the dim light coming through the open bathroom door. “How do you know that? Have you ever been dead? Who knows what the dead can feel when it’s way below zero outside? Besides, she might have been alive when he dumped her there.”

“He?” I said.

“The man who killed her.”

“You’re sure it was a man.”

“It always is.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll tell the cops.” While we talked, I got into my warmest skiing

combination of black stretch pants, orange wool socks, red turtleneck, blue sweater, green down jacket and yellow wool hat. I'm a regular rainbow on the slopes.

Martha popped out from under the covers and sat up. "Oh, get out of here," she said. "You're hurting my eyes."

"I'm gone." I leaned down, kissed her lips and gave her right breast a parting pat. "Stay warm."

I grabbed my cell phone off the bedside table and stuffed it into an inside jacket pocket. On the way to the hall door, I pulled on a pair of fleece-lined après-ski boots and my heaviest leather ski gloves. As bulkily bundled as I was, the air stung my face and sucked my breath away when I stepped through the outside door. Moisture from the atmosphere had condensed, frozen into tiny crystals and fallen onto the blacktopped parking lot, coating the surface with a slick layer of ice. The effect was that of a skating rink illuminated by a streetlight at the outer edge of the lot.

Walking gingerly, I reached my three-year-old Honda Civic without falling. I had seven minutes remaining on Don's time table when the engine turned over with a complaining groan and sputtered into life. I turned the defroster on full blast, got out with my scraper and cleared a patch of windshield in front of driver's side. The defroster would melt the rest as soon as the engine warmed up.

With every moving part in the Civic creaking from the cold, I backed out into the alley and turned toward the side street that led to Grand Avenue, a normally congested commercial-and-residential street that runs past the front of the building. As I turned west on Grand, I found it all but deserted thanks to the time and the temperature, and I coaxed the Civic up to 40 miles per hour on the frost-slicked roadway. Eight minutes and three slip-sliding turns later, I was going south on Mississippi River Boulevard.

A voice on the radio was warning drivers to use extra caution because of the dangerous road conditions as I pressed the gas pedal closer to the floor. On my right, the earth dropped away to the level of the river more than a hundred feet below. I said "thank you" to the Civic for the stability of its front wheel drive and kept the pedal down.

Multiple sets of flashing red and blue lights heralded my arrival only two minutes later than Don had demanded. Half a dozen squad cars, two unmarked police cars and an ambulance were parked at various angles on the street adjacent to the driveway. All engines were running, emitting white clouds of frozen exhaust fumes that gave an ethereal effect to the scene.

The body was sprawled near the end of the blacktopped driveway, surrounded by warmly-dressed cops, both uniformed and plain-clothed, who had tramped away most of the frost. This entourage was in turn encircled by a streak of yellow crime scene tape that kept Al Jeffrey, three TV cameramen and two TV reporters a good 50 feet away from the action. The presence of two red-faced, shivering uniformed cops just inside the tape discouraged

any efforts to sneak a closer peek.

Al was also bundled in his heaviest winter wear, topped with a red jacket and ski cap. His dark mustache was rimmed with frost from his frozen breath.

“You look like a fire hydrant in that outfit,” I said as I approached.

“I feel like a sausage in a tight casing,” Al said. “I’ve got three layers under this jacket—sweater, turtleneck and T-shirt.”

“What about the body? Martha wants to know if she’s nude.”

“Why? Has she suddenly got a thing for nude women?”

“She wants the naked truth. Actually, she’s afraid the poor girl is suffering.”

“Judging from what I saw before the current mob scene convened, the bare facts are that the poor girl is neither nude nor suffering. In fact, she’s wearing quite a fancy dress. But her arms are bare.”

“Martha won’t like that,” I said.

“Why not? Americans have a Second-Amendment right to bare arms.” Al’s jokes aren’t always of stand-up comic quality, but they help relieve the tension at sickening scenes like the one before us.

What appeared to be a five-and-a-half-foot-tall mushroom wrapped inside a brown tent-like, ground-length, fur-trimmed woolen coat with the collar turned up, topped by an oversize red knit ski hat, moved away from one of the TV cameramen and stopped in front of us. “Any idea who the victim is?” asked a voice that echoed from within the mushroom.

All I could see between the hat and fur collar was a pair of blue eyes above a dripping red nose, but I recognized the voice. Inside the bundle was Trish Valentine, a blond and buxom reporter for Channel Four.

“Haven’t got a clue,” Al said.

“I just got here,” I said. “You’re up awful early aren’t you, Trish?”

“This is Trish Valentine reporting live, any time of day or night,” she said.

“As long as you’re reporting live, you’re better off than she is,” Al said. He pointed to the rigid form being loaded like a log onto a gurney for the ride downtown to the morgue.

I walked up to one of the uniforms at the yellow tape and asked about the victim. He was flapping his arms to stimulate blood circulation and fend off frostbite but he stopped long

enough to tell me that the body was that of a white female about five-foot-four and “kind of pudgy.” He added that any additional information would have to come from Homicide Chief Brown.

“Do you know who found her?” I asked.

“You’ll have to get that from Detective Brown.”

“How about the people who live here?”

“Their name?”

“Yes, their name.”

“You’ll have to get that from Detective Brown, too.”

As I gritted my teeth and pressed my numb lips firmly together, Al spoke softly behind me. “Nice try.”

Looking past my purveyor of limited information, I saw Detective Curtis Brown, chief of homicide, slide into one of the steam spewing unmarked cars. “I don’t know why we’re freezing our butts out here,” I said. “I can call Brownie from someplace a hell of a lot warmer than this.”

“How cold is it?” Trish asked. “Do you guys know?”

Before I could relay Don’s weather report, Al said, “It’s so cold that the flashers in Rice Park are just showing people pictures of their privates.”

“How do you get to Rice Park?” asked Trish.