

A Cottage to Kill For

Chapter 1

One Sunday in March

“Martha’s Vineyard?” I said. “Did I hear you say you won a week on Martha’s Vineyard?”

I was talking on the phone to my Grandmother Goodrich, better known as Grandma Goodie, as I do every Sunday afternoon. She and my mother, both widowed, live together in the family farm house near Harmony, Minnesota, which is a small city about ninety miles south of where I live in the big city of St. Paul.

Our conversations usually begin with a discussion of my church attendance—or, rather, the lack of same—but this one had started with her blurting out an excited exclamation about spending a week on the island of Martha’s Vineyard out east in Massachusetts.

“Yes, Warnie Baby. I said I’m getting a week’s stay on Martha’s Vineyard,” Grandma Goodie said. “But I didn’t win it. I bought it on our church’s service auction last night.” My name is Warren Mitchell, better known as Mitch to most people, and I’m getting close to forty-five, but I’ve been Warnie Baby to her since the moment that the baptismal water dampened my newborn noggin.

“You bought a week on Martha’s Vineyard?” I said.

“Yes, I did. The owner put it on the annual service auction that raises a lot of money for the church, and I made the highest bid.”

“I’m not going to ask how much you bid,” I said.

“That’s good, because I’m not going to tell you how much I bid,” she said. “I told your mother that I’m spending her inheritance when I invited her to come along. Anyhow, it’s the owner’s summer home. He calls it a cottage, but it’s two-stories high with four bedrooms, and he says that it has a view of Nantucket Sound.”

I have been to that high-buck island three times, so I know the price of Martha’s Vineyard real estate. “That’s got to be well into the multi-million-dollar market,” I said. “Who is this guy that he can afford this as a summer home?”

“He’s a former member of our church who recently retired and moved to a winter home in Florida. His name is Olaf Johnson, and he was a big high mucky muck at Hormel for something like thirty years.”

“Hormel?” I said. “The people who make Spam? The edible kind, I mean?”

“Yes,” Grandma Goodie said. “Olaf was making Spam before it was a four-letter curse word on the Internet.”

“It would take a ton of cans of Spam to pay for that place,” I said.

“Whatever,” she said. “It’s mine for a week and with four bedrooms there’s room for you and Martha to join us. In fact, I’m thinking that your buddy Al and his wife could come along, if they wanted to join the party.”

Martha is my wife, who kept her full name, Martha Todd, when we were married. My buddy Al’s full name is Alan Jeffrey. He’s been my best friend since college days and he’s a fellow employee of the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch*, where I am a reporter and he is a photographer. We work together as a team so often that City Editor Don O’Rourke calls us Siamese twins who are joined at the funny bone, which, Don says, in our case is the skull.

“That’s a great idea,” I said. “I’ll run it by Al and see what he says. What are the dates? We’ll have to put in requests for vacations at that time and Al and Carol will need to find someone to stay with their kids.” The *kids* in question were seventeen and fifteen, ages at which the absence of adult supervision could possibly have unhappy consequences.

“It’ll be in August. We’ll be getting there on Sunday, the nineteenth, and leaving on the next Saturday, the twenty-fifth. Olaf says there’s buses that run between the Boston airport and the harbor on Cape Cod where you get a ferry to Martha’s Vineyard.”

“Yes, there are,” I said, and I couldn’t resist adding, “So, we’d be travelling on a Sunday morning?”

“That’s the only drawback,” Grandma Goodie said. “I’ll be missing church for the first time since I had that awful cold in the winter of 2016.”

“You won’t get your ten-year perfect attendance medal, but the money you gave the church at the auction should keep you in the good graces of the Lord, even if it means missing one Sunday in the pew,” I said.

“I’m sure that I’ll be saying extra prayers on the airplane all the way to Boston,” she said. “I’d be doing that in an airplane even if wasn’t a Sunday.”

“That’ll keep us all in the good graces of the Lord,” I said. “I’ll call Al right away and let you know if he and Carol want to join us.”

I put down the phone and went out to the kitchen, where Martha was putting the soup bowls from lunch into the dishwasher. “Guess what!” I said. “We are going to Martha’s Vineyard in the middle of August as guests of Grandma Goodie. And Al and Carol are invited, too.”

Martha dropped the bowl she was holding onto the floor, stared at me for a moment, and said, “Do you think that’s a good idea?” Luckily, the bowl didn’t break.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

“History,” Martha said. “Every time you and Al have gone to Martha’s Vineyard someone there has been murdered.”

“We weren’t the perpetrators,” I said. “And, to be fair, three of the murders actually were committed before we got there.”

“But two of the murders brought you there and two more murders were committed while you were there.”

“The murders that happened while we were there were coincidental. Like Al always says, timing is everything. The first time we went to the Vineyard, we were sent there by Don O’Rourke to cover the search for a missing St. Paul bank president, and it turned out that he’d been murdered. The autopsy placed the time of death several days before we got there. We just happened to be the ones who spotted the body in the water by the Oak Bluffs ferry pier.”

“What about the second time?” Martha asked.

“Again, the murder was committed before Al and Carol and Sherlock Holmes and I arrived. We were with the paper’s editorial page cartoonist, Dave Jerome, going to visit Dave’s Uncle Walt at his cottage.” This trip, like the first, occurred before Martha and I were married and on this trip my traveling companion, Sherlock Holmes, was a large itinerant black and white cat who’d come to my back door a year earlier and decided to stay. The victim in this case was a treasure hunter who’d been searching for an eighteenth-century shipwreck supposedly loaded with gold. This was a memorable visit because Sherlock Holmes was kidnapped and held for ransom.

“And the third time?”

“You know all about the third time,” I said. “Dave’s Uncle Walt had just died and the four of us tagged along when Dave, who was the only surviving relative, went to the Vineyard to settle his affairs. Because Walt was a former editor of the *Daily Dispatch* we had to stay and cover the story for the paper when the autopsy showed that he’d been poisoned. Again, Martha, the murder happened before we got there.”

“But there was another man poisoned while we were there,” Martha said.

“So, we were in the wrong place at the wrong time,” I said. “You can’t blame Al and me for that.”

“Are you going to say timing is everything?”

“I’ll leave that for Al. It’s one of his favorites, you know.”

“Then, of course, there was the fourth time,” Martha said.

“We had no choice about being there that time,” I said. “We were called to court by the prosecution to testify against the people charged with poisoning Uncle Walt. It wasn’t our fault that somebody hired a killer to shoot two people in the cottage next door while we were doing our civic duty.”

I remembered that visit vividly because Al and I had participated in a fast and furious deepwater boat chase and had survived a near-miss head-on encounter with a fast-moving airplane.

“I’m still not sure it’s a good idea for the two of you to set foot on Martha’s Vineyard again,” Martha said.

“Well, let’s see what Al has to say about it?” I said. I punched the Jeffreys’ home number into my cell phone and Carol answered.

“Hey, Carol, I’ve got some good news,” I said. “My Grandma Goodie bought a week at a cottage on Martha’s Vineyard at her church’s service auction and she has invited us and you two to accompany her and Mom to the Vineyard.”

There was a bang, as if the phone had been dropped on the floor, and a moment of silence before Carol said, “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

Good or bad, the idea intrigued Al when the phone was passed to him and I told him about Grandma Goodie’s offer. After having some off-line discussion with Carol that I couldn’t hear, he announced that they would be delighted to join us for a week on the island of Martha’s Vineyard.

“I didn’t know that your grandma was into long distance vacations,” he said. “I’ve never heard you talk about her even going off of the farm, much less leaving the state for a week.”

“She hasn’t ever done anything like this before that I can remember,” I said. “This sudden interest in travel is a total surprise to me. I don’t think she’s ever gone farther away from home than an occasional trip with my mother to the annual state fair here in St. Paul. Next thing you know, we’ll be seeing her wearing a skirt.”

Grandma Goodie is nearing her eighty-eighth birthday and has never been seen dressed in a skirt except on her wedding day. In her childhood pictures, she is always shown wearing either jeans, pants, or shorts. As an adult, she has always appeared in jeans, knee-length shorts, or dressy slacks, depending on the occasion—even at weddings and funerals and Sunday church services. She prefers to wear apparel with large pockets, in which she carries everything from cough drops to miniature chocolate bars. When I was barely beyond the wearing of diapers, she would sometimes produce an Oreo cookie from each of those pockets after emerging from a cluster of shrubbery near her front door that she claimed contained an Oreo cookie bush. I was strictly forbidden to look for this magical Oreo cookie bush, and not once did I ever find an Oreo cookie in all the many times I snuck into that scratchy mass of shrubbery.