

GORE GALORE

Aaron T Knight

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Chapter One

Several pedestrians were nearly run over by the pick up truck as it jumped the curb and screeched to a halt on the sidewalk. A man in work clothes leaped out of the vehicle and sprinted into police headquarters. He had left the truck door open and the engine running.

Inside the police station the man rushed up to the policeman behind the duty desk. His arms were waving wildly, he looked terrified. The policeman reached for his pistol to protect himself from the madman.

“No need”, the man yelled out, “They’re all dead! Oh my God! please! please!”

Then he collapsed onto the floor.

Sergeant Noulte came out of his office in response to the hysterical shouting. He saw the man on the floor. With the duty officer’s help they carried him into the sergeant’s office and laid him on the couch.

“Get a wet towel and some ammonia.” he ordered.

The man regained consciousness in response to the piercing odor of ammonia and a cold compress on his forehead. Looking around he saw the two policemen and the horror rushed back into his memory. They watched him regain his look of terror. Sergeant Noulte gripped his arm and brought him up to a sitting position.

“Easy now,” he said gently. “You’re safe here and we’ll help you. Tell us why you’re so upset and what you need us to do for you.”

Noulte was looking at him with concern and he began to calm down somewhat. With considerable effort the man began to talk.

“It’s awful sergeant! All of those dead people lying on the floor it’s the most terrifying thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Where did you see these people?” Noulte asked

“My name is Sam Moore. I’m a tree surgeon. I was hired to trim trees at 1410 Forest Avenue. There was no response from the residents when I knocked on the door. Rather than leave, I decided to try to find them since they might not have heard me knocking.”

Mr. Moore stopped talking abruptly as his mind returned to the memory of the horrific scene. Sergeant Noulte nodded then prompted the man gently.

“When you’re ready Mr. Moore, please continue.”

“I went around to the rear entrance,” he went on nervously, fighting back the terror. “I found the door open and I went in calling out for attention. There was no response so I continued down the hallway to the living room. Entering there, I,I,I.” he paused, struggling to remain calm. “On the floor were four dead people. Each of them had a pistol in their hand. There was blood splattered everywhere in the room, it was a macabre scene beyond belief. That’s all I can say.” He broke into heavy sobbing.

An ambulance arrived for Sam Moore. He was heavily sedated and taken to emergency. Sergeant Noulte got busy and put together a police squad to handle the details of the investigation. On his strict orders the police vehicles entered the backyard of 1410 Forest Avenue quietly. Two unmarked cars also arrived at the front of the house to block any possible suspects from fleeing the scene.

Noulte took two policemen with him into the rear of the house. He stationed one at the rear entrance and proceeded up the hall to the living room. He was a veteran policeman and he had witnessed his share of gruesome scenes, but this one was a shocker.

In the middle of the room were the bodies of a man and a woman he judged to be in their forties. The man was lying face up with one arm outstretched clutching a 9MM automatic pistol. The woman was lying on her stomach facing him about ten paces away. A small Beretta was in her hand appearing to be

still aimed at the dead man. Features were difficult to make out because of the blood splattered over their bodies.

Beyond them was a younger man lying on his back with his legs propped up on a chair. A 38 caliber revolver was gripped in his right hand, his gun hand was resting on his bloodied chest. Across from him on the floor was a young woman in a sitting position with her back resting on a couch. Her head was bent to the side against the seat cushion. The sun streaming in from a window lit up her face creating the illusion she was smiling. But this sight was swiftly erased by a the gaping hole in the stomach. From the wound her white small intestines spilled onto the floor. Her weapon was a 22 caliber target pistol.

There was an element of wickedness in the scene beyond the horror of bloodied bodies. In that respect, it resembled the butchering area of a slaughterhouse. Oddly, there were no large pools of blood surrounding the bodies, only the copious amounts of blood covering the corpses. Sergeant Noulte was unprepared for a scene so grotesque and he shuddered with revulsion. He gathered himself then the discipline of investigative detachment returned so he could continue to jot down remarks on his note pad.

When he was finished with his preliminary observations, standard procedures were set in motion for a crime of violence. Inwardly, Nick couldn't shake off his feelings of horror created

by the ugliness of the murder scene. It was so bizarre. As it was now all signs pointed to four people simultaneously shooting each other.

A police van pulled up on the street in front of the residence and blocked off the road with wooden stanchions. The house was similarly sealed off from the public and uniformed officers stationed themselves on the street leading up to the front entrance. People would soon begin showing up anxious to know what was happening in their neighborhood.

In the backyard additional cars had arrived bringing in the forensic team and the medical examiner. This area was also taped off barring the public. From the lead vehicle a police captain emerged taking charge of the investigation and giving orders to his men.

The medical examiner and his two assistants began their gruesome tasks with the corpses. Microphone in hand, the doctor began his examination work:

Tagged number One was the man on the floor lying face up. He had an entrance wound in his chest that had pierced his heart. The doctor described the condition of the corpse noting an absence of a large pool of blood around the victim.

Number Two was the woman next to him. When she was turned over onto to her back, the examiner was looking at a face

with the left side completely blown off from a bullet fired at close range, Her eye was gone and there was a hole exposing her tongue and teeth. It was impossible to picture what she had looked like prior to the gunshot. The bullet had savagely ripped the face wide open.

Number Three was the man with his legs up on a chair lying on his back. Evidently he was shot and bumped against the chair on his fall to the floor. His throat was shot away from a missile fired at close range. The examiner again noted there was no pool of blood around the body. Only part of a neck muscle and a shred of skin kept the head from being completely decapitated from the torso.

Number Four was the young woman slumped against the couch in a sitting position. She had also been shot once from no more than six feet away from the shooter. She had a gaping hole in her gut exposing the white entrails of the colon. Again, no blood pooling.

Sergeant Noulte was following along with the examiner and his assistants taking notes for the police report of the killings. It was an extremely unpleasant job for him to write descriptions of the grisly mutilation of the four corpses. Nick hoped the examiner would be brief on his comments about the four murdered people. It was only a faint hope though. Several hours past be-

fore the bodies were carried off to the city morgue for further study. By then Nick's writing hand was numb.

Privately, Dr. Croft, the county medical examiner, was bitching to himself about the obvious amount of hard work to be performed in the coming days. Hardly anyone involved in the murder investigation was particularly thrilled to have this challenging mystery thrust upon them. They knew there would naturally be differences of opinion among the officials to hinder an investigation. Pressure from the town population to solve the murders quickly was an even more troublesome problem. Foxtrot police needed to alleviate the citizens' anxieties about the lurking dangers of mad killers ASAP.

Chapter Two

Forest Avenue Massacre is the lurid name adopted by the media to identify the tragic and mysterious killings. That phrase only lasted one day when the mayor objected to it, He pointed out that a massacre required at least five corpses. Four didn't qualify for the sensational title. At this juncture it appeared to be a shoot out among the four people in which they all fired at each other at the same time. The medical examiner issued his report about the bullets extracted from the bodies. Ballistics tests of the spent bullets to the murder weapons indicated the two men shot each other and the women had done each other in.

If this is what happened, then there was no case to be investigated. After all, it was impossible to arrest dead people for murder. The medical examiner knew a can of worms when he saw one. Taking the safest route but feeling a little ashamed of his wimpiness, he declared that they all died from the gun shot wound found on each of them. Case closed. (he hoped)

In the town of Foxtrot, the county seat and the location of the Forest Avenue killings, the medical report suited the city officials just fine. This was easily the greatest event in the town's history. The other big event happening in Foxtrot up until the present ghastly multiple murders was ancient. The number one

thriller occurred during the Civil War when General Robert E Lee and his staff rode through town on the main road.

There was a brass memorial plaque set in a stone obelisk in front of the courthouse. It read:

“On June 10 1864 General Robert E Lee passed through Foxtrot with his staff on this road. We are honored.”

At the bottom of the plaque was a tiny inscription noting:

“On June 11 1964 General Grante rode through.”

General Grant’s name is misspelled. It could have been a mistake or maybe not.

Sergeant Noulte, who had by circumstances been appointed the man in charge of the investigation was ecstatic. He had been freed from a case with hard work, long hours and trouble written all over it. He immediately took off on a week’s vacation approved reluctantly by Captain Johnson.

Dr. Croft’s final declaration did not stop people from speculating about this tantalizing puzzler. Closing the case was like eating one potato chip to the curious. Dr. Croft developed a sudden necessity to attend a lengthy medical conference in Zurich Switzerland. Obviously he was no longer around to answer questions.

Not so fast. Twelve hours before the remains of the deceased were to be released to their families, the Virginia state police on orders from the governor’s office took charge. They were there

with a court order from the attorney general's office to take custody of the remains until further notice. A pathologist from Richmond arrived the next day to begin another medical examination of the bodies and what little forensic evidence had been found.

What piqued everyone's interest was the lack of bleeding from the corpses. Such wounds would normally result in rivers of the sticky stuff pouring out from damaged arteries. When the bodies and the area were cleaned up there was only the amount of blood splattered on the bodies to account for. It was the photos taken at the scene and the morgue which highlighted the incomplete picture. It couldn't be ignored by the authorities.

Several days past before the Richmond pathologist submitted his findings. Instead of providing a satisfactory answer to the killings, his report only made things worse. A veteran coroner without any doubts about his medical skills he declared the bullets had not killed the victims. In his considered opinion the bodies were placed where they were found in a staged manner.

It was quite clear to him the people were already dead when a bullet was shot into their bodies. And here came the kicker, he could not attest to their cause of death. There were no signs on the corpses to indicate what killed them. Exhaustive toxicology tests didn't yield any signs of poisoning. Also ruled out were asphyxiation, drowning, or bludgeoning.

No time was spent to determine if they had died laughing.

So things reached new heights of controversy. The corpses were shipped to Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington for examination. The army did announce two probable causes of death for all four of the deceased. Each of them had a seizure or a heart attack prior to expiring. But they couldn't determine for sure if a heart attack had preceded a seizure, or vice versa, a seizure had caused a heart attack. In conclusion, the report stated there was no evidence to say with certainty if it was only a heart attack or just a seizure or both.

Thus, the doctors at Walter Reed Hospital did their bit to mess things up even more. Their report didn't mention any tests to see if they had been scared to death. Apparently no such medical procedure is available to answer that question. The mystery was ubiquitous, no one knew a damned thing.

Finally, what remained of the remains were released to the grieving families for burial. Odds were long on these deceased persons' worked over corpses ever being exhumed for further study. They had died somehow. Since no information was available about what to look for in the way of weapons, the next step was to begin a criminal investigation. Within a week of the discovery, the governor of the state issued an order for the Virginia Bureau of Investigation to take charge of the investigation.. State police were withdrawn from the case.

VBI officer Pickett was in charge of the investigation for the state. Foxtrot's chief of police Johnson knew him from past cases involving his town. The chief was of two minds about the man. He was a well trained lawman but he was also an impulsive man of action hungry for headlines.

Pickett rolled into town accompanied by two of his VBI agents. In his brusque manner he told the chief about his planned massive manhunt named "Project Dagnet". He casually mentioned his team of agents would be flooding into the town in twelve hours. It was high handed, unprofessional and effective since the Foxtrot town council wouldn't have time to discuss it.

Chief Johnson was livid over this underhanded maneuver by Tom Pickett. He waited for Johnson to respond to his announcement. With an effort he thanked the VBI officer for giving the department twelve hours advance notice before it would begin. He didn't offer to help him with his investigation.

Pickett was caught off guard by Johnson's somewhat sarcastic remark about being told about the invasion a half day before it would commence. He was also surprised the chief didn't even offer any assistance for his project. Johnson planned to use the twelve hour window to fight the action in every way he could think of.

Every attorney in the town was contacted to ask for help in stopping Pickett from carrying out his dramatic dragnet which smelled strongly of political motives. Most of the lawyers were cooperative not wanting to appear indifferent to their many clients in town. Besides, they knew Pickett meant to milk out as much media attention to the murder case as possible.

Foxtrot real estate prices could be vulnerable if the public was hearing constant news about the murders in the small town. They held a conference at city hall to find a solution to a situation that could hurt their law practices and real estate market values.

Judges with jurisdictions in the town, plus state and federal, presided over the hastily formed legal group. How serious the problem was considered to be can best be judged by the speed with which they reached an agreement on a plan of action. To have a diverse group of attorneys actually agree on an important matter in four hours has to be a world record of significant importance.

On a strictly legal basis, a mere request for a voluntary action by a person wasn't illegal. So, no grounds for seeking a cease and desist order. They weren't going to let a little thing like the law stop them from arm twisting the governor, bribing judges nor call in favors from powerful state politicians.

Three hours before the big show, Pickett was contacted by his boss and told to stop the dragnet. He went on to explain there

were problems with a lawyers committee in Foxtrot organized to oppose the planned operation. The governor issued an order to postpone the project until further notice. It was Tom Pickett's turn to be livid over Chief Johnson's underhanded tactics.

Johnson eventually lost the battle to keep the VBI from conducting its interrogation of Foxtrot citizens on its list of suspects. But he did win one concession. VBI agents were not allowed to question Foxtrot residents without a county or town police officer in attendance.

Information used to compose the list of over one hundred people was simply everyone in the town who had been charged with any sort of felony in the last ten years. Court computer records were the source of the names. It was certainly a wide ranging stretch since it included all of the felony charges, even if they were dropped, or never went to trial.

The nature of the felonies was indiscriminate too, covering traffic violations, sex offenses, burglary, vandalism and domestic violence cases. A large percentage of these charges had been subsequently dropped, dismissed or the accused was found not guilty.

Reactions from the citizens who still lived in the town were as far ranging about the felony list. Defiance was common from the people who had been released from arrest without any further complications. Those found not guilty were eager to coop-

erate lest their arrest was reviewed, and this time looked at more closely. The innocent included the paranoid, and people who were guilty of something else. Then there were the truly innocent ones who were ticked off to have the damned felony charge coming to life again.

Out of the one hundred plus people, seventy six were still residing in the town. Only eight of the accused had been found guilty and were serving time in prison. There were no legal summonses involved, they were asked to answer a few questions about the Forest Avenue murders. It was explained to the people of interest that it was a request for voluntary cooperation. They could decline to cooperate if they wished. Hardly anyone on the list refused to be interviewed. They were all intimidated, fearing a refusal would land them on the suspect list.

Sergeant Noulte returned to duty after his vacation to find himself still in charge of the murder case. It was a nice try, he thought to himself. Now I'll have to come up with a believable alibi to get out of this impossible murder case. The VBI team worked its way through the list of suspects rather quickly since most of the people on the list were never actually tried for their alleged offense. They put together their information and left Foxtrot to begin their analysis of the mounds of data they had collected.

Chapter Three

State police now steamrolled back into the case without much regard for the town or the county. They were eager to grab the publicity this sensational, headline grabbing multiple murders case was generating. Lt. JW Cranston was appointed to head up a special investigative team. It was no secret about his political ambition and this case was a windfall of public exposure.

Captain Johnson wasn't impressed with their investigative program to find the perpetrator, or perpetrators of the murders now publicly billed as the Forest Ave killings. Lt JW Cranston contacted the chief and set up a meeting. Johnson correctly guessed it was planned to be a "show" of cooperation with the local authorities. He prepared for the meeting.

At the appointed time Cranston rolled up to the Hog Hollow County courthouse with three squad cars. Close behind were the media panel trucks set to record the meeting. Cranston was mildly surprised to find Captain Johnson waiting on the top step and his policemen lined up on both sides of the stairs. They looked sharp in their dress uniforms.

The mayor and the county DA were standing with the chief. Cranston's bubble of supreme confidence developed a slow leak as he walked up the courthouse steps. From the street the media

people were recording the event. They changed their minds about Foxtrot law enforcement too. What they saw was a professional appearing police force, not a bucolic group of misfits.

They met in a court conference room. Formalities were exchanged, then paperwork was shuffled back and forth between the parties in attendance. It was Cranston's show so he started the meeting.

"As you know, the state police force has elected to head a new investigation into the terrible murders of four people. There are official documents included in the papers I brought with me."

County DA Jim Benson spoke up.

"You're aware I'm sure, the state police have no legal jurisdiction to head up a murder investigation in our county. To my knowledge, as of today neither the town of Foxboro nor Hog Hollow County has been contacted offering to aid us in the murder investigation. How do you explain that?"

Cranston was unprepared to debate about the legalities involved in the investigation. He began to sweat, sure is hot in here he thought to himself. To gain time he poured a glass of water for himself, then took his time drinking it.

He finally replied,

"There is a memorandum from our chief in those files addressed to Captain Johnson about our decision to take over the investigation."

Silence. No response to his explanation. He waited nervously now for someone to say something. After an uncomfortable pause the mayor said,

“Lt. Cranston, we have discussed this police matter and we want to cooperate with your department. We have decided, as a gesture of generosity, for the state police to have two observers working with Chief Johnson. Thank you for stopping by.”
He left the conference room.

Cranston was in over his head and the only thing making any sense at the moment was to get out of there. He took the copies of the files prepared for him by the Foxtrot police department and said. “We will be back in touch.”
He hurriedly left the room. Outside of the courthouse he sprinted to his car and managed to leave before the media mob could ask him anything.

Chief Johnson and the DA joined the mayor in his office after Cranston left. They sat down by his desk, looked at each other and burst out laughing. When things calmed down the county DA reminded them.

“We won the first round, now we’ll find out how badly the state police want this murder case. Legally we are strong. It is our right and duty to investigate crimes in our own jurisdiction. Most of the time local governments are happy to have the state handle criminal cases, this will be a surprise for the state.”

The mayor turned to look at Johnson and said,

“Are you sure this is what you want? We can turn it over to the state and save you a lot of hassle.”

“I’m dead set on doing my duty to the people of Foxtrot. Any large police force in charge of the investigation could, and I’m sure would, uncover a number of private secrets. This sensational murder case has done enough damage. I’ll be damned if there’s going to be any more harm created by outsiders.”

There were no comments by the mayor and the DA, only looks of respect and admiration for a man of principle. As he left the mayor’s office DA Benson commented to Johnson,

“You have my vote. Call on me for anything you need in the legal area. I might have mistakenly opened another problem for you. I swear it wasn’t intended to make your life harder. Our county sheriff has been noticeably silent about a sensational murder in Hog Hollow County. It annoyed me when he didn’t even show up for the coroners hearing.

“At every opportunity I have dropped into his office to praise your masterful handling of the case without any assistance from the county. I reminded him that re-election time was only six months away. And the voters must be wondering about the lack of news from him. I rode him too hard and he told me he would come to see you tomorrow. Sorry.”

“Swell.” Johnson replied.

The following day county sheriff Sam Newton arrived at the chief's office. Johnson involuntarily winced when he saw him slouch in with his belly slumped over the waist of his trousers. He was sheriff for twelve years and his family had lived in the county all of their lives. Easy to hustle up enough votes with all of the family members to elect cousin Sam for years until now.

He was a burden to Johnson who didn't have hidden motives in his job as chief of police. Being a straight shooter he had been pulled into many county police matters. Sam wasn't about to do any real work so Johnson was saddled with investigations in county affairs. But Sam never came to the chief for help. He worked on the county officials reminding them about the expense of investigations. Then there were finely drawn areas of legal jurisdiction between the city of Foxtrot and Hog Hollow county.

Johnson's loyal ally the county DA Benson, was often steam-rollered by the county council. To avoid a confrontation with the county the city representatives acquiesced to the thinly disguised assertions of responsibility. All were sympathetic for Johnson and they murmured comments of support. Except the city mayor, he was a man of principle and fought many of the more blatant shaftings.

Johnson had a morbid curiosity to learn what Sam had dreamed up for this side-slip. No pleasantries were exchanged

and Sam plopped down in a chair. He said.

“What a lousy break Raymond to have this multiple murder case happen in your jurisdiction (emphasis on the word “jurisdiction”). I’ve been busy studying this mess here in Foxtrot. Believe me Raymond I would help out as much as I can but the county is almost bankrupt. I talked with the county treasurer and he told me we were in crisis. Only enough real estate taxes coming in to pay the current bills. So I decided in spite of the current money crisis to assign Deputy Sheriff Clyde Bascomb to you. Geez look at the time! I’m late for a meeting. Don’t worry Raymond we’ll solve this case working together.” He was gone.

Johnson wasn’t surprised at Sam’s scandalous move. But he was livid over his declaration of “we” will solve the case. If he could have objected, deputy Clyde would never step a foot anywhere near his office. He was more dangerous than just useless. Arrogance coupled with incredible stupidity worked in tandem to cause disturbances anywhere he worked.

The chief had often wondered how Clyde could attend the entire Virginia state police training course without learning a damned thing. The deputy’s police uniform he wore somehow wouldn’t convince anyone he was a police official. Never pressed and often dirty it was rumpled where his long skinny body didn’t fit to the contours of the uniform. Hair stuck out all around his police cap tilted jauntily to the side.

Clyde's face was a contradiction. One eye was slightly higher than the other eye. He had a long slim English nose that nearly touched his upper lip. It was all disproportionate so it was hard to look at him directly for long. Clyde was terrified of dentists so his neglected teeth were discolored and crooked. His canines were fangs like a wolf and his two front teeth sort of leaned against each other.

Johnson first encountered Clyde as he was on a highway leading into Foxtrot. There was a car and a police vehicle pulled up behind it on the side of the road. No officer in sight. He walked up to the wide open door on the passenger side. A lady was in the drivers seat in shock. There was Clyde with one of his muddy boots resting up on the dashboard. He was sprawled against the seat squinting as he slowly wrote out a ticket.

Johnson was confused and shocked at the weird scene.

"Officer! Step out of the car! This is chief Johnson come back here to me now!"

Silence. Johnson walked up to Clyde and pulled him out of the car by the arm. Then he realized the man wasn't a Foxtrot policeman. He let go of him and apologized.

"Sorry officer. I'm Captain Johnson of the Foxtrot PD. I mistook you for one of my officers."

Clyde checked him out. Here was his chance to tell off the big captain Sam talks about, he thought.

"Well you otta be! Yellin at me like that! You are interfering

with a deputy sheriff of Hog Hollow County! Now step aside and let me do my job!”

He whirled round and returned to the passenger seat of the car. Up went his muddy boots on the dashboard and he continued to write out a traffic ticket.

Johnson was shocked at the man’s attitude toward him at first. Then he looked at the surly slovenly deputy and yanked him out of the car again. Clyde yelled, “hey! let go of me!” then he actually went for his pistol. In a matter of seconds Clyde found himself flat on his rump on the pavement. Johnson was an experienced officer and disarmed him with one swift movement,

He put his face two inches from Clyde’s but yanked away when his nose got a whiff of the deputy’s breath.

“your behavior is unacceptable deputy! Your actions fit the description of physical assault!”

He cuffed him and pushed him into the rear seat of his cruiser. Then he phoned Sam.

“Sam, one of your deputies just assaulted me and is now cuffed! Get over here!’ he gave him directions.

It was Sam’s turn to be shocked. As he thought about it he was of two minds, damned rough way to treat one of my deputies! or, it sounds like Clyde. If it is him I’ll be real polite to Raymond and get that fool off the hook.

When he arrived Sam checked out the scene and spotted Clyde in the rear seat of Raymond's cruiser. I'll be real cool, he thought to himself. He walked up to the captain with a pleasant smile for a change.

"What's going on Raymond? Sounded like big stuff over the phone. What did Clyde do?"

Sam received a cold firm explanation of what had transpired. He included Clyde's intimidation of the woman driver who was still sitting in her car stiff as a board. Sam replied softly.

"Let me go talk to Clyde and calm him down."

"You do that!" Johnson snapped at him.

Johnson walked up to the woman and asked her to get out of the car so he could talk to her. The middle aged lady looked the captain over and saw a kind face looking at her. She got out of her car.

"Tell me what happened, ma'am."

"I have been driving on this highway for over thirty years without any trouble. I was doing about 55 miles per hour when the deputy put on his police siren and rushed up to my car. I immediately slowed down to obey him. But it wasn't fast enough for him. He rammed my car and pushed me to the side of the road with his squad car. My right front tire blew out from the collision. I was shoved into my windshield. He told me I was doing 58 mph in a 55 mph zone and he was citing me for speeding. I asked him to show me the record in his cruiser to verify

the speed. He refused and told me to shut up. You saw the end of it when he was dirtying up my car writing a ticket.”

Johnson was no longer doubting his next move. Sam came up to him with Clyde in Johnson’s handcuffs. Sam said,

“Clyde told me his version of the incident which is much different than yours. He wants to file an assault complaint.”

The captain proceeded to tell Sam the entire debacle including the driver’s statement .In conclusion Johnson told Sam he was filing a complaint against his deputy He added it would be a pleasure to meet with the DA and tell all. Humans can change attitudes quite quickly when on the losing end of a situation. Sam asked Johnson to forget the whole thing as fellow officers.

“Not a chance.” was the captain’s response.

Chapter Four

While the state power maneuvers were in progress, all of the policemen Johnson could spare were gathering information about the murder victims and their families. A daunting assignment when there are four killings multiplied by the members of each family, fathers, mothers, siblings and employers. Red eyed and ragged, several officers were threatening to quit if they weren't reassigned to other duties.

Johnson was a good tight rope walker and he managed to cajole, praise and make vague promises about promotions. The last one was risky since it could backfire on him if any officer was to learn the truth from the city's treasurer.

Sergeant Nick Noulte entered Captain Johnson's office with trepidation. He had rehearsed every reason he could conjure up of why he wasn't qualified to be a part of the team working on the Forest Ave murders. They greeted each other more politely than usual and exchanged pleasantries about the weather and local gossip. Johnson started the ball rolling with praise.

"You have been a valuable officer on the force and I appreciate your hard working dedication to the job. Not many officers on our team possess the keen acumen you have for police work. I have chosen to do the murder investigation of the Forest Avenue killings without any outside help from the state. I'm deter-

mined to keep this case from becoming a media circus to help anyone's election to any office, dammit."

He hit his desk with his fist for emphasis.

Noulte used the tiny pause to launch into his reasons why he wasn't a candidate to be involved in this mess.

"I wish I could help you captain but my doctor has warned me about my blood pressure. In fact, he put me on a strict diet last week. You need officers who can work long hours and push hard. I know you wouldn't want me in the hospital."

Good beginning for Nick, strong argument sort of threatening Johnson with a grave responsibility. He waited for the captain's response, pretty sure he would be left out of the case.

But Johnson had the played the game for many years and he was prepared for this alibi.

"Your blood pressure condition isn't as severe a health problem as you think. Just the other day I met Dr. Foster and he said you were to be careful with your salt intake. Nothing more than that, no pills or diet."

"Hmm, I don't remember it that way but it's a relief to hear Dr. Foster changed his mind about my condition. But I still have some urgent matters on my plate. My mother has had another relapse. She may not make it this time. I must be ready at any moment to drop everything to be at her side."

"Cut the bull Nick. Your mother has been dying for all the years I've known you. I'll let you go if need be and you know it.

I need you on this case. Your past training in the DC police department before coming here is vital to me. I have to rely on you to anchor the investigation and keep our men focused on the basic procedures you know so well. You can volunteer or I will order you to work on the case. If you refuse, I will ask you to resign from the force. So which is it?"

"After due consideration I volunteer."

"That's the spirit, I'm proud of you."

Nick said "shit" to himself and left to get organized.

The Foxtrot police force had two plain clothes detectives. They were sergeants like Nick but lacking any experience in a major case. They were mildly resentful when Johnson told them Nick was in charge. Privately, they were also somewhat relieved to be off the hook.

Two hours of reviewing the work done so far and Nick had a headache. So many details were missing he was tempted to chuck it all and start over. He needed cooperation from the men so he let it slide for now. A new plan emerged from his studies and the assignments were all switched around. Nick was then able to give orders to plug up the holes without bruising anyone's ego.

He began his investigating with the older married couple who were killed in their own home. Mr. Oscar Strong owned a financial management company using sophisticated IT systems and

the internet to control the business. There were many projects operating at any time and the work was assigned to divisions. Most of the business was custodial management of money on an international scale.

On the surface Oscar Strong and his company appeared to be trouble free. No big damage suits, no scandals and he personally had a clean police record. A check with the IRS cleared him of any tax problems. Nothing like hitting a stonewall with your nose for starters Nick thought to himself.

Mrs. Crystal Strong also had a clean record. Some of the comments of their neighbors backed up their image as a sober successful couple. Their children were married and apparently trouble free. These people look like the Donna Reed show but much more sanitary, he thought. His policeman's mind thought if something looks too good to be true, it is. Needs more work.

There was at least a connection between the murdered people. Ms. Pen Cooke, deceased, had been Strong's executive assistant for five years. It wasn't unusual for her to be present at her boss' home Nick reasoned. Ms. Cooke commuted to Foxtrot from DC regularly although corporate headquarters were located in the capitol. This case is already so bland on the surface I'm bored, he thought. However, chances were it wouldn't stay that way.

The young male victim was Mr. Bob Taylor an IT consultant for Strong's firm. Finally, a victim with a murky past life. Tay-

lor had served eight years in prison for Internet fraud on a large scale. When caught he had a cache of 50000 credit card numbers and he had stolen \$5 million using the internet. When he was released from prison he was 28 years old.

Crime does pay sometimes and Taylor was now running his own IT security company. His largest client was Oscar Strong, whose company was moving billions of dollars around the globe. Security had to be air tight or Oscar's company would be gone overnight.

Nick Noullte had more than one objection to being involved in the strange murder case. Aside from the obvious potential it had for being a lot of trouble from many sources, he didn't want to do police work in DC. Clearly the action in this investigation was centered in DC. Foxtrot was only a place where Oscar Strong had his personal residence. All of the victims worked and socialized in the nation's capitol.

He had resigned from the DC police force two years before to escape a personal problem that had been eroding his grip on himself. Appearances are often not what they seem to be, and Nick was an archetypical model of this common deception.

He was a sturdy specimen. His features were strongly masculine, close cropped black hair, steady grey eyes and a square jaw with dimple. Nick was over six feet tall and in excellent physical condition. In the Foxtrot police department he was a puzzler.

He had a solid record of effective police work with the DCPD so why had he suddenly abandoned a promising career?

Sly remarks, subtle leading questions and direct inquiries only elicited a slight smile, and a shake of his head. Unacceptable! Hog Hollow County was located near DC. Foxtrot citizens had contacts in the nearby capitol which didn't help one bit. Peeks at his DCPD personnel file also drew a blank. He was watched carefully in Foxtrot by the other officers looking for anything unusual in his behavior. No dice.

Nick became an obsession to the town people. Crafty traps were devised to bring out the truth. Some of the county's most wanted pretty girls were easily persuaded to take a shot. Mostly, he was delighted to date the winsome beauties, it sure beat being lonely. He did have to face some consequences though in a variety of ways. There were the girls themselves who were unable to pry any intimate details from him.

Most everyone knows "hell hath no fury like a woman scorned", and in a short time, he learned the truth of this old saying. Some girls simply gave him the brush when they had enough of his unwillingness to share more about himself. However, there were the more lively beauties who turned to open hostility and loud complaints. In some cases, it led to physical violence with male family members and boy friends. He gave up dating Hog Hollow County lovelies.

Nick swore to himself, no one, except for a close friend in DCPD would ever know his shameful secret. He was run out of DC by a bit of fluff, actually two bits of fluff. Identical twin girls of outstanding beauty who were celebrity fashion models in DC. Ordinarily a young policeman and highly paid models weren't fated to be operating on the same social level.

When Nick had been on the force nearly five years he was promoted to the detective division. His first assignment was plain clothes guard duty on the street outside of a foreign embassy. The occasion was a large dinner party. He was there to protect the guests when they were on the DC streets. Meaning he mainly watched them arrive and leave in their limos.

Late in the evening guests began to exit from the embassy for home. Limos began lining up to pick up their passengers. The street came alive with guests, drivers and body guards busy on their cell phones giving orders. Nick was standing at the bottom of the embassy steps watching the action closely for any disturbances.

Near his station four people swirled out onto the steps of the building. Two men were struggling in front of two frightened girls. One man was trying to protect them. The other one had a knife and he was charging toward the girls.

Noulte ran up the steps to stop the fight. As he neared the struggling men the knife wielder flung off his opponent and lunged for the girls. Nick raced into the breach between the man

and the screaming ladies. The attacker dodged his attempt to grab his arm and subdue him. Still loose he slashed at Nick with his knife opening up his right forearm from the elbow to his wrist, much like slitting open the belly of a fish. Blood began to gush out of the gaping wound as he tried to stay on his feet. As he stumbled away from his assailant he tripped and fell to the floor.

Now gripped in a killing rage the man stood over Nick ready to stab him but he managed to roll away from him. He pulled a small automatic out of an ankle holster and shot the madman in the knee causing him to pitch forward onto Nick. Gripping the man by the neck as he lay there entangled with his assailant he began to choke him in spite of the searing pain in his wounded arm. Fortunately two other officers arrived to save the attacker's life from Nick's stranglehold.

Nick lost consciousness from loss of blood and his last glimpse at anything were two beautiful girls standing near him. As he faded out he thought to himself maybe its only one girl and I'm seeing double.

Chapter Five

Nick came back into this world believing he was in a flower garden. The air was heavy with fragrances wafting from banks of roses and other flower species. His eyes focused as the anesthetic from his emergency surgery wore off. About every color there is in flowerdom was present. Except for a few modest bouquets sent by fellow officers and family, the huge floral display was from the lovely girls he had defended the night before.

Mercedes and Britney Hamilton were identical twin sisters of rare beauty. Success started very early for them. They were a commercial commodity by the time they were six years old. Through their growing up years there was hardly a famous brand product they hadn't advertised. Dolls, bicycles, toys of all types, clothing, shoes and the list goes on.

They had a fresh looking quality about them. Auburn hair, sparkly green eyes, turned up noses and full lips in perfect proportion combined to produce a dazzling sight. Now twenty years old, their beauty was approaching full bloom. Nick was hardly a hero type since he was an optimist who liked people rather than being a warrior. He took "serve and protect" seriously and he had performed his duty as a policeman to stop a dangerous assailant.

The next day a surgeon arrived with several aides to check him out. Nick's right arm was completely swathed in a cotton dressing. He was checked for blood leakage on the bandage, temperature taken, eyes examined for focus and his ears though he didn't know why. Tests done he was transferred to a hospital room.

Word of his progress must have traveled quickly. He had been in the room roughly thirty minutes when Mercedes and Britney swept into the room with their entourage. Parents, manager and several photographers filled up the space around his bed. The parents shook his hand murmuring thank yous, the manager who Nick rescued gushed out banalities. When it was the twins turn they nearly smothered him in their arms. Kisses and hugs began being careful not to touch his wounded arm.

It was a hero's welcome from a grateful group of people. Now it would become tricky since the girls had never met an authentic brave man before. The men they had known were in the fashion industry who weren't known to be particularly physical types. Here was Nick, a policeman, handsome, virile looking and matching their romantic fantasies. So the game began.

When he was released from the hospital the following day the twins whisked him away in a limo. He was taken to a luncheon in his honor sitting at a table flanked by the girls. So the compliments from people continued at the luncheon, Nick shaking

hands with his left one. A police commissioner was there to laud his bravery in the line of duty and rewarding him with a special week off with pay.

Hero worship was the only phrase that fits the twins reaction to him. Without his consent he was taken to a mansion the girls owned in Alexandria. Very tired he was guided to his guest room and allowed to flop on the bed alone. When he woke up there was a knock on the door. His visitor was the twins' father.

He was there to lay down the rules of decorum for Nick in order to avoid any embarrassing situations. Pretty much he was told hands off the valuable property meaning his daughters, of course. Veiled threats mingled with polite conversation clearly informed him any false moves could leave him singing soprano.

Nick understood him and the priceless commodity that his daughters represented. Right then he began to feel sorry for them, they were living in a fish bowl. The father also filled him in on the wild scene at the embassy. His assailant was a drunken tycoon in the garment trade who had an obsession for the girls.

Apparently Mercedes refused to sit at his table because he was drunk. Their manager saw trouble coming and he herded the twins out to the front entrance. Unfortunately the drunk staggered after them and the ruckus erupted.

At dinner that evening, Mercedes was seated next to Nick and Britney sat across from him. In between the girls sat their father

at the head of the table. A pillow was thoughtfully provided to rest his injured arm. His wound had begun to throb with pain but he was determined to keep it to himself. Twenty guests were seated for dinner chatting away while they waited for the first course to be served.

Nick was talking to the girls attempting to make them understand he was doing his job as a police officer that night. His explanation didn't seem to dim the light in their eyes as he spoke to them nor penetrate their minds. Their father was leaning forward having a conversation with a guest. It was an awkward seating arrangement but he knew the father planned it that way to separate him from direct contact with his darlings.

He nearly jumped out of his chair when Mercedes' foot began to creep up his inner thigh. She smiled sweetly at him as she continued to talk while her foot massaged his thigh then crept slowly toward his crotch. He froze and glanced over at the father but he was still engrossed in conversation. No help there. Looking at Mercedes he tried to signal her to stop by a slight shake of his head. She only winked at him and continued to explore his nether region.

For God's sake don't make a scene he told himself, I'll get up and go to the bathroom to stop this. Brilliant idea but Britney's hand began to explore his other thigh before he could stand up. Her smile was also angelic. Panicking, he started to get up again however Britney's hand clamped down on his leg to stop him.

And Mercedes's foot had now reached his fly.

Desperate now, Nick rose violently from his chair just as a waitress was about to fill his soup bowl. His move knocked her over while the tureen took flight and landed on the father's head. He screamed as the boiling hot liquid spilled onto his head and lap. Mr. Hamilton leaped out of his chair faster than Nick's move.

All of these physical exertions caused the wound to be ripped open and bleed profusely. Three steps away from the table he fainted from the loss of blood. It probably wasn't too much of a tragedy for him. He escaped from the melee he had caused, or rather, the bits of fluff created.

Nick went through the entire emergency procedure again at the hospital. Lt. Simmons, the officer in charge of his detective unit came to see him. After a solicitous remark or two about his condition, he said.

"We have reviewed the incident at the embassy party the other night. Your intervention was admirable," he hesitated, then continued, "but we made note of your possession of an ankle holster containing a small caliber automatic. You have no clearance to carry a hidden firearm while on duty. Permission was never granted since you never made a request to carry a concealed weapon. You have been cited for the violation and suspended from duty for two weeks. A copy of the citation will be available to you at the station. Get well soon."

He left the hospital room abruptly.

Several days later he was released from the hospital disconsolate over the disasters in his life. The Hamilton twins were in Paris for a fashion show which was a relief. He hoped they would soon forget him in their fast moving lives so he could get back to normal. Stan, his friend on the force came to see him.

He brought him up to date on the activities in the department and how the talk about him was fading.

“Maybe by the time I can go back on duty this whole twin thing will be forgotten.” Nick replied, “I never want to see them again. Their manager must be well paid to keep those two in line and on schedule. I was warned by their father to stay away from them. Not much of a problem there. He doesn’t have to worry about me.”

Stan sipped his beer as he listened.

“The girls are trouble alright, I talked to a reporter I know who works for the DC Daily Snore about them. He told me the father and the modeling staff are always working hard to keep them out of the news. They’re a wild pair but the American public who adore the little darlings aren’t aware of the truth. Obviously millions of dollars in revenue depend upon the fresh looking All American girls staying out of trouble. You could be trouble.”

“Not anymore, I’m staying clear of them.”

“Yeah, but will they leave you alone? Word is they are both

crazy about their hero.”

This talk re-kindled his anxiety. The hype, the crowds and all of that frenetic energy was not for him. He made his decision.

“I’m bailing Stan before those two terrors return to the states. I’m leaving today. I want you to carry my resignation letter to the department. Clear out my locker and close my apartment down for me. Okay? I’ll be in touch in a week or two.”

“You might regret this, you’re blowing your career with DCPD.”

“So be it. It’s painful but I’m desperate to get away from a big publicity circus involving the ‘lovely girls’. They would ruin my image as a policeman if I was publicly connected to the twins in DC. I’m sure the thrill seeking media would portray me as a party guy having fun with the Hamilton twins. My career in DC as a serious cop would be ruined. Rumors would spread like wild fire in the department. No, they’ve done enough damage as it is, they’ll not get a another shot at me.”

Chapter Six

Sergeant Noulte dug into the Forest Avenue murder case and began a twelve hour a day schedule studying the backgrounds of the four victims. His team was busy interviewing family members, friends and business associates. It was a huge undertaking. One murder required a great deal of fact finding, but four victims all involved in a single case gave one pause.

At least there was a close association among the victims. They were all connected to Oscar Strong's IT operation. He was reasonably optimistic that the case wouldn't be as complicated as it appeared to be on the surface.

His first task was to determine where the people were killed. It wasn't clear whether they were killed at the house or if they were deposited there after the deed was done. He had hoped to find a neighbor who might have heard something or saw a vehicle arrive at the Strong residence. So far, no one on the street could help the police.

He needed to get a feel for the killing. Returning to the scene Nick poked around the murder scene, nothing. Then he read the forensic reports made on the day the victims were discovered by the landscaper. He also studied the data created by VBI and the state police. Nothing. No signs of struggle were found, no blood trails starting from somewhere else, nothing broken, etc.

He ordered forensics to go over the property again. He asked them to take a microscopic look for a footprint or tire track, maybe a few threads stuck on something. He stopped there not wanting to insult his team. He went out of his way to make it clear he was not questioning their work, Nick wrote a whole paragraph praising their progress so far. Damn this case he thought to himself, egos are all around me in the department. It's like walking in a minefield. Like it or not he had to tread cautiously because he desperately needed everyone's best efforts.

It was assumed the people had been dead for approximately 24 hours or so before being discovered, At least it was the best guess Dr. Croft had made. He was the only coroner who examined the bodies at the scene. Other reports didn't question his conclusion. Nick didn't ask for the bodies to be exhumed, but he did request a careful study of the reports for any tiny thing worth questioning. He knew his actions were irritating a number of people. No other choice though.

Next was reading the reports on the movements of the victims prior to their demise. It was easy, no eyewitnesses. Nick's mind screamed, BUT? But nothing. Nothing was known past his "but". Here came the next move in the investigation to probably alienate the rest of his police team. Go question everyone again and ask more questions. This included visiting ALL the gas sta-

tions, cafes, motels, bars, movie theaters etc.

He could almost hear the cries of outrage while he wrote orders.

Nick didn't leave himself out of the investigative work, on the contrary, he would do the background work necessary in DC. There was no one else on the force qualified to investigate the IT firm and the people employed by Strong. He fervently hoped nothing would happen to bring him to the attention of the twins while he slipped around the capitol gathering information. Maybe they're out of town on a model project, he thought to himself, then I could be gone before they return to DC.

He felt such good fortune was probably not in the cards for him, it wasn't how his life had gone. He had a history going back to his childhood of having things go wrong for him in the most impossible ways.

Noulte made an appointment to visit his former boss in the detective section of the DC police department. He had quit his job in DC quickly so he wasn't sure how Captain Mc Elroy would greet him. He went to the appointment wearing his Fox-trot police uniform. It was an effort to look like a professional, no nonsense officer.

Mc Elroy was cool to him when he entered the office a few minutes ahead of the appointment time hoping it would impress the captain. He looked Nick over.

"I suppose I should say welcome back, but it would be dishon-

est. What do you want?”

“Good to see you again captain,” Nick replied lamely, “I-uh I suppose you have followed the Forest Avenue murder case in Foxtrot. I’m in charge of the investigation probably because everyone in the department managed to duck it, ha ha.” he said, hoping it would be a humorous ice breaker. Not so. McElroy remained stony faced. He replied.

“I suppose you’re here to have the DC police department solve it for you. Failing that, you probably intend to run away again.” He felt the sting of the remark, but ignored it with some effort.

Keeping his tone of voice steady, he replied.

“I’m hoping the department has some background information on Oscar Strong and his IT company here in DC. I shouldn’t be here more than an hour, sir.”

“Your old pal Stan has been working on some company information. You should be able to find his office without any help.”

Stan had been expecting Nick. He did extensive background work beforehand about the Strong IT operations. After talking awhile, Nick asked Stan about the Hamilton twins and if he knew where they were.

“You’re in the clear, they’re in Australia.” Stan replied. “Left yesterday so you’re good for at least a week before they return to DC. Let’s go have a beer and I’ll fill you in on what I learned about the IT operation.”

Seated in their favorite bar, Stan began talking about Strong Inc. and its operations.

“The company has an excellent reputation for being reliable in protecting the operations of its clients and an expert at moving money around the world. It’s a secretive operation and its clientele is unknown to the public. They use the Swiss banking method of coded numbers to identify its customers. That information is only known to four executives in the firm. Employees are only given transaction codes to work with.

“Naturally there is speculation and guesses about possible government covert business being a part of the operation, but no leaks to substantiate the rumors. Breaking into the office files would be a useless exercise. You could only learn what the employees know already. Strong was a genius at designing laborin-thian operations that led nowhere. They say a single transaction might be sent in five directions at one time.

‘There is talk that Strong was responsible for the murder of a well known hacker last month. They say he was a genius at laying traps for hackers. Once identified, they seemed to disappear from the internet

“But there is trouble in the company at the executive level not known outside of its offices. Oscar’s brother has been fighting to get control of the company claiming most of their success is due to his engineering work. Now that his brother is dead Rob

Strong is actively working to take over.

“It’s a legal mess. Oscar’s wife died with him, leaving their children with the responsibility of straightening out the control problems. Frankly Nick I don’t know how you’ll ever solve this case without help. You have to persuade Captain Johnson to turn the matter over to the state to handle. I have prepared a report for the captain maybe he’ll change his mind.

Nick felt the cold finger of dread shiver up his spine as he digested the information about a powerful secretive IT company and its troubles. He was out of his element trying to investigate a complex situation involving an on line giant. He quickly agreed with his friend and thanked him for his help. On a personal level he was relieved that he needn’t stay in DC any longer, considering his past real life strange occurrences. The twins might show up tomorrow rather than next week.

Chapter Seven

Although Nick had only been away for a few days he would learn things weren't the same in the Forest Avenue murder case. Armed with Stan's investigative report he went to see Captain Johnson to rid himself of the case as recommended by his buddy. Seated in the chief's office he relaxed while Johnson read the report.

When he had finished Noulte spoke up immediately.

"Stan did us a real favor by spending so much time digging up the facts about Strong's IT operation. When you pass his work along to VBI they'll have some insight into what areas will need to be investigated. You can see I'm not the one to head up the investigation."

Johnson looked at Nick almost sympathetically. His antenna went up. He could sense trouble coming since he had never seen captain Johnson show compassion before.

"Nice report. Insightful, good grasp of the situation and informative. But, while you were away in DC, big changes were happening."

Nick was almost afraid to ask. He didn't have to, Johnson went on to elaborate.

"The FBI has informed us they are taking over the case claiming Strong Inc is a vital vendor to federal government agencies. A blanket of silence now exists over the investigation. Before

you rejoice, the FBI wants you to represent local authority. It's a sort of a token gesture to prevent resistance to their activities around the town."

The human mind is remarkably flexible. With the speed of light Nick went from exultation to despair. Johnson told him to continue his work on the case, FBI be damned. The chief had told them Nick would be working independently. The FBI didn't care. It would be good PR to demonstrate their cooperation with local authority. Sergeant Noulte had nothing more to say to the captain, he shrugged, and left the office.

Sometimes, out of the blue, information vital to a case is provided by someone other than a police officer. The day after his disastrous meeting with the captain, Nick was visited by Pam Stone, a reporter for a DC newspaper called the Capitol Daily Wind. He looked at her suspiciously because she was known for her clever snooping. He didn't want to talk to her about the Forrest Avenue case.

Pam introduced herself. He attacked.

"I know who you are Ms. Stone and if you are here about the multiple murder case you're wasting my time. I have nothing to say or add to the information already known to the public."

Pam was a thick skinned veteran reporter and his declaration didn't bother her. She replied.

"You needn't worry Sergeant Noulte, I'm not here to pump

you for information about the Forest Avenue murders. To the contrary, I'm here to help you. I know you have a serious problem trying to find a starting point to trace the movements of the victims just prior to their demise. So did I, but I have developed a reliable network of people in Virginia who provide me with gossip about our citizens.

"They send me newspaper clippings from the local papers about social events. I sifted through the last month's items looking for anything I might have overlooked at the time as unimportant. I found a society item from Richmond dated two days before the murders naming some of the prominent people who attended the annual Strawberry Hill horse races. It's a time honored event going back to ante bellum days.

"One of the articles mentioned that the Wiltons had the Strong family as their guests for the races. I took a trip down to Richmond to interview the Wiltons about the visit. They were eager to help me. Oscar and Crystal Strong had visited them. They mentioned two of Strong's staff members were with them in Richmond to mix business with pleasure. Oscar's sister lives in Richmond with her husband Beau Bradley. They also visited them while in the city."

"Legere Bradley, the sister to Oscar, refused to talk to me about her brother's murder. It's a typical response for reporters so I wasn't upset. I came here to see you sergeant since you're the local policeman in charge of the case. With your police authority Legere Bradley would be forced to see you."

Nick was in a dilemma, he was delighted to hear about a place to begin tracing the victims' movements. On the other hand, cooperation with Ms. Stone meant a pay off of some kind. He asked her.

"If I decide a visit to Richmond is worth the trip, and I'm saying, if, what do you expect to gain?"

"I'll leave that up to you, sergeant." she replied looking innocent. "I would like to be kept informed of any progress in the case. But only what you will give out to the public. Just give me the information a little ahead of the public announcement,"

Nick mulled the deal over before answering her. Sounds fair enough to me he thought. It can't hurt to give her a little edge. She has opened up the investigation for me.

"No harm in that I guess. I'll let you know before information becomes public." then he warned her, "Only a day or so. Do you understand Ms Stone?"

"Oh sure sergeant that'll be great."
She shook his hand, and left the office.

Nick summoned the two department detectives to his office shortly after the reporter left. He was angry since the interviews of friends and family of the victims was their responsibility. He told them briefly about Ms, Stone's visit to his office then threw their report on the desk. He gestured at the folder.

"Oscar Strong's sister Legere, only has a short paragraph in

your report. I'm sure you don't remember it so I'll read it."

"Ms Legere Bradley was contacted by telephone today for any information that would aid our investigation. Her answers about her brother's whereabouts and anything he might have said, consisted of responses that she didn't know anything about her brother. 'He's in DC and I'm here in Richmond'."

Now I ask you, don't her responses strike you as uncooperative, even a little hostile?" Nick said with an edge in his voice.

Silence. Nick waited for some response. They shifted in their chairs, looked intently at one another, one replied.

"Should we make an appointment to interview her down in Richmond or something?"

"No, I'll meet with her. I want you to go over every interview and statement taken in this investigation. Look for any more oversights asking yourself, 'would sergeant Noulte be satisfied with this information?' If not, then I suggest you do the questionable reports over again from scratch. No quick phone calls to people you know, no assumptions or guesswork. I want honest to God police reports. Dismissed."

Nick would interview Legere Bradley. He was trying to decide whether he should go to Richmond. or interview her in Fox-trot. It would be a meeting in Richmond he decided since she seemed to be a difficult person to deal with.

Arriving in the city, he wasn't surprised to be given directions to the West End of Richmond near the James River to an estates

division called Windsor Farms. He drove through the entrance into a model community of perfectly groomed grounds and a myriad of house styles. This is no ordinary subdivision, he thought to himself, you can almost smell the money.

Their home was a large brick house with two wings and low brick walls on either side leading into flower gardens. Legere greeted sergeant Noulte warmly gushing out platitudes about the attention the police were giving to the horrible murders. Vowing to cooperate in any way to find her brother's killer, ad nauseum. This high energy personality was overwhelming him and he was caught off guard. He was prepared for a hassle or a cold reception based on the report written by his men. She finally finished by telling Nick.

"You just relax sergeant and I'll do ma best to help you in any way I can to find mah bruthuh's killuh,"

He was looking at a woman in her late thirties he guessed. Her black hair was shoulder length, flashing blue eyes and a large mouth set in a lean face. Almost a caricature of the skinny rich ladies pictured in publications covering some important society affair.

Nick started to speak but a man walked up to them. He looked like the "doughboy" in the biscuit commercials on TV. Everything about him was round, he had a "pouty" lower lip and vivid blue eyes. He put out a pudgy hand to Nick and welcomed him.

“It’s supah ta meet ya sergeant. Let’s sit down.”

Seated, Nick brought out his note pad and said.

“I’m gathering information about the victims’ movements. A good starting point seems to be their visit down here for the Strawberry Hill horse races. I understand Oscar and Dorothy Strong visited you at the time.”

“Wha yes, they were heah for a day. We hardly evah get togetha as a family cept for Christmas.” Legere replied.

Her husband suddenly cut in.

“At that, most of the time we were discussin’ dreary business mattahs. I wanted to bring’em down to our house on the riva to see the supah remodelin job we just done. It looks supah.”

Legere took center stage again by cutting in on her husband rather sharply.

“Well now deah, let’s not bore the sergeant with our family af-faihs. Anyway, they left for the Hamptons to see some friends before headin’ home. We went up to DC to see mah otha brotha for a big affaih the day after they left. It’s about all we can tell you sergeant.”

Nick asked some probing questions about any financial problems her brother might have. None he was told. How about marital problems. None. Any trouble with their offspring. None. They didn’t volunteer any information and he realized he was being stone walled by two able players.

He returned with no more than the places the murder victims visited in Richmond and the Hamptons before their return. Not much help but at least he had a starting point for their movements.

Chapter Eight

Nick continued to backtrack over the piles of interviews collected since the murder case began. He also called the people in the Hamptons the Stronges visited after leaving Richmond. The only useful information they could offer was the time the Stronges left for home the following day. Not one person in Fox-trot had seen the couple prior to the discovery of the bodies.

He thought about the coroner's guess of the time of death as about 24 hours. "About", an estimate word, Nick thought to himself. He remembered the coroner's hasty handling of the autopsies and quick report of his findings. Maybe, "about", was 10 hours, or 40 hours, or something else. Damn this case!

Captain Johnson and the DA talked about the case.

"I feel kind of guilty keeping Nick stuck with the Forest Avenue mess. But I need him for his experience and to hold off any moves the FBI boys might try."

"Yeah, they haven't even contacted my office. To my knowledge no FBI agent has ever been down here. What do you make of that?" the DA replied.

"They seem to be more interested in the IT company and looking for any tampering with federal funds. Maybe they know more about the killers than we do, which wouldn't be too hard since we don't know a damned thing.

I'm relieved they've left us alone."

On the same day, the FBI sent for a copy of the local police' files covering the murder investigation. They also asked for Sergeant Noulte to personally deliver said files to the DC headquarters for a conference. Captain Johnson thus had another occasion to order his sergeant into a difficult situation with no reward for his efforts.

The captain was known by his officers as a tough by-the-book policeman, but not cruel or unfair. Today was another day and almost magically every officer in the Foxtrot police force avoided any contact with their leader. The "image" change wasn't just for shafting Noulte, Johnson had bowed at the throne of the FBI. He had docilely surrendered all of their investigation records. It was an action in their minds, of a "woosy little pussy cat" hoping to please them. How nauseating. What a betrayal of their trust in him, and on, and on, etc.

When Nick entered FBI headquarters he was followed by two Foxtrot policemen pushing a cart piled high with files. They also felt shafted. Their work wouldn't be over until every file had been signed for by an FBI agent acknowledging receipt of the paperwork. They insisted on physical information, not trusting the internet given the recent sensational hacking into government documents. They didn't explain it that way to Captain Johnson, the request came for him in a curt email.

Nick was somewhat familiar with the FBI from his time in DC, so facing two agents for the conference didn't bother him. He knew one of them would do the talking while the other one took notes. He was alert for any questions designed to open a door to any information Nick might be withholding.

FBI agent Dick Forman, a rotund member of the Bureau greeted him with a friendly smile.

"Good morning sergeant. Say, are you a relative of Nick Nolte's?"

"No, my name SOUNDS the same but it is spelled N-O-U-I-T-E. Sometimes I've considered changing my name to avoid endless explanations." he replied while he attempted to look friendly and gracious. His true meaning was understood by the two agents and decided Nick was unduly upset over a simple question. His conference with FBI agents lasted for two hours.

Nick never deviated nor made any personal comments about the initial crime scene investigation. But it helped the FBI agents to get a feel for the murders much better than the crime photographs. They went fishing for more information than the files would reveal. He had to concentrate intensely on every query. In most cases he would direct them to the Foxtrot files for the answers.

It was kind of like taking the Fifth Amendment, and the FBI agents weren't pleased with his evasions and dodges. They

abruptly ended the meeting. The agents shook Nick's hand wearing tight lipped little smiles.

He was using the trip to DC to spend a day with his buddy, Stan. At their favorite bar he brought Stan up to date on the Forrest Avenue case including the intervention by the FBI. He told him about his trip to Richmond to find out where the Strongs had been up to the time they were found dead.

"I'm now trying to trace their activities on the last day before being discovered. I have a strong feeling the killers will somehow reveal themselves in those hours. I didn't tell the FBI about the Richmond trip."

"Good move Nick, they could get in your way if they knew. You have a problem, the twins are back. Let's hope they don't find out you're here. I heard they still talk about you. But you might get lucky, their father knows you're in Foxtrot but he won't tell them."

News of the twins close proximity made his survival instincts come alive. His eyes became keener, his hearing sharpened and his feet got ready to run.

"Oh man, I've had nothing but hard times lately. Get me down to the bus station Stan. I'm out of here."

Stan couldn't talk him out of it and delivered him to the bus station. Nick learned when the next bus would leave then hid in the mens room until departure time.

Everyone, including Nick underestimated the Hamilton twins skills for getting their way. They had quietly hired a PI to be alert for any information about Nick's whereabouts. If he did, orders were to follow him. Once located he was to remain close to him and alert the twins. They promised the PI a huge bonus if he had to kidnap Nick. The twins were convinced that he loved them but blamed their father for driving him away. Everyone loved them madly, so did he, they were sure.

When he boarded the bus, an exultant PI, Pete Sanders, joined him sitting down directly behind him. A custodian at FBI headquarters was a paid informer of Pete's and he heard about Nick's arrival. He followed him when he left the FBI building. The PI was about to earn a hefty fee from the Hamilton twins. All he was required to do was to contact the twins and stay on Nick's tail until further orders.

When he returned to Foxtrot Nick realized now that his search for information about the Strongs' movements after they left the Hamptons would require reading reports over again looking for a clue. He savagely opened files and began to read. Life was punishing him without cause he reasoned, Hopefully, this last chain of mishaps would be the end of it or at least for awhile.

Chapter Nine

Strong Inc. headquarters were situated on the top three floors of a modern office building near the capitol area. Rob Strong acting CEO, since his brother Oscar was killed, was presiding over a meeting. In attendance were Oscar's three children and their attorneys. At the moment the conference room resembled a court rather than a business operation. There were eight attorneys in attendance in a meeting wrangling over management control of Strong Inc. It was a wonder the long table wasn't bowed in the middle from the weight of the stacks of legal files.

When the meeting began Rob Strong was confident he would be the new CEO of Strong Inc. He wasn't aware Legere had secretly made a deal with Oscar's children to take over the company. The combined total of their company voting shares and Legere's gave them a clear majority vote to end all opposition.

Legere gave something to get something, which was control of the company. Her shares gave the children operating control. But in their secret contract she held vetoing power over their decisions, ergo, in essence she indirectly controlled Strong Inc.. To ensure her position legally, the youngsters had to give Legere power of attorney over their voting shares. When Rob Strong heard about the deal, he voiced his opposition. He threatened a lawsuit. Even saying the threat he knew he had lost.

The Strong children were ecstatic certain they had won management control. They didn't consider Legere to be anything but their kindly aunt honoring their father's wishes. Their shared opinion of her was a homebody matron living comfortably in Richmond without any tiring thoughts about business.

Nick had also pretty much taken Legere at face value, somewhat intelligent, but not too worldly. When he learned about the power move at Strong Inc., he placed her back onto his chart of people involved in the case. One more person to study he thought to himself.

Captain Johnson was informed by the VBI forensic team that they were finished searching the Forest Avenue house and leaving the following day. This was not a happy team of people considering their record for finding any new clues. Only two significant incidents occurred while they were snooping. Early in their investigation the team found two hairs on the floor of the murder scene. With great excitement, and fan fair, the hairs were sent by helicopter to Richmond for analysis.

The findings were rushed back to them via email. It turns out the hairs belonged to Rex, the Strong's miniature poodle. During the time of the murders Rex had been locked up in the basement. When he was let out he ran wildly through the house including the murder scene room. Two winded policemen finally cornered him by the attic stairs. Rex was out of running room.

At a later date, a tire track was discovered just off the edge of the driveway where the asphalt ended. Many plaster imprints were made of the tire track and distributed to all of the police units now involved in the murder investigation. Within a few days, nearly every tire in Foxtrot had been examined for a match to the imprint. No luck. The tire manufacturer who made the brand was contacted, and one more disappointment developed for the law enforcement groups. It was a standard model without any distinctive features since it was the economy tire and millions of them had been sold.

On the day of departure the VBI team was busy retrieving the many monitors and camera equipment blanketing the grounds around the Forest Avenue house. There was a utility dirt road branching off the parking area used for transporting equipment to the undeveloped backyard. A team member was picking up the monitors on the dirt road and discovered fresh tire tracks.

What excitement! A breakthrough! With considerable alacrity groups of four assembled and each team was assigned to an area to be covered. Since the track had definitely been made that morning everyone was warned to be quiet and alert. No telling where the person or persons might be. It was delicate work stalking cautiously because the land at the rear of the property had groves of trees and thick underbrush. Weapon less team members found fist sized rocks to carry for protection lest a crazed killer, or killers, should attack them.

An hour of stalking yielded zip. The point team, guns drawn, had entered the forest of trees at the very back of the estate. One searcher began to wave his arms silently then pointed to a place a few yards off the road. He had spotted the rear fender of a pickup truck sticking out of some bushes.

The senior officer proceeded slowly to the rear end of the pickup. It was an old truck covered with dirt and a few tools lying in the back. At first it was mistaken for an abandoned vehicle. Then rustling noises emanated from a place five yards ahead of them.

They slowly combed the area without any success. No one in sight. Then more rustling noises sounded from above them. It was from a large oak tree. Before they could formulate a plan of attack, the air was suddenly filled with the sound of an engine.

Police instincts kicked in and they all began to fire in the general area of the noise above them. Leaves began falling on them from tree branches wounded from the barrage of bullets whizzing around and trimming the tree. There was a loud scream and a man fell to the ground in a shower of broken branches followed by his chain saw.

It was the tree surgeon Sam Moore who had discovered the murdered people in the Forest Avenue house. He had returned to finish the tree trimming contract paid for in advance by the Strongs. He figured it would be safe to return and fulfill his obligation. He was sent to the emergency room at the hospital again.

This time it was for a sprained back, a broken toe, scratches and bruises. No hysterics because the incident had a feeling of familiarity. Then and there Sam Moore decided to move his tree business out of Foxboro lest another adventure came his way and killed him.

Chapter Ten

In the old Foxtrot town hall every office was uncomfortably small. What with modern communications equipment, not known when it was built and larger desks, cramped, was a word that came to mind. Nick had a space in one corner of the building laughingly referred to as an office.

At the moment Captain Johnson and Nick were seated at the conference table in the DA's office. Their knees were slightly elevated in order to sit close to the table. One could stretch the legs as the only alternative to the knees up position, but it left the sitter further away from the table. Nick had laid out a number of folders, each one contained the data gathered on a person connected with the Forest Avenue murders. It was time to talk now that the VBI, FBI and the state police were, at least for now, gone from the town of Foxtrot.

It had been exhausting to work around all of these police units gathering together their own data on possible suspects and profiles of the murdered victims. Taxpayer's money had been spent recklessly because each of the three teams did their own investigation. Redundancy was a mild word for it.

Foxboro had been spared some of the expense. The DC police provided invaluable information on the victims who had worked in the capitol area. By now it was clear more than one killer was

involved since the staged murder scene couldn't have been set up by a single person. But who? and how many?

In a logical order the murder victim investigations were studied for clues about the perpetrators.

1. Oscar Strong, the CEO, had no known ties to criminals nor did he appear to have any sworn enemies.

2. Crystal Strong, was active in DC social circles and seemed to be well liked by everyone. She was apolitical. She could care less about such boring business. If someone tried to start talking politics with her she stopped them by saying her husband took care of that.

3. Bob Taylor the notorious hacker now running a legitimate IT security firm, worked with Oscar to keep the Strong Inc. IT system clear of outside intrusion. It was a challenge to any team of systems engineers because of the awesome volume of transactions Strong Inc executed daily. On the surface, he seemed to be eschewing any temptation to steal.

4. Terri Clark, executive assistant to Oscar, was the easiest of the victims to investigate because she was only in her mid twenties. Born in Maryland, attended a community college, worked two previous jobs before landing her exalted position with Oscar. So, she hadn't been around long enough to develop an interesting history.

As for murder suspects, the list wasn't promising.

1. Rob Strong, Oscar's brother had ambitions to be CEO of the IT company on the grounds of being the chief architect of the computer system. Oscar was his older brother and held a voting majority in the company. Although Rob was the computer genius it was Oscar's entrepreneurial skills that had given birth to the successful management services firm. Rob was not a quiet man and he openly complained at headquarters.

2. Oscar's children were active in the company at lower management positions. Although there weren't any outward signs of family problems, they didn't appear to be close.

3. Strong Inc. was a major vendor of financial services for the federal government. Some of their work involved highly secretive money movements for the state department and the military. Were they assassinated because there was a disaster of some kind and Oscar knew too much?

4. Since they were beginning an investigation at this late date, why did the FBI wait so long?

5. Money of itself isn't evil, but it naturally attracts evil people and creates evil situations. Considering the amounts of money the firm handled, could there be criminal elements within the operation?

This was the list the three men agreed covered what they knew at this time. Captain Johnson commented.

"Damn! We have more questions than answers. And we have

nothing solid to investigate. No apparent motive, no murder weapon, we don't know what killed them and no real suspects. We will now wait for someone to make a mistake, it's the time honored method."

"Am I off the case then captain?" Nick asked eagerly

The DA came to the captain's rescue and replied.

"You would think that would be right Nick. But you know one of our main objectives here is to keep a lid on this case. You're doing a hell of a job at keeping the media muffled and restricting the other police units from doing any investigation without a Foxtrot policeman present. Now we have a new challenge, the FBI is trying to start the whole damned thing again. So, we still need you Nick to continue defending our town."

Nick lost his joyful look before the DA stopped talking. He wanted to argue that the FBI sort of told him they only wanted the investigation data he delivered to DC. No use getting into a big argument, he thought to himself, the captain and the DA hold the power. He nodded, put on an insincere smile and left the room.

Captain Johnson almost had a pang of pity for the sergeant. He was saddled with a case of an indeterminate length of time. No hot leads and sources of information regarding the murders were nearly non existent. The captain didn't know Nick intended, out of desperation, to solve this case as the only road to

freedom of mind. It was like a coyote caught in a trap who would gnaw off its own paw to free itself. Better to be called “old three paw” by the pack than be dead.

He figured now that there was no sense of urgency in solving the case. His only job now was reading ALL of the interviews given by anyone to any police unit. He went to the basement where the Forest Avenue case files were stored in rows. The only thing positive in this paper morgue was a coffee pot.

Nick set up a schedule starting with the Foxtrot police interviews, in date order. State police reports would be next, then the final analysis work of the VBI. He knew there was no way to make the job easier, every word had to be read, and discarded or set on a pile designated for further study.

File #1 was opened. Nick thought illogically, of course there has to be a first file. It was a feeble effort to lighten up as he savagely ripped open the damned thing. By two AM Nick was nearing the one quarter mark of the Foxtrot interview files. So far, only two files were set aside for another look.

Within a day’s time, the entire Foxtrot police force knew Nick had been transformed into a surly, impatient madman to be avoided at all cost. Captain Johnson went to see him in an effort to defuse him before he caused trouble in the department. He was not subtle.

“Knock it off sergeant! I will not tolerate an inner conflict in the department. I’m surprised at your childish attitude, simmer

down, or I will surely kick you out of headquarters for ten days. Then you can work at home and pout all you want. Clear?”

This was the first time Nick had experienced a disciplinary action from the captain. Somewhat shocked, he automatically said, “yes sir!”. To ensure peace and tranquility, the captain had him moved to a cramped space on the unoccupied fourth floor. There, the madman would be isolated from everyone. He was also ordered to use the rear entrance to the building. That hurt.

By the end of the week he had waded through the Foxtrot data and half of the state police stuff. At present there were only ten files set aside for further investigation. These people would have to be interviewed again on specific points requiring further explanation. One of the Foxtrot residents living on Forest Avenue told the police a bizarre story about seeing phantoms or ghosts floating around on the Strong property.

Nick saw there hadn’t been any further interviews with Mrs. Mabel Undershot who claimed to have seen the mysterious apparitions. There were several reasons why the policemen hadn’t probed further with the widow. She was 97 years old living alone as a recluse. Her neighbors believed she was somewhat senile. In addition, they disliked her since Mrs. Undershot spied on everyone in the neighborhood.

It nagged at him. The widow lived nearly a quarter of a mile from the Hammer residence. It was quite a distance for an ancient lady to claim a clear view of the grounds and ghosts scam-

pering about. Before visiting Mrs. Undershot, Nick stopped by her next door neighbors for more information about her.

When he interviewed the two ladies living on either side of the Undershot house, Nick didn't mention her wild story about ghosts. At the second interview he found out the widow was a super snoop who took her snooping seriously claiming she was protecting her neighbors. No one believed her since she was also a gossip and more than one story had drifted back to the person being attacked.

Before he could ask about her long range observations, one neighbor told him Mrs. Undershot owned a US Navy long range telescope with incredible power. In Nick's opinion he thought it was rather cold when told about the money pool betting on the date she would expire. He was ready to see Mrs. Undershot.

Chapter Eleven

Nick noted 1010 Forest Avenue was printed on the mailbox situated by the sidewalk, meaning he was at the right address. He pressed on the doorbell and musical chimes announced his presence. In a few moments the door was opened for him by an elderly woman. After the standard protocol she asked who he was. Nick told her and confirmed the time of the scheduled meeting. Having satisfied his identity and his reason for being there, Mrs. Undershot opened the door. Nick sat down on the chair pointed out for him.

She sat across from him, then removed a scarf coiled tightly on her head. Free from bondage wiry bright red hair sprang out, startling Nick. It was cut in a mohawk style, red down the middle with dazzling green crew cut hair on the sides. In a matter of seconds he was looking at a fierce warrior boring a hole in him through squinty eyes. Nick's right hand instinctively moved toward his gun, but he controlled himself. His hands were now clasped together on his knees.

She let out a croaky laugh and said.

"You look shocked not what you expected I suppose."

"I guess not," he replied as he stared at her.

"No use wasting time officer you're curious about the apparitions I saw the night of the murders. I know what I saw." she

added for emphasis. "There were several spirits at the rear of the house. Saw them plain as day. Sort of floating. I am a member of the 'Born again to be born again' inquiry group and we all are gifted seers who have seen many spirits. It is my duty to protect this neighborhood against spirits invading the area. My neighbors don't believe me, but it's okay, I use my methods to fend off bad spirits anyway."

Nick wanted to leave now. He had to be careful about what he asked her to avoid being trapped in the house having to listen to more of this nonsense. In a calm voice he asked her what time of night did she see, ah, the spirits. And how long did they hang around, so to speak. Her answers were immediately followed by Nick's dash to the door and his hurried good night. Prior experiences with people in the past who claim their own unique views of the world had taught him how to get the hell out of there.

Spirits of something now added to this baffling murder mystery. It almost seemed normal to Nick. Why not? he thought to himself, just one more thing to investigate. He would have liked to simply dismiss the wild tale as the hallucinations of a lunatic. But, what if she didn't see ghosts but real people moving around?

In the morning he would again search the grounds around the Forest Avenue house to find, or rule out, evidence of some activity. A disbelieving Foxtrot police force heard Nick order all

of them to assemble at the Forest Avenue house to work on another search. He rode alone to the house since the other officers quickly dove into their squad cars. They followed Nick up the driveway to the rear entrance.

It was a careful search of the grounds where Mrs. Undershot claimed to have seen the ghosts. Nick was fairly sure the apparitions were really the killers carrying the bodies into the house, or she was totally unbalanced.

She had described their movements, and how the spirits had floated out of sight several times then reappeared in the same area. It sounded like bodies wrapped in some kind of white material to him. Nick ruled out sheets since there were no blood marks anywhere in the house. Then she said they left in a white chariot and disappeared to their divine home.

He guessed the murders occurred somewhere else, then the murder victims were transported to the house. Mrs. Undercut couldn't see the killers from her vantage point only the white floating objects. He had checked it out with binoculars. Distance to the house from Mrs. Undercut's location showed him the rear of the house was nearly invisible. It was simply too dark, but something white might be seen from that distance. The latest search of the area didn't dig up anything new. The only result of the effort were added resentments toward him from the squad.

He had a meeting with Captain Johnson and the DA about this break in the case. For the first time since the killings Nick felt a sense of achievement by learning how the bodies might have been delivered to the house. Captain Johnson was relieved to hear about some progress no matter how small.

"Now the case feels more real. It definitely tells us something about the killers movements and that the people were already dead, then brought to the house. Without any doubt the murders were planned down to the perfect placement of the victims."

The DA looked more hopeful now. He added.

"Obviously the killers knew the victims. The intricate planning and execution tells us our killers were confident they were too clever to be caught. They also created an apparently unsolvable crime by creating the baffling murder scene."

Nick replied,

"But, there might have been an inadvertent mistake. It's possible they were seen by eagle eyed Mrs. Undershot as she randomly scanned the neighborhood. Let's hope we won't have to wait so long for another mistake."

Captain Johnson looked heavenward and said.

"Amen to that."

Nick went back to work concentrating on the movement of vehicles in Foxtrot. Being a small town he reasoned there was a decent chance of learning about the killers' transportation. He guessed the "white chariot" was a white van or a similar vehicle.

Although it wasn't a city, he was amazed at the miles of video tape produced from surveillance cameras installed at gas stations, public buildings and stores. It was necessary to scan all of the license plates of vehicles moving around the area in a 24 hour period before the discovery of the bodies.

Nick put together a less than enthusiastic crew to do the dirty work. It was frustrating, some license plates were difficult to read because of the movement of the vehicle. To keep the peace, Nick took on the job of identifying the unreadable plates by stopping the tape and reversing the images over and over. Several days later, the search was called off when the last of the DMV reports came in identifying the owners of the white vehicles. Nearly 90 % of the white cars were owned by local residents. Only 1% were vehicles from another state. the others were Virginia plates.

All of the owners' names were screened through the FBI records for a possible lead to the killers. In a short time, DMV profiles and FBI reports eliminated most of the Foxtrot residents and all of the out of state vehicles as commercial trucks making deliveries in the town.

Only ten possible suspects showed up in the search. Although there was a history of some past indiscretions, five were eliminated because they were driving mini cars incapable of hauling a bunch of corpses. Eventually the other five possibles all had solid alibis for their movements at the time in question.

To ease the pain of his constant frustrations Nick got very drunk. Not a regular practice of his, but understandable as the fates again gave him the shaft. To date, nothing about this case had been easy. The video tape study had been a slim hope something might lead to a suspect. If Mrs. Undershot's story was correct, the vehicle had to be large enough to carry the victims to the house. So, they were looking for SUVs, pickup trucks and vans of some kind. Obviously they didn't get a full picture of vehicular activity from the videotapes, there were many other routes available in town without cameras.

He returned to the slow, tedious task of reading interview reports trying to stay awake and study each one carefully. At the time, the police squad had been pressed hard to meet set deadlines to finish the interviews. Many of the interviews remained handwritten for lack of time to type up reports. Nick learned to intersperse the typewritten reports with the handwritten scribbles to save his eyes from burning out of his head.

Some of these crudely written gems had to be put aside so he could question officers about "what the hell is this word?" "did he say what make of van drove by?" "pretty sure" doesn't mean a damned thing to me"

One day after he hung up from a conference call with VBI, FBI, and VA state police, Nick casually remarked to Captain Johnson.

"This maddening case only needs the CIA to make the chaos completely impossible."

"Don't say things like that Nick, you might tempt something out there to make it happen."

"I don't believe in that stuff, it happens by itself."

Not more than an hour went by before he was summoned to Johnson's office. He entered the captain's office to see a young woman talking with Johnson. The conversation broke off as he came in. Johnson couldn't hold back a sly smile as he said.

"CIA agent Pearson, I'd like you to meet Sergeant Nick Noulte he's in charge of the Forest Avenue murder case."

She smiled and held out her hand which Nick grasped with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. He greeted her, she asked him.

"Just curious, but are you related to Nick Nolte the actor?"

"No connection," he replied, barely moving his mouth, "No, unfortunately, my name is spelled N-O-U L T-E, see the difference Agent Pearson?"

Agent Pearson only nodded her head as she stared at the animal in front of her who was most assuredly preparing to attack her.

Captain Johnson quickly brought their attention to himself and the reason for the meeting.

"Agent Pearson's assignment is to liaison with us and work directly on the investigation, sergeant. I have already made arrangements to move you to a larger office where the two of you

can work together. This might be exactly the help we need to break this case wide open." Seeing the murderous expression on Nick's face, Captain Anderson responded quickly. "Here is a memo for you sergeant outlining your new duty assignment. That is all."

In the hallway outside of the captain's office, Nick walked rapidly away from Agent Pearson. He sought solace and serenity in a local bar across the street from police headquarters. With remarkable restraint under the present circumstances, he ordered a beer rather than the hard stuff. Before Frank the bartender could start a casual conversation, he settled down in the last booth in the bar and sipped his beer. But the day wasn't over yet and in blew Agent Pearson who promptly sat down across from him. No greeting, only a steady eyed look at Nick.

"I'm accustomed to the adolescent behavior you displayed in Captain Johnson's office. It's a typical reaction from small town policemen when they are forced to work with me. Most likely they feel intimidated by a CIA agent and afraid to look foolish. I refuse to work with people who are only going to slow my progress. Send the files to the office Johnson sets up and stay away from me. I'll call you if I have a question. Got it?"

She stood up and left the bar.

Mixed emotions soared through Nick's brain. Delighted to be rid of her. As if he wanted to work with a spook, he thought to

himself, let's see how well she does without help. He was also worried about Captain Johnson's reaction to the hostile situation he had created in his office. Best to stay out of headquarters and concentrate on the Foxtrot people who his men failed to question thoroughly. They had known them for years.

The following day Nick was retreating backward down the sidewalk of a man he had just interviewed. He was fending off a fierce and determined small dog now ripping his pant leg. It was a delicate situation since the owner merely called out to his beloved pet, "here Pooky, here boy." Nick couldn't kick the dog loose in front of the Pooky lover, instead, he tried to waggle his leg hoping the little ---- would lose his grip on him.

Not meaning to, he wrenched his leg violently and Pooky's head struck the gate post knocking the dog senseless. He made a hasty retreat to his squad car uttering apologies to Pooky's owner but there was no real punch in his words. Only ten more people to interrogate, he thought to himself, this is hopeless.

Chapter Twelve

In DC, two invited guests stood near the front entrance of a grand ballroom appearing to be relaxed as they talked. They were there ostensibly to lend their support to a \$1000 a plate dinner held for some cause or other. Their attendance was really a smoke screen for a meeting of a sinister nature involving Strong Inc. and the murders. These people did business in the shadows.

There was a comfortable smile on the countenance of one of them. He was saying,

“We have developed a problem in Foxtrot. Some snoopy old bitch apparently saw us at the Forest Avenue house that night. Dammit! But it may not mean anything to us. She was too far away in the darkness to identify anyone or give a description of the van.”

His associate wore a smarmy smile as he replied.

“Our planning was solid, a happenstance like this is beyond anyone’s control. We stay away from her and see if anything more develops out of this. If it becomes a bigger problem, then she vanishes. Stay on it.”

“I’ve been hearing about a police sergeant in Foxtrot who is heading up the Forest Avenue homicide investigation. One of our associates has studied him. Although he doesn’t seem to

have solid information presently, to be prudent he has to go. His name is Nick Noulte, not a relative of the actor, and he is a former DC detective. I don't want to have a well trained cop close to us."

The listener stopped smiling for a second, then hastily assumed the pleasant little grin again. He replied.

"We can't do that! It's too big a risk to knock him off right there in a small town. I don't like it."

"It must be done. I have one of our associates ready for the assignment. This is a stalking situation. Noulte will be killed at a propitious moment when there is no doubt it is an accident. It may take some time to find the right setting, but it will happen."

"You're the boss, I know how careful you are."

he replied in a rather unsteady voice.

CIA agent Pearce was never seen in the city hall during regular working hours. The police department was headquartered there and she made visits at night. This way she didn't have to deal with, nor counsel with the local police, especially not Nick. It was no secret she was there, but the department personnel understood clearly why the nocturnal visits. It was insulting to have a law officer treat them with such obvious scorn.

Nick wasn't upset in the least about her deliberate move to have no contact with the local police. In fact, it was a relief to have her out of his way.

He commented. “well, how about that, she is truly living up to the CIA’s nickname, ‘spook’.”

It was a remark he made to one of the officers on his team who repeated it to another cop. It finally reached the ears of Captain Johnson who was not amused. He called Nick into his office for a little chat.

“Dammit Nick keep your opinions to yourself. We need to keep the peace with all of these high powered law enforcement groups. I don’t want to be reprimanded because of your big mouth. Think before you talk around your officers.”

Nick had nothing to say, he was wrong.

“I apologize captain, it was stupid and witless to open my mouth. It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“It was a particularly bad choice to criticize Agent Pearce who has already shown her contempt for us. When she hears about your little joke, she’s the kind of officer who might complain loudly to the mayor and maybe her own superiors. Let’s hope she’s too busy to bother about it. I can’t even hope she never hears about your idiotic joke. This case is so plagued with bad luck it’s too much to ask. You’re dismissed sergeant.”

Nick gratefully exited the office.

Back in his office, he glumly began to read the media reports taken from TV broadcasts and newspaper articles written about the murders. It was quite a pile since there were four victims and

each had their own story.

His head was buried in a newspaper when a visitor tapped lightly on his door. It was the reporter Pam Stone who didn't wait for him to invite her in. She sat down at his desk smiling cheerfully. She said.

"Good morning, it's the snoop again, however I'm not here to bother you. Per our recent agreement I have a few tid bits possibly unknown to you, Nick."

He looked up at her. No acknowledgement of her presence and certainly no welcoming smile.

"If this is an intelligence mission, Ms. Stone, you have wasted your time. I'm no further ahead on the case than the last time I saw you. I'm very busy."

Being a veteran reporter his rude response rolled off of her like rain drops from a roof. Still smiling she said,

"Give me some credit if you had something new I would probably know it. Your cops talk like old ladies at a bridge game. Now do you want to talk to me nicely so I can brighten up your day?"

Nick wrestled mightily to calm down. He was still agitated over the latest dead ends in the case and he was ready to burn the damned case files and skip town. He paused for a moment, then monotoned a reply.

"Go ahead with your so-called helpful news."

"You should probably swear me in as a special investigator.

My intelligence network appears to produce more insightful information than your files.”

Pam quickly pulled out a folder from her case.

“My informants around the area came through for me again with information about the final day in the life of Oscar Strong and his wife.”

Nick became the eager student with this great news.

“I know you aren’t a native Virginian, Nick. It has more traditional observances than any other state in the union because it’s the oldest. One of these time honored events is the annual wild horse round up on the Chesapeake peninsula in a small town in Virginia.

“This colony of horses has been in existence for at least four centuries. The most commonly accepted theory of how they got there is from Spanish ships sailing in a route close to the Chesapeake peninsula. It is believed they were survivors from sailing ships that sank along the coast and they swam ashore.

“Once again, I put the word out on Oscar Strong and his wife for news on the day of the murders. He’s a well known business magnate in Virginia so his appearance at various annual festivals is invariably worthy of a comment in the local newspapers. It so happens two small town papers reported the appearance of Oscar Strong and his wife at the wild horse event. Nick was desperate for her to get to the point.

Pam noticed his antsy-ness and commented.

‘Hold on Nick I’m getting to the story. You lost the thread to their whereabouts after your visit with Oscar’s sister Legere in Richmond. Then you said their friends in the Hamptons didn’t know where they were going from their home. It’s seems peculiar to me that they hadn’t openly told their friends about their planned visit to the big event.

“Here I’m guessing they were headed for the wild horse festival to meet secretly with someone. If they were meeting their employees, Pen Cooke and Bob Taylor, then it means all four of them were killed there. You need to take over the investigation from here Nick, because you have the police credentials to open doors closed to me as a reporter.”

“One more item of importance concerns Oscar’s three children. Researchers at my newspaper have also been helping me search for answers. You can eliminate the children from your list. They were all in DC that day attending the wedding of one of their childhood friends. Three birds with one shot is a pretty neat trick.”

Stunned is the only word to describe luckless Nick as he absorbed the answers to critical questions about where the murders of the Strongs’ took place. Here was a solid lead to work on in this strange murder case. He stood up and grabbed Pam by the arm and nearly propelled her into Captain Johnson’s office.

Nick was almost tongue tied as he explained the surprise visit.

“Sorry captain, but Pam here----I mean Ms Stone a reporter for, for you know----- a DC thing---- a paper. She ----”

Pam cut in at this juncture to calm things down.’

“He is trying to tell you I have some information about the Forrest Avenue murder case.”

Captain Johnson nodded at her while he kept an eye on the restless maniac literally nose to nose with him. She pulled Nick down onto a chair and repeated everything again for the captain. This assuredly informal meeting continued for three hours non stop in the captain’s office. He ordered the officer on duty to hold all phone calls and no visitors no matter what.

Chapter Thirteen

Nick left for Cincoteaque the following day. He checked into a motel outside of the town to avoid sparking the curiosity of the local folk. His first move was to reconnoiter the town in his personal car cruising down streets to get a feeling for the area. Not too hard since it looked like a smaller version of Foxtrot.

Like many Virginia small towns it had remained virtually the same for many years. It gave one the impression of having stepped back a hundred years or so when entering the village. Modern signs were there of course, like fast food joints and motels, but they were mostly sandwiched in among the old wooden buildings.

He had lunch in one of the old cafes on the main street where the locals would go for meals. It was crowded at noon, a perfect time of day to remain unnoticed by the town folk. In the early afternoon Nick realized this would be a short trip. He decided to visit the motels and hotels in the town for information. Then he would leave the area quickly before any gossip might start up about his presence in their town. And he was certain the gossip about him would happen as soon as he left the motels.

He used the same ploy at each of them by inquiring if Oscar Strong had left a package for him. With a few innocent ques-

tions he learned Oscar hadn't stayed at any of the hotels during the festival. Another dead end, he thought to himself, then he remembered the executive assistant, Pen Cooke was from Maryland. He called to find out if her parents lived in the state.

In the case file for Pen was the background information on the Cookes. Two home address' were there, one was in Silver Springs located within the DC beltway. The other home, Nick learned was a summer cottage in Maryland on the Chesapeake Bay Peninsula. "I'm not finished yet!" he said joyfully to no one.

Chesapeake Peninsula is divided by Maryland to the north and Virginia has the southern tip. It's mainly a rural area consisting of the fishing industry and small towns. No major highways run through the area since it's not a tourist attraction requiring large ingress connections.

No large towns, not needed, since there isn't much employment aside from agriculture and fishing. If it wasn't for the villages situated on the main highway with traffic lights a driver in this area is in danger of falling asleep at the wheel. In short, not much to see.

The rural area became Nick's next challenge when he left Cincoteaque and headed for the Cooke's summer place. Leaving the main highway, the roads became narrow and marked by state and county highway signs. Basically the rural roads twisted and turned because they were the trails set down centuries ago

for horse travel. Nick was confident that his Geo Navigator would lead him unerringly to the place.

Geo Navigators don't always have the most accurate information, especially in rural areas where changes have been made over the years. In many cases these corrections were never recorded. This leaves road maps only somewhat in tune with the roads. In the backwoods areas like the Virginia Chesapeake region, the changes were rarely reported by the inhabitants. No need they figured. Unless a number of complaints came in from motorists, the towns and counties weren't going to spend a lot of community tax money on map changes.

Nick was not a Virginian and he had not encountered this problem before. He was about to learn more about Virginia than he cared to know. Following his guidance system he drove on the main highway and some state roads without a hitch. On his first county road he got lost. Already edgy from weeks of frustrations and blind alleys Nick was not suited to be out in the woods alone.

Of course, logically the first object of his wrath was the damned geo gadget that wasn't working. Defective! Warranty, or outdated warranty made no difference the manufacturer was in for some real trouble from him!

Thankfully, he reached a gas station which meant hope of finding out where he had made a wrong turn or something. There were cars and tractors parked around the area and a me-

chanics' garage with three bays. Nick entered the office part. It was old and full of wooden shelves containing everything from canned goods to ignition wiring. No one there.

He couldn't find a bell or anything to attract attention. There was a banging noise coming from the garage so he followed the sound. The noise stopped, but he didn't see anyone around. Searching the seemingly vacant place, he was startled when a loud voice came up at him from the floor. Down below his feet was a grease pit.

"What ya need?"

"Need some gas," Nick lied not wanting to come right out and ask for free directions.

A man in dirty work clothes came out of the pit wiping his hands on an oily rag. Nick wondered what he expected to accomplish with a rag as dirty as his hands. He followed the mechanic into the office part and the man walked outside to fill his gas tank. When he was done and back in the office he got down to business. He opened a map of the area and pointed to a spot.

"I'm kind of lost and maybe my geo tracker isn't working. I can't find a turn onto state highway 916.

The mechanic looked at the map and replied.

"If I was you, I would throw that damned geo gadget out of the car. Hell, you past that road ten miles back. You need to go back and look for an old rusty gas sign, that's where you need to turn."

Nick took the news badly. He replied.

“Well, wait a minute, this map clearly shows the junction is about a mile from here. Why is that?”

This idiot was beginning to annoy him, gas or no gas.

“I told you to throw that map away. Look here.”

he pointed at a large mound of dirt piled up near the station.

“That there is where 916 used to run but that was about fifteen years ago. They blocked it off here and made a route that was more direct. See?”

Nick mumbled a thanks and hit the road. The mechanic watched the car drive off. I hope he never comes my way again, he thought to himself.

Highway 916 wasn't any where near being a main highway, but it was straighter and smoother, for awhile. When he reached a junction where 916 crossed the main highway, to his dismay the other side wasn't improved. Back to narrow, bumpy roads.

To lessen the pain for the reader it is enough to say Nick got lost a number of times most always being asked, “where the hell did you get your information?”

One man told him “you can't get there from here.”

Then there was the suppressed amusement to deal with.

After ten hours on the road and no end in sight, Nick got on the main highway and went north to the town of St. Michels. Not a metropolis but it had amenities. He called Captain Johnson and reported his findings about Oscar and the Cookes'

summer place that he was trying to reach.

Captain Johnson was a Virginian and he believed every word Nick uttered. He could imagine what he went through. Feeling a little guilty for letting him go into the wilds of Virginia without a guide, he said.

“To save time and your sanity I will get the state troopers to pick you up in a helicopter and get you there. Now check into a motel, rest, and the chopper will be there in the morning.”

Nick called the Cookes, they were cooperative when he told them about searching their place. Mourning parents, they were praying for the murderers to be caught and punished. In the morning, he was picked up by the chopper and whisked off to the cottage. From the air he looked down at the terrain and disorderly pattern of roads, glad to be above it not in it.

Nick didn't have a plan for his search. He was only looking in the cottage for some sign it was where the four people were killed. He found the place to be badly disorganized. Bottles everywhere and dirty dishes on the table as if the diners had just finished their meal. Looked like six people dined. In the kitchen the story was the same, unwashed pots and pans etc.

He knew he had found the place where the murders took place. Everything in the cottage was in disarray meaning they had left in a hurry, no time to be neat. Nick could feel it as he looked around. A little shudder ran through him as the image of the bloody victims flashed into his memory. What could he find

here? he thought, Not sure, but something out of place or a piece of evidence the killers left behind.

There would be no media splash over the investigation at the Cooks' cottage. All of the law enforcement agencies investigating the murders agreed with Nick about keeping his search a secret. No need to tip off the killers. Forensics teams were sent in at night, picked up in the morning riding in the interior of mattress trucks to the Norfolk air terminal to fly home.

Forensics preliminary reports were not encouraging. Given the mess the cottage was in, they expected to find fingerprints and other evidence. The only major finding was from DNA testing which showed the four victims had been at the cottage. Apart from that, the place had been as meticulously cleaned up as the Forest Avenue house where the bodies were found. Not a single fingerprint even though the place was dirty with unwashed tableware and cooking utensils.

It's a major find, Nick thought to himself, at least now we know the starting point for further investigation in the Chesapeake bay area. He was deflated though, arrests and convictions had been dancing in his head. His own poking around and studying the dinner items gave him a picture of a happy party. Fine wines, brandies, the best whiskeys and what looked like a gourmet meal. No signs of a struggle anywhere, no weapons and the knives had all been perfectly cleaned.

He kept ranging around looking for something out of place in the house. Not a drop of blood anywhere, no signs of a struggle. Forensics teams had thoroughly checked the property outside of the house to no avail. Everything about this case is illogical, Nick thought to himself, how do you kill four people and leave no clues whatsoever? We don't even know the cause of death.

Nick had been on the case constantly from the beginning when the tree doctor burst into the station babbling about dead people. He had gone through emotional states of bewilderment, anger (many times) small periods of elation over some small clue (pathetic) and horror. He was beginning to accept the case as is and it brought him some comfort.

Finally he locked up the cottage, probably for the last time, and walked down the driveway to his car. He was opening the car door when his eye caught the glint of something lying in the sun. He stooped down and picked it up, just a tiny bit of yellow metal. It wasn't gold and it didn't feel like brass. Must be a metal alloy, he thought, I'll go over the cottage one more time. Maybe I can match this chip with the object it came from.

Several hours later he gave up looking, and headed back to Foxtrot. I'll have it analyzed, probably a waste of time he thought glumly. But now the case came into focus by establishing where the killings took place. Now there was a definite area #1 for a reference point to look for clues along the roads the kill-

ers could have taken to bring the victims to Foxtrot.

Captain Johnson and the DA were more or less poker faced as they listened to Nick tell them about the latest incident showing promise but ending in a fizzle. When he finished, the captain commented.

“I know you worked hard to find some answers. But if clues only come to us in tiny unrelated pieces, we’ll all be dead and gone and the Forest Avenue case will still be open. Your report confirmed the action I’m going to take. We are closing the case as unsolved and let these other law enforcement groups have a free hand. Don’t misunderstand my decision, I tried to protect Foxtrot from more notoriety. Now I’m convinced we can’t solve the case. Besides the town emergency fund is tapped out by the hours spent on this damned mess. So no money was the clincher to stop.”

Chapter Fourteen

In the morning they went to work contacting the other groups investigating the case to let them know Foxtrot police were closing the case as unsolved. It meant the State of Virginia's law enforcement bodies were free to use their authority in Hog Hollow County. The announcement sparked a flurry of activity with the VBI and the State Police units. The local newspaper printed a notice written by Captain Johnson. By now the citizens of Foxtrot were jaded with it all, and since there wasn't a crazed manic killer around, no one cared.

Nick had mixed emotions about the change. His manly pride was injured because many would view the collapse of the investigation as his personal failure. On the other hand, as much as he had grown to hate the case, and its terrible strain on him, it meant no more hope at all of succeeding. Back to work with his regular duties. It looked like child's play next to the intense efforts he had made to solve the mystery.

Around 3 AM Nick's phone rang at home. He sleepily disconnected the phone and rolled over. An hour later there was a knock on his front door. This summons couldn't be easily shut off like the phone. He tried covering his head with a pillow. The unknown intruder kept knocking until his nerves were shredded.

"All right! Stop the banging!" he yelled out. "This had better

be good news whoever you are!”

He stumbled to the front door turned on the outside light and thrust his belligerent face through the opening. His visitor was also angry, it was Pen the reporter.

“You should have had the courtesy to answer your damned phone. Didn’t it occur to you no one calls at 3 in the morning unless it’s important? Get dressed. We have to contact Captain Johnson right now!”

A third grumpy sleeper soon joined them. They were at Captain Johnson’s house knocking at his door.

“What in hell are you doing Nick? The case is closed remember?” he looked at Pen.”Why are you here with him? We have no news to give you.”

Pen being the calmer person, she hadn’t been to bed yet, used her good manners to defuse the situation.

“I’m at fault here captain, I woke up Nick. I had to warn you something is brewing at the CIA headquarters but my informant only heard bits of the meeting there. They seemed to be discussing the Forest Avenue murders and the surprise they would announce to the media in the morning. You may be about to be sandbagged by them about some major development they didn’t mention to you.”

The two policemen nodded their heads in unison.

“I’ll alert the DA and the mayor right now so we can plan for anything the spooks throw at us.” Johnson replied. “I’ll guess

Agent Pearce used us as a smoke screen to cover her own investigation, lousy sneak. We'll be ready. Thank you so much for your warning Pen, we won't forget it."

In Washington DC at 8 AM, the CIA opened a press conference to announce the first arrest of a suspect in the Forest Avenue murder case. Agent Pearce was introduced as the arresting officer. She was the spokesperson for the CIA and stepped forward to give her report.

"At 10 PM last night we arrested Mr. John Harvey on suspicion of being one of the killers in the massacre of four victims in Foxboro Virginia. This is a unique murder case as you all know, without any evidence nor information on how the people died. We intend to solve the case and arrest all of the killers within 48 hours."

Agent Pearce then took questions from the reporters. They learned John Harvey was a DC corporate attorney whose activities had been watched by the CIA for several months. She then shut down any more inquiries concerning Mr. Harvey. One reporter asked about the role the Foxboro police had in her investigation.

"They weren't involved at all. I tried to enlist their help in my investigation but all I was offered were some case files of little to no use to me. As you may know, they closed the case yesterday in Foxboro finally admitting their inept department and personnel were going nowhere.

“Sergeant Noulte in particular was hostile towards me and made every effort to stop my work. I know he ordered his squad to ignore me and swear they would never help me. Such officers are bad for a police unit. They create chaos as they go off on their own without any regard for their department.”

In Foxboro, the mayor, the DA, Captain Johnson and Nick were watching the TV broadcast together. Silence followed when the news conference was over. The DA moved to divert attention away from the vitriolic attack Agent Pearce had launched against their police department and Nick.

“She went too far with her mouth. It was an ego mistake which will now cost her credibility with the public. I contacted some of the DC newspaper reporters to come here this morning for an interesting story I have prepared for them. Either way, whether we were criticized, or not, she has forced us to respond to her ambitious grab for national attention. It happened, but we have a responsibility to the citizens of Foxboro to set the record straight. They need to know our reasons for closing the case yesterday had to do with a lack of funds to continue. So relax Nick, retribution will be swift and painful for Agent Pearce.”

By the afternoon the DA’s rebuttal was published in DC. It began with a statement about the reasons for closing the case.

“One of the main problems was a lack of funds to pay for the investigation. As it was, the town had to dip deeply into the emergency fund to continue work on the case.

In other words, we're tapped out.

'VBI and the state police were unable to add anything new to Foxboro's investigation. But the present circumstances, lack of money and personnel, forced us to give the case to agencies with the manpower and funds to keep the case open.'

The last paragraph began innocently with a comment about CIA agent Pearce's work and results on the case. Then began the "buts". But the agent was a little off the truth about casting aside the Foxboro police files. Records were kept of persons coming and going 24/7 in the courthouse. A review showed that Agent Pearce had been making late night trips to the record room on a regular basis. Thirty two trips to be exact.

Then came Captain Johnson's own report of the meeting with Agent Pearce who was offered carte blanche to anything the department had to offer her. This promise included using as many Foxboro policemen as she required. Not once did Agent Pearce ever tell him about an on going secret investigation being operated from CIA headquarters. The mayor of Foxboro gave a short comment mainly to the effect that the offer to help Agent Pearce was still available for as long as it takes. With this announcement, the guns became silent.

The CIA didn't respond to the Foxboro statement to avoid a confrontation which held no benefits for them. Best to let the damning of Agent Pearce's activities be left alone they decided.

She was taken off the case and sent elsewhere to work on an unrelated case. Her moment of glory was indeed short lived.

Nick returned to his regular duty routine in a cheerful mood. Nothing, absolutely nothing of note was happening in the town of Foxboro. One bright morning Nick set off to work in his police vehicle cruising along his usual route to the station. Turning onto the main highway he accelerated to 60 mph, then the car sped up to 70 mph by itself.

He braked the car slightly and took his foot off the accelerator expecting to slow down to 60 mph. Instead the car kept moving faster, 80 mph, 90 mph, now Nick was frantically jamming on the brakes. The response from the braking system wasn't powerful enough to over-ride the roaring engine. Panic set in as the car reached the city limits traveling at 120 mph and pushing to reach the car's maximum RPMs.

What people saw coming at them was a car with smoking brakes and moving like a rocket. Nick frantically navigated the car through the main street side swiping cars and leaving a trail of broken auto parts. His only goal was to get through the busy part of town and collide with a tree. It was a plan of small scale whereas the result was quite spectacular.

The car jumped the curb. At the corner was a major power pole. It was taken away like a mower through grass. Half the town lost power since this pole was a main connector from the power plant.

It wasn't enough impact to stop the renegade car. At the other corner there was an auto dealership and the car dove through the main glass window. In an instant, a half dozen new cars on display were turned into junk. The car met its match at the garage hydraulic lift. It was torn to shreds before hitting a wall. It now resembled a wreck ready for the junk yard, its windows were gone, as well as three doors, and all four wheels were mangled. But Nick was still clinging to the steering wheel, unconscious and badly injured.

Finding the malfunction that caused the car's electronics system to fail was arduous and filled with arguments about the failure. Eventually the engineers of the car maker found a flaw in the computer that controls the electronic devices guiding an automobile.

It was explained by an engineer as the failure of a sensor controlling the intake of gasoline into the car's fuel injection system. The car became uncontrollable when the sensor failed to moderate the fuel intake. They hastily added such a malfunction was nearly impossible. It happened to Nick's car so there were obviously exceptions no one wanted to discuss.

A month of physical therapy was required to bring Nick's body into reasonable shape. Provided, of course, he did the daily prescribed exercises and stayed on the scheduled intake of pills needed to stop the screaming pain.

Despite all of the reports and explanations that it was a freak, he was convinced the car was rigged. He saw the cleverness of the plan. Once declared to be an accident, there would be no criminal investigation to look for possible suspects. Nick was convinced the Forest Avenue killers planned to eliminate him as a possible threat to them. Could Rob Strong the computer genius be involved in the highly technical work done on the car? It was amusing in an ironical way, the killers weren't aware he didn't know a damned thing.

He wasn't ruling out another attempt by whoever it was. It had to be highly skilled killers to rig a car in that manner. Besides, it was probably the people who murdered four people leaving no trail to them at all. Nick shivered a little at the thought of more attempts to kill him. What might be next.?

Over at Langley field the CIA ran into unexpected problems with their suspect. He was most eager to cooperate with them hoping for a light sentence and to clear himself of being one of the Forest Avenue killers. For several days they made him repeat what he had told them hoping he would slip up and open the door to the murders. It's a bit of a misnomer but here was a criminal telling the God honest truth.

Several weeks past while every aspect of his story, including his whereabouts on the night of the Forest Avenue murders was checked out. He had told the truth. The lawyer was a thief alright but it involved a conspiracy with a Treasury Department

employee. Their scheme was set up using Strong Inc. accounts known for speed and accuracy. Millions of trades go on every day at the treasury and many of them are tied to the Federal Reserve money desk.

Treasury short term notes and bonds are issued as vehicles to earn interest on transactions being settled in a day or two. Two money desk guys, one in the treasury and one at the Fed noticed a flaw in one area of trading with a particular foreign country. Interest was being paid to that country on the basis of five business days per week whereas, in fact, interest is paid on all 365 days in a year.

The conspirators secretly added another money account for the foreign country. Short term treasury instruments were paid to the country but the settlement amount excluded weekend accruals. The two days' interest was siphoned off into the thieves' special account. It doesn't sound like much, and in small amounts the thefts were easily hidden. Two days' interest on billions of dollars becomes a tidy sum.

One more time a possible lead to the Forest Avenue killers had evaporated.

Chapter Fifteen

In a deep sleep Nick was dreaming about the case with different scenarios. Some were tantalizing. In these dreams he would be right on the edge of solving the murders then the answer slipped away. He was writhing around in his sleep trying to bring the answer to the dream back, but his mind had moved on.

He sat up in bed suddenly jarred awake out of a dream. It took several seconds for Nick to be fully awake. His head was throbbing from a splitting headache. There was a strong odor of rotten eggs in the air. If he had been downstairs in the kitchen area the gas leak fumes would have been overwhelming.

Without another thought he dashed to the bedroom window, opened it and jumped out of the house. He was still in midair when there was a tremendous blast ripping out the first floor walls and windows. Without support the entire second floor collapsed down to the ground where a fierce fire had started. Nick had been blown away from the area by the blast and landed in his back yard showered with glass shards from the bomb.

It seemed impossible to stand up. In shock Nick needed several tries to get up on his feet. His body felt wet. It was blood oozing from a hundred cuts on his upper body brought on by the razor like pieces of glass. Neighbors were running from all sides of the block to the blasted area where the house once stood..

Nick was in emergency in no time at all. Attendants were around his body quickly pulling glass fragments and cleaning the cuts as they went along. No pain now as the pain killer kicked in. After the clean up the doctor examined him for his injuries. Lucky man, the doctor thought to himself, minor cuts and several nasty bruises from the force of the explosion, that's it.

Captain Johnson was somber as he sat down by Nick's hospital bed. He wasted no time.

"We are moving you to DC right now. You can heal up in a clinic there. Your luck is phenomenal escaping two assassination attempts by professional killers. They won't get another chance at you. You are being attached to the DCPD to work on the Forest Avenue case. Don't start arguing with me Nick it's a done deal approved by the mayor. It will be much safer than staying in Foxtrot and you know it. A chopper will be here to take you to DC in just a few minutes."

Nick couldn't have argued with Johnson anyway his face was swollen nearly twice its size. He did move his mouth once. He learned it was sore, so he nodded his head at the captain. The trip to DC on the chopper would never be in his memory bank, he was out cold.

One of the many fancy DC dinner affairs was underway and the two genial gentlemen who had set up the plan to eliminate Nick were there. It was difficult this time to maintain a smile

which they used as a mask to the public. While bubbling inside with rage, one said.

“Two screwed up attempts to off this cop by so-called pros is unbelievable. Now this guy is in DC. It’s a much more difficult area to get at him. It’s now a watch and wait for an opportunity to get him alone. I’m not giving up. Noulte is the key, get him dammit.”

His smiling partner only nodded he had nothing to add.

Stan was Nick’s first visitor. He had been waiting at the hospital since he was brought in. He didn’t know the whole story about the attempt on Nick’s life so when he saw him alert and strong he relaxed.

“I’m damned glad to find you alive. I only know there was an attack on you in Foxtrot. I guess you didn’t tell Captain Johnson to get you off the case. Two tries now, this has to be a professional bunch. Get out of the country as soon as you can walk. I’m begging you.”

“It’s great to see you Stan.” Nick said in a muffled voice out of a swollen mouth. “I did ask the captain to relieve me from the case. Actually he did but these killers didn’t know it or didn’t believe it. Now I’m not sure what will happen next.”

“Believe me run like hell.” Stan replied. “Oh, I almost forgot. I have a report with me from our crime lab about the tiny piece of metal you gave me. Briefly they identified the composition of the piece as a high tech carbon material. It has properties de-

signed to be a carrier of poison gases, sedatives and acids. It is one of the sharpest edges ever made. It is so sharp it can bypass the atoms in the skin. Substances can be placed without disturbing the victim. He doesn't feel pain and it leaves no mark. It probably got there by accident. It may have fallen then got stepped on and your piece was overlooked. My source is pretty sure only some federal government groups have access to it. This is highly classified material."

"This may be a mistake by the killers that will give us a trail to them. Either the material was stolen or a federal agency is involved in the killings. But why Stan? I'm feeling much better already. I should be released from here tomorrow."

"I'm asking you to give this report to the FBI to follow. Stick to the investigation of Strong Inc. as ordered by Johnson."

Nick didn't answer his friend. Stan left feeling uneasy. This is my case, Nick thought to himself, I won't tell anyone about this find until I bring in the killers. So help me. He studied the lab report Stan brought him.

Before he could leave the hospital the doctor checked his wounds. He was full of small scabs but healing nicely. Then the doctor became his opponent when he told him he needed to stay one more day to watch for a possible infection. Nick kept his mouth shut this time not wanting to cause friction with the doctor. It wouldn't get him out of the hospital anyway.

Pam came to see him. The attempted assassination in Foxtrot was news in the area. One of the policemen in the town was

easily manipulated and soon she knew about the secret transfer of Nick to DC. He was surprised to see her but then reminded himself as a reporter not much got past her.

“Hello Nick, I’m relieved to see you’re mending nicely. Oh, de ja vu. I was saying the same thing to you only a short time ago in the hospital in Foxtrot. When do you plan to change courses before my next visit is outdoors in a cemetery? Please listen to a friend you can’t continue to be a target for criminals.”

“What a cheery greeting Pam. I know I’m lucky to still be around but I’m a policeman I’m just doing my job. Besides it’s different now. I’ll work with DCPD detectives rather than alone in a small town.”

His visitor didn’t share his idea that he was now immune from danger. In the time since they had last seen each other she had learned valuable information about affairs linked to Strong Inc. Pam was there to warn Nick about the powerful undercurrents stirring within Strong Inc. He sensed something was disturbing her about the case. He asked her.

“The look of you tells me you don’t share my views about my safety? Do you believe I’m being naive or have you dug up something I need to know?”

Pam nodded her head slowly.

“A need to know for sure Nick. I have contacted all of my sources in DC for information about Strong Inc. and its executives. They have an excellent reputation for safeguarding their

clients' financial affairs. It was Strong Inc who tipped off the CIA about the interest fraud scandal agent Pearce so dramatically announced on the TV broadcast. Apparently their intelligence network hasn't learned who the Forest Avenue killers are. Stop being so stubborn and leave the country now!"

The vehemence of her warning startled Nick. It was particularly disturbing because Sharon hardly knew him and her outburst was unexpected. He had gained a measure of respect for her abilities so her warning made an emotional impression on him. He asked her.

"But where would I go? I mean assuming I decide to disappear. I've never been out of the country. Any ideas Sharon?"

"Maybe we need to think this out. Another country could make you stand out from everyone else. Let's think about a place for you to melt into the crowd."

"I have an idea." Nick replied, "A good friend of mine has a commercial fishing boat working off the Outer Banks on the Carolina coast. It could work Sharon. And it would keep me close to the DC area for contact with Captain Johnson and you. What do you think?"

She was quiet with her head tilted slightly to the left. It was an unconscious gesture acquired somehow in childhood. Nick watched her think and had his first chance to study the lively reporter. Every time they had met before it was always an animated discussion. Now he realized she was quite pretty. In her

present pose there was a softer more vulnerable appearance, like a child. Turning toward him she said.

“I like it Nick. Sort of hiding right under their noses. It’s essential for you to get away unnoticed,”

Chapter Fifteen

Captain Johnson hung up his phone and walked over to the DA's office. The DA checked out his visitor who wasn't looking pleased.

"I can tell you aren't too happy about something and now you came over to ruin my day too."

Johnson sat down heavily and shook his head."

"You know, I don't know if Nick is a jinx or the damned murder case is a malevolent horror. He's leaving the DC hospital for another hiding place down on the Outer Banks with a buddy. I have no way of stopping him dammit! I can't even contact him. He refused to tell me anything about anything, no address, no phone and no names! He'll call me he said."

"Did he tell you how long this will last? Ten days? Ten years? Until the case is solved, if ever? Let's pray he disappears without any way to trace him."

So no one was happy, neither the police units nor the killers could take any action. Hopefully.

Nick was released from the hospital in a wheelchair to a waiting rescue helicopter and whisked away. His exit was observed by several shady characters one of which was the man given the orders to eliminate Nick. Begging the boss for some slack he kept several of his guys on permanent surveillance for any clues.

No, was the simple answer. The hit man was unaccustomed to losing at anything and he refused to accept failure with the punk cop.

In a small clearing near the Outer Banks the rescue chopper landed by a man waiting in a rusted pick up truck many years past its expiration date. Nick waved at him as he left the aircraft. Headlights lit up on the antique machine then it rolled up to Nick. He sat down in the passenger seat next to a giant red headed man

“Nice of you to show up Bernie I wasn’t sure.”

” I was in the area so I said to myself, what the hell, the poor soul needs my help again.”

“It seems to me I saved your butt.” Nick replied

“Shut up and grab a beer from the cooler.”

Casual conversation went on for the rest of the trip.

Bernie was given a complete history of the murder sitting in the wheelhouse of his fishing boat. He now understood the impossible situation facing Nick. He asked a few questions when his close friend finished his story. The giant shook his head when he understood and agreed with Nick. His buddy’s future depended on something happening to end the suspicion in the killers’ minds that he was a danger to their future.

They went to work to change Nick’s appearance. First, he shaved his head which drastically altered his appearance then a

fake mustache was added. Bernie added a cheap ear ring supposedly a diamond. A cap and dark glasses completed the disguise. Bernie studied him then remarked.

“You are now Sammy Borden a deck hand of mine from a couple of years ago. No one in this dock area will question your identity, you are a copy of Sammy. Just don’t talk around anyone. Your voice is the one thing distinctly different from Sammy’s mumble. This is going to be great for me, I have free labor .”

“Enjoy it while you can Bernie I might be out of here tomorrow morning.”

Nick began to enjoy commercial fishing with Bernie. The first week was physical torture for him using muscles not ready for the demands hauling fish nets in and out of the boat. Equally difficult was emptying nets and sorting the catch. Bernie was amused to watch his friend struggle with long forgotten fishing skills used during summer vacation. It’s how he met and made friends with Bernie whose family had been fishing for generations on the Carolina coast.

The term “loose ends” is the worst phrase one wants to hear when planning for things needing to be without flaws. Bernie and everyone else in the area were unaware Sammy Borden had a hot affair with a girl in the town. He had left abruptly and no one thought anything of it. Eleanor Jackson was the only person who reacted when hearing Sammy had come back. He had left a

love package with her before he disappeared several years hence. The toddler was now two years old.

One day when Bernie was tooling his boat to the dock a girl jumped aboard before he stopped. She spotted Nick/Sammy working on the nets.

“Sammy!” she called. “Over here.”

Nick turned around to see a young girl running toward him. Before he had a chance to say anything she literally jumped into his arms. She was very excited.

“Oh Sammy! I knew you would come back for me. And our son. You didn’t know I was pregnant when you left. I hope your mother has recovered. Oh Sammy!”

Things unraveled quickly from there when Nick opened his mouth to protest. His voice was not even remotely like the real Sammy’s thus blowing his cover. The girl knew instantly this was not her Sammy. She thrust herself away from the impostor yelling at him.

“Who are you? What have you done with my man?” In an instant she jumped to the conclusion this stranger had done something to her lover. She ran down the dock yelling for help.

Bernie heard the commotion from the wheelhouse. He jumped down to the dock and quickly caught up with the hysterical girl. She knew him and allowed him to take her arm and restrain her.

“Whoa Eleanor. Someone must have mistakenly told you Sammy was working for me again. My friend Nick looks a lot like him and I’m sorry there was a mix up. It’s my fault for not making it clear to people that Sammy wasn’t back with me. Sorry Eleanor.”

Nick was quick to add his sorry about the mistake. Bernie consoled the disappointed girl as he drove her home in his rust bucket. He spent awhile with her and the family before returning to the boat.

When he arrived Nick had already packed his few things in a duffel for a fast exit. He said to Bernie.

“Just drive me to Virginia Beach. I’ll get a room there until I figure out what to do next. Sorry for all of the trouble Bernie.”

On the trip to Virginia Beach Bernie remarked.

“This has been a sorry day for everyone. You’re sorry for causing a hassle for me and Eleanor. She’s sorry you weren’t Sammy. I’m sorry for both of you. Soon as you’re settled at Virginia Beach call me on the boat radio. We can still take a run down to Florida for awhile that way I’m around to help out.”

“I can’t do it Bernie it would drag you into a deadly situation. I can’t have that on my mind.”

It felt strange to have the world suddenly become sinister. He checked into a small motel located on a street off the board walk. Nick went out for a walk. He looked quickly around him

for a suspicious person or persons. A sea breeze in his face while walking on the Virginia Beach boardwalk helped him to settle down. Soon he was jogging slowly in the ocean air, it was invigorating. Another man went by moving at a faster pace. Up ahead was a runner coming toward him.

Both men slowed their paces to bring them parallel to Nick on either side of him. Each of them put an iron grip on his arms then brought him to a stop. He tried to wrest himself loose as panic rose up within him. His effort to free himself was met with his wrists bent violently creating excruciating pain. He stopped resisting knowing this was a standard police move to take control of the resister.

One man spoke to him.

“Sergeant Noulte we’re Secret Service agents. We only want you to come with us peacefully.”

They accompanied him off the boardwalk to a waiting car. In a few minutes they were at a helicopter landing pad. It was a silent trip on the chopper to another landing pad on top of a government building near the White House. Whisked away again to the interior of the building Nick didn’t resist. Now he knew it was the good guys. In a small conference room he was seated at a table across from six people.

The group looked him over while Nick did the same with them. A man on the far right of the table spoke.

“I know you are wondering how we found you so easily. Your Captain Johnson received a call yesterday from your friend in the Outer Banks to inform him of your troubles. He believed you were in a desperate situation much worse than you imagined. Several of our men were in Foxtrot to contact you about the Forest Avenue murders. The captain was relieved to know we would pick you up before something dire happened.

“There have been some incidents recently of grave proportions that might tie into the murder case and Strong Inc. You have been working on the case from the start and we need to interrogate you. We need a link to connect events only you might know. Captain Johnson wants you to work with us.”

Damned nice of the captain to be so generous with my life Nick said to himself. He was outraged to have one more police group forced on him. It was beyond belief to him especially since he didn't know anything beyond the facts in the police files. Bitter anger began to rise up inside of him at this impossible turn of events.

“Virginia State Police, Virginia Bureau of investigation, FBI, CIA and now you! I can't stand it! I know nothing more than you can read for yourself! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing dammit! Now let me go!”

By this time he was pounding his fist on the table for emphasis and it trembled with every blow.

Six men watched the maniac cautiously getting ready to leap

away from the table if need be. Their eyes looked like they would never blink again. One agent began to rise up from his chair to stop Nick but he was restrained by the leader of the group. Suddenly it was over. In a matter of fact way the leader spoke.

“You have been sort of borrowed from the Foxtrot police force. Here is our warrant, you can read it if you want. Your are being treated as a witness in danger. We have a safe house ready for you here in DC.”

Chapter Sixteen

In no time at all Nick was whisked away to a small hotel near duPont Circle. An SS agent explained.

“The hotel we’re putting you in belongs to the government and used as a safe house. It’s loaded with the latest electronics and cameras. You can’t cough in this place without being heard by our equipment. Depending on who is lodged here, foreign countries are known to have surveillance teams near by. They know what an electronic fortress this is so they watch from a distance”.

He was given a suite with a small living room and a kitchenette. My home for Lord knows how long he thought to himself with an edge. Why doesn’t anyone believe I haven’t withheld information? I suppose there will be many sessions with various officials looking for an opening or something I’ve forgotten.

His guesses about the work were pretty accurate. After ten days of intense scrutiny they were done. They didn’t learn anything new but gained a better understanding about the lack of any evidence to begin a solid investigation. Nick was thanked for his cooperation and cut loose from their inquiry. Now what? he thought to himself where should I go? I have no house and Johnson ordered me to stay away from Foxtrot. I can’t involve

Stan in my troubles.

He reluctantly turned to the FBI for help. He hadn't enamored himself with the agents who were assigned to the Forest Avenue murder. Time spent with them was charged with suspicion. Both sides had been hostile mainly because of Nick's attitude toward the FBI's intrusion into the case.

During an awkward session with the FBI he brought them up to date on the attempts to kill him. Then he told them about the interrogation he had undergone with the Secret Service. For emphasis Nick told them.

"I don't know a damned thing more than you guys already know."

Captain Johnson was contacted to bring him up to date on the latest gut wrenching ordeal.

"This hiding idea isn't working out captain. I'm coming back to Foxtrot. I think the size of the town could be good protection. Everyone in town knows about the attempts to assassinate me. Suspicious moves would be risky for them now."

"Fine Nick I won't argue with you but where will you stay?"

"I'm going to live right in our jail for now. This thing has to end soon then I'll decide my next move. I'll limit my movements to downtown areas."

"Okay", the captain reluctantly agreed.

Leading a restrictive way of life meant Nick had time to

spare. He marveled at himself for poking around the Forest Avenue Murders evidence files. It was like a compulsive fascination with a mystery he hated for the pain it had caused him. One night he was reading newspaper articles relating to the case and its players. One of the articles was coverage of a Strong Inc celebration held at their DC headquarters. It was held shortly before the bodies were discovered in Foxboro. At that time the four murder victims weren't in DC, they were in Richmond.

He was sort of casually glancing at a photograph of the guests accompanying the news article. He flipped the article onto the pile he had reviewed and picked up the next one. This one was a boring article regarding the corporation's acquisition of a rival company. Then he had an uncomfortable feeling of missing something. But what? he thought to himself. Since it had just cropped up it had to be in one of the last few articles he had reviewed.

Riffling through the pile quickly and testing his reactions brought him to the celebration article and its picture. Carefully reading the article again didn't make any impression it was the usual business write up. He turned his attention to the group photograph. Studying the guests he identified Bob Strong and Oliver's children. Except Legere and her husband weren't in the photo.

Nick recalled his interview in Richmond with the couple.

They had told him they were in DC at a Strong Inc. event on the day in question. They had lied to him. A small door to the murder case had just opened. Why would they lie about their whereabouts if they didn't have a reason to do so?

Nick jotted down notes about what he had learned during the investigation. One thing in particular stood out. He could guess that the unknown guests at the Maryland cottage were Legere and her husband. It would account for the table setting for six people. He was positive the other four guests were the murder victims. Stan's report on what the tiny chip was made of that he had found in the driveway was further evidence that the cottage must have been the killing place.

As he assembled the facts it occurred to him that behind the case might be a giant illegal operation of some sort. Stan had mentioned the chip was a highly exotic material probably only available to branches of the federal government. He said it was the sharpest knife in the world capable of by-passing atoms in the skin to penetrate without leaving any trace. Perfect for assassinations.

Nick's mind was racing trying to find a place to start his new investigation. His first consideration was Legere and her husband. Who were they really? Conducting a secret investigation seemed impossible to him. Legere was certainly well connected in Richmond so any wrong move on his part could become known to her. Using the Richmond police force would require

inventing a believable excuse for investigating there..

Now Captain Johnson popped into his mental picture. Should he tell him about his important discovery? With all the time and a great amount of pain this baffling crime had cost him he had developed a proprietary sense about it. Why should I tell anyone about this break through, he thought to himself selfishly.

He was sure Johnson wouldn't approve of him secretly digging around in Richmond. If he was discovered in the city it would be hell to pay for the captain because of his defiant stand against outside law enforcement intrusion. Nick was in a quandary with the push/pull of interests pressuring him internally. There was his self interest bugging him, lined up in direct opposition to remaining loyal to his boss. He decided to let it go for a few days before taking any action at all.

Captain Johnson picked up on Nick's inner turmoil. It was fairly easy since the sergeant bounced around the police station. He would stay in his office for an hour or so then suddenly emerge and leave the building. After several days of this eccentric behavior the captain had enough of it. He called Nick into his office.

He walked into the office as if he were feeling his way through a mine field. Johnson watched his overly cautious behavior knowing for sure now something was up. Nick was like a steam boiler whose pressure gauge needle was quivering near the top red line. This situation will require defusing with pa-

tience and a “you” attitude used by sales people to make a sale.

Nick sat down on the front edge of his chair. He was carefully studying the captain’s face for any clues while his rump teetered on the chair edge.

“Do you have some place you need to be Nick?”

He shook his head rapidly as a “no” answer.

“Well then sit back in the chair and relax. I haven’t seen too much of you lately. Bring me up to date on your work. It shouldn’t take too long now that you’re free of the Forest Avenue case. So tell me about the traffic citations and the misdemeanor activity.”

Oh man, Nick thought to himself, I haven’t looked at those daily reports in weeks. No use trying to lie. Johnson is too sharp for tap dancing around an issue.

“Frankly captain I haven’t looked at them since I returned. All of the trouble I’ve been in for the last month has been stressful. Just the other day the doctor removed the bandages from my burns and cautioned me to go easy for awhile. Daily reports have been the least concern on my mind.” he replied hoping the heat was off. Johnson replied.

“I’m rather disappointed to hear you say that about your duties. It’s a surprising attitude toward your work Nick. You’re responsible to the city and to me for carrying out your duty assignments. Daily reports are vital work to keep everyone in touch with Foxtrot’s activities. Many a criminal has been apprehended

because their name showed up on a police report for some minor offense. Surely you remember this.”

Nailed! Cornered without an alibi that would work.

“I can’t argue with you captain. I have been derelict in carrying out my duties. It won’t happen again.”

Johnson’s look at him was disconcerting. Nick waited uneasily for a response to his humble apology. Nothing. Actually he was thinking about the most effective move to get him to talk. The captain was reasonably sure Nick’s agitation had something to do with the Forest Avenue case. He decided on his approach.

“I’ve noticed you’re antsy lately. It’s natural to be frightened having to wonder when and if the killers are out there waiting for an opportunity to whack you. If you need to ask the FBI to place you in a safe house you have my blessing. No need to be frightened out of your mind. You could relax instead of trying look brave. What do you say?” he wore an expression of kindness and genuine concern as if Nick were a child.

As the captain expected, knowing Nick, shock and anger were his response. With his neck changing color to a vivid red Nick blew up. He shouted.

“I’m not the least concerned about killers! There’s a completely different reason I’m concerned it’s He stopped himself realizing the truth nearly tumble out of his open mouth. He continued, “I had a another medical check up because my heart seemed to be beating faster. I was right and it was damned lucky I heeded the warning. Doc almost sent me to emergency but

treated me in his office with pills. He put me on a strong heart pill. Naturally I look tense after such a close call.”

Johnson thought to himself what a crock. He had another bag of tricks ready if Nick stonewalled him.

“Oh I see Nick. You were lucky to catch the problem. It’s a blessing you are off the Forest Avenue case with all of the stress involved. Luckily for you the city council voted to permanently close the case. There will not be another cent wasted on the case. It goes into the basement for good. Which reminds me, take Darlene with you to pack up the evidence and files into the cardboard boxes. I know this action is probably a hard blow for you after all your work. Try not to let the failure on the case make you feel like a loser Nick.”

Hooked! Johnson waited for his adversary to fight being reeled in. It wasn’t long. Nick protested.

“They’re wrong. Evidence could be discovered at any time and change the entire picture. I say it’s wise to spend a few more weeks on the case.”

Johnson shook his head and replied.

“No I agree with the city counsel and so should you Nick. I’m surprised you’re against it. Just a few weeks ago you were complaining again about being stuck with the maddening case. Need I remind you of the lack of clues. You tried about everything for weeks to duck out of the assignment. So what’s different now?”

Nick began to panic about losing his opportunity. Like all events, the Forest Avenue murders would be only a dim memory for the citizens of Foxtrot in a few weeks. He couldn't afford to waste any time. The case was to become a corpse in the basement today! He began to speak rapidly to Johnson spilling his guts about the solid clues he had recently discovered.

Several minutes of silence slipped by. Nick stared at the floor while the captain digested the new information. I was right! he thought to himself his sergeant was withholding evidence in the Forest Avenue murders. He had mixed emotions about it. Some solid clues in the case was exhilarating. On the other hand he almost wished Nick hadn't found it out because he was deeply hurt by his selfish secrecy to hog all the glory. He trusted Nick. Holding back his righteous anger the captain spoke.

"What brilliant plan do you have to solve the case on your own? Given the difficulty involved in proving anything you must be delusional if you believe you can cover all of this as a lone wolf. Or were you planning to recruit a secret force of experts to assist you? I can hardly wait to hear your plan."

Skewered! Nick thought to himself as he struggled with the pain he felt inside for betraying the captain.

"I was thinking about a way to learn if Legere Strong is involved in a conspiracy. She seems to be the key to learning about the motive for killing her own brother."

“I suspect you have become unhinged from the stress of this mess. Your so-called plan is irrational and has more holes than fabric Nick. I’m worried about this exotic metal thing. Stan told you only the military has access to it. If this is tied to a secret op and we tread on their toes there’s a good chance we would become “collateral damage” or let’s kill the bastards. Because of all the strife and interference from government agencies I want to meet with the DA and the mayor. Even though we haven’t acted on the information whatever government agency owns this won’t care. Knowing is enough.”

Chapter Seventeen

Three men sat in an office with identical expressions on their faces. “Deer in the headlights” stare is a fit description of the look. The DA spoke up first.

“Our efforts to be rid of this horrific mess and protect Foxboro citizens from harm isn’t working. It’s like chewing gum stuck on your shoe, some residue is left no matter how you scrape it. Drop it into the FBI’s lap faster than a hot potato. Here’s the phone Johnson make the call right now!”

No need for a discussion. The mayor and the captain were of a like mind “drop it on someone else”. Maybe it was an FBI undercover thing but that didn’t matter it was only necessary to report the information. When Johnson called the FBI agent in charge of the investigation, he covered their ass by emphasizing the case was closed. It was in the police station basement with no money to reopen it. His FBI contact promised to get back to him by the afternoon.

There was nothing else to discuss so they adjourned looking almost prayerful. Maybe they hadn’t visited God in prayer in some time or never. It was a good bet there was some silent beseeching to something. These were three men who had been around police work for years. Because of their past experiences near panic wasn’t an over-reaction when covert government ac-

tivities are involved. Usually they were operating at a high risk politically so no outside intrusion was tolerated. People without their wisdom would give information like this without another thought. Sometimes ignorance is dangerous.

Johnson went to his office and summoned Nick. He told him what action the mayor, DA and himself had taken to stop any suspicions of involvement in the case. Nick was ordered to not lift a finger, nor go anywhere near the case files dammit! Nick started to speak.

“Shut up Nick! You will report to me every morning so I know you aren’t sneaking off on your own. I’m very angry at you because I trusted you. I counted on you to help me with the work. You were up for lieutenant as a way to show you our gratitude for your work. Now I don’t give a damn what you do. Without .trust I can’t use you as an assistant. You can stay and carry out the duties of a police sergeant or quit, it’s your choice. Get out I have work to do.”

Nick couldn’t deny to himself how much his decision to keep important information secret had cost him. No alibis of any merit came to mind. He alone was responsible for the damage he had caused. Unless Johnson changed his mind about him a career with the police force was destroyed. His work now wouldn’t allow for any creativity “only by the book duties” easy to monitor .

A few days later Johnson received a call from the FBI. Their answer regarding new evidence was perplexing. They decided the evidence was worthless to them and no money would be spent to check it out. The agent went on to add the information wouldn't even be added to their case file.

Johnson held another meeting with the mayor and the DA to tell them about the baffling call.

"I can only conclude they are covering up the evidence to keep their skirts clean. There must be an undercover op being carried out by some other agency."

The Hog Hollow County DA spoke up,

"Going to the elaborate lengths performed in murdering four people all connected to a giant IT service provider conjures up a major government op. It still doesn't answer the question of motive. Probably the major players at Strong Inc fouled up or had a serious problem with the government agency. We can't rule out the Mafia as a suspect. It seems to be a stretch but the killings and the attempts to murder Nick are definitely the work of master killers. But we're out of the loop."

"Not so fast." Johnson replied, "We need to contact the CIA, Secret Service and DEA to ensure we're out of the picture."

No argument from the mayor or the DA. The mayor responded.

"Do it today captain." was his terse command.

But comfort wasn't achieved by contact with the other law enforcement agencies. To Johnson's astonishment all of the

agencies he contacted gave the exact response the FBI had given him. No dice, no interest and not worth a comment in their investigation file. Johnson didn't tell Nick about their contact with the FBI.

News travels fast and one of the conspirators was an insider in DC. He met his contact a day after Johnson called the agencies. He said.

"We can relax about sergeant Noulte. No need to risk another try to kill him. Captain Johnson gave the evidence Noulte had to the FBI who buried it and other agencies did the same. Actually Noulte only had bits and pieces of information not hardly enough to put a case together. With the cover up, things can move on."

"It's good news. We have a big operation with only another week to complete it. Now the way is clear for sure. Good work, keep on top of things."

Pam Stone visited the police station one day. She stopped by periodically to check for anything newsworthy. When she finished speaking with the office employees she went Nick's office to check for any news on the famous murder case. She noted how glum he looked.

"Good morning Nick you don't look very happy." He gave her a feeble wave and kept his head down looking at a report. Pam was somewhat miffed.

"Lose your voice? A wave is not acceptable."

He looked up a little surprised at her sarcasm but felt guilty for his rudeness. He apologized.

“Sorry Pam I’m depressed over one more disaster from the damned Forest Avenue murders.”

“I’ve heard some talk in DC about you from a source in the FBI. Instead of being depressed I thought you would be over the moon by surviving two attempts to kill you. You obviously didn’t take my warning Nick.”

“I wish I had” Nick replied, “this case sandbagged me again. Promise me what I tell you stays with you.”

Pam sat down but didn’t take out her pad and pencil. He spent over an hour outlining his discoveries and his terrible mistake to decide he could solve it himself. She listened without interrupting him. Internally Pam was becoming increasingly upset and frightened as he outlined the government ops’ cover up when told about what Nick had learned. She spoke up when he finished.

“Captain Johnson is a wise man to try to keep the town out of it by taking action. Where has your mind been Nick? Solving the case alone was a fantasy as far as I’m concerned.”

Pam’s last remark was annoying, talking to him as if he was an idiot. He still had the stubborn belief that if Legere was guilty all he needed to do is prove it and the case would be busted wide open. He told her about his suspicion and the simple plan he had to crack the case. She was about to laugh but

then his plan made some sense as a long shot.

“I’m sorry Nick I shouldn’t have said that. Your simple investigation plan might work”

He had explained to her how snooping around in Richmond as a police officer was a problem. He had been trying solve the problem some other way but the disaster with Johnson made him give up. Pam knew she was the perfect spy.

“I have to volunteer to be the snoop in Richmond. It’s my hometown and as a reporter I can go anywhere there. Snooping is what I do and I’m well known in the city for asking questions. Plus there’s my network of women who send me articles. They don’t miss anything to my knowledge and they’re keen on finding information for me. It’s exciting to them because I often use their information in my articles and they feel important.

Nick thought about her offer to help him. It was a wrestling match in his mind between considering the possible danger to Pam versus exciting possibilities. She watched him. She gave him a gentle nudge.

“I’m aware of the risks Nick. Reporters always have some risk out in the field so worry no more. I’ll tell my editor where I’m going but leave out why. It will be easy for me to work out a week’s schedule since I know Richmond so well. Now, what’s in it for my efforts?”

“You will have an exclusive on the case and complete freedom to use all of our case files. If you write a book you can have a copyright on the use of our files.”

“Perfect Nick it’s all a reporter could ask for. I’ll keep you informed of anything interesting by phone.”

It was a plan pleasing to both parties.

Chapter Eighteen

Pam spent two days lining up her contacts to be seen for information. She was prepared to do a ton of work by telling her people she was investigating five prominent Richmond women for a series of articles. They were sworn to absolute secrecy or the project would fail. The next task was a list for her informants of the information she needed. Education, interests, charities and any employment.

In addition they were asked to add any information they might know personally. Her team knew this part was their opportunity to share gossip on the women to be investigated. Their loyalty to Pam meant not one of them would break her confidential rule.

Within a few days she was being flooded with information by email and texting and as many phone calls as she could process. Patterns emerged in social activities since the five women were in the wealthy class and belonged to the same organizations. Other similarities emerged and speeded up her study of Legere.

Gossip was invaluable revealing things only a few people knew about the women. She quickly eliminated the dirty laundry except for Legere. One woman gave her information about Legere's ownership in Strong Inc. She was one of her closest confidants and didn't see anything wrong in sharing Legere's

clever move after the murders.

While everything about Strong Inc management was in flux Legere struck and undermined her other brother to grab voting control of the company. She explained the deal made with the three children of Oliver's to achieve 51% control of the company using some highly questionable tactics. The children were left without any voting rights, in reality they were only employees. Aunt Legere was taking care of them.

There it was. Legere became a sly aggressive business woman who had demonstrated her talent for dirty deals. Pam had her starting point to start close surveillance of Legere and her day to day life. She was sure shadowing her would be fairly easy. She knew Richmond.

Pam found herself involved in Richmond social affairs. One night was a fund raising dinner. She staked out at the rear entrance to the hotel. Dinner over, Legere and her husband left in their car for home. Another day Legere was moving around town to a dress shop, a nail salon and lunch with a friend. Somehow Pam lost her after lunch. That night she stayed home. Pam was relieved since her spying had been 14 hours a day.

It took a week before Legere did something significant. Off West Broad Street was a sizable industrial complex with a mixed variety of businesses. Legere parked in the lot of a large building housing an industrial printing company. Cruising past

the building Legere entered she saw a large sign on the building reading “Bradley Printing Company”. It was Legere’s married name to Beau Bradley. Perhaps she came to see Beau, she thought to herself, I’ll park in the far corner of the parking lot and wait for her.

Two hours went by without any activity. Pam tried to keep her attention on the building and review reports to kill some time. Shortly after two hours Pam who hadn’t nearly enough sleep for over a week nodded off. There was a sharp banging on the drivers side window. The sound woke her up abruptly.

Pam looked up at a uniformed man motioning for her to get out of the car. She obeyed him and he asked for ID. Confused she gave him a drivers license. While he was studying the license she became fully alert. He was wearing a security guard uniform so it wasn’t police business. Pam took the license back and asked.

“Are you a security guard for Bradley Printing? If so, what regulation have I violated?”

“This is private property and you need to leave before I call 911”! replied the jowly guard.

She returned to her car. When seated behind the wheel she rolled down the window and snapped at him.

“What’s so valuable that they need a security guard.? Of course I’m probably asking a top secret question. If I ever come back here I’ll park right in front of the office.

If I'm approached by an employee, I'll explain your strong arm tactics to your employer!"

She drove away quickly.

The incident shook her up. Why would a company in the middle of an industrial park need a security guard during the day? Especially with a huge parking lot nearly half empty. No place to hide. I'll come back tonight and snoop.

Pam drove to the rear of the building. It was the loading dock area with three bays. The dock was empty at the present time. Maybe tonight there will some action Pam thought to herself. The printing company rear area made her uneasy due to the hostile altercation with the security guard.

As soon as it was dark she drove to the printing company. A block away from the loading dock area she parked her car and walked to the plant. Now the lights were on at the dock and there were three tractor trailer trucks in the loading bays. The trucks were identical with plain aluminum trailers with no markings and blue tractors. It seemed odd to her.

When she was sure there was no one on the dock she scurried to a dark corner and hid behind a pile of wood pallets. Two of the trucks were fully loaded. One of them at the end had open doors and was half loaded. Pam needed to get closer in order to read lettering on the boxes. There were two sizes, a larger square one and slim flat ones wedged in between the rows of the

large boxes. She was faced with the problem of walking across the well lighted dock and gambling on being caught in the open.

Taking a deep breath and with a pounding heart Pam went over to the truck. Inside she flattened herself against the wall of the trailer in an area partially covered with boxes. Her nose was only six inches away from the cartons. Easy to read. There was “Bradley Printing Co” in large letters on the square boxes but no customer addresses. No lettering was visible on the flat boxes.

Suddenly Pam’s arm was being held in a vice like grip. Yanked to her feet she was facing the security guard from earlier in the day. His ruddy face was close to hers. He shouted.

“I told you! Get off the property! You have 30 seconds to leave or I will notify the police I have a trespasser who has been warned two times today. If you don’t leave I will handcuff you and turn you over to Richmond PD. He then viciously threw her to the floor smashing her nose on the concrete floor.

Pam was bleeding profusely from the facial injury. She managed to pull herself up and jump off the dock. Falling heavily she ripped her clothes, on her feet again she left the property. Her gait was uneven but she got to the car and drove off. No pursuit, the guard had done his job.

It was dawn when Legere and Beau Bradley arrived at their company in answer to a call from the security guard. Beau drove to the dock area. His crew was waiting with the security officer

who was puffed up with pride over his handling of the intruder situation.

Standing under a light on the loading platform Legere and Beau listened to the guard tell his heroic tale. He had seen Pam's vehicle and drivers license. He gave his boss the ID information. Beau assured the guard he would reward him for his professional handling of the intruder and drove off.

While he drove Legere studied Pam's identity

"Well I declaya we know this lady, she's a repotah from DC. I wondah why she's snoopin' round heah."

"Dahlin' theah can only be one answa'. I wondah who are sly fox maght be. Ah'l make the call."

In an instant he was talking to a powerful contact in DC. In twenty words he told Beau what he needed to know.

Pam wasted no time entering I 95 North for DC. She was in complete disarray but took no notice. There was a handkerchief fashioned around her nose to stop the blood from leaking onto her clothes. The shock of the accident wore away and a terrible pain rose in the wound. It was almost impossible to concentrate on driving but she was desperate to reach Nick in Foxboro.

Dawn was beginning to turn the eastern sky red when she arrived at the Foxboro court building. The police station was manned 24 hours a day. She slowly walked to the reception desk covered with blood on her face and clothes. To the on-duty cop

she looked like an accident victim or a survivor from a street fight.

He ran around the desk to help her. Pam whispered.

“Please get sergeant Noulte.” then passed out.

She regained consciousness the following afternoon from a deep sleep. No pain now, pain medication was working quite well. She felt the bandage placed across her nose. A nurse came in to check on her. Pam asked for a hand mirror. Her face looked like a large bandage with black eyes above it and a swollen mouth below it. No dinner date tonight she groaned to herself.

Nick walked into her room at this awkward moment. He was relieved to see Pam alert and healthy despite the raccoon look.

He said.

“Well my turn to visit you in a hospital. How are you doing?”

“It looks worse than it is but my nose is sore.”

“Do you feel like talking?”

Pam nodded, so he sat down and they talked. When they had finished discussing her adventures Nick said.

“This puts us back into a conundrum about our course of action. Captain Johnson will probably be insistent about staying out of the case. More than likely he’ll turn it over VBI for further investigation. I am tempted keep this information to ourselves and investigate from a distance. But I have to tell Johnson. You will have stay out of this too at least for now Pam. Don’t go near Richmond.

By now the Bradleys probably know who you are.”

She hesitated.

“Nick I think you’re missing something here. Nothing actually happened in Richmond. I got roughed up and chased off the Bradley Printing property. We still don’t know if there is anything to see. I can’t snoop there I grant you, but it wouldn’t stop my close buddy, Danny. He’s a state police detective and he likes excitement. I’ve known him since I went to a Richmond high school. I was dating his best friend and when that broke up we became friends. He’s a solid man and absolutely trustworthy. Knows Richmond people, in fact Danny might know something about the Bradleys. Should I call him?”

Nick’s mind went back and forth about another police officer doing his work for him. Necessity won out.

“Since you’re sold on his abilities we need him.”

Pam smiled a little watching his professional pride wrestle over depending on someone else.

“Great.” she replied.

He was relieved to have a third party in the investigation it solved his differences with Captain Johnson. Pam decided to go to Charlottesville and visit her aunt for awhile. She could work with Danny via cell phone.

Chapter Nineteen

In Richmond state trooper Danny Steele requested a week off without explaining his reason for the sudden leave of absence. He laid out a plan for snooping around the many people he knew in the city. It was essential to be careful about his contacts so he didn't start rumors about his interest in the Bradleys. When he contacted someone for information that person on his list couldn't know the person he had just questioned. He hoped.

Fishing for information often leads to building a network of people who knows someone else, who knows, etc etc. Boring, tiring leg work was Danny's experience for three days straight. Then he found out some things from a source whose brother worked at the Bradley printing plant. The basement floor was sealed off from the main operation.

The employee told his brother the company contracted with government entities to do specialized printing of financial instruments. No one could enter the area without a special pass to walk through an electronic gate. He spent several more days poking around with more contacts with mixed results. Legere in particular was a well known figure at charity events and political affairs. On the other hand, there was a curtain drawn across the Bradley's business life except for their well known family interest in Strong Inc. in DC.

It sort of kept attention away from their local printing operation activities considered to be a small business by the public.

This information contradicted what Pam had told him about her brutal treatment at the printing plant. Danny had to find out the truth about the operation and its workers. He couldn't rule out Pam's experience as being an isolated event brought on by a hostile worker. Only a first hand look at the printing operation could provide the truth.

He began studying the company from the outside noting times of day for workers coming to and leaving from work. It wasn't going to be easy to sneak in without being detected either by employees or by surveillance cameras. Judging by the many outside posts he was sure the interior area was probably guarded by more sophisticated motion detectors.

He had a way of learning the plant layout and the electronic equipment used at the company. An abbreviated site plan was on file with the fire department and his brother was a fireman. Telling him as little as possible Danny talked him into copying the electronics layout on file at headquarters. His brother didn't like it but it was his brother after all.

Luckily the fire department had inspected the building several months ago so the layout was up to date. All of the fire alarms were shown as well as the video cameras and intruder alarms. He thought the large variety of safety devices was odd for a

printing plant. He needed to gain entrance to the building.

Danny contacted Pam to work out their break in plan. They ruled out reporting their information to his superiors at the state police, not enough proof only clues. Richmond police, VBI and the FBI were also ruled out.

Pam knew Nick was the only person for the plan.

“Danny, we must include Nick at this stage. He knows more about the Forest Avenue murders than anyone. He can really help us.”

No need for any discussion and Pam called Nick. His attitude went from indifference to growing interest as she told him what they knew. He would be in Richmond the following day to go to work. It wouldn't be easy to get into the plant. Mostly because the plant was on a site with open spaces around the building.

Danny had an idea based on building alterations to the plant in the last thirty years. One area at the rear on the basement level had been opened and closed up several times. Maybe one of the numerous patches had weakened over the years.

It was nearly midnight before the last of the trucks at the loading dock were gone. An area of interest at the rear of the building was exposed near a corner. Pam was parked in a car across the street in the shadows of an alley. Nick and Danny began to study the foundation for any openings or outlines of a plastered-over wall. They found a straight crack near the bottom of the foundation, a sure sign it was a patch.

Chinking with a chisel at the crack opened up the area covered by the patch. Gradually a small door was revealed. They guessed it was a utility opening about half the size of a regular door. Pushing together the door was slowly opened to a dark area. There was a tiny slit of light showing at the bottom of a standard size door on the other side of the room.

They could now turn on flashlights to reveal a walled off area enclosing an ancient furnace and other equipment. It hadn't been used for many years as evidenced by the thick layer of dust over everything. Rather than remove it the owners had decided to leave it there. It was cheaper than the cost of opening up the foundation and hauling it all off to the dump.

As they approached the door with the light shining underneath the hum of large machinery grew louder. A look into the basement was a shocker. They were looking at three printing machines with men around them moving about tending them and stacking printed materials from the presses.

Along the walls on either side were cartons stacked nearly six feet high. No space was wasted in the basement it contained a massive printing operation with many types of smaller machinery surrounding the presses in the center. Nick motioned to Danny he would move to one of the stacks of finished product.

Sliding along the wall slowly Nick reached a stack of papers. He took one sheet then made his way back to Danny. What they saw was probably the last document in the world anyone would

expect to see. It was a U.S. Treasury bond for ten thousand dollars. Everything about the document made it clear it had just been freshly printed here. Nick jerked his head in the direction of the exit door.

Neither of them uttered a word to Pam until they were far away from the Bradley plant. At Danny's home they huddled to discuss the next step. No argument about alerting the Richmond police and the state troopers to set up a raid of the plant. It was time. Nick called Jonhson immediately even though it was 3 AM.

The chief had no complaints about the early hour as Nick gave him the exciting news of a major break. It took several days to organize a raid of this magnitude on private property. It would be a late night invasion to eliminate as many employees as possible from the plant. This would be a swift operation to stop any attempts to escape or possibly avoid a shoot out with the workers. It was a secret operation for many reasons.

It was dicey. They were acting strictly on the treasury bond Nick brought back. The Bradleys would be detained in the evening to prevent them from going to the plant. Another big risk if it was all supposition.

However the evidence seemed to be overwhelming and worth taking a chance. They also took elaborate actions to screen it all from the media. Decoy operations and activity around the area worked perfectly. The task force consisted of the most experi-

enced SWAT team members to ensure a swift suppression and arrest of the print op members. A simple plan since there were only two entrances and no windows in the basement.

The signal for the assault was a flash bang grenade thrown as the main door was smashed open. It was all over in two minutes. The fifteen men present in the printing operation were quickly rounded up and lined up against the wall.

Speed was essential since two of the men were armed. A short plump man tried to slip behind the line of men and a policeman quickly handcuffed him. He was brought to the officers commanding the raid. Chief Johnson stared at the man trying to remember where he had seen him before. He got it.

“Why it’s Mr. Earl Graham a member of the FBI’s top ten most wanted criminals. You have been on their list for at least five years. What a wonderful surprise.”

“I don’t know if we have met chief but then so many of your profession have been in my life. To save you time I will not make any statements. This is all I have to say.”

True to his word Graham never uttered a word during a long interrogation at police headquarters.

Studying the criminal record of Graham was a trip into the world of a master forger. He was wanted in twenty countries for various counterfeiting activities. Now in his mid thirties the master thief had only served five years in a state prison. His FBI file was so thick it required an addendum to hold all of it. Based

on the number of arrest warrants issued since he was nineteen years old his record of only being apprehended eight times was in the realm of the miraculous. As far as his wealth, there were many speculations about where Earl had hidden his money. A fair question since the millions he had stolen far exceeded what was needed to live lavishly.

Until now he had never been arrested at a counterfeiting operation. Past arrests were based on the forger's possession of forged product, mainly counterfeit currency and the print plates. His arrests were always based on the testimony of witnesses of the equally guilty looking for a deal. He was acquitted six times by high powered lawyers who could dismantle the testimonies of his cohorts. Physical evidence was always talked down as squealers planting incriminating items to bolster their testimony against Graham.

Federal agents of several species eagerly dismantled the forging operation in the basement. Most of these men were law enforcement veterans who had seen everything. That is, until inspecting the forging operation Graham created. There was almost no talking as they inspected the printing materials which resembled the US Treasury vaults.

Stacked all over were US bonds in a number of denominations and dollar amounts. To Nick it looked like enough bonds to pay off the national debt. The search became stranger when the police noticed most bond certificates had no serial number

nor a due date. It was like having a blank dollar bill.

It seemed likely that Graham printed a continuous inventory of government bonds then received the serial numbers and due dates from someone at a later date. Based upon the high activity of trucks in and out of the loading dock they figured bonds were being distributed to a wide range of destinations.

But the how? and why? The treasury department was now busy investigating every phase of the operation. Truckloads of equipment and files were shipped up to DC for closer analysis. One thing was certain it had to be Graham who had engraved the plates since it would take microscopic work to find any differences from the real treasury plates.

The forger's lawyers couldn't claim false information from informants this time since Graham was arrested on the scene with all of the evidence. Tough on the other members in the crew though they had no leverage to rat out the boss for gain.

Still, five of the arrested men took a shot to get a deal. Bits and pieces of the operation beyond the printing itself were only marginally useful. Serial numbers and due dates came from somewhere but these men didn't know from who or where.

Treasury men became almost hysterical when they compared the serial numbers on the counterfeit bond certificates to their records. They were the identical numbers of the treasury's groups of print releases. It was exactly what they were fearing.

Early in the year they began to get confused inquiries from financial institutions around the world of holding two US bonds with the same serial numbers. When the treasury received the bonds confusion increased. It was impossible to find any differences between the two bonds. Earl had outdone himself.

Secret Service was called in to begin a huge international investigation to retrieve as many bonds as possible. It was a super secret operation known only to the treasury and the Secret Service. They had no idea how much the forged bonds totaled, millions? billions? No one spoke of it as if not paying any attention to the menacing shadow would help somehow.

Regardless the US would have to cover the losses as the bonds were found. If it became a problem in the billions more than likely people would gossip in the financial institutions. It could become a disastrous national scandal. Time was of the essence in trying to reduce the government's exposure.

Chapter Twenty

Arrest and custody of the Bradleys was in the hands of the town of Foxtrot. Nick and chief Johnson brought their prisoners into the town at midnight. It was a successful move and the Bradleys were locked up in the police jail without an incident. Graham probably hadn't coach them to clam up but they also swore not one word would be uttered.

More than likely the counterfeiting operation was tied into the Forest Avenue murders. Still, at least a number of suspects were in custody who wouldn't be going anywhere. They were all under arrest for their part in the counterfeiting operation for starters. No chance of any super attorney getting them free on a technicality. VBI and FBI units joined the state police investigation to undertake a huge inquiry into the profiles of the men arrested on the premises.

No information was available to anyone outside of the law enforcement personnel. A strict cloak of silence was ordered so the other accomplices in this operation wouldn't have advance warning. They were hoping to gain enough information to arrest all parties at one time.

Foxboro police were holding Legere and her husband in a town that knew all of the Strongs. Johnson held a secret meeting with his officers to order them to speak to no one in town about

the jail birds. Any leaks from his department would result in being fired immediately, no appeals, no second chances. The chief delivered his orders in a tone of voice hardly ever heard from their leader. He dismissed them all with a wave of his hand. Still a mystery was who murdered the four victims at Forest Avenue in such a savage manner? And why?

Nothing could make the Bradleys talk. A three hour silent session with a number of people trying their hand at it yielded nothing. Nick reasoned they were terrified of the consequences if they cooperated. More than likely some powerful people either from the underworld or an agency of the government were involved in the operation. Obviously hundreds of millions were involved. Their only hope was breaking someone arrested in Richmond.

The town braced itself for an invasion by the legal teams,.Strong Inc sent their corporate team from DC and all of the eager media was represented. All because the state of Virginia was going public about the criminals arrested in a major police raid on a counterfeiting operation. No elaboration was offered and the press was stone walled. That, of course, didn't keep the media from dancing as fast as they could by speculating in a rambling meaningless manner about the government announcement.

Nick received a surprise when a pink limo arrived at the po-

lice station with the Hamilton twins. His name had been mentioned as a leading investigator in the Forest Avenue murders case. Their private eye hadn't reported Nick's whereabouts because of a more-than generous expense account of \$500 per diem. Collecting might be another thing, these girls had been in business since they were toddlers. Not easy to outwit them.

Nick was given an alert by the duty cop as they pranced into police headquarters to see their hero. Fortunately for him the fire exit at the rear of the building was next to his office. No time to sprint to his car. He ran to the the rear door of his favorite bar.

He, like the greedy private eye, underestimated their talents to get what they wanted. At the bar was their limo driver waiting to greet him. The twins always had someone arrive before them to make a plan. Foxboro was child's play and there was a staff member covering each exit route from town hall.

Nick stood still waiting for the limo driver's move. He simply spoke into his cell phone then stood in front of the back door smiling politely. He had been calm about it and ready to be captured----until the driver smiled at him. His face began to burn with humiliation and his ego erupted in a rage for being so easily outsmarted. The driver was calm and the raging man coming at him was a total surprise as Nick ran right over him. Back door was opened and closed as the fugitive disappeared. Gone!

He returned to town hall as probably the best place to disap-

pear. The fourth floor was mainly used for storage and a few small offices. Good a place as any to avoid the twins and the media people who were surely trailing after the stars. On a few floors below Johnson was taking the heat for Nick.

The chief was annoyed but he calmly ordered one of the town clerks to search the building for the missing sergeant. Easy to find him in one of the offices drinking coffee. Clerk Barbara didn't waste any energy on him she merely crooked her finger. He had wasted his energy for nothing. Surprise! there they were in the chief's office delighted to see Nick. Other girls might have been hurt by his efforts to avoid them, not the twins, they knew Nick was crazy about them.

He gave up. Tough to have two raving beauties hugging and kissing him. Johnson suppressed a snicker but he couldn't control his broad smile.

"I will let the three of you have the privacy of my office. No thank you is necessary Nick, it's the least I can do for love. Wonderful to meet you beautiful girls. I'm not sure the sergeant deserves to have you lovelies adore him."

Shut up! Nick commanded himself, don't make any waves. Dammit!

Arm and arm Nick was led to their waiting pink limo. The driver looked coldly at him for making him look foolish. In no time at all, actually two hours, they arrived at the twins pent-house in DC. Waiting for them were one hundred people who

had a relationship of some kind with the darlings. A lavish buffet and a large bar were set up in the middle of the main room.

Nick became a friendly, outgoing young man as he mixed with the guests. It was the only course of action he could take at the time. Nick could turn on the charm when he needed to but his private belief was dinners and parties were all a phony show of friendliness. He would stick to this cover for now until he figured out what to do.

He didn't have to develop anything. The twins were in charge now and Nick, who no longer had a home, was their guest. After the party was over they led him to their bedroom shoved him in and turned out the lights. Based on the sounds emanating from the boudoir one would envision a struggle with the two girls punctuated with protestations from Nick. As time went on his voice became fainter and less strident.

Until .

Nick woke up finding himself in a twins sandwich. As he became fully awake and understood where he was, terror swept through him as the memory of their father returned. Naked, he bolted from the bedroom to the bathroom and dressed himself in a robe. Maybe the father would buy his attempt to look innocent, like just a shower. In the enclosure he turned on the water to hot and scrubbed himself. The door opened and the twins joined him in the steamy shower. Nick froze. Trapped!

They shut off the shower and dried Nick off together. Mer-

cedes picked up on his fearful look. She asked.

“What’s bothering you Nick? You look terrified.”

Britney laughed and replied.

“Nick is waiting for dad to crash in here with a knife. I heard part of his talk with him and caught the threat to make a eunich out of him if he came near us. So relax. Last night wouldn’t have happened if our father was anywhere near the apartment. He’s on the west coast signing contracts”.

They had breakfast served in their bedroom which Nick found disconcerting. After a lively repast the twins became serious. Britney said.

“We’re not adolescent girls mad about a boy. In another year we’ll be 23 years old so in our father’s wonderful master plan it’s time to get us married to the right men. Your real life struggle with a man who was trying kill us made a very deep impression. Someone cared enough about us to risk his life to save ours with no more motive than to do his duty. Big stuff for us who live in a world always planned by our father. We love him and our career. He works hard to keep us on top. It’s a tough competitive business where other beauties are scrambling to take our places. Dad is the best”.

Mercedes cut in on her sister.

“We need to spend a week with you Nick to show our appreciation for being there. That’s all really. You have been skittish and we don’t blame you for running for your life. Live with us

for a week in Alexandria, we want to have fun. A week to be remembered because we want to be close with you and celebrate with our hero. Understand Nick?”

He got it. Their impact on his personal life had been major and he blamed them for many of his troubles. Easy target to salve his ego when things became messed up (I wouldn't be in this trouble if the twins hadn't forced me to leave DC etc).

Being around them and their adoration was slowly changing his perception of them. This candid explanation now made it impossible to stay mad at them. And they were the most lovely girls he had ever encountered. Well he was a man after all.

Nick insisted on going to Foxboro every day because of the critical developments in the case and his background knowledge. Maybe there have been stranger daily commutes to work but his had to be in the top ten. Every morning the driver would pick him up in the pink limo and drive him to Foxboro. At the end of the day the pink limo returned.

When he arrived at the police station the first time in the pink limo no one dared to say anything. However when he passed chief Johnson's office muffled noises of rustling papers told Nick the captain was covering up his guffawing. Instead of confronting him, his pride wouldn't let him react to such adolescent behavior.

So far the Richmond police hadn't learned anything past the counterfeit operation, Of the fifteen men there were seven local

men working there who didn't know it was illegal. Printing official documents was the main business of the Bradleys. Still, it made them paranoid to be cuffed and put in the lock up for two days. It would probably take a week or two before they stopped looking in their rear view mirror or scanning for a uniform nearby.

Two men among the suspects stood out from the others. When arrested they weren't dressed to work at a printing operation. They were the only men with weapons. One FBI agent swore he knew one of them under a different name. Richmond police gave him permission to interrogate them. Routine questions were producing routine answers from them. Too smooth, too confident until he got around to probing for information about their criminal backgrounds. Both of them denied having been arrested before but their demeanor changed. He had experienced these rehearsed responses before from mob members carefully coached by a criminal law attorney. Meaning he was being stonewalled and no more information would be forthcoming.

Interrogation resumed the following day. The agent had heard from FBI headquarters about the results of fingerprinting these suspects. They were members of the Linguini mob operating in New York. There was One Eye Joey Bologna alias Jack Brown and Six Toes Frankie Manicotti alias Bill Casey. The agent told them what he knew and would they like to correct their mistake?

They responded by giving the standard denials, such as, “it’s a mistake I swear” “someone is trying to frame me” “I want my lawyer”. The agent nodded as they spoke. He then excused himself to go to the mens room. When he reached for the door knob he quickly turned his head and said “hey Joey”. “Yeah?” was the automatic answer from one of them.

The agent sat back down at the table and replied.

“Let’s cut the BS gentlemen. Lack of cooperation is what I will report unless you get straight with me. I probably don’t have to remind you that lying adds up to lack of cooperation which goes into your arrest file. Judges aren’t amused when a pair of thugs like you get smart with them. Capice?”

At least the agent had cleared up their identification, but no information about the counterfeiting and Forest Avenue killings. They only repeated their memorized script.

Chapter Twenty One

It wasn't long before several well known defense attorneys arrived in Richmond to defend Joey and Frankie. It was another clue of how big the counterfeiting operation was. Mob bosses don't waste their money defending their lower echelon thugs. These two had the dubious honor of being represented by lawyers usually used for the top men. All of the police units involved in the investigation had their antennas come alive.

After lengthy debates about where to arraign the men arrested and being charged for their criminal activities, the FBI federal court in DC won out. In Washington they had to work long hours to set up so many arraignments. Schedules were set up for attorneys to meet with their client or clients. The FBI building began to look like a meeting of the ABA. Virginia law enforcement agencies were really relieved to be out of the court proceedings mess.

Other federal agencies like the Secret Service and the CIA became involved. Some of the men arrested were on their lists of suspects in a number of felony cases. The FBI set up a central booking group to work out details. In this process the forger, Earl Graham seemed to have disappeared. All of the federal agencies and the state of Virginia had the right to interrogate

him. So he began to be shuffled all over the place to agencies for interrogation. Sort of an embarrassing outcome with each agency pointing a finger at another agency for his escape. It was unsettling because Graham had to have been aided by an unknown professional force.

Treasury was having troubles of its own. They needed to learn how the counterfeiters were being given authentic bond certificate serial numbers. It was a proven fact since treasury was receiving duplicate bond certificates with the same numbers. There wasn't any way to find the source because the certificates were coming in from all over the world. What made this counterfeit operation extremely serious was the quality of the forgeries. Only their experts were able to make out any differences between the bonds. It was a quality they had never encountered. Who in their organization was stealing the numbers so carefully guarded in their operations?

It was truly a major problem capable of destroying financial institutions as the counterfeits were uncovered. It could cause economic chaos but such an outcome was impossible to predict. They had no idea when the certificate numbers began to be stolen. They desperately needed to find the thief and get a record of the numbers. How much in phony bonds was in current circulation and when were they issued? Two months ago? two years ago?

All of the undercover federal agencies were aware of the serious situation facing the country. Every country in the world was inundated with agents working on all of the underworld information sources they knew. Looking for anything that would give them a starting point in their manhunt.

On the other hand, the New York mob attorneys representing the two mob members captured in the raid were planning a different approach. After thoroughly studying the entire situation they found the right defense plan. They had a meeting with their clients to lay out a plan for them. After telling them about all of the criminal charges an attorney summarized their legal plan.

“We are going to make a motion to move your case to Foxboro. They have the right to prosecute anyone involved in the Forest Avenue murders. That includes you two after we learned about your part in the killings. If you are prosecuted by the feds on the counterfeiting charges your criminal records almost guarantees 15 years. We might get it down to 5 years but I can’t promise you.”

Frankie spoke up.

“What good is it to be charged in Foxboro”?

“You agree to cooperate in the murder case in exchange for leniency on the counterfeiting rap. We might get you off on probation for your cooperation.”

Joey hotly protested.

“Hey man! Are you forgetting about a murder charge? We told you we were there. They’ll get us for murder”!

The other attorney responded.

“Easy Joey. Let me explain it to you. Sure you were at the murder scene to carry the bodies with Legere and her husband. The murder scene had no clues about anyone. In exchange for your testimony about the murders we can work on a plea agreement letting you off the hook. They are anxious to solve it.

“We dangle the bait. What is it worth to the Foxboro Police to solve the Forest Avenue case? It’s a cinch they’ll be ready to deal. But we get all of their promises in writing before you guys say a word. And there is no evidence that you killed anyone only carried out orders from the boss. Is that right”?

Frankie and Joey were not the brightest pebbles on the beach but they didn’t trust getting chummy with the cops. Their past encounters with the law weren’t friendly in the least. They looked at each other. Joey spoke for them.

“We don’t trust anyone who’s a cop. So, what if these Foxboro guys go along with your deal? Then here comes the feds and Virginia cops and they say no? How can you be sure they’ll let Foxboro be top dog and not nail us later?”

“Not possible Joey. The murders were committed within Foxboro town limits giving them legal jurisdiction for any crimes

committed in their town. What they decide goes with the killings. If they make the deal you can't be tried twice for the same felony. Now the counterfeiting case will be different and I can deal there too. You were bystanders at the time of the raid on the print op so we can argue the charges down to probably a parole settlement."

Joey and Frankie looked at him like he was a god.

"I don't know how you came up with this plan".

Joey said admiringly.

Even "gods" have their vanity. The praise felt good.

"It's what I do Joey. You can stay within legal limits in cases but still use the law to your advantage. Now we need to go to work on what to say in the Forest Avenue murders."

Chief Johnson picked up his ringing phone.

"Johnson here. Yes Mr. Miner we met in Richmond. How can I help you"?

"I am filing for a change of venue for my clients, Joey Bologna and Frankie Manicotti to your town. I know you have jurisdiction in the Forest Avenue murder case. The reason for our request is my clients were present during the killings. If the feds are in charge of both cases it might take a year before my clients are tried in court. I can't speak for them but I'm anxious to stay away from the feds. We want a separate trial for the murders."

Johnson's heart skipped a beat but he kept his cool.

"That's an unexpected change in the case. If you wish I will

accompany you to the court.”

Miner agreed to the offer.

“If our request is accepted I’ll see you soon.”

Hanging up his phone the captain yelled “hooray!” Johnson decided to keep the call to himself until it was done deal. He couldn’t imagine what Nick might do if he heard about it before it was official.

Chapter Twenty Two

Johnson really didn't need to keep the appeal secret. Pam was in Richmond covering the law proceedings. As soon as she heard about the request for change of venue Nick found out from her. She didn't know about the plea bargain part, it was confidential. The motion would be heard in a closed courtroom no visitors allowed. The mob boys were being held by the state police in a station outside of Richmond.

Near the end of the week the closed hearing took place. There were some arguments among the judges. But what was compelling was Joey and Frankie's claim to have participated in the Forest Avenue murders. Their attorney was masterful in his presentation with subtle hints his clients might clam up if they were tried by the feds. He never said it. He didn't have to. These law veterans knew they were angling for a chance at a plea bargain in exchange for their testimony. The case would be moved to Foxboro.

Nick and Pam only knew about a possible change of venue. Johnson knew everything but he wasn't talking to anybody. Nick was miffed the chief hadn't mentioned anything about the change and why. He entered the chief's office looking calm and pleasant.

“Morning chief. It looks like everything is under control in Richmond with the feds taking over. I will alert the special unit they are no longer needed. They aren’t are they”?

Johnson continued to look noncommittal. He replied.

“The team was reassigned by me yesterday. With all they’ve been through I think you should send them a formal notice as their leader. Good for morale, be sure to thank them for their efforts. You won’t have to contact Deputy Clyde at the county he’s no longer with the sheriff’s office. It’s an interesting story about Clyde. Here is his police report about some trouble he started.”

Nick took the report: He skipped the official information:

“I was on patrol in the county and noticed a massage parlor with a big Open for Business banner. It hadn’t been on the duty roster so I thought I’d save some time and inspect it. Wearing my civilian clothes I entered the shop. The owner, a middle aged Asian lady came over to welcome me. I hadn’t had a good massage for my bad hip for awhile. So I decided to have a massage as good cover for snooping for any infractions of the county law.

“I entered a clean massage room with a young Asian girl waiting for me. No English, she pointed at the dressing room. I undressed and got onto the massage table with a big towel around my waist. She was an experienced masseuse and the massage was the best I ever had. I was even going to tip her a dollar.

“Before I could get off the table she stopped me still smiling

and asked me if I wanted to have a “Happy Time”.

I felt great and pleased they treated their customers good. I thought a beer and some music would be nice. I nodded ‘yes’ and she pushed me back to a lying position.

“Instead of like bring a beer, she slid her hand under the towel and touched my private parts. I was shocked and started to get up. Still smiling she pushed me back down and gripped my private part. I jumped off the table. I was in a whorehouse!

“I had my pistol, badge and handcuffs with me. I grabbed her before she could run and cuffed her to the table. In the main area I held up my pistol and yelled out ‘this is a raid!’. Then I ran to the other two massage rooms and herded everyone into the front. I fired two shots into the air to let them know I wasn’t kidding and waved my badge.

“The three young masseuses started screaming. The manager ran toward the front door with the naked customers. I got there first and blocked the door. Instead of stopping, the manager kicked me in the crotch. As I went down in agonizing pain I managed to shoot in their direction breaking the front windows. Unfortunately one of the customers was shot in the shoulder, just a little graze.

“I ordered everyone to lie down on the floor face down. With some robe belts I tied their hands. It was then that I saw myself in a mirror. I was stark naked.”

“I believe I have been treated unfairly. The county commissioners had no right to fire me, I was doing my duty although it

got a little out of hand. I know you cleared the owner when she claimed the young masseuse was a new employee. You guys bought her denial about not knowing she was a whore and released her. I am withdrawing my lawsuit against the county for forcing me to pay \$5000 to repair the massage parlor. I'm doing this to save my uncle from any embarrassment.

P.S.I wouldn't drive past my house on Main Street for awhile. Don't tempt me."

Nick laid down the report looking shocked then he burst into loud laughter. Back to business. He asked the chief.

"Anything new? I heard a rumor about a change of venue but no details. Right now chief you look like a poker player with his cards held tightly to his vest. What's up"?

"No news really. The New York lawyers might try for a change of venue to separate the two cases. Simpler that way. I'll let you know if anything new comes up."

Nick stood up as he continued to look at Johnson. They regarded each other silently for a moment then he left the chief's office. The confrontation ended in a tie. Neither of them knew anymore than before. He was angry because the chief had been less than candid about the case.

On the same day the court in Richmond granted the request to separate cases. Hearings on the murder case began in Foxtrot.

Altogether there were ten individuals present to hear the confessions of the mob boys. Joey was expressionless as he answered all of the questions of when, where and who was there. This was a narrative confession no questions would be raised until Joey was finished. Ratting to the police about anybody was an iron clad rule in the mafia and he began talking nervously:

“Word came down to our boss about a contract which required two guys to help with the job. We was given the job. We knew it was special when one of the top guys gave us the job and warned us to follow his instructions perfectly. No names, places or dates were mentioned. Our job was simple. Do whatever we were told by the killers like don’t touch anything or leave no footprints.

“Frankie and me got nervous when we was blindfolded for the trip to wherever. It began to feel more like it was us being whacked. Not one word was spoken which believe me made us real jumpy. We met with Legere and her husband near the house. Mr. Bradley was all excited. He talked fast to us about the job and how the victims would never know nothing.

“Outside the house we was dressed in them outfits used in clean rooms and radiation places. Just follow orders is all we knew and the Bradleys led us into the house. Four people were seated at a table set for six people. We guessed the Bradleys were also diners.

“These people were already corpses sitting upright dead as can

be. Now our work began. Joey and me carried the corpses out to a white van in the driveway. It wasn't there before. Inside the van plastic sheets covered every thing. It looked like a meat wagon from a slaughter house.

"It took some time to arrange the house to their plan. Every piece of furniture was removed and we made the space into a clean room. Legere was the boss and she followed the floor plan of a sterilized room. No waiting around after the job was done. Gone in seconds for a wild ride on country roads with no headlights.

"Legere did the driving. Her husband was an excitable type and a compulsive talker and he babbled at us in high excitement. We learned from him what they had planned. He bragged how the victims were poisoned with a high powered nerve chemical to knock them out. A tiny amount is quite effective he said. The juice disappears into the blood stream and no traces of it are left in the body.

"He liked to feel important and he told us about the poison that killed the people. Venom from the needles of a blow fish can kill you instantly. It is the most deadly venom of them all. Pellets had been coated with the poison and placed on the tiniest knife ever created. An air gun shot a pellet into the base of the skull just above the hair line. No trace of an entry into the skin is left. They was dead in seconds. Legere heard part of the story he was telling us. Raging, she ordered us to gag her husband and

tie him up with the bodies.

“Every detail of the work we had to do had been worked out. When the bodies was distributed on the floor the plastic coverings were removed and Legere went to work. She told us where to lay them. This was planned too.

“She took four pistols and began to fire at the corpses. She began with Mrs. Strong and at point blank range she nearly blew her head off. Now there was blood all around the body and splattered on the walls She planted a pistol on the mutilated corpse. Then Legere wheeled around and shot her brother, Oscar Strong, and left him on his back with a weapon. Now the place smelled heavily of the spilled blood splattered everywhere. Legere’s breathing had become strong and she was making noises in her throat. It sounded like a high pig squeal.

“She mutilated the young people with the same savage energy. At point blank range the bullets were shredding the bodies. Her husband was following her with a bucket filled with blood to spill onto the victims. When they had finished they ran to each other covered with blood. Legere had splatters of gore on her face.

“They held each other in a bloody embrace and when Legere kissed her husband some blood trickled down her neck. Frankie and me are professional killers but we was stunned to watch this evil couple create a devil’s embrace. This was a killing far beyond our job description.”

“Within two hours every physical trace in the house had been

loaded into the van. We was delivered to a waiting car several miles away to escape from Foxboro. I'll be spooked by them mutilated bodies for a long time”.

At a salvage yard the van was crushed into a mass of metal then carried away to a barge and dumped into the sea.

Chapter Twenty Three

Probably the safest place in DC to hold a clandestine meeting was at a fund raising dinner going for \$1000 a plate or higher. There was the reception before dinner where most of the guests would congregate as they arrived. Then right after the speeches promoting something or someone, guests milled around to socialize with friends. Then when everyone moves to the exits there's another opportunity for a word or two.

Two genial appearing men with slight smiles were in a large group of people. This was a formal affair and male guests had the added camouflage of black suit and tie. After some social chit chat one said.

"I sincerely hope this mess has seen its final trial. Sergeant Nolte is out of the picture. Legere and her husband have taken the fall for the Forest Avenue murders. What about our operation? Where are we?"

The other man kept his cool with some effort. He was the worrying type. He replied.

"The mob network of international distribution was closed down within 24 hours of the raid. I must say I wish my group performed as efficiently, but of course I don't have the option of killing them."

“I must remind you that this operation will continue within a few weeks. I’m most relieved about the Bradleys being the only ones convicted in the Forest Avenue case. The mob boys who became state witnesses against them have already disappeared. Our treasury contact is also gone.”

“What a terrible nuisance. One mistake is all it took to open the door, damn that computer geek!”

Computer whiz Bob Taylor had been recruited by the mob when he got out of prison. He wasn’t a professional gangster. Taylor was told about the mafia rules but they didn’t impress him. He told some of the mob he would never be whacked. He boasted about being the most important man in the counterfeiting operation. How could they do without him?

Taylor’s ego was too big to prevent him from telling a couple of his geek friends all about it. Oscar heard about the boast and he understood the rules of the mob. Oscar tried to quit the IT operation but it was too late. Legere was the leader of Strong Inc and had no intention of closing the op. Fights erupted in the group.

They couldn’t agree and Legere had no qualms about murdering her brother before he could try to run. She set up the executions with help from some of the mob’s experts. They needed time to stop the operation and leave no traces. The executions

were also meant to be a strong warning to all of the players. Running was not an option for anyone involved. With their expertise the executions would be impossible to track.

Smiling, the obvious leader replied.

“Our op is the most efficient group in the world. Every part of the operation is being revamped to eliminate any loose ends to worry about. Relax. We’ll meet again in a month or so.”

Pam wasn’t finished investigating. A veteran reporter she continued to look for information about the counterfeiting operation. Under her newspaper’s by line she turned out articles about the sensational trials. Yet, there was no exposure of possible suspects in the Treasury Department nor any names or trail of the fake bonds. In other words, whoever is leading this multi million dollar conspiracy is untouchable.

Only occasionally did a news story affect her personal feelings. This was one of them. Her investigative files were getting larger all the time. Every person who made the news during the trials was listed and included a profile of the person. Known criminals were a separate file. Not too many though and only minor players.

What was unnerving were the responses of people on the list.. Some wouldn’t see her. Others granted a few minutes and revealed nothing of interest. Pam’s criminal informers acted even stranger. Any questions involving the counterfeiting op caused

them to completely clam up. It was odd to be sealed off from any information. It gave her chills.

Pam wondered about the disappearance of the master forger while held in custody by the FBI? Not a trace, not a word. Next Legere and her husband disappeared in the same manner as the forger. During a custodial transfer the Bradleys vanished without a trace.

A massive audit of Strong Inc. was a sensation. Large gaps were discovered in the data files pertaining to transactions with the US Treasury. None of Bob Walker's personal files could be found. Then there was a powerful bomb detonated on the Strong Inc floor that vaporized everything. Strong Inc was out of business and then some.

Terrorists were automatically blamed for the bombing. Oddly no group claimed responsibility for the sabotage. Pam decided to try a radical approach to the problem. She began to look for a time when the Treasury began to receive counterfeit bonds from financial institutions. What brought on a massive counterfeiting operation? Where was the money going? To be used for what purpose? She stared glumly at her notes wondering if she could find an opening.

Pam went to work on the treasury records that were available to the public. It was maddening labor mostly consisting of money transactions. Reluctantly she went back two years and began to study records leading to the present day. Ignoring the required

reports she looked to the correspondence records for a clue. A series of letters addressed to the treasury suddenly appeared from a small bank in Ohio. The complaints were about the confusion in presenting treasury bonds to the Federal Reserve for redemption.

The Federal Reserve returned the bonds to the small bank in Ohio with a curt reply informing them they were phonies. The real ones had already been paid off. The bank did not acquiesce gracefully. \$100000 was a large sum of money to lose for this bank. The incident blossomed into a legal hassle. Attorneys hired by the bank prepared a lawsuit to sue for the money. A gap occurred in the correspondence,. A week later the Ohio bank was swiftly paid off by the Fed. End of the trail.

Pam was ecstatic to find a starting time when the counterfeit bonds first began to appear for redemption. She withheld this information while studying the remaining treasury reports. Whoever had purged the files of the counterfeiting op had overlooked some minor items. Pam copied them anyway believing all the records needed to be read.

Public records exist everywhere naming names of people seeking information. Pam was no exception. Someone was studying the visitors registry. He found the location in the building where Pam was working and sauntered out of the directory section. Probably the most dull section of the treasury files contained the routine reports and correspondence with the public.

It's where she was digging for scraps of information that might lead somewhere.

After three hours of looking Pam took a break for rest and a quick lunch. The stranger walked up to her work table and pasted a note on top of the pile of papers. It couldn't possibly be missed, it was written on a bright pink paper. She froze at the doorway when she spotted the note. Someone had been at her table for sure who knew her identity.

Pam's heart skipped a beat and a sick feeling began crawling around in her gut. She regrouped, then steadied her nerves while striding boldly to the work table, quickly picking up the note and reading it:

"No need to mention your name you are a newspaper reporter digging around in the counterfeiting case. I'm sure your curiosity is intense over the odd events since the printing operation raid. All of the known people involved in the op and the Forest Avenue Massacre have vanished. All that is left to prove it happened is counterfeit money and paperwork.

"To accomplish such an astonishing feat requires players from some of the top government leaders who are 'movers and shakers.' Row E, Table 4 has a bulky package taped to its underside. Read it and be the only person I know who will have all of the answers to a truly evil entity that is threatening the world. Its all there naming everyone and every entity committed to this colossal threat to our existing world.

"I beg of you to memorize as much of the data as you can then

destroy the files right here in this building with the incendiary device attached. Do not open the envelope if you want stop now. Once in. No way out.”

The tips of her fingers touched the package and stopped there. Her professional experience as an investigative journalist surged forward inside of her. Here it is! she thought to herself, the pay-off for many days’ work. The mysterious message was still in front of her and the warning caught her eye. Deciding to ignore the warning she grabbed the envelope and tore it open.

There were reports, correspondence and cut out news articles piled together. Set on top was an index of the contents with numbers marked on each one. Pam picked up a news article marked #1 The year was 2010 and the news in the article was about a fierce controversy in congress about future funds to continue the mid east war. An uneasy truce was reached about the defense budget to be reviewed monthly.

#2 Was a number of treasury reports regarding the defense budget which was becoming difficult to control. Different aspects of mideastern conflict were covered by a bewildering number of sub committees. Each committee funded itself.

#3 Another batch of news articles about the conflict and the defense departments demand for more troops. The information was filled with statements from congress and the defense department optimistically declaring troop withdrawals from the area.

Logically there were more requests for money so as not to stint on combat requirements.

#4 Reports and correspondence about the increasing growth of terrorist groups to join the jihad against the infidels. Hit and run bomb attacks were becoming nearly a daily event in the gulf countries. Included in this batch was frequent mention of the need to bolster underground ops in 6 countries being affected by the terrorists bombings. One small article was written by a reporter who somehow learned there were billions of dollars being poured out for this secret op.

#5 More news articles and reports about terrorist bombings which had been increasing since the vast secret op had been created. Strange.

#6 Papers were all about the withdrawal of US troops and the disbanding of counter terrorist networks. Too costly.

#7 Mid east terrorist activity subsided with the change in strategy by the defense department. The terrorists probably believed it was a victory.

#8 A year later the terrorist activity began again at a much faster rate than before.

Conclusion. "Myself and a small band of government employees have been investigating the underground op supposedly dismantled. We discovered funds were again pouring into the secret group. Puzzling since none of the funds were coming from the defense budget. As near as we could tell the amounts were greater than the entire defense budget.

“Here is the whole picture on the secret ops as far as we know. The printing op discovered in Richmond revealed where the money was coming from for the op. Strange, but like some other government ops, the mafia is the conduit for the international distribution to a vast “Shadow Government”. When the funding stopped there were high officials in the countries being attacked to find a way to secretly fight the terrorists. It is an underground war run by a shadow government.

“It was organized early in the mid east conflicts. Now the op has turned into a shadow nation convinced that the only hope of achieving peace in the mid east is a victory over opposing forces. Whatever it takes they are committed to creating one nation in the mid east and to destroy religious political power. One nation sharing one government with control over all of the oil in the region. They will use any method to achieve this goal and they are more dangerous than any organization on earth. Take nothing from here Pam we will destroy the papers”

Pam stumbled out of the reading room in a daze. It was an ugly picture of reality. This news had to reach her paper immediately! She nearly fell as she entered the waiting elevator. Two men were sharing the ride with her. One said politely, “hello Pam.” She too vanished.

In the end after all of the time, effort and money spent on po-

lice work on the sensational murders there was nothing tangible. All of the criminals had mysteriously disappeared. Not a trace of them remained anywhere. Legal files were the only evidence something had happened. No one had any idea who might be the bosses of a giant op nor what it did. Theories were plentiful but no proof. There was one thing they all shared. Deep inside was a muffled feeling of terror.

There was one principal participant in the investigation who didn't want to know anymore than he already did. Nick left Foxtrot. No good byes. Only distance from the place that almost drove him insane would help him. He was headed for DC to be in charge of protection for the twins.

In Foxtrot were two gentlemen seated in the mayor's office. They were in a good mood after their discussion about the current status of the shadow government. It had been returned to a smooth operation with no loose ends to worry about. Schedule back on time.

The mayor said.

"Only one problem was never solved. Sgt Nick Noulte has left the Foxtrot police force for a cushy job as a glorified body-guard for the Hamilton twins. I should be so lucky."

The visitor replied.

“I was relieved when he survived attempts to kill him. Things are back to normal at last. What are you planning to do?

Retire?”

“No I think I’ll run for mayor of Foxtrot again.”

Then he laughed.

“