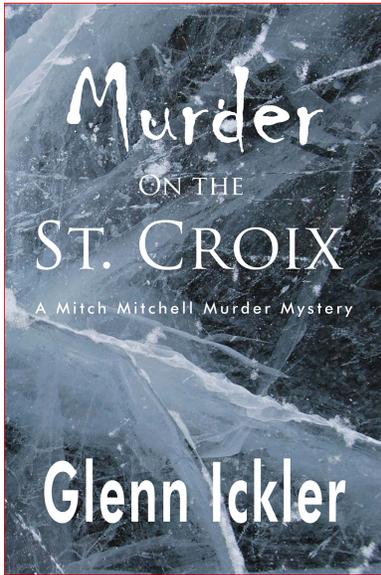


MURDER ON THE ST. CROIX

Chapter 1 Cold Case



Yards of yellow plastic tape fluttered in the wind, keeping us fifty feet away from a white panel truck with its rear wheels dug into a milk chocolate brown mixture of ice, snow and mud.

An orange chain saw lay beside the truck, near the door on the driver's side.

Two Stillwater Fire Department dive team members in glossy black rubber suits crunched through a light blue skin of ice along the shoreline on their way to deeper, fast-flowing water dotted with floating ice chunks, some as big as a Volkswagen Beetle. A trio of Washington County sheriff's deputies wearing dark brown coats and black winter hats stood close together watching the divers.

Standing out amid this rainbow of colors was Alan Jeffrey, dressed like a Christmas package in a red ski jacket and green knitted hat. Al was aiming his camera in all directions, shooting pictures of the truck, the divers, the deputies, the crystal-rimed tree branches against the gray sky and two white-bearded gawkers who had been drawn to the scene by the flashing red and blue lights of the deputies' patrol cars.

"Anybody know what they're lookin' for?" asked one of the gawkers, whose deeply lined face was topped by a red-and-black plaid wool cap with earlaps.

Alan Jeffrey and I knew, but we chose not to answer. Let the old snoop read about it in the St. Paul Daily Dispatch. The city editor of that fine newspaper had sent us out in 20-degree weather to gather the facts beside the windswept St. Croix River in the aftermath of a mid-March snow and ice storm. Beware the Ides of March in Minnesota.

I'm reporter Warren Mitchell, known to my friends as Mitch. Alan Jeffrey, better known as Al, is a staff photographer and my best friend. Our city editor, Don O'Rourke, calls us the Siamese twins. It's not that we look alike—I'm tall and slender

with a light brown moustache and Al is short and stocky with facial hair like Blackbeard the Pirate. It's because we team up together so effectively on assignments and our verbal exchanges sometimes provide amusement for our fellow workers.

On this bleak afternoon, we'd been chosen to follow up on a news tip phoned in by a woman who said police and firemen were looking for something in the river near her house in St. Mary's Point, a tiny riverside settlement twenty miles east of St. Paul.

Upon arrival, we learned that the object of the divers' search was the driver of the white van. The deputies wouldn't tell us his name, only that he was a Public Works employee from neighboring Afton who'd been cutting up branches brought down by the previous day's deposit of freezing rain. When two more men from Afton arrived to help him shortly after 1 p.m., they found his truck perched at a precarious angle on the river bank with its rear wheels dug in axle-deep. The truck was encircled by a maze of pockmarks where the driver's feet had cracked the icy glaze covering a two-inch-thick layer of snow that had preceded the freezing rain. Some of the footprints led away from the truck to the crust of ice at water's edge.

Even though we ignored his question, the gawker persisted. "Sure is cold out."

His partner chimed in. "How cold do you s'pose it is?" His choice of headgear was a red and blue knit ski cap, which he'd pulled down to touch his white eyebrows.

Al couldn't resist the obvious straight line. "It's so cold that a bank robber in the city walked in and found all the tellers wearing ski masks," he said.

The gawkers looked at each other and chuckled. "Good one," said the man wearing earlaps.

The man in the ski cap nodded in agreement. "Time we was gettin' into someplace warmer, Eddie," he said. "So long, fellas." The man wearing earlaps waved bye-bye to us, and side-by-side they shuffled away up the sloping, ice-coated road.

Al and I turned our attention back to the river, where the dive team was dodging the mini ice bergs. Like synchronized swimmers, the two dark figures ducked under the surface, came up and went under again.

The river ice had broken up early because of unseasonably warm weather the first two weeks of March, and the increased volume of water from the snowmelt upstream accelerated the flow. When the divers surfaced the second time, they were fifty yards downstream from their entry point. They signaled each other and began swimming toward a sand bar. The swift current almost swept them past the bar, but they plunged onto it, pulled themselves out and started trudging toward us. In

unison, they shrugged and spread their arms, palms up, indicating they'd seen nothing in the murky water.

One of the deputies approached us. "You, with the camera," he said, pointing at Al. "Could you come and take some pictures for us? Our forensic photographer is way up in Scandia, shooting a three-car crash. It'll be a couple of hours before he can get here."

Of course Al accepted the invitation. It allowed him to step inside the yellow tape and get some better shots for the Daily Dispatch in addition to those requested by the deputy. The footprints and a dark spot on a depression in the ice near the rear of the truck were of particular interest to the lawman.

"What's that dark spot he had you shooting?" I asked when Al returned.

"Not really sure," he said. "Looked like some liquid that froze into the ice. It might be anything, including blood."

"Blood? Do they think he cut himself with the chain saw?"

"The deputy isn't saying what he thinks it is or how he thinks it got there, but he wanted some close-ups."

A car horn blared behind us. We turned to see a black sedan skidding down the hill, brakes locked, fish-tailing out of control on the ice-slicked road.

"I move that we get the hell out of the way," I said.

"Second the motion," Al said, and we voted "aye" with our feet, literally slipping away on the icy surface.

This proved to be a really good decision. The car stayed in toboggan mode as it slid past the police cars and split the yellow tape where we'd been standing. It spun halfway around before it stopped less than ten feet from the stranded truck.

"What the hell?" yelled one of the deputies.

A woman wearing a purple ski jacket and blue jeans jumped out of the car. Her feet flew forward and she did a classic circus pratfall, finishing flat on her back on the ice.

Al and I started to laugh, but we cut the laughter short when the woman sat up and yelled, "What happened to my husband? Where is he?"