

Investigating the "accidental death" of a defense contractor, Nick Mercante lands in the middle of a conspiracy involving a possible murder, a U.S. Senator, the intelligence community and old postage stamps honoring the first flight at Kitty Hawk.

The Kitty Hawk Plot

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4288.html?s=pdf>

The Kitty Hawk Plot

BY PAT NICOLETTE

The Kitty Hawk Plot © 2009 Pat Nicolette

ISBN: 978-1-60145-919-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America.
Published by Booklocker.com Inc.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Also by Pat Nicolette

Nick Mercante Mysteries:

The Caruso File
The Trinity Church Murders
Twin Killing: The Gemini Plot
Code Blue for Murder
Murder at the Commission

Plays:

The House on the Hill
The Brother
In the Best of Families

PROLOGUE

JUNE 2005

On what was to be the last night of his life, Jason Porter was feeling pretty good. It was pleasantly cool for late June, his wife Angela was returning home, and he was pulled off the road in his white Lexus waiting for her call.

Twenty-odd miles to the south, Angela had just arrived at the American Airlines baggage claim area at Reagan National Airport. Taking her cell phone from her purse, she speed-dialed home. Her home. Still can't get used to that, she thought, moving closer to the carousel and stopping next to a woman she recognized from her flight. She heard a buzz, a click and then Jason came on the line.

"Hi," he said. "So the plane was on time."

"Ten minutes early. I'm waiting for my bags." Angela smiled at the woman.

"Good. I'm on my way."

"Where are you? I dialed the house."

"Ever hear of call forwarding? I'm halfway down Archer's Creek Road."

Angela looked at her watch. "Jason, I can take a cab. You don't have to pick me up."

"Sure I do. Now be good and tell me how you are."

"Exhausted. All I want is to go to bed. Mother's still unhappy about our wedding." This brought a smile from the woman.

"I know, for you not marrying a Catholic."

"No, now it's for keeping my last name."

"Warned you about that."

"One Mrs. Porter's quite enough, thank you."

"Did Tony at least send her a birthday card?"

"You know my brother. He's angry at everybody." The woman nodded with understanding.

"Wonderful family I married into."

"You can always go back to Brenda."

"No, thank you. Listen, I--Jesus Christ!" Jason yelled.

"Jason, what is it?"

Pat Nicolette

"Angie, they have aitch--!"

She heard a thump, glass shattering, another thump. "Jason, what's wrong?" she shouted.

Long silence, then, "Jen...should have known...you--." Silence.

"Jason!"

"Are you okay, honey?" the woman asked, touching Angela's arm.

Angela stared at her. "No. I think my husband's just had an accident."

PART I

THURSDAY, AUGUST 18

Nick Mercante was having trouble controlling Jasper, the new black and white Springer Spaniel he and his wife Kathy had adopted from the rescue league. The dog was a five-year-old male, younger and far more energetic than Patches, their first Springer whom they had to put down in March.

"Wait till you get to be my age," Nick said, yanking harder on the leash and bringing the dog to a reluctant stop at the edge of the driveway. He had just turned sixty, was short with graying black hair and brown eyes, and this time of year favored cotton shirts and jeans. An historian by training and a detective by avocation, Nick worked at home as a researcher for NASA when he wasn't helping the Metropolitan police solve homicides.

It was at NASA that he'd met his wife Kathy in 1991. After a brief courtship he'd moved into the beautiful house in Northwest Washington that she and her ex-husband had purchased a decade before. Together they successfully saw her daughters through their teens and off to college. Recently she'd been experimenting with telecommuting, giving her more time to spend in her garden or on her indoor projects. But today she and her red pickup truck had gone to work.

"All right, let's go," Nick said to Jasper, "but slowly."

The dog actually seemed to obey as they went across the cul-de-sac and started down the sloping street toward Overlook Drive. But when a Mercedes sedan turned the corner and drove toward them, Jasper began to bark and strain on the leash. The car promptly came to a stop.

"Looks like you have your hands full," a white-haired pleasant-faced man said, lowering his window.

"Phil! What're you doing around here?"

"Looking for your help."

"Good, I owe you one. Park at the top of the circle and I'll take monster mutt inside where we can talk."

With Jasper pulling him back up the hill, Nick watched the Mercedes glide forward. He had met Phil McKnight while investigating the murder

and attempted murder McKnight's twin goddaughters. McKnight was a prominent attorney and was instrumental in solving the case. The two men had kept in touch and, this past winter, Nick had asked McKnight to sign a letter posing as the attorney of a murder victim. The letter helped trap the killer.

After Nick gave McKnight a quick tour of the first floor of the house, the men settled in the glass enclosed porch that overlooked the back gardens, Jasper occupying one corner busily doing battle with a rawhide bone.

McKnight removed a cigar from his tan blazer before taking one of the large wicker club chairs. "By the way, how did the Sanford case come out? I never heard anything after the arraignment."

"They're still negotiating a plea bargain."

"Really? Who's defense counsel?"

"Linda Barringer."

McKnight nodded, unwrapping the cigar. "She loves the tough cases. Mine won't be any easier."

Nick took a sip of his coffee. "So who's been murdered?"

"No one, according to the police. It's supposedly an auto accident. Client of mine, Jason Porter. Car went into a ravine up in Montgomery County the last Sunday in June."

"Anyone see it happen?"

"No, but Jason's wife Angela claims he saw someone or something that caused the crash."

"How does she know?"

"She was on her cell phone with him at the time. She had just flown back from New York and was at the airport. She called 911. A witness confirms she was there."

"Maybe Jason saw another car."

"Possibly, but I doubt it." McKnight puffed on the unlit cigar. "He knew that road like his own face. It runs past his house and winds along some large estates to River Road. It's not used that much and people know better than to speed. Jason wasn't drunk and there were no skid marks."

"He die at the scene?"

"Might as well have. In the ambulance on the way to the hospital."

"If he was your client, he must have had a few bucks. The wife stand to inherit them?"

The Kitty Hawk Plot

"She does now," McKnight puffed.

"Now?"

"Angela Garcia's nearly 20 years younger than Jason was. He took my advice and had her sign a very tough prenup. But Jason changed his will just before their anniversary party in early June."

"Just a month before the accident?"

"Correct. Now she gets half the estate. I'm the executor, but I'm not rushing to probate until I'm sure it was an accident."

"Lucky her and an alibi to boot. Think she had a partner waiting for Jason on the road?"

McKnight smiled. "It's crossed my mind. I did a background check on her before the prenup but not since. Only people I know she's close to are her mother and a younger brother Tony."

"Anyone else benefit under the will?"

"His ex-wife Brenda gets a hefty chunk of cash. Part of her divorce settlement."

"Was that a nasty split?" Nick asked.

"Very amicable. Jason believed she deserved it after their years together. She wanted protection in case she remarried while he was alive."

"When the alimony would stop."

"Right," McKnight said, nodding. "She wanted to get paid either way."

"And she does. Okay, you have a young wife who trumped her prenup and an smart ex-wife. It still could have been an accident, Phil."

"Except that Jason left me a voice mail a few days before he died. I was away at the time."

"What did he say?"

"That the Jenny may crash. Call me. The Jenny was Jason's nickname for his latest project, the Fluxlight."

"Jenny. Name supposed to mean something?"

McKnight took another puff. "It should to you. You and Jason shared a hobby: stamp collecting."

Nick tilted his head, then beamed. "The inverted Jenny! The airmail stamp with the upside down plane. One of those is worth a small fortune."

"Jason could easily have afforded one, but kept hoping he'd find one somewhere in an old collection."

"A true collector," Nick nodded. "Okay, what kind of project was the Jenny, or Fluxlight or whatever?"

"Some kind of interrogation device for the military. Jason was an electrical engineer and founded a defense-contracting firm. Kitty Hawk Systems."

"Kitty Hawk...The Wright brothers. Airplanes again."

"Yep. Flying was Jason's first love. In college he took a summer job out near Andrews Air Force base and that's where he got the bug. He splurged on lessons and got his pilot's license before he graduated."

"The guy did a bit of everything."

"Might have even tried to fly jets if he didn't develop high blood pressure and the doctors told him to not to."

"And I gather Kitty Hawk was a successful company."

"Oh yes. Jason was brilliant and hired the best people. He sold the company a couple of years ago just before he divorced Brenda. That's when he met Angela. My firm represented Jason in the deal. She was a paralegal for the buyer's attorneys."

"He didn't waste much time mooning over Brenda," Nick said.

"No, and he never quit designing products either."

"So the message he left you that Jenny was going to crash meant some kind of trouble for the project."

"Or for him. But the Montgomery County police aren't interested. They say the accident speaks for itself."

"My friend Frank Stephens might talk to them," Nick said, referring to the D.C. homicide detective both men knew.

"Good, I'd hoped you might contact him. He must know a county cop or two."

"So should his partner, Sam Witkin, but let me start with Frank. Is there anyone else with a motive?"

"Two," McKnight said, taking two folded sheets from his blazer pocket. "Here are my ideas, names, background and phone numbers. Should give you a good start."

Nick looked down the list. "Brenda...Angela...David Holland?"

"Jason's college buddy and co-founder of Kitty Hawk. He later started Shamrock Industries and became a competitor. He tried to buy Kitty Hawk, but Jason would have none of it."

"They have a falling out?"

"Not at first," McKnight answered. "In fact, Holland agreed to less

The Kitty Hawk Plot

than a 50 percent buyout. In turn, Jason gave him a very liberal non-competition clause. Shamrock was only barred from manufacturing a few specified products for two years. Everything else was fair game."

"Sounds reasonable," Nick said. "What happened?"

"Shamrock landed a contract for a new type of fuel injector for helicopters. Jason sued, accusing Holland of breaching the non-competition clause and pirating a product in Kitty Hawk's pipeline."

"Was he right?"

"I thought so, but they settled the case. Still, it damaged the friendship. After that they were intense rivals right up until Jason's death."

"Why? After Jason sold Kitty Hawk he wasn't manufacturing anymore, was he?"

"No, but he was still developing products like the Fluxlight and Holland knew it. In fact Jason announced completion of the Fluxlight at his and Angela's anniversary party. He even invited Brenda and guess who was there as her escort?"

Nick looked back at the list. "Holland. This is getting complicated."

McKnight crossed his legs with a smile. "Keep reading."

Nick turned the page. "Senator Lloyd Gavin?"

"Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Defense Appropriations. Jason thought Gavin ruined his business. Forced him to sell Kitty Hawk."

"How?"

McKnight puffed on his cigar. "You ever hear of the Osprey troop carrier?"

Nick thought a moment then snapped his fingers. "Big news about ten years ago. Had the speed and range of an airplane but could take off and hover like a helicopter. Problem was it kept crashing."

"That's the one," McKnight said. "Actually killed a few contractor's employees in front of congressmen down in Quantico. But it's back on track thanks to folks like Gavin. He thinks it would be very useful in Iraq."

"What's the connection with Jason?"

"Kitty Hawk was a subcontractor on an electrical system for the Osprey. Gavin accused Jason of dragging his feet trying to perfect it. The two screamed at each other at a closed committee hearing back in 2001. Shortly afterwards Kitty Hawk lost the contract. The first of many."

"Political hardball?"

"Jason thought so. Claimed he was blackballed. He had been publicly criticizing Gavin for ignoring safety and quality control and pressuring the Pentagon to favor certain contractors."

"Would Shamrock happen to be one of those?" Nick smiled.

McKnight grinned. "I see you're getting the picture. And the thing is, people were beginning to listen to Jason's complaints." "Not great for the Senator's image."

"Indeed. He's up for reelection next year and already trailing Congressman Ted Brady for the Republican nomination."

"But, Phil, you don't really think Gavin's behind Jason's death."

"I'm a lawyer, remember? Politics and homicide go hand in hand since Brutus killed Caesar."

"This isn't Rome."

"But there are plenty of defense firms that want Gavin to keep his seat."

"Bad enough to commit murder?"

McKnight held the cigar up to the light. "You know, Nick, I once represented a union official charged with conspiring to kill the president of a rival union. The government said they had a witness who overheard the conversation."

"Must have been a tough case to defend."

"Turned out to be a piece of cake. The witness wouldn't testify and the judge threw the case out."

"Witness intimidation?"

"I can't say, but the rival union backed off and a few months later the witness disappeared. Nick, guess what company's one of Gavin's biggest contributors."

"Shamrock Industries."

"If I had another cigar, I'd give it to you."

Kathy Stilmore was blonde with light blue-gray eyes that changed color with her moods. They shifted to slate when she was angry and the strong chin she'd inherited from her father jutted out. But they were bright blue when she was in her overalls happily digging in her garden as she had done that afternoon after work. That evening, over a chef salad dinner, the blue was much in evidence as Nick told her about Phil

The Kitty Hawk Plot

McKnight's visit.

"Nicky, thank God you have a case to play with. You've been moping around here for weeks."

"I have been a little down. Does it really show?"

She pointed to the lone slice of tomato on his plate. "When's the last time you finished eating before me?"

"I don't know. I haven't noticed."

"I have, and it's obvious you enjoy playing detective more than research these days. Look, you've paid your dues at the shop. Maybe it's time to think about asking for an early out. Maybe a whole new career besides just waiting for Frank and Sam to call."

"Oh sure. Just what the world needs: an aging private eye who's afraid of guns and driving at night."

"I'm not talking about a full-time thing. You've helped solve five homicides, you have a reputation. Be a consultant or something. You can still help out Frank, but people pay good money for the kind of thing you do. I'll bet Phil would if you asked him."

"I won't. He's a friend."

"It sounds like Jason Porter was his friend, but I'll bet he charged him for that prenup and will."

Nick pushed his plate away and took a sip of wine. "Okay, let me think about it."

"You're brushing me off." Her eyes tilted toward gray.

"No, I mean it. It's, ah, just that I've never thought much about retirement."

"I do all the time."

"For me or you?"

"Both of us." Her eyes drifted back to blue. "Nicky, I love telecommuting, but it's only made me want to spend more time at home. We should think about retiring together. We can afford it with our pensions."

He shook his head. "Listen, I know you won't be bored around here, but who needs a part-time detective?"

"Phil, for one."

"And when I run out of friends? Then what?"

Her eyes very blue now. "Then you write that biography of President Buchanan you've always talked about."

"That'll take years."

"Then you'd better get started."

He smiled and stroked her cheek. "Right after I go over Phil's notes and call Frank."

"Liar."

"No, seriously. I'll run some numbers and see if we really can swing my leaving NASA."

"That's all I ask." She stood and adjusted her overalls. "I'll only be in the garden another hour or so. Why don't we make an early night of it?"

"That a hint?"

"You're the detective."

FRIDAY, AUGUST 19

Captain Frank Stephens initialed the last document in his pile and cheerfully tossed it into his out box. TGIF and he had time for a long lunch to boot. A handsome black man with graying hair, he moved quickly toward his office door. He was close to 230 pounds now, but still as agile as the wide receiver for Marshall University he'd been years before.

His hand was on the knob when his private line rang behind him. "Damn." He hurried back to his desk. Gail was on shift at the hospital and Chris and Mark were at camp, but you never know. He relaxed when he saw Nick's number in the caller ID. "Hey, amigo, what's going on?"

"Maybe nothing," Nick replied, "or I may need your help."

"Talk to me."

But before Nick could finish his account of Phil McKnight's visit, Frank broke in. "Hold on a second," he said and rummaged through his pending file. He found the list he was looking for. "Nick, you're not going to believe this."

"Try me."

"We have a red flag on Jason Porter."

"You have a flag and Montgomery County doesn't care?"

"Sounds screwy, I know. The First District issued it. It's a heads-up to lend a hand in case something breaks."

The Metro police were divided into districts. Frank worked the Second in Northwest; the First was assigned the Capitol Hill area. "Why are they concerned about Porter?" Nick asked.

"Could be a Federal interest. After all, you said Porter was a big

The Kitty Hawk Plot

defense contractor."

"But not for a couple of years."

"Yeah, the flag could be from a stale list. We've been getting a lot of those from Homeland Security since 9/11. Usually don't amount to anything. I'll call Alvarez at the First and see what he has to say."

"You'll let me know?"

"Unless it's classified."

"Thanks, buddy."

"Sure," Frank said. "Uhm, haven't you forgotten something?"

"No, I'd also like to see the accident report."

Frank smiled. "That's my boy. I should have it here by Monday at the latest. Call me then around noon."

"Thanks. Regards to Gail."

"Same to Kathy. Good weekend."

Frank checked over his notes from Nick's call. Maybe Porter's death wasn't an accident. He knew Phil McKnight was one smart attorney. He started to dial Leon Alvarez, then decided to check with Montgomery County first. He buzzed Lieutenant Sam Witkin. "At last," Sam said. "Thought you got lost. We still on for lunch?"

"Yeah, but I just talked to Nick and I have to make a call."

"Somebody finally run over that crazy dog of his?"

The jibe was typical. Sam had once objected to Nick's assistance on cases. While he had come to respect Nick's judgment, the two still engaged in friendly banter.

Frank outlined his conversation with Nick. "Who's taken over up in Bethesda?"

"Guy named Ed Corcoran," Sam said. "I don't know him. Let me call Tommy Sanchez. Been there forever. He won't waste any time on questions."

"Good. Nick will be glad you're helping."

"He'll pay for it."

Tony Garcia turned his PT Cruiser into Angela's circular driveway and slowed to a stop. He was early and decided to wait in the car. Not like in the old days, he thought, when he would sometimes just show up unannounced to see his sister. Still, he'd been pleased at the invitation.

He'd not been to the house since Angela's anniversary party nor seen her since a somber greeting at the brief memorial service. He looked up at the huge brick colonial. It would be hers now. A couple of years ago an apartment in Baltimore and now a mansion in Potomac. All thanks to Jason. Too bad how things had turned out.

Tony had been thrilled when Angela started dating Jason. At last someone who wasn't a politically correct snob who endorsed every editorial in the *Washington Post*. Jason had his head screwed on right. Sure, he'd had issues with Senator Gavin, but there was no question he supported the military. And Tony sensed Jason really liked him, wasn't just trying to score points with Angela. After the wedding, the three of them dined together often and the men would talk late into the night about their passions--Jason's love of aviation and stamp collecting, and Tony's of computers.

And Tony was honored when in late April Jason loaned him a key to the house and asked him to upgrade his computer security while he and Angela went out of town for the weekend. Jason was worried hackers might be after his special project, the Fluxlight. When Tony entered Jason's library that Saturday night, he was ready. He first used the passwords Jason had given him and checked all the existing software. As a precaution, he then backed up all the files to one of his own firm's special security DVDs, which was protected with the latest anti-duplication technology.

Tony then upgraded the entire anti-virus and anti-spyware system and installed an encrypted firewall program he had developed on his own time. It wasn't totally tamper proof--no security system yet devised was--but any serious hacker would receive a mass of gibberish that would completely disguise the real data. At least that was the idea. When he was done, he took a deep breath and deliberately crashed the entire system, unconnected all the power, reconnected, and rebooted. For a few moments, he thought he had failed, but when his new "Who are you" prompt appeared, he relaxed. For the hell of it, Tony decided to take a look at the Fluxlight documentation. He read the Introduction and was blown away. If this thing really worked, it would be like having a spy inside enemy headquarters. As Tony scrolled through the first few pages, it appeared that Jason had completed nearly all the schematics. Tony was eager to discuss the device with him, but wanted to read more before he did. He knew he would be busy at work for the next few weeks, so he

The Kitty Hawk Plot

decided to make a second back-up DVD for himself to study when he had the chance. It had proved to be a fateful decision.

Still sitting in his car, Tony saw the veranda lights go. He glanced at his watch. Time to go in. An electric eye turned on the front door light as he reached the top step and the door swung open before he reached it.

Angela stood there in black slacks and a yellow cotton blouse, a petite brunette with olive skin and dark brown eyes. "I saw you sitting out there," she said. "Were you afraid I'd bite you for being early?"

He saw her playful smile as she came forward and embraced him. "I'm glad you came, Tony."

"Me too," he said. He stepped back, a good head taller, with curlier hair and lighter eyes, but still nearly her twin. "I think I'm overdressed," he said, fingering his tie.

"You're fine. Come on in."

He followed her inside and she veered left.

"Not the dining room?" he asked, a step behind.

"Thought we'd eat on the deck. It's all set up. Pizza like when you used to come to the apartment. Even got your favorite beer."

They engaged in small talk as they made a sizeable dent in the large pizza. Then she sat back and stifled a burp.

"It's been too long," she said.

"Since the party."

"Yes, I remember. I was very upset when you and Jason argued about the Fluxlight."

"Yeah, I'm sorry I made a scene," Tony said. "But, you know, I still don't know what his problem was. He gloats to everyone about his new interrogation tool and how you must be his good luck charm, then a half hour later he chews me out."

"For making your own DVD. That was wrong, Tony."

"Angie, he let me see the files. He must have known I'd be interested when I read them."

"Yes, but you knew his concerns about security. You should have told him right away or at least apologized at the party."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right, but, frankly I got so busy I forgot all about the thing until...well, you know, and then it was too late. I really wish I had, Angie."

"So do I," she said, looking away.

He tried to change the subject. "Will you stay here? In this big

house?"

"I haven't decided," she said, closing the top of the pizza box. "God knows, I'm used to living alone. I'll have to figure out what to do with myself."

"You won't need to work. Mom told me about the new will." "I may want to anyway," she shrugged. "But before I face that, I want to finish up some of Jason's work."

"Finish? Angie, you're not trained to do that."

"No, not the science, but there are other things. Tony, you never gave Jason back your Fluxlight DVD. I'd like to have it."

"You want to show the plans to some defense firms?"

"No. I won't have the Fluxlight produced, Tony."

"What? You stood right next to Jason at the party. He was so proud of it. He even joked about asking Senator Gavin for funding."

"Things have changed," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I've made up my mind. I'm not showing the Fluxlight to anyone on Capitol Hill or anywhere else. Besides, it may not work."

"Come on, Angie, if that were true, Jason would never have said a word about it. And I read the summary of the testing analysis. Positive right down the line."

"It was preliminary."

"So? A good company can run more tests, find any glitches."

"They won't do any better than Jason."

He sat back and crossed his legs. "Okay, if the Fluxlight's not any good, why do you want the DVD?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Angie, what is this, some kind of shell game?"

"Look, Jason didn't tell me everything, and what he did, I promised not to repeat to anyone."

"I'm your brother, dammit."

"And I don't want to see you hurt if that DVD falls into the wrong hands."

"The wrong hands? It's for our troops. What would Dad say if you just ignored it?"

"I wouldn't tell him any more than I've told you. Trust me, it's better this way."

"Not without a reason."

The Kitty Hawk Plot

"I'm sorry, Tony. Please give me the DVD. I don't want to go to the police."

"The police? You invited me here to make threats?"

"No, of course I wanted to see you, but..."

He stood. "Thanks for the pizza. You can keep the leftovers."

SUNDAY, AUGUST 21

Brenda Porter was breathing hard, her short auburn hair damp with sweat, thigh muscles cramping as she waited for the serve. There was a time she could play two sets of tennis on a humid morning and hardly wipe her brow. Now she had barely won two games from Meredith, who was a dozen years younger and played like it. Brenda tensed, leaning right, readying her forehand as Meredith tossed the ball in the air. Here it comes. Thwack. Damn--she's going down the middle. The ball whizzed past her feeble backhand. Set over: 6-2.

She walked to the net and put on her best fake smile. "You're getting too good for me."

"Just lucky, honey. Rematch?"

"Sorry, got to shower. Lunch plans." The lies came more easily these days.

"Okay, dokey," Meredith said as they walked off the court. "I'll be here next Sunday. Jeff can't take a break till September. We were thinking Palm Springs might start cooling off by then."

"I'd wait till late in the month if I were you."

"Oh? Well, thanks. I forget how many years you've been going there."

Bitch, I'll bet you've counted every one. "Nothing like experience, darling. Have a nice day." She walked off without waiting for a reply. God, I hate getting old.

Half an hour later Brenda sat at the club bar halfway through a Bloody Mary, feeling a little better but no younger. What was it, 20 years since she met Jason and David at that air show? No, wait, it was 1987. Couple years to go. Too bad Jason would never celebrate that particular anniversary. He's just a stiff now. Like her legs. She giggled and gulped the rest of her drink.

"Freddy, I'll have another," she called to the bartender.

She'd had pretty good chemistry with Jason, at least at the

beginning. But the more money Kitty Hawk made, the stingier he became, always criticizing her spending on clothes. He never had any problem buying those stupid stamps of his, but she had to beg for every dime.

Even at the air show when they all met, David had seemed more easy going, more attractive. But Daddy couldn't stand him. "Holland's a spoiled brat, Brenda. Smart but lazy. He'll probably piss away his money at the casinos. Now you look at Jason. Worked his butt off to get into college and grad school. Knows his stuff. It's a shame he's partners with Holland." Ex-Marines never minced their words.

"Here you are, Mrs. Porter," the bartender said, placing the tall glass before her.

"Thanks, Freddy."

Well, Daddy was right and he was wrong. David and Jason both made a fortune with Kitty Hawk, but Shamrock grew even bigger. And now she was eligible once more and courting David--again. She wouldn't come on too strong, not without more current information. Maybe he wasn't gambling the way he used to, but she wasn't ready for another tightwad either. Meanwhile, she could still have fun. She looked at her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Not bad. Brown eyes clear, skin still smooth, no gray hair thanks to occasional help from Nice'n Easy. Plenty of men out there to make a lady feel good. Always were. Not that Jason ever cared enough to notice. Why would he? I'll bet he was squeezing that Spanish tomato before he sold Kitty Hawk. Well, not anymore. Did Angela taste good, Jason? Better than me?

Her cell phone began ringing the theme from *Hello Dolly*. She looked at the display and pressed Send. "David, where the hell are you?"

"Still at the Richmond plant. The Lancer's targeting sequences keep showing red."

She'd heard this kind of crap for years from Jason. "Don't you have a production chief down there?"

"People do take vacations, Brenda."

"He has an assistant, doesn't he?"

"His wife's about to give birth."

"Congratulations. How long will you be?"

"Maybe another hour. Look, why don't you go to the club and relax."

"I'm at the club."

"Then go home and have a swim. I'll join you when I'm done here."

The Kitty Hawk Plot

"Fine."

"Sorry about this, but I have to make sure this system's on track. I'm worried Gavin might ask us to testify again. And you know him."

"Yeah, sure. Hurry up, will you?"

"I'll make it as quick as I can."

She clicked off without a goodbye. Play the guilt card. He seemed hot to trot, but it was good to make him squirm a little and not take her for granted. Maybe she should have done that with Jason. Would it have mattered? Probably not. Things would have ended exactly the same.

MONDAY, AUGUST 22

It took the better part of an hour for Nick to read through the county accident report on Jason Porter's death, which also had been flagged with a Federal alert. It was very thorough--police accounts, interviews with neighbors, statements of the ambulance personnel, doctor's certificate, and a summary of Angela Garcia's story and that of the woman at the airport. Tossing his empty coffee container in the cubicle's wastebasket, he tucked the file under his arm and headed back up the hall to Frank's office where Lieutenant Sam Witkin was now lounging in the chair across from Frank.

"Hello, Sam. Please don't get up."

"In your dreams," Sam said, his smile softening his swarthy features.

"You're looking better than last month at Kathy's garden party," Nick said, taking the other chair.

"Rebecca's finally sleeping through the night. I think I'm going to keep her."

"I'm sure her mother will be glad to hear that."

"Don't mind me, fellas," Frank said. "It's just my office. So, Nick, whatcha learn?"

"Nothing I didn't know before this morning. Except nobody sees or hear anything in that neighborhood."

Frank nodded. "Houses are too far back from the road."

"And they're all inside watching Soprano reruns," Sam said.

Nick placed the file on the desk. "Frank, did you get anything more on the alert?"

"Only that it's not from Homeland Security."

"Then who?"

"Usually three choices. FBI, CIA or NSA. But my contact at the Bureau doesn't know anything."

"Or isn't telling," Sam said.

"What about the other two?"

"We don't have any access worth much."

"We had an ex-CIA guy at NASA," Nick said. "He's retired, but he still stays in touch with his cronies."

"Might be worth a call," Frank said. "I assume you're planning to talk to the folks on McKnight's list."

"Oh yeah. Probably Angela Garcia first. I'm curious what she thinks Jason might have seen on the road."

"That's where I'd start," Sam said. "She and the ex-wife have the clearest motives."

"That's my thinking. And then David Holland. After that, maybe Senator Gavin, though I'm not sure he'd even talk to me. Besides, the political angle's a real stretch for me."

"I'd save Gavin for last in any case," Sam said.

"Why?"

"A, he's probably out of town like most Feds are in August, B, senators are hard to see anytime, and C, you might learn something from the others that will get him to talk to you."

"No D?" Nick smiled.

"I can't count that high," Sam said deadpan.

"It's not counting."

"See what I mean?"

"Enough, both of you," Frank said. "Nick, how about joining us for lunch?"

"Another time," Nick said, standing. "Sam just gave me an idea."

"A, B or C?" Sam smiled.

"IRC, the Investor Reparations Commission. I'll see you guys." "Don't forget Rebecca's christening," Sam said.

"It's on our calendar. Are you actually having it in church during a service?"

"Sure, I'm covering all the bases. Even my father will be there."

"Good for him."

"Yeah, but if Rebecca had been a boy, he wouldn't come unless we had a bris too."

"Ouch."

The Investor Reparations Commission was the brainchild of retired Louisiana Senator Buford T. Montgomery. Established the year before, it empowered the investing public to sue their brokers for fraud and receive damage awards from the agency's administrative law judges. The Commission's Executive Director was Charles Ripley, a long-time aide to Senator Montgomery. Ripley had assisted Nick's investigation of the murder of Aubrey Sanford, the Commission's chief judge. So when Ripley's secretary told him Nick was on the line that afternoon, he immediately picked up the phone.

"Mr. Mercante, always a pleasure to hear from you."

"Same here, Mr. Ripley. I hoped you'd be in town and not at the beach."

"Bad for the skin even at my age." In fact, Ripley's skin was clear and youthful, although his blonde hair was wispy thin.

"What can I do for you?"

Nick briefed Ripley about Jason Porter's death. "So I guess I'd like any ideas you might have on how I might get in to see Senator Gavin."

"That will be very difficult. You'll no doubt have to go through his gatekeeper, Marcus Tremain. He's ex-military. Very wary and calculating. And very protective."

"So I'd need a convincing reason to see the Senator."

"Just to talk with him. Gavin dislikes meeting with people. He seems friendly when a voter drops by, but that's just for show. You want to talk seriously, something better be in it for him, his committee or the party, in that order."

"Whatever ever happened to representing his state? Isn't that what he gets paid for?"

"That's fourth or fifth. May I offer another suggestion?"

"That's why I called you, Mr. Ripley."

"Let me speak to the Chairman. He might have an idea."

Nick knew the "Chairman" meant Senator Montgomery. "By all means. How's he doing, by the way?"

"Loving retirement. Doing lots of fishing and enjoying being back home."

"You're close to retiring yourself, I recall."

"Less than two years, and the agency may offer early-outs in the next

Pat Nicolette

fiscal year. I may take one."

"Really? Must be something in the water these days. My wife wants me to leave NASA. Thinks I'm more interested in homicides."

"I'd consider that carefully. I never thought I'd leave government ahead of time."

"Thanks for the advice. All of it."

"You're welcome. I'll get back to you if I have anything to add."

TUESDAY, AUGUST 23

Lloyd Gavin's suite of offices was one of the smallest on the first floor of the Dirksen Senate Office Building. As Senior Senator from South Carolina, he could have moved into larger quarters at the beginning of his second term in 1989, but decided to stay put. Never let the folks from back home in Aiken or Charleston think you've become too uppity. Unless, of course, it were one of his big-time contributors. They deserved to see where their money had gone and were always invited into Gavin's plush and spacious private office down the hall, where only the best cigars and bourbon were offered.

But today Congress was still on its summer recess and the man in that private office with his feet propped up on the ornate desk and a yellow legal pad on his lap was Colonel Marcus Tremain (USAF Ret.), Gavin's principal aide and an expert on weapons acquisition. Tremain was muscular with short-cropped gray hair. His soft features and wire-rimmed glasses belied the fact that he was a very bitter man. He had been passed over for General as "prone to unconventional strategic planning, to choosing the more debatable course of action and, at times, to being insufficiently sensitive to the chain of command." Or as Tremain put it, not sufficiently a suck-up to the top brass in the Pentagon. But now he held sway over the very superiors who had marked him down. And now, on a whim, he could--and would--grant or deny access to one of the most powerful men in the Senate.

Tremain glanced at his watch. The Senator was probably running behind schedule as usual, but the rest of his afternoon's agenda was jammed so it was now or never. He cradled the phone under his chin and dialed Gavin's cell. The Senator surprised him by picking up right away. "Marcus, I hope you have good news. We're driving in a monsoon down here."

The Kitty Hawk Plot

"Sorry about that, sir."

"Well, at least they're keeping me dry, but make a note. No more barbecues until next year. The real campaign will be tough enough on my gut."

"Speaking of which, I saw the new poll in the *Post & Courier*. Brady hasn't picked up any more points this month."

"The people are beginning to see he's not up to the job. And soon we'll hit the little squirt right between the eyes."

Tremain smiled into the phone. "Then we can turn to the Democrats."

"And that won't be easy this time. Anyway, that's not why you called. And just what the hell are you doing in the office in the middle of August?"

"Going over the fall hearing schedule. In fact, I was about to leave when this strange call came in for you. Mrs. Pringle thought I should take it."

"She's usually right," Gavin said. "Who was it?"

Tremain looked at the legal pad. "Some guy who said he had a set of plans of Jason Porter's. They're on a DVD he wanted to mail to you. He wanted assurance no one else would see it."

"Porter...now?" A pause. "How did he get this DVD?"

"Wouldn't say or tell me who he was."

"He say anything about these plans?"

"Yes, sir. Mentioned high intensity discharge lighting. Said it was a special interrogation device."

"Interrogation? Didn't Porter talk about some new gizmo at that party of his?"

"The Fluxlight's the name I heard. This might be it. The guy said the thing tests out at over 90 per cent."

"Boy, I'd love to push that in the Committee. Make a great campaign issue on Iraq too."

"Absolutely."

"But we can't touch it if this guy stole it."

"Of course not. So I told him we don't deal directly with industry, but I might be able to put him in touch with someone. I said if he wanted to be taken seriously he should put a price tag on the plans. I suggested \$25,000."

"You'll get the word to Shamrock?"

"Just wanted to run it by you first."

"Holland will pay a lot more than 25, and he can sanitize the plans if he has to. But he'll want a buffer for deniability."

"I can handle it."

"Good. How did you leave it with this guy?"

"He said he call me."

"Marcus, the car's slowing and I'm about to eat a very wet hot dog. You'd better have John check this guy out."

"Yes, sir."

"And while you're at it, ask him about the A-bomb to blast Brady. We haven't had any news for a while."

Tremain made a note on the pad. "Will do. I'll call you tonight." He hung up and took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes, gathering his thoughts. Now avoiding the office phone, he took out his cell and dialed the number of the man he'd met years before but still knew only as John.

Tremain's call was connected to a phone in a subbasement in a building in rural West Virginia which, because it went unanswered after two rings, was automatically switched to a cell phone with a Phoenix area code that rang in the pocket of a man smoking a cigarette in Lafayette Park across from the White House.

John lowered his gray hat and squinted through his sunglasses at the display on his phone. He frowned, not wanting to tie up his line with the Director due to call any minute. Then he smiled. He was dating himself. There wasn't a line anymore and there was now call waiting.

"Hello, Colonel."

"I just spoke with the Senator."

John listened carefully to Tremain's report, all the while keeping an ear tuned for the buzz signaling the Director's call. "Colonel, this joker's playing you," he said when Tremain finished. "He's just after a quick buck."

"I don't think so, John. He never mentioned money till I brought it up."

Beware the Good Samaritan, John thought, recalling that Porter's new security systems had proved an obstacle even for him. "Colonel, how would this guy get access to Porter's plans or even to his house? Porter did all his work at home and the FBI's been babysitting the place for months."

"Porter wasn't a hermit and he had that big party in June. The guy's

The Kitty Hawk Plot

probably someone he knew."

It was a fair point. Maybe this guy did have a way into Porter's place. Or maybe he was FBI. Maybe both. "This guy say anything else about this device?"

"Let's see. Yes. He mentioned white noise."

"Sensory deprivation," John said. "That sounds like something in Porter's playbook. Okay. Assume this guy's got the real thing. How much will you charge Shamrock?"

"I'm thinking \$125,000. Twenty-five for the seller. I'd like you to check him out. Five for you like always?"

"Seems right," John said. "You and the Senator splitting the rest?"

"I'm figuring ten for a broker."

"Who will you use?"

"Brenda."

"Now?"

"Who better?" Tremain asked.

"She'll want more than ten."

"I'll deal with it."

"Good luck."

"Okay," Tremain said. "Let's use her land line for contact. You'll get a fix on this guy?"

"I don't have my own army, Colonel. I'll do my best. I get paid regardless. Agreed?"

"Of course. By the way, the Senator asked about the A-bomb for Brady."

"The field work's about done. Getting close to wrapping it up."

"He'll be very pleased. I'll be in touch."

"I'm sure."

John waited, but it was several more minutes before the Director rang through.

"Afternoon, John," she said in her throaty voice.

He reported on the results of his White House surveillance.

"Not much happening, John. Still, it's early. I'm sure you're bored, but keep at it."

"Uhm, Director, I have some other news." He detailed his talk with Tremain.

There was a long pause. He could almost hear her mind sorting through the information. He was pretty sure where she'd come out.

Pat Nicolette

"You getting a whiff of the Bureau here, John?"

"Always possible, Director. They've been quiet, but that cuts both ways."

"Yes." Another pause. "John, Bureau or not, if this DVD is for real, I'll want you back on this full time. I can put someone else on the White House snafu."

"Yes, Director."

"Brady's holding his lead in the polls. This Fluxlight may be the last piece we need for Gavin."

"I concur."

"All right then. Anything else?"

"No, ma'am."

"Go earn your pay."

THURSDAY, AUGUST 25

One of the first investments Brenda made after the property settlement with Jason was the pleasant Tudor house in the 7400 block of Bradley Boulevard in Bethesda, Maryland. There were larger houses available, but this one had a huge oval pool in the back, hidden by a circle of Leland Cyprus. She thought it perfect for all sorts of fun and games and had been proven right often.

This afternoon she was on her way out for a dip and sunbath when the front door bell chimed. Normally she'd ignore it, but since she was in a tight pink bikini and loved to show off her figure, she decided to peek out the window. She immediately recognized the black Jaguar XJ12 parked behind her Mustang.

What do you know, she thought, pulling open the door.

Tremain wore chinos and a long-sleeved white shirt and looked terrific. "You're over a year late, Marcus, but I think there's a pair of your trunks around here somewhere."

"Upstairs, lower right-hand drawer unless you moved them. Hello, Brenda."

"Then get them and join me," she said, turning away.

"Think I'll just watch."

"Enjoy yourself," she called over her shoulder. "Mix us a couple drinks, will you?"

About ten minutes later, she emerged from the pool and toweled off

The Kitty Hawk Plot

her hair, moving toward the patio table and swaying her hips just for the hell of it. Picking up the glass she knew was hers, she chose the plastic chair next to his and took a long swallow.

"Marcus, you always could make a helluva Bloody Mary."

"I manage."

"I'm aware. Now what the hell are you doing here?"

He sipped his Scotch and water. "I have a proposition for you."

"Does it involve a bed?"

"Not mine," he answered.

She closed one eye and shook her head. "I'm not screwing your boss again."

He smiled and adjusted his glasses. "That wasn't my doing, and you know it. He just makes a stronger drink."

"And uses cheap vodka," she said, running a comb through her auburn hair. "It took me all the next day to get over my headache."

"Shouldn't happen this time, Brenda, and anyway, five thousand buys a lot of aspirin."

"Five? That's a very nice number. Like the old days."

"It is. I need something of Jason's."

"Marcus, I don't live there any more, remember?"

"Not to worry. Someone already has the goods. I want you to be the middleman."

"That sounds too easy. Who's the seller?"

"I don't know, but his info sounds real. He'll be calling me back. I want to give him your phone number."

She nodded, swallowed some of her drink. "What's he have?"

"I'm not totally sure, but it could be plans for the Fluxlight."

"So you've heard about that."

"Who hasn't? Porter didn't exactly keep it a secret. Get as much data from this guy as you can to make sure he's not a fraud. Then pass it on to the buyer."

"Whoa, I never deal with the buyer. That's your job."

"Not on this one. Senator's orders. I have to keep my skirts extra clean. But don't worry. You're already on intimate terms with the buyer."

"Intimate?...David?"

Tremain smiled and took a sip of Scotch.

She shook her head. "No way. I don't like the idea of taking money from David."

"Come on, Brenda. You know damn well Shamrock bought some of Jason's stuff you got for me."

"That was then. Now, I'd feel like a hooker."

"What did you feel like stealing from your husband?"

She glared at him. "You're a bastard, you know that?"

"You've called me worse," he smiled.

"How much for the buy?"

"One twenty five."

"Are you joking? David won't shell out that kind of cash based on one phone call."

"Of course not. You'll also verify the goods."

"Ah, so there is work involved. Exactly what do I ask the seller to whet David's appetite?"

"First, are you on board?"

She took another swallow, considering. "I don't know. This is a bit complicated. It might be worth another ten thousand."

Tremain shook his head. "Five. Ten and that's it. Deal?"

She smiled. "Only if you take a swim with me."

"I'll get my trunks."

"That's up to you."

FRIDAY, AUGUST 26

Jasper barreled up the stairs then abruptly stopped at the bedroom doorway, obviously afraid to go in. With good reason. Puffer, the caramel and gray calico, sat three feet away, staring at him, yellow-gold eyes daring him to enter.

Nick reached the top of the stairs and grabbed Jasper's collar. "Come on, I'll hold your hand." He walked the dog past Puffer. The cat didn't move, watched Jasper hop on the bed next to Kathy, hissed disdainfully, then strolled down the hall to the other bedroom, a/k/a the Queen's chambers.

"She really intimidates him, doesn't she?" Kathy said, petting the dog.

"No surprise," Nick said. "Cats rule. She's got quicker paws and a brain."

"Dogs are just as smart."

"Not even close. They barely know enough not to tangle with a cat."

The Kitty Hawk Plot

"You can't teach a cat to roll over."
"Or a woman or so you tell me," he said, filling the coffee maker.
"Now you're being a smart ass."
"Learned from a cat. You want to set the timer or wait for Jasper's bladder to wake us?"
"I might get friendly and rouse you before he does."
"In that case, I--" The phone interrupted him.
Kathy looked at the display. "Unknown name and number," she said.
"Some telemarketer. Let it ring."
The answering machine clicked on. "You have reached Nick and Kathy's zoo. Please leave a message." Beep.
"This is Buford Montgomery. Please call me. I can be reached at--."
"Senator!" Nick bellowed into the phone. "This is Nick Mercante. Forgive me, I just walked in."
"Mr. Mercante. We speak at last."
"I'm delighted. I've wanted to thank you personally for your help on the Sanford case."
"Nonsense, my boy. You saved the IRC and I'll always be grateful."
"The Commission would have survived, sir. Besides, Charles Ripley was the key."
"Yes, a wonderful man and I miss him at my side. I should tell you that Charles and I recently spoke about Jason Porter. We agreed I should call you."
"I'd appreciate your insights, sir."
"I'm not sure I have any, but tell me, am I correct there's no evidence Mr. Porter did anything that night but lose control of his car?"
"Yes, sir, that's right."
"So, while I have an open mind, I'm assuming this was simply an accident."
"I understand."
"On the other hand, Mr. McKnight's suspicions could be well-founded. Money and jealousy are powerful motives, as Judge Sanford's death attests."
"Yes, Senator."
"So, that said, I gather you'll be taking a hard look at these women named in the will and at Mr. Holland?"
"That's my intention."

"Would you keep Charles informed of your progress?"

"Of course."

"Excellent. Now there is something else, but before I continue, I must ask that, aside from Charles, you not tell anyone."

Nick hesitated. "My wife and I have few secrets, Senator."

"That won't pose a problem. I trust she's discreet."

"Very." Nick motioned to Kathy to pick up the other handset. "You have my word."

"Good enough. Now, Charles mentioned that your local police may have received some kind of a Federal alert because of Porter's death."

"That's right."

"And Mr. McKnight believes, shall we say, that political intrigue might be behind Mr. Porter's death."

"Correct. A desire to assure Senator Gavin's reelection. Apparently he's not a shoo in."

"Far from it. It may come as no surprise that over the years I attended many of Senator Gavin's hearings. I'm fully aware he did not see eye to eye with Mr. Porter. I was also saddened when Kitty Hawk Systems experienced so many setbacks. I thought Mr. Porter to be a brilliant entrepreneur. Mr. Holland was no slouch either."

"Yes, sir."

"But sometimes the defense industry's too eager to go along with a military that loses sight of what really matters. Take this Iraq war. It's dividing the country. It almost cost the President's reelection and could mean my party will lose the Senate next year. "So it appears, sir."

"One of our biggest problems is the Pentagon itself. No long-range planning and a bunch of sycophants that sees no evil. Not to mention some elements that are out of control. You know, of course, that Senator Gavin's committee oversees funding the military establishment."

"Yes."

"Are you also aware it funds the CIA?"

Bingo. "No."

"Of course, I'm not at liberty to speak about that agency's operations, but I will say that not all the money that Congress appropriates goes where it was intended. In fact it may wind up in private pockets. You'll recall that Charles was my budget expert. Even he had trouble tracing some of the funds."

"I think I'm following, sir."

The Kitty Hawk Plot

"Now, don't get me wrong. Lloyd Gavin's a respected member of my party, and I believe he's a fine Senator and loyal American. But over the years, I've heard some rumors. Troublesome rumors."

"Yes?"

"I'll say no more. But if you learn this wasn't an accident and think there's anything I might help you with, please contact Charles."

"I will, Senator."

"Fine. And if you believe it necessary, contact me directly. Do you have a pencil?"

Nick wrote down Montgomery's personal phone number, exchanged goodbyes and looked across the bed at Kathy. "Well?"

"I don't think you'll need to set the coffee timer."

SATURDAY, AUGUST 27

Tony Garcia had been delighted when Marcus Tremain told him there was a possible buyer for the DVD until he learned he'd have to work through the buyer's agent. Tony demanded to know the identity of the buyer, but Tremain insisted his own contact wouldn't tell him. He said the company couldn't afford to be linked to the Fluxlight if it might wind up in a lawsuit from Jason's estate. It might take a risk only if they could sanitize the DVD and its agent could assess it beforehand. Tremain said Tony's only option was to call the agent, a woman who could be reached at the number his contact had given him.

Tony reluctantly called this woman, but was now sorry he had. He was becoming increasingly frustrated with her and the conversation. She seemed dense to the point of idiocy. "I've already told you," he nearly shouted into the pay phone. "The Fluxlight uses advanced high intensity discharge lighting. It's a breakthrough."

Brenda shifted her body on her chaise lounge, turning toward the sun. Stretch it out before you pump him, Marcus had advised. By now she had probably dragged it out long enough. "Look, whoever you are, I heard you the first time, but we've had HID forever. You replace the bulb filament with a gas capsule and send current through two electrodes. What's the big deal? I can buy HID lamps online."

"No, I tell you, this is different. It can break down the enemy's resistance."

She adjusted her eyeshades. "How? I aim it and they drop their

weapons?"

"No, I said it's for interrogation. You use it with white noise."

"Oh. But, wait a second. That's not new is it? Haven't we used white noise and sensory deprivation on prisoners?"

At last she's tuning in, Tony thought. "Not with HID. Now, they'll tell everything they know right away. It's like a truth serum without the needle."

"Hold on, I'm writing this down. You say it's based on HID and white noise together?"

"Yes, and flicker vertigo."

Boom. Brenda knew that flicker vertigo had fascinated Jason forever. "Now, that's interesting," she said. "Where does that come in?"

"I don't understand that part myself. I'm not an engineer, but it has to do with how the prisoner's brain's wired, how it matches up with the HID and white noise."

"And you have all this on a single DVD?"

"Yes."

"You're sure this is Jason Porter's work?" she asked, now certain it was.

"Absolutely." Tony waited. "So is it worth the \$25,000 I asked for?"

"It could be. Where can I get it touch with you?"

"No, let's do it like we did today. I'll call your number."

"Listen, we'll have to meet eventually," Brenda said.

"We can discuss that if we have a deal. When will you know?"

"Call me Wednesday morning at ten."

"Okay, then. Goodbye."

"Yeah, so long." She hit the Flash button on the phone. "You get all that, Marcus?"

"Every word. Good work. You'll tell David tonight?"

"He's coming over for dinner. I'll have a nice surprise for him."

"Make sure it's worth \$125,000."

Ten minutes later Tremain's cell phone rang. "You get the trace, John?"

"Pay phone in Northwest, but he was gone by the time my man got there. We'll have to wait till Wednesday."

"If Brenda can convince Holland."

"You know the lady has her ways, Colonel."

SUNDAY, AUGUST 28

David Holland was spending a thoroughly relaxed morning, leafing through the *Post's* sports section on the balcony of his lavish home in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Thankfully there was no crisis at the company this weekend, but if there were, he'd have been there. You don't make money by sloughing off. And he intended to make a lot more. His bookie would insist, he thought with a smile, putting the paper aside. This was a slow time of year for betting.

He lifted his chilled glass of Chardonnay from the table and closed his blue eyes to the morning sun. Last night with Brenda had been very rewarding, both in and out of bed. He'd always had success in the bedroom--women found it hard to resist his athletic body, rugged features and thick brown hair. Still, making love to your ex-partner's ex-wife had a certain depraved quality that was very appealing. He wished he could pick up the phone and tell Jason about it. And about the Fluxlight DVD. You're on a bad losing streak, Jason, he smiled to himself. His father would have enjoyed the perversity. He wondered if he was becoming like his old man. Perish the thought.

Philip Holland had made a fortune in banking, opening Cloverleaf Savings and Loan in North Carolina at the end of the Korean War and then establishing a huge trust fund for his two-year-old son. But while he doted on David throughout his childhood, he disgraced his wife by keeping a series of women all over the state. He died broken-hearted because David never talked to him again, after he learned the truth about how his mother had been treated.

But David never rejected his father's money. Even before he had access to the trust, he spent his allowance freely on women, cars, or gambling on baseball, football or basketball, depending on the time of year. The frolicking slowed in the early '70s when, primarily to avoid the draft, he enrolled at Ohio State and met Jason Porter. Both men were somewhat older than their classmates, Holland because he'd started late and Jason because he'd finally been able to scrape together the money for college.

Teamed as roommates, they became fast friends--Jason helped David with his courses, making sure he cracked the books; in turn David showed Jason how to relax and enjoy life. He also made sure Jason wouldn't have to worry about money for school. They both loved flying

and David joined Jason in becoming a pilot. Flying was as far from being a banker as anything he could think of. Their teamwork continued into grad school and afterward when they founded Kitty Hawk in 1982 with Jason Porter's vision and David Holland's money.

The men prospered as Kitty Hawk became a well-known defense firm, specializing in aviation electronic products and systems. But once Holland's father died, he wanted the company to grow bigger, diversify, while Jason was inclined to have Kitty Hawk retain its special niche in the industry.

After Holland left to start Shamrock, he kept an eye on the stream of new concepts Kitty Hawk always seemed to come up with. Eventually he managed to appropriate and exploit some of those ideas thanks to the help of an "aviation consultant" who had approached and offered his services several years before. All's fair in the world of industrial espionage.

All of this explained why Holland was extremely receptive to Brenda's news that she had been approached by someone claiming to have the schematics for the Fluxlight. If this DVD truly contained Jason's designs, \$125,00 would be a bargain. If Holland hadn't built two companies by being stupid. There were plenty of hustlers out there, even some who might have learned about Jason's interest in flicker vertigo.

He assumed Brenda was being paid and he didn't begrudge her making a buck. She'd done so in the past at Jason's expense and sometimes to Shamrock's benefit--which was why Holland might never trust her completely. But in those deals she'd always been the seller and she'd worked through Tremain. This time a different seller was in the mix. Who was he? And unless he knew enough to go to Brenda himself, there had to be a fourth party who had brought them together. Tremain? Most likely.

That would be a good sign, but he wanted to know for sure. His consultant might be able to find out, for a price of course. Glancing at his watch, Holland lifted his cordless phone, dialed the familiar number and waited.

"Good morning, David. Long time no talk."

"John, I've got a little task for you. Remember Brenda Porter?"

Investigating the "accidental death" of a defense contractor, Nick Mercante lands in the middle of a conspiracy involving a possible murder, a U.S. Senator, the intelligence community and old postage stamps honoring the first flight at Kitty Hawk.

The Kitty Hawk Plot

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4288.html?s=pdf>