

CHAPTER 1

Sandbagged

Ker-whump!

A forty-pound gray canvas sandbag thudded to the stage six inches from the right foot of the flame-haired young woman who was just opening her lips to say, "Dahling, are you theah?" in her best fake British accent.

What came out instead was, "Jesus H. Christ!" as she staggered backward and did an arms-akimbo, legs-apart pratfall that an Olympic judge would have scored 5.8 on the 6.0 scale. This exclamation was followed by, "That fucking thing could've killed me!"

In my seat at the back of the theater, I performed a sitting high jump that would have done a kangaroo proud. The balding, egg-shaped man on my left, who was directing the play rehearsal, leaped to his feet and waddled down the aisle shouting, "Son of a bitch! Where the hell did that come from?"

A young man who had been waiting at stage right to make his entrance stepped forward and pointed toward the ceiling.

"Schmuck!" bawled the director. "I know it came from up. What I want to know is how the hell did it get there?"

The actor shrugged and blushed, and moved toward the terrified woman, who was still sprawled on her elbows and derriere at center stage. The director, Duncan Dunworthy Bell, who was better known as Ding Dong Bell, tried to hoist his stubby, 250-pound carcass directly onto the stage. After one try, he decided to use the steps at stage left instead. Ding Dong and the actor, whose name was Norman Rogers, almost collided at the fallen woman's head while six other members of the cast of *Long Night's Journey Into Day* emerged from the wings and crowded around her, yammering things like, "Are you okay, Alice?" and "What the hell happened?"

With notepad in hand, I trotted up the aisle to get a closer look. I'm Warren Mitchell, better known as Mitch, and I'm a general assignment reporter for the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch*.

General assignment means I get sent to cover everything from accidents in autos to zebras in the zoo. I had been interviewing the famous guest director, Ding Dong Bell, at the Glock

Family Theatre, near the west-central Minnesota city of Alexandria, for a Sunday feature story.

Accompanying me, as he often does, was Daily Dispatch photographer Alan Jeffrey. Al, who had performed a sitting high jump almost as Olympian as mine, followed me up the aisle with his camera bag slung over his shoulder.

Expecting to experience nothing more stimulating than a group of actors struggling with a work in progress, we had accepted Bell's invitation to watch the evening's rehearsal. Now I had a news story as well as a feature. I could see the headline: "Mysterious missile barely misses bagging Alexandria actress."

Alice, whose last name was Prewitt, allowed Ding Dong and Norm to pull her to her feet. Amid the hubbub, I heard Alice say she was okay except for the bruises on her ass, but that she would like to get her hands on the throat of the asshole who had left that sandbag hanging above her head. It struck me that her recitation was an anatomical tour de force, beginning at the bottom and working its way up, then down, and then up again. We writers revel in spontaneous prose like that.

Once assured that the damage was limited to Alice's posterior and pride, all eyes turned upward, seeking the source of the bomb. I vaulted onto the stage (I'm six inches taller, sixty pounds lighter and thirty years younger than Ding Dong) to get a better look. Al, who is three inches shorter than I am, but more muscular and athletic, followed me on the first bounce.

Because the Glock Family Theatre was built beside a large scenic lake, its height was restricted to the equivalent of two and a half stories. This means the fly area above the stage was much shallower than the soaring lofts in large professional theaters. Still, the rows of steel rails supporting the lights, drop curtains and teasers were 15 feet above the actors' heads. A forty-pound sandbag falling that distance can gather enough momentum to flatten the skull and compress the spine of any person unlucky enough to catch such a missile on top of the head. If Alice had taken one more step to her right before the sandbag dropped, she could well be a candidate for another sort of bag - the kind in which dead bodies are removed from the scene.

Ding Dong's question about how the bag got up there was logical. These bags normally are on the floor, where they're used as weights to secure set pieces that can't be fastened permanently with stage screws or nails. People milling around me on the stage were asking how the bag had been hoisted, who could have done the hoisting and why.

I moved in for a closer look and discovered that the bag was attached to a long piece of rope. Someone had slung the loose end of the rope over one of the steel rails in the rigging above

the stage and hauled up the bag. But how had the hauler secured the rope and how was it released when Alice Prewitt walked into position to deliver the opening line of the second act?

"Do you have any idea who might have done this?" I asked Ding Dong.

The son of a bitch wanted to hit her, he miscalculated the landing spot. Maybe he just wanted to scare the shit out of her - and also everybody else in the cast. This ain't the first weird thing that's happened, but it is the worst."

"What else has been weird?" I asked. I smelled an even better story than "Mysterious missile barely misses bagging Alexandria actress."

"Not now, Mr. Mitchell," he said. "Talk to me later after I calm these people down and maybe figure out how that son of a bitch was rigged."

I had finished my interview with Ding Dong and we were planning to drive the 120 miles back to St. Paul after watching the rehearsal, but Al and I decided that this conversation was worth waiting for. It wouldn't be the first time we rolled into our respective domiciles at sunrise after chasing a hot news story.

Seeing Ding Dong in action was better than watching the play, which was a silly British farce set in a London whorehouse. The man was sixty-seven years old, had been working with actors since his college days and, of necessity, had become a master psychologist. He displayed this talent by having the entire cast and crew sit along the edge of the stage while he stood on the floor with his face at the level of their knees and spoke in a silk-smooth voice just loud enough to be heard. After a few soothing sentences, he advised them to go home, relax with a drink of whatever calmed them best and get a good night's sleep. He finished with, "I'll see you at the usual time tomorrow evening. Good night, everyone."

Everyone echoed his "good night" and filed out. Everyone, that is, except Jimmy Storrs, the technical director, who stayed to help Ding Dong solve the mystery of the plummeting sandbag. Al and I walked around with them, but he kept his camera out of sight and I took mental notes rather than written ones because we both figured discretion was the better part of valor at this point.

"The story is that there's a ghost in this theater," Ding Dong said to us. "Some bullshit about it being built on the ground where the Indians used to worship the spirit of the lake."

"There's a ghost in every theater, isn't there?" Al asked. Even the huge Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis had acquired a ghost before it was ten years old.

"Well, a lot of us have died onstage more than once," said Ding Dong. "But it sure as hell wasn't any ghost that did this."

Jimmy hauled out a ladder and climbed up to examine the steel rail above the point of impact with a flashlight. He announced that he could see where the rope had disturbed the accumulation of dust on top of the rail. Then he climbed down, moved the ladder and looked at the next rail. With a succession of moves, climbs and looks, Jimmy traced the rope to where the opening of a door would release the free end from where it had been secured. It was the door that Norman Rogers was supposed to have opened for his entrance after Alice spoke her first line.

"Somebody rigged up the sandbag before the rehearsal and tied it off somewhere so it didn't fall during the first act run through," Jimmy said. "Then during the break between acts, he moved the end of the rope to the bedroom door at stage right so the bag would fall when Norm opened it."

"Son of a bitch!" Ding Dong replied in a voice no longer silky. "I saw Norm open the door to take a peek just before his cue. If he had waited to open it when he was supposed to, Alice might have walked right into that goddamn sandbag when she turned to see him. Son of a bitch!"

"Jeez, it could have killed her," Jimmy said.

"Goddamn right it could have," said Ding Dong. "Up until now it's been goofy games, but this is getting serious."

"What do you mean, goofy games?" I asked.

"Oh, you know. Crazy little things, like furniture breaking or doors not working right or pictures falling off the wall. Stuff that pisses you off and makes you wonder what the hell is going on. But nothing that could hurt somebody. Son of a bitch!"

"Got time to tell us about it now?" I asked.

"Oh, I suppose," said Ding Dong. "But you gotta be careful what you put in the paper. The wrong kind of publicity could scare the audience away and wreck this show."

"On the other hand, the right kind of publicity might bring in a bigger audience," I said. "People are always fascinated by ghost stories. And if the ghost is an Indian from the tribe that lived around here, so much the better."

"Let's sit in the parlor while we talk," he said.

The parlor was in the center of the stage set. It was the area where the madam greeted the bordello customers and sat them down to wait for their evening companions of the evening.

"Fine, as long as you promise nothing will fall on my head," I said.

"I don't promise a damn thing, but Jimmy didn't see any more sandbags so I guess we don't have to put on our hardhats."

Al reached into his camera bag and pulled out a cell phone. "I'm going to call Carol and tell her we'll be home later than expected," he said. Carol was Al's long-suffering wife, who had been subjected to more than one empty night of waiting.

"Want me to call your apartment, too?" Al asked. He knew what the answer would be.

"Don't bother," I said. "Sherlock isn't taking any calls tonight."

Sherlock is a large black-and-white tomcat whose full name is Sherlock Holmes. Except for a persistent colony of ants below the sink, Sherlock is the only living creature sharing my one-bedroom bachelor apartment.

"You should train him to pick up the phone," Al said. "He'd be the purr-fect answering service."

"Really the cat's meow," I said.

Al shook his head, made a brief call and joined Ding Dong Bell and me on the plush burgundy sofa at left-center stage. The first preview performance was scheduled for the following Thursday, only eight days away, and the set was complete except for some finishing touches.

Talk about being surrounded by doors! The bordello set was exactly what one expects in a free-for-all, sex-filled farce, with five doors and a French window at floor level, a flight of stairs with a door halfway up on the landing and a balcony with two more doors. The French windows and the door to the outside world were up center. On the stage right wall were doors to a pair of bedrooms used by the ladies and their customers. On the stage left wall were doors to a walk-in closet and the madam's living quarters. The door on the landing led into a bathroom and the two doors on the balcony were for additional bedrooms (or playrooms, as the madam described them).

"So what's been going on?" I asked. I had reloaded the tiny tape recorder I always carry in my shirt pocket and I turned it on as Ding Dong replied.

"This whole thing's been fucked up from the start," he said. "You know about the deal we've got."

I did, having been told during the interview that Ding Dong was directing this show as a favor to the theater's owner, Herman Glock. Ding Dong and Herman had been close friends since college days, when they were almost the only Jews attending a prestigious Lutheran school. The college had lured them in with scholarships because the administration was trying to diversify the student body. This effort had been hugely unsuccessful because the Lutheran students universally ignored the non-Lutherans and the tiny groups of minorities mustered individually as isolated camps of Methodists, Catholics and Jews instead of joining forces.

After graduation, Ding Dong went to New York City, spent the requisite time waiting on tables and eventually emerged as one of Broadway's premier theater directors. Herman also loved the theater, but he went into business with his father, who owned a resort consisting of a rustic lodge and some log cabins in Minnesota's lake country. Hoping to lure more family trade, and to provide an outlet for his wife Ingeborg's dramatic desires, Herman built an attractive little theater and filled the summer seasons with light comedies and musicals. Herman kept the cost of the productions down by using amateur talent from nearby towns. This pleased the locals, satisfied the audiences and kept the box office busy for twenty-one prosperous years.

But times had changed. Despite the low overhead, Herman Glock's theater had lost money for three consecutive summers as attendance drifted downhill. In an effort to spark renewed interest in his theater as it began its 25th season, Herman called upon his old pal Ding Dong Bell to make a guest appearance as director of the silver anniversary season opener. Herman was hoping to fill the house from mid-June to mid-July with this production. All this information was going into the feature story I'd be writing for the Sunday edition of the Daily Dispatch.

"So what's been going wrong?" I asked.

"Well, it started with auditions," said Ding Dong. "I don't know any of these people, so I asked Herm to get somebody familiar with the situation to sit beside me as my audition assistant. I wanted somebody to clue me in on personal things - like who was pissed off at whom, who might have strange sexual preferences and who was banging somebody else's wife - stuff like that. I like to have a cast that gets along with each other if at all possible, so I try to stay away from putting people together who might hate each other for whatever reason."

"That makes sense," I said.

"The problem was that Herm sent me a girl from the local community college who didn't know from Adam any of the local schmucks auditioning. So all I could do was cast people according to how they fit the part and hope they'd get along. I found out I'd made some big mistakes when I showed the list to Herm."

"What kind of mistakes?"

"First off, I cast a dame as the madam and a guy as the madam's husband who turned out to be recently divorced from each other because she popped into his office one day and caught him getting a blow job from his secretary. Sort of like the former president and Monica, only this chick didn't bother to hide under the desk. The dame auditioned on Sunday and the guy came in on Monday, and they were both perfect for those roles. What did I know? Then I find out they don't speak to one another offstage except to fight, and I see them keep shooting each other nasty looks onstage. It's a real bitch working with those two."

"I'll bet it is," Al said.

"And I also cast two schmucks as regular Johns who in the real world have been taking turns screwing the same woman - who, of course, is also in the show as one of the whores. You can imagine how cozy that is for everyone concerned," said Ding Dong.

"Sounds like you didn't miss a single opportunity to make your directing job tougher," I said.

"Oh, but I haven't even mentioned the gay guy and the homophobe schmuck I cast as inseparable brothers who always come in together to patronize this cat house," said Ding Dong. "Herm tells me all this shit the day after I've called these people and they've all accepted their roles."

"Sounds like you've got a lot of headaches," I said.

"The only headache I didn't get was Ingeborg Glock. She didn't audition, thank God, or I'd have had to cast her and there's no role in this show for her. She ain't tough enough to play the madam and she's way too old to be a whore."

"I sympathize with you, but there's nothing in your casting problems for a story. Tell me about this supposed ghost - or what the spook has been doing."

Ding Dong leaned back and took a deep breath while he thought about how much he wanted to tell me. Before he could tell me anything, the door at the rear of the auditorium swung open and a loud voice called out, "Ding Dong?"

"What'cha want?" asked the director.

"I want to know what the hell went on here tonight," said Herman Glock. He walked up the aisle to the edge of the stage, pointed at Al and me and said, "And who are these guys?" "These are the guys from the St. Paul paper that are doing the piece about my being here," Ding Dong said. "They were here when Alice almost got beamed and I'm telling them about the other shit that's been happening."

"Like hell you are!" Herman said. "We don't need any of that in the paper."

Again Herman pointed at Al and me. "It's time for you guys to leave. I need to talk private to Ding Dong."

I'm not one to lose a story without putting up a fight, so I said, "Ding Dong has agreed with me that a properly told ghost story could sell even more tickets to your opening show."

"Well, Ding Dong doesn't own this theater, and I don't want any ghost stories being told about it, properly or otherwise," said Herman. "Much as I appreciate you coming all the way out here from the Cities to do a write-up on Ding Dong, I need for you to leave now so I can talk to my director."

Herman had that certain look in his eye - the look that means vamoose or I'll vamoose you. He was a short, wiry, gray-haired man in his late sixties, but I wouldn't bet against him in an arm wrestling match and I had no desire to provoke him. Although I'm persistent when pursuing a story, I also know when it's time to say good-by, which is what Al and I said right then,

But good-by is not farewell, and I was making plans to return by the time our front tires hit the blacktop at the end of the gravel driveway. I had some vacation time coming and Herman Glock's resort looked like an interesting place to spend a few days fishing for walleyes in the lake- and for ghosts in the Glock Family Theatre.