

DEADLY NEWS
A Novel
By Don Farmer, with Chris Curle

Deadly News – Prologue

ATLANTA, GEORGIA – The Near Future

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to become heroes to millions, role models to more and give the world a life changing morale boost. Or this city soon will become the laughing stock of the planet.”

Bren Forrest paused to let that sink in among the eighteen people gathered in the tenth story boardroom at the headquarters of the all news TV channel Global News Service in downtown Atlanta. This was a glittering assemblage of power players from around Georgia who had major roles in planning the Olympic Games set to begin in a few days.

These Olympic Games were nervously dubbed “Atlanta 2.0” by its supporters, “Atlanta 2.Oh No” by the critics.

Jerry Vaughn, seated at Bren’s right in an identical studded leather chair, turned to face the others, a tight smile on his face.

“The lady is an expert in understatement, but she is committed to truth-telling and plain talk, so let’s get to it. Are we ready? Are we really ready to bring the Olympic Games to Atlanta for a second time?”

Vaughn, the city’s premier builder of skyscrapers and other features of Atlanta’s impressive skyline, was the chairman of the Atlanta Olympics Committee.

“As owner of GNS, I know a little bit about public opinion,” Bren said. “And I think the games here next week will have to be the best run - no pun there - the cleanest and the most exciting Olympics in anyone’s memory.

“We have to show, in spite of the economic crises around the world, we can still put on a show, even after dozens of other cities pleaded poverty and slinked away from the challenge.

“So, let’s hear from each of you now about how your part of the plan is going. We’ll start with you, Chief Lutz.”

Atlanta’s police chief stood, smiled and set the tone for the others with a glowing message.

“We’re ready, Ms. Forrest,” he said with a gesture resembling a fist bump, except there was no one else standing to be on the receiving end of it.

“My officers know their specific assignments and we’re getting great cooperation from other law enforcement agencies around the state...”

He droned on for eight or nine minutes before sitting down to a round of applause that seemed mostly to laud the fact he finally finished.

Atlanta's mayor was next, with some reassuring words about what some thought would be a daunting effort to keep traffic snarls to a minimum. He finished his remarks with the reminder the city was about to start a buddy system for homeless people.

"We'll urge our homeless friends who wander around downtown talking to themselves to walk in pairs. Visitors who come here during the Olympics will think they're talking to each other."

Everybody in the room wanted to laugh out loud, but no one did.

"Thank you, Mayor," Bren Forrest said quickly. "Now, I want to call on my dear friend and the wife of our chairman, the person in charge of our innovative Olympics Hostess Program, Jan Vaughn."

She volunteered to handle the hostess project and by all accounts selected some of the best-looking young women ever seen in one place since the previous summer's Victoria's Secret catalogue.

"We have seventy-five lovely and talented young women who will attend most of the major social events," she said. "They'll be charming, multi-lingual representatives of Atlanta's hospitality, and I know they'll make us proud."

As each of the VIPs spoke, their messages became shorter and more alike, exuding confidence and congratulations to one another.

Bren went last.

"As you know, our Global News Service has exclusive world rights to broadcast the Olympics and we are ready. This is shaping up to be the biggest challenge for GNS since the day we went on the air fifteen years ago.

"It has been my personal privilege and thrill to have created GNS and to have reached this milestone.

"So, whenever something happens at the Olympics, you'll see it first and in some cases only on GNS."

Applause filled the room as Bren did an exaggerated southern belle curtsy. The Olympics committee members apparently also were clapping for themselves for studying Olympics history and discovering other "great cities" had snared the Olympics more than once. If London, Paris, Athens and Los Angeles could do it, why not Atlanta?

Some called it self-confidence. Others called it hubris.

Bren ended the meeting with a big smile.

"Some comedian once said, 'If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans.'

"With that in mind, what could go wrong?"

BUCKHEAD - ATLANTA, GEORGIA

The guy who answered the door looked like a miraculous merging of The Hulk and George Clooney. But when he saw the woman standing there, he mentally withered for a moment.

His smile, as dazzling as the inlaid crystal on the mahogany double doors to the penthouse, was fixed. The only thing about him that moved was his racing pulse.

When the stunning, black-haired beauty made a tentative step into the foyer, the doorman resumed breathing and stepped aside.

“Welcome, miss, uh...” he said, hoping she would say her name.

Lia just nodded, smiled and brushed past without a word.

The chattering and piano tinkling subsided as she moved through the foyer into the large living room. The other guests, glittering in small knots of conversation, stopped talking and stared, as though they were thinking collectively almost out loud, *Who is that stunning woman?*

Lia usually experienced that sort of reaction from strangers. She walked past a white baby grand and toward the bar in the corner without acknowledging the stares. Her raven hair fell almost to her waist, brushing her body as she moved. Her Amerasian eyes and ivory skin were magnets to men and women alike.

The piano player took a long pull on his vodka rocks, then resumed his show tune noodling, pretending he was not distracted.

The eight or ten women near Lia looked her up and down quickly, then pivoted back to their chat partners. The men turned away more slowly, willing to risk the disapproval of their spouses and dates for a lingering look at Lia's remarkable face and gold-medal body.

Standing amidst a clique of his financial backers, the mayor of Atlanta saw the quizzical look on his wife's face and shook his head slightly, as if to say, I have no idea who she is, dear.

A woman of abundant girth, standing to the mayor's left, leaned over and whispered in his ear, "I think she's some sort of official hostess for the Olympics."

"Sure beats the Welcome Wagon," the mayor whispered back.

"She's an athlete, I think."

"I knew I should've been a P.E. major," responded the mayor, a pudgy man who relentlessly insisted double-breasted business suits made him look slimmer.

His focus this night was single-minded, hoping these second Olympics would make him a celebrity known well beyond North Georgia.

Lia walked past an original Warhol, an eight by ten foot self-portrait, in which the artist gave himself orange hair and bright green eyes, the kind of painting eyes that do not follow the viewer around the room.

The Warhol probably was the least expensive piece in the apartment, a museum-of-a-condo on the forty-sixth and top floor of Atlanta's most exclusive high-rise apartment building.

It was the Atlanta home of Jan and Jerry Vaughn, who also had homes in Naples, Florida, in the Georgetown area of Washington DC and in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

This pre-Olympics party at their place undoubtedly would be one of the hottest tickets in town, so to speak.

The bartender looked up and smiled when Lia said softly, "Perrier, no ice please."

Lia preferred other self-medication to alcohol and knew she would get to enjoy that elsewhere very soon. She tipped the bartender enough so he'd recall her later, if necessary. She turned away and "accidentally" bumped into a tall, broad-shouldered man in a dark suit, a hearing device in his right ear. A few drops of her drink splashed onto his lapel.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, can I brush it off?" she asked, noticing the man was looking from side to side, not at her.

"Uh, no, it's OK," he mumbled, then looked down at her.

"Jeez," he whispered, staring at the most attractive woman he'd seen in a long time.

Ron was trained to see, to observe, to watch and to remember, but he couldn't recall anybody quite that startling.

"I'm Ron, he said," extending his right hand, approximately the size of a catcher's mitt.

"I'm Lia. Are you working or playing tonight, Ron," she asked, knowing the earpiece meant Ron was security for some VIP.

"I, uh, I'm with the mayor," he said, still staring blank-faced, wishing he were clever, witty and not on duty. He glanced over his shoulder to where the mayor was impatiently shaking the ice cubes in his empty glass.

"I was getting my boss another club soda," Ron told Lia.

A bead of sweat formed on Ron's right eyebrow. He was a pro, a veteran of at least two shoot-outs in his days as a street cop, but he never was quite so neutralized by a woman as he was at that moment.

Lia smiled, her black eyes sparkling at Ron's discomfort.

"I bet this place is full of guys with guns," she grinned, "all these important people around."

"Nah, just my partner at the door and the uniform in the lobby. And me," Ron said, catching his breath now, able to put fifteen words together.

"I'm one of the hostesses for the games," Lia said.

"I'm Ron."

"Yes, I remember, Ron. And, Ron," she said, feigning concern and looking past the nervous agent, "I think your boss is thirsty."

Ron turned toward the mayor and saw him chewing his ice cubes.

"Hope to see you again, Ron," she teased, then stepped aside and walked past the agent, noticing the room's twelve-foot sliders were open to the balcony of this rooftop castle.

Lia needed to check in with Jan Vaughn, her boss for the Olympics. Jan wanted to do something for the Olympics other than just be Mrs. Jerry Vaughn, so she volunteered to be in charge of the seventy-five beautiful, multi-lingual young women chosen as hostesses for Olympics-related events.

"Good evening, Mrs. Vaughn," Lia said, with a slight nod as she approached. Jan was with the guest of honor, Brenda Forrest, the owner of Global News Service. At Bren's side was her fiancé, the biggest Hollywood celebrity at the party.

"Hello dear, I'm glad you're here." Jan was five-three tops, with a friendly face and sandy blond hair with just enough gray highlights to look distinguished. At fifty-eight, she was very Vanity Fair-meets-Town & Country.

Jan turned to the woman on her left.

"Bren, may I introduce Lia Lee, one of our hostesses for the games. She's also an intern at Global News."

"Good to meet you, Lia," Bren Forrest said, shaking Lia's hand. "How is your work experience at GNS?"

"It's great, Ms. Forrest," Lia answered, noticing, as she expected, the cleft-chinned man standing next to Bren Forrest was staring with undisguised approval.

"Oh, and Lia, this is Cav Campbell," Jan said with a smile that said, obviously you know who this is and don't gush or anything.

"How do you do, Ms. Lee, or may I call you Lia?" said Campbell, his eyes dancing in a practiced way known to millions of moviegoers.

"Yes, please call me Lia, thank you," Lia said, almost in a whisper. She forced herself to a near blush, knowing Campbell would expect some sort of flushed unease from any woman lucky enough to meet him in person.

As Campbell started to say something, Lia turned back to Bren Forrest.

"Ms. Forrest, congratulations on the fifteenth anniversary of GNS. It must be very exciting."

Campbell interrupted. "Yes, we're thrilled," drawing Lia's attention back to where he wanted it.

Forrest and Campbell were "engaged" as they chose to call it. They had been sharing her penthouse apartment in the GNS building downtown for almost a year.

In that time, Campbell had not made a movie. He did turn fifty-two and acquired a younger chin, a tucked tummy and an eye job.

Bren met Cav Campbell at the premiere of a movie produced by the small but trendy film studio her company, Global News Service, Inc., bought a few years before.

Bren thought Campbell was good for her, rich enough not to be a gold-digger and just close enough to career over-the-hill-ville to be looking for a meaningful relationship, such as being the husband of a media tycoon.

Campbell was a heart throb once, a shy guy with a throw of hair on his forehead who shuffled his feet now and then and tried to remember to say "ma'am" and "sir" a lot.

At twenty-eight, he was an established star, enjoying the myth he cared more about his work than about his "celebrity," a word some columnist made up.

By the time he was thirty-eight, Campbell faded from the supermarket magazine covers. He did not want to play Ward Cleaver and was way too old to be the Beav.

He didn't deal with it well. Until he became engaged to Bren, the women he dated expanded in number and decreased in age.

After the Party House IV film, his first lead role in a couple of years, had record low revenues, making it pretty much a box office dud, Campbell smiled his way onto a few TV talk shows, telling people mostly he wanted to direct.

Then came that film at Bren Forrest's studio. It was better than anything he had done in a while, but not good enough to give him a bounce to other offers. So here he was, a good companion with an easily aroused itch.

Bren watched with a fixed smile as Campbell ogled Lia.

She had not noticed his legendary roving eye in play lately, so Bren thought, hoped, he was tamed.

Sure, he thinks this kid is gorgeous. She is. So what, Bren thought, as she turned to Jan and Lia.

"To have our network's anniversary coincide with these second Olympic games in Atlanta is a wonderful happenstance," Bren said to Lia, regaining Campbell's attention with the slightly sharp tone of her voice.

Jan smiled, noticing others socializing in clumps around the room were looking at her little group. And why not? Watching Lia from behind and Cav Campbell from the front offered something for everyone.

Campbell had a tan he could die from. Cynics wondered how many sheep placentas and joba plants were sacrificed to keep Campbell's face so smooth.

Physically, Cav Campbell was a hunk for his age, well, hunkish enough, but his career would never catch up with his charisma.

Bren Forrest's angular face was softened by her shoulder-length auburn hair and wide eyes matching her hair color. She looked like the winner of the British royalty gene pool, the slightest bit horsey, but pure, Triple Crown stock. She made middle age seem like first prize.

"Are other Welcome girls coming?" Jan asked Lia.

"Yes, Megan and Brittany take their turns soon."

Eight of the hostesses were invited to this party, a key social event leading up to the opening of the games.

Their job was to be there one at a time, for maybe half an hour, working the room, using their language skills or charm or both to make everyone feel welcome.

The girls were parceled out to different pre-Olympics activities. Lia swapped assignments with another hostess to get on the list for this party at this time, nightfall.

"Georgia, Georgia, the whole night through...." Country star Jake Owen was singing now at the front edge of the baby grand. He wore jeans, a black cowboy hat and cobra skin dress boots, quite a contrast with the penguinesque sameness of the other males in the room.

As Lia turned to watch the singer, several men who were staring at her snapped their eyes back toward the entertainment, but too late not to be noticed.

The conversation quieted as Owen finished the mandatory, "...keeps Georgia on my mind..."

Bren and Jan walked slowly toward the piano and stood by it, listening, smiling, happy in anticipation of the formal festivities that would take place there. They would bask in warm words and accolades.

Lia hung back, looking at Cav Campbell, who was looking at her.

"You know, I could use some fresh air," Lia whispered, nodding her head slightly toward the balcony.

"Me too, maybe a quick hit?" he said, looking for a sign of response from Lia.

"Hmmm, interesting," she said, almost batting her eyelashes.

"Then how about..." he began, but she put a finger to his mouth.

"Shhhhh, give me a few minutes to, uh, cover for us. I'll meet you out there, on the balcony, over in the corner."

Campbell shuddered slightly with anticipation as he watched Lia turn and walk toward the people clustered near the piano.

"Ron, I have to leave now. It was great meeting you," she said to the security agent.

"Same here. And, can I call you sometime?"

"That would be great, just phone the Olympics office. They all know me there," she said.

The mayor watched the exchange. Handsome bastard, that Ron, he'll probably want to show her his gun. He's lucky I'm not a player or he'd be making a date for me.

Lia then moved to where Jerry Vaughn was having a whispered conversation with Atlanta's police chief, R.E. Lutz.

"Excuse me, sir," she said to Vaughn. "We're changing the guard, so to speak, so I must go now, but I wanted to thank you for having me to your wonderful home."

"You are welcome, Ms..."

"Lee, sir, Lia Lee, one of your hostesses. I hope to see you again soon during the games."

The police chief, an inch shorter than Lia, bristling with brass and braid on his dress blue uniform, assumed his tallest possible posture and stuck out his hand.

"I'm Chief Lutz," he said with a salacious smile.

"Yes, a pleasure," Lia said. "Do you have the time, Chief, um, Lutz?"

As he turned his wrist so Lia could see the Rolex, she glanced at it, frowned and bowed slightly.

"Oh, I really must go. Nice to meet you."

She moved toward Jan and Bren. Lia thanked them, shook Bren's hand and excused herself.

She walked to the front door, nodding, smiling to everyone, knowing she looked good from all angles, as memorable in her departure as she was in her arrival. Her black dress was a good choice, with its silver threading on the spaghetti straps, around the neckline and at the above-the-knee hem.

The security agent near the front door opened it for her.

She smiled and nodded, walked the twelve feet across the hallway to the elevator and pushed the button.

Cav Campbell lingered on the balcony, the pungent smell of his marijuana cigarette carried away by the warm breeze of the Atlanta night.

Slam dunk, I think. She'll be back and then, well, wonder where she lives.

Campbell knew the Olympics would draw good-looking women to Atlanta, not to mention the "Bambies," his word, who already lived there.

I may learn to love this town, one girl at a time. Bren will never know.

Campbell checked his watch, but couldn't see the dial in the dark corner of the balcony.

He turned and looked out on the city, the lights of Peachtree Road winding south toward the lighted skyscrapers downtown.

Lia opened a door from the kitchen and slipped onto the balcony without Campbell knowing she had returned. She glided up to him as he stood looking out, put her arms around his waist and kissed his right ear. "Some view," she said.

"The city looks great too," Campbell said with a grin, turning to face her, leaning against the concrete railing of the balcony, his back to the city lights.

"And you, my dear, are sensational."

Lia smiled and let the tips of her fingernails brush against his stomach, just above the belt buckle.

Campbell sighed and reached for her. The marijuana joint in his hand touched her dress where it closed at her lower back. It hissed, leaving a small burned spot on the cloth.

"Oh Jeez, I'm sorry," he said, fumbling to wipe off the burn.

"It's nothing, no problem," she whispered.

He dropped the joint and stepped on it, then reached for her face with both hands.

Lia looked up, smiled, and purred, "Lean back."

She touched his belt, then the buckle, then the tab on his zipper. She pulled it about half an inch. He closed his eyes.

"Lean back, honey, come on now," she whispered.

As Campbell arched his back against the railing, thrusting his pelvis forward, Lia leaned down and grabbed him under each knee.

With a burst of upper body strength that would have surprised anybody who saw it, Lia jerked Campbell's legs up and shoved them backwards.

He teetered for a moment, grabbing at the air.

She pushed harder on both legs and Campbell tumbled over the railing.

Deadly News – Chapter Two

BUCKHEAD - ATLANTA

Homicide Detective James Hagan punched in Cassie's cell phone number with one hand as he sped up Peachtree Road in his unmarked sedan.

"Cassandra Page, News Blitz3." She was in the front passenger seat of the Channel 3 news van, her video photographer Daryl Evans at the wheel, heading south on Peachtree Road.

She was annoyed having to go cover the Park Towers party. As Channel 3's most prominent on-air reporter, she mostly covered crime, violence and corruption, not chichi social events. But so far this day, she couldn't even scare up a convenience store robbery to report on, so when the news director asked to help out at the gala, "just this once," she relented.

"Cassie, Jimmy here. Where are you?" She could hear the tension in his voice. Or maybe it was excitement.

"Hey, Copperhead, what's up darlin'?"

"Not much, other than some guy just fell from the penthouse at the building where there's a big pre-Olympics bash going on and I'm on my way there now. Other than that..."

"Jimmie for godssake are you serious, come on, what? I'm just a block or two from Park Towers myself. Long story, are you there now? Is this a joke?"

"No joke. That's why I called you. I'm almost there too. Race ya. Kiss, kiss," Jimmy said, ending the call.

Deadly News – Chapter Three

GNS HEADQUARTERS – DOWNTOWN ATLANTA

"Get that off the air you prime asshole!"

Senior producer Max Ippolito was yelling as loud as he could as he stormed across the newsroom of the Global News Service.

He was furious at what he just saw on the air and his shout made the two news anchors on the set wince. Their viewers could hear it too, even through the glass partition separating the anchor desk from the production and work areas in the background.

The foreign minister of Jordan had just been shot to death in Amman, the capital, by a man on a motorbike who then turned the gun on himself.

The producer of the hourly newscast in process ordered a "graphic," the photo or drawing viewers see on the screen, over the news anchor's shoulder.

"Call it 'Jordan Shooting'," he hollered over the intercom to the graphics department.

The anchorwoman, a streaky blond with brown eyes and a cameo type blouse that added a touch of school marm to her look, started to read the story of the Jordanian's assassination. As she did, up on the screen came the graphic.

Large red letters at the bottom read, "Jordan Shooting." The photo above the headline was a picture of basketball legend Michael Jordan.

"Get it off now!" the producer bellowed as he stormed toward the "pit." That's what GNS people called the control room where the director sat facing a battery of monitors and switches, running the video and audio of the newscast. It was not a pit at all, but a step-down area, part of the original studios built at the birth of GNS. The name "pit" was born and survived a couple of control room spruce ups and expansions.

"Jesus, how did that get on, Billy?" Max asked, the two worry lines in his forehead seemingly growing as he frowned. He rushed over to stand behind the director, Billy Olson, whose job was to control what would go on the air, including audio, video, sound, graphics and everything else. He already was punching the graphic into oblivion and ordering the director operating remote camera three to fill the screen with a tight shot of the anchorwoman.

Billy leaned back in his swivel chair and looked up at Max.

"You won't believe it, boss," he said shaking his head.

"As soon as the graphic hit the air, I yelled at Bastige it was wrong. I told him 'Jordan Shooting' was not about the NBA for chrissake. You know what he said? Honest

to God, he said 'Don't tell me how to do my job, I've been a full producer for almost a month now.' Can you believe it? Three weeks and he's Einstein."

Max shook his head as the director turned back to the wall of TV screens and said into his headset, "Teases next, then throw to commercial break."

Max leaned in to Billy. "Isn't Bastige the one who once said he shouldn't be expected to know about the Third Reich because he wasn't even alive then?"

Billy grunted, "Yeah and he wasn't joking. He has the sense of humor of a doorknob. But just wait Max, that incompetent smartass will be a vice president here someday."

Max nodded, knowing Billy probably was right. Ned Bastige was a holdover from the early years, always an associate or an assistant, never a full producer until last month. In Max's opinion, Bastige more or less stagnated in place all that time. He was not promoted, for good reason.

"He's just uninformed, in his own twisted little world," Max told his boss a year or so earlier when asked about Bastige's news judgment and overall journalistic savvy.

"Some months ago, he asked our Chicago bureau chief to get us an interview with the mayor there about some political corruption controversy. The mayor refused, and the Chicago guy called Ned and said, 'Sorry pal, the mayor blew me off. I messed up. I didn't get dick.'

"You know what Bastige did? He snorted at the bureau chief and said, sarcastically, 'Well, forget about it pal, I can get Dick. Just give me Dick's phone number for godssake and I'll get Dick!'"

Max also told GNS brass Bastige was a whiner who always blamed others for his frequent screw-ups. But the bosses promoted Bastige to show producer anyway and assigned him to the ten o'clock news hour. They also reminded Max Bastige started at the network when it was founded and deserved a shot.

Max disagreed, but lost the argument. Now, hoping to forget Bastige for a moment, Max turned away from the control room and walked a few steps to the rear, deep in thought.

He had a live truck committed to covering his big boss, Bren Forrest, at the GNS anniversary party at Vaughn's home. The video from there would then fold into the network's TV special at ten o'clock. Already, it was costing him overtime because the camera crews and other techs in the field started before dinner and would be on the clock at least until midnight.

Worse, the on-scene anchor for the live coverage would be Max's least favorite on-air personality, the GNS entertainment reporter, Sheila Belle.

As Max once said to a GNS co-worker, "Deep down, she's shallow."

Sheila could be counted on to do at least one interview in every program with the guest's back to the camera, so Sheila would be seen asking the question, then smiling, nodding and pouting her lips in a way she believed was sexy.

Sheila thought so because some guy once sent her a poem from prison, the last lines of which were:

Your full red lips are beautiful; I love to see them pout.

Your teeth, your tongue do turn me on, just wait till I get out.

Sheila's boyfriend at the time advised her to tell GNS security about the letter. Instead, she posted it with little stickpins on the corkboard above her desk.

"It helps keep me centered," she explained when anyone asked.

Max also was up to his ear-buds in plans for a huge, star-studded, live gala the next night to tout the GNS exclusive TV coverage of the Olympics and to celebrate the network's fifteenth anniversary.

It would be held in the fourteen-story atrium of GNS headquarters downtown.

A success with the special show would be a big plus for Max. His next career move could be a vice presidency at GNS or even a higher-paying job at ABC, NBC or CBS.

PARK TOWERS, BUCKHEAD - ATLANTA

"What the hell was that?" Jody Portier said out loud. He was sitting on the roof of his live truck, sweating, as he fiddled with the faulty microwave dish he had just removed from the pole atop the truck.

He felt the truck rock, then a warm, wet splat on the top of his head.

"Christ, what..." Jody's upward glance froze in shock as another splash of wet stuff hit him full in the face. He wiped his eyes and wished he hadn't.

Jody was a Global News Service engineer whose TV remote truck was parked in the half-circle driveway at the lobby of the Park Towers.

He was trying to fix the dish he had taken off the mast, an extendible metal pole.

Jody raised the mast to thirty feet, so the other engineer inside the truck could see whether the problem with their test signal was in the mast cables.

The mast elevated the microwave dish to send audio and video signals to the GNS receiver atop its building downtown.

The GNS news team was there to do a "live shot," a live remote broadcast from the party for Bren Forrest in the condo forty-six floors above.

Miller Andrews, the news cameraman working with Jody, was standing at the rear doors of the truck, getting a battery and a spare P2 digital memory card for his video camera.

He also felt the truck shudder and looked up to see what it was.

"Oh god, oh god, Jody are you OK? Jesus, Jody, there's... oh god, look at that!"

Miller grabbed his camera and began to shoot video. Mentally he was on autopilot, the same way he reacted in tense situations before, in Fallujah a lifetime ago, in the big earthquake in Haiti and in other "oh crap" situations during his years as a TV news photographer.

With all his experience - the eternal Arab-Israeli carnage, a couple of plane crash aftermath scenes, the Mexican drug wars - Miller had never seen what he saw when he felt that jolt and looked up at the roof of the TV truck.

Staring back at him, the eyes open in surprise and frozen in death, was a man, his arms outstretched, his hands open as if anticipating a bear hug.

The legs were spread-eagled, too, and Miller's shocked mind saw the whole picture as a sort of human wind Lutz, suspended in air.

Then Miller saw why. The man was impaled on the mast atop the TV truck. He fell face down. The square metal cap on the top of the pole punctured his chest. The mast protruded about three feet out of his back.

Jody was trying to stand up on the roof, staggering, wiping the blood from his eyes.

Miller was dizzy for a moment as his video camera recorded the scene. His shock abated as he squinted through the viewfinder.

He zoomed his lens back to get a wider view, showing the entire body of the man, the mast holding him up there as blood oozed and dripped down the pole and puddled on the truck's roof.

GNS HEADQUARTERS

Max was standing by the domestic assignment desk, talking with a writer for the GNS live broadcast, when the phone rang next to him.

"News, Jackson speaking," said the writer.

Jackson listened, nodded and listened some more. Then he hung up, his hand shaking.

"What, what?" said Max, exasperated at Jackson's silence.

"Holy shit," Yusef Jackson said.

"What is it?" Max asked again.

"Somebody just landed on the mast of our live truck."

"What do you mean, landed?" Max said.

"No shit! The tech called from the truck over at the Vaughn party, at Park Towers. He says the mast on top of the van was fully extended and a body just came outta nowhere and spiked itself on the mast!"

PARK TOWERS

Cassie opened the door of the news van with the station logo all over it before Daryl completely stopped. As her feet hit the pavement she saw lights go on around the Global News Service live truck. She turned on her cell and yelled into it as she ran.

A news crew from another Atlanta TV station, arriving to cover the party, also saw the GNS camera lights go on. The news photographer walked over quickly to where Miller was recording video.

"Chuck, Cassie here, we have to go live. Some guy just fell out of the building onto a TV truck. He's dead, I guess," she panted as she caught her breath next to Miller. Her own cameraman, Daryl, ran up behind her and began shooting video of the impaled body.

"Yeah, at the Vaughn's building, the big party. What do you mean we can't interrupt regular programming?" Cassandra shouted into the phone.

"For godssake, Chuck, somebody falls out of the building where every VIP in town is attending a party and we can't take it live?"

Cassandra's voice rose as she caught her breath.

"Who is he? Whattaya mean who is he?" she snapped. "What the hell difference does it make who he is? He's a dead guy. Ever see a guy skewered on a TV truck mast, Chuck? It's a first, goddammit, so let's go live in a coupla minutes.

"Oh for...jeez, Chuck I don't know how... what's...just get us on, now!"

Cassandra's mocha complexion was reddening now, sweat trickling down her temples. Her black hair was matted with humidity and sweat from the heat of the July night and the run-around tension of the moment.

"Can you believe this jerk on the assignment desk?" she huffed to Daryl, as he continued to shoot the scene unfolding before him.

"He says we normally don't report suicides, so Chuckie has to call the boss at home for permission to break in."

Daryl laughed but kept recording, walking backwards to get an extra wide shot and a pan down from the building to the speared body.

The security guard from the front desk of the building saw the two camera lights and sauntered out of the glass door into the driveway.

"What's up guys?"

"Up there," Miller motioned with his head.

The guard looked up, saw the body on the mast and saw Jody now sitting cross-legged on the roof of the truck, wiping blood off his face and clothes, silent, disbelief slowing his motion.

The security man looked sick. Miller thought he might collapse and shouted, "Call the cops."

The security man recovered and walked haltingly back into the lobby. At that point two police cars screamed to a stop out front. One officer made a call on his cell phone and the other began asking rapid-fire questions of the stunned security guard.

Another TV truck drove up with the blazing words "News9NOW Mobile Bureau," front, back and on both sides. The station had three of those video vans, but the promotions department renamed them mobile bureaus shortly after the station closed its real bureaus in the outlying small cities of Athens, Rome and Peachtree City. It saved money.

A reporter with salt and pepper hair – he added the pepper - jumped out of the truck and jogged to the officer on the cell phone.

The channel 9 photographer went to where the others were shooting.

"Who's that?" he asked. The newsies all shrugged and kept recording.

"It can't be who I think it is, can it?" the cameraman asked. More shrugs.

A squad car arrived, then another, then an ambulance, lights flashing, and three uniformed officers rushed up.

A sergeant on a cell phone was heard saying, "Alert the chief."

"He's there, at the party? Go up and tell him."

"No, I don't want to go up there. Can't you text him?"

"Damn. Stand by."

The sergeant directed a patrolman to put up some yellow crime scene tape and get the media back behind it.

Detective Jimmy Hagan slid his car behind one of the squad cars and walked over to talk with the sergeant. He then looked around, hoping to spot Cassie. He heard her first, talking animatedly on her cell.

I'll have to tease her about pushing that guy off the balcony just so she'd have a big crime story to report tonight. Nah, better not. She might push me outa bed instead.

Jimmy walked into the lobby and to the bank of elevators.

If this turns out to be a homicide, it could be a long night for me. And Cassie too, but not with each other.

At that moment, Sheila Belle, the GNS entertainment reporter who was there to do the live report on the festivities, walked from the ladies' room in the lobby out to the GNS truck.

"What's all the fuss about?" she asked Miller, a blank expression on her face. "Anything wrong with our signal?"

Miller adjusted his camera, then looked at Sheila.

"Oh no, the signal will be fine, as soon as we get the body off the mast."

Sheila looked up and shrieked, "My God, it's Cav Campbell!"

Even in the dark, punctuated by the camera lights and the flashing lights on the squad cars, Sheila knew the dead celebrity immediately.

His tan had not yet begun to turn death gray. Sheila had seen Campbell a dozen times with Bren Forrest. Now and then she would see something about him in the local alternate online newspaper, The Riot. Years earlier he was popping up on TMZ or Pop Tarts with some regularity, but not much lately.

Sheila choked back a gag and looked up at the mast again.

"It's Cav, it's our Cav, it's..."

She swallowed hard, brushed aside a strand of otherwise well trained hair and turned to Miller.

"Does this mean we'll go live any minute?"

Ten feet away, Cassandra Page heard what Sheila said. She walked closer and realized Sheila was right.

She grabbed the phone again. Chuck, pick up dammit, she said to herself as the phone rang back at Channel 3.

"Chuck, Cassie here. We have the story of the year here, Chuckie, so I suggest we break in and go live now or else you're going to be under the viaduct with a sign saying 'Will produce TV shows for food,' get it?"

Chuck didn't respond, but Cassie could hear a lot of loud voices in the newsroom.

"Chuck, Chuck, listen. Cav Campbell, the movie star, Bren Forrest's boy toy, is hanging suspended over the driveway here on the mast of the GNS live truck. His fiancée is upstairs at a party with the mayor, the police chief and every other important person between here and the Antarctic. I'm, what? Call who? Hell, call the Milkman himself if you have to, but we need to go live now!"

Inside the GNS live truck, the engineer was on the phone with the writer at GNS headquarters downtown. It was his second call, a few minutes after the first.

"No shit. Sheila says it's Cav Campbell. Yeah, the Cav Campbell, honest to God. What? Did he fall?"

"Hell, I don't know if he fell or jumped or what, but he must have been at the party for the boss. Yeah, our boss, Bren Forrest.

"Right. Sheila is here, yeah, yeah. But the dish is off the mast. We'll have to prop it up on the van roof and go with it.

"The picture may not be great, but we can't do... Jesus, no we can't put it back on the mast. There's a body there. Get somebody out here with a LiveU. Meantime, send us what you can see on your monitor with your cell phone. We need help out here!"

He pocketed the phone and hollered out the back of the truck toward Sheila.

"We're going live in five, grab this mic here, and your IFB!"

Sheila ran to the truck and clipped the little microphone onto the lapel of her black linen jacket, pulling a thread as she did. That never happened before. Sheila was distraught. She had not put on her TV makeup yet and the humidity and heat made her hair a mess, she just knew it.

"I need to fix up," she said, as Miller handed her the IFB, the earpiece attached to a wire going to a small transmitter on her belt. It allowed her to hear what went on the air, plus instructions from the producer and director in the control room at GNS headquarters.

IFB is short for "interrupted feedback." Most reporters more colorful names for it and for the off-air people who liked to shout orders through it at the on-camera reporters and anchors. To Sheila, however, the IFB was her substitute masters degree.

Her producers knew how little she knew about so much of what she covered. They often made her seem smarter than she was with timely information on the IFB.

Sheila did know, however, Cav Campbell died on TV, literally, and she had a worldwide scoop in the making.

GNS HEADQUARTERS

Max juggled phones at the GNS studio, struggling to keep things together, trying to analyze the information sputtering in from the Park Towers building. He barely noticed producer Ned Bastige at his desk, reading Associated Press news bulletins on his computer.

Realizing what happened, Bastige jerked upright in his chair, stood, walked to a row of empty desks and sat down in front of an idle computer.

He hit "Log In," then tapped, "NoBeeb@nwsuk.com."

"Password," the computer prompted him in the upper right corner.

"Hammer," he typed.

"Hammer, send second password," appeared on the screen.

"Mime," Ned typed, his fingers shaking.

"Password Invalid."

He went back and deleted the "M" and replaced it with a "T." "Time," it read.

"Hammer confirm action," popped up on his screen.

"Hammer confirms."

The machine hummed, the screen went gray, then lighted up again a moment later.

Rows of gibberish type poured onto the screen, stopped for a few seconds, then more "xoxpo8644h@xoewoeoro329L04oir9ekfd6W*k.ju."

"Hammer Report."

Ned was sweating now.

"Hammer Down," he typed carefully.

"Repeat."

"Hammer Down," Ned typed again, his fingertips leaving moisture on the keyboard.

"Game Over," the screen read, then went dark.

Bastige pushed back from the computer and stood up. His armpits were wet and the small roll of fat over his belt was damp. He walked slowly past Max and Yusef, both

of whom were yelling into telephones now. Eyes straight ahead, Ned walked out of the newsroom, down the hall and into the men's room.

In a stall, he pulled a scrap of copy paper from his wallet, tore it in two, then in two again, threw the pieces into the toilet and pushed the flush handle.

The water blurred the words "Hammer Down" as the paper bits swirled, then disappeared. Ned thought he ought to want to throw up, but he didn't feel sick. Fear maybe, but not sick.