

88 Ways to Die

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PRELUDE

The electronics section of the department store was graced by over a dozen television sets ranging from thirteen to fifty inches. Over half of the sets were tuned to a mid day newscast. A brown-haired semi-gorgeous woman with a bright red lipstick enhanced mouth was the sole anchor.

“Police today are searching for the boy friend of a slain Chicago woman in connection with her bludgeoning death. Donna Beck, twenty-seven, was found slain in her home this morning when co-workers became worried when she didn’t report to work.”

A still photograph of a smiling innocent looking black woman flashed briefly across the screen.

“Miss Beck was an employee of the highly regarded IVS brokerage firm here in Chicago.”

A blonde goddess dancing on the edge of tears appeared on camera. Superimposed on the bottom of the screen briefly were the words; FRANCINE DARDEN, CO-WORKER

“It was so unlike her not to report to work. You know, without calling first. So we were really worried by lunchtime. I don’t know who would’ve wanted to kill her. She was so sweet. She didn’t have an enemy in the world.”

There was a cut back to the anchor.

“Neighbors reported a loud argument between Beck and her boy friend shortly before the murder occurred. Police wouldn’t release the name of the boy friend. And they wouldn’t say if he’s considered a suspect at this point. Coming up after a break, more hard times for the White Sox and Cubs.”

Chapter 1

It was a good time to be in Chicago in 1988. The ice, slush, snow, and vicious

blowing winds of winter had passed. In the interim between a steamy and hot summer, pleasant temperatures and bright, breezy days of spring filled the air.

Ellis Mason was seated on the driver's side of a black Volvo parked near the middle of a block on a street of old brownstone buildings with basement apartments and one or two stories above them.

Ellis was a medium brown-skinned man in his early thirties. He was just under six feet tall on a slender frame. His deep-set eyes and wide flared nose gave him a rugged appearance.

He was busy doing his job as a private investigator. He had been hired by ex-con Armad Drew to tail his girl friend, Donna Beck. Armad was worried about Donna possibly dating a man she had been involved with during his stay in prison. Ellis had been wary of taking the case. He wasn't sure how Armad would react if he received news he didn't like.

Fifteen minutes passed before a petite, cute brown-skinned black woman just above five feet tall emerged from a second floor apartment. She was dressed in a tight fitting bright red mini dress. She moved down the walk with a stride that said she knew she looked great, and would have no trouble exciting the man she planned to spend the evening with. She got into a light green compact car and drove straight up the block.

After pausing for several seconds, Ellis started his car and trailed Donna's. He quickly recognized the route she was taking. He knew she would stop at a one-story house covered by light blue aluminum siding.

Ellis parked behind Donna's car five doors down from the light blue house. He reached over and snapped the glove compartment open. From it he took a camera with a long lense attachment. Ellis aimed the camera outside the car window in time to snap several rapid-fire photos of Donna moving up the walk, ringing the doorbell and waiting for her lover to answer.

A lightskinned man with slicked down hair appeared in the doorway and embraced Donna and peppered her with kisses.

Ellis stayed parked for nearly a half-hour before deciding they were in for the night and no more photo opportunities were possible. He had enough material to justify his fee and provide evidence of an affair.

Ellis went home to his one story brick house located in the Chicago neighborhood of South Shore. In the living room, he removed his shirt and tossed it on the sofa. He left the room and returned with a can of beer. Ellis picked up the remote and clicked on the TV. He dialed around the channels, finding nothing interesting. His second time through he landed on a PBS talk show.

The host was a typical serious-expressed PBS guy wearing a print sweater over a white shirt. He was interviewing candidates for a congressional district. The incumbent, Walter Ryan, and his challenger, James Cody. Ryan was a stocky guy in his mid forties with unruly dark red hair, narrow gray eyes, and a nose that looked like it had been broken more than once. Cody had a square-jawed farm boy look about him. His dark hair had a receding line that angled to the right toward a part.

The host said: “Now Mr. Cody, the Republican party has had a hard time in this part of the state, so what makes you think you can defeat an entrenched incumbent like Congressman Ryan?”

“I think we’re coming into a new era of politics in this country. As we saw in the 84 presidential year, many Republicans rode the wave of Reagan popularity into office. I expect the same thing will occur with Mr. Bush. Plus the old days of overspending Democrats are over. People want big government out of their lives. The private sector has to be set free in order to stimulate the economy and bring prosperity to this country.”

“Congressman, how do you respond?”

Ryan smiled dryly. “Let me say this. The Democratic Party has always delivered for the people of this city and county. And yes. We do need to stimulate the private sector. But I firmly believe the government still has a valuable role to play in its citizen’s lives.”

“Now uh. Since the district has been redrawn, it now encompasses a diverse economic and racial make up. From the affluent lakeshore and a portion of the northern suburbs to black and Hispanic wards. How do you appeal to such a varied group of voters?”

“There’s only one way you can do it,” Ryan said. “You do your best to make people’s lives-”

Ellis had seen enough. He clicked off the set.

The following morning, Donna Beck lounged in her bed reviewing in her mind how thoroughly glorious her lovemaking session with her lover, Randy, had been the previous evening. The man knew how to make her tingle. From every orifice, from the top of her head all the way down to her toes.

She recalled a conversation they had.

“Are you doing the right thing, baby?” Randy had asked.

“What’s right? All I know is I’ve been kicked in the ass all my life. Now it’s time

for me to kick some ass.”

Chapter 2

Cody was in a very good mood as he tooted toward the Loop in his Lincoln. At

the age of forty-two he felt like he was on the verge of finally accomplishing something on his own. His life had been relatively easy compared to most. He grew up in the Illinois state capital of Springfield. His father was a partner in a prestigious law firm that had been founded by his grandfather. It seemed predestined that he also would become a lawyer. He was never prodded toward a career in law but the ambience and allure was always hanging in the air he breathed. When he was old enough he attended some of his father's trials. Although fascinated by his father's court persona, it was the prosecutor's approach to law that intrigued him. Only his family was surprised that after he completed law school and passed the bar, he wanted to use his talents working for the state. Reluctantly, his father pulled enough strings to get him on the staff of the State's Attorney in Chicago. He steadily climbed the ladder to the point where he was handling a high percentage of high profile cases that came through the office. His success rate brought him to the attention of down state Republican bigwigs. They convinced him that he could be a viable congressional candidate. Against his father's advice, Cody jumped in with both feet. Now, after the television appearance, he was flying high and feeling good about his chances.

Cody left his car in a downtown parking garage. Although his advisors were a little worried, he enjoyed driving in alone, leaving his car and walking to his campaign headquarters.

At a street corner waiting for the light to change, Cody stood next to a plump woman in her forties.

"You are him. You're James Cody, aren't you?"

"Guilty as charged."

"I've been listening to you. I like it. I support you. I may want to work for you."

"We need all the volunteers we can get." Cody reached inside his suit coat pocket and removed a business card. "If you really want to work for us, call the number and ask for Maggie."

"Oh I will. I will."

Cody turned on the avenue and started toward State Street. The driver of a parked car poked his head out of the window.

"Hey Cody. Saw you on TV last night. "Give 'em hell!"

Cody smiled and waved at the driver. "I will."

The campaign headquarters had once been a fashionable boutique. Red printed letters on a yellow background simply stated its purpose, It said: **CODY CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS**

Inside, several desks were jammed into the front room. Most of the workers manning the phones and performing other duties were women, with a smattering of college aged men thrown into the mix.

Cody strode into the headquarters. He waved, greeted, and shook hands with

workers on his march to his private office.

Expensive but bare bones furnishings and equipment dominated Cody's inner office. A thin partitioned wall divided the room into a pair of offices. A smaller one for his office manager, and another, which contained an oak desk and a long oblong clear plastic conference table.

Cody stepped in and veered toward the office of Maggie Bowen, an energetic and perky woman in her mid fifties. She was busy banging on a computer and engaging in a phone conversation. Cody waited until she was off the phone.

"Good morning gorgeous."

"Hello Mr. TV star."

"How are things popping so far today?"

"Quite well, thank you. We've had some positive calls about the show last night. Some potential contributors."

"That's always nice to hear."

"I've got the ladies doing a little informal poll. I'd be surprised if we don't see a boost in name recognition and support. I have a feeling things will be looking up."

"Amen to that. Knock on wood."

Ryan skipped down the stairs of his suburban home and went to the telephone table just off the staircase. He dialed a number.

"Hello."

"Hello there. It's me, doll. Have you got many calls, you know, about the show last night?"

"Not really. But the one's we've gotten have been positive."

"Just like it should be, huh? We'll be all right. Democrats rule. Am I right?"

"You're right."

Ellis sat in his car in the small parking lot next to his business. The structure was located on a block of businesses on the West Side. It was a small place on a corner lot. The sign out front said: MASON DETECTIVE AGENCY

At times, Ellis gazed at his business and was amazed that it had lasted four years. It had been a long haul getting there. He had gone to college two years with the idea of becoming an accountant. He lost interest. Plus scraping up college money was a problem for him and his parents. He bounced around from job to job until he landed with a security company. Ellis was contemplating leaving for a higher paying position when the company decided to expand the business into divorce work, document serving, and locating missing persons. A boost in pay, training, and more interesting work made him stick around.

Ellis was bitten by the bug of wanting to start his own security firm. He took

business and criminal justice classes, and looked into small business loans. The early stages of the operation cost him income, which didn't bother him. But it also cost him his marriage, something that upset him for several months until he came to the realization that there was nothing he could do to rectify the situation.

Inside the agency, there was wood grain paneling along the walls in the reception area. A narrow hall led to an equipment and storage area, and straight ahead to Ellis' office.

At the desk out front was Maybeline Connors, a round-faced medium-brownskinned woman nearing thirty.

Ellis entered the office.

"Well hello," Maybeline said. "For once you're right on time."

"That's why I'm the boss. So I can come in a little late. Where's your brother?"

"He went around the corner to get some coffee and doughnuts. We didn't have time to eat anything for breakfast."

"Have you heard from our Muslim buddy?"

"No."

"Damn. If we don't hear from him by this time tomorrow, we'll just have to tell him to get somebody else to handle the security for his event."

J.C Connors came through the door carrying a box of coffee cups and a bag of doughnuts.

"People, people, people. Hello people. The goodies have arrived."

J.C had his sister's round features. His hair was cut down close to his skull. His face seemed flat and nondescript until he smiled, and everything about him was illuminated. He was twenty-four.

The coffee and doughnuts were placed on the desk by J.C. He popped the lid of a container of coffee and drank from it.

"So what's on the slate for today?" Are you still stalking the babe for my man Armad?"

"No. That's pretty much wrapped. All I have to do is get him in and drop it on him. I just hope the brother will stay cool."

"I think he will."

"I hope he will."

Chapter 3

Brad Royce left the office building and stepped onto the sidewalk. He wore a tan Armani suit, pastel gold shirt, and a dark brown solid tie. In his late twenties, Royce had preppy All-American features topped with close-cropped light brown hair.

Royce approached the waiting cab, sliding into the back seat. The Arab driver mumbled something in his language when Royce requested the short ride into the Loop.

Four people were assembled in the office conference room. Cody was there along with his campaign manager, John Brooks, a world weary, gray haired man in his fifties. Also present was Marty Silver, a political consultant extraordinaire. He

was a balding guy with deep set eyes, and a salt and pepper beard and mustache.

The lone woman was Andrea Newsome. She was tall and slinky and had short-cropped black hair with bangs. She had arching eyebrows, narrow light green eyes, a thin straight nose, and small pouty lips. She was Silver's associate.

Royce stepped into the room. "Good morning everybody. Sorry if I'm a little late. I had to deal with a lost and confused cab driver."

Brooks stood and shook Royce's hand. "Hello Brad. Good to see you again. I know you recognize Mr. Cody. This is Mr. Silver and Ms Newsome, our political consultants."

Royce shook hands with Silver. He reached to take Andrea's hand by the fingertips but she turned it into a traditional handshake. She flashed a brief pleasant smile in his direction. It was enough to spark interest in her by Royce.

"Have a seat," Brooks said. "Let's begin. Go into a little detail about what we want from you. As you may know, our campaign is about ready to kick into high gear. The television appearance last night was the first big kick off. According to all the polls, James will not just be a token candidate. He has a legitimate chance of unseating Ryan. Which means things could get a little nasty."

"What we have to do, is be ready to fight fire with fire," Cody interjected. "We want your agency to do a thorough investigation into Ryan's background. If you find anything that's not too kosher, go with it to the hilt. You know, I'm not too fond of operating in this manner, but it seems to be the way of the world. These days at least."

"I suppose you have to do what you have to do," Royce said. "It seems to me I do recall Ryan being under fire for awarding a contract to a company he used to work for before he was elected."

"Yes. But nothing ever came of it. The company seemed to have made a legit low bid. You won't have any qualms about delving in Ryan's personal life. You know, marital infidelity, psychiatric care."

"Not a all. It's all part of doing the right thing for the job."

Cody leaned forward in his chair and locked his fingers together in front of him. "I'm sure you understand that I don't wish to be linked directly to this uh, operation. You'll be making reports to Mr. Silver."

"Actually, you'll be coming to me," Andrea said.

"I'll have no problem with coming to you."

Royce's tone was suggestive. He wished he could have returned the words to his mouth before they became audible. He surmised that he would have very little chance of getting anywhere with Andrea.

The metal desk in Ellis' office was always cluttered with papers and other

business related paraphernalia. There were two photographs encased in a frame folder. One was of his four-yearold daughter, Keisha. The second was his current girl friend, Zoe, who some said favored his ex-wife, Carmen.

Black cushioned chairs were positioned around the desk. A few feet from the desk was a table on which a computer and fax machine rested.

Ellis was seated at his desk going over paper work when Armad Drew sauntered in.

Armad was a muscular, broad-shouldered stocky man in his late twenties. His mahogany complexion, shaved head, and killer eyes game him a hard-nosed appearance.

“Armad. My man. Come on in and sir down.”

Armad moved over and sat in one of the chairs near the desk.

“So. What’s the four one-one on my baby, Donna?”

Ellis searched through the clutter on his desk and secured a file folder. “The news ain’t too good, man. But I guess you need to know.”

Armad yanked the file containing surveillance photos and activity logs from Ellis’ grasp. He opened the file, scanning quickly through the photos, and ignoring the log. He rose to his feet angrily.

“Goddamn that bitch. She played me like a sucker.” Armad began to pace back and forth. “Bitch! I’ll kill her ass. I’ll kill her ass.”

Ellis rose to his feet. “Come on, man. You can’t do that. You don’t wanna end up back in the joint, do you?”

“Shit naw. But I can’t be played. I can’t be played for no chump.”

“Look, what you have to do is calmly sit down and talk to her. Find out if you can fix things up, or just move on. That’s my advice. Does it sound cool to you?”

“Yeah. Yeah. You speaking right.”

A staff meeting was being held in the richly furnished conservatively decorated conference room at Royce Investigations. Royce was there along with a couple department heads and the company president, Josh Allison, a dapper man in his early sixties. He had been with Royce’s father since he started the agency thirty years ago.

“We have a high priority case brought to us earlier by Mr. Royce. Nice work Mr. Royce. We’ve received a five thousand-dollar retainer from the client. Of course, we’ll be doing a hundred percent background check on Congressman Walter Ryan. We’ll send out a team to run down old friends and enemies from the past. Electronically, we’ll check all the usual sources and contacts. For a week to ten days we’ll have round the clock twenty-four hour surveillance on our subject. This will begin as soon as possible.”

“I know my dad wouldn’t like it, but I want to get in on the surveillance detail,”

Royce said.

“I won’t tell if you don’t.”

The investigation of the life and times of Walter Ryan swung into operation. The search for political colleagues with axes to grind against him. The check for any type of disciplinary actions or complaints dating back to his high school days. Through computer link up the checking of credit status, financial dealings, the presence of his name on mailing lists of hate or porno operations.

Royce lived in a spacious bachelor type apartment on the Gold Coast. He had the room loaded down with electronic toys. A wide screen TV, VCR, CD player, video cameras, and his own personal set of electronic bugging devices.

On the walls in the room were collectible authentic vintage movie posters. There were posters from the films *The Big Sleep*, *Maltese Falcon*, and *Chinatown*.

Royce knew the realities of being a private investigator, but it was the hyped up glamorous myth that intrigued him. He hoped to one day be involved in a dangerous and exciting case.

Royce had just slipped on a pair of light gray pinstriped slacks. He moved to a closet with a sliding wooden door. From the closet he removed a medium pink dress shirt and a pink and gray striped tie.

The phone on a table near the bed sounded off. Royce slid over and lifted the receiver.

“Hello.”

“Hey, it’s me. Wallace.”

“Yeah. How is it going so far?”

“Just routine stuff. He went from an appearance to lunch. And then back to his headquarters. He hasn’t left since then. I have to ask you about doing me a little favor. My wife called and said she’ll be late getting home from work. So I need to get off a little early to pick my kid up from school.”

“Sure. I’ll be there as quick as I can. Probably in about twenty minutes.”

She glided down the street like a woman that had to be somewhere in a hurry. She was so stunningly beautiful, even dressed in a below the knee business suit, she turned a lot of heads. She had straight shoulder length honey blonde hair, big ocean blue eyes, and a bow-like mouth.

Francine Darden stopped at the Ryan campaign headquarters and disappeared inside.

Royce investigations had an operative on the opposite side of the street from Ryan’s headquarters. When he saw Francine go inside he ducked into a doorway. He pulled out a walkie-talkie and spoke into it.

“Hey. I’ve got a little development. A hot blonde in light blue just went in. It could be something big, but maybe not.”

“A hot blonde can’t be all bad,” Royce quipped.

Royce was in a company car parked a couple hundred feet down from the rear of Ryan’s campaign headquarters. Forty minutes after he received the walkie talkie report Francine exited the headquarters carrying a briefcase. She paced about and checked the street as if waiting for a ride. A few minutes later a black limousine tooled onto the street and parked. It was then that Ryan emerged from inside. To most it would look like a boss and his co-worker heading out to a business appointment, but Royce was a bit more skeptical.

“I’ve got a blonde babe and Ryan in a limo together,” Royce said into his walkie-talkie. “I think I better tag along.”

Royce watched the limo head north. He waited a few moments and took off behind it. The limo hit Lake Shore Drive, stayed on a minute, and cut down a couple blocks before turning left and stopping in front of an upscale apartment building.

Royce pulled the car over and parked. He saw Francine leave the limo and stride toward the building entrance. The limo did something he didn’t expect. Instead of driving away it moved along and swung into the resident’s parking lot.

Royce wondered what the hell was going on.

Five minutes later he found out. Ryan came from the parking lot, now donning dark glasses and a fedora. He went inside the building.

It suddenly came clear to Royce. Dress your babe up in a nice business outfit. Drop her off at the door. Hang out a few minutes in the parking lot. And then come around and ask to see a pre-arranged accomplice. Pretty smart, Mr. Ryan. But not smart enough.

Royce waited a couple minutes before exiting his car and moving to the apartment building. In the vestibule there was doorman, a beefy guy in his thirties, who was in charge of buzzing up, and letting people inside.

“Good afternoon, sir. How can I help you?” the doorman asked.

“Uh. The thing is. I’m Dr. Rodgers. I’m embarrassed to say this. The young lady in blue that just came in. I’ve uh. Seen her at the hospital a time or two. And I. I saw her leaving just as I was. And I. I just had this impulse to follow her wherever she was going. Hopefully home. She does live here, doesn’t she?”

“What are you? A pervert. A stalker?”

“No, no, no. I’m not. I assure you,” Royce said convincingly. “I just want to know her name. I could find out from another source. But since I’m here.”

The doorman seemed to shut down for several seconds. Finally, he said: “Her name is Francine Darden.”

Donna Beck paced back and forth across the carpet on her living room floor with a phone receiver to her ear.

“I’m worried about this, Benny. I really am. I have the feeling people are watching me everywhere I go.”

“Come on girl. You’re being paranoid. We’re cool. We’re in control.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Will you stop. You said you wanted to change your life. Are you going to wimp out on me?”

“No. No.”

“Good girl. That’s what I like to hear.”