

DEATH'S REVENGE

ALSO BY STAN WILCZEK JR.

The Kept Secret

The Soma Man

DEATH'S REVENGE

STAN WILCZEK JR.

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For Rose

*Thank you for all those nights . . .
You know the ones I'm talking about.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I know . . . I know . . . this book has taken forever! Thanks to all of you who kept asking, “When is the next book coming out?” Well, here it is! My only excuse is, life got in the way.

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To those who think you see yourself or others described in this book (you know who you are), let me assure you that you do not. Also, because this novel is totally fictitious, nothing in it is true, except of course for the parts that are!

Finally, I want to thank all of you who took the time to read and then provide me with such great feedback on *The Kept Secret* and *The Soma Man*. I hope you again find this book clutched in your hands when you know you should be doing something else.

As a final note, any and all mistakes contained herein are mine.

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PROLOGUE

He was invisible, sitting across the room in the shadows at the far end of the dark, crowded, muggy bar, cocksure his ex-wife wouldn't notice. In his years of observing her, though he knew some might call it stalking, not once had she seen him. She was in a new life now. He had been part of the old. The one she had long forgotten. The one he was still in. The one he would soon remind her of.

“Excuse me.” Hot breath fell on his right ear as a stranger's voice suddenly blocked out the dozens of conversations surrounding him. Nudging sideways into the small space next to the stool, her breasts rubbed against his clammy upper arm. He instinctively leaned left. “A little crowded in here tonight?” Without saying a word he turned his head and refocused on the woman across the room.

P. J. Dorsey's was one of a dozen bars in the renovated Armory Square district of downtown Syracuse, New York. Now home to upscale apartments, restaurants, bars, and trendy boutiques, the crowds that flocked here nightly were a stark contrast from the rats and homeless people that had roamed the area just a few years before. When he followed her in earlier, he knew it would be just the right place to 'observe' her.

“Thanks for the space.” The woman slipped away from the bar, two sweaty cold bottles of Coors Light in each hand, this time with a more deliberate rubbing of her body onto his, which he ignored.

He gazed across the room again. That familiar contagious smile was clearly visible, even at this distance. She was holding a freshly mixed drink, Absolut and orange no doubt, and seemed to be carrying on two conversations at once. How could she just block out her past like that? His hands tightened on the large glass mug in front of him. And look at the way she was dressed. “Slut,” he mumbled aloud. Now he had something else to add to his list of reasons for hating her.

It didn’t really matter, though. His list was already long enough. After all, she was the one he blamed for their daughter’s death. Their only child, gone forever. She was the one who walked out on their marriage. Had he known at the time that the only thing she really wanted from him was her freedom, he wouldn’t have given it to her. But he didn’t, so he did. She’s now in her new life, while he’s still grieving the old. Even today’s news—cancer, less than six months, the words had hit him like a punch in the stomach—he blamed on her.

It’s all her damn fault, he thought. He started shaking as he gulped for a deep breath of heavy air. It wasn’t right. She should be grieving for their daughter too.

He lifted his mug and downed the rest of the beer. It was still ice cold. He pushed the glass and a twenty toward the back of the bar, catching the bartender’s eye.

It would be so easy to kill her, he thought as he looked over at her again. To snuff out her life as she had done his and their daughter’s. But no, death, even a slow, gruesome one, was too final, too irreversible. Just because she had blood on her hands, didn’t mean he needed to. Anyway, he wanted her to suffer just as much, if not more than he had. Death was too much of an end.

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He thought he heard her voice. Then her laugh. The one that had been so familiar to him. His eyes closed as they went blurry. He wiped the drop with his fingers as it slid down his cheek.

He squeezed the freshly poured beer with both hands, watching the white frost disappear from the outside of the mug. How could his life have come to this? Not long ago, things were so perfect. Now his life would soon be over. Why? No matter how hard he tried, he knew he would never find the answer to that question. Not here on earth, anyway.

Not here on earth . . .

A smile, requiring less energy than the one a minute ago, spread across his face. Every cloud does have a silver lining, he thought. In six months he would see his daughter again. In six months he would be done with his suffering. In six months . . . his eyes opened wide. “Six months was not enough time,” he whispered. “She needs to suffer more than six months.”

Then, like a vision, it came to him. Death may be the end, but the dead can still affect the future. When that happens, you have little control over the events that transpire. In fact, you have no choice but to succumb to the dead’s wishes.

A calm came over him, one he hadn’t felt in years. He sucked down the rest of his beer, left a generous tip on the bar, and started toward the door. As he snaked his way through the crowd, his heart pounded in his chest. With one more step, he was touching her, back to back. He started to turn, but hatred stopped him.

He continued down the steps, stopped in front of the door, then turned and stared back at her. In an instant, their eyes met. It was less than a second. He pushed his way out the door, but not before he saw her smile disappearing from her face. He knew she had

seen him. Or maybe she just thought she had seen him. He wasn't sure which was worse. He smiled. It didn't matter, he thought. The look on her face told him that he had found death's revenge.

1

As the car door opened, Dan could feel the suffocating blast of hot, humid air against his face. It felt so thick he had to force himself to suck in a deep breath. Even though it was seven thirty in the evening, the sun was still above the trees, keeping the temperature hovering near ninety. The unexpectedly warm June weather for upstate New York was a welcome relief from the bitterly cold winter that seemed to end only a few weeks ago. No one was complaining about the heat today, although that wouldn't last long.

As he stood next to the car he glanced at the blinding orange ball, still high in the sky, then at his watch. The puzzled look on his face soon disappeared as he remembered that this coming Saturday was the longest day of the year.

He leaned over and reached back into the car to grab the ticket that was lying on the center console and the black canvas bag that was on the passenger seat. The air in the car still felt cold. He took a deep breath before standing back up. Closing the car door, he pushed the lock button on his remote, then pushed it again, each

time listening for the muffled clicking sound from within the car. Then he lifted the car door handle to make sure it was locked. Glancing from side to side, he walked briskly down the well-landscaped path to the alcove of his apartment building.

As he pushed on his apartment door, the cold air from within washed over his now sweaty, damp body. A shiver jolted him as he stepped inside. He leaned his head back out into the alcove to make sure no one had seen him, then quickly closed the door, being careful not to let it slam. He locked the two dead bolts, then turned and leaned back against the freezing metal door.

He stood there for several minutes, as if in a hypnotic trance, motionless, with his eyes staring at nothing and everything. Then, suddenly, he raised the ticket that was still clenched in his fingers and read the itinerary. Mohawk Airways flight 2145, departing Syracuse on Thursday June 19 at 7:10 a.m. from gate 44, arriving Washington Reagan at 8:30 a.m.

Another shiver jolted him. "I can't believe I'm going to meet with him," he mumbled aloud. "Maybe I shouldn't have agreed to meet on such short notice. Then I could have driven instead . . . I can still back out. I don't have to get on that plane tomorrow. And even if I do get on the plane, I don't have to show up for the meeting . . . so I am still in control of this." Convinced he was, he placed the bag and ticket on the counter, then remembered he had a six pack of Coors Light and leftover pizza in the refrigerator.

"That hit the spot," Dan said aloud, as he sat down in his well worn but comfortable leather recliner, holding a beer in one hand and his black canvas bag in the other. He reached into the bag and, without looking, pulled out the SONY micro cassette recorder, pressed the rewind button, and placed it and the bag on the coffee

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table in front of him. Then he reached for the hard covered black and purple journal that was laying on the table. He opened it to the page where his silver Cross pen was clipped, the same page he had finished on the night before.

It had taken his counselor years to convince him to start keeping a journal. "It would be great therapy," she'd say. But for Dr. Daniel Lockwood, it had turned into an addiction, one he didn't even realize he had. Although he had diligently written his thoughts down every evening since his wife had left him five years ago, often spending hours doing so, he rarely read what he wrote. If asked how many of the identical hard covered journals there were, Dan wouldn't be able to tell you a number. He only knew he was up to the letter P.

Collecting his thoughts, he took a deep breath and started writing. Almost an hour later, he reached down, switched the cassette player on, and began to meticulously transcribe the phone conversation he had recorded earlier in the day, just as he had done for the previous fourteen calls over the past six weeks. When he was done, he rewound the tape and listened to it again, double checking to make sure he had captured every word in the journal. Then he repeated the process.

Finally, he clipped the pen to the page in the journal, closed the book and threw it back on the coffee table. He leaned back in his chair and gazed at the shadows on the ceiling. "I don't have to meet with him tomorrow," he again repeated aloud to himself. "But if I don't, then the last three months of my life will have been a waste of time. And time is something I don't have a lot of. Maybe I am crazy after all."

Somehow saying those words out loud, though no one was

there to hear them, seemed to calm him down.

“I AM CRAZY!” he yelled out. “Step one of the twelve step AA process . . . admit you have the problem.”

Crazy or not, for a man who had only months to live, he appeared to be totally in control of himself and what he was doing. It had been three months since he learned of his pancreatic cancer. Fourth stage. Already spread to the liver. He had decided against any treatments, reasoning that months of sickening chemotherapy, in exchange for a few months more life, and even that wasn't a guarantee, was not worth it. Luckily, he had been able to control what little pain he experienced so far, though he knew it would get worse, with daily doses of Tylenol and a few beers.

Admittedly, his mind had been focused on something else in these intervening months. He was on a mission. It had totally consumed him. Knowing he only had months to live gave him the incentive, and balls, he needed to put his revenge plan into place. And so far, everything was proceeding exactly as he had planned, including tomorrow's meeting.

Dan smiled to himself, something he had done more of in the past three months than in the previous ten years. The most difficult part of his plan, at least he had originally thought it was going to be the most difficult part, was finding someone to play along with him. Someone who would unknowingly carry out his plan long after he was gone. Fortunately, money had solved that problem. He now understood why greed was called one of the seven deadly sins.

“I've got to meet with him eventually . . . tomorrow is as good a time as any.” Again, talking out loud made it sound more convincing to him.

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Although he knew his meeting tomorrow was a necessary part of his plan, it would also be the most daring thing he'd done so far. Of course, he also realized it could turn out to be the most stupid. Another smile came across his face.

He got up, walked to his bedroom and fell belly first onto his bed, just like he did when he was a kid. Suddenly he was reminded of the dull pain deep in his gut. Laying motionless, with his eyes closed, he realized how exhausted he was. He turned his head and slowly opened and focused his eyes on the clock. The blue-green numbers—10:18 p.m.—came into view. He reached over and pushed the alarm button. It was set for 4:00 a.m. That would give him plenty of time to get to the airport, through check-in, and to the gate for his 7:10 a.m. flight.

As he lay there, staring at the clock, his stomach started to tighten. He could feel his heart pounding hard and fast. He was still concerned about flying tomorrow under his own name, but in this post-911 world of heightened airport security, it was the surest way of guaranteeing there would be no mess ups. The last thing he needed was to be arrested by airport personnel for impersonating someone who didn't exist. His other identity was carefully concealed in his briefcase. He would replace the appropriate items in his wallet upon his arrival in Washington tomorrow.

He suddenly turned his head and caught sight of the briefcase on the chair in the corner of the room. Taking in a deep breath, he tried to reassure himself that he was ready for this meeting. He had accounted for every detail, every possible problem that could arise, checked and double checked everything. He was certain all was in order. He turned back to look at the alarm clock, reached over once again and pushed the alarm button, still set at 4:00 a.m.,

then dozed off, fully clothed, with the lights on.

He stared out the window as the runway started to move below him. He glanced at his watch in time to see the digital readout change to 7:13 a.m.

“Perfect, perfect, perfect! Everything is right on schedule,” he mumbled to himself.

“Pardon me?” said the older, but obviously not hard of hearing, woman sitting in the seat next to him.

Ignoring her, he turned his head back toward the window. Seconds later, he felt the force of the speeding plane push his body back into the seat, then his stomach bounced, as the plane nosed up and leaped into the air. He closed his eyes. His heart started racing as he thought about the day ahead of him. He couldn’t believe it was finally happening. He smiled.

Moments later, as if she could sense something before anyone else, the woman next to Dan reached over and grabbed his arm. As he turned to look at her, he too heard the deafening noise, like fingernails on a chalk board, only infinitely louder. In this case, though, it was the sound of metal bending and twisting.

From the ground, all that could be seen was the plane banking hard to the left, then heading nose first to the earth. A huge fireball erupted from the trees just beyond the runway.

2

One. Two. Three. Reannon counted to herself as she heard each tone. She then took the cell phone from her ear and pressed the one button three times, repeating a one-one-thousand between each movement of her finger. Even though she was holding the phone in front of her, she could still clearly hear the tone each time she pressed the button. She put the phone back up to her ear just in time to hear the single beep. Then the phone went silent.

She placed the cell phone back in the charger cradle and filled in the blanks after line one hundred and forty on the page, putting her initials and the date in the last space. She glanced at her watch. It was only 10:46 a.m. She had this task down pat.

Reannon had just completed her first year of accounting at Boston College and was grateful she again had a summer job working at her uncle's wine, beer, and liquor distributorship in Syracuse. Like last summer, she worked in the small business office, filling in for whomever happened to be on vacation that week. The work was easy, the pay was good, and with Friday

afternoons and weekends off, she still had time to enjoy her summer respite from college.

She closed the yellow folder and eyed the words written in bold letters on the cover, New Demand and Projection Project. She wasn't exactly sure what the project was, only that her uncle had dreamed it up, and until it was proven viable, he wasn't willing to share the details with anyone.

Her task was actually quite simple. Each day, precisely between 10:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m., calls were placed to the next ten phone numbers on the list. With a total of two hundred numbers, it took the entire month to get through the list.

Reannon had strict instructions to never speak over the phone. The only form of communication was via the push buttons, which she concluded was somehow linked to a computer at the other end.

Her only other instruction had been, if the tones ever came back other than what was specified in the instructions, she was to notify her uncle immediately.

"I'm all done Uncle Nick," Reannon said, after she knocked once on the oak door jamb of the office and strolled up to the large, old, but well-maintained mahogany desk, where her uncle was sitting.

Nick was a huge man, even considering that over the past year or so he had shed a hundred pounds of flab from his body. His weight loss, unfortunately, was not from dieting, but from stress. Consequently, any positive affect this had on his appearance had been overshadowed by how much he'd also aged, some said at least ten years. Add to that the recent mood swings, from a man whose jovial personality once rivaled that of Santa, it was no wonder even his closest friends thought he was dying, of what, they

didn't know for sure.

As Nick looked up from the papers on the desk in front of him, a smile grew on the lower half of his face. He glanced at his watch. "Finished within the hour again. Great job Reannon." He reached for, and she handed him, the yellow folder. "Any problems?"

"No, nothing. Everything worked perfectly." After three weeks of phone calls, one hundred and forty in all, her uncle's system seemed to be working just fine. "You know Uncle Nick, I took a computer programming course last semester and I might be able to program a PC to automatically make these phone calls for you."

Nick stared at her. Though he was straining, some of the smile had noticeably vanished from his face. "Let me think about it. I'm still not sure if this project is giving me the information I'm looking for. I might end up scrapping it anyway."

"Maybe I could take a look at the project. I might be able to make it do what you want it to." Reannon's excitement was now evident in her voice. Though she was grateful for the summer job, most of the tasks she was assigned were far below her intellectual capabilities. She was hungry for something more challenging.

"Let me think about it honey."

"Okay . . . just let me know."

Nick watched her as she walked out of his office. He knew he had just lied to her. It was one of a dozen lies he had already told today. It didn't bother him in the least.

As he glanced down at the yellow folder, Reannon's voice echoed through his mind. "Everything worked perfectly. Everything worked perfectly. Everything worked perfectly." If only she knew, he thought to himself, his face now devoid of any smile.

Two years ago Nick's life had taken a turn for the worst when

someone walked off with a bag full of his money. The cash, collected from his upstate New York network of small time drug dealers, was being delivered to him when three inexperienced couriers botched a transfer. Though the couriers paid for their mistake with their lives, the cash was never recovered. His suppliers, who were even more ruthless than he, still got their money, though it had taken some creative accounting on the company books to manage it. A hundred-year-old family business, one that had survived the Great Depression and Prohibition, was now on the verge of bankruptcy.

Nick had not given up on finding his money. He had assumed that a passerby had found the red duffel bag and, with their new found fortune, would eventually expose themselves by living a lifestyle well above their means. When that happened, he was hoping his network of eyes and ears, mostly local politicians and law enforcement, spread across upstate New York, would pick up on the spending spree and report back to him.

Unfortunately, after two years of quarterly calls, subtle reminders to remain vigilant to their task, and compensated by his campaign contributions and bottles of top shelf booze during the holidays, he had nothing to show for his effort. He was even losing enthusiasm over the project when several months ago he delegated the calls, something he would not have thought of doing during the first year and a half, to his trusted, non-questioning, assistant. With her on vacation for the month of June, the task had fallen to Reannon.

“I’ll give it another quarter,” Nick said aloud, as he placed the yellow folder in the top left drawer of his desk, the only thing he kept in that drawer, and locked it. It would be a fitting time to stop, he thought, almost two years to the month since the money was

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taken. If a spending spree hadn't shown up by then, the culprits were either well outside of the area he was monitoring, or they were smart about spending their new found treasure. Besides, after two years, his network of eyes and ears were getting tired of playing his little game. He sensed a "don't call me, I'll call you" attitude emerging from some of them.

Nick leaned back in his chair. "How could I have been so stupid?" It was a phrase he had repeated to himself thousands of times in the past two years. That and, "Two million dollars fuck'n gone!"

3

Roger Stone sat motionless in the high back chair, eyes locked on the red expandable folder on the desk in front of him. It was almost six o'clock in the evening, and he had just spent the past three hours reviewing and then re-reviewing every piece of paper in the three inch-thick folder.

“Son of a bitch!” he said out loud, then looked up at the open doorway to his office to make sure no one was around to hear him.

This morning Roger had woken up believing he was going to be a very rich man by the end of the day. Claspng his hands behind his head, he leaned back in the chair, trying to figure out what had gone wrong.

For over forty years the only pay checks he had ever received had United States Treasury printed on the top of them. He had retired from the Army with over twenty years of service, including two tours of duty in Vietnam, although he would never voluntarily admit that he saw no real combat. Roger was an excellent details man. An organizer. A strategic planner. For these skills he

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was awarded administrative assignments in Vietnam, and afterwards, at the Pentagon, although he did spend one tour of duty at NATO's Supreme Headquarters in Brussels.

Another skill he had been fortunate enough to acquire during his stint in the Army was computer programming. The Army wasn't quick to pick up on the merits of information technology, but when it did, Roger was positioned to ride the wave of promotion associated with it. That skill alone made him a sought after commodity in the Defense establishment.

His reputation and many connections fostered during his years in the military made it easy for him to land a job in the Defense Department when he retired from the Army. Ironically, his new office at the Pentagon was only a few hundred feet from the military one he retired from.

Over the years Roger had been content with following orders. He was never one to aspire to the next higher position and therefore never a threat to any boss he worked for. This reputation had afforded him the opportunity to move on to different assignments whenever he got too bored doing whatever it was he was doing. He liked the change associated with jumping from assignment to assignment. He also liked the lack of accountability that came with never being held responsible for getting anything done.

Several years ago Roger landed a project manager position in DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency of the Defense Department. DARPA was a research and development group known mostly for its imaginative, out-of-the-box thinking. Among its many accomplishments, the agency has been credited with creating the forerunner to the Internet.

Roger's job was not to think up new ideas, but to manage

bringing other people's ideas to fruition. The latter required the planning and organizational skills he possessed. He was currently responsible for researching and evaluating the feasibility of ideas sent to the Defense Department by ordinary citizens. Most of the ideas that landed on his desk got there because they were so far-fetched that no other agency wanted to deal with them. But in this post-911 environment, resources were being spent to evaluate even the most bizarre ideas, to make sure no stone was left unturned in the war on terrorism. Although his work was necessary, it was not seen as being very important. For the most part, his boss left him alone.

Roger liked change, not only in his work life, but in his personal life too. He had survived three failed, childless marriages and more short-term relationships than he cared to remember. At fifty-nine he had a younger, distinguished look about him, almost movie star like. He was tall, just over six one, had a rugged handsome face that was always tanned, and a full head of meticulously styled salt and pepper hair. His thin physique was more a byproduct of his usual happy hour dinner entree of scotch on the rocks, than any kind of regular exercise, which he had given up long ago. He attracted more than his fair share of women, but recently had become content with paying for any pleasure he might desire, knowing that way his fantasies would be totally met.

Though he never aspired to be in charge, recently he felt he deserved more than his current GS-12 grade salary of \$95,000 afforded him. He had always put off any serious planning for retirement, instead living for today. Except for his townhouse in Georgetown, a 2008 Z06 Corvette, and two government pensions, he had little to show for his forty years of "sacrifice to his country"

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as he would always say to himself whenever he was feeling sorry for the cards he had been dealt in life.

Over the years he had seen many of his colleagues take jobs in the private sector at purported salaries two to three times more than what they were making working for Uncle Sam. It seemed the private sector was willing to pay the right individuals for their knowledge of, and relationships with, the Uncle. If only he could stumble onto one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, he might yet be able to attain his dream of retiring to endless days of warm Jamaican beaches, before he was too old to enjoy it.

Until earlier today, Roger thought that he had stumbled over one of those opportunities. It had started six weeks ago when an anonymous phone call was transferred to him by a totally inexperienced employee in the Department of Homeland Security. The Department was still experiencing growing pains, especially with the recently implemented hotline it had set up for reporting potential terrorist threats. Overwhelmed with input from a shaken public, they found it difficult to keep up with the call volume coming in. Other agencies, including DARPA, were asked to provide support until the public's fascination with the program wore off.

Roger would have normally been more abrasive to the employee transferring the call, since he didn't like it when others dumped their work on him. But in this case, Vanessa's throaty but soft spoken voice convinced him to help out, especially when she gave him her number and said she owed him one.

The caller introduced himself as Mr. Timer, which he readily admitted was an alias. The government, fully aware of the public's fear of retaliation since 911, was much more receptive of anonymity than it had been in the past. It had finally concluded

that it was more important for a terrorist act to be thwarted than to know who the informant was. Monitoring chatter over the Internet had taught them this.

From the beginning, there was something about Timer that piqued Roger's curiosity. Timer was very articulate, always choosing his words carefully, almost as if they had been rehearsed beforehand. Yet there was an underlying tone of fear in his voice. To Roger, it meant the man was truly afraid of what he had found. More importantly, it also told him that what he had found was probably real.

"I think I uncovered a terrorist plot."

"Is the public in any imminent or immediate danger?"

"No, I don't believe so."

"Do you know when or where this act of terrorism will take place?"

"No."

"Is it something that will take place on American soil?"

"Yes . . . that I'm certain of."

"What exactly do the terrorists plan to do?"

"They plan to destroy the public's confidence in our monetary system."

"Do you know how they plan to do this?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me?"

"They plan to flood the economy with counterfeit money."

"How do you know this?"

"I accidentally found some of the money."

"How much did you find?"

"Several mill . . . let's just say a lot of money."

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When Roger first heard these words, his heart pounded so hard his chest ached. He honestly thought he was having a heart attack.

Unfortunately, Timer too sounded distressed over sharing the information he had uncovered. He confided to Roger that he was not confident that the governmental bureaucracy could protect him. Since there did not appear to be any imminent danger, he asked Roger to keep their conversation confidential until he was ready to come forth officially. He also requested that Roger use his personal cell phone for all future communications. Roger was more than willing to keep any record of these conversations out of the Uncle's purview.

Over the following two weeks, Roger spoke with Timer four more times, each call traced via his caller ID to rural phones in Blue Mountain Lake and Woodstock, New York, Kennebago Lake in Maine, and Picton, Ontario, Canada. No pattern to the locations and untraceable to the actual caller.

Although Roger was having no luck identifying who Timer actually was, he was making considerable progress in gaining his trust. Timer had sent, to his Georgetown address, a copy of the documents he had found detailing the terrorist's plan. Roger had a difficult time interpreting the documents the same way Timer had, but decided to play along with him anyway. Then, during that last conversation on the second week, Roger decided to ask the burning question he had been holding back.

"I believe you told me during our first phone conversation that you had some of the counterfeit money."

"Yes . . . I do."

"I have a close friend at the Treasury Department. I'd like to pass some of the money by her. Have her assess its quality. That

way we'll know what kind of a threat we are really up against. Do you think you could send me some samples?"

"How well do you know this woman?"

"Extremely well. Don't worry. She'll keep it on the QT."

"I'll get a package out to you tomorrow."

A week had gone by and Roger had neither received a package nor heard from Timer. Convinced Timer's finding had been nothing but a hoax, albeit one that someone went to an awful lot of time and effort to perpetrate, he decided to enjoy happy hour a little more than usual that evening.

When he arrived home, he found an eleven by fourteen inch manila envelope, lined with plastic bubble wrap, folded but sticking out of his mailbox.

He sat at the desk in his study staring at the envelope in front of him. There was no return address, but it was postmarked Raquette Lake, New York. He took a deep breath and picked up the envelope. His hands shook as he slid his fingers under the seal along the end flap. He spread open the end of the envelope and peered in. There were three stacks of bills, twenties, fifties, and hundreds, each held together with money straps.

He removed each bundle, one by one, and counted the bills without removing the strap. There were a hundred bills in each stack. Seventeen thousand dollars in all. Although he was no expert, it all looked real to him.