

THE CHATROOM MURDERS

HARRY F.
SMITH



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without written permission from the author, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

For information regarding special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Like A Duck Publishing, Special Sales Dept. at 1-605-741-0118 or at info@LikeADuckPublishing.com

Visit our website at www.LikeADuckPublishing.com

Like A Duck Publishing
P.O. Box 424
Centerville, SD 57014-0424

Copyright © 2007 by Harry F. Smith

Thirty Five

But For The Grace Of God

JOHN WALKED DOWN THE HOSPITAL hallway, his nose crinkled at all the various antiseptic aromas. Born with a good sense of smell, he thought he could distinguish a few of the odors and if he was correct, he did not like any of them one bit. *I'm not paranoid, but God only knows what else is wafting through the air into my body.*

It might be the loss of control, the feeling of helplessness or having to trust your care and feeding to someone else but he always hated any kind of medical institutions. The few times John had been a patient, he was one of the world's worst. *Not to mention those dreadfully cold bedpans,* he thought as a chill ran down his spine.

The corridor abruptly changed from a drab olive green to a more cheerful pastel combination. When John noticed brightly painted murals of clowns, ponies and circus scenes adorning the walls, he knew that he was in the children's ward.

The nurse's station was located in the middle of the intersection of two long hallways. He walked up to the counter and looked at the nurse in attendance wearing light blue surgical scrubs. *Whatever*

happened to those tight, starched white uniforms you always see on television? he thought sullenly.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for my daughter’s room. They moved her here last night.”

“Name, please,” she said without looking up from her paperwork.

Even though it wasn’t the best of circumstances, he was in an upbeat mood, so he decided to try a joke.

“I’m John. What’s yours?”

The nurse looked up at him slowly. He could see weariness in her tired eyes that suggested she had heard every opening line that a pretty young RN could hear. With an icy cold stare, she said slowly for effect, “No. Your daughter’s name.”

John swallowed hard as he realized the mistake he had just made by trying to be a smartass.

“Sorry. It’s DelMonico. Elizabeth DelMonico.”

The nurse swiveled around in her chair and rapidly consulted a stack of medical charts hanging from a wire wheel. She said in an even voice, “Room 1277.” Without turning around to face him, she held out her arm and pointed down the hallway. “That way.”

John mumbled his thanks as he turned tail and walked in the indicated direction. In a minute, he found Elizabeth’s room. Peeking inside, he saw his eleven-year-old daughter sitting up in bed, casually thumbing through a magazine. Even though he had seen her just yesterday, he was taken aback at the sight. The bottom part of her left leg was in a plaster cast while her right forearm was wrapped tight in an elastic bandage.

Elizabeth, being equal parts DelMonico and tomboy, had to prove to the other kids on the block that she could climb trees as well as the rest of them. *Just your average little girl trying her hardest to be one of the guys*, John thought. But when the rotted tree limb snapped from her weight, she had come tumbling down to the hard

city pavement twenty feet below, spraining her wrist and breaking her tibia in two places. Alison, at home with Johnny Jr., had heard her daughter's cries and immediately called 911, which brought them to the emergency room at St. Francis hospital. John had been at the police station when he got the call and set new speed records rushing to his daughter's side. It was only after Elizabeth was being attended to that Alison let herself break down in tears.

Today was his daughter's second day in the hospital. Normally, the doctors would have set the bones, put the cast on and sent her home but the young girl had hit her head hard on the pavement and they wanted her in for observation for a few days. *Last time she was in a hospital was when she was born*, John thought as he gazed at Elizabeth through the doorway. *But she's still my little baby*. He steadied himself and walked into the room.

"Hey Lizzie!" he said cheerfully. "When are we going dancing?"

"Oh, Daddy!" she answered back, throwing the magazine onto the bed. Her smile lit up both the room and John's heart.

John walked over and gave his daughter a hug, followed by a quick, loud kiss on her forehead.

"How's the noggin? You know the city gave me a bill to repair the crack in the sidewalk?" he joked.

"Oh, Daddy!" she said again, the smile widening a notch. "No they didn't!"

"Sure they did!" Seeing her laugh and her eyes bright and clear brought John's anxiety level down a notch. "Where's the hag patrol?" he asked.

One of the fringe benefits about being a police officer meant that John could pull some strings and was allowed by the hospital higher ups to have family members on almost round the clock vigil. And since Elizabeth inherited her father's extended Italian family, she had a constant stream of aunts and girl cousins in attendance by her bedside, some wearing traditional Italian long black dresses and

all older than dirt. John wondered about the futility of this since none of them spoke any passable English. Still, it was nice that Elizabeth could wake up to a semi-friendly face, even if it was a withered one.

“Mom just left,” she informed her dad. “She didn’t want to go home, but Aunt Stella made her go. She looked tired.” Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “And she needed a shower, too.” Quickly she added, “You’d better not let them hear you call them the hag patrol.”

John was glad that his wife went home for some rest. Alison had been in the hospital by her daughter’s bedside almost constantly since the accident.

“Don’t worry, pumpkin. If any of them give me trouble, I’ll have them all deported back the Old Country.” The inside joke between father and daughter made them both laugh again.

He looked at the plaster cast on his daughter’s leg. Feeling the need to keep the conversation upbeat, John reached into his jacket and pulled out a pen.

“Lizzie, can I be the first one to sign your cast?” He clicked the ballpoint pen rapidly for effect.

“Sure you can, Daddy.”

John reached over and went to sign the cast up by her knee, but suddenly Elizabeth shouted, “No, not there!”

“What’s wrong with right here?” he asked surprised, pointing to the spot with his pen. “I wanted to sign here so you can always see it.”

His daughter looked at him a bit sheepishly and after a moment’s hesitation she said, “I sorta have that place reserved for somebody else, you know?”

As was usual with his young daughter, John did not know what the hell she was talking about.

“No, I don’t know. Who’s it for?”

“Umm, nobody special,” she mumbled, eyes downcast. “Except, well, there’s this boy in my class...” Her voice trailed off.

In an instant, the time that John had dreaded had arrived. Another male was quickly displacing his position as the most important man in his daughter's life. The words, "There's this boy in my class..." echoed again and again in his head.

"Does this boy have a name?" John asked slowly.

Elizabeth answered, "Michael."

Not 'Mike' or 'Mikey', but a solemn, dignified 'Michael.'

John capitulated the prime cast real estate to the unseen Michael, as he knew he had to.

"Well, how about right here?" He pointed to a spot lower down the leg.

Elizabeth's eyes brightened as she said, "That's fine."

John was going to write some smart-ass remark like 'Have a nice break? See you next fall!' but instead opted to write, 'Love you always and a day, Daddy.' And as an afterthought, he underlined the word 'Daddy.' Twice.

"There. Plenty of room for... Michael." He made a flourish of replacing the pen back into his inside jacket pocket.

A black orderly bringing in a wheel chair broke the moment. "Time for more x-rays," he announced to the room in general. Expertly, he positioned the chair alongside the bed. John stood helplessly out of the way as Elizabeth slid over and with the orderly's assistance, got into the wheel chair. Together, the group headed out the room.

"Listen, this is probably going to take a while, so I'm going to go home and see how your Mom's holding up." He bent down and gave his daughter another kiss on the forehead. "I'm sure one of the Italian Hit Squad will be back soon to stand guard. I'll peek in on you again tomorrow. Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm fine," she said over her shoulder as the orderly pushed her down the long hall. "Tell Mom not to worry, okay?" was the last he heard as they disappeared around the corner.

John just stood in the doorway staring down the empty hallway, still a bit numb from being blind-sided and upstaged by Michael. Noticing a water fountain, he bent over and took a long drink, letting the cold water quench his thirst. From close by, he heard an unfamiliar voice say, "They grow up so fast, don't they?"

He turned his head around to see a man next to him. John quickly guessed from the stubble on his face and the wrinkles in his clothes that this was another weary dad visiting a sick child.

As John finished with his drink, the stranger continued. "The kids. They grow up so fast."

"You bet," John joked. "They sprout up like weeds. Although my wife suggested that if we stop feeding them, they'll probably stop growing."

John had hoped for a smile or at least a nod of understanding, but the man's face remained strangely reticent. Observing that this was the second time in fifteen minutes that he did not get the intended reaction from a joke, he stuck out his hand and offered, "I'm John DelMonico. That was my daughter Elizabeth. She broke her leg trying to play Tarzan of the Apes."

The man shook his hand and offered back, "William Cook. My friends call me Cookie."

"Glad to meet you, Cookie."

"Likewise. My boy's name is Christian. He's in the next room."

John took a step towards the doorway and glanced inside. He was instantly galvanized by what he saw. This was one serious hospital room. Monitors and electronic machines filled every corner of the large room, dwarfing the bed. By comparison, Elizabeth's room was filled with stuffed animals, homemade greeting cards from her friends and the odd salami smuggled in by one of the Hags.

In the middle of all the technology, a small figure lay under the covers. Even at this distance, John could see tubes and wires

running into a frail body. The boy's head, peaking out from under the bed sheets was completely hairless, even the eyebrows strangely absent. John could not even begin to guess at the child's age.

"Neuroblastoma." John heard the words softly behind him. "It started out as a low grade fever a couple of months ago. We thought it was chicken pox at first since a case had been going around his school. But when we took him to the doctor for a checkup, they found a large mass." John turned around to face him just in time to see Cookie point to his stomach. "Right about here."

"The chemotherapy made all his hair fall out real fast," he continued in a worn out tone. "But it did shrink the tumor somewhat. The doctors want to try a bone marrow transplant soon if there's no further improvement." His shoulders hunched down another level. "Don't know what we would have done if we didn't have the health plan from my company." As if trying to change the subject, he said, "I'm a salesman for an electronic outlet. What do you do, John?"

John looked his new friend in the eye and said, "I'm a police detective here in Jersey City."

Cookie's face brightened for just a moment, a hint of sparkle in his eyes.

"You're a cop? Christian wants to be a policeman so bad he can taste it. He watches all the detective shows. Even draws pictures of them in his coloring book."

His voice dropped a level as he said, "Listen, John, you don't have to if you don't want to, but if you talked to Christian for just a moment, it would mean the world to him. I mean anything, any kind of cop story, anything at all..." He trailed off wearily.

John put his hand on Cookie's shoulder.

"No problem. Let's go inside and see if we can't cheer him up." John forced a wide smile on his face as he followed him into the crowded room.

Cookie went to the opposite side of the bed and bent close to his son's face. In the softest of voices, he said, "Christian, I have somebody that I think you might like to meet. This is John DelMonico and he's a policeman." The small boy slowly turned his head to John's direction.

"Hello, Christian. My name is Lt. DelMonico and I'm a detective just like your dad said."

He reached into his side pocket, pulled out his identification billfold and opened it. Leaning over a maze of tubes, John placed it within easy reach of the boy. A skinny finger came out from under the sheets and traced the outline of the metal badge.

"Your dad tells me that you'd like to be a cop too someday?" The boy slowly nodded his head yes.

Almost inaudible over the machines, John barely heard Christian ask him, "Do you have a gun?"

"Of course I do." Making a great pretense of looking around, John slowly opened his jacket so that his holstered .38 was visible. Christian's face lit up.

John continued. "It's pretty cool being a cop, you know. You get to ride around in a police car all day and arrest the bad guys."

"Do you ever get to play with the siren?" Christian asked.

"You bet!" John said excitedly. "Every chance I get! And tell you what, I'll make a deal with you. If you promise to get better, we'll go for a ride in my cop car. With the siren on and everything!"

John could see the tiniest bit of life in the young child's eyes. "And all I have to do is get better?" he asked incredulously.

Yeah kid, John thought, *you just gotta beat cancer.*

"That's it, son. And maybe draw me a picture, if you want to." John motioned to a small pad lying on the bed.

"What of?" Christian asked.

"Hmmm... I don't know. Anything you like. I'll leave that up to you. You promise?"

“Promise.”

“Well, I gotta get back to the squad room, Christian. We’re hot on the trail of some bad gangsters.”

John made a great pretense of waving his arms in the air, hand formed in the shape of a gun. “And we’re going to get them, too.”

With a broad smile for everyone, John said his goodbyes to Cookie and Christian and left the room.

Two days later, John and Alison were back at the hospital to pick up Elizabeth. The fear of a concussion or head injuries was ruled out, but the nasty compound fracture in the leg would take a while to heal. John noticed the cast was now almost completely filled up with signatures from her school friends. Discreetly as a detective could, he read the inscription that Michael had written on his daughter’s leg, the words ‘Did you fall for me?’ in big, bold script.

Gotta remember to check up on this Michael character, John thought. He could have a rap sheet. Might need to put an APB out on his young butt.

As Alison pushed the wheel chair down the hall, John peeked in the small window of Christian’s room. The place had been efficiently transformed back down to an ordinary hospital bedroom. All of the life sustaining machinery was gone, the only thing remaining from the other day was an unmade bed with the metal rails down. John remembered that Cookie had said something about a new procedure at the end of the week. *They must have moved him to a surgical area or the intensive care unit. That’s what they do with cancer surgery patients, don’t they?*

From down the hall, John heard someone calling “Detective DelMonico” in that hushed sort of way people use in hospitals. Both John and Alison turned around to see a nurse waving at him. Alison, who was highly suspicious of any female paying John the slightest bit of attention, gave up one of her famous ‘Hmmpfs!’ and said curtly, “We’ll wait down in the lobby for you when you’re done here, John.”

Before he had a chance to defend himself, the elevator door opened and Alison whisked Elizabeth inside.

As the doors closed, John recognized the cold woman from the nurse's station.

"Detective DelMonico. Can I have a minute, please? I just wanted to apologize for being curt with you the other day. I was just finishing up a double shift..."

"Forget about it," John said, cutting her off. "I was the one being a butthead. And thanks for all the help you've given my daughter."

He pointed down the hallway. "By the way, do you know where they transferred Mr. Cook's kid? I'd like to pop up and see him again before I go."

The pretty nurse lowered her voice. "Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I'm afraid the young boy expired this morning."

She continued before John could say anything. "As a professional, you're supposed to stay aloof and distant, but with little kids it's really hard. When you spend as much time with the children as we do, you get attached. Before he left, his father told us what you had done for him. That was very kind of you. You really cheered him up, you know."

John's heart sunk in his chest. "No. That's terrible." He mumbled out, "Please give my condolences to the family if you see them."

"I will. Mr. Cook wanted me to make sure that you got this." She reached into the large pocket of her scrubs and pulled out a piece of paper. Handing it to John, she turned and quickly walked away.

John unfolded the paper. Inside was a crude crayon drawing of a car. On the side was labeled 'Police' with the 'L' written backwards. A light on top was flashing, red jagged lines emanating from a bubble on the roof. Two stick figures were inside the car. One was a tall

figure in front, one hand on the steering wheel, the other shooting an extremely large pistol into the air. John noticed that the second occupant in back was a smaller figure with a rounded little head. An IV pole, complete with hanging bottle was outside of the car. Apparently, the whole apparatus was being pulled along since it was equipped with its own set of wheels.

As he pushed the elevator button, John carefully folded the drawing and placed it in his pocket. When the doors opened, he was grateful that the elevator was empty. He never did like people to see him cry.