

Death in Chicago

WINTER

DEATH IN CHICAGO: WINTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Somebody once said, maybe it was Jerry Garcia, that what we ultimately become is nothing more nor less than a reflection of the choices we have made in life. We don't get to decide just once who or what we want to be: tinker, tailor, soldier, priest. We choose again and again, in each unfolding moment, and have to live with the consequences of those choices forever. Pondering that fact in a dark and favorite bar in the middle of the afternoon on the far North Side of Chicago, I am finding it no wonder that my life is such a mess on this bleak February day in 2009, late in what has been a typically hard winter. Approaching my sixth decade, I am counting heavily right now on my one and only friend, Jack, surnamed Daniels, Black Label, of course. I find myself calling on him more and more these days.

I'm waiting for one Ed Waterman in the dim light of a sticky booth near the back of the room. Two o'clock, he said, anywhere I wanted. I could have picked a place closer to home, but I chose St. Martin's Inn in Edgewater because it is the seediest of the bars I am known to frequent. And that's saying a lot. I can't even imagine there being a bar in his home town of Wilmette. That old-money North Shore suburb probably doesn't allow bars on its BMW-lined streets. And if they do, they sure don't smell like this trap. The odors of spilled beer, unwashed bodies, and pine-scented urinal cakes all blend together in an all-too-familiar air that somehow comforts and assures regular denizens of the dark like me. I've already stolen a little head start on Waterman. I've been here since noon and Jack's first stop at my table was a quick

one. "First one fast" is a policy that just never seems to fail me. His second visit was more leisurely. I'm nursing this third glass now and starting to feel comfortably numb. That's what a good friend will do for you, put the world at arm's length and give you a moment of serenity. A moment of sweet oblivion. But even the whiskey has faltered at softening the ragged edge of tension grinding at me in recent weeks. Lately even Jack can't seem to keep the adrenaline from squirting through me for no apparent reason. So I'm stuck with a sense of dread that even Old No. 7 can't cover up today. Having to meet with Ed Waterman is helping not one bit.

Waterman. I hadn't seen him since May of 1976. May 11, to be exact. That was the day he had me kicked out of St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, the "Enchanted Forest" to those select men and boys privileged to live there. It was the week before I was scheduled to be ordained a deacon, a year before my long-striven-for ordination to the priesthood. In those candidate-rich days of Holy Mother Church, the Archdiocese of Chicago could still afford to be choosy in discerning whom the Holy Spirit really wanted to see elevated to priesthood. My name got swiped from the list.

One of my classmates, I never figured out who, turned me in for taking a buzz as I sat alone on the pier erected by the very Cardinal Mundelein whose name the town bears. I was caught toking while watching an historically spectacular spring storm cross St. Mary's Lake. It was a religious experience, a moment of communion with God's created world, is how I tried to sell it to then Fr. Edward Waterman, Dean of Formation, who wasn't buying. He sported a crisp crew cut, spit-shined wingtips, and a perfect manicure, and reeked, as always, of bay rum aftershave and the odor of his own sanctity. I couldn't shake the feeling that he relished canning a bad apple like me. In a way I had just become his newly elected golden boy, I was his cherished bad example.

What we might call today a cautionary tale. When word of my canning got out, not a few of my classmates got haircuts, flushed their secret stash down the toilets in the seminary bathrooms, and had their new and better moment of come-to-Jesus.

The irony of the fact that Waterman would leave the priesthood in disgrace six weeks later did not escape me. He ran off with a doe-eyed girl, a recent graduate of Barat College, the exclusive school for good Catholic girls just down the road in Lake Forest. Seems that throughout her senior year they were doing the old down-and-dirty behind the ample backs of the oblivious Madams of the Sacred Heart. In any case, the good father ignored my pleas that day and I was cast from Mundelein as unceremoniously as Satan was cast from the right hand of God. So I left behind the first estate and set out afresh to seek my rightful place in the world.

One of the funny things about having a religious vocation is that you never get to be fifteen. While all my boyhood friends were launching their adolescent voyages of self-discovery, I was closeted in my bedroom translating Caesar's *The Gallic Wars* from the original Latin. In the seminary, you're so focused on achieving your dream that you never get to be that young adult with your whole life in front of you and no responsibility in the world beyond securing your own temporal satisfaction. So I decided that's what I ought to do, and then I went and did it. For the next ten years. I drifted west and dropped out. I panhandled. I picked lettuce with migrants who possessed not a dozen words of English among them. Sold magazine subscriptions. Worked the window at an all-night taco trailer. Held a short gig as a bonded security guard in a chilled Embarcadero warehouse on the graveyard shift, making sure nobody snuck in and stole the bananas ripening there. Peddled a little blotter acid out the back door of Buddy's Quick Stop in Hunter's Point.

I did almost manage to hang on to one sure thing, Peggy

Hackett, a Chicago girl with violet eyes to die for, who hitched her wagon to my star for a while and followed me when I struck west. She tried her best to get me to grow up, but couldn't in the end. I came home from work one morning to an empty apartment in Sausalito with my unfolded clothes in a heap in the middle of the living room floor. "Gone home," was all the note on the floor next to my clothes said. She took the pen with her. I added her name to the long list of people I have disappointed in my life and moved on.

I never managed to stay anywhere or with anyone for long after Peggy. I burned a lot of hemp and burnt out more than a few girlfriends. I lost touch with my family. Never heard about my father's death until three months after he was in the ground. The years passed. Some of them are just gone to me now. I finally figured I'd had enough of being fifteen and walked out to the I-80 ramp one morning carrying an army surplus duffle bag filled with all my worldly goods and a cardboard sign that read "Chicago or Bust" and never once looked back.

I got home seven days later. Slept in my old room with Mom's blessing. Cut my hair a little shorter. Stopped smoking up, usually. Started taking criminal justice courses at Truman College and began to study Tae Kwon Do to get myself in shape. I never did muster the courage to look Peggy Hackett up.

After a while I took a notion to join the Chicago police force, maybe even become a detective. You'd be surprised at the number of guys in the seminary who at one time or another found themselves torn between the cops and the cassock. I think it must have something to do with needing to be the one in charge. But a couple of minor legal scrapes from my days in the wild, wild west kept me from qualifying.

"You could still be a private eye," one of my old seminary buddies, who is in fact a city detective, offered one day when I was down in the dumps. "All you got to do is take the test. They

give you a manual and everything. You can answer wrong like 30% of the time and you still get a pass. I know lots worse degenerates than you with a private peeper's license."

So that's what I did.

To meet the requirements for qualifying experience, I may have embellished my gig as a security guard, both in terms of its longevity and the paramount importance of my duties, which mainly entailed not falling asleep if a boss was around and not stealing too many green bananas yourself. But eight months, two tests, and \$600 later I put out my own shingle. "Cosmo Grande," my name, "Confidential Investigations," and my phone number are all that is written on my business card.

I rented a tiny second floor walk-up, as cheap as I could find, in an art deco limestone building at Clark and Diversey that looks like it is right out of the 1940s. No receptionist, no name hand-painted on the door in block letters, no tenor sax blaring *Blue Seven* as I walk toward it down the dark, rain-washed streets of the second city that never sleeps. But an office nonetheless. A place of my own. A reflection of the choices I have made in my life. I mainly expose unfaithful husbands and trace deadbeat dads. I often see the same guy more than once. I go to a lot of ugly divorce proceedings and give sworn testimony that somehow always casts the most favorable light on people who have given me a little money. I drew my gun once to shoo a mugger, but mainly use it to keep papers from blowing around on my desk in spring and fall when the windows are open. I don't have to put the Tae Kwon Do to use all that often, but I do enjoy teasing a little blood from the nose of an occasional wife beater who I find particularly annoying. I've got a cartoon taped to the wall behind my desk. Two guys in hair-shirts are hanging in chains from the dark stone wall of a medieval dungeon. One is turned to the other and he's saying, "It's a living."

My record is clean. I never work on Sundays. Usually I eat

my plate of Sunday pasta all alone in my underwear with the television on. Prego isn't half bad. I will admit that I keep looking for a woman with violet eyes and legs this long and a dead mother and a doll-faced Persian cat to finally sweep me off my flattened feet. It hasn't happened so far. I've been living a mainly celibate life, not so much out of virtue, but probably as more of a regular habit than a lot of my ordained classmates. You don't need a P.I. license to figure that out.

I'm starting to worry about myself a little lately. I wonder, am I slipping? Or is it just the weed that I've started using again to mellow me out at the end of a long day? It is actually easier to procure than ever, more potent, and while it isn't exactly cheap, it's a lot cheaper than in the old days. But no matter how slow business is, I always find a way to have my buddy Jack at my side. There is some talk on the streets that I have started to get a little too rough with some of the people my clients have asked me to maneuver into a state of compliance. People just seem to piss me off lately. I don't know, maybe I've just been angry so long that I've forgotten why.



So I'm sitting here alone in St. Martin's, waiting for a ghost from my storied past to appear. There's just a little Jack left sitting in the melting cubes. I give the glass one last lift. Someone walks in and from the way he screws up his face as he takes the dive in I know that it must be Ed Waterman of the Waterman Family Furniture Stores. I look at my watch. Two o'clock on the dot. I wait for his eyes to meet mine. He glances over at me and then looks past like he doesn't recognize me. I lift my empty glass in a toast and he starts to walk toward me. A chilling draft from the door he opened follows right behind him.

CHAPTER TWO

Grande?”

“Have a seat.”

“Christ, Grande. What kind of dump have you dragged me into?”

Some things will never change. He’s still the Dean of Students, still enjoys passing judgment. He still carries himself like a drill instructor, but seems to have lost his tall-man’s confidence, and looks like a man the years have taken a toll on. I can see a little spot of whisker he missed on his chin this morning, and a fleck of congealed blood low on his neck. His hair is all silver now, but still cut in the high fade he favored in 1972.

“Sorry, I don’t do Wilmette. What are you drinking?” I ask as I lift my empty glass to get Marge’s attention at the bar. “Marge will fix you up with whatever you need. The premier selection of top-shelf libations here is rivaled only by the décor.”

Waterman makes a tight gesture with his mouth that isn’t exactly a grimace, but isn’t exactly a smile either. He looks over to the general area where Marge is standing, but not directly at her.

“Johnny Walker Red. Make it a double, one ice cube. Not two. One.” He lifts and shakes an upright index finger as if at heaven above.

I notice the slight arching of Marge’s eyebrows. Waterman is oblivious to it. Marge pours and saunters over with the two drinks. The good thing about Marge, no matter what else you say about her, is that she pours them deep. God bless the bartender who counts slow. Now Jack and Johnny are meeting together.

That's always nice. She sets the glasses down on chipboard coasters with retro nudie cartoons from the 1950s printed on them. Waterman's hand shakes a little as he reaches for his drink.

I see this a lot. Nobody ever looks me up because everything's going so rosy. But a rattled client doesn't usually tell me the things I need to know. I think it best to try to relax him a bit. Also to give Johnny Walker a moment to do his job.

"You're looking good, Ed."

I very consciously use his first name. It works a little. He tries to force another smile but it comes out more like a series of twitches.

"Thanks, Cosmo, you haven't changed much yourself?"

"I haven't changed much in over thirty years? Are you a liar or are you blind?"

I wave a hand right in front of his eyes as if to verify whether he can really see. My attempt to lighten things up a little has the opposite effect on him. I have clearly unnerved him. Mental note to self. Nix on the humor. We are not amused.

Waterman drops his eyes back down to his glass and studies the lone ice cube intently. I let him. I take a moment to recover the right air.

"I get it that you were trying to be nice," I offer. "Yah, I still have the long hair, even if it's gone all gray now."

"Yeah, that's what I meant. Your hair, you know, the way you look." He seems ready to get up and bolt out. I know this even before he says, "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all."

"Relax, Ed." I take a slow sip from my Jack, the way he started to work his drink. "Why don't you just tell me in your own words what we're doing here?"

I have always found the phrase "in your own words" to be redundant. Who else's words are they going to be? But the phrase always seems to help affirm a necessary locus of control for potential clients whose lives have just taken a crazy and unexpected

turn south.

He looks back up at me, takes a deep breath and drains the rest of his scotch in one gulp. I catch Marge's eye and tilt my head and she prepares another round. He looks in my direction, not really at me, and then takes another deep breath and says, "I need your help."

He kind of coughs the request out like one of my cats raising a hairball. They have to be tough words for the former Fr. Waterman to choke out to a bad actor like me. Marge sets two more drinks on the table then wanders back to the far end of the bar. I take a slow sip from my fresh drink to encourage him to treat his in the same way. Instead he takes another big gulp, but still just sits there not saying anything. I sit quietly and watch him. Cashmere overcoat, Brooks Brothers suit, button-collar Pima cotton shirt, and hand-woven silk paisley tie. Everything hangs on him comfortably, as well-tailored clothes will do, and looks like just what he is meant to be wearing, not like he is dressed up. He's the kind of guy who always appears to be about to convene a board meeting. Sitting here in a back table at St. Martin's he blends in about like the queen in a cat house. I decide that I need to get him talking again, about anything.

"How's the furniture business?"

He clears his throat and takes a more careful sip.

"That's one of the reasons why I am here," is all he says. He goes silent again. The glazed look in his eyes confuses me. It is like he has slipped miles away from me. He looks down at his drink and swirls the ice cube in what little whisky is left. I look at Marge and nod at Ed. She understands my sign and brings him another, which he takes from her distractedly before she can set it down on the coaster. I decide to nurse the Jack in my hand and not get any fuzzier than I have already become.

Business isn't getting the ball rolling, maybe family. "How's the wife?"

“Still dead,” he says, bitterly, accusingly, as if I should have known. “Very suddenly six years ago.”

“I’m sorry. Any kids?”

He shakes his head.

“I kind of fell apart when Clarice died. I guess I lost the will to go on. I decided to cash out of the business not long after her death. Fourteen stores. Did pretty well. There’s just the trust now. I still manage that. We help fund three inner city parochial schools. Help out with parks and gardens. Clarice loved to garden...”

This is getting me nowhere. In a minute I’ll be hearing how to cultivate bougainvillea in a Midwest climate. I am still clueless about why he wants to talk to me.

“Yah, right. But you and me now, we’re here because...”

“You’re a private investigator, right?”

I answer him with a nod and a tip of my glass in what I think is my best Mickey Spillane imitation.

“Private. Like confidential?”

“Says it right on my business card.”

He nods.

“And are you still a Catholic? I mean, have you followed what’s going on in the church? And are there people in the chancery whom you know you can trust?”

Ex-priests often seem to know more about what’s going on downtown than those still in the hallowed ranks. But then ex-seminarians like me never get in the loop in the first place.

“Catholic? Not like you mean. Following the church? Kinda. Chancery contacts? They don’t call it the chancery anymore, Ed. It’s the Pastoral Center. It’s over at the old Quigley Seminary.”

He nods. “I went there.”

“Yah, me too. Before I went to Mundelein. You remember Mundelein?”

Too long a visit with Jack has loosened my tongue and I wor-

ry for a moment that my last comment might antagonize Ed. Instead, or maybe it's just that his third drink is kicking in, he finally seems to relax.

"Yeah, sorry about that, I guess. Water under the bridge, huh? It's all worked out for the better, though, hasn't it?"

He gives out a nervous little laugh.

"Is that really what it looks like to you?" I put my drink down. No more for me. I know that I better start controlling what I am saying. Brain first, Cosmo, then tongue. I take a second to stretch myself over the sore spot. "Okay, Ed. Let's you and me let the past be the past. Neither of us can change it. Why don't you just tell me what the hell you want."

"I want to hire you to investigate a murder."

"Clarice?"

"Oh, good grief, no. She had a stroke."

"Whose then?"

He jabs a thumb at his chest. "Mine."

He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out an unmarked envelope and lays it on the table between us.

"That's five thousand in cash. If you agree to what I ask now it's yours free and clear. If nothing happens to me, you'll never hear from me again. It'll be the easiest five grand you ever earned."

He sits back and finishes the last of his drink in one gulp. Before I can half give Marge another signal, he shakes his head.

"I have to drive downtown to meet someone tonight and I can't drink like I used to."

"What makes you think you're in danger? Who would want to murder you? And what the hell does the church have to do with it?"

He raises a hand as if to block my questions.

"Maybe I'm just being paranoid. I don't want to embarrass myself. And most especially don't want to cause the church any unwarranted embarrassment. But if anything happens to me be-

yond what usually happens to a man my age, and I don't care if it's...it's..." He hesitates and then continues, "...if it's tomorrow or if it's ten years from now, I expect you to check it out thoroughly."

He stops talking but doesn't look away from me.

"You don't want to give me a clue about what you suspect? Who you suspect? I don't get it. What am I supposed to investigate?"

He finally looks away, over my shoulder, like he is peering back at the past, or maybe into the future.

"Don't worry," he says, "You'll know. You'll receive a message. Maybe from the grave. And trust me, you will know what to do with it when you get it. If you expose the person or persons responsible for my death, I have made provisions for my foundation to cut you a cashier's check for two hundred thousand dollars. I'm afraid you will have to just trust me on that. We won't be signing any contract." He pushes the envelope on the table towards me. "One more thing. We never had this conversation. If you tell anyone about it, the deal is off. I know you will be checking up on me. I can't stop you. I don't even mind. Just do it with discretion. I am hoping and praying the foundation won't require the services you are agreeing to."

Ed Waterman reaches across the table to shake my hand. It is steady now. I take it with a firm grip. When he gets up to leave, I stand up with him. For a moment I think he is going to give me a hug. He doesn't. He just turns without another word and walks out of the bar. I throw some bills on the table, stuff the envelope into my pocket and follow him out the door. I watch him put his head down into the wind as he walks to a black Audi R8 parked half a block up the street. A blast of the frigid air that had followed him into the bar chafes my face as I stand alone in the open doorway. A winter storm is brewing.