

Prologue: April 16, 1970

by Debra Lattanzi Shutika

The muster zone was south of U.S. 119, off the Halleck Road. The search began on a large parcel, some 75 acres of farmland, property of one Mr. Shakelford. Shakelford had allowed the earth to go wild; brush, thistle and small seedlings now covered everything in sight. Some two hundred National Guardsmen, dozens of state troopers and nearly every Morgantown City police officer had gathered on the scene. Dozens of volunteers had also come out for the search on this cold clear morning. A thick fog nestled over the hills but burned off quickly.

Four days earlier, little Stevie Trickett and his sister found a purse on the side of Halleck Road shortly after they exited their school bus. Always a curious boy, Stevie looked inside the purse, finding a card bearing the name Karen Ferrell. Stevie didn't pay much attention to the news, but nearly every resident of Monongalia County knew that a girl named Ferrell disappeared in January. He took the purse to his mother who called the police.

A few days later, Fred Stewart found a pair of glasses in a case about a half-mile off 119. These were also believed to be the property of the Ferrell girl. For months no one had found or heard a thing. Two college coeds hitched a ride back to their dorm on a Sunday night after seeing a movie in town, then disappeared into the inky darkness. The spring thaw uncovered clues that led the full force of West Virginia law enforcement, backed with the manpower of the National Guard. Together they planned to thoroughly scour the area.

The guardsmen lined up shoulder-to-shoulder, forming skirmish lines, the idea being that each man would be responsible for the area in front of him, and no evidence would go uncovered. Steve Slavinsky, a twenty-one year-old guardsman, waited for his assignment. In his first year with the National Guard, this was also the first time his unit had been deployed on an actual assignment.

Most of his weekend warrior days were spent at Camp Dawson doing practice maneuvers.

"Slavinsky!" Captain Gooden hollered.

"Yes sir."

I want you, Jackson and Meister to follow that creek bed up the hollow. The terrain is to inconsistent for a skirmish line."

The three headed out, Jackson, a slightly older man with a bad knee (a high school football injury), grumbled as they marched up the hollow. Slavinsky knew Jackson's occasional limp reminded him of his glory days, although he had never heard Jackson tell the story. That was Meister's job, but he was in a similar foul mood. No one would recount past adventures. Not today. "Goddamned thistles," Meister cursed as he tried to disentangle himself from a bush he had accidentally happened upon. "I'm gonna walk up that dirt road to the knoll. That'll give us a better view. Y'comin'?" He scowled at Slavinsky as if he had placed the briary obstacle in his path.

Jackson immediately followed Meister, a taller, beefy man. He commanded authority even though he a private, just like Jackson and Slavinsky.

"I'm gonna follow the creek," Slavinsky said, then under his breath, "And follow orders." He didn't move.

"Suit yourself," Jackson muttered, taking long limping strides as he followed the old farm road. Slavinsky watched them go before he continued on. He looked at his watch as his stomach growled uncomfortably, eleven o'clock. It would be a while before lunch.

Moseying up the hollow, Slavinsky watched the ground for clues. He stopped to look at an ancient knotty maple, the branches twisted and imposing. It was wide with a huge hole about three feet off the ground. "That'd be a place to hide a murder weapon," Slavinsky muttered, poking a large stick into the knot. Although wide and round, there was no depth. Nothing. He looked past the tree and up the hollow again. Along the ground amongst the brush he saw—was it? He stopped and shook his head. Did he see—? Slavinsky moved forward slowly toward a delicate foot, peeking from

a large brush pile scattered with leaves, some ten feet behind the tree.

"Officers! Detectives! I found--well, look here! I think I found them!" Slavinsky shouted.

A racket erupted at the far end of the field, then dozens of officers ran toward Slavinsky who stood stock still, not moving toward the pile, the foot, just watching, waiting.

Trooper Richard Cunningham arrived first on the scene. He stopped, his eyes followed Slavinsky's hand, pointing toward the brush pile. Slavinsky's hand shook.

"Good work young man," he said, patting Slavinsky gently on the shoulder. "You'll need to step back, we'll take it from here."

Slavinsky moved out of the way, to the farm road and then up the hill slightly. It gave him a birds-eye view of the brush pile, now crime scene. The police swarmed the area, but Cunningham kept them at bay, "keep the scene secure," he shouted as the officers gathered, forming a clear perimeter well clear of the area. Slavinsky saw Captain Bowley arrive, and within an hour the excavation began. Then the guardsmen and other observers stood behind an invisible perimeter, allowing the police to do their job.

The troopers, working in teams of two, slowly removed debris: brush, leaves and rocks. All had been piled on top of the victims to create a makeshift grave. The recovery moved slowly, made slower by the photographer and the repetitive click of his shutter. It took six hours to finally uncover the bodies. Slavinsky watched the entire operation. His legs ached and his gut growled with hunger, but he refused to leave even though his unit had been dismissed when he found the bodies. By midafternoon a warm westerly breeze stirred the dry leaves along the roadway. Slavinsky waited.

When the bodies were finally exposed, another man moved in. He had been standing on the sidelines, watching. Short, balding and unlike everyone else, he did not wear a state trooper's uniform. He stood out in a pair of grey dress pants, a white shirt with his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows. He had taken off his jacket and tie earlier, he draped over the open door of a police cruiser. He

sauntered around the grave, examining the bodies. A murmur reached Slavinsky. It was the coroner, Bowers. Carefully, he moved around the site, occasionally bending in for a closer look. He stopped twice at the top of the makeshift grave, kneeling, shaking his head.

Slavinsky could not hear what the coroner had to say. He would not realize that the bodies of Karen Ferrel and Mared Malerik had been decapitated until the murmurs of the crowd around the crime scene reached him a few minutes later. He would not hear Sergeant Herald mutter, "We've got a sick fuck on our hands." He would not be privy to the tension in the murder room back at the station, nor the heated conversations, the pressure that Sergeant Herald and Troopers Cunningham, Mozingo, and Rogers would come under from the community and the press. He would never understand their intense need to find the "sick fuck" who did this.

Slavinsky watched, and once Bowers' men gently gathered up the bodies and ferried them away to the University Medical Center to be autopsied, he went home. Slavinsky's role in this spectacle ended on April 16, 1970 at 6 PM, which was somewhat unfortunate.

It was just beginning.

