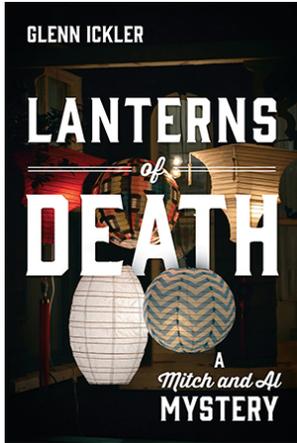


Lanterns of Death



Chapter 1

Deja View

“I don’t believe it,” said Alan Jeffrey, better known as Al.

“I told you he would be,” said David Jerome, better known as Dave.

“You were right; the son of a bitch *is* naked again,” said Warren Mitchell. That’s me, better known as Mitch.

The approaching son of a bitch in question was Richard Rylander, who had been the attorney for Dave’s late uncle, Walter Jerome. Rylander had met the three of us in the stark staring nude on the same Martha’s Vineyard beach the previous October to discuss Walter Jerome’s last will and testament with Dave, who was his uncle’s only surviving relative.

Dave, Al and I worked together at the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch* for many years as staff cartoonist, photographer and reporter, respectively, until Dave was laid off two years ago. Now he was free-lancing his cartoons, but we were still buddies and we had traveled as a trio when Dave’s uncle, a former *Daily Dispatch* editor, was murdered on Martha’s Vineyard.

This time we were meeting Rylander on Lucy Vincent Beach on a hot, sunny August Saturday afternoon. At this time of the year, Lucy Vincent Beach is open only to Chilmark residents with identifying stickers on their cars, but Rylander, who lives in Chilmark, had left instructions with the attendant to admit us as his guests. We had discussed the possibility of

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finding him in the same state of undress as before, and had unanimously expressed hope that the lawyer, who was fifty-five, fat and floppy, would at least put on a Speedo for this occasion. No such luck.

The purpose of this meeting was to discuss our testimony in the upcoming murder trial of identical twin sisters with the improbable names of Ima Jewell and Ura Jewell, who were Walter Jerome's financial advisers. They had confessed—or should I say boasted?—to Dave, Al and me that they'd poisoned both Walter Jerome and Walter's slightly loopy friend, Teddy Brewster. They had made this statement while preparing to kill all three of us, but we had foiled their plot in the best tradition of Alexandre Dumas' Three Musketeers. Now we were to be the key witnesses for the prosecution in the sisters' trial for the first murder, the poisoning of Walter Jerome.

Because our testimony was so vital, we wanted to discuss possible defense attorney questions and tricks with an island-savvy lawyer before we were called to the witness stand. Unfortunately, Rylander was the only person we knew on Martha's Vineyard who met that qualification. Still, we couldn't help wishing he'd dress even a little bit modestly to discuss a serious situation, even though he insisted that we meet him on a clothing-optional beach.

However, we'd been told that you take what you can get on Martha's Vineyard, so we all shook the naked man's outstretched hand. Fortunately, all three of us were taller than the stubby five-foot-six-inch Rylander, so we could direct our gaze across the top of his suntanned bald head. With my eyes so directed, my hand almost missed his, which at the level they would have passed would have been disastrous.

"Thanks for coming all the way out here, gentlemen," Rylander said. "I hang out here on weekends because I can't stand to be cooped up indoors all the time. I've got some blankets

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spread out for our little conference. Come on with me.” He turned his back and waddled away.

We followed the bountiful bouncing brown buns along the beach, passing a few other sunbathers, mostly men, who were “hanging out” as completely as our host. We felt out of place, dressed in T-shirts and shorts, but we did our best to ignore the sunbaked sideshow.

Eventually Rylander stopped at a triangular cluster of unoccupied beach blankets spread across the sand. A black briefcase lay on one of the blankets. Rylander seated himself on that blanket, facing the other two, and placed the briefcase on his lap. All three of us uttered quiet sighs of relief and arranged ourselves across the other two blankets. The writing on my T-shirt actually said: “KEEP CALM and accept reality.” Here was reality, laid bare before us, and I was gritting my teeth in an effort to keep calm.

“Nice to see you gentlemen again,” Rylander said. “What precisely can I do for you on this glorious summer day?”

“Well, Mister Rylander, we’re hoping you can give us some hints on how the defense might try to trip us up or discredit our testimony,” Dave said. “We’ve never been witnesses in a murder trial before.”

“Please call me Dick,” Rylander said. His lack of wearing apparel should have reminded us that he’d always preferred to be a Dick. “I think your biggest problem will be the defense’s attempt to find inconsistency in your testimony. They will pick apart what each one of you says, sentence by sentence, trying to find even the smallest difference so they can claim you’re making this all up.”

“So we each need to listen closely to what the other guys say on the stand?” Dave asked.

“Can’t do that. Witnesses aren’t allowed to listen other witnesses’ testimony.”

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“So what then? We’ve all got to memorize the same answers to whatever questions we expect?”

“Not quite, but almost. You want your testimony to be consistent, but you don’t want to sound like you’ve rehearsed it.”

“Jeez, now we’ve got to be actors?” Al said. “We’re real people, not actors; like in the Chevy commercials.”

“There’s always plenty of acting going on during a big trial,” Rylander said. “Lawyers do it all the time—putting on a show of being mad or surprised or indignant or whatever they think will impress the jury at that particular moment.”

I had covered enough major trials as a reporter for the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch* to know that he was correct. I’ve seen defense lawyers in action who could have made it big in Hollywood. In fact, my lawyer wife, Martha Todd, worked at a law firm headed by a sure-fire Oscar winner.

“So what do you suggest we do?” I asked. “We don’t have much time. The trial starts Monday.”

“All they’ll do Monday is start picking a jury,” Rylander said. “Given that every warm body on this island is familiar with the case, it might take two or three days to find fourteen people who claim they can be unbiased and open-minded.”

“Fourteen?” Dave said. “I thought juries were twelve.”

“In a trial this big, they’ll want at least two alternates in case anybody gets sick or has an accident of some kind. They might even go for more. The prosecutor sure as hell doesn’t want a mistrial on account of insufficient jurors.”

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“Can they find that many?” I asked. “I can imagine the news coverage has been intense with two murders and two very glamorous defendants.” Ima and Ura Jewell were stunning redheads in their early thirties with movie star bodies and long shapely legs.

“They’ll be bringing in prospective jurors from Cape Cod and Nantucket as well. Nantucket is also part of Dukes County, which is subject to Cape and Islands District Court.” Nantucket is a neighboring, smaller island located southeast of Martha’s Vineyard.

“They don’t have newspapers or TV on Nantucket?” Al said.

“They don’t pay as much attention to what’s happening on the Vineyard,” Rylander said. “Nantucketers believe that they’re above all that. Their saying is that God made Nantucket. We say that God made Nantucket but he lives on the Vineyard.”

“Can God afford Vineyard real estate prices?” Dave asked. His late uncle had willed him a so-called cottage that was assessed at eight-hundred and fifty-thousand dollars. He’d been told it would sell for a million.

“God hasn’t got a prayer,” Al said.

“Way over God’s head,” I said.

“God was here before the prices went up,” Rylander said.

“Hymn bought it for a song?” Al said.

“I’m taking note of that,” I said.

“So when should we expect to be called to do our thing in court?” Dave asked.

“There’ll be several witnesses ahead of you,” Rylander said. “The prosecution will lay the foundation for your testimony by calling the police officers who arrested the defendants and questioned them, anybody who saw them holding you three at gunpoint on the dock and getting away in their boat, and the medical examiner who found the arsenic in your uncle—and in poor

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old Teddy Brewster, although Teddy won't be mentioned in this trial. They're doing that separately. Might not get to the first one of you until Friday or even next week, depending on how long those people are on the stand."

"I hear the defense attorney is really a tough one," I said. I'd been told this by *Martha's Vineyard Chronicle* staff writer Alison Riggs, whose brother, Lawrence Riggs, was the district attorney prosecuting the twins.

"Oh, yeah," Rylander said. "Robert Fitzgerald King is one of the premiere defense lawyers in Boston. He's won not guilty verdicts or reduced sentences for some real bad-ass people. And he doesn't come cheap. The Jewells must have dangled a shitload of their stolen money under his nose."

Through their investment agency, which the twins called Double Your Money, the Jewells had bilked some of their investors, including Dave's Uncle Walt, out of millions of dollars. Walt Jerome was murdered because he'd discovered the theft from his account and had threatened to go to the police. "Poor old" Teddy Brewster, a loony old homeless man who spent his summers in a tent on Walt's wooded Chappaquiddick property, was killed when he demanded hush money from the Jewells after Walt told him about the theft.

"Won't the stolen money go back to the victims?" I said.

"That'll be a whole new trial, or maybe a set of civil suits, if the Jewells won't say where they're hiding it."

"And what's his name—King—will defend them and collect more of the stolen goods."

"That's the way it works," Rylander said. "But that's not your problem. You're wondering about the questions you'll be asked. Most of them will be the same ones you

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answered when you wrote out your statements—you all gave written statements to the police, didn't you?"

"Yes, but that was way back last October," Dave said. "Who can remember all that?"

"Okay. Tell you what I'll do for you guys. I'll make up a list of questions I think both the prosecution and the defense will ask you and give them to you at my office Monday morning. That'll give you a few days to look them over, refresh your memories and standardize your answers."

"Works for me," Dave said. Al and I nodded in agreement.

"Okay. Now which one of you is officially hiring me?"

We looked at each other. We hadn't thought about that. "What does it matter?" Dave asked.

"I need to know where to send my bill."

We looked at each other again. We hadn't thought about that either. You might find a lawyer who forgoes his swimsuit but you'll never see one who forgoes his billable hours. And on the beach, no less. After an uncomfortable silence, Dave said, "I guess it would be me because it was my uncle who got killed."

"We'll all chip in," I said. Mitch Mitchell, Santa Claus in August.

"We will?" Al asked.

"Of course we will. Remember? One for all and all for one has been our motto right from the start of this craziness."

"The three musketeers ride again," said Dave. We shouted "hola!" in unison and high-fived each other. Thirty yards away, two naked women with all-over tans on crinkly skin turned toward us and shook their gray heads in dismay.

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We had adopted the three musketeers' shtick the previous year, even though we didn't look like Alexandre Dumas' originals: Athos, Porthos and Aramis. We are more like the three stair steps, with me the tallest at six-one, Al the shortest at five-nine and Dave in the middle at five-eleven. Al and I are brunettes, and we both sport dark moustaches and beards, while Dave is blond and clean-shaven. We all waved gallantly to the crinkly-skinned women as we stood up to say goodbye to Dick Rylander.