

ARSENIC & OLD MEN

Chapter 1

On the Beach

Where does a guy dressed modestly in shorts and a T-shirt look when he's shaking hands with a naked man?

That was my dilemma as I reached for the outstretched hand of the nude sunbather who was introducing himself to me on the clothing-optional section of Lucy Vincent Beach on the island of Martha's Vineyard.

"Richard Rylander," the naked man was saying. "But you can call me Dick. I don't believe in formalities."

Or swimsuits, I said to myself. And as for Dick ... well, after taking a quick glance at waist level to intercept his hand, I raised my gaze to the level of his eyes and kept it there.

"Warren Mitchell," I said. "Better known as Mitch."

At six-foot one in height, I was looking down at Dick Rylander, who stood about five-foot-seven, with a sagging pot belly that thankfully was obscuring all objects between his navel and his knees. He was somewhere in his mid to late fifties, with a soft, lumpy body and a pudgy round face under a shiny bald dome that was surrounded by a ring of stringy gray hair. A deep brown suntan coated every inch of slightly-crinkled skin that I could see.

This was not a casual meeting with a bare-ass beach bum on a sunny, summery October morning. Rylander had invited the three of us to meet him on this beach without mentioning that we'd recognize him by what he was *not* wearing. By the three of us, I mean myself, Alan Jeffrey and Dave Jerome. For the record, Al and Dave were as conventionally clad as I was—in shorts and T-shirts.

Rylander was a lawyer representing the estate of the late Walter Jerome, Dave's 78-year-old uncle, who had become late quite unexpectedly a few days earlier in his expansive Victorian-style home in Oak Bluffs. Rylander had called Dave, who was Walter's only living relative, with a request to come to the Vineyard to take charge of Walter's body, take a look at Walter's will and take possession of Walter's 19th-century dwelling, which was called a cottage even though its size far exceeded the dictionary definition of the word.

Merriam-Webster says a cottage is (1) "a small single-storied house" or (2) "a small summer house." The people who live in New England say a cottage can have two stories, four bedrooms, three bathrooms and an enormous wraparound porch, and be occupied summer, winter, spring and fall if the occupier so chooses. Curious folk, these New Englanders.

Dave did not want to make the trip from Minnesota to this famous island in Massachusetts all by himself, so he asked Al and me, his closest friends, to "take a few days" off work and accompany him for emotional and physical support. The three of us had worked together for many years at the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch*, where I am an investigative reporter, Al is the paper's best photographer and, until recently, Dave was the staff editorial cartoonist. Dave had been one of those reduced in a staff reduction, but he had survived by becoming nationally syndicated and was happier working at home in his jammies and bathrobe than he had been in his closet-size office at the *Daily Dispatch*.

Al and his wife and I (and my longtime feline companion, Sherlock Holmes) had joined Dave and his wife for a Martha's Vineyard vacation at his Uncle Walt's cottage nine years earlier. Although it had not been an altogether pleasant experience because of a murder, a mysterious threat on Uncle Walt's life and a battle with an armed killer, we decided to bring the wives with us again on this brief trip.

ARSENIC & OLD MEN

Al and I took vacations from the paper. Martha Todd, the gorgeous Cape Verdean woman I'd married since my last trip to Martha's Vineyard, took a leave from the St. Paul law firm where she works as an attorney. Al's high school teacher wife, Carol, took some accrued family leave time. And Dave's wife, Cindy, left her duties as an executive at a small private college in the hands of her assistant—all for “just a few days.”

I would actually be doing some reporting about what occurred on this trip because Walt Jerome had once been the very popular editor of the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch*. He had been fired by the publisher under bizarre circumstances many years ago, and had later become the editor of a weekly called the *Martha's Vineyard Chronicle*, from which he'd retired at the age of 75.

“Uncle Walt always said that fall is the best time to be on the Vineyard,” Dave had told us. “He said all the summer tourists are gone, the traffic is almost zero and the weather is still beautiful.” We had found these claims to be partially true upon arrival on the first Friday of October. The number of tourists was reduced but not “gone,” and the traffic was less than it had been during our summer visit but it was nowhere near “zero.” The one fully accurate claim was the weather, which was “still beautiful” on this Saturday morning as we drove to Lucy Vincent Beach in a Dodge van we had rented for \$129 a day (plus the tax) and were welcomed by a naked Dick Rylander. When Rylander approached us sans swim suit, Al, Dave and I were glad that the women had decided to walk the beach in the opposite direction and “leave all the legal chatter to the boys.”

“I just couldn't bear to sit inside a stuffy old law office on a gorgeous day like this,” Rylander said. “It's the perfect time to let it all hang out here on the beach. I brought Walt's will along, and some papers for Dave to sign, and I've got some blankets to sit on over here. Just follow me.”

He turned his back, revealing a drooping, flabby and deeply tanned ass, and we followed the rolling and bobbing cheeks to the blankets. He let it all hang out as he lowered himself onto the corner of a blanket and sat facing us with his legs stretched straight out in front. After an awkward moment during which all three of us were looking everywhere but straight ahead, Rylander placed a red-and-white striped beach towel and a brown leather briefcase across his lap and we all relaxed.

Rylander withdrew a pack of folded papers from the briefcase. “Here's your uncle's will. He updated it last May. He had a mild heart attack early in May, you know.”

“No, I don't know,” Dave said. “He didn't communicate with me all that much.”

“Well, he did have a scare, and it motivated him to update the will. He's left money to a couple of his pet charities, but the bulk of the estate goes to you, Dave. You now own a home on Martha's Vineyard that's assessed at a little over eight-hundred-thousand dollars. Fortunately, the mortgage has been paid in full and there's also more than enough cash in an investment account to keep up with the taxes and whatever you need to spend for maintenance and caretaking.”

“Uff-da! Eight-hundred-thousand?” Dave said. He was accustomed to more modest Minnesota real estate prices.

“That's nothing. If you put a tower on it, so you could see the ocean over the top of the house in front of it, the place would be worth well over a million. Actually, you could probably get a million for it as it is.”

“So what am I going to do with a high-priced house on Martha's Vineyard when I live fourteen-hundred miles away in Minnesota?” Dave said.

“That's where the cost of maintenance comes in,” Rylander said. “I assume you'll want to hire someone to take care of the house and the yard, and also hire an agent to handle rentals to vacationers when you're not here. I can give you some advice along those lines.”

“I hope you can also give me advice on finding a realtor to sell the place,” Dave said.

Rylander looked surprised. “You mean you won't be spending your summers here?”

ARSENIC & OLD MEN

"I can't imagine that," Dave said. "A couple of weeks would be fun, but all summer just doesn't make sense to me. And I can't imagine years of dealing with upkeep and rentals long distance from Minnesota just to have a couple of weeks here every summer."

"You might want to talk with the missus before you make a snap decision to sell," Rylander said. "She's a teacher, isn't she? Spending all summer here might make sense to her. You're only a ten-minute walk from the Oak Bluffs town beach and you're close to all kinds of restaurants."

"And T-shirt shops," Al said. "Circuit Avenue is T-shirt shoppers' heaven."

"I need more T-shirts like that ocean out there needs more water," Dave said, waving a hand toward the waves breaking on the shore. "I'll sell the house to you, and you can take an early retirement and live here wearing Martha's Vineyard T-shirts all year 'round."

"Sorry, but you'll have to mark the price down about ninety percent before it's in my ball park," Al said.

Dave was silent for a moment while he did some mathematical computation. "Okay, give me eighty-thousand in cash today and it's a deal."

"Sorry again. I'm a few bucks short in my billfold and I didn't bring my check book. Do you take MasterCard?"

"Strictly cash in your case, Al. I guess I'll have to find a realtor after all. But that can wait. What else have you got for me, Mister Rylander?"

"Please call me Dick," Rylander said. "I was your uncle's friend as well as his attorney. I have some papers you'll have to sign in front of a notary public in order to transfer the house to your name and some paperwork to deal with taking custody of Walt's body after the autopsy is completed."

It was Dave's turn to look surprised. "Autopsy? You said Uncle Walt died of a heart attack. Why would they do an autopsy?"

"State law," Rylander said. "An autopsy is required for any unattended death. Walt's cleaning lady went into the house and found him passed away in a chair. It sure looked like a heart attack, but nobody was with him when he died, and the law is the law."

"So when will this needless autopsy be done?" Dave asked.

"It's scheduled for Monday. You can have a nice weekend on the Vineyard and make whatever arrangements you want on Monday. The stuff I'm giving you includes a document signed by your uncle, and witnessed by me, that says he definitely did not want any kind of funeral or memorial service to be held in his name, and that he wished to be cremated and have his ashes scattered in two places: his garden and a certain ferry landing in Oak Bluffs harbor."

"Is there anything else?"

"Oh, yes. There's the deed to a patch of woods that Walt owned on Chappaquiddick. That might be something else you'll want to sell."

"I remember that patch of woods," Dave said. Al and I said we did, too. Walt had hidden himself there while dodging the man who'd threatened to kill him. By following his housekeeper, who was surreptitiously supplying him with food and water, we rode across Edgartown harbor to Chappaquiddick on a very small ferry and found Walt living like a homeless vagabond in a tent among the trees.

"I'm not sure I could find that spot," Dave said. "It was almost ten years ago that we were out there."

"There's a map along with the deed," Rylander said. "That'll help you find it if you want to check it out." He passed the stack of papers to Dave and stood up. "That's all I have."

As Rylander stood facing us, it was obvious that he really didn't have much more. And the full frontal view reminded me that our beach-strolling wives might soon be turning around and heading our way.

ARSENIC & OLD MEN

“We should get back to the girls,” I said in a tone that implied a need for speed. Both Al and Dave caught my implication.

“Ooh, you’re right,” Al said.

“Good thinking,” Dave said. “Thanks, Dick. I’ll give you a call on Monday. I’m sure I’ll need your help with the cremation arrangements.” He did not offer the nude attorney a parting handshake.

“Nice meeting you, gentlemen,” Rylander said. “I’m going to hang out here as long as I can this morning.”

“I assume he means hours and not inches,” Al whispered as we walked away.