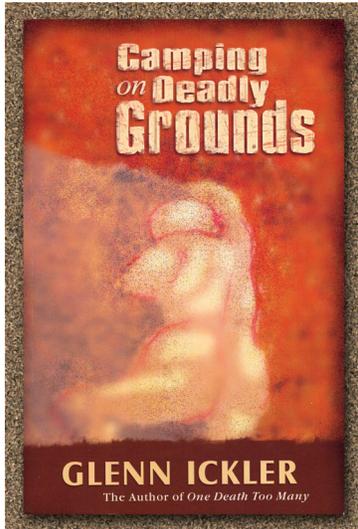


Chapter 1

Where's John E.?



It all started with Martha Todd reading the Sunday paper.

She was lying flat on her stomach on the apartment-beige carpet of her living room, which, she told me, was the way she has been reading Sunday papers since she was six years old.

She said, "Hey, Mitch, here's something odd."

"What's that?" I said from my more dignified position, slouched in a large armchair. My name is Warren Mitchell, but people call me Mitch.

"A St. Paul bank president is missing on Martha's Vineyard," Martha said.

I lowered the sports section I had been perusing to my lap, sat up straight, and said, "Isn't that where Clinton used to take his vacations when he was President?"

"Yes, it is. And it's where Ted Kennedy drowned his girlfriend when he drove off a bridge."

"It's an island off the coast of Massachusetts, right?"

"That's what I gather from this story."

"So, what's with the missing bank president?"

"It's just a short story on the front page. It says:

John Eichelberger, president of the American Bank of St. Paul, has been reported missing by his wife, Janet Eichelberger. The couple is vacationing with friends in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, on the island of Martha's Vineyard. Janet Eichelberger told police her 51-year-old husband failed to return to their hosts' home Thursday evening after going to meet someone he described only as an old friend. Then there's some stuff about his job at the bank."

"I interviewed John Eichelberger once for a story. Seemed like an okay guy, as rich bankers go."

I work as a general assignment reporter for the St. Paul Daily Dispatch. General assignment means I cover whatever hits the fan on a given day, which could be anything from an ambulance crew's heroics to a zoo baby's birth.

"What do you suppose happened?" Martha asked.

"Who knows?" I said. "Maybe he went for a ride with Ted Kennedy."

"Oh, be serious."

"Zap, I'm serious. But I can't begin to guess what might have happened to a rich banker on vacation with rich friends on an island full of rich people."

"Mitch, you're a reporter. Aren't you curious?"

"Of course I am. I'll ask Don to send me to Martha's Vineyard tomorrow to check it out." Don is Don O'Rourke, city editor of the Daily Dispatch, a man noted for pinching corporate pennies as if they were his own. "I'm sure he'll have me on the next plane. Maybe he'll pay for two tickets so you can go with me, seeing as how your name is Martha."

"Yeah, right. I can see that cheap paper sending you to Martha's Vineyard."

"Me, too," I said. I returned my attention to the sports section, and we both read in silence for a moment. Then Martha spoke again: "Now here's a piece of reporting I seriously don't believe."

Again I lowered the sports section to my lap. "What's that?" I said.

"It says here that the first thing a man looks at when he meets a woman are her eyes," she said. "I don't believe that's at all true."

"Of course it's true. The eyes have it."

"Really? Do you look at a woman's eyes first?"

"I always look at your eyes first."

"You do?"

"Of course."

She turned her head away quickly and said, "What color are they?"

"They're, uh, they're brown."

"Well, you guessed right on that anyway."

"It wasn't a guess. They're as golden brown as the twin toasted almonds on top of that popular coconut candy bar. I've always admired your eyes, but you have other assets to attract a man's attention, as well."

"Yes, every time I turn around quickly I catch you paying attention to my other assets," Martha said.

The truth is that when I look at Martha Todd, no matter where my gaze begins, it eventually travels to her ass, which was molded in heaven by some angelic hand. In my opinion (and I have studied a fair number of women's asses in my time), Michelangelo, himself, could not have sculpted a more beautifully proportioned, exquisitely shaped pair of female buns.

Not that I don't enjoy the front view, as well. Born to a Cape Verdean mother and a father of English stock, Martha's skin is a delicate, coffee-with-cream shade of tan. From her mother, Martha inherited coal black hair and the brown eyes I had just identified correctly. When Martha smiles, she lights up the room with an even row of glistening white teeth that belong in a toothpaste commercial. I love Martha's flat, little nose, which is stubby in proportion to the rest of her oval face, but I hate her hair because she crops it close to her scalp, way too short for my taste. She has a valid reason for adopting that hair style, which I won't go into right now.

Figuratively speaking, Martha's breasts are a size smaller than average for a five-foot, ten-inch woman, but this slight shortage is more than offset by that perfectly proportioned ass, which scores at least an eleven on a scale of ten. I was, in fact, looking at her beautiful backside as it lay on display at my feet, demurely draped with a loose-fitting pair of satiny red running shorts, when I said, "My attention may wander, but my gaze always begins at your big, brown eyes."

"So you claim this story is accurate?" Martha said.

"If you're reading it in our paper, it's got to be accurate."

"God forbid I should read any other paper in your presence."

"Yes, God forbid." I allowed myself another look at Martha's perfect ass, ran my eyes over the length of the long, lean legs that extended from it and was about to say something that might have gotten me into trouble when a ringing telephone interrupted the conversation. Martha went to the kitchen to answer it while I happily focused my eyes on the retreating red shorts. Ah, if only they fit a little tighter.

"It's for you," Martha said from the kitchen. "It's your Siamese twin."

"What the hell does Al want on Sunday afternoon?" I asked as I hauled myself out of the comfy arm chair and headed for the kitchen. Al is Daily Dispatch photographer Alan Jeffrey, who has worked closely with me on so many stories that our colleagues and friends have accused us of being joined at the hip.

"He didn't say," Martha said as she handed me the phone.

"I figured I'd find you there," Al said after I greeted him with a grumpy hello. "Sorry to interrupt your Sunday tete-a-tete, but I thought I'd better give you a heads-up on what's happening tomorrow morning."

"So my head is up. What is happening tomorrow morning?"

"Don O'Rourke just called to tell me that you and I have reservations on a 7:15 Northwest Airlines flight to Boston. That's 7:15 in the A.M., I repeat. He's probably leaving a message on your answering machine even as we speak. Would you believe he's sending us to Martha's Vineyard to talk to the wife of some St. Paul bank president who's been missing since Thursday?"

"That would be John Eichelberger, president of the American Bank. Martha just read me the story about him in this morning's paper. Are you telling me that the paper is really paying for us to fly out there?"

"Don even found us a place to stay for two nights. Or, rather, the publisher did. It seems this banker is a personal friend of his."

"I would think that finding a hotel room at a place like Martha's Vineyard would be a real challenge in the middle of August."

"Me, too, but I guess the publisher knows the right people. Glad I'm not paying the tab. Anyway, I thought I'd better call you at your girlfriend's in case you didn't go back to your own apartment tonight."

"Don't I wish? I'm afraid things haven't progressed to that stage yet," I said.

I had only known Martha Todd for a little over two months. We met shortly after she moved into my small, two-story apartment building on St. Paul's Grand Avenue in June. I had been seeing her quite a bit the last couple of weeks but we're both a little gun-shy when it comes to forming close relationships, so things are still Platonic. I have been trying to get over being summarily dumped by a woman to whom I was about to propose marriage, and Martha hasn't fully recovered from the trauma of divorcing a guy who had been using her for a punching bag and a floor mop.

"Well, you never know," Al said. "Anyway, I'll see you at the airport bright and early, ready to soar with the eagles."

"That should be an uplifting experience for you."

"Just so you don't get too high and mighty."

"Oh, take off, will you?"

"What was that all about?" Martha asked after I put the phone down. She had gone back to the living room and, much to my visual delight, was bending over from the waist to pick the Sunday paper off the floor.

"You know how I was kidding about going to Martha's Vineyard?" I said. "Well, believe it or not, it's actually going to happen. It seems that the missing Mr. Eichelberger is a personal friend of our publisher, and The Man wants a story and pix direct from the scene of the crime, if that's what it is. Al and I are flying out in the morning and staying two nights at the fabled vacation Mecca of the rich and famous."

"Oh, come on; you're not even sure of where it is."

"Well, it must be close to Boston, because that's where the paper is flying us to."

"Remember, it's an island. Are you going to swim from the Boston airport?"

"Maybe there's a bridge, like there is to Coronado from San Diego."

"Want me to haul out the atlas and take a look?"

"No, we'll worry about geography when we get there. Besides, if I know Carol, Al will be able to tell me more about that island than I ever wanted to know when we meet tomorrow morning." Al's wife, Carol, is an Internet nut, and I could picture her lighting up her computer to explore the web for information about Martha's Vineyard as soon as the photographer hung up the phone.

"Ah, yes, how would you guys manage without Carol to do your research for you?" Martha said. Although we both use computers in our work, neither of us will touch one outside the office.

"Mostly she gives Al the joke of the day," I said. "I can live without that."

"I'll bet you can't live without food. How about I cook up a batch of my world-famous vegetarian pasta sauce, throw some spaghetti in the pot, and feed you an early dinner so you can go home and pack?" Martha's vegetarian pasta sauce was a delicacy fit for the gods, savored even by those of us who are sworn carnivores.

"Sounds like a winner," I said. "Our flight takes off at 7:15, which means being at the airport about 5:15, which means leaving here about quarter to five, so I'd just as soon get packed up tonight. Also I should run down to the office and pull the clip file on John Eichelberger so I have some background to work with when I start writing stories out there."

Martha began pulling things out of cupboards and the refrigerator. "So what will you take along to wear on an island off the coast of Massachusetts?" she asked. "Do you know what the weather is like out there in August?"

"Good question. I'll call our research assistant, Carol Jeffrey, before I pack. I'm sure she'll have it all doped out for Al."

"If you'd quit being a fossil and come into the personal computer age, you could dope it out for yourself."

"Why should a dope like myself waste electricity duplicating what Carol is doing? That would be like running down to my apartment right now and making a second batch of spaghetti and pasta sauce to compete with yours."

"I give up! You guys are just lucky that you have us women take care of all of your needs."

I was tempted to say something about one particular need that I wouldn't mind having Martha take care of, but I knew this wasn't the right time for that. Instead, I shrugged off her comment and went back to the living room to finish the sports story I had been reading when Martha had asked the question about men eyeballing women's eyes.

An hour later, we had finished dinner, and I was standing in the doorway saying good night. "Sure you don't want to buy a ticket and come along?" I asked.

"Great idea," Martha said. "Where would I sleep? On the beach?"

I could have told her that I would have preferred that Al be the one sleeping on the beach, but again I passed. "We'll be back before you know it, anyway," I said. "Since you insist on staying home, how about I give you a key to my place and you feed Sherlock Holmes his daily ration?" Sherlock Holmes is a husky, black and white tomcat that adopted me after begging at the back door of the apartment building for food and finding out that I was the softest touch on the ground floor.

"Sherlock could come and live here for a couple of days," said Martha.

"He'd never come back to me after you spoiled him rotten for two days." Martha is one of Sherlock's favorite people because she pets him and fusses over him every time she visits me. Actually, I'd purr just like he does if she ever stroked me that way.

"Okay, leave the key, and I'll go in and feed Sherlock while you're basking on the beautiful beaches of Martha's Vineyard," she said.

"I just hope the cops find our missing banker while we're basking on those beautiful beaches."

Martha smiled, went up on her tiptoes, put one hand on the back of my head and gave me a quick peck on the right cheek, barely an inch from my carefully-trimmed moustache. "I just hope you guys find Martha's Vineyard," I heard her say as I turned and started down the hall to my apartment on the other end of the red brick building.

"So what could be so hard about finding Martha's Vineyard?" I asked myself as I made the five-minute drive from my apartment to the downtown office of the Daily Dispatch. I had listened to Don O'Rourke's message on my answering machine (it ended with the admonition, "Remember, you're on Martha's Vineyard to work, not to lay around on the beach like a goddamn tourist.") and had packed some clothing suitable for a couple of days of labor on a sunny vacation isle. This included a swimsuit, Don's warning notwithstanding.

It being Sunday evening, I was able to park my ten-year-old blue Honda Civic on the street, half a block from the paper's front door. At my desk, I booted up the computer and my search of the library files for John Eichelberger produced a substantial number of stories, some of which I printed out to take along to Martha's Vineyard.

Browsing through the files, I learned that Eichelberger was a local boy who had made good - in a big way. Born to a middle-class family on St. Paul's East Side, he had been a shining light in high school and won a scholarship to Harvard, where he graduated with high honors. Two years later, he received an MBA from Harvard, after which he returned to St. Paul and went to work for a small locally-owned bank.

>From there Eichelberger climbed steadily upward in the banking world, moving to bigger banks and better jobs until he was named president and chief executive officer of the American Bank of St. Paul, the city's largest and most prestigious financial institution. Last year's annual report showed that Eichelberger, who had held the top spot for seven years, had received a combination of salary and bonuses totaling \$5.7 million. "A guy could live on that," I said to myself.

From another story, I learned that John and Janet Eichelberger had been married for twenty-seven years. They had sent two sons through top-of-the-line universities and were living in a luxurious four-bedroom home tucked away in the rolling, forested hills of Dellwood, a very posh suburb located north of St. Paul.

What particularly intrigued me was a comment John Eichelberger had made to a Daily Dispatch business reporter during an interview published just six weeks earlier, two days after Eichelberger had been given a rave review and a salary increase by the bank's board of directors. The reporter had asked Eichelberger if he had any concerns about the

future, and the bank president had replied, "From a business standpoint, all the indicators point to a good year ahead. On a more personal level, anyone in my position is always concerned about the possibility of being targeted by criminals. More than one bank president has been kidnapped and held for ransom, you know."

I asked myself, "Could that be what happened on Martha's Vineyard?"