

J Michael Donovan

Author of Priest . . . scores once again with

Fat Chance *goes Hollywood*

A rousing mystery of legal injustice!

***Fat Chance** is dedicated to those working tirelessly for justice.*

PROLOGUE

Scene: Durham Courthouse, June, 1997

The accused and his attorney, Fat Chance, stood to hear the verdict.

“We find the defendant . . .

Those who had attended the trial held their collective breath . . . court was perhaps milliseconds away from choosing to substantially alter a life. The defendant, recalling the ‘accident’ leading to his arrest, began to shake . . . *his truck careening onto and over a green coupe, crushing the life from its teenaged occupant.* Thus engaged, he was unaware of his attorney’s subtle grin . . .

Not guilty.” the foreperson shouted.

Fat’s grin broadened to a smile. His client nearly collapsed, but quickly regained sufficiently to note a rumbling displeasure displayed around him. Regardless, he resolved, he would celebrate later by inviting several of his ‘trucking’ buddies to a feast. *Note: unfortunately, the man ended up leaving that feast grossly intoxicated and re-incarcerated. Thus he succeeded in maintaining the abysmal habit that precipitated the original carnage.*

Several days later, that same attorney hummed to himself as he pulled into his office parking space. Once he had struggled out of his old, red VW convertible, his mind became filled with visions of a glorious future following his recent court success. Strolling through the office door he found his way blocked by Mabel, his best friend and secretary. She jogged up to him with a big grin on her face. Both arms extended, she nearly knocked him down reaching to grab his face in order to ‘smooch.’ Of course, he was completely taken by surprise, going from a comfortable

high, looking forward to work after a great weekend—to fighting off a wild attack by a huge, gorgeous red head. Hah, hah!

“Golden, we are golden, Fat,” Mable screamed into his ear as she pressed his blonde head into her ample chest. She was all soft against his face, and smelled delicious. He was having trouble catching his breath.

“Ok, ok, May,” he coughed into her blouse as he took a last whiff of Chanel. Pulling away, he was able to drop his old briefcase and ask, “Just how are we golden, May?”

“Well,” she smirked, spinning around to extend a willowy, freckled arm. “Take a look, Master . . . over there, hanging on the wall behind your desk for all to see, is a certified check from the state. It’s your *golden* reimbursement as payment for the negligence case last year against the highway department. It arrived first thing this morning, special delivery.” With that announcement, May turned back and posed like a proud ring-master, fluffy red hair hanging in an awkward ‘servant’ pose.

The check was Fat’s portion of a court-ordered payment to one of his first clients. Rather than being found guilty, an accused truck driver had been miraculously judged to be the victim. Fat had wisely determined the State Highway department remiss in failing to provide adequate signing for the construction zone where the accident had taken place, and that case had automatically led to a series of similar cases—all woeful clients accused of ‘accidentally’ dispatching a person . . . or persons.

“Wow!” is all Fat would say. It took May a moment to realize from the sparkle in his eyes and his Cheshire cat grin that the exclamation was more for her display than the check on the wall.

“Aw, come on Fat, enough with the horny crap. Don’t you get it? That check means we can keep the office open . . . do more great things to clean up the city. After all, it’s the most money in one chunk that you’ve made since we opened the office, and that was almost a year ago. You ought to be thrilled . . . for God’s sake, now maybe I can get a raise!”

“Look,” he reasoned, “the check is great, but it’s not that I didn’t know it was coming. The fact that it’s here is a thrill. The biggest thrill is seeing you thrilled—it’s, well, thrilling. There will be a raise, and that’s not all, because I have a surprise for you.”

For emphasis, Fat marched across the room to stand between their two musty Salvation Army desks while he did a magician-like motion with his arms. “Ta-dah,” he yelled. “As of this coming September, the law firm of Francis Chance will move out of this crummy two-desk store-front. We will be relocating to one of the lofty upper floors of the city’s impressive landmark, the Carolina Bank building. We, you and me *and* another young lawyer whom I shall be selecting and grooming between now and then, will have our own offices, suitably furnished.

So, what do you think?” He stood there, palms up, waiting for a reaction, but there was none, at least at first. Mabel just stood there with that dismal, hang-dog expression she tends to put on whenever he commits an error (in her opinion). “Ok,” he raised his voice. “What? What did I do or say wrong? I thought you’d be bowled over. Come on Mabel, talk to me.” All of a sudden a scraggly ray of sun sneaking through the dusty windows gave him the clue as it sparkled on a big tear-bubble sneaking out of the corner of her eye. She was clearly in pain and he not only felt bad, but experienced the guilt and fear of having done something terribly wrong. Over the three or four years that she and he had been together, Mabel had become his conscience—not that it made him a *nice* guy, because, as she would have it: *‘lawyers can’t be nice guys.’* Even so, Mabel’s line of ethics became the moral fence beyond which he could choose to go only at his

peril. Past incidents had made him a total believer. Matching her hang-dog with a hung dog, he sidled over and gave her a hug around the waist. She pleased him by accepting, graciously, and placing her cheek on his fluffy, yellow head.

Fat mumbled into her chest, “Come on, Mabel, you know nothing’s going to change for us.” (She was tough, but he knew that she could be manipulated.)

Her arms came up trying in a vain attempt to encircle his thick back. “Oh, it’s just me,” she muttered. “All of a sudden I felt sad thinking of the changes you’re suggesting . . . not that they’re all bad, really. But I have a hard time dealing with change. You know that.”

“Yes, yes, Mabel, I do,” he mumbled into her breast, fascinated by the way it vibrated against his ear. “Yes-s-s,” he repeated for an extended moment of pleasure.

They stood there entwined for a long time, simply hugging each other. The only sound came through the front windows—the rumble of cars and the shouts of kids at play across the road.

“By the way,” May broke their silence as she moved away. “There was a strange envelope that arrived for you. It must have been left over the weekend—shoved under the door—it was laying on the floor when I came in. It’s on your desk, there, behind you.”

“What’s in it? Didn’t you open it? Maybe it’s more money,” he joked, turning to look.

“Nope, a plain envelope, sealed, with your name on it,” she said, patting her hair and smoothing her skirt. “It looks personal. See?”

Sure enough, after parting from Mabel’s clutches he grabbed the envelope and turned it over to see large crude lettering: ‘FAT’ that someone had written.

For some strange reason a chill came over him. He considered tossing it unopened into the trash, but finally opened it to find ample basis for his reluctance. Inside was a snippet from what appeared to be a newspaper article. As a lawyer he was wise enough not to touch it, only turned

on his desk lamp in order to read without removing it. It turned out to be a simple obituary notice, cleverly produced. He knew right away that it was unreal, since it was about him!

Francis (Fat) Chance, noted attorney, on his death today from mysterious cause.

No date!