

Seven Steps East

By the same author

THE BURNING FUSE

THE GIRL IN THE CAGE

TARGET IN TAFFETA

THE VENUS DEATH

LILY IN HER COFFIN

STAMPED FOR MURDER

BEWARE THE PALE HORSE

ALIBI AT DUSK

THE SILVER COBWEB

BROKEN SHIELD

THE NINTH HOUR

THE RUNNING MAN

THE BLONDE IN BLACK

THE BLACK MIRROR

THE AFFAIR OF THE
EXOTIC DANCER

Seven Steps East

A RALPH LINDSEY MYSTERY

By Ben Benson

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Chapter 1

At the time just before the murder happened, I was stationed at the State Police Academy in Framingham, Massachusetts. It was in July of the year and the summer had been cool and dry. The meteorologists spoke of the high-level winds and the high-pressure polar air from the Canadian northwest. As a result the flower-scented mornings were sunny and cool. As the afternoons wore on and the temperatures rose to the mid-seventies the inevitable puffs of cottony white clouds would appear. By late afternoon the massed clouds would be low on the eastern horizon and the sky would become a clear cobalt blue again. The only rain was in the form of occasional showers.

At the Academy in Framingham this year there was a recruit class of forty-four men training to become state troopers. They were in their eleventh week at the school. In two weeks they would graduate. They would then be assigned to one of the State Police barracks as probationary troopers for three months of field training before getting their permanent status.

I had been assigned to the Academy staff on a temporary basis because one of the sergeant-instructors was attending the U. S. Army Chemical, Bacteriological and Radiation School at Fort McClellan, Alabama. My job as junior man on the staff was to last a month until the sergeant returned.

This particular Wednesday evening after supper I was standing outside the Administration Building having a cigarette. I looked over in the direction of the messhall where the glass-enclosed bulletin board was attached to the side wall of the building. The bulletin board contained the gigs, demerits and punishment details of the training troop. One of the trainees was standing there studying it. I walked over. His name was Kirk Chanslor. He was reading a notice posted on the board:

STATE POLICE ACADEMY
FRAMINGHAM, MASSACHUSETTS

8 July

FROM: Lieutenant John Eaton, Commandant
TO: Trainees—43rd Training Troop
SUBJECT: SPECIAL PASS

1. The below-named trainees, members of the All-Star Softball Team, having beaten the inter-squad champs, are hereby granted a special pass to commence as of 1700 hours on Friday, 10 July, and to terminate on Sunday, 12 July, at 2200 hours:

Chanslor, K. M.
Owen, W. J.
Lynch, R. A.
Murphy, M. L.
Herzog, R. V.
Fralin, A.
Lacaire, A. D.
Cretecos, J. P.

John E. Eaton
Lieutenant, Mass. State Police
Commanding Academy

"Chanslor," I said.

The recruit turned and stiffened to attention, his fingers straight down by the seams of his suntan pants. "Sir?"

"At ease," I said. "Anxious to get home, Chanslor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I guess it's been a busy week," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"How's your mother?"

"She's fine, sir."

"Give her my best."

"Yes, sir," he said. "She was asking about you, too, sir."

There was an intense look about him. I kept thinking, he was only twenty-one and just a kid. Then I realized that I had been about the same age when I attended the Academy four years before. It was hard to believe that I had looked as callow and immature as he did. I said to him, "You worried about anything?"

"No worries, sir."

"You sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right," I said. "Take off, mister."

He stiffened to attention, did a smart about-face and double-timed back to the recruit quarters.

I watched him go. He was a tall, loose-jointed boy with blue eyes and reddish, carrot hair that was closely cropped—recruit style. He had a narrow face and his aquiline nose was spattered with freckles. I supposed most girls would find him attractive. To the Academy staff and to me he was nothing but a piece of raw material to be molded, bent, shaped and disciplined into the form of a trooper. In eleven weeks he had been hammered hard and was beginning to take shape.

I turned and walked back into the Administration Building. First Sergeant Jack Considine was sitting at the duty desk. I put my uniform cap on the hook and sat down at my desk near the window. I looked outside and watched the punishment detail of three trainees doing close-order drill, their hands smacking the rifle stocks smartly as they ordered arms, shouldered arms and marched off.

I lit another cigarette and picked up the worksheet. Being

the junior member of the instructional staff, I handled the daily log, recording the daily strength of both the uniformed and civilian personnel. And, although I was not a non-commissioned officer yet, I acted as duty N.C.O. two nights a week, from 6:00 P.M. until midnight. It was my job to check the messhall and the quarters of the messboys, and to make the kitchen inspection. I was responsible for the evening classes starting on time and for the escort of the evening guest lecturers. I was in charge of organized athletics and it was I who set up the film-projection machine in the classroom. Besides these various duties, my instructional assignment was the demonstration and practice of the science of judo.

I sat there at my desk doing my paper work until it was almost time to call out the troop for inter-squad softball competition. As I stood up to go over to the loudspeaker microphone Sergeant Considine turned his head and said, "Ralph?"

I swung around. "Sir?"

He said, "You fraternizing with Chanslor again?"

"Just checking on a couple of things," I said. "There's no impairment of discipline in my mind."

Considine rubbed his short-clipped, brown, wiry hair. He was a man with massive shoulders and neck, and a wide, sun-burned face. "Your boy's been acting a little weird lately."

"In what way?"

"In that last class on gambling devices and frauds. Why was he asking so many questions?"

"You said you always liked them eager, Sergeant."

"That kid's worried about something, Ralph."

"I was just asking him. He shook it off."

"He's a big, good-natured kid. What makes him so curious?"

"That's his nature. The sign of a good cop, Sergeant."

"Maybe he's worried about the exams."

"He shouldn't be," I said. "He's a squad leader and second highest man in the class on grades."

Considine moved his big shoulders, causing his muscles to

strain against the fabric of his shirt. "Look, he's *your* friend. If you're not bothered, it's no skin off my nose."

"I'm not bothered."

I turned on the microphone, let the tubes warm up for a moment, and made the announcement over the public-address system. Then I went outside to check the athletic equipment.

Kirk Chanslor. He was my friend, of course. I had known him since he was a child. A well-liked kid all around. Not only at the Academy but in his home town of Sachem. A kid with a big infectious grin and a willing, snap-to attitude. He had the makings of a good trooper.

Kirk's mother and mine had been schoolmates. Later Kirk's mother had married Philip Chanslor and had moved to the town of Sachem on Cape Cod. But they still kept in touch. Philip Chanslor had inherited a small hardware store. He had worked hard, expanding it into "Chanslor's Country Place," selling gardening equipment and renting power tools. In the years before World War II it was something new and it would have prospered.

But in 1941 the National Guard was called into federal service. Chanslor had been a first lieutenant in an anti-aircraft unit of the 26th Division. Through a series of assignments and transfers he was put into the 182nd Infantry Regiment and shipped out to the French colony of New Caledonia. There the 182nd became a component of a new division called the Americal. In March of 1943, Captain Philip Chanslor was killed on Guadalcanal. Kirk was five years old then.

With the war shortages the Country Place withered and died. Mrs. Chanslor never remarried. She augmented her pension by going to work in the Sachem Savings Bank. To Kirk his father was just a picture on a wall. He had no other memory. He was an amiable youngster, red-headed, freckled, snub-nosed, inquisitive as a kitten and unspoiled. The town had a warm spot for him. Later, when I grew up, as he did—we

were not too many years apart—I was assigned to the Yarmouth substation of D Troop. Part of my patrol coverage was the town of Sachem. I got to know Mrs. Chanslor and Kirk better. I liked Kirk. It was probably because of me that he became interested in becoming a state trooper.

The next day, Thursday, July 9th, I had no time to talk to Kirk Chanslor personally. Neither did I all day Friday. On Friday evening, July 10th, at 5:00 P.M., I took the inspection of the eight-man squad which was the winning softball team. Kirk Chanslor, as squad leader, lined them up and called them to attention. After the inspection I dismissed them. Chanslor and the others ran swiftly for their cars in the parking lot.

It was the last time I saw him alive.

Chapter 2

On Sunday morning, July 12th, at 10:00 A.M., I received a telephone call at the Academy from Mrs. Chanslor. She asked if Kirk had returned yet. I said he had not. We chatted for a few moments. Her conversation was aimless, vague and distracted.

Sunday afternoon at three, she telephoned again. I told her that Kirk had not returned yet. Was there anything I could do? She asked that her son telephone her as soon as he got in. I said I would tell him. Now she had me worried.

Sunday evening, 10:00 P.M. There was a troop muster on the parade ground. I, as duty N.C.O., accompanied First Sergeant Considine on the roll call. Each squad leader reported his men as present. We checked them off as they brought their rifles down to order arms. When we came to Kirk Chanslor's position he was not there with his squad. His assistant squad leader reported him absent. The troop stood at attention.

Considine turned to me and said, "Kirk Chanslor. Mark him AWOL."

I saluted. Considine returned the salute and marched off. I told the troop to prepare for lights-out in fifteen minutes. Then I dismissed them.

When I came back to the Ad Building, Considine was in the commandant's office, reporting the roll call to Lieutenant

Eaton. The sergeant came out and went wordlessly to his desk. A few moments later Eaton called me into his office. I went in. He was a tall, lean man, with careless good looks, dark straight hair, thin lips and a small clefted scar over his right eye. His two-tone blue uniform was exceptionally well tailored.

Eaton said crisply, "Type up a dismissal order on Chanslor."

"Lieutenant," I said, "this man is a squad leader and has one of the cleanest records in the class."

"He's AWOL," Eaton said.

"Something's happened to him, Lieutenant. His mother called twice today to see if he came back."

Eaton pointed to the telephone at the corner of his desk. "It only takes a dime to make a phone call. Did he call you with a good excuse as to why he'd be late?"

"No, sir."

"Then why bother to give me a big pitch, Lindsey?"

"I know the kid, Lieutenant. He's been working very hard and he's one of our best. Only two weeks to graduation. Why would he deliberately spoil it now?"

"How should I know?" Eaton asked. He stood up. "Chanslor's not here. If he couldn't make it back in time he knew it was his job to notify us. He didn't. That's all."

"With your permission I'd like to call his home."

"No," Eaton said. "I'll be damned if I'll make an exception in his case."

I stood there without moving. Eaton turned his back on me and looked out the window into the darkness. He swung around again.

"You still here, Lindsey?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, damn it," he said irritably. "Phone him."

I picked up the telephone on the desk and asked the operator to get me Chanslor's number in Sachem. When I got

the connection I spoke to Mrs. Chanslor. Eaton was watching me carefully. A few minutes later I hung up.

Eaton said, "Well?"

"Kirk Chanslor came home Friday evening about seven," I said. "He stayed home not much more than half an hour. He left the house at seven-thirty and that's the last his mother has seen of him. She's worried sick, Lieutenant."

"Did she notify the police?"

"Yes, sir, a little while ago."

Eaton stepped over and studied the big wall map near his desk. He turned. "Better get me D Troop Headquarters in Middleboro."

I telephoned D Troop and spoke to the duty staff sergeant there. Then I handed the telephone over to Eaton. He took it from me, speaking into the receiver, making short, incisive notes on the pad of paper in front of him. When he hung up, his face was thoughtful.

"Chanslor's been missing since Friday night," Eaton said. "No sign of him or his car. D Troop was just going to call us. They're getting ready to put out a File 6 on him."

I stood there silently. He bent down and looked at the papers on his desk. "The schedule has us moving to Camp Kiwanis tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," I said. "It's our week there on water safety and rescue."

"According to my records this Kirk Chanslor was once a lifeguard."

"Yes, sir," I said. "At Craigsville Beach in Hyannis."

"We can let him miss a day or two," Eaton said. "I'll give him until reveille Wednesday morning at our quarters at Camp Kiwanis. If he shows up then with a legitimate excuse, okay. I'm not going to carry him longer than that. And when he does come in I'm busting him as squad leader. He'll do penalty tours and extra details. I'll have him shoveling sand against the tide until graduation. I want him to know he's in the glue."

“Yes, sir.”

He sat down in his chair. I waited.

He looked up at me. “All right, what now?” he asked wearily.

“I was thinking that maybe you’d want one of the Academy staff to go out to Sachem and check up on this.”

“One of the staff?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes.”

“Can you give me one goddam reason why, mister?”

“Because Chanslor’s one of us, sir.”

“No, he is not. Not yet. As far as the S.P. is concerned he has no status whatsoever.”

“I know you want to be absolutely fair, Lieutenant. Chanslor’s been here eleven weeks. In those eleven weeks he’s learned a lot. He happens to be a very eager kid and—”

“Now, don’t give me the high pressure, mister. He’s probably got a girl, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, sir. But—”

Eaton held up his hand. “Did you check out the girl? They could have gone off and eloped and he couldn’t get back in time. I’ve known that to happen.”

“No, sir. The girl’s still in Sachem. Mrs. Chanslor said the girl hasn’t seen him all weekend.” I took a deep breath. “Have you been considering what man you want to go out there, Lieutenant?”

“No, I haven’t.” He smiled with deceptive gentleness. “But since you know the Chanslor family personally, just whom would you recommend?”

“I guess you know my answer, Lieutenant.”

“I guess I do, Lindsey.”

“I’m the youngest one here and only on temporary duty. Most important, I won’t be needed at Camp Kiwanis.”

“Just between you and me, Lindsey. Where did you learn all this salesmanship?”

“I got all my training under you, Lieutenant.”

He smiled faintly and tapped his chest. “You touch me.