

Chapter 1

Murder Discovered

Noon, Wednesday, 15 March 2000, Highlands, North Carolina

Sheriff Jerry Cook drove his police cruiser down the last few hundred feet down Clear Creek Road without flashing lights or blaring sirens. He hardly needed to slow down to take the turn as he knew every road, every turn, every bump, and besides, he wasn't going all that fast to begin with. The roads in Highlands were typical North Carolina mountain roads; narrow and winding they followed the natural curvature of the land. They didn't mar the earth up there when they made roads. They cut them into the mountain with the least amount of damage to the landscape as possible. No gapping cuts in the mountain to make wider areas for easy turning and especially no extra wide roads to enable higher speeds. The roads here reflected the mindset of the people—no need to hurry. Chief Cook turned onto the gravel driveway and slowly climbed the last 500 yards up the steep mountain slope, then parked behind the other police car belonging to Officer Fish. He stepped out of the car, smiled slightly as he watched two chipmunks scurry across the gravel driveway and into the woods, then turned towards the house and the possible crime scene.

“What do we got, Fish?” Chief Cook asked as he closed the cruiser door behind him and turned to his young assistant who had come out of the house to meet him.

Officer Fish started to brief the chief as they walked to the cabin front steps. “Two dead, one man one woman, both shot. I can't find any signs of forced entry but I'm sure the house has been gone

through.” They walked up the three steps to the porch and the Chief stopped at the front door.

“And?” The Chief looked at his young officer, who stared back without a clue as to what to respond. “And what else? Did they kill each other? Did you find a weapon? If so, what type? Any witnesses? If so, who are they? How did you know they were even here?” The Chief shook his head and opened the front door, and then stopped almost immediately. It was a simple mountain cabin; log construction, open main room with a wood burning stone fireplace, three small bedrooms and very small but functional kitchen. The house was a basic rectangle shape; the front door in the middle of the front wall with the rear exit door in the same position on the back wall. Just inside the front door there was an open kitchen on the left, one bedroom behind that on that. On the right side, a large open room filled the entire width of the house. In the middle of the great room and against the right wall stood a wood-burning stone fireplace there was a set of fireplace irons perfectly arranged in their stand, and logs neatly stacked beside the fireplace. The fireplace had been used frequently as the stones on the front of opening were blackened from years of use, and had been used recently as ashes from a very recent fire lay under the andirons.

On the farthest side of the room, past the fireplace two bodies, a man and a woman lay on the floor. The man was in a semi kneeling position and slumped over on one side, like he had been kneeling on both knees then just fell over on his right side. The Chief examined the body without touching it. The man had been shot in both knees and also in the chest. His gray flannel shirt was soaked in blood, as were his jeans. There was a large pool of blood beneath the victim and it was clear to the Chief that the man had bled out. Behind the man lay a younger woman. She was dressed in jeans, a blue blouse and a slight sweater, and other than the neat round hole in her forehead she looked like she was just resting before she went out to town.

Without emotion the Chief turned to Fish, “It’s Nick Roberts, and that’s his young girlfriend Sarah Call.” Officer Fish did not respond he just continued to look at the dead couple.

“Fish!” Chief raised his voice.

“Sorry Chief. It’s just I’ve never seen a murder before. Just old people that died in their sleep. That’s not so bad. You see one old dead person in their bed and you know it’s like they’re sleeping. We call the ambulance and they take them away, no big deal. There was that girl last year though that ran her car into the big truck on highway 106. Damn that was terrible. She was such a sweet kid. I really had a hard time with that. It was so...”

“Fish!”

“Yes Chief?”

“This case, please.”

“Yes Chief.”

“So what do you have? Start with who found them?”

“Sure Chief. Ah, it was called in by...” Fish tried to remember a name. “I’ll get it,” drawing a blank. “I think it’s all the blood.”

“Did you take notes?”

“Yes Chief.”

“Why don’t you use them?”

“Yes Chief.” He reached into his pocket and took out a small wire-bound note pad, fumbled through a couple a pages. “Got it Chief.”

“Good work,” the Chief sarcastically said as he looked back at the two bodies.

“I got a call from Bert Hudson. He said he had gone to Nick Roberts’ house because he hadn’t been to work in two days. So he drove over, found this, then drove over to Sampson Lines’ place and called it in. I got here at 1:10 PM.”

“And the crime scene?”

Fish was now more composed and was able to provide a slightly more professional report. “The door was open, the bodies right where you see them now. I haven’t found a weapon and there does not appear to have been forced entry. The doors are undamaged and all the windows are closed and also undamaged.”

“Okay,” the Chief said without emotion. “You said Hudson went down the street to Sampson Lines’s house and called?”

“Yes Chief.”

“He didn’t use this phone?” The Chief pointed to the phone on the end table that sat next to the easy chair right next to the fireplace.

“No Chief.”

“Any idea why not?”

“I guess he was scared. You know...” he paused and looked downward and spoke uncomfortably like a child who had to admit to his mother he took the cookie from the cookie jar, “...the dead people and all.”

“I guess.” The Chief walked over to the phone picked it up and listened for the dial tone. When he got it, he dialed ‘star, six, nine’ and waited.

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Officer Fish was nervous around the Chief to begin with but this was a whole different matter. A murder, a double murder to boot and now he was responsible for the crime scene. ‘This is bad,’ he thought. ‘The biggest thing I’ve had to handle was the house theft at the Country Club. That was easy, no dead people, just missing paintings and silver. He interviewed the owners, found out what was missing, interviewed the house staff, contractors, and the gate guards; he determined who was where and when. When the Chief asked what was missing, he knew. When he asked where the staff was, he knew; no problem. That was nothing compared to this. He didn’t have the answers the Chief wanted, and hell, he didn’t even know the questions. He was sure wishing Officer Hunt had taken the call and not him.

He fumbled though his note book looking for answers to questions the Chief hadn’t yet asked.

“Write this down,” the Chief said.

“What Chief?” Fish looked at the Chief who was listening on the phone.

“I said, write this down.” He called out a few numbers, “Five, two, six, four, one, two, one.”

Fish listened as the Chief spoke. “This is Chief Cook. Is this Stewart?”

Fish tried but he could only hear the Chief’s side of the conversation.

“Not right now, Stewart. I got a question for you. I was wondering if Nick Roberts called you this past weekend.”

There was a short pause then the Chief continued. “Just checking a few things. You sure he called and ordered a pizza?”

Fish strained harder to hear the other side of the conversation, but the voice was too quiet.

“We are cracking down on people who call in phony pizza orders.” The Chief shook his head then continued. “Stewart you’re working too close to those ovens again,” and then the Chief hung up.

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The Chief put down the phone and shook his head, “Are we sure Stewart isn’t inhaling that pizza dough?”

Fish, still trying to anticipate the answers to the Chief’s question, and “Well, I haven’t seen him do so Chief.”

The Chief just stared for a moment at his less than stellar young officer. “Never mind. So what time do you think they died?”

Fish looked back at each corpse then back at the Chief, “I suppose a day... or so.”

“A day or so?”

Fish did not answer the Chief’s rhetorical question who then continued. “When a body dies, it does so slowly. Yes the heart stops and we think of the person as dead but the body continues on, actually

living for some time. The brain is the first to go; it ceases to function a few minutes after the heart stops supplying blood. Ah, but the cells of the muscles, skin, and bone continue to live on, dying only when metabolic waste products build up and stops their functions; this could be days after the heart stops.”

The Chief knelt on one knee beside the body and touched Nick’s face with his hand.

“Now I know, you know that when the body, or should I say the heart, stops, body temperature begins to drop and does so at a rate of about two degrees per hour until the body reaches the temperature of the surroundings. This varies of course with conditions like blistering heat or freezing cold, or just being in an air conditioned home.”

“Within 6 hours, rigor mortis sets in, the eyelids stiffen then the neck and jaw, and finally the remaining muscles and maximum stiffness is reached around twelve to twenty-four hours post mortem. The joints stay stiff generally for one to three days and then loosen.” The Chief paused for a moment to think, and then continued. “There’s a medial reason for it, I used to be able to say what caused it but I’ve forgotten. After a week the skin loosens and can be covered with large, really yucky blisters. Then a few weeks later, the hair, teeth, and nails begin to loosen and sometimes fall out. Then some of the organs start to liquefy.” The Chief looked dead at Fish, “I think that takes it far enough.”

The Chief stood and stretched out his tired knee. “So Fish, do they still have their hair?”

Fish hesitated, looked at the dead bodies then back to the Chief, “Yeah Chief.”

“Okay, so it’s not been a couple of weeks. Let’s go the other way. You think someone killed them, lets say an hour ago?”

“No,” he quickly answered.

“So what do you make the bodies temperature to be?”

Fish looked then knelt down and touched the male victim, “I don’t know.”

“You think they are hot, cold?”

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Ah! So they are maybe the same temperature as the air, and since it is about 75 degrees right now and body temp generally drops about two degrees an hour it would have to have been at least...” The Chief waited for Fish’s answer, which didn’t come. “Exactly, over thirteen hours ago,” The Chief replied as if Fish had answered his question.

“Now, since rigor mortis starts about six hours after death and since,” the Chief bent down and picked up the male victim’s limp arm and dropped it, “the bodies are loose, which takes one to three days to cycle through, then time of death must be at between three and seven or eight days. Since they were seen on Friday and today is Tuesday, I can narrow time of death to between three and five days. And based on further evidence, the lights being on,” the Chief pointed to two table lamps that were on. “I further estimate time of death to Friday somewhere between 8 and 8:15 PM.”

Fish was both surprised and impressed with the Chief’s ability to determine the time of death and quickly told him so. “That’s awesome police work Chief.”

The Chief walked over to the bodies and then studied the scene around him once more. “Yep you can walk around guessing or you can you scientific methods to deduct time of death. You can also you the Pizza method.”

Fish looked confused. “Pizza method Chief?”

“Yep. Nick worked late on Friday, just got home and decided to eat in. Called for pizza,” the Chief look at Fish with a deadpan look, “Roberts called in an order to the *Brick Over* and Stewart wrote down the time of the order at 7:55 PM, a large supreme to be precise. After Nick ordered the pizza, someone must have come in, killed the girl with one shot, then apparently shot Nick at least three times. He probably did it just after Nick called. Unless he wanted cold pizza Roberts had to drive into town to pick it up. It takes eighteen minutes to cook a pizza, at least it takes Stewart eighteen minutes, and if he wanted it hot Roberts had to get there when it just came out of the oven so it wouldn’t get cold on the way back. So he would have left at just around 8 PM.”

“Why? But why would anyone kill Nick, and her?” the confused deputy asked as he feverishly took notes.

“Damned if I know. Sure looks like they wanted to torture Nick.” The Chief pointed to the dead man’s legs. “Shot him in the knees like he wanted him to suffer.”

The young officer crouched down to study what the Chief had just described.

The Chief turned his attention away from the bodies to the rest of the room. “Anything missing?”

“Well, Chief,” the officer pointed to the desk. “That desk was gone through. So were the dressers in the bedrooms, the closets and the kitchen drawers.” He looked about the room and then consulted his notebook. “I couldn’t find the dead man’s wallet and the woman’s purse was emptied on the dining room table.”

“Okay. So what about Hudson?”

“What about him?”

The Chief stared at his inexperienced officer trying to get him to report on the man. When the young officer failed to respond the Chief prodded him. “Did he touch anything? Did he use the phone to call it in? Where is he now?”

“Oh, yes, Chief.” The officer turned the pages in his nearly full notebook. After flipping nearly every page he returned to beginning part of the notebook to finally find the entries he made on the subject.

Received call 1243
hours, from Bert
Hudson, Roberts dead,
called from Sampson
Lines house, instructed
Hudson to remain at
Lines.”

Fish read them to the Chief.

“Why?”

“Chief?” Fish looked up from his notebook.

“Why did Bert Hudson go to Lines’s to call and not use this phone?” The Chief pointed back to the phone he had used a moment ago.

“Oh, he said he freaked and ran out of the house to get help. When he called it in I took the call, told him to stay where he was and not to return to the house.”

“Why is that?”

“I didn’t want him to disturb the crime scene, Chief.” Fish smiled slightly acknowledging he knew he had done the correct thing.

“And he’s still there?” The Chief stooped down to get a closer look at the bodies. “I mean in case you want to question him, or maybe arrest him”

“Arrest Bert? What for?”

The Chief did not answer, but just looked up at Fish and then back down at the bodies as if the answer was obvious.

“Oh no Chief, it wasn’t Hudson. These two were shot.”

The Chief stood up and looked at Fish with a confused look. “And because they were shot you have determined Hudson could not have done it. Why?”

“Because he’s the worst shot in Macon County, Jackson too I would guess.” The Chief did not respond so Fish continued to make his case. “I’ve gone hunting with Bert every year since I was fourteen, deer and turkey. In all these years he got exactly one bird, and I swear Chief, there wasn’t a mark on the bird. I think the shot just scared it to death.”

“I see.”

“No really, Chief. Bert couldn’t have hit Roberts with a shotgun, and the girl there was shot in the forehead.” Fish pointed to the girl. “And she was shot cleanly and it wasn’t at close range—no powder burns or blow by damage. You know; if the weapon were close to the victim there would be discharge.”

The Chief just looked at his young officer. He was certainly right about how the girl was killed, and since the Chief also knew Hudson, he suspected Officer Fish was correct in his assessment of Bert as a possible shooter.

“Okay.” The Chief paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. “The Macon County Sheriff’s Department has jurisdiction and they can take the lead if they want, but since they never do we will assume we will take the lead. Now, the SBI will send the mobile crime lab and conduct their own investigation so I’ll want you to take point on this to make sure we stay in the loop.”

Fish acknowledged with a rapid series of nods, like a young child responding to his mother’s offer of ice cream.

“So, what else?” the Chief asked.

“I’ve already called Bryant’s Funeral Home for transport the victims to the Coroner’s office in Waynesville,” Fish responded. The quickly added, “And I called the Coroner as soon as I got here.”

“Good. I’ll wait for the Coroner. You go and interview Hudson.”

The young officer acknowledged the Chief's order and turned to leave.

“And tell him to keep his mouth shut about this until we can figure out what happened here. I don't want everyone in town to know about this before I can question people.” The Chief looked at the young officer who was now just standing looking at the Chief as if were waiting for more instructions. The Chief then made a motion with his hand, as if he were shooing a child out the door, and the officer hurried to his cruiser and left. The Chief turned back to the bodies. The woman was on the floor with her back against the wall as if she had been sitting. Her eyes were open, indicating she was awake when she was shot. There was a spatter of blood and brain matter on the wall five feet above the ground just above her. Blood had run down the wall and had met the sitting woman as she sat in death.

“So you were shot standing right there.” The Chief spoke to the dead girl. “You took one shot and died instantly, otherwise there would be blood elsewhere.” The Chief sighed, “Well at least you didn't suffer.”

He turned to the man on the floor. “Well that doesn't appear true for you.” He walked back towards the front door, careful not to disturb anything as he walked. “There is blood all around you.” The Chief pointed to the places on the floor. “You were shot in the chest, both legs and...” The Chief bent down and looked closer at the man's left hand. “And in your hand.”

He stood up and shook his head as he looked at the body. “So who did you piss off that would make someone want to do this to you?”

“Chief,” came a voice from behind him.

The Chief turned around. Officer Hunt had entered the room with two men from the ambulance, which had just arrived.

Hunt quickly looked around the room, “Who are you talking to Chief?”

The Chief ignored the question, and then deflected the curious questions by shouting a list of commands and directed the three men as he prepared to depart. “I want a full set of photos on this one. Shoot

everything, and I mean everything. Take samples of every blood pool, and when you get to the morgue tell that damn doctor I want the clothes removed and saved, both victims. And tell him to save everything, this is a murder investigation.”