

The Fifth Column by George Meech

Excerpt from Chapter One

The day the nightmare began started out like most of the others—with a whisper instead of a shout.

It was colder than I expected for the last weeks of February. The clouds had opened up and it was raining, but there was still the odd trace of the night's dusting of snow on the lawns. The morning drudge had commenced as it always did—with me strapped in behind a steering wheel, waiting in traffic as the people of Vancouver moved about and made their way to their offices or factories. A little more than an hour spent gazing past the hypnotic back and forth of my windshield wipers at cars filled with half-wakened faces sipping lukewarm coffees. Sixty-plus minutes of long lines and short tempers and gearing myself up for another day on the job.

I'd killed my first twenty minutes at the office writing a piece on the previous night's murder in the Surrey district. The city had grown an ugly face, and an act that used to warrant half the front page was now relegated to a handful of sentences on page three or four. But that was back when the annual body count in this town was a single digit number. These days, the announcement that another bloodied corpse had been abandoned under the Port Mann Bridge stirred about as much emotion in the people of this burg, as the promise of a tax cut made by one of our empty-headed political windbags.

It's funny how quickly your life can change. In the blink of an eye, white can become black, and right can become wrong. It's still hard to believe that it all started with a phone call from an old woman who was preparing herself for death.

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I slouched down in my chair, fingered my lucky green tie, and flung my old grey hat onto the coat hook at the end of my cubicle. There was a time when men were men and they weren't fully dressed unless they had their hats on. Mine was a magical piece of felt. I only had to hold it in my hand to bring back the memories of my younger days, and I could still hit that coat hook from ten feet away. A lot of water had trickled under the old bridge in the time I'd spent pounding a beat. Hunting out news for the *Vancouver Tribune* had been my duty, my honour, and my passion for almost thirty years. I'd seen a lot of changes take place, for better, and for worse.

The world had become different, and the newsroom had transformed right along with it. The days when hard-driving reporters sat hunched over manual typewriters were history. The zing of carriages being hammered back and the clatter of tobacco-stained fingers punching out real stories on real keys were gone. Now I had to put up with the irritating tick of carefully manicured digits on plastic computer keyboards and the equally annoying whine of a bank of networked laser printers. The constant jangle of a score of ringing telephones was a thing of the past too. What once was Bakelite, heavy and black, was now plastic as well. You couldn't slam a receiver down in anger now if your life depended on it. And that nerve-grating electronic pulse tone: Who of sound mind could have come up with that? The newsroom had lost its character.

I could never figure out what had happened to the fever that used to saturate this room—the intensity that often came accompanied by voices raised in anger and even the occasional swinging fist. There was always a spark in the air, regardless of how badly it smelled in here. Back in the days when the bottom drawer of every desk held a bottle of six-dollar Scotch, you could always tell when a guy was on to something big. The smell always gave it away. The number of cigarette butts heaped in his ashtray, the stench of cheap booze drying in a dirty coffee cup, or that special fragrance that can only

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come from a shirt that's been worn for three or four days straight. Now we had flowers, for Christ's sake, and whipping out a cigarette in here was worse than pulling out your dick.

It all began to go downhill when they hired that first woman. When I was in my prime, a skirt had to have a bucket and mop to set foot in here, and that's the way it was meant to be. It was the seventies that did us in. The whole world started going for a shit back then. Nowadays, more than half the people in this room shaved their legs, not their faces. My only saving grace around this joint was that at least now my bottom drawer held a much better brand of whiskey. The desk to my right, along with a collection of potted plants, had a picture of a kid and a cat on it. What kind of reporter could put up with a cat?

I knew why management had assigned the two cubs to me. I was the best this paper had seen in ages. Retirement wasn't that many years off, and it only made sense that I pass my experience and my wisdom down the line. But why on earth a woman? Wasn't having Jimmy Olsen at my side enough? This was a man's world, and one that I had to fight to preserve. A reporter had to be as tough as nails, and have no fears or boundaries when it came to telling a story. I just didn't see the point. It made no sense to me at all. Was there really a need to drag Lois Lane around with me, too?

Excerpt from Chapter Four

"Terry Hartree," I said.

"Good morning," my mystery caller replied.

I laughed. "You again," I said. "Apparently you've decided that I *am* worthy of your time."

"I've narrowed the list down," she said. "I'm still not entirely sure about you."

"My tough luck," I said. "You're not that phantom jaywalker the police have been trying to stop for the last ten years, are you?"

"No. It's a little more serious than that."

I chuckled again. "What?" I asked. "You're not the person that soaped the windows of the mayor's house last Halloween, are you?"

"I've killed," she said.

I felt a chill run through my body. Her words had a haunting sincerity to them. I reached for my cassette recorder.

"I'm sure you must be taping this. Have you got your machine running?"

"I do."

"I'm a cold-blooded murderer," she continued, "and I don't want to go to my grave with this still on my chest. The guilt has been eating at me for years. I need to tell my story. The world has to know why."

"Who did you kill?"

"Not so fast. First, I need to know that I can trust you. There are other people involved. If they find out where I am, and that I've been talking to you, they'll kill me. And it won't be a pleasant death."

"Other people?" I asked.

"Yes, very powerful and very dangerous people. You'll understand once you figure out who the first victim was."

"The *first* victim? You're telling me there was more than one?"

"That's right. Once the killing started, it carried on for years."

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“When can we meet?”

“Never,” she said. “Even if I decide that you’re the one to trust with my story, all of our conversations will be by telephone.”

“No,” I said, “I don’t work like that. If you want to spill your guts about some murder spree you claim to have been a part of, then you’ll do it face to face with me.”

I listened to her laugh.

“We’ll just have to see about that,” she said. “I’m going to give you the biggest news story of the last forty years. Believe me, once you clue in to what’s being handed to you, you’ll dance naked down Main Street for a chance to break this story.”

“Don’t be so sure of that.”

“It’s between you and Sharon Halter of the *Globe and Mail*.”

“Halter?” I asked. “Why would you want to get involved with that dingbat?”

“Dingbat?” she asked. “Wasn’t she just short-listed for this year’s Canadian Journalist Award?”

“Jesus Christ,” I mumbled, “that woman shouldn’t be allowed to cover anything more important than a Pillsbury bake-off. I don’t know where she gets the nerve to call herself a writer.”

“I guess the Journalist Association people made a mistake, huh?”

“It wouldn’t be their first.”

“Right, I hear they passed you over this year—again.”

“They probably had to fill their quota of women, that’s all. The piece I did on Alan Ball and Chris McDermott was ten times better than anything Halter’s even dreamed about writing.”

“Sounds like sour grapes.”

“It’s not sour grapes,” I said. “It’s the truth.”

“It would be nice to go out with a bang, don’t you think? How long have you got left before you retire?”

“I’ll go when I’m goddamned good and ready.”

“A Ceejay award would probably look pretty nice hanging in your den. You’ve never won, have you?”

“No.”

“Didn’t that Halter woman pick one up a couple of years ago?”

“She did,” I said. “Her second.”

“How’s your knowledge of history?”

“It’s as good as anyone’s.”

“It’ll have to be better than that. You’re going to have to spend some time researching.”

“I’ve got people that can do that for me.”

“No!” she insisted. “That will be something you will have to do alone. I don’t think you understand.”

“Understand what?”

“The type of people and situations you’re going to be dealing with. I just hope you’ve got what it takes.”

“Trust me,” I said, “I’ve got the balls for it.”

“You have to understand the rules here. Once you verify my story, you have to go public with it all at once. You can’t let anyone know before that. That’s why there can’t be any researchers.”

“But—”

“I’m telling you, Hartree. You can’t breathe a word of this to anyone.”

“And why is that?”

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"I told you. These people are savage. If they even dreamt that you were on to them, they wouldn't hesitate to silence us both."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a fact. You have to know what you're getting into. You'll understand soon."

"You're going to have to give me more than that."

"I will," she said. "Be patient. I've pretty much made my decision, but the final choice hasn't quite come down to you yet."

"I have two interns working for me. There's a young man, he's good, and he'll keep his mouth shut if I tell him to."

Silence again.

"Are you there?" I asked.

"OK," she said. "This story is huge; you'll probably need the help. You just make absolutely sure that your interns know the rules. No one can hear about this until the time is right."

"And who's going to decide when that is?"

"I am," she said. "I haven't got long to live. If you end up being the one, I'll make sure you have the whole story before I shuffle off this mortal coil."

"For in that sleep of death what dreams may come."

"You know, *Hamlet*," she said. "It's my favourite Shakespeare play."

"Are you going to tell me your name?"

She paused for a moment. "No," she said, "not until the end. I have to protect myself. We'll use a code name for now. You can call me Dallas."

"Dallas?"

"Yeah," she said. "Deep Throat's been used already."

"Dallas?" I asked again.

"Yeah," she said. "You know, as in *Debbie Does*. I'll talk to you soon."

The line went dead. I ejected the cassette from my recorder and held it in my hand. Something about the way the woman spoke told me this was no prank. There was fear in her voice, but at the same time there was resignation. I marked the tape "call #2" and tossed it into my top drawer.

Excerpt from Chapter Seventeen

It was a rather cold morning. The walk in from the parking garage had chilled me to the bone. The heating system in the newsroom always did its best work in the summer months. I wrapped my hands around my coffee mug to transfer the warmth. I pushed open the door to the meeting room with my shoulder and stepped inside. Amanda jumped at the sound of the swinging door.

"You're here early," I said. "Making up for missing the last few days, are you?"

"I was here all day yesterday. I figured you and Grant would be wrapped up in your Morazzo story, so I spent the day by myself downstairs in the archives."

"The archives?" I asked. "What were you doing down there?"

Amanda fidgeted with her pen. I was staring at a different woman. She always was a bundle of energy hovering at the bursting point, but something about her manner was not quite the norm. She looked frayed. I knew that spending a few days with a sick child had to be stressful, but it was more

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than that. She was so high-strung, it was like I could see her nerve endings. Her eyes darted about the room, and if she shuffled through the stack of papers in front of her one more time, I was going to lose it. It was like she'd confronted a ghost. Her skin was pale and I could actually see her hands trembling. Too many days without sleep, I thought, too much coffee maybe. She'd looked at her watch at least three times in the last minute.

"Where's Grant?" she snapped.

I looked at her. Her brow was furrowed in anger and it almost felt like I'd just been barked at by a superior.

"Pardon me?" I asked.

"Grant. Where is that little prick? It's after nine. He's probably downstairs hitting on Petra again."

"Prick?" I said. "Did that word really come out of your mouth?"

"I've got things to tell you. I need to get started. I've been working on a theory of my own. Dallas confirmed my suspicions when she told you the drug they used to kill the first victim was Nembutal."

The door behind her swung open. Amanda nearly parted company with her skin.

"Where have you been?" she barked. "Don't we start these meetings at nine?"

Grant turned to me and whispered, "That time of the month?"

"Sit down and shut up," she said. "I've got some news for you two hot-shots. I want your complete attention."

I felt the hair on the back of my neck bristle. I couldn't believe this woman was speaking to us in that tone. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out she had something on her mind, but the insolence was almost too much to bear. It was bad enough that she was speaking to Grant like that. God help her if she spat any of that venom in my direction.

"Suppose you bring it down a notch," I said. "Tell us what you've got."

"Make yourselves comfortable," she said. "This is going to be a long story, and I'd like you to keep your mouths shut until I'm done."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Trust me," she said. "You can fire me if you don't like what I have to say."

I grinned. "Promise?" I asked.

She nodded. "Where's your story on the Morazzos?"

"The first part is in editing. We're dialled in for the front page on Saturday."

"Good," she said, "there's still time to kill it."

"Kill it?" Grant burst into laughter. "Kill the story that's going to earn Terry and I Ceejays?"

"Yeah," Amanda said, "the only thing you're going to win with that story is the moron of the decade award."

Grant rose from his chair.

"Sit down," I ordered.

Amanda took another look through her notes.

"Friendship Seven," she began. "What does that mean to you?" She looked up from her papers at me.

"That's what Dallas and her cohorts called their little group."

"Right," she said. "They were in a bar, on her twenty-first birthday, watching television. What was the date?"

"February twentieth."

"Right. On February twentieth, 1962, what was the world doing?"

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I searched for an answer.

Amanda flipped a page of her notes. “Everyone was sitting in front of a television set watching John Glenn orbit the earth.”

“Son of a bitch,” I said. “You’re right. I remember now; his space capsule was called Friendship Seven.”

“Exactly, I’m guessing that’s how they came up with their name. So, if Dallas celebrated her twenty-first birthday in February of 1962, how old was she when Kranz died?”

“Nineteen,” I said after a moment of calculation.

“Sure,” Amanda said, “I’ll bet there were dozens of nineteen-year-old hired assassins running around back then. She told us the only time they ever got together with members from the other cells was when they trained for the first murder. How come she’s meeting with the Friendship Seven group in 1962? Kranz died in 1960.” She turned to Grant. “Did you find a date of birth for Kranz yet?”

“I did,” he said.

“I did, too,” Amanda said. “So you know that she was thirty-seven when she died. Dallas was very specific. She told us the first victim was thirty-six.”

“Dallas was mistaken,” Grant said, “that’s all.”

“You’ve got the wrong woman.”

“We don’t have the wrong woman,” I said. “Dallas would have told us that.”

“She did,” Amanda said, “over and over again. She absolutely refused to confirm that Kranz was the first victim. The only reason you had for pursuing Kranz was that Dallas didn’t deny it.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mumbled.

“It gets better,” Amanda said. “I found your cop.”

I stood. “You found Jack Clemmons?” I asked.

“Sort of—he died a number of years ago. But I did get his story.”

“Speak up, woman.”

“Sergeant Clemmons was called to the scene in the early hours of August fifth. I’ve got his notes as they were outlined in the news reports.”

“Where did you get them?” I asked.

“Downstairs—in the archives. The answers were here in this building all along. There was an incredibly detailed account of the death that occurred on August fifth and the events that took place afterwards.”

“I don’t believe this,” Grant said. “I searched every August fifth. You’re telling us that I missed a death that was high profile enough to be covered by this newspaper and in that much depth.”

Amanda stared at me. “Yup,” she said, “that’s exactly what I’m telling you guys.”

“Bullshit,” Grant replied. “I couldn’t have missed something like that.”

“You wouldn’t have missed it—if you’d listened to me in the first place.”

“Well,” Grant said, “I’m pretty much done listening to you now. I think you’ve lost the fragment of a mind you had.”

“Grant,” I said, “try keeping that mouth of yours shut for a couple of minutes. Listen to what Amanda has to say.” I turned to the woman. “Go on,” I said.

“It’s all here,” she continued. “Just like Dallas said.”

“Bullshit,” Grant muttered.

“Sergeant Jack Clemmons was the watch commander that night. He received the call informing him of the death at 4:25 a.m. This information is straight out of the pages of the *Tribune*. Clemmons was told the body was discovered around midnight. You’ll never guess who found the corpse.”

“Who?” I asked.

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“The housekeeper,” Amanda replied, “a Mrs. Eunice Murray.”

“Dallas mentioned the housekeeper,” I said. “We never did get an answer as to what she was doing when the cop arrived.”

“Well,” Amanda said, “we’ve got one now. She was doing what any good housekeeper would be doing at four in the morning after discovering a dead body in the bedroom.”

Grant shuffled in his chair. “What?” he asked.

Amanda turned to him. “Laundry,” she said. “When Clemmons arrived on the scene, Mrs. Murray was doing the laundry.”

It was all I could do to control myself. Her whole story seemed utterly ridiculous. There wasn’t a chance we could have missed something like this.

Amanda scanned her notes. “This is right out of the official police report,” she went on. “When Clemmons checked the woman’s body, he made note of eight to ten bottles on her nightstand that had contained prescription medication. His report stated that every one of the bottles was opened, and that each one was empty.”

“Dallas told us that,” I said. “That was how they set things up.”

Amanda looked up from her papers. “There was no syringe. You weren’t listening to the clues. Dallas said they administered the drug. She didn’t say they injected anything. Remember what she said about the drinking glass?”

“I do,” I said. “One of them left their prints on a drinking glass.”

“No,” Amanda replied. “Dallas didn’t say anything about leaving prints. Her exact words were: ‘Look for a drinking glass.’ She said the cop knew right away.”

“Well, if they didn’t leave prints on the glass, what was she talking about?”

“She said they’d made mistakes. Clemmons noticed it right off the bat. There *was* no drinking glass. How could a person swallow eight to ten bottles of pills without a glass of water?”

“Jesus,” I said.

“It’s all right here,” Amanda said. “Front page of the *Vancouver Tribune*, August 5, 1962. I had archives print you off a photocopy.”

She shuffled her papers again and produced the copy. Her hand trembled as she passed the reprint across the table to me. I felt a sickness in my gut. There it was, front-page banner headline—eighteen point bold type. Dallas was right. This was bigger than anything I could have ever imagined. The words blared at me. My eyes darted over the copy—the Associated Press release—dated August 5, 1962.