

A DEADLY VINEYARD

Chapter 1

Where's Walter?

Announcing that "this is the place," Dave Jerome brushed a drop of sweat off the tip of his nose with the back of his left hand, hauled his suitcase up the steps onto the porch of the sprawling, Victorian-style home and knocked on the front door.

The four of us who had followed Dave for nearly half a mile, schlepping our luggage in the muggy July heat of Martha's Vineyard, traipsed up behind him and waited for the door to open.

A minute went by. No response from within. Dave knocked harder. Another minute went by. Still no one came to the door.

"Are you sure this is your Uncle Walt's cottage?" I asked. In my mind, a cottage was the size of the gingerbread structure where the cannibalistic witch imprisoned Hansel and Gretel. This place looked like a Victorian version of our modern-day McMansions.

"I've been coming to this cottage for 10 years," Dave said. "And Uncle Walt hasn't moved."

Dave had assured me that his uncle would be happy to be our host. I'd begun to wonder about the accuracy of this assessment approximately 20 minutes earlier when his uncle failed to meet us with vehicular transportation at the Martha's Vineyard Steamship Authority ferry landing in Oak Bluffs. Dave had dismissed it as merely a matter of miscommunication. Now there seemed to be a matter of misplacement as well.

Dave had tried to call Uncle Walt while we were on the ferry, but got shuffled to his voicemail. So we dragged our bags (thank heaven for luggage with wheels) through the green expanse of Ocean Park and along a bumpy blacktop street until we reached the porch where we now were standing.

Dave knocked again, pounding with the side of his fist. Maybe Uncle Walt was hard of hearing.

"He knows we're coming, but he hasn't answered my e-mails or returned a phone call for the last week," Dave said. "All I can think of is that he's probably out working on another story. You'd never know the man's retired, he keeps so busy all the time."

Next door, a thin, gray-haired man wearing only shorts and sandals straightened up from weeding his flower bed and walked toward us. "If you're lookin' for Walt, he ain't there," the man said. "Ain't nobody seen him since they found that guy's body about a week ago."

Dave turned toward the neighbor. "Body?" he asked. "What guy's body?"

"That treasure hunter fella that Walt wrote about," the man said. "Big story in the *Boston Globe* when they found his body. Didn't you see it?"

"We're not from this area," Dave said. "I'm Walt's nephew from St. Paul, Minnesota. He's expecting us on the island today." Us included Dave's wife, Cindy; my best friend and working companion Alan Jeffrey; his wife, Carol; and me. Oh, and an unhappy 12-pound feline named Sherlock Holmes that I was lugging in a cat carrier.

I'm Warren "Mitch" Mitchell and I work as an investigative reporter for the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch*. Alan Jeffrey is the *Daily Dispatch's* top award-winning photographer and Dave Jerome is the paper's highly creative and extremely popular staff cartoonist.

"Don't know what to tell you folks, except that Walt hides a key under the soap dish in the outdoor shower behind the house," the neighbor said. "That'll get you in."

"Thanks," Dave said. "I'll get it and we can all go in and make ourselves at home." His voice sounded positive, as if everything was fine, but the look in his eyes betrayed him.

As for me, I was ready to turn around and take the next ferry back to the mainland. This was beginning to feel too much like déjà vu. The purpose of my only previous trip to Martha's Vineyard was to write about the search for a man who had disappeared. Al and I found him, but unfortunately, he was dead. A few days later, I nearly joined him in the land of eternal rest.

I swallowed the urge to walk away and stayed with the others waiting for Dave to return with the key. It took him a couple of minutes because of the expanse of this so-called cottage, which was at least 40 feet wide and approximately three times as deep. It stood two stories high, with a three-level turret sprouting from the left front corner. The porch, which stretched completely across the front and wrapped 20 feet around the right side, was furnished with eight white wicker rocking chairs and two round white wicker tables. In true Victorian style, the basic white color scheme was augmented by four shades of lavender and green, adding up to the traditional five colors.

When Dave invited me to join the group going to his uncle's cottage, he promised me a vacation I'd never forget. My aforementioned previous experience had triggered a firm negative reaction to the prospect of spending two weeks on the Vineyard, but I'd finally accepted because I really, really wanted to meet his Uncle Walt.

Walter Jerome was, as the saying goes, a legend in his own time. He'd been editorial page editor of the *Daily Dispatch* for almost 15 years when it was a family-owned, independent newspaper. Walter won a wall full of awards for his biting editorials and witty Sunday columns, and he was respected by public officials and revered by readers throughout Minnesota and western Wisconsin.

One night, soon after the *Daily Dispatch* became the newest link in the chain of a corporation that owned newspapers in a dozen major cities, the publisher, Herbert Riley, and his Minneapolis counterpart were getting shit-faced together at the governor's annual fishing opener. This event was a weekend booze bash hosted by the governor at a northern Minnesota resort every spring to celebrate the opening of the walleye season.

The walleye opener is a religious experience that ranks ahead of Christmas and Easter in the eyes of Minnesota fishermen. Governors of both political parties traditionally have exploited this, using their opening weekend party as a means of schmoozing members of the news media before the final, usually contentious, weeks of the legislative session.

The Minneapolis publisher had been giving Herb Riley a ration of crap about losing his authority as publisher under the new corporate ownership. He'd been teasing Riley about "corporate now calling all the shots."

"That's not the way it is," Riley had said, hoisting his fourth vodka martini. "I have full authority to operate the St. Paul paper any way I see fit."

"Bullshit!" the Minneapolis agitator had said as he tossed down his fifth scotch on the rocks.

"I'll bet you a case of Johnny Walker Black against whatever brand of vodka you name that you can't fire Walt Jerome."

"You're on," Riley had said. The next Monday morning, with his hangover still hammering at the back of his skull, Riley summoned Walter Jerome to his office. Before Walter could say good morning, Riley thanked him for his many years of faithful service and told him that he was being replaced by a younger man who would be more in tune with the generation to which the new, more progressive *Daily Dispatch* intended to cater.

Walter was stunned, the readers were shocked and the high mucky-mucks at corporate headquarters in far-away Florida were distracted by the filing of a monopoly complaint against them by the Federal Trade Commission. By the time the bosses at corporate realized that one of their editorial stars was no longer shining in St. Paul, Herb Riley had found his younger editorial page editor, more than a thousand readers had cancelled their subscriptions in protest and Walter Jerome had begun a new editorial career on Martha's Vineyard, where his 95-year-old grandfather owned a weekly newspaper and a vintage Victorian cottage within walking distance of Nantucket Sound.

My hardcore resistance to a second trip to Martha's Vineyard had melted when Dave told me the name of the uncle with whom we'd be staying. "If I can actually meet Walter Jerome, I'll accept your invitation," I had said, despite my gut feeling about returning to the isle of my near demise.

"Of course you'll meet him," Dave had promised. "He'll love talking to a reporter. He's semi-retired, but he still picks up a lot of freelance work. Just last month, he had a piece in *Men's Adventures* magazine about a guy who's hunting for a ship loaded with South American gold that sank somewhere between Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket in the late 1700s."

Now, as four of us stood in front of the legendary editor's locked front door, the odds of chatting with him were looking slim.

"Where do you think he's gone?" I asked as Dave returned from retrieving the hidden key.

"Beats hell out of me," Dave said. "The last e-mail I got from him said he was looking forward to seeing me and Cindy. He sent that a week ago Thursday. The next morning, Friday, I e-mailed back that I was bringing three guests from the paper, but he never answered that one."

"Maybe he was hinting that he wasn't looking forward to entertaining your guests," Al said.

"No, that's not it," Dave said. "He and Aunt Winnie always enjoyed having a houseful of people in the summer, and since she died, Uncle Walt has wanted company even more. Let's go in and see if he left us a note or whatever."

Dave unlocked the door and we filed into a living room that was as big as my entire one-bedroom apartment in St. Paul. The room looked as Victorian as the outside of the cottage, with voluminous curtains on every window, an Oriental rug on the floor, four more white wicker chairs, a white wicker loveseat, an antique Queen Anne sofa and a scattering of lamps with elaborate shades. The only thing that looked out of place was the coffee table, which was topped by a two-foot-wide slab of weathered, rough-hewn wood.

On the coffee table was a copy of *Men's Adventures* magazine, lying open and face down. Dave picked it up and found that it was open to his uncle's story about the treasure ship hunter.

"Look at this – the guy's name is Wade Waters," Dave said. "Is that a perfect name for a diver or what?"

"Great for a guy hunting for liquid assets," I said.

"He sounds all wet to me," Al said.

"Probably made up that name," I said. "You know, kind of a pseudo-swim."

"I'm going to bail out of here if you guys don't dry up," Dave said.

The flow of watery puns was shut off by Cindy's return. She had gone searching for a note in the dining room and the kitchen. She spread her empty hands, palms up, and shook her head. "Nothing more helpful than an old grocery list on the kitchen counter," she said.

Dave frowned. "I think I'll go talk to that guy next door," he said. "Maybe he can remember if Uncle Walt said anything about going off-island or something."

"We might as well make ourselves at home," Cindy said after Dave went out the door. She flopped into one of the wicker chairs, Carol took a chair beside her and Al settled onto the sofa.

Before I could sit down, a loud note from the cat carrier reminded me that Sherlock Holmes was still cooped up, so I opened the cage and set him free. Sherlock, who has shared my apartment since he adopted me several years ago, looked slowly around the room, took a leisurely stretch and padded off to explore his spacious new surroundings.

I had used frequent flyer miles to purchase a seat for Sherlock in his carrier – no dark, frosty hole in the baggage compartment for my buddy – but getting him into the cabin had been a challenge. In addition to Sherlock's portable shelter, I was carrying my laptop, which I had removed from the luggage I was checking. The people at the security checkpoint had insisted that I could only take one carry-on and I had to show them Sherlock's boarding pass. At the gate, I received the same lecture before I displayed the boarding pass. Onboard, I had to convince a doubting flight attendant that I had paid to have a cat sit beside me.

With Sherlock Holmes free to prowls throughout the cottage, I flopped down next to Al on the sofa and looked at my three companions. All three looked as energetic as Sherlock when he's found a sunny patch of carpet after a heavy meal. And why not? Since rising at 5 a.m., we had traveled halfway across the country by taxi, airplane, bus and ferry, and topped off our day with the sun-baked trek from the pier to the cottage.

The walk in the sun had been particularly rough on fair-haired Carol. Her Nordic skin was pink on every exposed area except her nose, which was red, and her blue eyes had lost their sparkle. Cindy, whose forebears were Italian, had not been scorched by the sun, but her dark curls were hanging in moist strings down to her eyebrows and her expressionless face was glistening with sweat.

Neither Al nor I had acquired a sunburn, but his eyes were closed and his dark-bearded chin was almost touching his chest as he relaxed with his legs straight out in an exhausted slump.

As for me, I felt like a lobster that had been in the boiling pot too long, and I was ready for a nap. I wiped a film of perspiration off my light brown mustache with the back of my hand, leaned back and stretched out to assume the same pose as Al. But at six-foot-one, my legs extended three inches farther than his, and when I straightened them, my feet contacted a newspaper on the floor beneath the coffee table. I reached down, picked up the paper and looked at the front page. It was the previous Friday's *Boston Globe*.

As I perused the page, a three-column headline below the fold not only caught my eye, but caused both of my eyes to open to their full width. The headline said, "Treasure hunter's body found."

The story, datelined Oak Bluffs, began: "An Oak Bluffs fisherman snagged the submerged body of nationally-known treasure hunter Wade Waters in Nantucket Sound, about a mile from Edgartown, shortly before sunset Thursday.

"Waters, 54, had been missing for five days, according to local police. His boat, the All That Glitters, has been based in Oak Bluffs harbor since April, when he began searching for the wreckage of the Daniel French, a sailing vessel believed to have sunk in Nantucket Sound in the late 18th century."