

Chapter III - The Rostrum Project

Present day, a tall slightly overweight man dressed in a wrinkled dark-gray business suit walked into the auditorium of the FBI Field Office located at #24 Shackelford West Boulevard in Little Rock, Arkansas. He was alone, as was usual for him at such official Bureau functions. FBI Agent Stan Thompson didn't have very many friends outside the Bureau, much less any at work and those agents he did work with normally didn't care about spending too much time around him. No, Thompson was somewhat of a loner; an island to himself most of the time.

Annoyed at having to attend this dog and pony show to begin with, Thompson scanned the large room looking for anyone of authority in the vicinity that he wanted to avoid. He spotted Special Agent in Charge Brenner and some of his lackeys standing in the middle aisle towards the front engaged in what appeared to be a serious conversation. Brenner and

the tall blonde woman in the group looked up from their conversation and noticed Thompson standing at the back of the auditorium. Having unintentionally made eye contact ever so briefly with Thompson, both individuals quickly turned their attention back to the other members of their group never acknowledging Thompson. Thompson figured correctly that they were talking about him and decided this was a group he wanted to keep his distance from at all costs. So, like a good Baptist, he quickly took the aisle seat in the back row and settled in for what he figured would be an uncomfortable, boring and long drawn-out presentation.

As was his normal tendency he was early, so to kill time as he sat he looked through the program he had been handed as he came through the door. He, along with every other agent in the Field Office, was instructed to attend today's big gathering. Since the Director of the Secret Service was coming into town

to speak at the event, SAIC Brenner wanted the auditorium filled to capacity. All the agents were told to be there or pay the consequences. Thompson had thought to himself that it was just like Brenner to try to suck up to the head shed. Never mind that all the agents were busy working cases, they all still had to attend and if not, Brenner indicated that the only acceptable excuse for missing it was that they were in hospital hooked to a ventilator.

In the middle of reading his program a young sharp dressed man wearing dark sunglasses paused in the aisle next to Thompson and asked, “Anyone sitting here?” and pointing to the seat next to him. Thompson, thinking it was quite obvious no one was sitting there said, “Why no, you are welcome to sit here. You must be thinking the same thing I am; these seats will make it easy for us to exit quickly when the agony is done.”

With a grin, the young man replied, “No, actually I’m supposed to take down the names of all those who begin to nod off during the Director’s presentation.” Thompson squirmed a bit in his seat and quickly the younger of the two men held out his hand to shake and added, “Just kidding. Hi, I’m Special Agent Mathew Foster with the Secret Service,”

Relieved that he hadn’t stuck his foot in his mouth as he normally does in such situations, Thompson shook his hand and said, “Stan Thompson with the FBI’s Little Rock office”.

As he took his seat next to Thompson, Foster said, “A local guy. You’re one of the lucky ones that didn’t have to fly halfway across the country to attend.”

“They made you fly here to attend...” Thompson declared in disbelief. “...I thought it was bad enough that all of us from the local office had to be here. So

why do you Secret Service guys have to be here for this boondoggle?”

“You mean besides the usual bunch of staff managers that have their noses up the Director’s butt?” responded Foster.

“Now that’s funny, I think I’m gonna like you. By the way, that reminds me of an old joke, do you know what the difference is between a brown noser and a shithead?”

With a puzzled look Foster said, “Why no, I don’t”.

Thompson quickly answered in a slightly louder than acceptable level for the situation. “Depth perception.... Get it?Depth perception.”

Foster uttered a short, muffled laugh and continued his explanation, “No, the only working agents that had to be here were those of us that are being assigned to the protection detail for the upcoming election. You see they are going to unveil something they have been working on for a while that

is made by a local company here in Little Rock.

Whatever it is, it is supposed to revolutionize our protection programs for the future.”

“Do you like the election protection details?” asked Thompson.

“I don’t know, this is the first time I’ve been assigned to one. Happened all of a sudden, but I am glad. You know?” Foster paused for a second to reflect. “You see, my great great grandfather, George Foster, was one of the Secret Service agents assigned to protect President William McKinley.”

“Wait, didn’t President McKinley die from an assassination attempt?” injected Thompson.

“Well yes, that’s what I was getting to. My full name is Mathew McKinley Foster. You see, though it wasn’t his fault, George Foster felt personally responsible for the failure and started a tradition of naming all first born male sons in the family with McKinley to honor the fallen president. I see it as my

family duty to reclaim the Foster name, which is why I joined the Secret Service to begin with.”

“Wow, brother, that's a heavy burden to bear for such a young agent” consoled Thompson. “You need to live your own life, not that of some distant dead relative you didn't even know.”

“I know, but it has hung over the family for so long. I mean, I don't want to name my first son after McKinley. I want to break the cycle of tradition. It's just time.”

“Well I understand where you're coming from. Best of luck with that” added Thompson. Foster nodded in acknowledgement of Thompson's empathy and opened his program to check the agenda.

By now the auditorium was about full and the people stirring around down near the stage was a tell-tale sign to Thompson that things were about to kick off. He looked around and saw what he assumed were lots of political dignitaries and government

officials towards the front. He recognized the Governor, a Senator and a handful of representatives from the great State of Arkansas, both Directors from the FBI and Secret Service, and a hoard of staffers from both agencies. But strangely there were no reporters or cameras recording this event for posterity. In the middle of the stage Thompson could see what appeared to be a podium covered by a red velvet drape that seemed to flow like a crimson waterfall onto the polished hardwood floor of the stage. Whatever it was it emitted an air of elegance or maybe even a regal impression. The stage lights came up and the auditorium overhead lights dimmed a bit. The Director of the Secret Service walked up the short flight of steps along the right side of the stage, approached the draped object and paused beside it a second or two before speaking.

Beginning his official statement, the Director said, "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us

today on this momentous occasion, for today we mark a milestone in our agency's service to protect members of our government's Executive Branch. Since 1894 our agency has a long and distinguished history in fulfilling its role in the provision of protective services for the Office of the President of the United States and aspiring candidates for the oval office.

“I and my fellow members of the Secret Service take our responsibilities very seriously and we are continually monitoring national and international events for potential new threats and attack methodologies that would-be assassins might employ. Based upon the recent success that terrorists have had in the use of suicide bomber attacks in other countries, we knew our agency had to do something to address this potential threat against government officials and political candidates in the U.S. A single individual wearing a vest packed with explosives and

various forms of shrapnel; a suicide bomber need only gain close proximity to their intended target to be relatively effective. Use of non-metallic shrapnel, powerful plastic explosives, and a separate battery source would make a cloth vest almost impossible to detect with metal detectors. Therefore, an assailant with a false pass carrying this lethal combination would be able to gain access to an inner protective perimeter with relative ease.”

“To counter this potential threat, we at the Secret Service not only had to be creative in our detection capabilities, but we also had to be able to ensure the survivability of the principal should detection occur at the very last second. We have used bulletproof podiums, in varying degrees of bullet resistance capability, for many years. The first podiums we used were only designed to be effective against a handgun, the most concealable firearm available. Using a handgun required the assailant to

get in relatively close to the target to initiate an assault. As the threats changed, our podiums were then designed to stop a round fired from a rifle, the longest-range firearm threat that could be used. A rifle allowed the assailant more standoff, but required them to have an unobstructed corridor to the target. Aimed bullets were very predictable, but what about explosives with multiple fragmentation projectiles and blast waves from the detonation of a suicide vest? This would take something more substantial but relatively portable that can travel to various venues. To address that risk, we conceived the Secret Service's Rostrum Project."

The Director continued, "In ancient Rome, a rostrum was a platform or stand for an orator in their senate. For our use, we envisioned a rostrum that would be constructed of special materials, capable of withstanding all of the effects of a moderate explosive blast within thirty or so feet. Our

operational concept for the Rostrum was that, when an eminent threat is detected at the last minute, whether a firearm or explosive, the Secret Service agents positioned to the rear of a principal, behind the Rostrum, would move quickly to the principal, push him down behind the Rostrum, and shield the back of his body with theirs. Given proper material resistance, weight, and deflective surfaces, the explosive effects would pass over and around the rostrum, providing a protective void for at least three personnel taking cover behind it.”

“In preparation for this election season, we at the Secret Service conducted a competitive bidding process to select a vendor to manufacture one hundred of these podiums. Our plan is to pre-stage these safe-haven podiums in regional areas across the country, so that they are available when and where we need them. The reason we have assembled here in Little Rock is because a local company by the

name of Smithson Integrated Engineering, Inc. was selected to produce, certify the protection level of, and deliver all one hundred Rostrums. The decision by our source selection board was a no-brainer. Smithson was not only the lowest bidder, but they also added back-up battery power within the podium that would support built in infrared communications which interface with remote speakers for a public address system. In the opinion of our selection board, this was an impressive innovation because we are beginning to use electronic jamming devices similar to the U.S. military's Warlock System used to prevent remote detonation of improvised explosive devices. Many of us questioned how they could make a profit with such extra bells and whistles at such a low price. When asked, Smithson responded that they weren't doing it for the money, but out of a strong sense of patriotism, that it would give them nationwide recognition and promote positive public relations."

As the director turned toward the covered podium, he pulled the drape off and announced with ceremonious fanfare, “Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Rostrum.”

Positioned just to the right of center stage, the Rostrum appeared sleek, polished, and substantial, but not imposing. The fine mahogany finish subtly glistened, under the intense glare of the spotlights and gave it a quality of fine art. Though it was built for form and function, the craftsmanship made it a rare thing of beauty.

Pointing to the various features of the Rostrum, the Director explained, “Smithson’s unique design of overlapping and angled ballistic panels uses a combination of advanced military-grade ceramic and Kevlar materials which we consider very innovative. Because it uses lightweight ceramics behind a polished wooden veneer, the ballistic panels are removable, to allow our agents to inspect and replace

them if they are ever damaged by a bullet or accident of some kind. Smithson was an excellent choice to produce the Rostrums. As you can see, they are artisans of their craft; besides, there are no cost overruns and production is currently ahead of schedule. Now when was the last time that you heard of a government project that was on time and within the projected budget?” The crowd laughed and applauded at the comment. “We are very pleased with our selection and with the final product that Smithson has delivered. Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes my formal presentation, and I invite each of you to come down and examine this work of art for yourselves.”

Responding to the director’s invitation, some attendees began to get up from their seats and walk forward to take a closer look at the Rostrum, while others remained seated and began to talk among themselves about the project.

Thompson stood and stretched a bit before turning to Foster. “Well, that didn’t take as long as I expected it to.”

“Yeah, I thought for sure we would get an added lecture about our behavior living up to the Service’s expectations. That has been the norm since the guy didn’t pay his hooker down in Columbia several years back.”

“Whose protection detail are you being assigned to?” Thompson asked.

“Senator Jamal Jordan.”

“That sounds like a good assignment. He seems to be kicking butt in the primaries for the Democrats. What can you tell me about him?” Thompson inquired.

“I’ve been reading up on his background getting ready for the details to start up. He’s a first term Senator that seemingly came out of nowhere on the national stage. He was born in Detroit and raised

by his grandmother. He got an Ivy League education and law degree, and after schooling, he returned to Detroit, set up a law practice, and caught the eye of the Democratic Party. They were desperate for a promising future contender, so the party got him into the state senate. Then before his term was up, the powers that be pushed to get him appointed to the U.S. House of Representatives to fill the seat of a long-term and influential Congressman who died while in office under suspicious circumstances. He then ran for U.S. Senate and was elected less than a year ago.”

“The similarities to President Obama’s race in 2008 are unmistakable. I guess the Dem’s are planning this race on a proven formula from the past. My assignment here is working white supremacists in the regional area. Because he is black, his rapid rise in politics has not gone unnoticed by the kooks I've been monitoring around here. They are not at all

happy with the prospect of another black left-wing president, after they endured Obama's time in office" described Thompson.

"That's why I am glad to be assigned to his detail. A controversial candidate always draws the nuts out of hiding. I want to be the one to stop an attempt; you know, to reclaim the Foster name."

"Oh yeah, still trying to compensate for that distant dead relative."

Trying to shirk off the comment, Foster asked, "You want to go down and check out that podium?"

"Nah, I'm just gonna slip out and head back to my office." While shaking Foster's hand he added, "It was good to meet you. Here's my card, give me a call if you come back into town."

Foster took the card and gave Thompson one of his in exchange, "Will do."

As Thompson began to walk away, he turned back to Foster and said, "Remember, depth

perception.” Foster grinned and headed down the steps to the stage.

