

**A Matthias Jones Mystery**

**The  
Handyman's  
Secret**

**Robert P. Fitton**

**The Handyman's Secret  
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by Robert P. Fitton**

# 1

Disaster has no excuses. Lark's new Outboard Special skimmed Hamilton Bay's velvet blue waters and was on a collision course with the drifting boat. Back at Hansen's Marina he should have accepted Captain Kendall's offer of piloting instruction. As the boat skipped over rougher water, Lark again gripped the jammed ship's wheel. On the lounge at mid deck, Flo, red kerchief flapping in the breeze, glanced up from her romance novel. He raised the binoculars and prayed she did not sense the impending doom. The old white and green boat, the only craft presently in Hamilton Bay, came into focus.

" There's no one piloting this boat!" screamed Flo from the chair.

She quickly steadied herself along the deck railing as Lark adjusted his captain's hat. " Not to worry, Snookems." He yanked the wheel one more time. " Just a little navigational glitch."

Flo covered her mouth. " The wheel is stuck!"

Lark flipped open the plywood supply chest and retrieved the bulky specification book. He thumbed through the pages, frantically trying to solve the problem. " Wheel, wheel. Must be under W. Or it could be under S for ship's wheel. Or maybe steering."

" Lark, do something!"

Lark dipped his glasses. He should have gotten new bifocals and not waited until somebody had a sale on glasses. " Let's see. Automatic Navigational

Compensation: ANC. Dislodge ANC activation throttle and replace command with overdrive secondary protector... Hum."

Lark set the manual atop the storage bin near the railing and peered over the confusing controls. He pointed the binoculars through the salt-sprayed glass shield. Nobody was on the deck of the green trimmed boat.

" What do you see, Lark?"

" The odds are we will miss it. We have to miss it."

" Miss what?" Flo stood on her tiptoes, but probably could not see the boat without the binoculars. Lark searched for the ANC throttle until he located an orange rectangular plastic piece stamped ANC. He pushed the button without a second thought. The ship's wheel now moved freely after a sudden snap. " You did it, Lark! You did it!"

" I thought we were dead ducks." Lark gripped the varnished wheel and prepared for a course change, but now the wheel, although unlocked, spun freely.

" Whoops."

" Lark, the boat up ahead."

" Radio, radio, where's the radio?" As his boat bounced along, Lark stuck his head into the storage compartment, knocked his skull on the edge and his captain's hat fell off. Unable to find the radio, he again reached for the manual on the railing. His voice shook as he scooped up his hat. " The manual, it's gone! It must have fallen into the water!"

" Just steer back to shore!"

" Right-O."

He planted himself in front of the wheel again, adjusted his captain's hat and squeezed the smooth wood, but the wheel rotated like a spinning top. With his clenched fist he banged the ANC button, but nothing happened. " We're stuck!"

Flo looked through the glass shield. " Lark, there *is* another boat out there!"

The older boat he had only seen through the binoculars, was now only a few hundred yards away. He raised his thumb to align his position with the stray boat.

" My God, we are going to crash..."

\* \* \*

Jones inhaled the warm May air as Tom McGill scanned the bay waters with the field glasses. Three weeks away from his summer vacation at his Aunt Mae's farm in Indiana, he longed to shed tension accumulated from another year of coaching three sports at Hamilton College. Although the bay was only a few miles from the college, he already felt farther away. To his right Captain Kendall steered their rented boat past vessels moored along the channel. Back at the bridge, along the highway, a woman next to an off road vehicle stared at the bay.

" What the hell is he doing?" asked McGill.

Jones looked back to the Captain. " Bringing the boat to the dock."

" No, Lark."

Jones was so sleepy in the hot sun he did not want to open his eyes.

" Lark is enjoying his insurance claim after the hurricane last summer."

" Matthias, he's headed for that boat out there."

Jones' eyes opened and McGill's mix of brown and gray hair came into focus. McGill handed the field glasses to him. Lark's cruiser moved at a good clip, stirred the foamy waves and headed toward another boat. " He's going to hit that boat."

" It's the only boat on the bay."

Jones gave him the field glasses and ran down the pressure treated dock planks. The white bearded Kendall threw out a long, blue nylon rope and brought the boat closer to the dock. " Captain, we've got a problem out on the bay!"

The Captain stepped onto the dock and looped the heavy rope around the pole. " You spot some passing whales, Matthias?"

" It's Lark."

The Captain squinted and raised his bushy left brow. " What about him?"

" We just saw his boat heading toward another boat out on the bay."

" I pleaded with him to let me show him how to properly pilot that boat."

They scurried toward McGill in his beige Bermuda shorts. He lowered the binoculars and handed them to the Captain. " Captain, he's going to hit."

The Captain only looked for a second. He motioned them down the dock toward the Harbormaster's orange and white fiberglass patrol boat. They climbed inside and he cranked the engine. Almost immediately they moved away from the dock. The Captain held the radio microphone. " Lark, this is the Captain. Come in Lark."

Jones leaned forward as the boat kicked to a higher speed. Lark's course toward the second boat looked like a demolition scene in a Hollywood movie.

" He drives that boat like he drives his car."

" You got that right," said McGill, eyes pressed to the binoculars.

" Lark, come in. This is Captain Kendall."

The wind pushed Jones' brown hair back as they followed the green buoys along the bay. The Captain scanned through his own binoculars. " Captain, why is he headed for that one boat?"

" Don't know."

" I see him!" shouted McGill. " He's trying to move the wheel."

Jones gazed ahead as the Harbormaster's boat moved into the bay, but Lark did not change course and was about to ram the only other boat within ten miles.

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" It's broken! It's broken!" Lark raced around the wheel as if his machinations could make a difference. The white and green boat now loomed directly ahead, bobbing gently with every wave.

" You need to shut off the engine, Lark!"

" Right, right. Shut it off. Shut it off." Now he searched for the key. He remembered starting the engine but forgot the ignition location. The older boat was perilously close as he ran his hand under the panels. He felt the metal key and quickly turned it, grinding the starter. Frantic, he twisted it back and the engine shut off. The boat still moved at a high speed and through the glass he saw the faded green letters across the old boat's peeling white bow.

## MAINTENANCE FREE

" My God, Lark, we're going to hit that boat!" She grabbed him and they dropped to the deck, nuzzled together against the front wall.

After dead silence and long anticipation, a loud crunch exploded into the sound of cracking wood and Lark's boat lurched upward. For a moment he thought they were airborne. Something broke apart above, raining debris over the deck. He shielded himself over Flo as his boat skidded and scraped bottom. They were now tilted upward and bobbed at an odd angle.

" Are you all right, Snookems?" He squinted in the sunlit blue sky. The boat's strong wooden mast had snapped into a twisted wood splinter.

" You saved me, Lark. You saved me!"

Lark steadied himself as he stood, not sure what he had done. He tensed his jaw. His glasses were still in place as he edged his way through the debris to the railing. His boat had careened atop the other vessel. Stairs led below the Maintenance Free's dull, varnished deck. Lark had seen this boat in the marina. Flo crossed the deck and held him as both boats continued to sway in the water.

" This is Webster Howard's boat, Flo."

" The maintenance man?"

" Sometimes he goes fishing... I wonder if anyone is on board." He stroked his chin. " Hum, only one way to find out."

" What do you mean? You're not going down there, are you?"

He cupped his hands. " Hello down there!"

" You think he's on the boat, Lark?"

" No, sir. " He squinted his eyes. " We're dealing with a run-a-way boat."

" You make it sound like a western where the horse breaks away from the coral."

" I assure you, Snookems, no one is aboard this boat."

" Unless we knocked him out or something."

Lark nodded and raised his index finger. " You may have a point, Flo."

He waddled to the box under the panels and pulled out the emergency rope ladder. " Lark, you're in no shape to be climbing ladders."

" A man's got to do what a man's got to do."

Lark straddled the railing and lowered his bulbous body onto the unsteady rope ladder. He longed to be twenty years younger and forty pounds slimmer. Rung by shaky rung he descended the ladder and finally stepped onto the older boat's weathered deck.

" Are you all right, Lark?"

" A-OK. I'm going in!"

" Please be careful..."

Lark heard another boat engine as he crossed the upper deck, but was uneasy as he descended the warped stairs below deck. In the dim light he nudged the faded green wood door and a fishy, filthy odor filtered outward. Light from the bay shined through the dirty window and onto Webster Howard's body, face down on the moistened carpet. Curly dark hair stuck out of his orange and green baseball

cap and his glass brown eyes were frozen. Lark recoiled when he saw blood on Webster's olive shirt and jeans.

" Webster?" He resisted getting near the body, but finally inched across the musty jute rug and knelt. " Webster, are you alive?" He studied Webster's dark beard stubble and strong set jaw. His mammoth fists were clenched, but his chest was not moving and even with the blood, no wounds were visible.

" You're dead, aren't you? My God, I've killed you!"

\* \* \*

" That's Webster Howard's boat,." said Jones, smiling. He held the railing as the Captain pulled alongside the Maintenance Free. " He was just at my house last week doing the gutters. We were joking about the baseball team. Or I should say he was needling me. He's at the games sometimes when he's not out fishing. "

McGill nodded. " Good old Web. Makes a living on things falling apart. But he can fix anything. He re-shingled the back of my house last April. Nice guy. Funny. Good sense of humor."

" Practical joker, " said Jones. " With a serious face he told me my roof was on the verge of collapse. Oh, he really enjoyed me getting upset."

" You upset?"

Jones grinned. " He must be coming in from fishing. Four days in, two days out. One day back, one for the Lord. That's his motto... I hope Lark didn't

hurt him. How the... how do you crash into the only boat on the bay?" Lark's boat was propped at an angle and both boats moved with the waves.

Flo, red kerchief tied around her hair, appeared on deck. " Lark's on Webster's boat! He killed Webster! He's below in the cabin."

" He what?" Jones climbed over the railing as the boat dipped in the water and leaped onto Webster Howard's fishing boat. He ran across the old deck boards. " Lark! It's Matthias."

" Do you see him?" asked McGill from the Captain's boat.

" I'm going under." Jones raced down the stairs, but met resistance at the door.

" He's dead! Dead, I killed him!"

Jones pushed open the door. Webster Howard lay face down in blood splattered jeans and army shirt. Lark's frantic eyes were opened wide as he hugged the cabin wall. " Web, oh my God."

" Lark, what happened?"

" My boat... I lost control. Poor Webster."

Jones gazed across the body, but suspected something more than Lark's pleasure boat had killed Webster. " He's dead, but his body is just lying there. I don't see where he impacted on anything. This is very strange."

McGill moved through the squeaky cabin door. " What the hell is going on?"

" I killed Webster Howard," whined Lark. " I need a private investigator!"

" Don't be so sure, Lark." Jones first studied the small cabin's table, bolted to the floor and scanned the tiny stainless steel sink under a row of white Formica cabinets. Some of the lower cabinets had sharp edges, but Webster Howard's body

was at least ten feet away. Next to the sink was a plastic cup and a white paper napkin smeared with tomato sauce and marked, **R/L**. A coiled microphone cord dangled from a transmitter near the window.

"What are you thinking, Matthias?" asked McGill.

"I'm not sure yet, Tommy." Webster Howard's hands were strong and callused, still tightened as if he were in the midst of a fight. A finely molded body filled his army shirt. Bringing down a man of this physical strength required more than just being knocked to the floor. "Lark, did you see him on deck before the accident?"

"No. I thought it was an empty boat. Oh, dear, God, what have I done?"

"I don't think you did anything besides crash into his boat." Jones knelt next to Webster without touching him. Behind the edges of the orange and green baseball cap, through the dark strands of hair, the dried blood of an expanded, gaping wound indicated a more extensive injury. And the blood on Webster's army shirt and jeans was long since dried.

"Was he murdered?" asked McGill.

Jones studied the ripped jute rug, floorboards exposed, but none of the rug stains contained blood. "Yeah... but not in here."

## 2

Jones studied the bleachers where Webster Howard sometimes sat during home games. Thoughts of Webster's murder overshadowed Hamilton's dismal performance on the baseball field. He wondered if Webster was murdered somewhere else and dragged onto the boat, and the woman looking across the bay from bluff bothered him. Jones clapped his hands along the third baseline and called out to his freshman pitcher. "Come on, Craigie. Come on, boy. Pitch your game, kid."

"How can he pitch his game when they're down by eight runs?" Jones turned and saw orange-haired Father Gallagher just outside the base path.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Jim. I get more credit from the sports column in the Enterprise."

"How come you're not pitching, Svoboda?"

Jones looked over to the large framed Svoboda at first base and then back at Gallagher. "Svoboda plays first base Perhaps, you'd like to coach the team?"

"Well..."

Nigel Kent, impeccably groomed even at baseball games, leaned toward Jones. "Might improve the record."

Gallagher smiled and winked at Nigel as Jones clapped his hands. "Come on, Craigie... Nigel, the Fletchers have nominated you for the presidency of Hamilton College, I don't think you want me protesting outside your house."

" You would do that, too," said Nigel, glancing at Gallagher. " What about Webster Howard, what do we know?"

" I talked the Medical Examiner when we got the boat to the marina."

" My old friend Clayton Morris," said Nigel.

" Svoboda is playing back too far, Matthias," said Gallagher.

Jones looked down the first baseline and back at Nigel. " I can tell you what I knew right away. Lark didn't kill him in that screwy boat accident. Somebody hit him hard from behind and dragged the body onto the boat."

" And let it drift?" asked Nigel.

" It would appear that way. Plus, I've got an obnoxious state trooper named Mike Fitzgerald investigating this with George Strickland. He wanted to hold Lark over the barracks until Clayton Morris informed him Webster was already dead when Lark hit the boat."

" The only boat on the bay?" asked Nigel.

" Yup, the only other boat within a ten mile radius and Lark smacks head long into it." At the plate the Riverside catcher produced a perfect drag bunt down the first baseline. Jones kicked the dirt. " Oh, gee whiz."

" Father, would you be interested in the Hamilton coaching job?" asked Nigel.

" Oh, no, no. I have my hands full in this town as it is."

Nigel nodded. " You mean the new chapel?"

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" Well, don't take this the wrong way, Nigel. I know you attend the First Parish Church, but your Reverend Bricker has tried to block my efforts to locate a satellite chapel the church off Washington Street."

" One more, Craigie. One more. Force at second!" yelled Jones.

" Yes," said Nigel. " I understand First Parish somehow has the deed to that land."

" We didn't know that at first when I went to the Diocese. I was very hopeful when I learned it was church land. The Reverend was emphatic. Quote:

' There will be no sale of the Washington Street land, Father Gallagher.' Unquote."

" Frankly, First Parish could use the money for repairs," said Nigel.

" Exactly, but the best is yet to come, and I thought the days of prejudice were long gone. When I pressed him, he said: ' We don't need any additional Catholics in Hamilton.'"

" Well, I apologize for that, Father, and I will have a talk with Reverend Bricker. I don't think it's all prejudice. He might want to use that land for the Christian Youth Group. They have a camp north of town on the Pocquanticut River, but no area for basketball and youth activities. So, maybe that's it, Father." Nigel turned to Jones as the next player grounded to second and Hamilton headed for the bench. " Matthias, will I see you at The Colonial House tonight?"

Jones nodded and moved toward Craigie. " How's the arm, Craigie?"

" Good, Coach. I'm all right."

" Good. All right boys, this is it. You need one to tie. One more to win." He looked up at his freshman first baseman. " And you, Svoboda, belt one out, will you?" He hit Svoboda on the arm and turned to Nigel. " I'll be at the Colonial

House, Nigel. What's that you say about Bricker? He wants a youth camp on Washington Street?"

" Youth area for the Christian Youth Association in Prince William. Maybe a youth center but they don't have the money. By the way, Matthias, I need to speak with you about that video you're making with the Communications Department for the annual faculty meeting."

" You'll like it. Mark Morrison tells me we're ninety percent complete." Steve Bradley lined first pitch for a single to right field. Jones clapped and shouted out to Joe Svoboda as he moved his massive frame to the plate. " Come on, Joey. This is the big one, kid. One duck on the pond. Send it flying."

" Kid has a lot of talent," said Gallagher.

Jones smacked his forehead when Svoboda took two called strikes. He returned to the bench as Lark's long brown car slid to a stop within inches of the surrounding chain link fence.

" Our dear coach emeritus," said Nigel with a sly grin.

" Why is it I think he wants to find Webster Howard's murderer?"

Nigel held his arm briefly. " Must be your lucky day."

The crack of Svoboda's bat echoed across the ball field and baseball sailed high above center field and into the towering maples near the music conservatory. Jones and his players cleared the bench and met Svoboda at home plate. The broad shouldered Svoboda tipped his red cap and the meager crowd applauded. Hamilton had won the final game, easing the lackluster season's pain.

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As the small group of fans left the stands and the teams drifted across the field the locker room, Lark marched through the street entrance. Next to him, moving at an equally rapid clip was a lanky man with pinpoint brown eyes and dark wavy hair. Lark wore a bright orange blazer and the other man was dressed in a frumpy checkered sport coat and brown polyester pants. Jones turned to his assistant coach. " Here comes trouble, Woosey."

" Lark I recognize. The other guy-"

" I don't know who he is either. I was supposed to meet Tom McGill at the marina to talk about Webster's murder."

" You want me to cover for you, Matthias?"

" No, it's too late now. I'll get rid of them quick and see you in the locker room before I go."

" Right-O," said Woosey, using one of Lark's favorite expressions.

" Oh, be quiet." Jones moved forward and met the two men behind the backstop. " Lark, you just missed the end of the game. Svoboda hit a two run homer to win it."

Lark's tightened his facial muscles and ground his teeth. " I would like to pursue my usual interest in Hamilton sports, but duty calls. I feel responsible."

The other guy had an odd smile as if he were constantly pleased with himself. " Responsible for what, Lark?"

" The Webster Howard fiasco."

" I told you he was dead before you hit his boat."

" Don't jump to conclusions, Jones," said the other man loudly. Jones looked into his tiny dark eyes. " What we see is not always what is there."

" Who are you?"

" Oh, I see I've gotten your attention. Spiffy, real spiffy."

Jones was already annoyed by this guy. " You haven't told me who you are."

Lark stepped between the two men. " He's Clyde Hooper. I hired him last night."

" Detective Hooper."

Jones rolled his eyes as Hooper rigidly extended his hand and dropped his clipboard on the ground. Papers went flying across the field. " Don't fret! Don't fret, a little wind won't deter me!"

Hooper scampered across the grass and scooped up the papers. " Lark, where did you get this guy?"

" He comes highly recommended."

" From where, the dog pound?"

" He showed me his credentials," said Lark.

" I'm sure he's chasing them now." Hooper plucked pieces of yellow lined paper from the chain link fence. " Webster Howard was a friend. I liked him. I'm looking into his death and so are the state police and George Strickland locally."

" I appreciate you efforts, old boy," said Lark, raising his hand and whispering. " We need undercover work here."

Hooper, attempting to reach for a piece of paper, perched halfway along a maple branch. He slipped and hung upside down. " You really hired this guy?"

" No, he works on the Bolpine Ratings System." Lark's mouth turned down as he spoke. " I think he's stuck."

Hooper pleaded for help from the branch. " Well, fire him. Get rid of him... What's the Bolpine Ratings System?"

" Used in the intelligence services."

" It is? " Jones furrowed his brow and looked up at Hooper's red face and brown tie pointed to the ground. " Just let go."

" Clyde Hooper will not be defeated." Pens and a small notebook fell into the grass.

Jones scooped up the pens. " Just let go, Clyde."

" *Detective* Hooper." Hooper spoke in a lower voice as he looked down. " Confidentially, I'm rather afraid of heights."

" You're only five feet from the ground... Oh, boy." Jones placed his hands on Hooper's back. " I've got you. Just let go."

" Are you sure? I don't want to re-injure my back."

" I've got you!"

" I will trust your judgment, Jones."

" I'm glad."

Hooper unclasped his legs and swung into Jones's stomach. " In the words of Confucius: All's well that ends well."

" That was Shakespeare," said Jones, rubbing the pain his abdomen.

" Oh, did he say it, too?" asked Hooper.

" No, I'm sure it was Vince Lombardi," said Lark.

Jones stared at both men, wondering how he could break away to meet McGill at the marina. " Well, I'll be seeing you."

" Wait," said Hooper, grabbing his arm. " You haven't asked about BRS."

Jones took two steps toward the field. " Oh, well."

" The old BRS, used by investigators around the world."

" That's nice. I have to go now."

" Working on the case, eh?" asked Hooper.

" I'll see you later, Lark... Hooper."

" *Detective* Hooper. It will be case closed, problem solved."

" Right..."

Jones broke into a run, increasing his pace across the infield back to the gym. His abdomen still sore, he tried to focus on Webster's murder and forget Lark and the boob he hired.

## 3

Jones maneuvered his jeep past the flashing yellow light at the end of Shore Drive and continued on the smooth road along the bay. He could not remove thoughts of Hooper hanging from the branch behind the backstop. Both Lark and Hooper could hamper the investigation and Jones was still not sure what happened to Webster Howard. As he rolled across the marina channel's metal drawbridge, dozens of boats were highlighted in the late afternoon sun, but the bay waters were deep blue. McGill's red compact was parked on the grass above the marina near the spot the woman had overlooked the bay.

Jones skidded onto the shoulder behind the compact and got out of the jeep. He snooped around the grass blades for a few moments, looking for footprints or a tire tread from the off road vehicle. When McGill waved from the dock, Jones hiked down the grass-clumped slope to the dock. Webster Howard's weathered white boat was moored further down the dock. " How goes the battle, Tommy?"

" Fitzgerald and Strickland just left."

" Oh, is he still ordering George around?"

" And everyone else. You know, I've seen obnoxious cops in my day, but this guy... George couldn't get a word in edge-wise with the Captain. And Fitzgerald took charge of the evidence and shipped it out to the state police lab. "

" The napkin and the cup?"

" Yeah, the guy is a class-A jerk in my opinion."

" Did George do anything?"

" Wendell and Tully dusted for prints. The state police lab is running tests on Webster's clothes and sneakers. But George did find something interesting."

" Oh?"

McGill motioned him along the dock to Webster's boat. Although the plank leading to the boat was block by two saw horses and yellow police tape, McGill pointed at the hull. " Red paint."

A long red scrape, crossing peeled paint and scuff marks, angled downward into the dark water. " That's new."

" Supposedly, they're testing that, too."

" I wonder what he hit or what hit him?" Jones approached the yellow tape. " Can we go inside?"

" Fitzgerald says no."

Jones nodded, thinking back to the napkin with the **R/L** on it. " Has anybody checked where that napkin came from?"

" I thought about checking the yellow pages."

" Good idea... Who would want to kill Webster? Everybody liked him."

" Everybody did like him. But he did have a bad fight or I should say argument with his wife before he went out. I heard Fitzgerald talking to Strickland about it. The Captain could tell us more."

Jones stared at the scrape in the diminishing sunlight. " That's a good starting point. I'd also like to know whether Webster filled the tank before he went out and when he went out."

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" The Captain would know that, too."

Jones gazed up the slope near the bridge. " And I want to know who that woman was... She was staring out toward Webster's boat. "

" You don't know that, Matthias. She probably was just enjoying the view of the bay. "

" Let's go see the Captain. "

\* \* \*

The harbormaster's house reeked of cherry tobacco. Jones looked down at the boats and across the darkening bay before he turned to the white bearded Captain. " Captain did you notice any red boats when Webster went out?"

The Captain puffed on the curved brown pipe and shook his head.

" Nope."

" Did Webster fill the tank?"

" Yup, bout seven Monday night."

" So, this was his usual time to go fishing?" asked McGill.

" Nope. Webster usually left on Wednesday mornin' and came back Thursday night."

" Well, what was he doing out on Monday night?"

" He didn't say." The Captain set down his pipe on the side table's glass ashtray. " But he did seem in one hell of a hurry when he pumped that gas. Usually he comes in and talks to me. Gives me a hard time, but Monday night was different."

" You mean his wife?"

" Yup. Before he pumped the gas. They were goin' at it like cats and dogs down at the dock. Just for a few minutes and then she left. He pumped. I tallied his slip. Then he got right on his boat and that was that."

" I need to check that gas gauge," said Jones.

" For what?" asked McGill.

" See how far he went. We may not be able to know right away where he went but we might be able to figure the mileage."

" I knew Webster's father... Nathan. Wonderful man. Handyman just like Webster. But he lived into his eighties... Family's been in Hamilton for a couple of hundred years."

" Trouble," said McGill from the window overlooking the bay and Shore Drive.

" What's the matter, Tommy?"

" Fitzgerald's state police car is parked on the highway again."

Jones peered over McGill's shoulder. The tall gray haired trooper, in full green uniform, hat squarely on his head, and boots probably spit polished, climbed the wooden stairs to the Harbormaster's house. " Great, just what we need. There was a woman on the bluff, Captain. "

" Yes, there was. "

The sound of Fitzgerald's boots on the wood planks grew louder. He never knocked, the door crashed open, shaking a set of attached bells, and he strode

inside. His long face noticeably twitched when he saw Jones. " Who the hell are you?"

" Matthias Jones, I'm trying to find out what happened to a man we all knew in town."

" I've heard about you. I got a place over the barracks for people like you. People who think they know more than the police. The investigation on the scene is ninety-nine percent complete. As far as I'm concerned this is an open case right now."

Jones turned from the window. " What about that napkin? Have you checked what restaurant that napkin came from."

" I don't take orders from you."

" He just asked a very valid question," said McGill. He reached out and shook Fitzgerald's hand. " Tom McGill, I own the Enterprise here in town. "

" My people have found nothing and neither has your Chief Strickland."

Jones intended to follow the napkin lead, but did not want to create more animosity with Fitzgerald. He looked down at Webster's boat. The red streak was still visible on the hull even with the sun nearing the western trees.

" What about the long scrape against the bow?" asked McGill. " Has anybody checked out the manufacturer and color of that paint or how about a boat matching that paint."

Fitzgerald's eyes tightened. Tension brewed in his clenched fist and set jaw. " What is this a news conference? You're a newspaper man, you check it out."

" I don't want to duplicate your work."

The trooper's beeper sounded and he reached to his belt. " I have a call."

" Use the phone on the wall," said the Captain, who had taken everything in from his chair.

" Thank you, Captain."

As Fitzgerald stepped to the rotary dial wall phone, Jones moved to McGill and spoke in a low voice. " We won't get anything out of this guy."

" Mr. Personality."

" We're going to have to find out this stuff ourselves."

" Unless Strickland knows something," said McGill.

" True."

Fitzgerald's green uniform bordered the knotty pine wall. His voice, although still loud, became responsive rather than aggressive. " Yes, Mario. This is Mike."

Jones pressed his lips and stared at the Maintenance Free. Whomever killed Webster would need to know about his spending a couple days a week out fishing at sea. More remote was the possibility Webster had a prearranged meeting with somebody or maybe he pulled into port along the coast. " We need to talk with Webster's wife. She might have information about his activities."

Fitzgerald moved behind the corner." Yeah, I'm up here right now, Mario. What? You have to be kidding? That is ludicrous!"

" You going to use Svoboda in football next year?" asked McGill.

Jones turned from the trooper's loud conversation. " Yeah. I think, although Woosey disagrees, we're going to try him at quarterback."

" Good move," said the Captain, removing his pipe. " He has one hell of an arm and he's solid. Good combination."

" That's my point," said Jones, looking toward Fitzgerald.

" Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, I will leave right now. Yes, sir. Good bye, Mario." He set the receiver back on the wall and stepped into the room. " Okay, I have been called away, but I want to make one thing abundantly clear."

" And what might that be?" asked Jones.

Fitzgerald squinted as he lumbered across the wood floorboards. " I'm in charge of this operation, Mister. Don't forget that when you're back on the ball field. Is that clear?"

" No."

Fitzgerald was in the process of turning, but his head snapped back.

" What?"

" The last I heard this is a free country, unless that's changed in the last few minutes."

The trooper held up his thumb and index finger as if he were going to pinch salt. " You're this far away from spending the night at the barracks."

" Are you going to arrest me, Mike?"

" *Trooper Fitzgerald.*"

" Everyone's got a title. "

" Watch it, Jones. " He spun toward the Captain. " Thank you for the use of your phone and your cooperation in his investigation."

" Call me if you need me."

" What about me?" asked Jones, with a grin.

" Watch your step." He stomped to the door without looking back, the bells shook, and he scampered down the hillside stairs.

" Well, he's not a bad guy," said McGill, still holding his yellow pad. Jones laughed as Fitzgerald reached the dock and headed up the highway hill to his cruiser. Even the Captain chuckled from his chair. " A little hyper but not a bad guy."

" Not a bad guy? " asked Jones. " You've got to be kidding. That guy is a-

" Matthias, cool your jets, " replied McGill.

Jones watched Fitzgerald get in the cruiser and quickly pull onto Shore Drive. " This guy wants us out of the investigation. That in itself is suspicious."

" First the woman on the bluff and now Fitzgerald. I think that's just his personality," said McGill.

Jones spun around. " So, Captain, we have Webster usually going out to sea on Wednesdays and coming back to port on Thursday evening."

" Correct," said the Captain.

" But this time he left a day and a half earlier."

" Yup."

" And he left in a hurry after filling the tank. I wonder where he was headed?"

The Captain puffed on the pipe. " Could be anywhere."

## 4

Jones was late he when opened the heavy Colonial House doors. Clyde Hooper blabbered on the lobby phone. He spotted Jones and slammed the receiver. " Just the man I wanted to see."

" Hooper, let's get a few things straight. I am not working with you on the Webster Howard thing. If Lark hired you: that's fine. Do your thing."

" I've encountered jealousy in my dealings with fellow sleuths."

" I knew Webster Howard. He did work for me. And I'm not a sleuth."

" Modest... modest." Jones started for the inside doors, but Hooper blocked his path. " Now, now, let's not be hasty."

" Hooper, you're starting to give me a bad feeling right here in my gut."

" Good, I've got your interest."

" Out of my way."

Jones stepped by him and entered the restaurant. Hooper leaned through the lobby doors. " Remember I have intelligence connections around the world!"

" Good why don't you go connect your booster cables? " Jones rolled his eyes and headed to the rear booth. Father Gallagher was in an animated conversation with Nigel and Mrs. Johnson. Briefly Jones glanced back but did not see Hooper. Gallagher, still in his dark shirt and collar, looked up at Jones.

" Well, finally, Matthias."

" Good evening all."

" We were just talking about Mabel Howard," said Nigel.

" Webster's wife."

" They were married twenty-three years," said Mrs. Johnson.

Gallagher moved his coffee cup and large frame toward the wall as Jones sat down. " What does she say about all this?"

Mrs. Johnson's face tightened. " She's in a state of shock more than anything else. Her sister is coming down from Millbury. "

" They have any kids?" asked Jones.

" No."

" What was the argument about down at the dock before Webster left?"

Mrs. Johnson shrugged her shoulders. " She didn't say."

" I need to speak with this woman."

Jones nodded as Frannie set a cup of coffee, light and sweet, on the table.

" Big level conference?"

" All the heavyweights," said Nigel.

" Now, I have everyone else's order, Matthias."

" I know I'm late." He looked at Hooper in his checkered shirt and pleated beige pants, lingering with a notepad and pencil in front of the Main Street windows. " Oh, no."

" What the matter?" asked Frannie.

" Clyde Hooper."

" Oh, Detective Hooper."

" He's not an detective of anything," said Jones, getting flustered.

" He told me he was a government operative." Jones closed his eyes briefly. Hooper maintained his position up front, but looked away as Jones stared at him.

" He said he had world wide intelligence connections."

" I think he should worry about the intelligence connection between his shoulders and his head."

" Now, now, Matthias," said Gallagher. " Let's respect the man."

Jones pretended to bite his tongue. " I'll have the pork special, Frannie."

" A number five," she said smiling and headed across the room.

" What's the latest from Clayton Morris?" asked Nigel.

" Blow to the back of the head with a blunt instrument." Jones wondered why Webster had left a day and a half early. " Why did he sail from the bay on Monday night? And was that woman waiting for him?"

" What woman? " asked Gallagher.

" I specifically saw a woman on the bluffs, looking across the bay, Jim. "

" Well, Lark was about to ram the boat. "

" There was suppose to be a big storm, wasn't there, Father?" asked Nigel.

" That's true, but they didn't mention the storm until Tuesday morning. I remember because we were afraid we would have to move the Woman's Club bake sale into the parish hall."

Hooper was no longer up front nor was he anywhere in the restaurant. Jones turned to his friends. " Webster was an experienced fisherman. He must have had access to the national weather forecasts. Obviously, we didn't get the storm and it went out to sea. *When* they changed the forecast is essential because he wouldn't just sail into a storm coming up the coast."

" Maybe he was trying to beat the storm and that's why he left early," said Nigel.

" True." Jones stroked his chin and let his suspicions travel down the side road. A potential killer, planning to commit a crime at sea, would have the perfect accomplice in a storm; sweeping Webster Howard's body out to sea.

" What are you thinking, Matthias?" asked Gallagher.

Jones let the steamy coffee rise. " Just trying to sort it through, Father."

Gallagher pointed at Jones. " *Where* he was killed is important. There was no blood on the boat, correct?"

" Nothing on the boat. Webster could have been murdered on another boat... anywhere. Then dragged onto the Maintenance Free. "

" Why drag him downstairs?" asked Mrs. Johnson.

" I think he tried to get to the radio. He was still alive." Jones pictured the red bow scrape. " And he almost got to the radio. "

" Maybe he broadcast something," said Nigel.

" We would have heard about it. Somebody would have reported a plea for help."

Nigel pressed his thin lips. " But who would want Webster dead? He had no enemies."

As if he were about to step in the boxing ring, an angry look swept over Gallagher's face. The bearded Reverend Bricker, blonde hair disheveled, alternated grimaces at Gallagher as he waited to be seated. Gallagher spoke clearly. " The reverend has arrived."

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" I assure you, Father, I will talk to the reverend. I frankly don't understand his attitude about the land."

Gallagher slowly nodded as he stood. " All I ask is a little courtesy and possibly an explanation."

" Jim, let Nigel talk to him."

" Sometimes things are better settled up front."

As Gallagher crossed the restaurant, Nigel rapped Jones on the arm.

" Matthias, stop him."

" Once he gets his mind set on something he's like a freight train rumbling down the track."

" Well, at least referee it."

" All right." Jones slid from the booth. Gallagher had already reached Bricker and extended his hand, but the reverend did not reciprocate.

" I do not wish to be disturbed," said Bricker in a whining, elite voice.

" Reverend, I can understand it's your private business whether you sell that land on Washington Street. And I know you want it to go to the Youth Group "

The reverend's blue eyes were unusually intense. " You're right, it is my private business."

" Your table is ready, reverend," said the hostess.

The reverend stared at the taller Gallagher for a second and then started across the restaurant. Gallagher turned to Jones. " What's wrong with that man?"

" I would drop it, Jim. You can find other land for the chapel."

Gallagher's eyes tracked Bricker to the table along flowered wallpaper.

" You're talking to a former College Gloves champion, Matthias."

" Round's over, Father."

\* \* \*

After dessert Jones attempted to leave several times. He listened to the boat crash story three times in the twenty minutes Lark and Flo were at the table. Lark wore his flashy orange blazer with a green tie, and Flo's flowery dress closely resembled the restaurant's vibrant wallpaper. She clutched Lark's arm and looked at the ceiling as she spoke in a squeaky voice. " I never want to go out in that boat again."

" Not to worry, Snookems, Detective Hooper has assured me he will offer me an instructional course before we set sail."

" What does Hooper know about boats?" asked Jones.

" Part of his intelligence work, old boy. Navy Seal... "

" No way, Lark. "

" He knows all the connections to intelligence."

" And they're all short circuited," mumbled Jones.

" What was that, old boy? " asked Lark.

" A passing comment about the illustrious Mr. Hooper. "

" Detective Hooper."

" You should fire him, Lark, now that you've figured out the Howard murder," said Flo.

" You should fire him anyway," said Jones. " You figured this out, did you, Lark?"

Lark held a glass of sarsaparilla in his hand and sat upright with a whimsical smile on his face. " I do have figured this out and it's all very simple."

" And?"

He smacked his lips after taking in some sarsaparilla.. " A fisherman. A fisherman, get it?"

" Nope, I don't get it," said Jones, thinking about Mike Fitzgerald and his arrogant attitude. Fitzgerald was going to block Jones every step of the way.

" Here's how I see it," said Lark. He leaned forward across the table and again squinted his blue eyes, magnified behind his glasses. Gallagher half grinned and Nigel seemed restless. " At sea mysterious things can happen to witnesses. That's how *they* got him."

" They?" asked Jones, trying not to look at Gallagher.

" The passing trawler."

" Passing trawler?" asked Nigel, transforming a chuckle into a laugh.

" Excuse me."

" I say they *lured* him in," said Lark softly, quickly raising his voice as he grabbed Flo's arm. " *Then they got him!*"

" Oh, dear God don't scare me, Lark!"

Jones visualized the long red scrape, certain it was relevant to the investigation. " Yes, don't scare her, Lark."

" Lark swears the fisherman were Canadian, right, Lark?" asked Flo.

" *Revenge* on Webster for all the fish he caught. Then they *got him!*" he shouted.

" Oh, Snookems, you're such a kidder."

" See," said Lark, gesturing with his hands like a politician showing a vision for the country. " Webster was a mechanical genius."

" He was?" asked Jones.

" Sure, he fixed my toilet." Lark snapped his fingers. " Bingo!"

" Can you beat that?" asked Jones.

" And that toilet is still running, Matthias."

" Well, that's a great story, Lark. I really do have to be going," said Jones. He stood and stretched in front of the booth.

" Do you have to go now?" asked Lark. " I was about to tell you about the 1941 double draw."

" Some other time."

" The double draw was ahead of it's time. Funny... no one ever used it again." Jones picked up the check. " That's nice of you, Matthias."

Jones had not intended to pay tab. Gallagher shook his hand as Jones caught sight of Cora and Courtney Jefferson from Jefferson's Hardware. " Real nice of you."

" Matthias," said Cora, motioning him over.

" Evening, Cora."

" He's a wicked cheap skate, that Lark Larsen," she said, compressing her wrinkled face as she spoke.

" Mother, he might hear," said Courtney.

" Well, maybe he damned well better hear. He hates to part with a buck."

" Cora, you're a lady after my own heart," said Jones.

" See, when he comes in the store he keeps buying stoppers for his garden hose. Patch kits for his tires."

" I have to re-groove his old house key," said Courtney, shaking his head.

" Talk about cheap."

" Maybe if you cut it right the first time. "

Lark dipped his fork into a hunk of midnight chocolate cake. He said something to Flo and she giggled loudly as Jones shook his head. " Canadian fisherman..."

## 5

Jones shifted his jeep and passed through the campus into town. Earlier, at St. Bart's rectory, he had made another pitch to Gallagher about halting the plans for a chapel on Washington Street. Helping the Youth Group was a good gesture, but entertaining such thoughts made Gallagher all the more adamant to build the chapel. Reverend Bricker had fought Gallagher when Gallagher had demonstrated sincerity. Jones now prepared himself for the long haul.

He shifted his jeep again near Larsen Field and started up the hill toward Main Street. A lone figure stood in the street across from the Cornucopia theater. Jones braked, downshifted and flicked the high beams. Clyde Hooper raised his hand in the headlight's glare. Jones thought about looping around him, but decided to stop and Hooper marched up to his window. " I figured you'd be returning from Prince William via this road."

" Wouldn't be easier to use a phone, Hooper?"

" *Detective* Hooper."

" What is it you want?"

" Ah, ha. Cut to the chase. No small talk. I like that. Yes, sir. "

Jones shifted into neutral. " Hooper, I'd like to get home and get some sleep."

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" We all would like to rest our bones." Jones watched incredulously as Hooper rounded the hood and stood along the passenger side. " Now, let's get down to brass tackles."

" Tacks. "

" Tacks, yes of course. "

" Do you have a reservoir of clichés?" asked Jones. He pulled behind an older red and white Volkswagen van along the sidewalk.

" Be glad I tracked you down," said Hooper, sticking his head inside the jeep window. Then he looked down the sidewalk.

" What are you doing?"

Hooper pulled his head back in the jeep. " Always be prepared, Jones. Webster Howard's murderer is lurking out there."

" That true, but-"

" While you've been living it up at the Colonial House, I have been at work."

" I know I'll hate myself for not asking, but what have you found?"

Hooper squinted his beady eyes. " Well?"

He spoke in almost a whisper. " The wife is very suspicious. I have learned, Jones, that she spends beyond her means."

" Oh?"

" Howard did not make a great deal of money."

" That wasn't his intention." Ahead on Main Street Reverend Bricker's wood paneled station wagon raced around the common and shot out like a an arcade cannonball. " Bricker..."

Hooper's head snapped forward. " Who is Bricker?"

" The reverend of First Parish Church." Jones shifted and started to pull out. Hooper trotted alongside the jeep. " Where do you think you're going, Jones?"

" I need to speak with him." Jones stopped briefly at the Main Street corner as Bricker bounced into Pudgy Wilson's Gas Station.

A winded Hooper approached Jones' window. " Jones, we need to discuss the handyman's murder."

" Discuss," said Jones, inching onto Main Street. Bricker stopped under the pump lights. A young kid emerged from the gas station. Bricker yelled something out the window as Jones pulled next to the pay phone less than a hundred yards from the gas station.

" Now, Jones. I believe Webster Howard had a mission."

" We all have missions in life." Jones stepped from the jeep and meandered down the sidewalk. The kid stuck the gas nozzle into the tank.

" Jones, you're evading me," said Hooper, catching his breath.

" Oh? What made you think that?"

In the warm night air Jones walked onto the gas station cement. Bricker looked up from inside the window. " Coach, Jones."

" Reverend."

Bricker's collar was gone and his powder gray shirt was unbuttoned.

" What's the problem?"

" I didn't know there was a problem."

His yellowed teeth were chiseled and his brown beard curled upward when he smiled. He spoke slowly and precisely, and swept his head with every word.

" You think I don't know Father Gallagher sent you over here to coax me out of my position in regard to the land proposition."

" You sound like you're giving a legal deposition," joked Jones.

The reverend's steely eyes remained fixed. " The land is not for sale, Jones."

" Why not? Who cares?"

" That land belongs to the First Parish Church and as the pastor of that church I have made that decision. And furthermore what kind of arrogant priest does he think he is?"

" Is there more than one? "

Bricker did not flinch and Jones' smile dropped. " He thinks he can just dictate what my church can and cannot do. As far as I'm concern that's a good reason for him to stay in Prince William."

" I guess I understand your position. Reverend. I can only say that Jim Gallagher is my friend and you really don' t know what you have against him."

" Excuse me?"

" And I see no reason why you can't bend a little bit and sell Gallagher that land. It would mean money for First Parish. Since when do churches not want to fill the coffers?"

The gas nozzle clicked and Bricker looked up at the pump. Pudgy Wilson waddled from the garage. " Hey, Pudge. Didn't know you were on tonight."

" You own the business, you're always on. And Chuckie is on vacation. Hey Leo Crowley told me about Svoboda's home run."

" I really have to go," said Bricker.

" Kid's going to help your teams. I can' t believe he's only a freshman."

Pudgy forced in more gas into Bricker's station wagon.

" I'm going to try him at quarterback next fall."

" I have an appointment!" said Bricker.

" Oh, sorry," replied Pudgy. He pulled out the nozzle and placed it back in the pump. " That will be fifteen dollars, Reverend."

" Put it on the church's tab." Bricker started the car and quickly cut a narrow arc back to Main Street. A smoky exhaust trail fanned back to the station as he raced toward the traffic lights.

" That car could use an engine overhaul."

" He could use an engine overhaul," said Jones. " I'm sorry, Pudge. I know you're a member of First Parish."

" The old reverend's got quite a following, but..."

" He's such a... a..."

" Dipstick."

Jones grinned and gave Pudgy a tap on the shoulder. " Have a good one, Pudge."

" You, too, Matthias."

Jones smiled, but quickly turned. " Say, Pudge, a woman in an off road vehicle, maybe green, ever pull in here? "

" A lot of people come and go. Can' t say anything comes to mind right away. Why?"

" She may be a suspect in Webster's murder. "

" I'll tell the boys. We'll keep a lookout. You say green off road? "

" Green or dark... Thanks, Pudge. "

Jones headed back to the jeep, but he did not see Hooper. He walked around the jeep and checked the rear seat. " Hooper, where are you?"

He climbed back in the driver's seat. A kid's tape playback toy was stuck on the visor. Jones pushed the button and Hooper's annoying voice vibrated on the tiny speaker. " *I'm on the run and undercover. I suggest you follow up on the napkin and other evidence. And then it will be: case closed, problem solved. Hooper out.*"

Jones shook his head and started the jeep. He glanced at the playback toy as he veered onto Main Street, but Bricker's attitude bothered him. Now he understood why Gallagher was so upset. Maybe because of his position within the small town, Bricker was both pompous and arrogant. Jones thought back about the land. Just six months ago, around Christmas time, the blue and red Abrams Realty For Sale sign came down. Nigel mentioned no one had expressed an interest in purchasing the land, yet six months later Gallagher was a legitimate buyer and Bricker would not sell.

Jones had the green light and started around the common, but hit a bump, and the recording on the visor went off again. " *I'm on the run and undercover. I suggest you follow up on the napkin and other evidence. And then it will be: case closed, problem solved. Hooper out..*"

" Oh, shut up, Hooper."

He ripped the toy from the visor, chucked it out the window, and it rolled toward the common. Unfortunately Hooper was right. That napkin was related to the murder and Webster Howard likely was murdered at a place call R/L. Witnesses at R/L might help unfold the investigation. Maybe Mike Fitzgerald knew more than he was saying. Jones looked back uptown. Hooper's van was gone in front of the Cornucopia.

He passed the bank and trekked around the west side of the common. Mike Fitzgerald had an odd antipathy about the whole case. Sharing any evidence, such as why Webster went to sea earlier than usual, seemed remote. Jones sensed Webster tried to beat the pending storm, but his hurried pace and the argument with his wife at the dock was suspicious. Jones imagined Webster sailing out early for nefarious purposes; maybe a drug run. He smiled at the absurdity and shook his head. Webster appeared to be an innocent handyman with no sinister motives nor any bad habits.

Jones peered up at Bricker's huge white church as he turned at the far end of the common. The prodigious pane glass windows were dark and the steeple disappeared into the night air. As he headed toward his own house, he saw the glow from lights in L.G. Bentley's office across the common and he slowed the jeep. Bricker's station wagon was parked in the side alley. The important appointment, alluded to by the reverend back at the gas pumps, was with a lawyer. Jones stopped the jeep in front of his picket fence and got out.

L.G. was visible through the window. He swiveled in his brown leather chair. Bricker waved papers in his face, gestured vigorously, and then hurled the papers

onto the desk. L.G. sprang from his chair and pointed at reverend. He scooped up a piece of paper and held it in front of Bricker's face. Bricker snatched the sheet and the rest of the papers on the desk and bolted out of sight.

L.G. pounded his fist silently on the desk and sat down again. He reached in his desk drawer and pulled out a cigar, lighting it quickly. Jones could almost smell the smoke. The side entrance door slammed across the common. Bricker was not visible, but the station wagon soon started and headlights shone out the alley. He rounded the corner, shot along the common and rolled rapidly into the church's circular drive.

L.G. had placed a phone call as Bricker's red taillights went dark. Jones had little understanding of the confrontation nor of the reverend's adamant attitude against Gallagher, but he knew Gallagher would relish hearing this story.

## 6

Jones crunched a warm English muffin between his teeth as he listened to Tom McGill yawn from his Enterprise office and complain how he had scrutinized the area phone books for a restaurant called R/L. " Matthias, I have checked from up the Maine coast to Cape Cod. I don't find anything named R/L... Nothing."

Jones swished a blended coffee in his mouth. " It's a question of how far The Maintenance Free would go. He filled the tank. "

" I'm sure there is a maximum radius Webster could have gone and still have brought the boat back to the bay. Unless he re-filled somewhere else. We should check with the Captain this morning."

" I have to meet this afternoon with some incoming boys who want to play ball. The Fletchers made an inane remark about the team's record and now Nigel is apoplectic. I have to beef up the team, but... I can check with the Captain before I head to the college. What about the woman on the hill?"

" Haven't checked. Let me know what you find out. I'll be in my office. As long as that nut, Hooper, stays away, I can get some work done."

" Hooper? What did he want?" asked Jones.

" Oh, I heard his long resume. Intelligence service, courses, ranks, secret operations. I threw him out after he started checking phone line for bugs."

" Get used to him. Lark hired him to find Webster's murderer," said Jones.

" I'm surprised Lark would shell out the bucks.."

" He's on some incentive system. He's too much of a boob. He'll disappear.

"

" I tried Mabel Howard again and got the answering machine *again*. Where the hell is she?"

" I should go over there, too."

" Call me if you find anything, Matthias."

" Talk to you later."

\* \* \*

Jones turned at Shore Road's flashing yellow light. The sunlight produced a shimmering mass of diamonds across Hamilton Bay. He briefly pictured Bricker in L.G.'s office, but his thoughts quickly swung back to the murder and the restaurant napkin. McGill should have found something in the phone books. Webster or someone associated with him had been inside a restaurant called R/L. Fitzgerald was probably on the same trail, but breaking through his cocky facade would not be easy.

On the other side of the marina bridge George Strickland's white and blue Hamilton cruiser was parked in the tall grass off the highway. Jones crossed the bridge's humming, grid surface and then veered left. He stepped outside the jeep. The coast was hazy down to Massachusetts, but as he stepped into the high beach grass he realized Webster or someone else could have picked up the napkin inland.

Under the puffy Atlantic clouds the colorful inlet boats lined the channel. The damaged Maintenance Free was moored at the end of the dock. The sea was calm now, but in a storm, the murderer would have counted on all evidence vanishing in raging waters.

" Matthias!" Strickland and the Captain stood on the deck outside the harbormaster's house. The Captain smoked his pipe and Strickland waved as Jones continued through the grass. " You're out early."

" Captain make your breakfast?" asked Jones.

The Captain lifted a heavy pewter stein from the deck railing, " I'm having my breakfast."

" That and raw herring," said Strickland, pretending to be nauseated.

" Both will put hair on your chest," said the Captain.

Jones raised his brows. " I bet it will. Anything new on the Webster Howard case?"

" You just missed Trooper Fitzgerald," said Strickland.

" Oh?"

" Yeah, and he specifically asked me if you've been snooping around."

The Captain smacked his lips and put down the stein. " No, what he said was: ' Has that pain in the- ' "

" Never mind," said Strickland.

" Do you know him, George?" asked Jones, gazing back to Webster's boat.

" The guy isn't very professional."

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Strickland nodded. "You're right. I thought he was going to punch out that investigator you hired."

"I didn't hire anybody. You're not talking about Detective... Clyde Hooper, are you?"

"You hired someone to help you?" asked the Captain.

"I didn't hire him."

"It's all right, Matthias," said Strickland, smiling. "Listen, I admire someone who knows they need help."

"Fitzgereld threatened Hooper?"

"Told him to beat it or he'd bring him over the barracks for questioning."

"Maybe my opinion of Fitzgereld is changing."

Strickland pointed at Jones. "Don't worry about Fitzgereld. He was just transferred from up here. Clean record. Good cop..."

"Well, did he find anything new?"

"Only what I told him," said the Captain.

"About what? The argument with the wife?"

The Captain shook his head and pulled out his pipe. "Nope, the woman in riding pants. I didn't think anything about her being by the bridge."

"When was she first by the bridge?"

"Before you and Tom arrived and then she came back when I got the rental for you. And yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you talk to her?" asked Jones.

" Apparently, Detective Hooper did," said the Captain.

" Oh, great," said Jones, raising his hands. " Did Fitzgerald get to speak with her?"

" No, he didn't mention that in his reports," replied Strickland. " She drove an off road vehicle, smaller than your jeep, Matthias. Kelly green, right, Captain?"

" Kelly green. Every time, she was looking like she was waiting. And this morning she started down the hill a couple of times."

" She was looking for something in the boat," said Jones.

" Matthias, don't come up with any wild theories, " said Strickland. " We've been through the boat a dozen times."

" But have you taken it apart, George?"

Strickland put his hand on his hips. " Maybe she likes the view."

" I'm going to check it out," said Jones. " Let's go down to the boat."

" All right, but we're not ripping anything apart without going to Herbert Lane and getting a search warrant."

" And what does dear old Herbert say about all this. "

" He's tied up in some fraud case," said Strickland.

Jones tilted his head back and chuckled. " Yeah, he's probably the defendant. "

" Herbert... is Herbert. "

" You coming, Captain?" asked Jones.

" I have to finish my breakfast," he said, grasping his stein again.

Jones grinned and he and Strickland started down the pressure treated stairway to the lower docks. " Do we know where Webster sold his fish?"

" There's a brokerage in Prince William just under the Crosstown Bridge. Fitzgerald talked to the people over there. Apparently, Webster came in every Thursday morning, but he never told them he wouldn't be there this week. And obviously he wasn't."

" And there was no fish caught on the boat." Jones reached the dock first and focused on the red bow scrape. " Maybe he really went out to beat the storm but wasn't able to fish."

" Possible."

" But he had a radio and would have listened to the National Weather Service. See, Webster would have known once he was out there that the storm went out to sea. I still say the killer didn't realize the forecast had changed."

" You mean the killer thought the boat would go down?"

" Yup. That was a powerful storm." Jones squatted and stared at the red scrape. " Webster wouldn't have come back to Hamilton Bay, George, knowing the weather was clear. He would have stayed out there and fished."

" That's a good point. Except there are no fish on the boat... I reached Webster's wife."

" Oh?" asked Jones, standing. " What about the argument?"

" She says she and Webster were supposed to go out to eat."

" Where? R/L?"

" I asked her that. No, The Colonial House."

" I find it hard to believe she would get that upset because of a canceled dinner. There has to be more."

" She says no. I don't know her that well, but she sounds like someone who is trying to act refined, but can't cut it."

" Does she have an alibi?" asked Jones.

" Listen to this: At home, no witnesses."

" Convenient." Jones scanned the clear blue waters. " I think he went out for another reason. Maybe drugs."

" Drugs? You don't know that. Webster was just a handyman in a small town.. a guy who minded his own business. To transform this into a drug run is a leap."

Jones stroked his chin. " No. The whole thing, the napkin, the early trip to sea, no fish... And what about the woman on the hill. What was she waiting for?"

" You don't have enough facts."

" You're right."

" And I want to be with you if you talk to Mabel Howard."

Jones walked in front, but stared at the boat. " I would paint my boat if I struck the boat of a dead man."

" Maybe, did you hear what I said about Mabel Howard?"

" There are seven thousand people in Hamilton not counting the students. Somebody must own a red bottom boat. And I'm wondering about the woman in riding pants. That vehicle must be parked in a local stable at one time or another."

" Don't get yourself in trouble with speculation."

Jones smiled. " George, I'd like you to come to Mabel Howard's house with me."

" Oh, what smart idea," said Strickland, opening his eyes.

Jones turned. Hooper's red and white Volkswagen van was parked across the bridge and Hooper was now at the bridge rail, pointing a camera at the two men.

" What the hell is he doing now?"

" Filming us."

" George, you need to tell this guy to back off." Jones pulled Strickland behind the post. " I have additional two thoughts. How did Webster get down to his boat? And where's his truck?"

" At home."

" So, you're saying he walked five miles to get on the boat?" asked Jones.

" Good point."

" And I'm telling you," he said, looking back at the boat. " You need to get dogs on that boat and check."

" We don't have dogs, Matthias. I've got enough problems trying to get the selectmen to approve money to pay my guys. " He gazed back the Maintenance Free and thought. " Dom Pacheco has dogs in Prince William, but I don't want to bother him on some wild guess. All the boys at the P.W.P.D. think we live in the sticks anyway."

" We do... Have Fitzgerald get them." He peered around the post. Hooper and the van were gone. " Hooper is going to cause problems, mark my word."

## 7

Nigel prattled on about the upcoming annual faculty meeting. Jones leaned back in the unstable chair behind his office desk. He looked into his friend's magnified brown eyes, but his mind was set on the murder, and he wanted to find the identity of the woman waiting on the bridge. Checking the local stables would help him find her small jeep. Although the R/L napkin might not prove conclusive, Jones sensed it was part of composite evidence surrounding Webster Howard's last hours on earth. McGill suggested he check the school library for restaurant listings down the coast. He inhaled as Nigel continued. In twenty minutes he and Strickland would speak with Mabel Howard. Her argument with Webster still bothered Jones and he wanted to know how Webster traveled to the marina.

" Excuse me, Matthias," said Nigel. " You seem to be off in another world somewhere."

" I'm sorry."

" I was going to check on your progress with the students."

" Progress?"

" Yes, on the video you're producing for the faculty meeting."

" Oh, right, the video."

Nigel leaned forward and looked over the top of his glasses. " Well?"

" Our problem is putting it all together. All year Mark has been sticking a video camera or a thirty-five millimeter in someone's face. We just have to string it together and add the sound."

" Good. And your friend, the Reverend Bricker, has agreed to say an invocation."

" Wonderful."

" I know you will put the proper spin on this video."

Jones steadied himself in the chair. " The Fletchers will love it."

" Ham will. He's younger, but I'm not sure about Hamilton," said Nigel.

" Don't even worry. The whole film will center around the Fletchers, benefactors of the town and the college. What about you, Nigel? Do you think they'll appoint you President of the college?"

Nigel sat up straight and tightened his brow. He cleared his throat.

" Hamilton has been reluctant to discuss it nor have any of my contacts heard anything. I heard a rumor they might be bringing somebody in from outside."

" I thought that only happened with athletic coaches," said Jones as the desk phone rang. Jones almost lost his balance in the chair as he reached for the receiver.

" I'm putting a new chair in the budget for you."

" And get rid of this thing?" He gripped the phone and it kept ringing.

" This was Lark's chair. It has historical significance."

" Really, Matthias."

He put the phone to his ear. " Matthias Jones."

" I'm in the area," whispered an almost indiscernible voice.

" Who is this?"

" Stay put."

The line went dead and Jones banged the hook. " Hello, hello."

" Who was it?"

" It had to be Hooper."

" Hooper?"

Jones stood, still staring at the phone. " It had to be that idiot."

" Who exactly is Hooper?" asked Nigel.

" He thinks he's a detective. Lark hired him to look into the Webster Howard murder. As I said before, he's not an detective of anything." The phone rang again and Jones ripped up the receiver. " Listen, you little pea brain. Stop bugging me. Stay out of this!"

" Pea brain?" asked Strickland.

" George?"

" Bugging you?"

" Forget it, forget it."

" What did I do?"

" It's not you, I thought it was that dumb bell, Hooper."

" He just left here," said Strickland.

" Then you know what I'm talking about."

" He snuck up on me out back. I almost shot him. Said he had valuable information, but he wouldn't tell me what it was. I threw him out."

Jones sat in the tipsy chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. " Mercy."

" Well, I do have something. I talked to Clayton Morris. He has the preliminary report on Webster Howard."

" Oh, good," said Jones looking at Nigel. " Excuse me, Nigel. I'll only be a minute."

" No, please go ahead."

Strickland rustled some papers and began reading. " Webster died between three and four a.m. They found half digested cheese pizza in his stomach and some beer. Not enough to make him drunk."

" Does Clayton know when Webster had the pizza?"

" He figures between twelve and one. Maybe earlier, but he's convinced Webster was not attacked on the Maintenance Free. Clayton figures he was attacked hours before."

" I knew it."

" Hit in the head with a heavy, blunt instrument. Cracked his skull. Paper towels were used to wipe down his body and shirt and then the cap was placed on his head. No fingerprints. Nothing."

" How did he get back on the Maintenance Free?"

" Dragged. Slight contusions under the armpits. Work shoes scuffed. Apparently, the killer took him for dead."

Nigel stood. " I have to go."

" I apologize, Nigel."

" No need to. Brief me later on the progress of the faculty meeting film."

" I will."

Nigel left the office and opened the gym lobby doors. " So, George, if the killer believed the storm was coming..."

" That's the interesting part. Clayton thinks Webster was deposited on the deck. Thus, he would be washed out to sea. Somehow, he had the strength, it might have taken hours, to crawl below. Clayton believes the bruises on his arms and ribs were from a fall down the stairs and there is minute blood splattering along the stairway. Webster almost activated the radio."

Jones tried to imagine the scenario. " Then it happened at sea."

" Who knows?"

" Maybe on a red bottom boat?"

" That sounds logical," said Strickland. " There are strong lateral currents along the coast. His boat could have drifted back toward Hamilton."

" Good point. That puts the boat down toward Massachusetts and not up to Maine."

" Just a guess," said Strickland. " Listen, I'll be over in ten minutes. We'll talk to Mabel Howard."

" Yeah, let's explore that argument with Webster."

" I'll be out in front of the gym."

" Bye, George."

Jones set down the phone, went over to the small office cooler and grabbed a soda. He opened the can and let the cola trickle down his throat, but as he turned Clyde Hooper sat on the edge of his desk. " Hooper, what are you doing here?"

" You don't know, do you?"

" Know what?" asked Jones, squeezing the can as he crossed the room.

A walkie-talkie sounded on Hooper's belt. " I hear you, Walter."

" Detective Hooper: all clear at the marina."

" Who is that?" asked Jones.

" Walter, I told you, it's M-5. Someone might be listening."

" M-5. M-5."

Hooper clipped the radio back on his belt and stood straight. " Fortunately, Jones, I have operatives on standby. I fully intend to find the mystery woman."

" The horse rider."

" Very good. I see you're right on this, too." He leaned closer to Jones and lowered his voice. " We are checking the area stables."

" We?"

" My investigative force. I wasn't born yesterday."

" Really? I was going to send you a birthday card." Jones moved forward.

" I really have to go."

" Wait one minute. Aren't you curious about the new and important evidence I've uncovered?"

He sipped the soda and headed out the office. " Not really."

" Then you must already know," said Hooper, following him. " You have your own men out in the field, right?"

Jones stopped by the lobby door. " I don't have anyone working for me nor do I know what you're talking about."

" I am about to break this case," he said in a high pitched voice as Jones bounded into the gym lobby. Hooper trailed him past the trophy display cases.

" Clyde Hooper will not rest until justice is served!"

Jones continued through the lobby and pushed open the outside doors. When Hooper grabbed him out front, his anger surged. " Hooper, get lost. Get out of the investigation. Get out of my life."

" I've been hired on the Bolpine!" Jones stood at the curb, shaking his head as he waited for Strickland's cruiser to appear around the corner. " Lark now thinks Webster Howard more than likely committed suicide."

" What?" asked Jones facing him. Hooper had an odd smirk on his face.  
" That is the dumbest thing you've said yet."

" He almost fired me and-"

" That act would be beneficial to humanity."

" He said to stop looking for your killer because Webster killed himself."

" Sure, I know I've always thought about beating myself to death using a blunt instrument in the *back* of the head!"

" There's where experience is the best teacher. To use the Latin: *Experientia... Experientia... Wait, I'll get it.*"

" *Experientia docet. Experience teaches. Experientia docet stultos.*"

" I'll remember."

Strickland's white and blue cruiser barreled around the Main Street corner.

" Thank God."

" What was that, Jones?"

" Listen, Hooper, why don't you check in with your man, Walter, or something?"

" Experiencia... Don't you want to know how Lark thinks Webster Howard really died?"

" Not particularly."

Hooper briefly touched his arm. " Credit is hard to share sometimes, Jones."

" Larks says Webster placed the object on the rope and let it swung into his head."

Jones exhaled deeply, but refused to look at Hooper as Strickland drove into the parking lot. " Are you looking for the women in the riding pants?"

" Absolutely."

" You let me know if you find her," said Jones as Strickland slowed.

Hooper grasped Jones's arm again. " Why was Webster so distraught?"

" Darned if I know."

" I'll tell you: Wife was a cheater."

" How do you know that?" asked Jones, turning.

" I will not reveal my sources."

" Do you actually know she was cheating on him?"

" Absolutely, Jones. Absolutely." He saluted Jones and spun, as if he were in a military parade, toward his red and white van.

Jones briefly watched him and then opened the cruiser door.

" Unbelievable."

" Is that Hooper marching over there?" Jones just shook his head.

" What did he want?"

" George, you don't want to know."

" We have bigger problems," said Strickland, looping around the gym parking lot.

" What happened?"

" Mike is gone."

" What do you mean, he's gone?" asked Jones.

" I mean AWOL. He hasn't showed up at the barracks in North Paxton for two days. Ianelli, he's the lieutenant, can't locate him. They've had troopers over to Mike's apartment in Devonshire and at his house up in Hilldale. The guy is gone. Vanished."

" You know what I'm thinking." Hooper's van, spewing a trail of stinky exhaust, cut in front of Strickland. Hooper beeped the lame horn several times and swerved back toward Main Street.

" What a jerk."

" Yeah, they should list that with his qualifications in the yellow pages," said Jones. " There are two possibilities with Mike. Worst possibility is the killer got to him"

" What's the other?"

" He's the killer."

Strickland slammed his boot against the brake pedal and the cruiser stopped in front of the Cornucopia. " What?"

" He could be the killer."

" That's ridiculous. On what basis?"

" The fact that he was so arrogant when he began this investigation and the fact that he's gone."

" I think someone got to him." said Strickland as he pulled to the corner and signaled right. " Herbert Lane never mentioned that at the D.A.'s office."

" Herbert's too busy being impressed with himself," said Jones.

" You don't like him, do you?"

" He never recognizes anything I do."

" Matthias, you keep coming up with state troopers murdering people, then I can understand why."

" I said that was a possibility. I still maintain the killer counted on that bad storm moving up the coast. I think Mike would have been aware of any forecast change." As they drove along the common, Jones gazed over at his own house across the green, but he kept thinking about Hooper talking about Lark's bizarre suicide theories. " Jackass."

" What was that, Matthias?"

" Hooper."

" Oh."

" Dealing with Hooper almost makes me want to work with Lark."

## 8

" You know I never heard much from Fitzgerald anyway," said Strickland.

" I have to call Ianelli. It would be nice to have the results of some of those evidence tests."

Jones nodded and stared at the sloping Washington Street field a few hundred yards from Bricker's church. Strickland slowed and stopped. " Did I tell you I ran into Bricker at Pudgy's. He hates Gallagher."

" Father could stand to be a little more tolerant," said Strickland.

" Why wouldn't Bricker sell this land? What's his problem? It was for sale six months ago."

Strickland slowly drove away. " Father should have Marcia Abrams find him another plot. We live in a rural town. It isn't like we're running out of land."

" Gallagher will never back down."

" And neither Bricker."

" What a combination," said Jones.

Strickland buzzed down past rows of tall green cornstalks in the bright sun along Washington Street. The Miller farmhouse was set back on a hill within a clump of trees a few hundred yards from Webster Howard's house. Webster's faded white clapboards were patched with new unpainted sections, black shutters, missing slats, hung at angles from the window frames, and the sagging porch was

cluttered with assorted debris. Strickland guided the cruiser into the long grass off the road.

Jones opened the door before Strickland shut off the engine. Smoke from a sheet metal stovepipe, jutting from a tiny tar papered shack out back, spread into the warm air. " That's odd."

" What?" asked Strickland, rounding the cruiser.

" The smoke on a warm day."

Strickland nodded as they moved up the dirt driveway. A blue and gray pickup truck was parked behind a shiny red Mercedes sports car and a pale green late model sedan. " Who's car is that?"

" The Mercedes is Mabel Howard's car."

" What?"

" The other car I'm not sure of," said Strickland.

" What's she doing with a car like that?" Jones peered at the smooth white leather interior. " Wow."

They passed a cluster of heavily scented lilac bushes and trotted up the cracked, unpainted front steps. The porch was loaded with boards, spare machine parts, and an old musty green sofa. Strickland knocked at the screen door.

" Looks like the handyman wasn't too handy," said Jones.

" Yeah, but the inside has been renovated."

The inner gray paneled door opened and a plain looking woman with thinning permed brown hair and a flowery blue dress hid behind the screen.

" Oh, I thought you were Clyde."

" Clyde?" asked Jones.

" Detective Hooper. He just called." She opened the screen door and looked ahead to the road.

" I don't believe we've been introduced," said Strickland.

" Oh, yes. The police chief."

" I've brought a friend of mine with me concerning Webster's death."

She nodded and folded her arms across her chest. Her brow tightened and her eyes moistened. " Poor Webster. Not good. Not good."

" May we come in?"

" Yes, of course. I'm Anne Dawson, Mabel's sister."

" Nice to meet you."

She held open the screen door and motioned them inside. Heavy perfume permeated the darkened room and a huge wide screen TV blasted out a shop at home cable channel. A tall woman, tanned with an elongated nose and frizzy red hair, jaunted in from the rear kitchen. Heavy gold wrist bracelets jingled and sharp triangular earrings dangled as she rumbled forward. Around her neck and freckled chest hung a thick gold pendant. She had huge teeth, deep green mascara, powdered purple lipstick. She sashayed up to Jones. Her voice was shrill and inappropriate. " Hi, I'm Mabel Howard."

" Matthias Jones."

" Oh, you're one of Clyde Hooper's men."

" Mam', I don't work for-"

" You work for a good man. He has credentials." She picked up a silver wrapped piece of chewing gum from the coffee table. " You guys want any gum?"

" No thank you," said Jones, still disturbed about what Hooper had told her.

She adjusted her loose fitting lavender jumpsuit and sequin top. " Have you made any progress, Chief?"

" We are still trying to gather facts, Mrs. Howard."

" I told you before, you can call me Mabel." She scooped a gold cigarette case from the coffee table.

" Is that your Mercedes out there?" asked Jones.

" Yup." She pinched a cigarette from the case and lit it with a bulky black plastic lighter. " You like it?"

" Oh, I'd like to have a car like that."

She produced a schoolgirl giggle and snapped the gum as she puffed on the long cigarette. " Hey, look Anne. Shopping Bonanza is advertising them velvet Elvis flags. You drape it out the second floor of your house. They say it's going to be a collector's item."

The women on the TV set pointed at the prodigious Elvis in Las Vegas flag, unraveled in the studio. Jones wondered how Mabel afforded the TV and the Mercedes. New wallpaper and a thick carpet as well as a white leather sofa and side chairs added to Jones' confusion. " Mabel, could I ask you a few questions?"

" Whatever you want."

" You seem like a woman with remarkable control, considering what's happened."

Her green eyes filled as if on cue and her voice became cute. " There's nothing I can do about it now." She sucked in the cigarette smoke and exhaled

quickly. Then she snapped the gum again. " I guess Webster must have been involved in things I never knew about."

" Is that what you were arguing about on the dock before he left?"

" What?"

" The argument on the dock. What were you upset about?"

" Going out to eat." She looked at her sister and put out the half smoked cigarette in a wide glass ashtray.

" You sure you weren't upset he was involved in what you say things he shouldn't have been?"

" Mr. Jones, you're really stretching it. I ain't... I didn't kill him."

" I didn't say that. What things was he involved in?"

" Dunno."

" Well, his truck is in the driveway. How did he get to his boat?" asked Jones.

" Detective Hooper asked me that."

Jones cringed at the thought of Hooper. " What did you tell him?"

" Told him it was Webster's business."

" When did you decide to go down to the dock?" asked Jones.

" Say what?"

" I said, Webster left, you don't know how he left, but you went down to the dock because you were upset about supper."

" That's right."

## The Fitton Chronicles

## The Handyman's Secret

Jones stepped around the long wood table. " Did he tell you he was going out to sea early this week?"

" Yes."

" He usually came back Thursday," said Jones.

" Stinking of fish," she said, tightening her eyes. " So, what's the point?"

" I'm trying to find out if he told you he was leaving-"

" He just walked out the door."

" And you found it strange he didn't take his truck?"

" A car picked him up. I only saw the headlights," said Mabel. " As far as leaving early, I never got into Webster's business. He was leavin' early and that was that."

As Strickland struggled with some questions about her relationship with Webster, Jones scanned the slate top end tables. Under the heavy metal lamps with red felt lampshades were dozens of spent lottery tickets tucked under days of accumulated newspapers.

" Mrs. Howard," said Jones, turning.

" Mabel."

" Mabel, who do you think killed your husband?"

" Oh, God," she began , blowing her nose. " Oh, I just don't know."

" Did he mention the storm coming up the coast?"

" I don't follow the weather," she said, sniffing. " I only know my husband came back dead."

" Came back from where?"

" Dunno."

" What about you? Where were you after he left?"

" Alone... waiting for him. Watching TV. You don't understand, Mr. Jones, when Webster left or even during the week when he was so busy, I became a hermit. He had calls scheduled, you know fixing things around town. And he had his responsibilities with the church and he was on call at the Grammar School. When he was here, he hung out in that shack out back or tending his garden."

" Sounds like you never saw your husband, Mabel."

" He did his thing, I did mine. I used to do some cleaning around town, but I don't do that no more."

Strickland stepped forward. " Mabel, you must have some thoughts about who would kill your husband."

" Nope."

" How about a place called R/L?" asked Jones.

" Huh?"

" R/L, is it a restaurant or bar?"

" I don't know what you're talking about." She leaned back on the sofa and closed her eyes. " This is making me tired."

" We can go," said Strickland.

" Please."

Strickland signaled with his head for Jones to follow him to the door and thanked Mabel for her cooperation as they rounded the white sofa. When he was at the door with Strickland, Jones scanned the new furniture. " Just how much do you two make in a year's time?"

" Well, that con-fidential. You gut a court order or somethin'?"

" Well, no. We're just asking questions."

" I apologize, Mabel. We'll head out now," said Strickland. " Sometimes Matthias gets a little carried away."

Jones put his hand on the outside screen as Mabel's voice quivered behind him. " After all, my husband was just murdered!" He shook his head and stepped onto the porch. Strickland was inside another full minute before the screen door creaked and he strutted across the porch. Jones waited for Mabel's sister to close the inside door. " George, she's a liar."

" Come on, Matthias. The lady just likes to think she has money, that's all."

Jones started down the stairs. " No, no. Something isn't right. I think she's a total phony."

Hooper's voice echoed out from between the porch railings. " M-5, here. I agree, Jones." A small device attached to his belt was connected to an earphone.

" Nice of you to eavesdrop," said Jones.

" I have heard every word uttered in the house."

Strickland leaned over the porch rail. " Listen, detective. What you're doing isn't very legal."

" He's not an detective, George."

" I assure you I am an detective and I assure you Mabel Howard is a phony like you say."

" Well, I guess you've outmaneuvered us...*detective*."

" Been there. Done that. Kept the Republican Guard at bay in the gulf!"

Jones and Strickland both descended the porch stairs " You were in the Gulf War?"

" Strategic planning behind the lines,." said Hooper adjusting the device.

" Probably for the Iraqis," said Jones and Strickland smiled.

" What was that, Jones?"

" I said our country is grateful for your service."

" Thank you, sir." Jones looked into his wandering dark eyes. " I baled out at five hundred feet, in the dead of night, behind enemy lines."

" Brave man," said Jones.

" Seems I ended up in the Mediterranean."

" In the ocean?"

" Yes, picked up by a cruiser line. Had a lovely ten days at sea. Gained ten pounds. When we reached port in the Aegean, the war was over."

" Wonderful," said Jones, taking a step toward the shack in the yard behind the house.

Hooper stood only a few feet away as he spoke. " Keeping under cover is a prerequisite for intelligence."

Jones shook his head at Strickland. " That it is, Detective Hooper. That it is."

" Hum, tracked me down. Nice going. I see you have an intelligence background, too."

" Remember, " said Strickland. " You can't just spy on these people without a court order."

" Ah, ha. Spying who is spying?" he asked, opening his brown beady eyes and tucking the transmitter in his army jacket pocket.

Strickland's cruiser horn sounded. " My phone. I'll be right back."

" While he's gone, I suggest, Jones, you follow me to Webster's shack."

" What did he just say about search warrants, Hooper?"

" You'll miss key evidence."

" What key evidence?" asked Jones.

Hooper motioned Jones across the uncut grass. Jones reluctantly shuffled behind him and up to the shack's weathered wood boards. As Hooper opened the door, Jones stepped inside the smoky shack and studied the wood walls. A calendar with the large Dewars Lumber truck and the gawky Arnie Dewars, sitting with his brothers on a load of lumber, was nailed to one of the two by fours. All the days were X'd out, including the day Webster was killed at sea. In the corner firewood was piled next to a Franklin stove and a stack of old yellowed newspapers. A small 13 " TV was balanced on an old wood crate, but set on top of the TV was a multi-band weather radio. " Look at this. He would have know about the storm heading south."

" Storm?" asked Hooper.

" Yeah, the storm that was supposed to come up the coast. Where were you Hooper?"

" I'm not at liberty to say."

" Oh, brother." Jones winced. " So, we know that Webster must have known about the storm. But he headed out early anyway. See, I don't think he left

early just to beat the storm. It was something else that brought him out to sea. And quickly."

" Don't jump to conclusions, Jones."

" Hooper..."

" Just trying to add my two cents."

Jones stood before the calendar. " Yet, the days are already crossed out. Like he planned his usual fishing run, but something sidetracked him." Hooper was about to speak, but Jones, his lips pressed, stared angrily into his eyes. Hooper pretended to button his lip. " I say drugs. You own a boat, you can make drug runs."

" Howard has no record. I have run a complete background check., " said Hooper.

" The guy is dead. Obviously something wasn't right! And I think Mabel had something to do with it," said Jones. " She was yelling at him because she probably knew."

" So now you think she killed Webster? You have a good point," said Hooper, raising his index finger. "We must catch this woman in her lie!"

" Unfortunately, I agree with you. Something else is going on here. That woman is popping out lottery tickets like monopoly money... And look at the new Mercedes and the inside of that house."

" Brilliant, Jones."

" Let's get out of here before we get in trouble."

" Wait!" Hooper ran to the door and spread out his arms and legs. " I will have to ask you to close your eyes for thirty seconds while I leave."

" What?"

" I will not allow my operation to be compromised. Eyes closed."

Jones shook his head and briefly closed his eyes. Hooper crawled through the side window and raced across the field toward the woods. " That man is a nut case. Figures Lark would hire somebody like him."

Strickland leaned in the doorway. " Maybe you just don't like the competition."

## 9

Jones brought the three coffees and a dozen donuts out of Sullivan's Donut Shop in Prince William. Mario Ianelli, in his gray and green trooper uniform, and Strickland sat in the unmarked state cruiser. Strickland popped open the rear door and Jones slid inside. " Here you go, guys."

" Thank you," said Ianelli, a slow speaking man with dark boxed side burns.

" Then it's possible," said Strickland, taking his coffee, " that someone may have gone after Fitzgerald."

" It's not like Mike to just take off," said Ianelli, taking the cup in his hand.

" At least you have the napkin and other evidence."

" Napkin?"

" Yeah, the napkin, the paper cup," said Jones.

" I have red paint from a bow scrape and prints from the Hamilton PD."

" Great, he ditched the evidence," said Strickland

" Was he involved in any of this?" asked Jones.

A deep crease formed on Ianelli's brow. " Matthias, Mike Fitzgerald is an unblemished record. I've known him for twenty-five years. I don't know what happened to that evidence or do I know where Mike is, but I hear what you're saying. I don't like to even think about Mike not being on the up and up."

" I didn't mean to place blame."

" No, we have to look into it, but we don't have too many leads right now. Now this blonde woman the Captain talked about down at Hansen's Marina."

" Wore riding pants," said Jones.

" I would like you to track that down, George. In the meantime, I've got my people looking for Mike."

" We can look around the stables in town," said Strickland.

" Good. At least find out what she was waiting for." Ianelli bit into a jelly donut. " What else? What about the Howard woman?"

" She has no credibility with me," said Jones.

" Why?"

" The woman is either living beyond her means or has new money somehow. New Mercedes, house re-done inside."

Ianelli wiped his face with a paper napkin. " She argued with her husband before he went out to sea. You think she did it?"

" She didn't do it," said Strickland.

" You don't know that, George," said Jones.

" You be good to me or I'll send Hooper over your house."

" Hooper... Can I ask you a favor, Mario?"

" Sure."

" This guy Hooper says he's a detective. He keeps turning up in this investigation. Full name is Clyde Hooper. Can your people find out if he's for real?"

" Clyde Hooper?" asked Ianelli, moving his silver pen across in his notebook.

" Right. He may even be monitoring us now. " Jones looked down Main Street. " Says he was in US intelligence services."

" I'll run a check on him." Ianelli faced both Jones and Strickland. " My main concern right now is Mike. I just pray no one has got to him."

\* \* \*

With a clipboard full of Clyde Hooper's notes in his hands hand, Lark surveyed the stables and barnyard beyond. He thumbed through the first few pages and stroked his chin. Hooper had detailed conversations, photographs, and statements from people who knew Webster Howard, yet had no conclusions about the murder. Lark glided over to the horses and attendants.

" Well, it's about time, Lark," said Flo from atop a caramel horse.

" Just checking the Detective Hooper's notes. I don't want any doubt remaining about my innocence."

" Oh, Snookems. Nobody thinks you killed Webster."

" Confidentially, I hope he doesn't solve the murder... I don't want to shell out the money."

" Can I take your clipboard, sir?" asked the attendant.

" Oh, no, no, no. This is confidential information."

" Excuse me?"

" Carry on. Carry on." He placed his foot in the stirrup, but had trouble swinging his large torso over the saddle. Another attendant appeared from the

stable. Both attendants pushed Lark's buttocks upward and he plopped into the saddle. Still holding the clipboard and the saddle horn, he fought to keep his balance.

" Lark, I wonder if you really should be carrying the clipboard," said Flo.

" I assure you, Snookems, my riding experience spans forty years. I am quite capable of-" The huge horse lurched. Lark nearly lost the clipboard and he pulled back on the reins, stopping the rowdy horse. " Whoa. Whoa."

" Lark, you're going kill yourself!"

The horse pranced forward. " I have the situation under control."

Flo's horse paralleled Lark along the stonewall lining the wooded trail, but Lark remained mesmerized by the yellow lined pages. " Lark, that clipboard is bothering me."

" You know I don't have to pay anything unless Hooper actually finds the murderer."

" He seems like a strange person."

" Genius is always strange." The shadows from the tree branches cut down the sun's glare across the pages. He removed a pen from his pocket and circled the paragraph about Webster Howard's argument with his wife. " Now this is important. I know it is."

" Lark, hold onto the saddle, please."

" Under control, Flo." Lark looked up as a rider galloped between the trees along the distant hill. He flipped the next page as the horse tramped along the path. The sound of horse hooves grew louder as he read Hooper's summary of the coroner's report.

" Lark, somebody's coming."

" There's room for all of us." He ran his finger along the print.

" Lark, pay attention!"

A woman with wispy blonde hair shot over the hill. Lark's horse jerked left and accelerated up the embankment. The clipboard flipped into the air. As he frantically reached for the saddle horn, he slid over the horse's rear quarter into the pine needles. Air was forced from his lungs, the tree branches spun, and he blacked out.

\* \* \*

When he opened his eyes, Flo was silhouetted against the blue sky and leafy branches. " Oh, Lark, don't be dead!"

" He's conscious," said a squeaky voice. Without his glasses he had difficulty seeing the woman with blonde hair leaning toward him. " Are you all right, sir? Can you hear me?"

" Snookie, pass that ball, Snookie. Get the long yardage!"

" You're hallucinating, Lark!"

" The pep rally. Find out who we have assigned to the pep rally. We have to beat Norwich. Find Snookie. Has anyone seen Snookie Mackenzie?" Without his glasses, the thick green foliage blurred, but the birds chirped throughout the forest.

Flo and a younger woman knelt next to him. " Lark, can you hear me?"

" Yes, I hear you." Flo placed his glasses over his eyes. The freckled, brown-eyed blonde seemed concerned. " Yes, that's better."

" You took quite a tumble," she said in a whimsical voice. She grasped his hand firmly and Lark staggered to his feet.

" Thank you, Miss."

" You're lucky you weren't seriously hurt. You look familiar."

" He's Lark Larsen," said Flo as she turned. " You do know who you are, don't you, Lark?"

" Of course... I think. I *am* Lark Larsen."

The blonde seemed confused. " And..."

" Hamilton College, coach, retired now. I have relinquished the helm to Matthias Jones."

" Well, I'm glad you're okay." She stood and looked over at the horses grazing by the stonewall.

Flo reached for the clipboard, yellow pad still intact, and handed it to Lark.

" That should teach you a lesson, Lark."

" Yeah, I should have a less nervous horse."

" No. Concentrate on what you're doing," said Flo.

" You two have a better ride," said the blonde as she mounted her black sheen horse. " Are you sure you're okay?" " "

" Fine. Fine, never felt better in my life. "

" What was your name, Miss?" asked Lark.

" See you around." She tapped the horse, his mighty muscles tensed, and she galloped down the trail toward the stables.

Lark breathed deeply as Flo dusted off his sweater and pants. " What a nice girl. Nice girl."

" She was right, Lark. You were lucky."

Lark slowly nodded his head. " Yes, Snookems, I could have died... again. Twice in one week is just too much!""

# 10

The pitcher cocked his arm and released a sizzling fastball, but the umpire's raspy voice abruptly declared Willie Fox had struck out. Jones rolled his eyes and headed toward Willie. "Get em, next time, Wil. Come on, Larry. Get a piece of it, kid. Start the rally." Jones scanned the sheared grass and smooth dirt diamond. Players pounded their gloves and called in support to the pitcher. These kids from Riverside had won twenty-four games and with a one run lead and a runner on first, they were about to win their twenty-fifth. Tom McGill wandered behind the backstop and raised his hand. Jones waved back as the pitcher hummed one by Larry. "Come on, Larry. Hit away. Hit away."

Back toward the gym, along the fence, Hooper's van, sounding like a lawn mower, slowed. The pitcher's racing slider caught the outside corner. "Hang in there, Lar. Hang in there!"

Jones backed along the bench and met McGill by the water fountain.

"Tough game, Coach?"

"Is that your headline, Tommy?"

"Depends."

Jones heard the ball smack the catcher's mitt and the umpire's voice boomed out again. He looked into McGill's chestnut eyes. "Two down."

"Here comes Svoboda."

" We need the long ball, Tom." Jones cupped his hands. " Come on, Joe, hit it out of here!"

" I just came over from the library."

" Oh?" asked Jones, looking toward the five-story building beyond right field.

" I can't find R/L."

" I'm beginning to think someone has gotten away with murder," said Jones. Svoboda took a prodigious cut and missed the ball. " Geese... Come on Joey, just meet it!"

" Any word on Mike Fitzgerald?"

" Nothing." The crack of wood against the ball resounded across the baseball field. When Jones turned the baseball arced toward the oak cluster in center field. The Riverside center fielder watched the ball float over his head and the chain link fence. This time it rolled right up to the stone Shaker style music conservatory. " Good hit, Joe. Good hit!"

Jones rushed forward and stood with the rest of the team at home plate when the large framed Svoboda round third. They surrounded him as if they had just won the game. Jones patted him on the back and escorted him back to the bench. " He gave me my pitch, Coach. High and outside."

" What a hit. Not many people have cleared the center field fence like that, Joey."

Jones was still smiling when he started back toward McGill. Along the fence, Hooper's van was moving backward at high speed. " What is he doing now?"

" Who?"

" Hooper. He's driving backwards."

McGill turned. " I heard Lark hired him."

" The guy is a crank. He's dangerous."

" Don't look now, Matthias, but the game's over."

" I'll catch you in a minute, Tom." Jones lined up with his players and they moved forward, shaking the Riverside players hands. When he met the overweight, aging Huck Tewksbury, he grasped both the Riverside coach's hands. " Huck, good game."

" My boys are graduating. Your boys are all underclassmen. I told Svoboda that was one hell of a hit."

" Let's see if we can get together fishing this summer."

" Yeah, we had a good time year."

" I'll call you."

As Jones turned Hooper's red and white van pulled behind the backstop. Jones walked briskly across the infield and rounded the backstop. Lark and Flo were seated next to Hooper in the front seat. Jones rushed up to the driver's side window as the stinky exhaust spewed into the air. " Hooper, what do you think you're doing? This is a baseball field."

" I have a significant break in the Howard case, Jones." McGill moved closer and seemed perplexed by Hooper. " We will find answers now. And you can thank Lark Larsen. I may forgo my fee on this."

" What's the break?" asked McGill.

Hooper leaned out the window. He waved Jones closer and spoke in a low voice as he looked at McGill. " Can he be trusted?"

" He's a friend of mine. What's the info?" asked Jones.

" You never know who's lurking out there..."

" Just tell me what you've learned."

Hooper raised his brows and glanced at Lark. Flo tilted toward the window.

" Lark almost died!"

" What?"

" It's true, Matthias! It's true."

" What happened?" asked Jones.

" He was thrown from a horse," said Flo. " I thought we were going to lose him."

" Oh, I was back in time."

" Shaken up?" asked Jones.

" Snookie MacKenzie was going to run the ball."

" Did you break anything?" asked Jones.

" I have to report that I'm shipshape."

" Did you have x-rays or have a doctor look at you?"

Hooper rapped Jones's arm. " Don't insult his manhood, Jones."

" Well, it might be smart if you're seventy-two years old and you fall off a horse, to get checked out."

" You're a nervous Nellie," said Hooper.

Jones stepped back from the window. " What's the break in the case?"

Hooper waved him over again. " We have located the mystery woman."

" At the stables no doubt," said Jones.

" Brilliant deductive powers, Jones."

McGill pinched the bridge of his nose. " Who is she?"

" Are you in this case in an official capacity?" asked Hooper.

" He owns the Enterprise. Come on, Hooper, who is she?"

" Well... we-"

" He doesn't know," said Jones, stepping back from the van.

" Unbelievable."

" Well, we know where she is."

" Where?" asked McGill.

" Are you sure he can be trusted?" asked Hooper.

" Oh, boy..."

" The Fletcher Stables, across from the estate," yelled Lark..

" Not so loud," said Hooper.

" See Lark doesn't have to pay to rent the horses over there," said Flo.

" That's nice, but what about the girl?" asked Jones.

" I thought nothing of it until Detective Hooper put the whole thing together."

" A blonde woman with freckles. It's rather obvious, wouldn't you say, Jones?"

" No. What about the off road vehicle?"

" Well.. I haven't seen-"

" Have you even been out there, Hooper?" asked Jones.

" Not yet. I thought we might go out there together. Wrap this thing up."

" Why don't I go out there alone, *Detective*, and I'll report back to you."

" No... no, I insist."

" He's going out there anyway, Matthias," said McGill. " If you're smart, you'll keep him in line."

Jones glanced at Hooper, reaching over the wheel as he spoke with Lark. He pressed his lips and moved up to the window. " All right."

" Good. Get in."

" I have to speak with my team. Give me forty-five minutes."

" I'll bring him to the trophy case," said Lark. " History before your eyes."

" I would enjoy that," said Hooper.

" Lark was coach for thirty two years," said Flo.

Jones stepped back from the window. McGill was laughing. " What's so funny?"

" I'm glad you're in such competent hands."

" You're coming with me, McGill," said Jones.

" Gee, I have an editorial to finish."

" Great, I'm sure this is going to be a classic," said Jones, shaking his head.

" History before your eyes."

# 11

Hooper's loud, humming van shook at sixty miles an hour along Route 7. Jones was stunned at how Hooper never actually looked at the road and carried on several concurrent conversations, yet still managed to stay within the road lines.

" So, I gathered evidence for that case for thirteen months. "

" Who were you working for?" asked Lark.

" High level, Lark. High level, I'm sworn to secrecy." Jones closed his eyes and then stared out the window at the cornfields sweeping over the hills north of town. They whipped by the green and white sign for The Fletcher Stables. " I brought my team up to the twenty-second floor and we of course easily entered the office complex."

The long dirt road to the stables was lined by rows of straight oak toward the hills beyond. " Hooper, you're going to miss the road to the stables."

" Not now, Jones. All five men began the sweep of the offices. I beeped my main office to confirm entrance."

The van shot by the entrance and soared by the adjacent golf course's open green stretches. " Hooper, pay attention, will you?"

" I left them inside and went down to the first floor to survey the situation."

" Oh, what happened, Detective?" asked Flo.

" The ground floor was clear. Until the police lights started flashing."

Now they zoomed along the birch clusters beyond the golf course and the entrance to the Fletcher estate. "Hooper, do you realize you missed the entrance?"

"What about your men?" asked Flo.

"Brave men... They are scheduled to be paroled this fall."

Jones leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes.

"How did they know you were in there?" asked Lark.

"Apparently, they gave me the wrong number for the main office and I beeped the police station."

Jones opened his eyes. "I hope you know you missed the stable road, Hooper."

Hooper gazed into the mirror. "I thought the terrain looked a little rough."

"Mercy..."

\* \* \*

Jones slipped away from Hooper, Lark, and Flo back inside the long stable. As he wandered away from the red barn, Hooper pontificated about some bizarre intelligence case. More adjacent barns were separated from rolling green meadows by a thin line of pines and a stonewall. A few riders passed on prancing horses through the meadow's late afternoon shadows.

"Lookin' for somebody?" Jones faced a large man in denim overalls with no shirt. His huge block limbs were strewn with black body hair and veins.

"You look like your tryin' to find somebody."

" I am." Jones extended his hand. " I'm Matthias Jones."

" Wilbur Williams." Wilbur's work worn appendage surrounded Jones's hand and clamped shut like a bear trap.

" Whoa, you have quite a grip there, Wilbur!" Jones opened and closed his hands several times. " Yes, indeed."

" Comes from shoe-in them horses for twenty years."

Jones studied his rounded ball biceps. " Save your strength for the horses."

" Sure... Sometimes I don't know my own strength. Who you lookin' for?"

" Blonde, thin rider. Freckles... Drives a green off road-"

" Diana Lee."

" Ah," said Jones, looking back. Hooper and the others talked to the stable hands outside the long barn. " Di... ana Lee. Well, well. She live around here?"

" P.W. But hell she's around here all the time. Sometimes she rides for competition. Sometimes she judges."

" You know Webster Howard?"

" Yes, sir... He did odd jobs around here form time to time. That is before he was murdered. She have anything to do with it?"

" That's what I'm trying to find out." Jones sat on the stonewall and looked up at Wilbur. " Anything about her strike you as different, odd... remarkable."

" She can ride a horse." Jones smiled. " She's real flighty. Mousy little voice. I guess I'd call her spacy."

" Spacy?"

" Well, you talk to her and it's like you're talking right through her. What else? She has the problem with hay, which is great if you're around horses." He laughed and slapped Jones on the shoulder, nearly knocking him from the wall.

" Allergies, eh?" he asked, rubbing his shoulder.

" Yeah, always sniffing. You might want to check on of the dressage arenas through the meadows. Or she might be jumping on the south trail."

Jones took out a card and quickly slipped it in his hand. " I appreciate the information."

Wilbur stared at the card and then extended his hand. " Hey, you're the college coach. I thought you looked familiar."

" You wouldn't be offended if I don't shake your hand, Wilbur?"

" Hell no. And good luck. If I see her I'll call you."

" Thanks." He pivoted over the stonewall and headed across the meadow. He rubbed his sore hand as he trampled the tall grass and wondered if Diana Lee was the woman at the bridge. The fact Webster Howard did odd jobs up here might prove significant and linking the two of them could establish motive.

A level dirt arena, bordered with empty viewing stands, came into view between the maples at the top of the knoll. A rider in a cut off white jersey stirred the dust as he brought a brown and white horse through what looked like a predetermined routine. Jones hurried to find Diana Lee before Hooper arrived up the hill.

At the wood's edge a petite blonde woman called out suggestions in a wispy voice from behind a rail fence. She wore white riding pants and a pale green jersey.

His heart beat quickly as he crossed the trail under the trees and emerged on the far side of the arena. She immediately glanced at him, but continued a critique of the rider's performance. " I find Hilda's movement stilted. It has to be more free flowing."

" I think I've pushed her," said the rider.

" Maybe. Maybe she needs to rest."

" What about the choice of routine?" he asked.

" I have no problem with that." She moved along the fence. " Why don't we wrap it up for today, David?"

" No argument from Hilda."

When Jones started around the fence, she retreated to the small unpainted barn adjacent to the arena. He crossed the yard and entered the barn less than a minute later. The toilet flushed and Diana Lee blew her nose as she stepped from a small bathroom. Her eyes were watery and darting.

" I'm Matthias Jones. I coach at the college."

" Okay." She shuffled over to a desk near the open window and faced the arena.

" Miss Lee."

" You know my name. Very good." She pulled out another pink tissue and dabbed it on her nose. " Well, I'm busy with lessons. What do you want?"

" To ask you a few questions?"

" I don't understand."

Jones moved closer to the desk. He pursed his lips before he spoke. " I saw you waiting at the marina bridge the day Webster Howard's boat was found in the bay. The Captain saw you a few other times."

She finally turned. " So what?"

" What were you waiting for, Miss Lee?"

" I like the view. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have another lesson scheduled." She headed for a narrow closet across the room and rummaged through the shelves.

" Did you know Webster Howard?"

" Not personally." She spun around with a new pair of riding pants in her hands. " Listen, obviously you've figured out Webster worked here and I work here. And let me save you the trouble of asking around. Sometimes Webster helped me with my horses."

Jones looked into her bloodshot dark eyes and wide pupils. He now pondered whether she had dumped drugs down the toilet. " He was due back in port and you were waiting."

" I was viewing not waiting." They stared at each other. " You have no authority in this matter."

" What about the District Attorney?" asked Jones, raising his brows

" Good day, Mr. Jones."

She bolted toward the open door but Jones followed her. " You and I both know you were waiting for Webster Howard at the marina bridge, Miss Lee."

" I have nothing to say," she said, continuing toward the corral. " If the District Attorney wants to speak with me, let him."

" I don't think you killed him!" called Jones as she ducked under the rails.

She turned briefly once inside. " Thanks a lot."

" I really don't care why you were at the bridge but I think I know why you were there. I just want to know who you think might have killed Webster."

" No clue."

" What do you know about R/L?"

Diana's eyes widened and she moved up to the fence. " Mr. Jones... please."

" What do you know?"

" Please, just leave me out of this."

" Are you in it already?" Jones ducked under the fence, but she stood firm.

" There was supposed to be a major storm."

" Listen... I don't know why he was killed."

" Drug runs can get people into trouble, Miss Lee."

" I like to look over the bay. Good bye, Mr. Jones." She spun in the dirt and marched across the arena. Jones was now convinced she was waiting for Webster to return. Her eyes had popped at the mention R/L. Sooner or later Herbert Lane's office or Strickland himself would question her, but that would take time. Jones did not see her as Webster's killer just because she was at the bridge.

Diana mounted a dark horse at the far end. Almost immediately the horse broke into a sturdy gallop down the wooded trail. Jones squeezed under the rail again. Even if his supposition about Webster running drugs was true, he would still

have to establish why Webster would engage in such behavior. He retreated into the barn, also convinced R/L was the nexus of a potential drug run. Contacts and possible witnesses might unlock reasons and logistics of a drug run. He peered inside the bathroom. The ceramic toilet water was clear with no evidence of cocaine or any other drug. Diana might have a criminal record if she was prone to drug use. Strickland could sort that out.

" Hello, Matthias!" said Lark from the open window. Jones turned quickly as Lark and Flo scooted around the doorway. " Oh, excuse me. I didn't know you were using the little boy's room."

" I'm not..." Jones moved up to the white haired Lark. " Where's Hooper?"

" Covert operations."

" What?"

" He didn't want to be seen," said Flo.

" Did you find the woman?" asked Lark.

" Let's just say I haven't made any progress," said Jones. " Where did you get Hooper anyway, Lark?"

" He did some work preventing break-ins at Dewars Lumber."

Jones nodded his head and an image of the goofy Arnie Dewars, puffing on a cigarette, flashed into his mind. " So, what you're saying is Arnie Dewars recommended Hooper?"

" Highly."

" Great..." Back into late afternoon sunshine, Jones looked for Diana down the wooded trail. " Webster Howard's funeral is tomorrow morning and his killer is still at large."

" Lark thinks it was suicide," said Flo, her arm looped over Lark's arm.

" Right." Jones's cell phone sounded and he pulled it from his pants pocket.

" Jones."

" Matthias, where are you?" asked Strickland. Jones motioned Flo and Lark to move ahead of him on the trail. " I'm out at the Fletcher Stables, George."

" I called out there earlier. But I didn't-"

" Her name is Diana Lee. You need to run a background check on this woman."

" Why?"

" I'm looking for a drug background."

" I'm not sure about that theory and we have other problems," said Strickland.

Lark and Flo, arm in arm, moved into the maple tree shadows ahead.

" Oh?"

" Add Mabel Howard to the missing."

" Any sign of foul play?" asked Jones.

" No, but the house is locked up and that red Mercedes is gone. Keep in mind that her sister lives in Millbury."

" Yeah, so what?"

" So, did Mike before he transferred down here."

" Mike? You think they have a relationship?"

" I don't know. If they do, Ianelli is unaware of it..."

" Maybe they're dead," said Jones.

" Or hiding."

" Call me later about Diana Lee. "

" I'll check it out. Talk to you later."

Jones put down the antenna. Lark and Flo were stopped up ahead.

" Matthias, we were just taking about Joe Svoboda... that home run this afternoon."

" It was quite a drive."

" The lad reminds me of Smoky Johnson. You remember Smoky, don't you?"

They continued up the dirt road. " Can't say that I do."

" Now, there was an athlete." Jones tried to listen, but his mind drifted back to Diana Lee's thin face and long blonde hair. " Back in forty-seven, he led the division. Smack Bacon followed in his footsteps in forty-eight."

Jones looked into Lark's blue eyes behind the glasses. " Was there ever a player who didn't have a nickname, Lark?"

" There was Boot Willis, Sprint Harris... Snookie Mackenzie."

" Or *Lark Larsen*."

" Right-O."

" How did you get the name, Lark?" asked Jones as the long stables came in sight again.

" The winning season of fifty-one. We won so many football games, everyone thought it was a lark."

" Lark made it up himself," said Flo.

Lark raised his index finger. " On a suggestion of Muddy Jacobs at the landfill, only it was the dump back then."

Jones grinned as they approached Hooper's van and the potent stables smells. " I wish Hooper was back here. I could stand heading out for some supper."

Hooper's voice echoed around the barnyard. " You aren't very observant, Jones."

Jones scanned the area. " Come on, Hooper, I want to eat."

" I have surveyed the terrain and have not found the woman in question."

" Great, now where are you?" asked Jones.

Hooper backed out of an upper stable loft, binoculars around his army jacket. He crawled onto a side ladder and leaped to the ground. " The blonde is elusive, but I'm convinced she contributed to Howard's death. You can't win them all, Jones."

" Nope, you can't."

## 12

Jones left his house, but never told Strickland he was going to again snoop around Webster Howard's house. He questioned whether Webster funded his wife's extravagant lifestyle or if she had disappeared at the same time as Mike Fitzgerald. With the funeral only two hours away, Jones sped by the First Parish Church and onto Washington Street. Cars were already parked along the circular black top drive. As he drove up the Washington Street incline, he thought about his earlier conversation with Strickland during breakfast. Background checks showed Diana Lee had a clean record. Maybe she was just smart.

Once over the small hill south of town Webster's house and back shed came into focus. A hint of smoke lingered in the warm air across rows of rolling corn stalks on Harvey Miller's farm. He rolled up the rutted dirt drive and stopped behind Webster's truck. A heavier gray haze hung over the yard. From the shack's metal stovepipe a thin white smoke continuously blended into the summer air. Jones exited the jeep and walked along the grass separating the driveway ruts. He looked in the window of Webster's polished truck. Even the inside was cleaned and tools organized.

Jones pivoted across the grass to the shack. The door was held open by a hook on the outside boards. Harvey Miller, in his blue suit and red tie, looked up from the table. "Harvey, what are you doing in here?"

Harvey solemn round countenance reflected an inner grief and turmoil. " I can't believe he's actually dead, Matthias."

" Then you knew him well?"

" We used to hold court on the world right here. Webster never raised his voice and I respected his opinion." Harvey removed his gold glasses and rubbed his eyes. Then he moved his fingers through his thinning brown hair. " Who would want to kill Webster?"

" I'm trying to find that out."

" Guy works his ass off all his life and for what? For her?"

" Who, Mabel?" asked Jones

" Mabels got real hoity toity."

Jones sat next to the calendar. " Why was she such a big spender?"

Harvey pushed his glasses up his nose. He shook his head and then blew his nose on a fresh white handkerchief. " You know, all that spending didn't just happen over night."

" Really?"

" But I almost dropped in my field when I see her pull up in that Mercedes."

" Big bucks," said Jones.

" Webster made the payments on that car."

" How?" asked Jones.

" I told you, he worked his ass off. Everywhere he could get work. And who paid the bill for that big screen TV? *Webster*. All that work in the house. *Webster again*."

" How much did she run up?" asked Jones.

" He wouldn't say, but he wasn't too pleased, let me tell ya. You have any idea who killed him?"

" Not really. Did Webster mention making special runs on the boat?"

" Just fishing runs. What are you saying, Matthias?"

" Did he ever mention a Diana Lee over at the Fletcher Stables?"

" No, sir." Harvey stood and walked slowly over to Jones. " Why, was Webster involved in anything illegal?"

" One of those big unknowns, Harvey."

" Well, I'm going up to the church. Maybe walk through the cemetery. Look at the old headstones. People who lived and died in this town over the past three hundred years." He looked out the dirt-splattered window toward the driveway.

" Looks like somebody washed Webster's truck."

" I noticed that. I'd ask Mabel about it, but she's not here."

" Probably at her sister's in Millbury... " You know I should have known something was up when my wife saw the state cruiser in the driveway Monday night."

" You mean Tuesday night."

" No, Lois saw the cruiser Monday night. She brought me to the second floor window. I know it was Monday because Harvey Junior had just come back from a final exam from Riverside."

" What time Monday night?" asked Jones as he stood.

" He pulled in bout eight-thirty."

" You see a state cop?" asked Jones.

" No, just the cruiser."

" That's incredible. Any number on the cruiser?"

" We went back to watching TV. You think it means anything, Matthias?"

" Yeah, it means somebody from the state police had a reason to come out here Monday night."

\* \* \*

He decided to walk the hundred yards to Webster's funeral at the church. Just minutes before, The Lowery Insurance Agency called his house. Lowery, himself told Jones what he had just told George Strickland. Webster Howard was heavily insured for three hundred and forty thousand dollars. Jones stepped across his brick front walk in a new beige suit bought with Nigel at a Boston clothing store and opened the picket fence gate. It bothered him Mike Fitzgerald was missing, but even more confusing was the state cruiser's presence at the Howard house Monday night.

A yellow envelope was duct taped to his black mail box flag. Jones fiddled with the tape, bending the flag as he ripped the envelope loose. Apparently, someone had mailed him a telegram. He unfolded the clean yellow sheet of paper.

**JONES:**

**KEEP THE FAITH. STAY THE COURSE. DON'T GIVE UP THE SHIP. NEW EVIDENCE IS ON THE WAY. HANG IN THERE.**

**M-5**

Jones folded the paper and then crumpled it, wondering if Hooper himself was responsible for taping the envelope to the mail box flag. He shook his head and crossed the road, attempting to extinguish Hooper and his clichés from his mind. As he strolled along the sunlit common, he had no proof of a relationship between them, but could not discount the possibility both Mike Fitzgerald and Mabel Howard killed Webster Howard. Cars were parked outside the circular drive and back along Main Street. Webster Howard would reside with his ancestors little more than an hour and his wife had not even bothered to show up. While Jones pondered a possibility of a Mabel and Mike Fitzgerald affair, even more intriguing was the likelihood of Fitzgerald discovering the Webster-Diana Lee connection and why did he discard the R/L napkin?

As he paralleled the stonewall bordering the church grounds, Jones saw Hooper on the second floor balcony of the Marlboro Inn across the street. The detective had a long range lens attached to his camera and with a pair of field glasses, he scanned the people trickling into the old white church. Jones' temples throbbed as he clamped Hooper's note tightly and cut across the common to the

inn. Hooper had not spotted him as Jones looked to the balcony. " Hooper, what are you doing with the camera and glasses?"

Hooper swung the binoculars. " Waiting for the killer of course. Don't you know anything about intelligence?"

" One of us does."

" What was that?" he asked, leaning over the balustrade and he almost fell.

" Let the man be buried, will you?"

" Clyde Hooper never rests. I will photograph the killer this very afternoon."

" Yeah, right. Come on, put the camera away. Give Webster Howard some respect."

" The first rule of intelligence work is to remove the emotional component, Jones."

" The first rule of intelligence work, Hooper, is to be intelligent. " He held up the compressed paper. " Did you tape this telegram to my mailbox?"

Hooper moved out of sight but Jones could still hear his voice. " I am not at liberty to say. Besides, I don't work for you. Lark Larsen hired me on the Bolpine."

Jones closed his eyes briefly and headed back to the church. Hooper's camera shutter clicked vigorously and Jones cringed as he walked up the Main Street sidewalk. Townspeople passed under the maples branches overhanging the drive. The church's towering pillars and high steeple were imposing beyond the stonewall and pine trees. Inside, the lengthy darkened pane windows the chandelier bulbs produced a pinpoint brightness.

Nigel's long blue car slowed as Jones was about to cross the road. The power window moved downward and the gray haired Nigel, wearing dark suit and red silk tie, raised his left brow. " Would you like a ride, Matthias?"

" You think you can spare the gas?" asked Jones, glancing back to the Marlboro Inn's balcony. Hooper scanned the area with the binoculars. " Oh, boy."

" What's the matter?" asked Nigel.

" Oh, that idiot Lark hired. He's up on the balcony taking long range pictures."

" What?" asked Nigel, looking into the rearview mirror. " He looks harmless."

" So is a rogue elephant."

" Matthias, you worry too much," said Mrs. Johnson across the seat.

" Maybe, Mrs. Johnson. Maybe."

" Sure you don't want a ride?" asked Nigel with a slight grin.

" I'll meet you at the doors."

" I made the offer." The window moved up slowly and Nigel signaled for the circular drive.

Jones turned back to the inn again. Hooper and the camera were gone. As he straggled up the drive, Jones worried whether Hooper's shenanigans would jeopardize the investigation. Nigel parked his car in the blue stone lot to the right. On the far side of the church was a square box colonial parsonage attached to the church hall. Nigel walked with Mrs. Johnson through the stonewall opening and met Jones under the columns.

" How old is this church, Nigel?"

" Two hundred and fifty-two years old."

" That was quick," said Jones, peering at the peeling paint on the columns. " Needs some work."

" He should be a church tour guide," said Mrs. Johnson.

" Knowledge of the history of Hamilton is something not to be taken lightly," said Nigel.

" Or a guide for the town," said Jones. " A good summer job. We could get you a trolley with a public address system."

" Actually, I would enjoy such a venture."

" Hey, Matth-*i*-as." Jones turned. Arnie Dewars seemed out of place in his light blue, double-breasted suit and he walked up the drive with his brothers. All the Dewars brothers wore black rimmed glasses, had thinning dark hair and large noses.

" Arnie, Eddie, Milty..."

" You find out who knocked off Webster yet?" asked Arnie.

" No." Jones pointed to the inside of the church. " Arnie, this is the guy's funeral. Come on."

Arnie leaned forward and elbowed Jones as he moved by. " Don't worry, the detective will solve it."

" He's not an detective," said Jones.

" He has an intelligence background," said Eddie. " He found those rats in the store."

" Rats?" asked Jones.

" Yeah, we thought kids were breaking into the store. It was just rats."

" Little jealous, eh, Matth-*i*-as?" continued Arnie from the door and the Dewars boys disappeared inside.

Jones winced and Nigel leaned toward him. " Arnie can be aggravating. "

" No, it's Hooper. He's starting to get to me."

" Forget about Hooper," said Nigel as the ushers handed them funeral programs at the door. Nigel spoke with the ushers and then checked his watch.

" We still have forty-five minutes."

He motioned Jones and Mrs. Johnson across the narthex and up the side stairs. " Can we go up here?"

" Nigel has the inside track," said Mrs. Johnson. " He's on the parish council."

" So, this is the official tour?" asked Jones.

" It is."

As they trudged up the worn red-carpeted stairs, Jones studied the photo copied yellow program with Webster's name in bold letters and birth and death dates underneath. A Latin phrase typed in the lower right corner. " Ex uno disce omnes. What does that mean?"

Without looking at the program, Nigel spoke as he moved onto the second floor. " From one judge the rest."

" Well, that is certainly appropriate," said Jones. " Who put that on the program?"

" I do not have the answer to that question." He opened the white paneled choir loft doors.

The spacious interior, held together by cracked wood buttresses spanning the ceiling, had a rich, clean old church smell. Although several shiny brass chandeliers were lit with dozens of flame-shaped bulbs, the outside summer light from the lofty windows provided the primary illumination. Pews were white with wood stained trim, boxed in sections on the short pile red rug. To the right, a rising white paneled pulpit, draped with green cloth, towered over the pews. The altar was simple, covered in white linen with two thick white candles on either side.

" I'm used to a more ornate appearance inside a church," said Jones.

" The Hamiltons and the Fletchers built this structure, the original church, before the addition of the parsonage and church hall. "

" Old money, Nigel?"

" Yes, money that predates the families arrival in America. Money from Great Britain. The Hamilton money goes back through various manufacturing enterprises, culminating in their paint manufacturing today. The Fletcher money originated with the Hall fortune, shipping ventures out of London."

" No wonder they could build a college," said Jones.

Nigel smiled and nodded. " Now, most of the glass you see in the panes is original as are most of the upper wooden buttresses. But we have noticed some structural imperfections lately. We will have to raise money to revamp the support system while still keeping the historical integrity."

" Why not just sell the land on Washington Street to Gallagher?"

" I wish it were that simple. I spoke with Reverend Bricker, but I must say I was not able to make much headway."

" That's a perfect, clean quick way to get money for the structure work," said Jones.

" I don't understand it. And I don't particularly like prejudice in this day and age."

" Gallagher won't give up. He's a fighter." Jones moved down the steep angled aisle along the choir benches. He leaned over the rail near a bulky organ and scanned the crammed pews. Noticeably absent was Mabel Howard from the empty front pew. With both Mike Fitzgerald and Mabel missing, Jones had two theories on the murder. The first directly involved Fitzgerald in some kind of relationship with Mabel. Speculating down that side road brought a number of alternate theories. Maybe Webster knew about the relationship and the presence of the cruiser created antipathy between the two men.

Fitzgerald may have killed Webster or perhaps Webster tried to kill him. But Mike Fitzgerald did not need to go to sea to simply murder Webster Howard. He would have access to weather data and setting up Webster to disappear at sea would be perfect. Jones kept thinking about R/L and whether Fitzgerald met Webster at the mysterious location.

Three of the funeral ushers accompanied Ham Fletcher and his blonde wife to the Fletcher pew up front below the pulpit. Jones looked over his shoulder as Nigel and Mrs. Johnson reached the railing. " I don't see Hamilton Fletcher, Nigel."

" No, he would send Ham. I think Ham knew Webster from the stables."

Jones watched Lark, in a bright orange blazer, accompanied the nimble Flo in her blue flowered dress, squeeze into a side pew. The bald L.G. Bentley, in his

everyday three-piece suit, slipped with broad boned wife into the pew behind Lark. " L.G. has a presence," said Jones.

" L.G. knows where to be, when to be there, and what to say."

As the white robe choir members moved inside the loft, Nigel motioned them up the stairs. Nigel exchanged pleasantries with a few members as they climbed the stairs, but Jones was drawn to the long tarnished brass pipes rising to the buttresses. Centered between the pipes was a prodigious carved matted gold framed painting of Christ, praying and gazing up at an angel. He followed Nigel and Mrs. Johnson outside the loft. As they moved down the staircase to the narthex, Jones again thought of the mysterious Diana Lee. While he did not place her as the killer, she was in the middle of whatever Webster was involved in on his early journey out to sea. And what of the red bottom boat?

The brass organ pipes resonated above when they reached the narthex. Outside, the glossy black hearse had arrived up the drive and Webster's simple wood coffin was wheeled toward the church. Jones did not see a limo. He turned and entered the spacious church with Nigel and Mrs. Johnson. The choir's collective voices echoed serenely as Nigel edged his way into a middle pew.

The bearded Reverend Bricker, clad in white with green vestments, entered from a side door behind the altar. His blue ethereal eyes looked skyward. Even his religious cloth did not change Jones' disparaging opinion. His annoying arrogance and prejudice bothered Jones. He climbed the pulpit and checked something under the lectern. Then he looked upward again. Jones thought the gesture was not genuine. For just a moment, Bricker locked eyes with Jones, quickly turned away and descended the pulpit stairs.

Jones could not understand why Bricker would not sell the Washington Street land just for the money. A flag was draped over Webster Howard's coffin, advancing conspicuously up the main aisle. Jones was convinced Mabel Howard's spending habits, expensive clothes, and gambling led to a chain of events resulting in Webster's murder. The organist paused and when the pipes blasted out with Amazing Grace, everyone packed in the pews, stood. Bricker appeared on cue at the altar, clutching his red hymnal as he sang out the words.

Jones thought the Reverend too melodramatic. He strutted across the altar like a king before his court, ascending the pulpit in a perfectly timed maneuver, coinciding with the last verse of the song. Slowly he raised his arms from the robe and his voice boomed without the aid of a microphone. " May the Lord God be with all of you!"

He grabbed the sides of the pulpit, tilted his head and jut out his lower jaw as if he were in deep thought. " Webster Howard was a man of great faith... of piety, who traveled quietly through life's journey." His index finger rose upward like a hot air balloon. " *Equipped with the virtuous qualities of the common man.*"

Jones leaned toward Nigel. " This guy is very articulate."

" He has every Sunday to practice."

Jones smiled and looked up at the pulpit. The animated Bricker assumed an intense, but scary control over his congregation. Every sentence was clearly enunciated, each change in cadence accentuated with a sincerity even Jones began to believe. Bricker whispered at appropriate passages and raised his voice to stress the tragedy of Webster Howard's untimely death. During the half hour talk, as the

Reverend asked his people to become more like God, Jones shook his head. " To achieve that inner and outer peace and to avoid the derision and hatred of the modern day world, we must extend out hands in joy rather than anger. To give to God and not satisfy our own selfish ends."

" He ought to listen to his own words," said Jones.

Nigel motioned with his finger over his mouth for Jones to be quiet. Bricker finished his eulogy, nodded toward the choir loft and everyone stood and sang Near of My God To Thee. Bricker led the procession down the main aisle. He continued a litany of prayers and salutations, quoting frequently from the bible as Webster's coffin inched forward. Jones stared at the flag, determined to find the location of this R/L and match the long red paint scrape on the Maintenance Free to a specific vessel.

\* \* \*

Under the maples and pines across the knoll, amidst simple weathered gravestones, Bricker began the rhetoric again. The white clapboards surrounded the dark, elongated windows, reflecting the graveyard. The Reverend upset Jones with the over-generalized remarks. Jones walked around the crowd assembled under the canopy. Just in the last few minutes he decided to trace R/L on the Internet. Bricker quoted from the book of Revelation as Jones studied the two slate stone behind the raised casket.

## The Fitton Chronicles

## The Handyman's Secret

**Nathan B. Howard**

**Born March 28, 1910**

**Died July 16, 1981**

**Elizabeth N. Howard**

**Born June 11, 1916**

**Died March 16, 1989**

Jones remembered Nathan Howard was also a handyman. More gravestones stuck up from the hillside grass containing dozens of Howard names spanning the centuries. He saw Webster not only as a handyman, but as a man whose lineage went back several hundred years.

"Matthias, are you going to the reception in the parish hall?" asked Nigel.

Jones looked back to the crowd dispersing back to the church from the grave. He started back with Mrs. Johnson and Nigel. "I guess I was lost in thought. Webster's ancestors go way back."

"Most ancestors do."

"Very funny."

"And he ended up in that house on Washington Street. You'd think money would have been handed down."

"Not everyone has lofty ambitions."

"At least land," said Jones. "Maybe that's how he got his plot."

Nigel opened the door. "I believe that was his father's house, wasn't it, Mrs. Johnson?"

"Webster got everything. He was an only child."

Inside the parish hall the conversational buzz overtook the grieving graveside faces. Jones kept looking out the smaller modern vinyl windows at the canopy and surrounding graves. Something about those graves troubled him.

" Deep in thought," said L.G.'s sharp to his right.

" L.G."

" Solve it yet?"

" Na..."

" What about the trooper and Mabel Howard?" Jones creased his brows.

" A possible relationship?"

" Considering they're both gone, I'm beginning to wonder. L.G., ever hear of any place called R/L?"

The wrinkles moved up L.G.'s his bald head. " No. Does it relate to the murder?"

" The napkin on Webster's boat. Tom McGill has searched up and down the coast. Nothing.... I'm thinking of using the Internet."

" Try another name. Suppose they changed names?"

" Good point." Bricker, quickly changed into a sports shirt and jeans, walked in from the corridor with a tall brunette and two older silver haired women who laughed at every utterance out of his mouth. The younger woman stood rigid with a dour look on her thin face. " Bricker is in love with himself."

" More flamboyant than some of them we've had in here," said L.G.

" Everything becomes a production with him. Plus, he should sell the Washington Street land to Father Gallagher." The tall woman drifted away from Bricker as more parishioners surrounded him. " Is that his wife?"

" Yes."

Jones crossed his arms and lifted his brows. " I don't think she's entirely pleased to be playing second fiddle to the Reverend. He's a showman, that's for sure. Perhaps he should have gone into the law."

L.G. smiled " If you're not a showman they won't listen to a word you say."

Jones thought back to Bricker arguing to L.G.'s office the other night.

" He was certainly putting forth his opinion the other night up in your office."

L.G.'s head swung around. " Time to pull the shades... He was mad."

" Oh?"

" I can't break privilege, but suffice to say you don't yank out a socket wrench when you bring your car to the shop and start working alongside the mechanic."

" Giving you a little advice, was he?"

" I ended by asking him if he would like me to go up in the pulpit with him on Sunday morning." L.G. produced a deep laugh and Jones chuckled until he saw Hooper lurking outside the window.

" Oh, come on."

" What's the matter?" asked L.G., turning, but Hooper ducked from view.

" Hooper?"

" Who?"

" Hooper. That so-called PI Lark hired. The guy is a loon." Jones stood on his tiptoes but Hooper was not outside. " Hooper's an accident waiting to happen."

" Sounds harmless. Matthias, call me if you need my help solving the murder."

" Thanks, L.G."

Arnie Dewars, red punch swishing in his glass, cackled loudly with Lark and Flo at the window. Jones moved along the wall to avoid a prolong conversation with either Arnie or Lark. He picked up a china plate on the buffet table and loaded several sandwich slices. When he reached the huge chrome coffee urn and opened the spigot, Bricker, joking with two women, appeared next to him. The Reverend finished his coffee and seemed taken aback when he saw Jones. " I'm real surprised to see you here, Jones."

" What do you mean?"

" Did Father Gallagher allow you to commune with the competition?"

Jones tried to make light of Bricker's hostility. " Actually, I called the Pope this morning to get clearance. He said he'd make an exception for you, Reverend."

" I see." His eyes were steely and his mouth down turned within his beard.

" By the way, I did enjoy your homily. You have a gift."

" Homily? You mean sermon. We call it a sermon. When in Rome do as the Romans."

Jones set down his coffee cup. " I wasn't aware that *you* would compare First Parish to Rome."

" Touché. And if you're trying to humor me about that land, you can forget it."

Jones shrugged his shoulders. " No, I understand you're pretty adamant."

Bricker placed his cup under the spigot. He filled it to the top and motioned Jones off to the side near the bookcases and corridor. Before he spoke he made sure they were away from the crowd. " You inform your Father Gallagher he can forget his intrusion into Hamilton."

" You aren't even using that land. That land is free and clear. What authority is keeping you from selling that land?"

Bricker shook his head, drank the coffee and set the cup on the bookcase. "How typical of you people. You need all your answers in some canon law or Papal encyclical."

" Oh, come on, Bricker. I think this has gone far enough." Jones turned to leave but Bricker grabbed his arm.

" I will use all legal means to keep you people from attacking my church!"

" *Your* church?"

" Yes, *my* church. *My* followers. People with open minds and not tainted by tradition and rules!"

" Hey, you're out of line, you know that?"

Several people turned. Bricker snarled and moved closer. " Maybe it's time you left..."

" Go ahead, say it. *My* church. Don't talk about rules and tradition. The primary doctrine keeping this church together is ego!"

Bricker's knuckles whitened and his cheeks flushed. " Get out!"

The hall was silent and Jones took one step toward the outside door, but stopped. " Is that what a man of God proclaims? Throw his enemies out of the worship hall?"

Bricker spread his arms outward and his eyes were glazed. " And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple-"

" Reverend." Jones scanned the hushed hall. Even Arnie Dewars was quiet.  
" Reverend, listen."

" And he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple..." Jones said nothing and glanced briefly at L.G. as he neared the outside door. " And he taught, and said to them, Is it not written that, ' My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?' "

Jones held the door knob. " Let me finish the passage: ' But you have made it a den of robbers.'"

" Get out!"

Jones opened the door and stepped into the warm air. He looked ahead, his heart beating wildly, and just stared at the common. As he started down the stairs, Hooper's voice cut the thick summer air. " Bad move, Jones."

Jones looked around the church grounds. " Where are you, Hooper?"

" He has a loyal group of followers."

" Hooper, where are you?"

" And he'll never give up that land."

Jones started down the circular drive. He spun around when he heard Hooper's voice again. The pseudo-detective's boots stuck out from under the parish hall steps. He marched back to the steps, grabbed Hooper's boots and dragged him into a cluster of rododendums. Hooper stood and brushed his olive fatigues. " You know, you're starting to really get under my skin with your... your hiding... your camera..."

" The heart of counterintelligence."

" Okay, Mr. Counterintelligence. Who killed Webster Howard?"

" I am not at liberty to say."

" Oh, Hooper, shut up." Jones moved down the drive again.

Strickland's cruiser rounded the common and pulled into the church drive.

" Matthias, get in."

" Am I under arrest for provoking a preacher?"

" Hurry up. Someone ripped apart the Maintenance Free last night."

# 13

Strickland raced down Shore Drive without the cruiser lights flashing as Jones knew everyone in the church hall had seen his confrontation with Bricker. Maybe he should have avoided a showdown, yet Bricker's prejudicial beliefs sent him into a tizzy. "I should have kept quiet."

"It's done now. I'm just wondering who would rip apart the Maintenance Free."

"My guess is Mike Fitzgerald."

"He could have worked with the courts and gotten a search warrant," said Strickland.

"Yeah, if he hadn't gone into hiding. Then I'd put the blame on Diana Lee, but I don't think she could have physically torn apart that boat. Just like she couldn't have physically carried Webster onto his boat. Mike is very capable of doing both."

"The fact his cruiser was at the Howard place Monday night bothers me more and more. Ianelli says he reported being up the Interstate toward Paxton Monday night, not in Hamilton."

"Obviously reports can be falsified, George. And I keep thinking about that three hundred and forty thousand dollar insurance policy in Mabel's name."

Strickland paused at the flashing light across from Sal's Grill and zipped around the corner along the bay. " I suppose you're right. Why was he over there?"

" I don't know. I've suspected a relationship with Mabel because they're both gone," said Jones.

" She not at her sister's in Millbury according to Ianelli. But he's got people watching the place. I may go up there."

" And I also wonder if Mike was onto something. You know, if Webster was making a special run, which is likely with Lee's having worked with Webster and because of what just happened on the boat."

" Let's think this through. Somebody wanted something in that boat. Webster went out early before an approaching storm. The storm veers out to sea and he is murdered. Diana Lee waits for the boat to return. Inside the boat is a soda glass and a napkin to R/L. Webster ate cheese pizza before he was murdered, probably off the boat, but he didn't die until he went for the radio."

" Webster would probably still be missing if the storm came in like the killer wanted."

" That's true," said Strickland. He slowed at the marina bridge and his phone rang. Jones stared at the channel beyond the silver bridge rails bay as Strickland talked to Wendell back at the station. " He's got more background on Diana Lee."

" Good.""

Strickland pulled the cruiser onto the high grass on the far side of the bridge.  
" Yup...Yup...Yup."

" What does he say, George?"

He shut off the cruiser and set down the phone. " Nothing. I mean no arrests. Clean record. A few minor traffic violations. Five years ago she was listed as a sales rep for a medical supply house to hospitals, but she got into this horse training thing. She's been doing that for the past few years, according to the speeding ticket info. So, the whole drug theory goes down the drain."

" Not necessarily," said Jones, stepping outside.

" How can you say that, Matthias? If she was a drug user, it would have shown up."

Jones rounded the hood and put on his sliver-framed sunglasses. " No, suppose she's not Diana Lee."

" An alias, eh? I see Hooper is rubbing off on you."

" Watch it. " Strickland grinned as they started down the hill toward the docks. " And Mike might be more involved in this more than you think."

" With drugs?" asked Strickland.

" Maybe in tracking the deal down. In fact someone may have got to him and Mabel. Maybe they're dead."

" Crazy."

" Is it?" asked Jones as they reached the docks. The Captain stood down the dock, near the Maintenance Free and spoke with a few people on a small cabin cruiser. " Well, something made him disappear, George."

Jones approached Webster's boat. Boards were pried off the upper deck wall. " A lot of damage, George."

" We don't even know if this was drug related."

" Call in police dogs," said Jones.

" The only police dogs are in Prince William and I'm not calling Dom Pacheco to make an ass out of myself."

" You're right, you don't need to call Dom to make an ass out of yourself."

Strickland pretended to be upset, because Jones could see him smile. He walked ahead to the plank connecting the dock with the boat. Jones looked back to the road before Strickland climbed onto the plank. " What's the matter now?"

" I keep thinking Hooper is going to show up."

" Ianelli says good things about Hooper. Decorated war veteran. Very successful in intelligence."

" Him?"

" Yeah, so maybe you can work with him."

" No way. The man is a chuggle head." Jones removed his suit coat and loosened his tie as he followed Strickland up the plank. " What was he decorated for, leaving the service and sparing others the risk of working with him?"

Strickland tried not to laugh. " You'll regret it if he comes up with something."

" The only thing he'll come up with is more aggravation." Planks were scattered about the deck, exposing the inner supports and outer hull. " What a mess. How can this not be drug related?"

" Could be any type of contraband."

" You sound like Mike."

They walked across the weathered boards and down the narrow stairs to the swinging green doors below deck. Inside the little cabin where they had found Webster's body, the walls and ceiling were also split apart. Jones moved along the counter and radio to the window. He gazed through the smeared glass. The Captain continued speaking with the cabin cruiser people. Jones turned toward the green doors when the Maintenance Free rocked and someone crossed the deck. " It has to be Hooper. Hooper!"

" What?" asked the voice on the deck stairs.

The doors did not move when Jones pushed. " Okay Hooper, stop the games and come on down here."

The doors opened and gray haired Tom McGill stuck his head inside.

" You thought I was Detective Hooper."

" He's not an detective," said Jones. " What are you doing here, Tom?"

" Excuse me for trying to make a living but I do run a newspaper."

" Matthias is a little edgy this morning," said Strickland.

" I heard about your blasting Bricker."

" Me?"

" And he keeps thinking Detective Hooper is trailing him," said Strickland.

McGill fully stepped into the room. " I just saw Hooper back at the beach."

" The beach?" asked Jones.

" He was renting a sailboat at Wally Durning's shop."

" Now, what's he up to?" mumbled Jones.

" So, any truth to drugs being involved in the Webster thing?"

Strickland looked around. " I debating whether to call dogs in from Prince William. And I need to cordon off this place. What do you think happened, Tom?"

McGill stroked his mustache. " I think Fitzgerald and Mabel are somehow on the periphery of the murder. Maybe they were having an affair, I don't know. And I think Fitzgerald had a handle on whatever Webster was up to that night."

" Ianelli has a watch on the sister's house and Fitzgerald's Paxton apartment," said Jones, gazing across at the sailboats on the bay. " We're not going to break this until we question Fitzgerald or Mabel."

" And find R/L," said McGill.

Jones nodded. " I'm going to have dinner tonight at St. Bart's with Father Gallagher, but tomorrow morning I'm going check the Internet and old phone listings. It's time we got answers, Tommy."

# 14

Jones drove his jeep to Prince William after speaking with Strickland. Diana Lee had an alibi during the trashing of the Maintenance Free and it was a good one. A half dozen people at the stables saw her working late. Later she crossed the state and stayed with two friends in Murpheysboro over the Vermont border. It was still possible she might have hired someone to look for drugs on the boat.

Gallagher decided not to challenge Bricker directly. He invited Jones and two members of the Christian Youth Group to supper at St. Barts' rectory. By the end of the evening he had hoped to persuade the group not to locate a youth center on the Washington Street land. Given Bricker's explosive personality, Jones thought it prudent not to push the Reverend.

Leaving Hamilton, the college, the murder case, and Clyde Hooper behind, as well downing a few glasses of Father Gallagher's 1969 French Chablis, allowed Jones to relax, yet thoughts of the murder persisted. Strickland had told him initial tests on the red paint were inconclusive, but no more tests were scheduled. Jones consciously tried to nix thoughts of the investigation as he answered questions from Mr. Harriman and Melanie Willard of the group about his teams at Hamilton.

Gallagher perched at the end of the long table and leaned slightly on the chair arm as a lion ready to pounce on his prey. " Now that we have sufficiently recapped the football, basketball and baseball seasons for my favorite college,

maybe we should have a discussion of what happened inside First Parish's church hall this afternoon."

" Something happened?" asked Jones.

" Oh, yes. Good news does travel fast, Matthias."

Harriman raised his brows. " Father has already given us a full description."

" But we know how Reverend Bricker can be," said Melanie. " He is involved in our group."

" And takes full advantage of our facilities," said Harriman.

" I don't know how well you know Bricker, but he has it in for both me and Father Gallagher."

" Why?"

" Yes, why?" asked Gallagher. " But I am not happy about it. All I want to do is locate chapel, very small not auspicious, on that land. Are you people really that adamant about putting something over there?"

" Not really," answered Harriman. " It would be nice to have that land, but there is always the question of funds. "

Melanie turned to Gallagher. " I'm confused, if you have the funds and we don't, why wouldn't he sell the land to you?"

" I tried to ask that question this afternoon," said Jones..

" Your dispute is all over town," said Melanie.

" Just a friendly little chat with the good Reverend."

" Not what I heard," said Gallagher, smiling.

" Well, I tried to be civil with the man. He began by correcting me about his homily, I mean his sermon. And then he told me to tell you, Jim, to forget about any intrusion into our town."

Gallagher's voice was louder. " Intrusion?"

" Oh, he talked about his church and his land and he threw me out!"

" He is very possessive about the land," said Harriman.

Gallagher stood and pointed at Jones. " Good for you, Matthias. And he hasn't heard the end of this.""

" Jim, maybe you should just drop it. It's not worth it."

" Not now. If his attitude were different. I would really like the Christian Youth Group to yield. "

The kitchen phone rang. Gallagher's rotund housekeeper leaned in the opening. " Father. "

" Company?"

" Maybe Reverend Bricker," said Jones and they all laughed.

" It's for you, Matthias. Tom McGill calling from Hamilton," she said.

" Excuse me, gentlemen." Jones set down his napkin and skirted the table. Once in the kitchen the housekeeper handed him the phone. " Thank you, Miss Cranford."

" Father's upset, isn't he?"

" Serve him that pecan pie and he'll quiet down," said Jones and he put the receiver to his ear. " Hello, Tom."

McGill's voice came through clanking dishes and constant conversation.

" Racer's Lounge, Sagamore, Massachusetts on Cape Cod."

" All right! How did you track that one down?"

"Actually Susan did before we went out. From the phone listings. Five years ago The Pendulum was Racer's Lounge. I've called down there. Occasionally some of the old napkins pop up out of a supply closet, according to Pete the guy that works the bar."

" I want to go down there," said Jones.

" Good idea, we'll make plans during the week."

" No, I mean now,"

McGill exhaled. " Susan will kill me, come on, Matthias. We're having dinner with L.G. and Michelle."

" Tom, I'm going. You sure want to miss this one?"

After a short pause, McGill answered quickly. " No."

" I'm at St. Bart's.

" Okay... I'll see you in half an hour."

\* \* \*

Jones hung around St. Bart's long enough to taste the pecan pie and coffee. Gallagher, still fuming about Bricker's tirade, had convinced Harriman and Melanie Willard not to build their center on Washington Street. Harriman was a Red Sox fan and while Melanie talked with Mrs. Cranford, Jones waited at the window as the Red Sox game sounded loud from the bulky wood console TV. Gallagher leaned forward in his recliner. " You can't win with no depth in your pitching."

" I thought you said they were going to win it this year," said Jones at the curtains. An occasional car passed under the streetlights.

" Did I say that?"

" You say it every March just when they leave Florida."

" Well, maybe they will."

Jones's smile dropped when Hooper's red and white van signaled for the rectory parking lot. McGill was in the passenger's seat. " Oh, no. No, no, no."

" What's the matter, Matthias?" asked Gallagher, the remote control still in his hand.

" No... Hooper."

" Who?"

" The guy Lark Larsen hired to investigate the Webster Howard case. What is Tom doing with *him*?"

" Are you heading out?" asked Gallagher as he stood.

" I was." Jones shook hands and excused himself. Mrs. Cranford showed him out the front door. He trotted down the porch steps and rushed into the brightly lit parking lot. McGill, in jeans and a sports shirt, stepped from the van, but Hooper was still inside. " Tom, what are doing with-

" What?"

" Why are you here with... with *him*?"

McGill put on his lightweight jacket. " Why are you upset with me? You made the arrangements with him."

" I never talked to him." Jones studied the rusted van and waxed rear windows. Then he stomped around to the driver's side, but the seat was empty.

" Hooper! Hooper, where are you? This guy is a lunatic. I'm taking my jeep and you're coming with me."

" He was driving the van," said McGill.

" Idiot... Hooper!" He turned and faced McGill. " Come on, Tom, we're heading down the Cape."

McGill stroked his bristly mustache and smiled. " Then you shouldn't have asked him."

Hooper's annoying voice shot out from behind the van. " Let's hit the highway, Jones."

Jones ran past McGill and around the back but still did not see Hooper.

" You never called him?"

" No, come on, we'll take my jeep."

" Hold it, Jones." Jones located a small, enclosed speaker below the rear windows. McGill shrugged his shoulders and Jones quickly opened the side door. Hooper was seated in front of a black and white monitor and had a microphone in his hand. " Good evening, gentlemen."

" Hooper, what are you doing?"

" Testing the equipment and remaining under cover."

" You do that. Come on, Tom."

Hooper spoke at a higher volume through the speakers. " I have valuable information that you will not learn unless you let me tag along."

Jones stopped but did not turn. His brow furrowed. " What information?"

" I know Diana Lee's real name."

"What is it?" asked Jones, still not facing the van.

"Ah, you want me to dip my hand, eh?"

Jones grit his teeth, spun and marched back to the open door. "Holding back that information might let the killer go free."

"And if I tell you, you'll leave me behind and take your jeep."

Jones shook his head. "This is ridiculous."

"Checkmate," said McGill, smiling. "He's got you."

Hooper clipped the microphone on a side shelf and turned off the monitor. He hunched over to the driver's seat. The exhaust spread quickly when he started the loud engine. "I'm all tanked up and ready for action."

Jones looked at him and then at McGill. "Let me get my cell phone."

# 15

Hooper tapped his fingers on the metal dash as loosely connected speakers piped out polka music. Jones squirmed in the back seat amidst an assortment of listening devices, wires, cameras, monitors, and recording machines. He stared at the Boston skyline lights as the van hummed over the bumpy elevated highway.

" Turn that down, will you?"

" What was that, Jones?"

" I said turn it down. I feel like I'm at Polka night at the VFW."

McGill turned in the front seat as Hooper lowered the volume. " I'm wondering whether Fitzgerald was aware of this Racer's Lounge."

" It could be a wild goose chase," said Jones as Hooper placed a pair of wide sunglasses over his eyes. Then he looked ahead at the tunnel running under several city blocks. " Hooper, what are you doing?"

" Not to fear. These are not ordinary sunglasses."

" Wonderful."

" Opening up the infra red spectrum allows a greater ability to survey the terrain."

" We're driving through Boston. It's pretty bright out there." Jones shook his head. " Tom, I think Webster could have brought the boat down the coast and back without refueling."

" Whether he did or didn't the napkin was on the boat. Now why can't they track down the paint on the bow?"

" I don't know. Maybe George should get the Fletchers involved. After all, they manufacture paint."

" Not a bad idea."

Hooper leaned over from the wheel, took his eyes off the highway and spoke in a lower voice. " I say call the FBI, chums. The boat has crossed state lines. I have contacts throughout the intelligence community."

Jones nodded as they entered the tunnel. Hooper was contorted in the seat as he drove and wandered over the lanes. " Watch where you're driving, Hooper."

" I have a chauffeur's license, Jones. I assure you I know what I'm doing." He quickly veered back into the fast lane.

Jones opened his eyes as McGill tightened his seat belt. " Now, listen Hooper. This bar is at the end of the Cape Cod Canal near the electrical plant."

" I've sailed the canal many times. I know right where you mean."

" Well, we get off at the first exit once we cross the bridge."

Hooper pointed to his temple and opened his large brown eyes. " Stored right up here."

" That's what I'm afraid of."

\* \* \*

Jones was awakened from a light sleep by Tom McGill's aggravated voice. " Exit one, how simple can it be?"

" I went exit one," said Hooper as they moved into a heavily wooded area.

Jones checked his watch. " Eleven o'clock... Where are we, Hooper?"

" I will find my way back. I've always had a superb sense of direction."

" Then why are we lost?" asked Jones, leaning into the front seat. " How long have we been on this back road, Tommy?"

" I don't know I drifted out, too," said McGill.

" Forty-five minutes or was it twenty minutes?" asked Hooper.

" Where's the map?" asked Jones.

" The map, oh, yes the map. I had hidden it for security purposes in case we were stopped."

Jones hit the seat. " Stopped by who? Hooper, just pull out the map."

" I'm sure the Cape Cod Canal is just over the next knoll according to my calculations."

" What calculations, based on what?" asked Jones as the van's engine sputtered. Again he looked at McGill . " Oh, great the van is dying."

" I was meaning to have that tune up," said Hooper. The van shimmied as they moved around the bend and up the hill. A green and white interstate sign glowed in the headlight's glare. " Ah, here we are. All set."

Jones winced when he saw a sign for Providence, Rhode Island. " What the... What are we doing near Rhode Island?"

The van backfired twice and rolled to a stop near the off ramp. The engine shook and then shut off completely. As Hooper turned the key the engine coughed until the carburetor was flooded with gasoline. But he pumped the gas pedal.

" Hooper, you're flooding it," said Jones.

" Just a blip. Just a blip."

Jones pushed back in the seat. " Thanks a lot, Hooper."

" No need to be annoyed, Jones." Hooper bent over and fiddled with something under the seat as Jones fumed.

" You drive us off the highway with no map, in a van that should have been scrapped years ago, and now we're stuck in the middle of nowhere... And you say I shouldn't be annoyed?"

" I am prepared for all contingencies." He pulled an oversized orange flare gun from beneath the seat. " We will be rescued in a short time, I assure you."

Jones grabbed his cell phone and jammed it in his pocket. " I'm out of here, Tom."

" Where can you go, Matthias?" asked McGill as Jones slid open the jammed side door.

" I'll walk it if I have to just to get away from him!"

McGill pushed open the creaky passenger side door. " You don't even know where you are."

" I don't care."

Hooper opened his door and with a huge flare gun in his hand, stepped around the van. " Stand back. Stand back, I say!"

" Hooper, shooting off that gun is useless. Let me use my cell phone."

" I don't think that will be possible." Hooper swung the flare gun toward Jones and Jones leaped behind the front fender..

" Why not?"

" When I first was lost I took it off the seat. Seems I dropped out the window and snapped the antenna."

Jones pulled out his phone and looked at the snapped antenna. " Okay. Goodbye, Tom." He started along the off ramp toward the interstate. When he tried 911 the scratchy signal caught, but faded out. Behind him he heard a pop and the grass around the ramp was illuminated for a few seconds. Above him a long orange ball streaked across the sky, arced and dissipated into the night. Hooper said something to McGill, but McGill soon trotted away from the van." The man is dangerous."

" I told you," said Jones as Hooper cranked the engine again.

" I've seen one car go by here the five minutes we've been here," said McGill, catching Jones.

" I'll walk to Cape Cod rather be within a twenty mile radius of that... that... Hooper."

\* \* \*

The highway along the canal rose over a series of rounded hills and descended onto a nearly deserted rotary in front of the silver bridge. As the truck driver downshifted and the truck started up the bridge, Jones looked over the yellow street lamps lining the swift moving murky canal. Two prodigious cubed plant buildings and towering concrete smoke stack were visible at the end of the

canal. A series of green oil tanks were brightened by additional white lights and the full moon over the bay coated the silhouetted coast.

" You wanted exit one?" asked the driver.

" You don't have to bring us over there," said Jones. He scanned the road behind the truck.

" Hooper's not there, Matthias," said McGill in the middle. " That car was DOA"

" We'll see."

The road dipped at the bottom of the bridge and rose again to the exit. He figured Webster Howard had come down to the old Racer's Lounge either by truck or boat. As the driver moved in low gear back under the cement bridge supports, Jones grew nervous, not just because of the problems with Hooper. His heart beat quickly as they paralleled the canal and approached the cylindrical storage tanks. He stared past the barb wire above the chain link fence. The road wound through darkened scrub brush and to a more lighted area near the canal.

The Pendulum appeared as a curled shingled fish shanty, long and in several sections across from a dirt parking lot. They came to a stop as the truck's air brakes hissed and Jones extended his hand to the driver. " We appreciate this."

" How you boys gonna get home?"

" Call you up," said Jones.

" Go ahead, I'm heading to Provincetown and making my way back tomorrow morning. Be out on the highway about noon"

Jones climbed down the corrugated metal steps and leaped into a gritty parking lot. McGill backed down slowly off the step. The driver revved the engine,

waved and looped around the lot as Jones slowly turned toward the lounge. The bar music pumped bass into the full parking lot and people were dancing inside the pane windows.

" Why do I get an uncivil feeling about this place?" asked McGill.

" Because it's an uncivil place," said Jones, starting across the lot. Near the door, marijuana laden smoke drifted outside like fog pouring off the bay. Jones stepped onto the boardwalk. The crowd noise and bass through the open doors grew louder. He peered through the screens, past the animated dance floor, at a west coast baseball game playing on a huge wide screen TV. Side TV sets above the booths played old black and white movies while competitors in a wild dart game argued in the barn board area down back. Jones opened the spring-activated door and he and McGill took seats at the center bar.

He ordered two draft beers from a bartender wearing a blue striped work shirt with, " Steve, " pressed on the chest. Fishnets sagged from the rafters and dusty red and blue glass railroad lanterns and weathered lobster traps hung next to chipped red and white buoys. Steve set the beers on the thick glossy wood bar and Jones slid three dollars to him. Then he turned to McGill. " Susan know you hang out in places like this, Tommy?"

McGill stared at two short-haired woman in bright spandex tops, holding hands down the end of the bar. " I can't say she does, old buddy."

Jones gazed up at the menu written in white chalk on the blackboard near the TV. " Pizza! Webster had pizza."

"What was that?" asked the bartender. " You want pizza?"

" Actually, I have a few questions," said Jones.

" Oh, yeah?" He wiped the bar with a clean white linen rag. " What do you want to know?"

" This used to be Racer's Lounge," said Jones.

" What are you a historian?"

" You still have napkins with the R/L on them, right?"

" Yeah... What else."

" We're looking for Pete," said Jones, sipping his beer.

The bartender smiled and leaned forward toward Jones. " I'm Pete and I'm busy."

" The shirt says Steve," said McGill.

" Yeah, so what? "

" I've got no problem with that," said McGill.

" I'm glad." He turned back to Jones. " What about you?"

" What about me?"

" You got any more questions?"

" As a matter of fact-

" Drop us a post card." He laughed as he waited on a couple across the bar.

Jones took a full sip of beer and tried to speak over the music and the crowd buzz. " Nice guy. At least the beer is good."

" As an old reporter in town, I'll tell you these guys are going to be tough."

" I agree." Jones looked to his right. Hooper had just stepped through the screen doors. " Oh, no..."

" I'll second that," said McGill. " I'm surprised he got that van going."

" Dumb luck." Jones grabbed his beer and guided McGill's shoulder as they disappeared down the bar. He slipped into an open booth in a darkened area lit by the hockey game on the overhead TV. Fifty feet away Hooper stepped up to Steve at the bar.

" He's probably asking about us," said McGill.

" Maybe not.

" He's not a bad guy. He means well."

A young woman at the pool table shot the break, cracking the table balls as Jones pointed at McGill. " You're trying to upset me, aren't you, Tom?"

" No, but it's not a bad idea."

Hooper moved his arms wildly as Steve returned to the other side of the bar.

" Is he out of his mind?"

McGill leaned to his right. " He's gone."

Jones stepped from the booth. " Good. I'm going to talk to Steve or Pete or whoever he is. "

" Don't push your luck, Matthias." McGill slid out of the booth and followed him past the pool tables and back to the bar.

" Never."

" I have to use the men's room. I'll be right back."

" Okay." McGill circled the dance floor and entered the hallway near a set of stairs next to the large screen TV. Jones leaned over the bar as Steve turned around. " You again."

" I need to talk with you."

" Lots of people need to talk with me."

Jones smiled. The big guy clasped a pitcher of beer at the end of the bar and started guzzling. " You know a guy named Mike Fitzgerald?"

" Never heard of him."

" What about Webster Howard?"

Steve snapped his fingers and the big guy set down the pitcher and furrowed his brow. He stood behind the stool like an angry bear in the woods. Steve pushed his duck lips together as if he were about to quack. " If I were you, buddy, I'd take your questions to another location. Comprendo?"

The big guy loomed next to him. With beer breath and body odor reeking, he glared down at Jones with two black pinpoint eyes. " You got trouble, Steve?"

" Got a man asking too many questions, Darryl."

" Listen, I'm investigating a murder."

" Murders happen, dude."

" I knew the guy that was killed. I think he was in this bar the night he was killed."

Steve's eyes darted between Darryl and Jones. " Get him the hell out of here, Darryl. Break his bones."

Darryl exposed his yellow teeth and with delight in his eyes lifted his two shovel sized mitts toward Jones. Without thinking, Jones thrust his knee upward into his cushioned stomach. His face was void of expression, Jones fists tightened and he felt the same adrenaline surge he experienced before his amateur boxing bouts back in Indiana. He hit Darryl with a left hook, squarely on his bearded chin, stunned him, and he then countered with a right cross to the chest. Dazed, Darryl

stepped back, but Jones continued the attack. He could see people had gathered around the bar as he quickly popped Darryl's chin. With one mighty upper cut, stinging his knuckles, Jones knocked Darryl back. The larger man's eyes rolled upward, the crowd cheered and he when he hit the floor.

"Wow," said Steve from the bar. "Nobody ever cold cocked Darryl."

His knuckles cut, Jones moved his crunched fingers. People applauded as a well dressed man in a smooth leather jacket and red turtleneck pushed through the crowd. His dark hair, moussed and trimmed at the ears, he squeezed behind the bar and faced Jones. "You upstairs."

Jones looked for McGill, but did not see him. "What about my friend?"

"He's taking a whiz," said Steve,

"When the other guy gets back, send him up."

"Sure, Pete."

"I'd feel better if I waited for my friend," said Jones.

"I'd feel better if I won the lottery. Let's go."

As a group of patrons applauded Jones started along the bar. Three men dragged Darryl across the dance floor toward the kitchen. The man in the leather jacket waited for Jones and accompanied him up the dimly lit carpeted stairway to the brighter second floor walnut paneled offices. A huge window span overlooked the electrical plant and storage tanks lights. Pete motioned him toward a wide wood desk kitty corner to the window. To his right were a series of black and white TV monitors of the bar downstairs.

"You're very efficient. My first question would be about those monitors."

## The Fitton Chronicles

## The Handyman's Secret

" You ask a lot of questions. Who are you?"

" Jones, Matthias Jones."

" Well, Matthias Jones. Let me give you the proper answer. You don't want to know. I don't own this bar, but I keep watch for powerful people." Jones nodded and glanced at Steve behind the bar, talking with several patrons.

" Seems you're the talk of the bar. What are you doing here?"

" Looking into a murder."

" Wonderful... Nobody's been killed in here since last month."

" I need to know if a guy from New Hampshire brought his boat over to this bar last Monday or Tuesday night."

" Who knows? What did he look like?"

" Tall, strong, dark wavy hair. Tanned complexion, dark eyes."

" I can check." He jostled something inside his desk drawer.

" And I'm also checking on other people. A state cop, a thin little blonde and an over made up forty year old woman with red hair."

" Sounds like a board game with suspects." He pulled out a red case videotape and crossed the office. Under the shelf were several video machines. Jones scanned for McGill on the downstairs monitors as Pete pushed in the tape.

" This tape is for Monday."

" I won't even ask why you record everyone downstairs."

" Good move." The console TV filled with an image similar to the current bar image. " Now, there's six hours of tape here. And I have the Tuesday tape. I would suggest putting it on fast forward."

" Why are you helping me?"

" Probably because you knocked Darryl on his ass. No one ever did that."

" I'm worried about my friend, McGill."

Pete nodded and pressed a buzzer on his desk. He spoke directly with Steve at the bar and asked him to check the men's room and around bar. Jones leaned forward as people on the tape zipped around the bar. " Who was the guy who was murdered?"

" A local maintenance guy in my town." Jones did not recognize anyone on the Monday night bar tape. " He went to sea a few days a week. There was a R/L napkin on the counter when we found him dead on the boat."

" Ah... Now, I see." The buzzer sounded and Steve's voiced echoed in the speaker. McGill was not in the men's room and they were searching the bar. The thought of McGill being hurt crossed his mind. " See anything?"

" Not yet."

" Stevie, sweep the bar for McGill," said Pete and Jones stood. " Don't worry, Mr. Jones I'm sure it's a simple matter of his stepping outside for a smoke or-

" He doesn't smoke."

" Or maybe he went looking around the bar."

" You'll excuse me for being nervous, but we are looking into a murder." He turned toward the console. On tape Webster Howard moved into the picture, sat at the bar and munched on an appetizer basket.

" There he is! Slow it down!"

Pete manipulated the machine and the tape resumed its normal speed. Jones squatted in front of the console. He studied the Webster's heavy facial features and large hands. In the orange and green baseball cap he would be wearing in death, Webster Howard watched a game and occasionally panned the lounge as if he were looking for someone.

" How was he murdered?" asked Pete. " And more importantly, where? I've got enough to contend with without someone being murdered down here."

" He was probably murdered off the New Hampshire coast." Webster stood and turned. A flutter of emotion crossed Jones's stomach as Mike Fitzgerald, in white chinos and a green sweatshirt, walked up to Webster and shook his hand.

" You have sound on this, Pete?"

" Nah, just a monitor. Who's the big guy?"

" Someone who has a lot of explaining to do."

Neither man sat, but immediately Fitzgerald, his back to the camera, gestured strongly with his hands. Webster's face was strained on black and white image and he constantly shook his head. For five minutes the confrontation continued until Webster finally pointed at Fitzgerald and said something adamantly before he turned and straddled the stool again. Fitzgerald stared at him and then crossed out of camera range.

Seconds later two men, one younger in a plaid shirt and ponytail, the other with full gray hair, appeared at the bar. The older man put his hand on Webster's shoulder. Webster's head snapped up and he shot to his feet. He listened as the older man counted out something on his fingers. Webster nodded and all three men moved off the screen.

" Drugs," said Pete.

" What?"

" I said it looks like drugs."

Jones nodded and stood. " I've had that feeling all along."

" You want a copy of this?"

" Sure, it further incriminates Fitzgerald."

" The big guy?"

" Yeah," answered Jones as he thought about McGill. " I'm worried about my friend."

" In this place you have to be careful, Jones."

" We'll have to start looking outside."

\* \* \*

Like a grumbling behemoth, the unabated bar music and noise shook the former Racer's Lounge. As he waited for Pete to return with his men, Jones panned the bar where Webster Howard had sat only days before. Now, Mike Fitzgerald moved within the hub of the investigation. Once he found McGill, Jones would call George Strickland and report the extraordinary image of Fitzgerald on the upstairs monitor.

Someone darted across the bar into the dim light. Jones marched around the dance floor, but as he rounded the corner bar, Hooper slithered along the bar

behind the stools. Before Jones could retreat, Hooper saw him and his annoying voice pierced the noise barrage. " Jones!

" Hooper, I wouldn't come back in here. "

" I saw what you did, Jones. A display of courage, perfectly executed... a remarkable-"

" I thought you were broken down."

" Was."

" What?"

" *Was* broken down."

" So, you're fixed, I'm glad, but I have other things on my mind." Jones looked for Pete's men outside the front windows.

" The van is destroyed."

" What do you mean, destroyed?"

" Harold felt bad."

" That's nice," said Jones, wandering toward the windows, but Hooper followed him. Pete and his men were not in the parking lot nor along the electrical plant fence. " Who's Harold?"

" Harold used his truck to push the van."

" A Good Samaritans lives."

" He had a big truck."

" Wonderful," answered Jones.

" And a heavy foot. Bumped the van over the bridge onto the highway."

Jones turned. " Then why are you still standing here?"

He moved closed and spoke in a lower voice. " We got our signals crossed."

" I'm sure you did."

" I had to water the lilies and he thought I was driving the van."

Jones closed his eyes. " Look, Hooper. McGill is missing and-"

" And a bit of additional bad luck. I think I'd still be driving now if the eighteen wheeler hadn't flattened the van."

Jones stared into his dark eyes. Pete, wearing a blue windbreaker, opened a side door across the dance floor. The crevice cutting his brow rattled Jones. Pete checked the bar, but moved briskly when he caught Jones' eye. " We haven't found him."

" I'm coming out there," said Jones.

Pete turned to the gawking Hooper. " Who *are* you?"

" I'd rather not say," said Hooper.

" That's the smartest thing you've ever said," replied Jones. " Let's go look outside."

Pete nodded and they moved out the front screen doors. The outside air cooled his face behind the lounge. Hooper remained at a discrete distance. Jones panicked when they reached the rocky edge of the dark, fast moving canal. McGill could not survive the swirling current. Pete trekked along anchored boats in the adjacent sheltered cove as Hooper nonchalantly strolled about twenty-five feet behind.

Somebody wanted McGill away from the investigation. Jones cared little for his own safety, but McGill being hurt or kidnapped would devastate his wife and three kids. The bathroom door was out of camera range, but it was possible McGill was on one of the monitor tapes. As they checked the cove, someone yelled from the electrical plant fence a few hundred yards across the parking lot. Flashlights moved like fireflies buzzing in the night.

Jones raced with Pete across the parking lot. As they converged on a group of five men, flashlights aimed at the fence, McGill's beige jacket, splashed with blood, came into view in the wispy grass against the rusted fence.

" Oh, Tom... no." McGill's eyes were closed. Lacerations covered his face and a larger temple gash was surrounded by fresh blood. " Oh, Tom, damn. This is all my fault. My damned fault."

" Get a car!" shouted Pete.

Jones heard nothing when he put his ear to McGill's chest, but as he felt a faint pulse within McGill's limp wrist. " Forget the car! Call the ambulance!"

" We can't risk the cops getting involved in this," said Pete.

" Oh, yeah?" yelled Jones, shooting to his feet. " I'm not risking my friend dying either!"

" Just leave us out of this."

" Forget the ambulance, he needs to be med-flighted. Probably to Boston."

Pete hesitated and turned to a smaller man within the group. " Call Granby Hospital now. Tell them this man has been head injured. Tell them we want a flight into Boston."

# 16

Jones feigned sleep as the helicopter trekked up the coast. Over Boston harbor, with only a few hours to dawn, the sporadic lights cut the darkness. McGill, lifeless under a stretcher sheet, had IV's and blood plastic tubes looped into his arm and a green oxygen mask strapped over his mouth. Gauze bandages were wrapped around the top of his skull. Jones pondered how Susan McGill, waiting at the hospital when they landed, would adjust to the frightful sight of her husband battling for his life.

The helicopter veered to the south of the city, over the nearly deserted double highway where Hooper had driven Jones and McGill only five hours ago. They swung around a mass of brick buildings and slowly descended to a huge green cross painted across a roof top cement landing pad. Radio communications sounded up front as the chopper swayed from side to side

When they touched down, Jones looked out the window again. Behind a scattering team of medical technicians and an empty gurney, L.G. Bentley emerged from the roof's red doors. He held Susan McGill's hand as the slowing rotor blades blew the air against his black jacket. Jones unbuckled his seat belt and hunched over. Someone opened the side hatch. Tom's stretcher was hoisted outside and he was quickly transferred to the gurney.

By the time Jones stepped on the concrete, the entourage disappeared behind the doors. He wandered across the windy roof, praying Tom would survive the attack, but questioned whether Tom's injuries were the result of a random attack. He pushed open the heavy doors and waited in front of silver elevator doors. Tom was lured outside the bar. Unless someone had information about Webster Howard, Tom would have located Jones before heading outside with strangers.

The elevator doors opened and Jones stepped inside the empty car. He sifted through the motives of his suspects as the doors closed and he rumbled downward. Diana Lee would not have the strength to kill Webster Howard nor could she hurt McGill. Not only was Mike Fitzgerald strong enough to inflict such damage, but he was smart enough to get away with it.

\* \* \*

With a half filled Styrofoam coffee cup, Jones entered the emergency room waiting area. Susan McGill, sitting with L.G. and Michelle Bentley, looked stunned as she stood. She moved in slow motion, hugging Jones. " Oh, Matthias. "

" I'm sorry, Susan. This is all my fault taking Tom with me. "

" He's still... still in surgery, " she said, her voice shaking badly. Jones walked her toward the couch. " They, they don't think he's going to make it. "

" He'll make it, Susan. He'll make it, " said Jones emphatically but he did not believe it. Susan glanced at Michelle and sat down again.

Jones looked into L.G.'s gray eyes. " Matthias. "

" Thanks for coming down here. L.G. "

" What the hell happened? "

" Tom went into the men's room and didn't come out. I was upstairs reviewing a tape. Mike Fitzgerald met Webster Howard in the bar last Tuesday night. "

" Come on. I wondered about him disappearing. Why did he meet Webster? "

" I don't know. "

" You'd better call Strickland. "

" I did. He was on his way up north to Millbury with Ianelli... They're trying to track down Mike and Mabel."

" What about tonight? Were there cameras there tonight?"

" The lounge manager checked it while we were waiting. Out of range. Whoever got Tom outside was sophisticated enough to avoid the cameras. I'm sure I was targeted, too."

" Someone knew you were going to that bar."

Jones pinched his brow and thought about Hooper driving up to the rectory with McGill. " Hooper knew and Lord knows who he told."

" Where is he?"

" I don't know. He totaled his van." Thinking about Hooper further drained him. He sat in one of the orange vinyl chairs.

" You don't think Hooper was involved in this, do you? How did he know you and Tom were heading down the Cape?"

Jones looked up and sipped the coffee, but it was cold in his mouth. He set it on the side table and smacked his lips. " Hooper is too much of a klutz to be a murderer. I have no idea how he knew we were going down there. He's got electronic devices. He was probably listening to Tom and Susan's conversation. Mike Fitzgerald had the means to kill Webster and maybe the motive if he was involved with Mabel... or Diana. Hooper said Diana was just an alias. "

" What was her real name?"

Jones again closed his eyes and yawned. " He never said."

" Somebody was tipped off."

Susan, her head firmly set in her hands, slouched next to Michelle on the couch. " And now Tom McGill might not make it."

\* \* \*

Cigar smoke infiltrated his every breath and the morning sun brightened Jones' stuck eyelids. He leaned back in the seat as L.G.'s road hugging Jaguar hummed along the highway. Having fallen asleep before they left Susan and Michelle back in the hospital, he slowly opened his eyes. In the bright light along the interstate the stone spires of St. Bart's appeared behind the fluffy trees. L.G. smiled, puffed on a neatly wrapped brown cigar and appeared as if he had a full night's sleep. " Good Morning."

Jones yawned. " What a nightmare."

" I talked to Michelle half an hour ago. The neurosurgeon, Pellisier said they have brought down the swelling, but Tom is still out."

" He knows the identity of the killer, L.G."

" The next few hours will be critical as to whether he emerges from the coma." L.G. signaled for the second Prince William exit near the long tanned brick building housing the Fletcher paint factory. " There's where the dollars are generated, my friend."

" I need to see Ham or Hamilton about that paint on the bow of Webster's boat. Nigel can set up something." Jones took out his cell phone, but as he pulled the antenna, he realized Hooper had broken the phone last night. " Idiot..."

" What's the matter?"

" Hooper... He wrecked my cell phone last night."

" Use mine." L. G. pulled the phone from the holder and handed it Jones, but he was grinning.

" What's so funny?" asked Jones.

" Hooper."

" It's no laughing matter, believe me." He punched in Nigel's number as L.G. navigated through the traffic lights at the base of the ramp. The line rang, he closed his eyes. He could easily drift off to sleep.

" Dean Kent's residence."

" Mrs. Johnson, this is Matthias."

" Matthias, what do you hear about Tom McGill?"

" Doctors have brought down the swelling. They're hoping he comes out of it."

" So, awful. Nigel was very disturbed by the news. I'll get him." Jones stared at the rows of three decker apartments as L.G. skirted the downtown traffic. Hopper kept popping into his head, but he consciously forced out thoughts of the bumbling investigator.

" Matthias, you must be exhausted."

" I slept in the car. We just got into Prince William."

" Mrs. Johnson says Tom is better?"

" Yeah, but he's still out... Nigel I need some help."

" Yes, of course."

" I need to talk with the Fletchers about that paint scrape on Webster's boat."

" What do you mean?" asked Nigel.

" They're in the paint business. I might get closer to the murderer if I know exactly where that paint was manufactured. Then maybe I can get the model of the boat-

" I will see what I can do, but tracking down the actual boat could take time and you don't even know if it is related to the murder."

Jones nodded, his eyes still closed. " I know... I'm headed to St. Bart's to pick up my jeep."

" Oh, speaking of Father Gallagher and Reverend Bricker, I spoke with the Reverend after your spat."

" I hope I didn't embarrass the college or-

" On the contrary, I think you were baited. I am not happy with the Reverend's behavior as of late and I have informed him of that fact. I also let him

know as a member of the parish council, I will bring up a resolution to sell the Washington Street land to St. Barts."

" What did he say to that?" asked Jones.

" Dead silence. He turned and left. I must say it is not often you see the Reverend at a loss for words."

" He knows he can't stop this deal from going through." L. G. turned onto a side street. St. Barts was only a half a mile ahead. " I appreciate your talking to him, Nigel."

" Let's not be premature. I have to convince the other members of the council. I would advise Father Gallagher to still be looking at alternative parcels. Talk to Marcia Abrams and see what she has available. Have a plan in place in case I can't persuade the Reverend."

" Why? Does he have the final say?"

" I'm afraid he does. On another note, your tape with the Communications Department for the faculty send off. I know this murder investigation has taken up a lot of your time."

" Mark and Sue nearly have it done. It will be ready."

" Good. Everything is on schedule for tomorrow night in the drawing room at Fletcher Hill."

" I'll verify everything and get back to you before then. And thank for your efforts with Bricker."

" What's right it right. I'll talk to you later."

" Okay, bye. "

L.G. slowed at the intersection. St. Bart's, surrounded by sultry sun drenched trees, cast shadows across the asphalt. " About that land deal. "

" I'm not even thinking about that now. "

" Well, I have to tell you Bricker was adamant when I talked to him about it. He's not going to yield. He wouldn't even get into it with me. "

" Yeah, well. I'm tired. Let Gallagher duke it out with the Reverend... I don't care. Listen, I'm going to get some shut-eye and talk to the Fletchers about the paint scrape. "

" If anything breaks on Tom, I'll call you. "

" I hope he makes it. "

# 17

Jones was unsure how long the ringing had echoed around the bedroom. He rolled across the bed and in the low light he reached for the bedside phone.

" Mr. Jones? "

" Yeah.. " He checked the red digits on his alarm and realized he had only slept for forty-five minutes. His head throbbed at the temples.

" You are in big trouble! "

" Who is this? "

" Why this is Alberta Norris. I'm the First Parish Secretary. "

Jones had trouble keeping his eyes open. " Listen, any questions about the proposed chapel on Washington Street can be directed to Father Gallagher. "

" No, I'm just a bit annoyed with you. Who do you think you are with your tactics? "

" What? "

" I'm calling you now to call off your blood hounds. "

"Mam', I don't know what you're talking about. "

" Oh, then you don't take responsibility, do you? " she asked.

Jones rolled out of bed. " What are you talking about? "

" Your man. "

" Who? "

" Hooper. "

" Look, I have nothing to do with Hooper, " said Jones, wondering how Hooper had returned to Hamilton.

" He said he was working for you. "

" Well, that's just wrong. What is he doing down at the church? " asked Jones.

" Snooping all around with headphones over his ears and the video camera. I wanted to call you first before I called Chief Strickland. "

" Call the police, be my guest! "

" I will. "

She hung up and Jones stared at the receiver. He jiggled it back on the hook, sprawled out on his belly and placed the soft pillow over his head. His stomach wrenched when he thought about Hooper. Why was he over the church anyway?

The phone rang again and he pushed the pillow against his ears. With the pillow still over his head he reached for the phone, grabbed the receiver and pulled it under the pillow. " Yes, what is it now? "

"Excuse me? " asked Nigel.

Jones threw off the pillow and sat up. " Oh, Nigel. I thought it was somebody else. "

"Obviously. Any word on Tom McGill? "

" The swelling is down but he's still unconscious. "

" Tragedy, just dreadful. I just got off the phone with Hamilton Fletcher himself."

"Oh? "

" He fully agreed to aid you in the search on the paint scraped on Webster Howard's boat. "

"Excellent... "

"He has made arrangements to test the paint. His chemist will be calling you and George Strickland. "

"Great, " said Jones as a horn sounded outside. He leaped from bed and pulled up the shade. Hooper sat in a two seat, green sports car with a rusted rear fender. " What in the name of? "

"Problem? "

" I'll take care of this problem right now, Nigel. And thank you. "

" My pleasure. Let's hope we find out who killed Webster Howard "

Jones set down the phone and quickly threw on his jeans. He pulled up the shade and leaned against the screen. Hooper sat on the hood. Jones' voice was low and tired. " Hooper, go back where you came from. "

" You need me, Jones! "

"Right, I need to have a heart attack, too. Get lost. "

" I have answers. "

"Just like you had Diana's real name. "

" Paula Demers. "

Jones shook his head. He spun on the wood floor, scooped up his sneakers and hurried downstairs. Through the side lights Hooper paced the front steps. Jones quickly pulled open the wood door. " Why didn't you tell me that before? "

" I was going to. McGill's condition has not changed. "

"How do you know that?" asked Jones.

" I logged into the hospital computers from the car. "

Jones gazed at the car beyond the picket fence. " How did you do that? "

" Microwave and the proper equipment I just procured through my contacts.

"

" Yeah, right. You have no contacts. I dispute your background. I don't need your help. " Jones slammed the door.

Hooper opened the door. " Miss Demers has a background laden with assault and battery, robbery and drug convictions. She's served time."

Jones held the door knob. He did not know whether to believe Hooper.

" How do you know that? "

" I have my contacts and they have also told me where Trooper Fitzgerald is staying."

Jones shook his head. " Then just call the police. I don't believe you. "

" I cannot call the police without compromising my contacts."

When the wall phone sounded in the kitchen Jones rolled his eyes and slammed the door again. He walked quickly across the wood floor and grabbed the receiver. " Hello."

" Mr. Jones, this is Gordon McPhee. I'm Hamilton Fletcher's chief chemist"

" Yes, Mr. Phee. Thank you for calling."

" I will be in the lab this morning if you want to drop off that sample. You see, there are a limited number of manufactured marine paints both factory applied and consumer driven. I think we should be able to match the paint with the type of boat."

" That would be helpful.. Then again, we have to find the boat. I suppose the Captain at the marina could help us there. I'll be over around eleven if that's all right."

" That would be fine."

As Jones hung up Hooper sat at his patio breakfast table outside the sliders. He grit his teeth and slid open the glass. " You don't give up, do you?"

" Clyde Hooper never gives up. Finding that boat is a first step, Jones."

Jones moved into the warm air. " Where's Fitzgerald?"

" I will not tip my cards to you."

Jones marched up to the table. " Hooper, if you really know where he is, I could wrap this whole thing up. The guy probably attacked Tom and could attack again... You don't know where he is."

Jones turned and headed back in the house to make breakfast. He filled a coffee mug with water and slid it in the microwave. Finding Fitzgerald was essential, but he doubted Hooper's credibility. He dragged the cereal box and bowl from the cabinet and walked back to the sliders. " Listen, Hooper-"

An empty white metal chair was pulled across the landscape blocks. Jones quickly rushed to the front door and pulled it open. The sports car was not at the curb and he scanned common's spreading maples, but Hooper had somehow slipped away. He inhaled the warmer air. Having Hooper was not involved in the investigation was the best possible scenario.

\* \* \*

Jones dropped the small plastic bag filled with red paint chips on the black lab table. McPhee, a round little man with wavy hair and a thin mustache, raised his brows. " You still have the possibility that the scrape on the boat was something unrelated to the murder."

" This is the only thing I have to go on right now."

" Give me a few hours. We'll come as close as we can."

" Shooting in the dark, Mr. McPhee."

" Gordon. And sometimes you have to. I have your cell phone number."

" The call may be scratchy. The phone was damaged last night. Good luck."

Jones moved out of the lab and down the office corridor. Someone spoke with the security guard in the main lobby. Maybe Hamilton Fletcher had come over to the plant. When he rounded the corner, a smiling Hooper stood with the guard. The guard laughed and smiled as Jones approached. " Your partner has arrived to help you."

" He's not my partner." Jones shook his head and started for the lobby door.

" What can I do to make it up to you? "

" Let me make a list," said Jones and he pushed open the door. He hurried down the plant stairs toward his jeep, but Hooper trailed behind.

" Jones, listen. I have a confession."

Jones turned at the jeep door. " Oh, yeah? And what might that be?"

" I really don't know where Gus Fitzgerald is."

" Isn't that a real news bulletin..." He opened the jeep door and got behind the wheel.

"And I made up the thing about Diana Lee's alias."

" That one I believed," said Jones. He lifted his cell phone from the glove compartment and punched in the Samaritan Hospital in Boston. " Why did you make it up?"

" I'm sorry."

Jones glanced at him as the line rang and a woman on the switchboard answered abruptly. " GSH. "

" Yes, I want to check on the condition of a patient."

" Name."

" Thomas McGill."

" That would be patient relations-" The line rang again.

Hooper grabbed Jones's arm. " I've tried to solve this and I'm rather embarrassed. I wanted to do a good job in your eyes and I've messed everything up."

" So, you made up information? Hooper...."

" I know, I know."

The line clicked. " Patient Relations, Mrs. Stoddard speaking."

" Mrs. Stoddard, I'd like to check on a patient. Thomas McGill."

" McGill, Thomas, G." Jones heard her tapping the computer keyboard.

" Status unchanged. Guarded."

Jones pressed his lips and nodded. " Thank you." He ended the transmission and threw the phone on the seat. Then he rubbed his itchy eyes.

" Hooper, did you see anything unusual outside the bar last night?"

" Just the tough crowd. I've seen characters like that before. When I worked in Mexico-"

Jones looked up. " Nobody hanging around outside?"

" I was outside for no more than five minutes, Jones. I didn't see your friend McGill nor did I hear in pleas for help by the electrical plant fence. People wandered in and out. A few cars left. "

" Fitzgerald is in the center of this, whether he did it or not."

" Why did he meet Howard?" asked Hooper.

" I don't know. He could have sensed a drug connection, in which case he would be just doing his job."

" Then why is he gone?"

" The million dollar question, Clyde."

" I want to help."

" Listen, I would just tell Lark he doesn't need to be footing your bill. Nobody suspects him."

" You forget, I'm on the Bolpine."

Jones started the jeep, shut the door and rolled down the window. " Clyde, sometimes things can't be solved."

" Clyde Hooper never gives up. I believe that the cases will be closed-"

" I know. Problem solved. "

Hooper spun around and marched as if he were in a parade back to the little car. Jones picked up the phone. Maybe he could reach Strickland and check his progress in tracking down Fitzgerald. Before he could dial, the little car's engine choked and sputtered.

He pushed the phone's memory button and sent a signal out to Strickland's car phone. The line connected and rang for some time before a recording told him Strickland was out of range. He smelled gasoline fumes in the air as Hooper kept pumped the gas pedal and the car seemed to lose power. Jones tried not to feel bad for Hooper and backed the jeep around. In the mirror Hooper stepped from the car and kicked the front fender. Jones pulled from the plant parking lot.

Hooper looked up as Jones drove the jeep behind the car. "Hooper, you need a ride or something?"

"I dare say the MG has seen better days."

"You want a ride?"

"If it's not too much bother."

"That's not the question. Do you want a ride?" asked Jones.

"Clyde Hooper accepts help when he needs it."

Jones nodded and unlocked the side door. "Go ahead, get in."

"That is very kind of you. Remember, I have contacts. Any favors can be made worth your while."

Hooper climbed inside and Jones started from the lot. "I'm not looking for favors."

"Oh, we all can use favors."

" Where do you live?"

For a second Hooper seemed taken aback by the question and he did not look at Jones directly when he answered. " In the Ashley Heights section of course."

" Ashley Heights? You can't get more exclusive than that," said Jones. He turned at the traffic lights and headed up the hills toward Ashley Heights. Hooper moved his leg as if it were a piston and tapped his fingers on the door. Jones was convinced Hooper was fabricating the Ashley Heights story.

" I of course bought my house after I retired."

" What kind of house is it?" asked Jones as the jeep moved at a steep angle in second gear.

" You'll see it, you'll see it."

" Listen, Hooper. I don't want to embarrass you, but do you really know where Mike Fitzgerald is?"

Hooper stared out the window. The homes were huge near the top, with spacious yards and spreading trees, were set back from the road. " I am not at liberty to say."

" Well, where is he? Come on Hooper."

" This is a Catch thirty-three."

" You mean twenty-two."

" No, thirty-three. The paradoxical conundrum."

" Hooper, shut up. I mean just shut up. You and your conundrums."

" A thirty-three, Jones, means you have information but due to the delicate dependency of your sources you can do nothing."

" Do you really know where he is? This sounds like a bunch of nonsense."

" Yes, I know. And he is not the murderer."

" And how do you know that? The guy is on tape with Webster Howard."

" And he had and still is having an affair with Mabel."

" Possible."

" I only deal in facts, Jones."

Jones did not pursue the matter. He crested the hill and slowed at the stop sign. " Which way Clyde?"

" Ah... right."

" Listen, maybe you can help me later."

" Of course, Clyde Hooper is always ready." He turned to Jones and deepened his brow until he was nearly cross-eyed. " What am I ready for?"

" Diana Lee. I don't care about her alibi. She either ordered or tore apart Webster Howard's boat herself. Obviously, we're talking about a big shipment. Get rid of Webster and you reduce your overhead."

" Yes, I of course have considered that angle and rejected it."

" Why?"

" Never cut off the hand that has the golden goose."

Jones shook his head and cruised along under the trees and well kept grounds. " You mean cut off the hand that feeds you."

" That, too... I live over there. One fifteen Burton Boulevard."

Jones grinned. " Is that right?"

" I will get off curbside."

" Don't you want me to drive you in?"

" Not necessary. You never know who is lurking about. Remember the Boy Scout motto... "

" Be prepared," said Jones, pulled to the curb next to a long old brick wall covered with ivy.

" Yes, I will be prepared. I want you to call me as soon as the lab gives you the results on that paint. Wait."

" What's the matter?" asked Jones, looking around.

" No, I will call you or meet you. We will find the red bottom boat together!"

Jones leaned against the steering wheel. " I can hardly wait."

Hooper exited the vehicle, saluted Jones and started up the drive, but he repeatedly glanced over his shoulder as Jones rolled the jeep forward. At the next street he turned and accelerated to the street paralleling Burton Boulevard. As Jones neared the stop sign, Hooper was a few hundred yards away on the sidewalk and headed down the hill. Jones backed into a side driveway and waited.

Hooper passed the stop sign a few minutes later and continued down the hill. For some reason he had tricked Jones into thinking he lived in the mansion beyond the ivy wall. Jones shook his head, pulled out of the driveway and shifted in the opposite direction. He wanted to question Diana Lee one more time.

# 18

The magnificent white horse cantered around the arena and the small crowd behind the rail fence applauded Diana Lee. Jones wandered over from the barn, aware of her competence in the dressage arena. When she concluded the informal demonstration, the horse dipped his head and trotted from the arena. He moved steadily along the fence and she first saw him as she neared the gate. Her tight little face brightened as the horse slowed. " The investigator has returned. "

" Yes, he has. I'm convinced Webster Howard was on a drug run to Racer's Lounge. "

" You have an overactive imagination. "

Jones leaned against the fence and gazed up at her. " I don't think so. Did you get what you wanted? "

" I was in Murpheysboro, Vermont. "

" Who is he? "

" I don't understand your question. "

" You should. You hired somebody to get the drugs out of Webster's boat. You knew from his working around here of his financial problems. How his wife overspent. "

" How his wife was having an affair with the trooper. "

Jones stood up straight and approached the horse. " Do you have proof of that? "

She produced a crescent moon smile and her eyes dazzled gleefully. " I sure do. I have recordings made with a small micro cassette. "

" Why haven't you mentioned this before? "

She furrowed her brow. " I think you know the reason for that. "

" No, I don't. "

" I won't say what I did or did not do or what I was involved in. I wouldn't even say that much to Chief Strickland, but I will tell you I want this investigation as far away from me as possible. "

" Interesting. Then you did run the drugs. "

" Speculate if you will. "

" How long did he know of the affair? " asked Jones, certain she was telling the truth.

" The affair had started a year and a half ago. Webster found out a week before he was killed. "

" Who killed him, Miss Lee? "

" I'd put my money on Mike. He certainly harassed me enough. "

" He was after the drugs, but did he kill Webster Howard? I don't think he needed the insurance money. "

" Mabe's did. She was deep in debt... "

" So, Webster dies and they stood to gain from the insurance settlement. But the storm goes out to sea and fouls everything up. There's just this one thing: I just don't think Mike would do it. Obviously, he went out of his way to remove

evidence and to disappear. Maybe because of the relationship, but I just don't think he killed Webster Howard."

" He threatened me."

" Why?"

" I'd rather not say."

" Come on, who are you kidding? He threatened you because he was after you. And I'm still not convinced you didn't kill him."

" Don't be absurd," she said, laughing, and the horse moved forward.

But Jones followed along. " Or you could have had somebody do it. But that doesn't makes sense because that same person would have torn the boat apart at sea, got the drugs and left."

" My, my, we're full of theories, aren't we?"

" Side road theories. And one of them, Miss Lee, is going to stick. And when it does, you'd better hope it doesn't involve you." His cell phone sounded. The signal was strong despite the broken antenna. Diana brought the horse away from the barn and seconds later was in a full gallop on the wooded trail.

" Matthias Jones."

" Matthias, this is Gordon. That paint is ours and sold locally at Dewars Lumber."

" That was quick."

" I checked our marine paint formulas. Marine Epoxy Paint, number 12-667. A yellow and brown label. Dewars should have that right on the shelf."

" Excellent, Gordon, I think that's break I've been waiting for."

\* \* \*

Arnie Dewars spent too much time talking and applied an equal effort wasting time. Jones stuck his head inside the air-conditioned portion of the contractor section, lit by overhead fluorescent tubes, and surrounded by gray pegboard. The area always smelled and looked mechanical. When he did not see Arnie he closed the pane glass door and walked inside. Large five gallon buckets of paint were stacked on the cement and the gallon cans were lined up neatly with red labels along the wall.

Henry Ellerby, gray sideburns chopped to his jaw, stood in his blue striped Dewars shirt at the paint mixing table. The paint shaker next to him vibrated crazily. " How ya doin', Matthias?"

" Good, Henry. You have you a few minutes?"

" Yeah, just mixing something for builder work tomorrow morning." He wiped his hands and stepped forward. " You ain't gonna paint your house again, are you?"

" Do you know how long it took to cover up that pink color?"

" Arnie footed the bill, right? "

" He's the one who told Muddy to paint the house pink... I know I'll regret asking this, but is he here? "

" Haven't seen him. "

" Actually, I'm working on something real important."

" Webster's murder?"

" Exactly. Just keep this kind of hush, hush."

Henry looked around the gondola. " Not everyone in here has a big mouth like Arnie."

Jones grinned. " I'm looking for a Fletcher marine paint. Marine Epoxy Paint, number 12-667."

" Marine paint is down the back aisle here." Jones followed him past an assortment of brushes and rollers. " We actually do more marine paint than anything else."

" Really?"

" 12-667. I think that is a red paint if I'm not mistaken."

" You know your stuff." Along the back wall pegboard several shelves were lined with brown and yellow gallon cans. Quarts were on top. " I need to know if anyone came in here buying paint for a small boat."

" People come in here all the time. Plus, when I'm not here, people from other departments cover." Henry pulled a gallon bucket by the handle. " Marine red."

" You must remember somebody local buying it this spring maybe."

" We could check the records. A lot of people buy this color."

" I didn't realize that." Jones visualized the red streak and now questioned whether he could track down the vessel. " If I could get to the records, say of the past few months."

" Yeah, I could do that on the computer."

Jones scanned the store for the gawky Arnie. " This boat could have been painted any time."

Henry stepped up to the counter and tapped the keyboard keys. An array of green digits and letters filled the dark screen. "What I'll do is list the marine paints from March."

"I'm looking for the name Mike Fitzgerald or Diana Lee or Mabel Howard."

"Okay."

An actual bill of sale form for March first flashed on the monitor. At the far end of the store, Arnie Dewer's loud, grating laugh overtook the speaker music. Jones stepped back into the main aisle. Arnie, cigarette pack rolled up his blue striped jersey sleeve, was joking with Muddy Jacobs in the lumber section.

"Oh, no."

"Arnie?" asked Henry.

"Yup," said Jones, hurrying back to the screen. "Is there another terminal? I just want to do this in peace and quiet."

"I understand. There's one in the warehouse, but Arnie could come back there, too."

"It's just that Arnie has such a big mouth," said Jones.

"You don't have to tell me." Henry hit something on the keyboard and the screen went blank. He yanked Jones's arm and they backtracked through two swinging doors as Arnie's voice resonated only a few aisles away.

They hiked between mammoth lumber stacks and dodged the racing propane-powered forklifts' flashing yellow lights. Henry motioned him toward the small glass office across from the main doors. "What if he follows us back here?"

"We'll just say I'm writing an invoice for you." Henry opened the door and sat at the desk. Again he tapped the keys. The same March first invoice for three

gallons of marine paint popped on the screen. " Sold to a G. Frankin, Prince William."

" Let's keep it rolling." Jones looked outside the glass toward the two sales floor doors. " Anybody else sell this paint in town?"

" Jefferson's Hardware did, but Courtney kept mis-tinting the paint and then tried to get credit for the gallons from the Fletchers. They finally refused to sell to him."

" Sounds like Courtney." None of the names looked familiar. Jones alternatively peered out the window to check for Arnie as Henry flipped through the March invoices. " You guys sell a lot of paint."

" We do. Anything ring a bell?"

" Nope. Maybe I'll have to get a print out and track the names." Arnie pushed open the lumber room doors and pulled out his cigarette pack from his sleeve. " Oh, no. Here he is."

" Pull the blinds."

Jones checked the door and window blinds. Then he grabbed the cord and dropped the blinds. He squinted through the slats. Arnie and two of the warehouse men sat on a stack of plywood, but Arnie's voice was muffled through the wall. For the next five minutes Henry retrieved all the March invoices, but nothing significant showed up.

" I'm relying on wing and a prayer. The boat could have been painted anytime. And the scrape on Webster's boat might mean nothing."

" You want me to try April?"

" Yeah. Thanks, Henry." Jones's cell phone sounded, but he kept his eyes trained on the computer screen as he pulled the phone from his back pocket. The transmission weakened. " Jones."

" Detective Hooper here."

" Clyde, I'm busy now." A new order flashed before him, Henry looked up and he shook his head.

" I am moments away from apprehending Mike Fitzgerald," said Hooper.

" Listen, Clyde, you don't have to impress me. It's okay." Arnie threw his spent cigarette across the cement, precariously close to a stack of paint thinner and headed back inside the store. " Stupid moron."

" No need to get personal, Jones."

" No, not you, Clyde."

" I told you my sources fed me the lead."

" Clyde, get back to me when you lasso him in.." Jones hung up. The crunched cigarette glowed red less than three feet away from the inflammable metal cans. Jones opened the door, rushed into the warehouse, stomped on the smoldering butt and dragged the tobacco across the cement with his sneaker. Henry shook his head at the door. " I can read your mind, Henry."

" It's a wonder this place hasn't burned to the ground years ago," he said, kicking the door shut.

Jones pulled up a chair as Henry sat down and turned invoices again. Why would Hooper make up a story about apprehending Mike Fitzgerald? Alluding to exaggeration was more his style. Maybe he really did have the trooper under surveillance. Jones checked the swinging doors and gazed back at the screen.

Henry hit the button, the next invoice appeared. " The Christian Youth Group!" Jones immediately connected Bricker.

" Oh, yeah. Three or four kids came in here. I remember them. Five gallons. I told them they were buying too much. They charged it."

" I don't believe this. Did they say where the boat was located?"

" I guess they have a camp up the Pocquanticut River."

" Well, well, this could be interesting. You'll keep this under raps, Hen?"

" Hell ya. Don't even worry about it."

" Thanks," said Jones, tapping his shoulder. He stepped into the warehouse again, but opted to use the outside lumber entrance. Bricker had connections with Harriman's group and had used facilities according to Melanie Willard. Jones stopped at the loading dock and looked through the trees toward the railroad tracks. Why would Bricker want Webster Howard dead? Where was Bricker last night when Tom was attacked? Jones grinned. As much as he did not like Bricker even speculation down the side road of the investigation made no sense. He had no motive and no evidence.

He removed his cell phone and pushed the memory button for The Good Samaritan Hospital in Boston. The killer's identity rested in the unconscious memory of Tom McGill. Even if McGill regained consciousness, the injury might hinder his recollection. The line rang and he was quickly connected to patient relations. He saw no reason to bother Susan McGill. A man at the desk read Tom's condition as guarded. Jones closed his eyes and cut the transmission.

" Matth-*i*-as!"

He spun to his left. Arnie, new cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, swung his arms as he walked under the lumber canopies. " How are you, Arnie?"

" Fair to midland... Ha...Ha...Ha... Say, I hear your going into TV."

" What?"

" Yeah, your putting together a documentary for the college. You know, trying to be a producer is a pipe dream."

" I'm not trying to be a producer. I'm not even-"

" Then why you walking around telling everyone about producing big TV specials?"

" The Communications Department is making a retrospective video of the year at Hamilton. I did have a minor in communications back home. I'm just overseeing the effort. Well, it was nice seeing you, Arnie."

Jones hated when Arnie elbowed his ribs. " Don't want to admit it... in case you bomb, eh?"

" Right. Well, have a good one."

Arnie followed him through the yard and around the building, " So, I hear the detective took the wind out of your sails."

" He's not an detective."

" Don't put him down just because you haven't solved the Webster's murder."

Jones was tempted to sprint to his jeep. " Arnie, it's been nice." Arnie inhaled and chucked the cigarette into a saw dust pile to his left.

" This place is going to go up in one big fireball."

" Huh?"

" You just through that cigarette into saw dust."

" Ah, you worry too much, Matth-*i*-as. Sawdust don't burn." Arnie shook his head and moved back into the yard as Jones stared at the increasing smoke billow from the pile. He debated whether to leave the cigarette. Then he hurried to the pile, kicked it out and snuffed it again with his sneaker. He heard Arnie's honking laugh as he returned to the jeep. With the afternoon just beginning, he had time snoop around the Pocquanticut River north of town.

# 19

Bricker had no reason to kill Webster Howard. Jones brought the jeep through the wooded dirt road along the widening river. Past the tapering pines, the puffy cumulus clouds filled the sky near the shoreline marshes and Hamilton Bay beyond. A yellow painted brown sign appeared off the road in the forest.

## **The Christian Youth Group Camp Camp sites, Horse Trails and Boating**

He followed the arrow left into the woods. An extensive campground, covered with pine needles and several log cabins, was visible in the clearing beyond the narrower road. Three cars and a small truck were parked outside the cabins. He slowed the jeep and cut the engine. A teenage kid age kid with buzzed brown hair, an earring in his right ear and a colorful tie dyed undershirt stepped off the cabin porch.. " Can I help you, sir?"

" Yeah, you guys have boats here?"

" Yup, but they're not for rent. This is a private camp, sir. Hey don't you coach the college teams?"

" I do. What's your name, kid?"

" Bruce Tessler."

" You have a red boat, good sized, sea worthy boat here?"

" Yup. Used to be white now it's red."

" Can I see it?" asked Jones.

" Yeah, but you can't take it out."

" Don't want to."

" Sure. Let me get my sandals. Boat's moored down river. Just down the trail. If you're interested in buying the boat, the main office is in Prince William."

" Just want to look."

\* \* \*

Through the trees branches the boat was stark against clouds and blue sky. The trail exited the woods and continued for less than a hundred yards through the marsh reeds to five other boats docked along the mooring area. He walked along the older dock and studied the red boat's hull for any sign of white paint from the Maintenance Free.

" You from the Coast Guard or something?"

" Does Reverend Bricker use this boat?"

Bruce squinted his blue eyes as he thought. " I think he used the boat last fall."

" What about lately?" asked Jones, walking past the boat. He knew the hull would be marked with a stretch of white paint. When the scuff came into view he

spun around and raised his voice. " Has Reverend Bricker used this boat lately or got the keys?"

" No, just last fall. I'm here everyday. I didn't see him."

" Boat's never been missing?"

" Nope... But the keys. I must have misplaced the keys last week. Found them on the desk the next morning."

" Oh?"

He nodded his head. " I always put them on the hook, but I must have been in a hurry."

" Bruce, were the keys in place this week?"

" I made it a point to place them on the hook."

Jones stared at the boat, but his mind raced and his heart thumped under his jersey. " What about the gas? Was the gauge ever down?"

" Nope."

He still had no motive to include Bricker in his suspect list, but Webster had done work at the church. " A thin blonde haired woman ever come down here? She rides horses."

" Diana?"

" Yeah, Diana Lee."

He smiled as if he had a crush on her. " Diana like to bring her horses along the river from the Fletcher Stables. The trail connects. It's at least five miles through the conservation areas."

" She ever use the boat, Bruce?"

" No, just horses. She and I talk when she rides down here."

" State cops ever come down here?"

" Guy came down here earlier in the week. Thursday. Trooper-"

" Fitzgerald."

" How did you know?"

" Just a lucky guess. What did he want?" asked Jones

" Same questions you asked. But he was real nervous."

" He ever use the boat?"

" Nope."

" Okay... Thanks, Bruce."

Jones still did not preclude the possibility of Mike Fitzgerald using the boat. Yet, he could have just as easily driven to Racers Lounge and talked to Webster Howard. But somebody piloted the Youth Group boat from the Pocquanticut River. Diana Lee would not bring out the boat, murder Webster and wait for him at the bridge to come back. The drug run took place and she wanted the goods. He wondered if Fitzgerald had time to drive back to Hamilton, get the boat into the bay and kill Webster. But why not just kill him on the Cape? Jones' suspicion swung back to Bricker only because the Reverend used the boat once last fall. Yet, someone had used that boat last Tuesday night.

## 20

When he saw Strickland's cruiser, Jones rushed into the police station. Strickland's heavy eyes reflected fatigue. He leaned back in his desk chair and yawned deeply. " Mabel's sister doesn't know where Mabel is... Nor Fitzgerald. I don't care what Hooper says. I see no evidence they were having an affair. I asked Anne that very question."

" Hooper also said he was about to bring Fitzgerald in," said Jones.

" Hooper is a boob. But I find that information about the boat interesting. Very interesting."

" And Bricker is a suspect."

" You're joking, right?"

" No, he used that boat last fall."

" So what? Why would Bricker kill Webster Howard?"

" I don't know that yet. I need background information on him," said Jones.

" You're shooting in the dark, my friend." The desk phone rang and as Strickland shook his head he lifted the receiver. " Hamilton."

" I need to see if anyone made keys for that boat," said Jones.

Strickland's face tightened. " You're kidding, Dom? He what? No... And you have him in custody? What does he say? Right, right. No, Ianelli... What about Hooper, is he all right?"

" What about Hooper?" asked Jones, leaning over the desk.

" Is it still leaking? The whole block... That's incredible. No, we'll be over and take care of the paperwork? The Keystone Kops... right. What? About twenty minutes." Strickland put down the phone. His eyes seemed brighter. Jones thought he might burst out laughing. " Unbelievable."

" What's the mystery, George?"

Strickland stood. He laughed as he grabbed his hat and tilted back his head. " *Hooper...* he brought in Mike Fitzgerald."

They both started down the back corridor toward the outside door. " I find that hard to believe."

" Hooper knew where he was hiding." Strickland pushed open the outside and howled again. " Oh, man... Hooper somehow got Mike out of some apartment on the Boulevard."

Jones crawled in the cruiser. " He told me his contacts knew Fitzgerald's location but I didn't believe him. How can he have contacts? He's an idiot."

Strickland started the cruiser, laughing again as he backed around. " Mike starts running down the sidewalk near Cafe Square across from City Hall and Hooper, *in his car*, starts chasing him. "

A smile came to Jones' face. He could visualize Hooper driving the little sports car in pursuit. " On the sidewalk."

" The sidewalk?"

" No one was hurt." Strickland crossed Main Street and headed toward Route 32 through the college, but continued to laugh. " He mowed down three outside cafes, all the tables and chairs: *Destroyed*. Six vendor carts: *Destroyed*. Hot

dogs, burgers and pizza all over the road. Mike keeps running and he might have gotten away if..."

" What happened?"

" Hooper slams into a fire hydrant. Clipped it right from the connection. The water spurts up like Old Faithful and knocks Mike into a basement staircase. By the time he recovers, the Prince William boys have three cruisers on the scene. Hooper broke his arm, but he's outside screaming: " Murderer! Murderer!"

" So, Mike is in custody?"

" Yup."

" Where's Hooper?"

" Getting his arm set at Prince William hospital."

\* \* \*

Strickland talked to several officers behind the Prince William police station's main desk. Dom Pacheco, a couple of homicide detectives and some plain clothes police had Mike Fitzgerald in the Chief's second floor office. Jones bounded up the stairs ahead of Strickland. Down the wide tiled corridor, a uniformed officer stood outside the office. When he saw Jones he moved forward. " Sir, I'm sorry there's no admittance in here right now."

" He's with me," said Strickland from behind.

The officer glanced at Strickland and quickly opened the door. An inner office was empty and the wood paneled door to Pacheco's office was closed, but

Jones could hear the Prince William Chief shouting. Strickland stuck his head inside. "Come on in, George."

Jones followed Strickland into the oak paneled office. An unfinished ham and cheese sub and a Coke sat on Pacheco's desk. Mike Fitzgerald, in a plaid shirt and jeans, leaped from the chair. "You, Jones. You're responsible for all this!"

Two of the plain-clothes guys pushed him back and forced him, still growling, into the chair.

"Jones has done nothing wrong, Mike," said the greasy haired Pacheco, moving around the desk. "As a matter of fact he and Tom McGill risked their lives tracking down your trail. Tom is still unconscious in Boston. What gives, Mike? What were you doing in the bar, talking to Webster Howard?"

"No comment."

"Were you and Mabel Howard having an affair?" he asked, moving closer.

Mike smiled and tilted his head back. "I don't have to answer anything without my lawyer, Dom."

"Tell that to Herbert Lane when he gets here."

"Herbert is coming here?" asked Jones.

"Mike," said Pacheco, turning from Jones. His dark, moist eyes focused on the state trooper. "I don't know if you killed Howard or not, but you'd damned well better know, Herbert may arraign you for the murder."

"I have no comment."

"Did you know about the change in the weather last Tuesday night, Mike?" asked Jones.

" Jones, you're the last person I want to be answering questions from."

Jones sat in the chair next to him and leaned forward. " Listen, I don't think you did it."

" Well, that should get me released."

" What do you know about the Christian Youth Group's camp north of town?"

Fitzgerald furrowed his brow and his eyes slowly tightened. " Why?"

" You've been out there. I know because I talked with Bruce. You were tracking Diana Lee."

" Where's Ianelli?"

" He's on his way," said Pacheco.

" How come Ianelli never mentioned you were tracking Diana Lee?" asked Jones.

" No comment."

" You wouldn't be sharing in the bounty, would you, Mike?" asked Jones and Mike tried to stand again. " You didn't by chance tear that boat apart, trying to find what Webster brought up from the Racer's Lounge haul?"

" Shut up, Jones!"

" You were going to leave with Mabel Howard," said Jones in a louder voice, but he was not sure why he said it. " Isn't that right?"

" You'd make a good prosecutor, Jones," said Herbert Lane, moving his large frame inside the office. His gray toupee was not properly fitted. " And that is an excellent question, Mike."

" My attorney will be here from Concord shortly, Lane. Don't even bother asking questions."

Lane's cologne was bold and Jones sneezed. Lane turned. " Bless you. Ragweed got you, Jones?"

" What I'm allergic to has no cure."

" Right. Now, Mike. If you didn't kill the Howard man, then just say so. I'm willing to overlook certain things."

" All right, I didn't kill him. How's that?"

" How do you know he isn't lying?" asked Jones.

Fitzgerald clenched his fists. " Shut up. You and that stupid detective you hired."

" He's not an detective and I never hired him."

" That is neither here or there," said Lane. " We'll wait for your attorney, but I'll tell you right now, Mike, I've got men rounding up Diana Lee as we speak. I will not rest until justice is served."

" Sounds like a good campaign slogan," said Jones.

Lane squinted. The sides of his little mouth turned up within his pudgy cheeks. " Haven't you got a ball game to coach?"

Jones ignored him and stood. " Where's Mabe's, Mike?"

" I wouldn't know."

Lane maneuvered his huge frame around Jones and pointed his finger at Fitzgerald. " You think the courts are going to be lenient with a state cop who's up to his waders in this murder thing?"

" No comment."

" I'll go after her, too."

Mike stared at him and his left hand curled inward. " *I have no coment.*"

One of the secretaries leaned in the doorway. " Mr. Jones, you have a phone call."

" Thank you." Jones followed her into an adjacent office and she handed him a heavy black phone. " Jones."

" I assumed you would be at headquarters and you are at headquarters."

" Hooper?" Jones heard the elongated wail of an ambulance in the background.

" I am fully prepared to bring this investigation down the homestretch."

" Are you all right?"

" A few insurance liabilities with the street vendors, but I am ready to face the future! Seems as though the city is after me for the bloody fire hydrant."

" Well, at least Mike Fitzgerald is in custody. Good work."

" And the store owners want to sue me... Yes, the trooper is behind bars, but I assure you that is only step one!"

" Step one?"

" Of course. I am not sure whether the trooper killer Howard, but I am sure you are headed in the right direction in finding that red boat at the youth camp."

Jones stared at the phone. " How did you know about that?"

" My contacts of course."

" Hooper, the local police and the state police couldn't locate Mike Fitzgerald. What kind of contacts do you have?"

" Anonymity must remain secure or my sources will disappear."

" Who are you?"

" Detective Hooper."

" Right, but-"

" I would worry less about me and track down your leads. I am ready to assist."

" Oh, I would advise you rest, Detective... Clyde. You broke your arm, right?"

" I intend to find Howard's murderer. That is what I was hired to do... On the Bolpine."

" On the Bolpine. Well, if anything comes up..." Strickland appeared in the doorway. " I have to go."

" Wait, Jones-"

Jones set down the phone and looked up at Strickland. " What's up, George?"

" Mike's legal beagles have arrived. Somebody from Concord. Lane knows them. They don't like Herbert."

" I can understand that. "

Jones nodded as Strickland retreated into Pacheco's office. He looked out the window toward the Crosstown Bridge's green girders spanning the river and he was still bothered by Bricker taking that red bottom boat out last fall. Nigel would have more information on Bricker's background and maybe people at the church could detail how well Webster Howard, in the course of his maintenance duties at

the church, knew Reverend Bricker. Whoever took out that boat did not use the key hanging on the hook at the camp cabin. Both Mike Fitzgerald and Diana Lee had access to the key. Duplicating it was simple.

## 21

Jones balanced the Communications Department phone between his shoulder and ear as the video rolled across the monitor. Three students, editors of the tape, sat next to him. Scenes of the college, taken throughout the academic year, were strewn together with appropriate music. " Yes, Nigel. It looks good."

" Excellent. Hamilton is looking forward to it."

Jones moved around the corner and pulled the telephone cord into the outside corridor. " Hamilton will not be disappointed. Nigel, who would I talk to at your church about Webster Howard?"

" I thought the police had the state trooper in custody."

" He hasn't confessed to anything. I need to check everywhere Webster worked." Jones did not mention he was looking specifically into Webster Howard's relationship with Bricker. " And what about Mabel Howard. Was she involved in church activities?"

" I am not sure of that, but you want to talk to Mrs. Norris in the office. I think she works a few days a week."

" Yes, I talked to her on the phone. Hooper was bothering her."

" You need to pull in the Detective's reigns."

" Nigel, he doesn't work for me... What about the Reverend, how does he run the church? I mean financially."

" Excuse me, Matthias, but what relevance does that have to the murder investigation?"

" What's his background? Any hint of scandal?"

Hooper, his arm in a sling appeared in the corridor. " That is an excellent question, Jones!"

" The ubiquitous Detective Hooper."

" Matthias, are you there?" asked Nigel.

" Right here."

" Are you suspecting the Reverend?"

Hooper strutted up to the closed door. " I can find out that information."

Jones nodded and turned away. " Is he as vindictive as he appears?"

" Leave me out of these suspicions."

" Where did he come from? Before he arrived here in Hamilton."

" Youngstown, Maryland, but that's as much as I will get involved in this. A word to the wise: I would not be asking questions concerning the Reverend. For what?"

" I'll be discreet. Thanks, Nigel." Jones held the phone to his side and turned to Hooper. " How's your arm?"

" Not incapacitating. Now, during this entire investigation I have suspected Reverend Bricker."

" But you haven't bothered to say anything until now?" asked Jones.

" But I aborted my thoughts."

" Not the first time," said Jones. " Excuse me, Clyde." He moved back into the office and set the phone on the hook. " Chris, do we have the large screen TV and someone to bring it to Fletcher Hill for the party?"

" You want smaller monitors, too, Coach?" he asked, gazing up at Hooper.

" Not a bad idea. Oh, this is Clyde Hooper."

" Detective Hooper," said Hooper, raising his index finger.

" Detective Hooper. Chris Krafts and Sue Baines. I'm going to go back into town for a while. Call my cell phone if you need me."

" We can fix the antenna, Coach."

" I will take you up on that, Chris. Good job, both of you with the video." He brought Hooper into the corridor and faced him directly. " Why did you suspect Bricker? I have a gut feeling because I found the red bottom boat."

" And he used it last fall."

They wandered toward the stairwell. " How did you know that?"

" A passing fact, meaningless, Jones, unless it leads somewhere."

" True, but I am going to check and see if he or anyone else made duplicates of the boat keys." Hooper accompanied him down the stairs. Both men tried to assign a motive to the Reverend and agreed money was always a good place to start, but Bricker showed no overt sign of accumulated wealth. Jones opened the outside door and they moved into the humid air. " The guy drives a run down station wagon."

" The Reverend has hidden it well if he has somehow absconded with church funds. I would rather ask, what did Howard know? Did he have something on the Reverend? Or the Reverend on him, Visa versa, etcetera, et- cetera...."

" What do you mean?" asked Jones, moving toward his jeep.

Hooper climbed in and Jones started the jeep. His voice was shrill, bordering on annoying. " Whoever killed Howard wanted him out of the way, Jones. The trooper may still have to answer questions."

" He denies having an affair with Mabel Howard."

" Of course he does, but it is fact. I have witnesses in Millbury who have seen them together."

" You do?" asked Jones, pulling onto Main Street and he climbed the hill toward the center of town. " Hooper, who are you, really?"

Hooper produced a sly grin. " Who I've always said I was."

Jones shifted and coasted past the bank. When he focused on L.G.'s law office in the rear view mirror, he thought about McGill, still unconscious in Boston. But he also pictured Bricker's animated protest in the office the other night.

" Maybe Bricker knew about the drug run or participated in it."

" Ah."

" What?"

" Right."

" Clyde, what are you talking about?" In the side mirror he checked the huge white church on the hill.

" Proximity is the key to accountability."

Jones rolled his eyes, but instead of heading south he veered right toward Dewars Lumber. He quickly crossed the railroad tracks and brought the jeep into the yard. " I'll check with Henry. He would have made keys."

" My course would be to confront Bricker directly, Jones. Get him and get him now!"

" We have only suspicions. I'm not going to run around shooting off my mouth until I have something."

" We need to shake him! *Shake him!*"

Jones shut off the engine. " Hooper, use you head, will you?" He left the jeep and once again headed to the small hardware section behind the main lumber yard. When he reached the door, he turned back to the jeep, but he did not see Hooper. " Where is he now?"

" Talking to yourself, Matthias?" asked Henry inside the open door.

Jones turned. " Who me?"

" You find the boat?"

" Yeah... " He walked past the register, but he glazed over his shoulder for Hooper. " Henry, I need to know something else."

" What?"

" The Reverend Bricker, does he come in here?"

" Sure, the Reverend's been in here. Buys little things. Maybe a hammer, screw driver. Or some grass seed and fertilizer. Off and on he comes in."

" Ever get duplicate keys for a boat?"

Henry squinted and stroked his chin. " Nope. I never made keys for him."

" What about Arnie or someone else."

" Every time Arnie makes a duplicate key, he messes up the cut and the key either doesn't work or gets caught in the lock."

Jones grinned. " Anyone come in and makes copies of boat keys?"

" Lots of people. How about a state cop or blonde horse rider?"

" Not that I recall. Go up to Jefferson's Hardware. I'm sure Courtney would be able to help. But he can't cut keys either."

Jones nodded and exhaled. " Keep this under raps, if you would, Hen."

" Will do."

Jones exited the building and crossed the lumberyard to the jeep, but he saw no sign of Hooper. He sat behind the wheel for a few minutes, contemplating Bricker's role in the murder and worried about Hooper causing more trouble. Quickly, he backed up the jeep and started across the tracks. He approached the brick police station and debated whether to talk to Strickland. Instead, he crossed Main Street and swung up to the meters in front Jefferson's Hardware's weathered clapboards and long porch.

He moved up the spongy stairs, along new rows of shiny lawn mowers and wheelbarrows. Harvey Miller, a small bag in his hand, opened the screen door.

" Matthias."

" Harvey. Keeping the Jefferson's in business?"

" A bag of bolts won't do that. Hear anything about Tom?"

" No. Still the same."

" But they got the trooper. He do it?"

" I don't know."

" I tell ya, I can see the Howard house right from my second floor. Mighty funny that trooper was over there the night Webster went out. Rumor has it he met Webster down the Cape."

" At a bar... Webster always live next to you, Harvey?"

" Oh, the old man, Nate, he owned a big chunk. Gave Webster a plot when he married Mabel. She really sunk money inside that house. And her car, oh boy."

Jones held his shoulder briefly. " I'll let you know if I find anything."

" Yeah, old Webster was a powerful guy. He wouldn't have gone down unless someone got him by surprise."

Jones nodded and stepped inside. He squeezed between several fertilizer bags piled by the front door, but tripped and fell onto the wood floor. " My shoulder."

The short, gray haired Cora Jefferson moved like a high-energy machine down the main aisle. " I've been telling Courtney to move those damned bags!"

Jones rubbed his shoulder as he stood. " Right in front of the door."

" My son is a dim wit, what can I tell you? You all right, Matthias?"

" Where is the dim wit?"

Cora covered her mouth and laughed like a revving buzz saw motor.

" The dim wit is off somewhere. Probably making another one of those three-hour deliveries. I end up paging him, but he doesn't answer the beep. If my husband were alive..."

" I need to check on some keys."

" Did he mess up another key?"

" No, I need to know if someone made a boat key. "

"I don't make keys anymore because my arthritis. Now we have to rely on my steady handed son. You can ask him... if he ever comes back. "

" Have him call me. "

" Okay and watch yourself on the way out."

Jones nodded and grabbed his shoulder as he climbed over the bags. He stood on the porch and looked across the common. Finding out more about Bricker might give Jones insight into his character. He scanned back across Main Street but did not see Hooper. The detective might turn up anywhere and do something bizarre like he had in Prince William. Once inside the jeep, Jones debated whether to snoop around up the church. Any questioning of Mrs. Norris might begin a wild retaliation by the Reverend. He pulled away from Jefferson's and with an increasingly uneasy feeling about Bricker as a person, started around the common toward the church.

He glanced over at his own house and then up the church drive. Bricker's station wagon was not parked near the church hall nor on the drive. Still he was hesitated linking Bricker to the Webster Howard murder just because he used youth camp boat once last fall. Murdering Webster would require more expertise behind the ship's wheel. A storm was approaching and the murderer, if he did arrive by boat would need to know his position and be able to maneuver and dock with Webster's boat.

Jones again checked for Bricker as he signaled at the far end of the common and sped up the drive. He brought the car into the crushed stone lot in front of the church hall, but worried about Bricker showing as he stepped outside and headed

for the end offices. The sound of an old typewriter's keys rapidly striking the roller echoed from inside an office screen door. The door spring creaked when he stretched it, open and stuck his head inside the darker cooler air. A curly brunette with rose lips smiled and kept typing.

" Good morning."

" I'm Matthias Jones."

" So, you're the one who hired that obnoxious Detective Hooper."

" No, Mam', I didn't"

" I threatened to kick him in the shins. I'm Alberta Norris, I'm Reverend Bricker's secretary. Well, if you're coming in, come in."

" Thank you," said Jones stepping up and the door slammed.

" Don't worry, it always does that." She continued typing. " What can I do for you?"

" You were chartering a boat when Webster was killed."

Jones raised his brows and crossed his arms over his jersey. " How did you know that? "

" It was in The Enterprise. And you were with Tom McGill when he got zapped." She typing faster. " I just heard from my sister that Tom woke up this morning."

" What?" Maybe he would not have ask questions if Tom was awake. Jones took out his cell phone, but the signal wavered. He pictured Hooper sitting on it.

" May I use your phone?"

" Problem?"

" It's a long story." Jones dialed the hospital number and put it on his credit card. In a few minutes he was speaking with an ebullient Susan McGill. Tom had emerged from the coma a hour and a half ago, but was having trouble remembering even going to the Cape with Jones. Jones pressed her about the attacker. The last thing McGill remembered was finding the location of Racer's Lounge. Anything that followed during the evening was tucked away or maybe gone. He hung up the phone.

Mrs. Norris stopped typing. " He doesn't remember does he?"

" No, it's a blank. At least he came out of it."

" Were you looking for the Reverend?"

Jones did not want to arouse suspicions. " Well, actually, I wanted to apologize for our little argument after Webster's funeral. I guess it's gotten all over town."

" No kidding."

" Great."

" However, it wasn't your fault." She started typing again. " Reverend Monson as never like him. Reverend Monson never raised his voice. Reverend Monson never confronted anyone, Reverend Monson worked with people."

" Did Bricker come in after Monson?"

" Oh, God no. There was a six-month lag. They brought the Reverend in from-

" Youngstown, Maryland. That much I do know."

" Yes."

" You like the Reverend?" asked Jones.

" He can be hard to work with, that's for sure." She stopped typing and laughed. " You know he likes to have things the way he wants. This is his church."

" He ever lose his temper?"

" Well..."

" Ever get violent?" asked Jones, but she started typing again. " What was his relationship to Webster Howard?"

Mrs. Norris pushed the chair back from the desk. " I hope you're not trying to somehow connect Reverend Bricker to Webster Howard's murder."

" I'm trying to find out who killed Webster Howard and I'm not naming anyone. Webster's activities here at the church may steer me in that direction."

" Webster fixed everything when it needed fixing and he seemed to get along with the Reverend. The Reverend had me compile a list of things to do and Webster did them. Cut the grass, too."

" Did they ever argue?"

" No, well I don't know if you'd call it an argument. Couple of weeks back when Father Gallagher and the Reverend tried to settle the land thing. The Reverend and Webster lets say had a discussion. They walked the graveyard grounds for almost an hour. " Her eyes moistened. " I can't believe Webster's lying back there now."

" Were they talking about the land?"

" I'm not sure. Webster was waiting the Reverend to give me the weekly list when Gallagher left."

" Is there anything about the land that might concern Webster?" asked Jones.

" I don't know. You think their discussion is connected to the murder?"

Jones shrugged his shoulders. " I don't know. I think everything has to be strung together. Then maybe it will make some sense."

" All I know is the Reverend can be stubborn."

" Okay...Thanks."

Jones let the door shut and returned to the jeep, but he wanted to speak with Bricker directly. He checked his watch. The town hall was closed by now. Tomorrow he could run a title check and trace the history of the land. Courtney's gray truck was back in front of Jefferson's Hardware. Jones rotated his sore shoulder and wondered if Mrs. Jefferson had badgered Courtney about the fertilizer stack. He started the jeep and drove past his own house around the common.

\* \* \*

Jones avoided the fertilizer bags this time. Mrs. Jefferson, behind the tool counter, spotted him and cupped her hands. " Court-ney! Court-ney! "

Jones gave her the thumbs up sign and meandered down the main aisle toward a four sided, moveable pegboard display filled with keys. Courtney squinted through his thick glasses as he climbed the wide wood cellar stairs. He had the dazed look of a man with too many things on his mind as he grimaced at his mother before focusing on Jones. " How are you, Court?"

" I found him Mother!"

" Make sure you move that damned fertilizer when you're done."

He waved his hands through the air and shook his head. " You looking for someone who had a boat key duplicated, Matthias? There are a lot of boats here in Hamilton.." Mrs. Jefferson blabbed a few aisles over. Courtney glanced in his mother's direction. " Anybody in particular?"

" Reverend Bricker."

" Nope, the Reverend never duplicated any keys and I make em' all."

Jones stroked his chin. " Are you sure?"

" Yeah, I'm sure."

" What about the state trooper, Mike Fitzgerald?"

" Nope."

Jones paced around the key rack and stared at the rounded cutting machine blade. " What about Webster Howard's wife?"

" Mables?"

" Right."

" Yes."

" Really?" asked Jones.

" Yeah, for that big new Mercedes of hers."

" Anything else?"

" Nope..."

When Mrs. Jefferson bothered Courtney about the fertilizer again Jones wandered into the electrical aisle. Bricker or anyone else ready to use the boat for murder would have keys duplicated away from town. He nervously nibbled on his

knuckle and placed his foot on the gondola base. Bruce had said Diana Lee had rode her horse to the camp. " Courtney."

" Well, it will kill my back, Mother! I can't move all those bags."

" Just like your father, slacking out of a good day's work!"

" I'll have one of the stock boys do it in the morning."

" Sure, sure" she said, " after we get sued. You ain't gonna sue us are you, Matthias?"

" No... What about a thin blonde woman with riding pants"

" Yeah, I remember her. Paid cash. It was only a dollar nine. " Courtney tightened his brow and clamped his lower teeth over his lip. His eyes were enlarged through his glasses. " About three weeks ago."

Jones quickly turned. " Diana Lee was in here, making keys?"

" She didn't give her name. I made one key for a boat. Don't remember what boat though.. She said she wanted a duplicate. Why, is there trouble?"

" Just some unanswered questions."

" She had a cold. I gave her my handkerchief but I guess that grossed her out. She just kept sniffing. Like she had allergies."

Jones nodded, but now he was even more confused. " Thanks, Court."

" Sure."

" Court-ney!"

" Duty calls."

" Looks like you're going to be moving some fertilizer," said Jones as he started down the aisle.

" Maybe she should move it."

" I overheard that, you big lummo!" Mrs. Jefferson appeared from the next aisle. Jones waved and bolted for the front door. She continued to berate Courtney as Jones moved onto the porch. He still did not think Diana Lee piloted the boat nor did he think she killed Webster Howard. But she may have ordered Webster's death or been involved with his demise.

He quickly returned to the jeep and for the second time that afternoon he drove away from Jefferson's Hardware. His mind spun with suspicion and doubt as he veered toward the college and decided to parallel Main Street. Diana would not have worried about being seen buying a key if she and the killer thought the storm would blow up the coast. With Webster lost at sea, no one would question her purchasing a boat key.

Once away from Main Street the woods separated him from Washington Street. Bricker had no compelling reason to kill Webster Howard. Outwardly, he did not have then usual vices of womanizing, drug use or absconding with funds. Jones slowed as he gazed through the woods toward Webster's backyard. "What did you know Webster? And who was upset about it?"

The brown and white cows were scattered in the afternoon sunlight across Miller's farm fields. How many times had Webster hiked these woods behind his house? Jones turned the jeep and decided to return home and have something to eat. But as he trekked along the woods, he had a unique perspective to see Webster's house and the disputed plot of land a few hundred yards up Washington Street. " The Howard house... It's too convenient."

Quickly, he headed back to the college and raced back to the common, Bricker's station wagon was now parked near the church offices as he turned onto Washington Street. The cleared hill, coveted by Gallagher and held by Bricker, came into view. From this angle Webster's house was hidden by the forest.

" How did the church get this land? "

Somehow Webster was tied into that land. Maybe he once owned it or knew something about it. After all, Bricker was defiant about selling the land. Maybe it was not all prejudice or even possessiveness. At worst Bricker himself had done something nefarious, but was it bad enough to kill Webster Howard and how was Diana Lee or Mike Fitzgerald involved?.

# 22

Not liking Bricker only added to Jones's motivation. After a light meal, near sunset, he donned his jogging clothes and exited his house. He checked his stopwatch as he stretched on his brick walk and opened the picket fence gate. When he started his run along the common, Bricker's station wagon's brakes squeaked at the Shore Drive traffic lights and stopped in front of J.J's Drug Store at the corner of Main. Jones paced himself around the common, but his eyes were peeled toward the drug store window.

He assumed a holding pattern, darted left on Main and jogged down the opposite side of the common. Linking Bricker with Diana Lee's key seemed remote. As he rounded the corner granite post, across from First Parish Church, Bricker quickly emerged from the drug store and his mass of blonde hair whipped back in the breeze. Jones raced faster, crossing Shore Drive near the drug store. Bricker's car started and skidded onto Main

Bricker signaled as Jones flew around the corner and sprinted down the Main Street sidewalk. The Reverend banked into a side alley as Jones approached cautiously and peered around the edge. Jones did not see the station wagon, but Bricker emerged from the side lot. He glided by several shops and climbed a stairway to the second level. He walked briskly along the metal rail fence and opened the door to Ducky's Travel Adventure.

Jones leaned against birch trees in the parking lot garden. Bricker stood near the front desk and computer monitor. A bleach blonde punched something into the computer keyboard. Bricker shifted weight from foot to foot and held his hands rigid behind his back. The blonde rolled back in the chair, Bricker said something, and she handed him a long white envelope. He eyed the envelope and rushed out the door. Jones ducked behind the birches.

Less than fifteen feet away Bricker climbed into the station wagon and exited via the rear alley. Maybe Jones had just seen a killer about to flee the area. He ran to the stairs, ascending two steps at a time, to the travel office. The woman was still at the computer. " Oh, did I miss the Reverend?"

" I'm afraid so."

" And I wanted to catch him before he left. Where is he off to this time?"

" Both he and Mrs. Bricker are headed to Switzerland on Monday. But plans are inconclusive. They may do Europe by rail. I told him to get a round trip. The rates are better. But he wouldn't listen. He's very persistent."

Jones's stomach sunk. Although he had no proof of Bricker stealing anything, a neutral country such as Switzerland was an obvious place to store money in private accounts. He stared into the shadows covering the lot behind the building and knew he had no way to link Bricker to Webster's murder.

\* \* \*

Jones pushed open Strickland's screen door. " I tell you they are leaving! "

" You actually saw the tickets?" asked Strickland, turning down the TV volume in his living room.

" No, I didn't have to actually see the tickets, George. I'm telling you the woman told me Bricker was leaving with his wife, one way to Switzerland on Monday morning."

Strickland thought as he crossed the room, then sat in his side recliner and folded his hands. " I think your going a long way trying to nail Bricker for Webster's murder. You're just upset with him because of the Gallagher thing."

" Why is he leaving town?"

" He's probably going on a vacation. Look, Matthias, I'm not wild about the guy either, but Mike Fitzgerald still has a lot to account for. He won't even answer questions about that tape from Racer's Lounge. The lawyer has him clamped shut and I say that is a real bad sign. And where's Mabel Howard?"

Jones shrugged his shoulders. " I'm not concerned about her."

" What? She was probably having an affair with Fitzgerald. Hooper said he had his sources."

" Don't even bring up Hooper. The man is living in a fantasy world. He has me drop him off up in Ashley Heights at this walled-in mansion. And when I leave, he slithers away. He didn't live there. I don't know who the hell he really is, but I wish he would just disappear... What about Diana and the key?"

" Listen to yourself. First you find the scrape on Webster's boat. Okay, the Fletchers matched the paint, but then you make this leap to the youth camp purchasing the paint from Arnie Dewars. And then because Bricker used the boat

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once last fall, you have him chasing Webster in the youth camp boat. And because Diana Lee bought a ninety-nine cent key from Courtney-

" Buck nine."

" You know what I'm talking about. The theories of leaps and bounds. I know you have your usual side road theories, Matthias, but let's just concentrate on Fitzgerald."

" Why was she waiting at the bridge?"

" I don't know," said Strickland, rising from the recliner. He walked by Jones into the kitchen. " Mary, get Matthias a sedative, will you?"

" Matthias is usually right, George."

Jones grinned at Strickland's dark-haired wife. " A good judge of character."

" All right," said Strickland, removing two beers from the refrigerator. He handed the cold can to Jones. " I admit Diana's in this. Whether it's drugs I can't say."

" George, get him a glass. You're not some kid drinking beer in the woods," said Mary from the stove.

Strickland handed Jones a glass but drank from his own can. " And I know what you're going to say, Matthias. They or she. Somebody ripped apart Webster's boat."

" Well."

" He has a point, George."

Strickland tightened his pudgy face. " All right, let's assume there were drugs involved. Maybe Webster needed money because of Mabel's spending."

" And Fitzgerald was tracking him.," said Jones.

" Then why won't he say anything?" asked Strickland.

" Maybe he wanted a cut."

" No way." Strickland set the beer on the counter. " So, how does this involve Bricker?"

" Land. That parcel of land is right next to Webster's house. You've lived in Hamilton all your life, George. How did the church get it?"

" So now you're saying Webster knew something about Bricker and the land."

" It's right next to his land."

" I'll bite, but in order for Bricker to kill Webster Howard, Webster would need to know something that would ruin Bricker."

" Now, he's got it, Mary."

" Bull."

" And I think Hooper is out to lunch about this affair thing. Fitzgerald was tracking Lee and the shipment. And he may have been asking Mabel questions. I think he thought he'd nail Webster in Racer's Lounge. But the transfer occurred at sea."

" In the red bottom boat."

" No, I don't think so. There's a Bricker-Lee connection, but I don't know what it is. Bricker knew about the whole drug run and used that as an excuse to kill Webster at sea. And with the storm coming he thought he had the perfect crime."

" Thank you Mother Nature," said Mary.

" Yup."

" What do you think the connection was?" asked Strickland.

" Piqued your interest, George?"

" Yes, you've piqued my interest. What's the Bricker-Lee connection?"

" Drugs."

" He's not on drugs, Matthias."

" No, but maybe he invested in the run."

Strickland rubbed his hand over his mouth. He shook his head. " You really have to prove Lee and Bricker knew each other."

" I don't care about that. I want to know about that Washington Street land."

" Check it out at Town Hall."

" Yeah, but I want to know why Marcia Abrams just all of a sudden last December took it off the market."

Strickland nodded again. " We'll have to call her... What about Tom? He can't remember anything."

" I'd like to know where Bricker was that night Tom and I were on the Cape and the night of the murder. He'll have alibis and talk his way out of it. I have to talk to Marcia Abrams."

" If you're right, Matthias. And I'm not saying you are, we only have to Monday and then he's gone."

" I have a gut feeling if he gets on that plane we'll never find out who killed Webster Howard."

## 23

Jones hurled the cell phone across the seat. Hooper's ruining the phone had progressively ruined the reception. He signaled by the bank and found a parking space across the street from Abram's Realty. Last night he had spoken with McGill for the first time, but his friend had no recollection of the trip to the Cape. Frustrated, Jones pressed until McGill grew fatigued. McGill's memories of the attack were critical to the investigation. The doctors were hopeful after a wide range of tests and general observation, McGill would be back in Hamilton in a week or ten days, but his memory of the attack remained questionable..

Jones crossed Main Street and glanced at the church in the bright sunshine at the far end of the common. The short-haired Marcia Abrams waved at him from inside the window span. She put out her cigarette and met him at the front door. The cool air conditioned air chilled his arms. "Feels like winter in here, Marcia."

"Cold or sweat, sweat or cold. Either way somebody's uncomfortable."

"How's business?" asked Jones, looking at the house photographs tacked to a side cork board.

"This is Hamilton. The big houses sell over here. We have rentals, we have five constructions starts a year. Most of our volume comes through business in Prince William. You said you wanted to know about a piece of land we had for sale?"

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" Well..."

" Well, just try and get by the Hamilton Commission, which includes both Hamilton and Ham Fletcher. They want to leave Hamilton just the way it was a hundred years ago. You looking for land?"

" No, no... I want to know about that land next to Webster Howard on Washington Street."

" You mean the on again, off again land deal?"

" Right. Does the church have title to that land?"

" The Reverend kept changing his mind. Driving me nuts. I have no idea of the exact history of the ownership. There were ten acres there. Two hundred and fifty thousand, which I thought was a conservative price. He couldn't make up his mind. I heard you had a go around with him."

" I did. Who owned that land before the church?"

" You'd have to go back for that. We never got beyond the rigmarole of playing for sale. Gallagher had the cash in hand. Maybe Bricker is doing this privately so he won't have to pay the Commission."

" That's a possibility I hadn't thought of. You and Father Gallagher should go over to town hall and research it if you want to see how long the church has owned it."

Jones thanked her for the information. He asked her about her family and stayed no more than ten minutes. When he got back to the jeep his cell phone rang on the seat. " Jones."

The transmission was still bad. " Matthias, it's George. Ianelli got Fitzgerald... admit he... trailing Webster and Lee about the drugs. Ianelli had..."

" George, I can't hear you very well," he said, starting the jeep.

" I said Ianelli had no knowledge of the operation. I'm out at the stables... of the... to track down Diana Lee."

" Find out the connection with Bricker."

Static inundated the line and Strickland was gone. Either Jones would get the phone fixed or just buy a new one. He pulled away from the curve, turned left on Front Street behind the Main Street buildings. The large three-story brick town hall at the end, separated Lark Larsen's and Flo's identical two story houses. Jones gazed up at the hall's gold cow weathervane atop the white cupola as he walked across the lot.

He opened the aluminum framed glass doors and passed by older, varnished oak doors with glass transoms. Quickly, he headed up the worn staircase. On the third floor a small gold lettered, black sign hung on a chain outside the open door.

### Real Estate Records

Behind the counter a thin woman with gray hair typed on a computer keyboard. On her desk was a brass nameplate. " Mrs. Quill? "

" Sir?"

Jones was winded. " I need to check on a land title."

" You need to get in shape. I climb those stairs every day and I'm not panting like you are."

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" I raced up the stairs."

" Sure you did." She stood quickly and flew to the counter. " What kind of land title?"

" I'm sure it goes back a long way..."

" Maybe. It's a piece of land next to Webster Howard's house and Forest Street."

" The records room is back here," she said, pointing to a room behind the behind her. " I'll unlock the filing cabinets for you."

" Thanks."

She opened her desk drawer and retreated into the back room. Jones walked along the counter to the open window. He peered through two leafy green maple trees to the white church steeple. Bricker's station wagon was stationed between the church hall and clapboard parsonage to the left. The graveyard's solid stone markers laced the grassy hill. Even if he proved criminal activities against Bricker concerning the land or involvement with drugs, he had nothing to indicate the reverend killed Webster Howard.

Jones felt someone grab his shoulders. He spun with both fists clenched. Hooper stood in light Bermuda shorts, a khaki shirt, and Australian back woods hat with a loose cord. " Hooper, don't sneak up on me like that."

" Jumpy. No need to be jumpy, Jones. Clyde Hooper has the situation well in hand!"

Jones rolled his eyes. " Where did you disappear to anyway?"

Hopper leaned forward and spoke in a lower voice. " I needed intelligence."

" You got that right."

" Oh, yes. A little joke. Right. Very funny. I get it."

" I'm glad." Jones crossed his elbows on the warm window sill.

" I have the shake down on the Reverend Bricker."

" Really?" asked Jones as he tried to see the disputed land through the trees.

" His hands were in the till in Maryland, Jones! I know it for a fact!"

Jones did not turned from the window. " Yeah, and how do you know that?"

" Clyde Hooper does not burn bridges! People owe me favors."

" Oh, yeah?"

" The present pastor of the church in Youngstown, Maryland indicates funds were missing during Bricker's tenure at the church. The church council, ready to avoid scandal, did not pursue the matter."

Jones looked over his shoulder. " He stole funds? There's proof of that?"

" Not only in Youngstown, but in Virginia and Delaware. We are talking thousands. And if we let this out, he will run early. We only have until Monday to stop his trip."

" How did you know about his trip?" asked Jones as he faced Hooper.

" My network," said Hooper, again in a lower voice.

" Hooper... you have one big credibility problem." Jones returned to the counter as Mrs. Quill emerged from the back room. " Just like Mabel and Mike. There's no relationship there."

" The cabinet is open."

" Thank you," said Jones.

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" Don't be so sure. Never judge a book by it's cover. My contacts are infallible with impeccable backgrounds in intelligence."

" I'm glad," said Jones, leaning forward. " You never stop, do you? You just keep pushing."

" Pushing forward is a credo of my life."

" Why would they hire a guy to be reverend at First Parish if he's been ripping off all his former congregations?"

" Yes, of course."

" Didn't you hear what I just said?"

" Bricker is very clever Very clever in deed, but he has met his match in us. He talks a good game and covered his tracks well. Everyone is afraid to accuse him because they're not sure. And another quality. Because he gives the impression that he cares, people don't want to face the fact he may have been ripping them off."

Jones looked him in the eye. " That, Hooper, is the first meaningful thing you've said since I met you."

" Remember, Jones, if they think you know too much, they'll expect too much."

" Huh?"

" Mr. Jones," said Mrs. Quill.

" Sorry."

Jones, trailed by the ubiquitous Hooper, rounded the counter and followed Mrs. Quill into the back room. She pointed to a tall oak filing cabinet in the corner where the roof dipped. The top drawer was pulled open. " The records for the past year are in the upper section. If you go back farther than that, let me know."

" Thank you, I appreciate it."

She glanced at Hooper's hat, opened her eyes and returned out front. Hooper moved by Jones and grabbed both sides of the drawer. " Wait a minute, Hooper, I'll check this."

" I am quite familiar with the real estate game."

" That's nice," said Jones, sliding by him. He looked down at a cluster of manila folders wrapped with a thick elastic band. A small note was attached to the outside, indicating these were the real estate transactions for the past six months. He lifted the folders out and carried them to the small table by the outside window. Hooper perched at the open window as Jones unwrapped the folders.

" Be sure and check for any aliases and surnames, Jones."

Jones looked up and tightened his eyes. " And just how would I know it was an alias?"

" Ah, you need to know the codes."

Jones shook his head and turned the folders, beginning with a house sale on Maple Street last December. The address and date of each transaction was labeled in dark marker on the face of the folder. From the window Hooper babbled about a surreptitious operation he was involved in twenty years ago as Jones perused the folders. " Hooper, please."

" Yes, I understand, you're envious of my background."

" That must be it."

" I apologize, sometimes I need to not toot my own horn."

" No... I found the church folder. Six Seventy-three Washington Street. April nineteenth. "

" Although, I suppose I should be proud of my record," Hooper mumbled.

He was still gazing out the window as Jones opened the folder. The history of the transaction had been handwritten on a document from years ago. " That land was given to the church by *Nathan Howard...* in 1947 for the sum of one dollar."

" Ah, ha. Good work, Jones! We must locate this brother," said Hooper, raising his index finger.

" Father. Nathan was the father. And he's buried behind the church, Hooper."

" Hum, that could present a problem."

Jones exhaled and turned the paper sheets. Bricker's name was signed on the bottom of a real estate transaction from less than two months ago. A lawyer named Daniel Lee from Murpheysboro, Vermont had drawn up the document. The land was sold a developer named Ridegway from Belvidere Sound, Maryland.

" The Ridegway Group." Jones's stomach spun and he gripped the table. " Eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

" Maryland? Bricker was from Maryland," said Hooper.

" I'll bet money it's right near Youngstown. But look at the lawyer, Hooper. Daniel *Lee*. The connection gets stronger to Ms. Lee." Jones stood and looked over the common at the church. A slow smile came to his face. " So... our innocent reverend had decided to pocket some money and leave the country."

" We will of course apprehend him immediately."

Jones stared at Bricker's station wagon. " The man is a murderer, Hooper. But I'll fix him. See, somehow Webster became aware of this land thing. I'm not quite sure how. My guess is when he started dealing with Diana Lee the land thing came up in conversation. Or he could have seen something his father's name on the land. She wouldn't have just divulge the transaction, but Webster must have figured it out and he had Bricker."

" And threatened to smash his operation!"

" No, not necessarily. He may have merely been upset because Bricker had made money off of his father's land. And Bricker knew about the drug runs. He had Lee innocently make the keys for the boat so no one would know. When he heard about the approaching storm, he made his move."

" But Jones, he's leaving the country on Monday morning!"

From the window Jones grinned again. " I don't think so. We're going to invite a few more guests to the faculty send off. The Reverend Bricker will enjoy the performance."

## 24

Jones and three students scampered up the drive to the Fletcher estate's east portico. Gripping a videocassette case, Jones turned under the prodigious white columns and surveyed the acres of the town forest extending to Hamilton Bay's stretching coastline. Ianelli's state cruiser, flanked by two Hamilton police cars, and Herbert Lane's long yellow Cadillac were strategically parked under the pines near the Fletcher garage. Faculty vehicles, including Bricker's station wagon, were also positioned along the drive.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Coach?" asked Mark Morrison.

"Reverend Bricker will flip."

"I'm an advocate of justice being served."

"I suppose the question is how it is served," said Sue, who had done much of the new editing last night.

Jones paused and faced the towering estate doors ahead. "Served cold."

He walked slowly through the shadows. The Fletcher's chief butler was stationed inside. "Good afternoon, Matthias."

"How are you, Hawlings?" asked Jones as they moved into the spacious tiled lined foyer. Guests were already gathered in the foyer and conversation resonated down the corridor to the drawing room.

"I am fine sir. Do you need assistance with your production equipment?"

" Perhaps, if someone could direct us to the video recorder and the wide screen Mark set up last night."

" Of course." Hawlings leaned to his left and said something to one of the women in black dresses, serving horsd' oeuvres on wide silver trays. The woman nodded and set down the tray. " Marilyn will bring you to the drawing room."

" Thanks."

The bright-eyed Marilyn smiled and motioned Jones down the long hallway. He followed Mark and Sue toward the end of the hall. In the larger room guests sipped champagne and munched on the horsd' oeuvres. Round linen topped tables, each with a lighted water candle, were positioned across the darkened drawing room's parquet floor. A strong smell of rich brewed coffee and an assortment of food drifted through the air. He spotted the wide screen TV behind the long, linen draped VIP table near the closed gold drapes.

Herbert Lane, drink in hand, stood with the tanned, white haired Hamilton Fletcher, and three other trustees near the atrium doors. Jones thought he might avoid Lane before setting up the tape, but the rotund District Attorney excused himself and meandered across the parquet. He cornered Jones near the front table.

" Jones, what are you up to?" Jones was always amused how Lane's smoky gray toupee always remained rigid when he flexed his forehead. " This request for extra police is unorthodox. "

" I wouldn't drink too much of the bubbly, Herbert. You're going to need your faculties."

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" Now, wait a minute. If you know something about the Howard murder, I want to know right now. Don't play games. You don't know the law, mister."

" Enjoy this show, Herbert."

They left Lane at the end of the table and walked with Marilyn along the chairs. Mark located the recorder inside the cabinet housing the TV. He checked the connection and nodded to Jones. " Piece of cake, Coach."

Jones handed the tape to him. " Good, we're ready to roll."

Strickland, accompanied by Ianelli hovered leaned over the table.

" Matthias, would you please clue us into what you're doing."

" Do you guys have extra people here like I asked?"

" I have three men."

" Wendell is with me," said Strickland. " You said you solved the Webster Howard thing. What's going on?"

" You'll have to wait, but I would be prepared to arrest Reverend Bricker."

" *Bricker?*" asked Strickland. " Matthias, this is ridiculous. Tell us what you have."

" And miss giving the Reverend what he deserves?"

" George is right. You could mess up the court case, Matthias," said Ianelli.

" Oh, I think the case will be intact. I would just guard the entrances. "

Strickland pushed his teeth together and shook his head. He and Ianelli stepped back to the state troopers speaking with Wendell by the front windows. Jones squatted down. " You all ready, Mark?"

" We're ready." He looked at Jones and removed his headphones. " They weren't too happy, Coach."

" They'll get over it." Jones stood and scanned the room. " I don't see the Reverend. He's scheduled to give the invocation. We wouldn't want our guest of honor to miss the show."

" What about the detective? He was right behind us coming up Route 7," said Sue.

" He's not an detective... He's probably going to assault Fletcher Hill on foot, who knows? Clyde Hooper is the least of my worries right now."

\* \* \*

Jones remained anonymous as the faculty and guests filed into the mammoth room. Strickland again voiced his displeasure at Jones's unorthodox manner, but Jones loitered at the end of the atrium doors and trained his eyes on Bricker at the head table. The Reverend wore a simple maroon blazer and blue flowered print tie and, between sips of coffee, chatted with Travis Thayer and members of the English Department while Nigel made points with the Fletchers and finally approached the podium.

He tapped the mike once and spoke clearly through the same room speakers for the video documentary indicting Bricker. " Ladies and Gentlemen, assembled faculty members, welcome to our annual recognition reception, Hamilton College's send off at the end of the academic year. During a few hours together, so graciously hosted by Hamilton Fletcher" Hamilton half stood, nodded perfunctorily and moved his pencil thin mustache at an odd angle.

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" Hopefully, we will have a chance to visit and to share our thoughts of the past year in this tiny little inlet along the coast of New Hampshire. Later we will," he said, gesturing toward the wide screen TV,

" have a chance electronically to view the past year in detail. Let me first introduce the Reverend John Peter Bricker, who has kindly agreed to say a few words and the invocation. Reverend Bricker."

Jones stood in the corner with his arms folded, surprised at the level of the applause. Bricker seemed to relish the attention as he had in church at Webster's funeral. Jones studied the bearded reverend with a new intensity as Bricker clutched both sides of the wood podium and produced a slanted grin lost in his wispy beard. His moist eyes reflected an unusual optimism as he panned the audience, but Jones hid in the corner. " How wonderful it is to gather here today. God has truly smiled on this corner of New Hampshire. I give thanks to God for all blessing he has bestowed on us all." He spread his arms outward in a flamboyant gesture. Running through Jones' mind was the private purchase of Nathan Howard's land gift to First Parish Church.

" All mighty God, we thank you for this institution of higher learning. We thank you for the many devoted professors, workers, and all involved in educating our young people. May they be secure in their future here in Hamilton. May we remember our blessings as well as our ingratitude and failings."

Bricker raised his head as if he were emerging from a self-induced trance. Like a CD starting abruptly, the room conversation resumed as Bricker left the podium and took his seat at the head table. A team of waiters, busboys and food servers descended upon the room with wide plates of pork roast, potatoes and

beans. Jones stared at Bricker, the anger building inside as he formed a murky image of the Reverend somehow slamming a blunt object into Webster Howard's head and later performing the same procedure on Tom McGill.

Dinner and cake and ice cream lasted a full forty-five minutes. Nigel asked Hamilton Fletcher to pronounce his own blessing on the proceeding. Hamilton delivered the talk, without a word wasted, flowered with a curt joke about professors and tenure. Jones' heart rate soared when Nigel returned to the podium and gave a brief summary of the Communications Department tape. Fletcher servants pulled back the drapes over the atrium windows span and darkness swept over the room. Nigel's neatly cut blue suit was highlighted by a small podium light, which he shut off as the original tape began.

Shots of the campus were clear and colorful on the huge square screen behind the main table. Bricker, visible in the TV light, leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. In twenty-four hours he was planning to flee the country with his windfall from the Howard land and whatever else he had accumulated over the years.

A visual summary of the sports year, commentary provided by Mark Morrison and appropriate music surges slowly dissolved into images of several students holding pumpkins last fall. An aerial sunlit view of Hamilton Bay had the crowd gasping. A helicopter was hired to film a stunning effect, approaching Hamilton across the sparkling bay waters with the darker Devonshire hills providing a distant back drop. The beach, cottages, Shore Road and the town landfill passed below as the church steeple rose across the town forest trees and the Parkview

Apartments. Jones watched Bricker's face. In a few seconds the original tape, now edited, would shift dramatically.

A previously unused panoramic view of Hamilton Bay, shot from above the bridge at Hansen's Marina, froze with the date of Webster Howard's last venture to sea.

**May 28: 1:00-2:00 A.M.**

Bricker slowly sat rigid. His brow creased gradually and his eyes blinked erratically. Both Ianelli and Strickland were also watching the Reverend. Amidst Beethoven's Sixth Symphony a yellow dotted line elliptically swung to a point outside the bay where Jones believed the red bottom boat, piloted by Bricker, could have encountered the Maintenance Free. Immediately, the red bottom boat, filmed at an angle from the youth camp shore, filled the screen, but in the lower corner of the screen was the red scrape left on Webster Howard's hull.

As the room buzzed, Bricker, in the near darkness of the TV light, pushed his seat back toward the drapes and propped his elbows on his knees. A bright specification sheet from Henry at Dewars Lumber brilliantly highlighted the exact qualities of **Fletcher Paint Company, Marine Epoxy Paint, # 1266A**.brown and yellow gallon can flashed briefly on the screen as Mark Morrison's deep, professional quality voice echoed throughout the room.

" Marine Epoxy Paint, number twelve, six, six, seven. Tests reveal this specific coating was applied recently to The Christian Youth Group's boat on the Pocquanticut River. Further, a long collision mark on Webster Howard's boat, the

Maintenance Free, according to chemical research, matches the Pocquanticut River boat exactly."

Now the assemblage buzzed. As Nigel scanned the room Herbert Lane shouted something to Strickland. Bricker left his chair and paralleled the tables. He tilted against a support pole as Mark Morrison, holding a silver microphone, stood at the marina bridge. " I'm Mark Morrison. Webster Howard was murdered in the early morning hours of May twenty-eighth. He journeyed forth from Hansen's Marina that evening and sailed for a small bar on Cape Cod. When he returned to Hamilton he was murdered at sea."

Hamilton Fletcher whispered to Nigel. Nigel nodded and headed toward Mark and Sue. In the low light Bricker, eyed by Ianelli and Strickland, slipped along the far wall. Morrison stalled Nigel as the tape continued.

" This is a Ford Motor Company engine key, fitting the boat docked in the Pocquanticut River. And a cash receipt for one dollar and nine cents from Jefferson's Hardware. The key to the Youth Camp boat was duplicated on May 15 at three-thirty-two P.M."

Ham Fletcher now moved past his father and joined Nigel confronting Morrison. A graphic from the Weather Cable now showed a storm, highlighted in bright orange and green, moving up the eastern seaboard toward New Hampshire on May 27. Even Ham closely watched the tape. Nigel turned as Morris's commentary continued. Bricker was twenty feet away from Jones at the atrium drapes.

## The Fitton Chronicles

## The Handyman's Secret

" Let me postulate a theory, a theory of murder. A massive storm was heading up the coast on Tuesday morning and scheduled to begin on Tuesday. It would be logical to assume that a small boat, still at sea on Wednesday morning, would encounter forces beyond comprehension. A murdered man on that boat would easily be washed off the deck and swept into the raging brine. No one would be the wiser. But the storm unexpectedly veered south, away from the coast and out into the Atlantic, leaving Webster Howard, who struggled in his last minutes to radio for help, dead in the cabin of his boat."

In the loud confusion Bricker vanished. Ianelli marched from his doorway position as a graphic of Bricker's alleged pilfering at other churches was superimposed over an image of First Parish Church. Herbert Lane himself shut off the tape and as the drawing room lights suddenly blazed, Bricker darted from behind the drapes and sprinted through the corridor door.

" Outside!" shouted Ianelli. Strickland, Wendell and the state cops, rushed like players sweeping around the end in a football game.

Nigel attempted to reassure the crowd as Jones dodged the guests. He traversed the long mansion hallway and turned at the foyer. Ianelli's green and gray uniform came into view on the portico.. His gun was drawn as Wendell and the two state cops fanned across the front drive.

" I hadn't planned on him bolting!" shouted Jones.

" You nailed him, Matthias. What do you expect him to do?"

Ianelli ran toward the garage and yanked a microphone through his cruiser window. As Jones rushed down the portico stairs, guests streamed from the house. Ianelli called for backups from both the state police and the Prince William Police.

Jones scanned the woods along the neatly trimmed lawn. Then he looked back at the pines around the huge brick mansion. Bricker's cleverness hiding behind the drapes and escaping left him livid and he feared his own actions might have allowed the Reverend to flee the area.

# 25

The cleaning woman shut off the parsonage lights and Jones walked into the quiet church, lighted by two silver chandeliers. The elevated wood pulpit where Bricker had preached for the past few years looked empty inside. In his zeal to trap Bricker, Jones had given him the opportunity to escape. He opened the first front pew door and sat in box number one. He pressed his lips and panned the cracked rafters.

The chandelier bulbs reflected in the black cold glass panes. Jones leaned on the pew and studied the smooth pastel painting of Christ and the angel above the organ's rising brass pipes. Ianelli had the airports and bus terminals sealed but Bricker's station wagon remained atop Fletcher Hill and dozens of police had scoured the hill and surrounding countryside. He exhaled and sat back in the pew. No one had proved Diana's Lee's drug connection, but Ianelli had brought her in for questioning. Mike Fitzgerald and his lawyer indicated they were preparing a statement implicating Diana Lee in the drug deal, but Bricker's name was not mentioned.

The speakers around the church hissed and crackled as if the microphone system flipped on. Jones' eyes bounced from speaker to speaker. His stomach wrenched as Bricker's high-pitched, omnipresent voice once again dominated First Parish Church. " You want justice, Jones?" Jones spun in the pew. " Justice for

those who dare to cast their demons outward into this world! Whomsoever has challenged the word will be punished. Whomsoever has made my temple a den of thieves!"

"Where are you?" In the choir loft like a eerie gray moon appearing through sinewy tree branches, Bricker, still clad in his maroon blazer and automatic rifle tucked under his arm, rose above the railing. Jones now feared making any sudden movement. "Think about what you're doing, Bricker! You have no chance if you kill me."

"I have done the Lord's work." He lifted a heavy brass candle holder to the rail. "I have taken away those who would destroy the temple!"

The gaping wound under Webster Howard's cap and the severity of McGill's injuries now made sense. His legs grew weak when Bricker slowly raised the gun.

"Put down the rifle, Reverend."

"I was the one, Jones. I decimated that boat and found the drug cache. I had it all planned. I had money set for life, Jones. Until you came along." He lined up Jones in the rifle sight. "You and the priest trying to get my land. At least I'll have the satisfaction of killing you."

Even if Jones dove to the floor, Bricker could pump bullets into his body. The unseen power of the aimed rifle shook him. "Bricker, listen to me."

"You will do your explaining now to God All Mighty."

A single rifle shot shook the church. Jones felt no pain nor heard a bullet whizzing. Bricker's mouth opened and his expression flattened as his weapon fell and bounced on the aisle carpet below. He held his bloodied blue shirt at the chest,

buckled and tumbled over the choir loft railing. His body twice turned in mid air and cracked against the pews. Jones stared at his folded form and turned toward the front of the church. Gun powder lingered in the sanctuary as Hooper, in combat fatigues, and arm still in a cast, strode onto the altar.

He said nothing and held a rifle similar to Bricker's gun by his side. Jones stepped from the pew and strayed down the main aisle. The Reverend's glassy eyes stared into a vast nothingness and his limbs hung lifeless over the wood. Jones slowly turned as Hooper approached. "Faber est quisque fortunae suae."

## Epilogue

Tom McGill, his head bandaged under a baseball cap, sat upright and turned to Jones in the open air on the Washington Street land. Although he still had no recollection of Bricker's attack outside Racer's Lounge, McGill had spent the past month undergoing intense physical and speech therapy. " I can't believe Gallagher surrendered his claim to this land."

" And actually supplied funds to the youth camp."

" Ridgeway's returning of the land helped," said McGill.

" Yeah, Ridgeway was about to be indicted." Jones listened to Harriman at the podium, speaking to the crowd about building the new youth center once further funds had been raised. The orange haired Gallagher nodded at Jones and joined everyone in applause as Harriman finished. Jones stood and helped McGill to his feet.

" So, when do you leave for Indiana?"

" In a few hours. It will be good to go home and visit my Aunt Mae for a few weeks."

" Matthias!" Jones turned. Lark, in his bright green blazer, pushed through the crowd. " The detective wanted to relay a message to you."

" I thought he might be over here today," said Jones.

" Oh, no, he's on another case according to his telegram."

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## The Handyman's Secret

" I didn't think anyone sent telegrams anymore," said Ianelli.

" *He* would," answered Jones. " But he did save my life."

Lark then grimaced, removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. " I was ready to write him his Bolpine check this morning."

" You're actually spending money, Lark?" asked McGill with a wide grin.

Lark pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. " I guess Detective Hooper does this as a hobby of some kind."

" Why would he do that?" asked Jones.

" Oh, the Detective is independently wealthy. He lives in Ashley Heights, you know."

" He doesn't live in Ashley Heights," said Jones.

" No, he assured me he did, old boy."

Jones looked at McGill and rolled his eyes. Ianelli's cruiser pulled alongside of the grassy lot and Strickland emerged from the passenger side. As Lark advised Jones about the upcoming football season, Ianelli and Strickland moved through the dispersing crowd. The round face Strickland spoke first. " Mike Fitzgerald detailed his investigation of Diana Lee and his knowledge of the drug run. "

" Really..."

" Matthias has told me of the Racer's Lounge tape," said McGill.

" Did Mike think he was going to arrest Webster in the bar?"

Ianelli stepped forward. " Mike was in an unauthorized operation, but thought he had Webster, but Webster was only making the arrangements to rendezvous. Mike still doesn't know where Webster made the pick up. And Diana Lee has given a written confession about the drug run and the request from Bricker

to make the key. She had no knowledge of what he was about to do. Apparently, they met each other last year when Bricker was hiking the youth camp and she was riding. He real name is Paula..."

" Demers," said Jones, shaking his head. " I don't believe it. Hooper was right."

" Bricker knew about the drug thing," said Ianelli. " Lee thinks he ransacked the boat, but she may just be covering her own activities."

" What about Mabel?" asked Jones.

" In a Millbury Hotel. She and Mike *were* fooling around," said Strickland. Jones held his arm. " Hooper was right again."

" I still want to talk to you about that tape of yours," said Ianelli.

" I didn't think the Reverend would run. Sorry."

" You did uncover the whole thing."

" Well, Hooper helped I have to say," said Jones. " And he did save my life."

Strickland patted Jones's shoulder. " We just left him at his Ashley Heights place."

" He really does live in Ashley Heights?"

" He has more money left to him than he knows what to do with," said Strickland.

" Who is he?"

" An extensive military record. A little bumpy, but he is who he says he is. Some town in France did make him a detective. I don't know how official the title is. "

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## The Handyman's Secret

Jones sat down again and aimlessly shook his head. His paperboy maneuvered his red bicycle off Washington Street. In his hand was a yellow envelope. " Coach Jones, I have a telegram for you."

" There are no telegram offices in town. I'm not even sure there's one in Prince William," said Strickland.

" Oh, there are still telegrams," said Jones.

" This came from Prince William to O'Conner's News Store. For five bucks I ran it over for you."

Jones took the envelope in his hand. He reached in his pocket and handed Billy an additional dollar.

" At least someone tips me," said Billy, pointing to Lark, talking with Father Gallagher.

" Lark is tight with the buck," said Jones, smiling. He opened the envelope and removed a crisp piece of yellow paper.

**JONES:**

**FUN WORKING WITH YOU. GLAD YOU SURVIVED UNDER FIRE. I'LL BE CHECKING THE PAPERS AND WILLEND A HELPING HAND IN FUTURE INVESTIGATIONS. GOOD LUCK. CASE CLOSED, PROBLEM SOLVED.**

**DETECTIVE C. R. HOOPER**

Jones slowly folded the telegram, glanced at Strickland and walked slowly toward road.

Strickland started behind him. " Matthias, where are you going?"

" I'm getting as far away from Hooper as I can... I'm going on vacation to Indiana now!"

" But, you don't have your car."

Jones reached Washington Street. " Then I'll walk, George! Case closed, problem solved!"