

CHAPTER 7 CALL TO DUTY

At that moment, there were still only five people who knew exactly what happened at Buttonhole Golf Course the night before. Two sets of parents woke that morning having no knowledge that one of their children had been murdered. Friends who had been out dancing with the couple the night they were killed had no reason not to believe that the pair had gotten home safely. None of them knew that the lives of these two young people had been taken in exchange for a ride to Pawtucket and some gas money. The only ones who had any understanding at all of how something so horrific could have taken place, incredibly, did not seem to be troubled by the loss of life in the least. Aside from Burdick's fear for his own safety, which was a reasonable enough concern for him to have, considering his actions prior to the slayings and his reputation among the other suspects, there did not seem to be any conscionable afterthought given to the two people whose lives they had taken. This is one thing that has always bothered me. It still does to this day.

By all accounts, the killers went home afterwards and went to bed. I can't for the life of me imagine how a person can just lay their head down on a pillow and fall asleep after being a part of something like that. It's really mind-boggling to me how anyone could have such a lack of feeling for innocent life.

You may think that as a police officer I see this kind of thing all the time and that I've become immune to it. However, while I probably see violent behavior on this level more often than most people, it's not frequent, not in Johnston, Rhode Island, and it's not something you ever get used to.

Tragedy is tragedy is tragedy, but this case was different. It put a whole new twist on human savagery, as far as I was concerned. If it were possible to observe the way the murderers behaved in the hours immediately after the killings, you would never have known that they had participated in such a brutal double homicide a short time before. They seemed to have no conscience at all. Either that, or they would have to be lacking some of the basic genetic material that would make them human.

It's just so disturbing to think that these killers are somehow included in the same species with the rest of us.

At 1:07, Lt. Louis Courtemanche of the Providence Fire Department, Emergency Medical Division, responded to the scene. Police from Providence were already present when he arrived, and with the two victims showing no obvious signs of life, the ambulance was turned away. The coroner would take this one, Courtemanche realized.

As soon as the bodies were discovered, Chief Tamburini canceled all leaves and days off for the department detectives, who were called back to duty between 1:15 and 1:30. At 1:20, I was among the first Johnston officers to arrive at the murder scene. Providence Patrolman Paul O'Rourke was the initial respondent to the double homicide, and had the scene secured. Providence Detective Patricia Cornell, Detective Sergeant Steven Bathgate and Sergeant Napoleon "Nappy" Britto of the Providence Police BCI division had begun a preliminary investigation and were moving around carefully inside a section of crime tape surrounding the bodies, an area that measured roughly a hundred feet in diameter.

I got my first look at the victims then, and it was a sight I'll never forget. It was revolting on every level, but what was particularly repelling to me were their ages. These were just kids.

They were both in a semi-sitting position, slumped on their left sides against a tract of hay bales. In this section of the section of golf course, construction was just getting underway and there was nothing but ashen brown dirt almost as far as the eye could see. The bodies, however, were resting on a narrow swatch of green grass that bordered a forested plot of trees and shrubs, with the Woonasquatucket River just beyond that. The overhanging branches of spindly trees provided them with little shade or protection from the sun and the elements and the insects.

The male victim, his legs folded in front of him, was practically on top of the second victim, which appeared to be female. His dark blue jacket was prominent, the left side saturated with blood, the staining more apparent on the upper part of his left pant leg, the slacks a lighter gray color. A pool of blood had collected near the bodies, running a short distance through the grass down the slight incline on which they were reposed. His head was resting on top of hers, and he appeared to be 'blindfolded,' indicative of an execution-style murder. However, it was clear to me that this was a simple black headband that had dropped down below his forehead following the impact of a gun blast. Resting on top of the male's left sneaker, in the tangle of shoelaces, just below the cuff of his pant leg, was a live round of ammunition. It almost seemed as if it had been placed there intentionally, perhaps a calling card left by the killer. But that was only speculation at this point, and remained to be determined.

The second victim was pinned beneath him, her back pressed against the hay. Her yellow sweater contrasted sharply with his dark blue jacket. Her right hand was resting on his right elbow, his right arm draped across her bent right knee, which was nestled between his right hip

and arm, as if they were hugging in a final embrace. She was wearing a white headband, though her face and much of her petite frame was obscured by his bulk.

The remote possibility of a murder-suicide was instantly eliminated with the absence of a vehicle or a weapon. The victims were fully clothed and there was no visual evidence that a sexual assault had taken place. There was no indication of a struggle of any kind, in fact. It appeared to me that they were very scared at the time they were killed, huddled close together and did not put up a fight, probably trying to convince their murderers to let them live. Just looking at the results of this brutal and horrific crime, I was thinking that whoever was responsible might be hundreds of miles away by now.

There was some confusion at that time about which department had jurisdiction because the property was straddled two municipalities, with unequal portions in both Providence and Johnston. Like the park before it, however, the recreation facility was laid out predominantly in the town of Johnston.

That said, there was never any kind of adversarial atmosphere or power struggle between the departments. In fact, just the opposite was true. It was not the kind of thing to squabble over. No town or city wanted to have a murder occur in its jurisdiction. Having the least amount of crime as possible was something to boast about. Even petty crimes, you'd prefer to have them happen across the town line. I couldn't even begin to estimate the number of times that a stolen car was discovered in that park, and some of our guys, perhaps not particularly in the mood to do paperwork that night, would push the vehicle across the line into Providence. Sometimes Providence would push it back, and this was the good-natured game that went on between the departments over there for years. So, as you might imagine, a murder dump site was the last

thing anyone would fight about. Solving those types of cases are always improbable, if not impossible. With this grim discovery, however, finding whoever was responsible was all that either department was interested in, regardless of who had jurisdiction. I knew right away it was ours, but we were both there, and it had to be determined which agency was going to be the lead department so that the investigation could begin. As with any murder case, you have to move fast and efficiently. There's about a 72-hour window, after which time evidence is lost forever and the trail starts to go cold very rapidly. It's exponential. And that's why it was imperative for command to be established right away. Time was working against us. Every tick of the clock would make it easier for the guilty to think, to flee, or worse, hurt someone else, which is not a farfetched scenario. Anyone who had been responsible for these killings would be capable of just about anything.

When Johnston Police Sergeant Jones pulled the land specs and determined what I already knew, the case was officially designated to our department and I became the lead detective.

There were some admittedly mixed emotions on my part. Already, there were television news trucks lining up at the top of slope around the entrance of the golf course construction site. Chief Tamburini and Johnston Mayor, William Macera, were on the scene, as well. I understood then that everything we did would be under a microscope from that point on. Despite all that, I felt very alone at that point with these two, as yet, unidentified bodies. At headquarters, when this call came in, there was only myself, Patrolman Sasso, who was working the radio room that day, and Detective Albert A. Faella. On scene with me initially was Patrolman Parillo and Detective Faella. That was it.

I was still a junior detective then, and it was more than a little disconcerting for me. It was a hot afternoon, and very humid, which probably didn't help. But worse, still, dark clouds were gathering on the horizon, and moving like a black wall across the sky. The threat of severe weather, bringing heavy rain and lightning to the area did not bode well for an outdoor crime scene investigation.

Considering the task the lay ahead, I took a breath and tried to steady my voice as I turned to Al Faella. "Al, what the fuck do I do now," I asked him.

In a very calming voice, he said, "Ping, calm down. You can do this."

It turned out to be just the boost of confidence I needed.

He assured me that when something like this happens, most detectives don't answer their pages right away. In this case, however, it turned out to be very unusual that we got such immediate responses from all our guys. Still, I have to admit, those were a couple of anxious minutes before the cavalry arrived, so to speak, and everyone reported back to work.

Very soon, there was a large contingency of officers representing both departments on the scene. You never saw so many police officers in one place that didn't involve a marching band, a Grand Marshal and politicians waving from an open convertible. But this spectacle was the furthest thing from a parade you could ever imagine.