

A Matthias Jones Mystery

The Lake House Murder

by

Robert P. Fitton

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1

Professor Davis had bullied too many people not to take the death threats seriously. Irene said he was threatened several times and the strange people arriving at his lake house scared her. Ever since Gus brought her to the lake for the summer, she had snooped on the professor more than she watched daytime TV. Gus was tired of listening to her claims about a bunch of students, people in ritzy cars, and the exotic dancer over there. Even Hamilton Fletcher, himself, frequented the house just that afternoon. He wondered about the dancer.

Irene finally removed the whistling tea kettle from the gas burner as Gus gazed across the sandy road. The afternoon light reflected off the cars parked in the pine grove surrounding the varnished A-framed lake house. “ Irene!”

“ Have your coffee, Gus.”

“ Huh?” The coffee steamed upward from the brown tin cup on the end table. “ Oh, thanks, Irene.”

“ Don’t tell me I’m the one bein’ nosy, Gus Nickerson.”

“ You are nosy. But somethin’s going on. That long black car is Hamilton Fletcher’s car.”

“ No, Fletcher had the Caddie. The car out there is a Lincoln.”

“ The dancer drove the sports car.” Gus grimaced when he tasted the bitter coffee. “ What did you do, pour Fletcher paint in this cup?”

“ Make it yourself next time... Waste of propane. ”

Gus fully cranked open the cottage window, leaned forward and cupped his ear. “ I can’t hear nothin’.”

“ Get that puss of yours back in here. You might as well just run out in the road and wave them out of the house, Gus.”

“ Somethin’s confusing me.”

“ Wouldn’t take much.”

“ Hardy, har, har... Why did Hamilton Fletcher, the most powerful man in town, come up to the lake and visit a college professor? And furthermore, why did he yell at the professor and-”

“ Too much hanky panky,” said Irene. She produced the same buzz saw laugh he had heard for forty-two years.

“ Irene, you’re always comin’ up with them per-verted daytime talk show thoughts. You really see Davis smack Fletcher?”

“ Yup.”

“ Fiddle fat. He’d be fired on the spot. The Fletchers own Hamilton College!”

“ Fletcher had his handkerchief over his mouth, all bloody, when he got in the Caddie. You would have seen the whole thing, Gus, if you hadn’t made a career of hanging out in the john.”

“ Hardy, har, har. I didn’t see Fletcher but I saw that blonde in the skimpy outfit go inside about an hour ago. She had one nice-”

“ You would notice that.”

Gus rolled his eyes. “ Any-who.”

“ She wasn’t sellin’ Girl Scout cookies.”

“ Nope.”

“ And the professor beat on her, too,” said Irene. “ I wuz talkin’ to her by the mailbox. The professor has death threats.”

“ Ah... You and your death threats.” Gus checked the house through the pines. “ Woman like her is used ta being beaten on.”

“ What a macho thing to say!”

“ Macho-smatcho. There ya go with that talk show stuff again.”

Gus shook his head, but spotted a sandy haired man in a white shirt and red tie. He and a grubby, balding, fat guy in a purple jersey and gray pants talked to the professor. “ Here we go.”

“ Whaddy a see Gus?”

Gus was still miffed about being called macho. “ You ain’t turnin’ into one of them woman’s libbers, are ya, Irene?”

She pressured her elbow against his shoulder. “ At sixty-eight? Come on, Gus. What the hell is going on over there?”

“ I can’t see nothin’ if you knock me on my arse!”

Irene dug her nails into his arm. “ They’re gonna kill him or the woman!”

“ Stop it.” Gus pushed her hand away, but hid behind the curtains when the two men dragged the dancer through the open sliders. They carried her kicking across the yard, jammed her into the Lincoln and the engine started. The pudgy guy leaped into her silver sports car. From the sliders the professor watched both cars spin in the sand. He moved outside as the cars disappeared up the lake road.

“ Get the plate numbers, Gus!”

“ For what?”

Irene raced across the living room and pulled her tiny, red vinyl notebook from the kitchen drawer. Gripping her red pen, she traipsed back to the window and quickly scribbled something in the notebook.

“ Hot damn, I gut em!”

“ Gut what? What in the name of kingdom come are ya gonna do with them plate numbers?”

“ Stubborn, Gus.” She carefully placed the notebook back in the kitchen drawer.

Gus shook his head and turned as the lake house’s screen door slammed. The professor marched across the main room into one of the side bedrooms, but quickly returned with a black cordless phone at his ear. He talked as he paced near the gray, stone fireplace, but his hand soon swung up wildly. Irene leaned over Gus’s shoulder. “ Irene, my bad shoulder.”

“ I tell ya somethin' is brewin' over there. Somebody's gonna get him and you know it.”

“ The only thing I know is your overactive imagination.”

“ Too many women been comin' and goin' and they're all probably hookers. Even that college lady from Illinois.”

“ How do you know who she is and where she's from?” asked Gus, his eyes still trained on the angry professor.

“ Gut her plate numbers. I gut all their plates.”

“ If they were hookers I would have gone over there myself.” Irene stung his leg with her boot. “ Ouch!”

“ Let that be a lesson to ya, Gus. Hookers would croak that bum ticker of yours.”

“ Hardy, har, har.”

Irene stayed at the window. “ The Professor wuz yellin' at the woman professor, too.”

Inside the lake house the professor threw something toward the rear sliders. Gus could not hear his voice through the screen door as he tried to move Irene off his shoulder. “ How do you know he yelled at her? You can't hear a damned thing either.”

“ And Little Rusty, the student. He smacked her around and she still hangs all over him.”

“ What's the big attraction over there anyway?”

“ Ignorant, Gus.”

In the lake house, the professor made one final comment and stuck the phone in his back pocket. He strutted across the room, picked up a drink and exited the rear sliders overlooking the bright blue lake.

“Well the party’s over and I don’t see no hookers. I have to use the john.”

Gus abandoned his position and Irene nestled herself in his spot as he stretched his long arms in front of the chair. “ He's made too many enemies. Sooner or later somebody will bag him. And bag him good.”

2

Jones looked his watch. Nigel's party guests were now squeezed into the new drawing room and the accumulated conversation was loud enough to drive him outside along the pool's aqua glow. Even with his Maine camping trip only hours away Jones stayed at the party, but wondered if he was merely waiting for Maggie McCay to arrive. He was all the more attracted to her when she rejected his suggestion to see a movie downtown.

He was about to check the time when Nigel's grandfather clock slowly resonated ten times inside the drawing room. Nigel's eyes opened wide behind his thick glasses as he spotted two students, bathing suits dripping on his new rug, near the atrium doors.

Jones grinned turned as Carl Rogers shuffled his well-toned frame along the pool tiles. Carl had done a great job since Woosey Williams' early retirement. Jones was about to talk to Carl when Nigel stormed through the atrium doors. “What's the matter, Nigel?”

“I warned them not to track in pool water on my new Berber! They went right through the house!”

“You need to lock the doors.”

“I've been assured the rug won't bleach, but...”

In his orange bath suit Carl hobbled forward and Jones patted him on the back. “ Is Florida Western's Superstar on the disabled list?”

“ I was running as a matter of fact near your house on the common and twisted my ankle in a pothole.”

Jones raised his finger. “ I’ve stumbled on that pothole myself. You all right, wobble?”

“ Wobble? Should I add that to my nicknames?”

“ You want to have that ankle looked at?” asked Jones. “ I know some sports medicine guys in Prince William.”

“ Nah, a little water therapy and I’ll be fine. You two going in?”

“ Maybe Matthias will take a dip,” said Nigel, still looking into the drawing room.

“ No, no. I'm probably going to head home. We’re leaving for Maine early.”

“ Maggie didn’t attend the party,” said Nigel, still glancing at his drawing room rug. “ That’s odd.”

The blue eyed Carl removed his sweaty jersey, revealing his bronzed, well developed chest. “ You look like an advertisement for one of those exercise programs on late night TV.”

“ Got to keep in shape,” he said. He turned and dove into the iridescent pool, splashing water onto the blue glazed tiles.

“ He's in great physical condition,” said Nigel. “ He's knows what he’s doing.”

Carl swam over to two women on the other side. “ With the women or helping me coach?”

Nigel again looked toward the drawing room and raised his index finger. “ Speaking of women, Matthias, your Professor McCay is here.”

Jones' face tightened. “ She's not *my* Professor McCay.”

“ That gentleman that owns the lumber yard was by this afternoon with some finishing trim.”

“ You mean Arnie Dewars.” said Jones. “ I can just imagine what rumor he’s spreading now.”

“ He said you... well, you and Ms. McCay-”

“ Nigel, I learned along time ago not to put credence in anything Arnie says. Besides, McCay’s a pain. You've heard her at the faculty meetings. Little Miss Sassy. Not that she just has an opinion, but it's like she has a chip on her shoulder. Spoiled little rich kid with that monster black Expedition and she lives in the Marlboro Inn.”

“ They do rent rooms at the Marlboro, Matthias.” Nigel raised his brow. “ I believe I detect an inordinate interest. Perhaps, Mr. Dewars was right.”

“ Don't be ridiculous. She said no when I asked her out and that’s that,” said Jones. Carl's powerful arms churned like a steamboat paddle wheel as he swam laps in the pool. “ Look at him. There's a kid who worked his way up and got to Florida Western on a football scholarship.”

“ He won't last long here,” said Nigel. “ He'll have his own team somewhere.”

“ True,” said Jones. McCay, tall and slender in a tight fitting blue dress, appeared in one of the open atrium doorways. Her long dark hair, usually combed neatly, was wispy down her neck. She clutched her drink as Hank Wenzel from the Math Department approached. Jones listened carefully to her precisely enunciated words. Her green eyes were incredibly expressive as she fidgeted with the glass.

“ You're staring,” said Nigel.

“ Did you hire her?”

“ Yes, I was involved.”

“ I heard the Fletchers made a private call on her behalf.”

“ That is confidential.”

“ Ah, I knew it.” Her eyes darted as she lectured Wenzel. “ Poor Hank. Too much pontificating. I wouldn't take her guff. Who does she think she is?”

“ Why don't you ask her? Here she comes.”

Jones looked to his right. McCay's lost expression was transformed into a wide smile and she extended her hand to Nigel. Her eyes brightened. “ Dr. Kent, a lovely party. I'm sorry I was a little tardy this evening. I was just remarking to Professor Wenzel that we should have more of these gatherings during the academic year.”

“ I think you're right,” said Nigel.

Jones rolled his eyes, but her potent perfume caused his nose to itch and he sneezed.

“ Bless you,” she said with a snicker.

“ You of course know Matthias Jones, Maggie.” Jones glared at Nigel as he drifted away, leaving him alone with McCay.

“ Our beloved coach. Mr. Jones...”

Her smug attitude irritated him. “ You can call me Matthias.”

“ I see.” She looked him over as if he were not properly dressed.

“ Something wrong, Miss McCay?”

“ Ms. McCay”

“ Ms. and Coach,” said Jones, smiling.

Her face was rigid. “ Right.”

“ Just a joke.”

“ So, you have gained great notoriety in the small pond called Hamilton College, Mr. Jones.”

“ What do you mean by that?”

“ Don't be so defensive.”

“ Me? You talk like you're above everyone else.”

“ I could say the same of you, Mr. Jones.” Her eyes revealed an inner anger. “ And you are quite pleased with yourself, aren't you?”

“ Yeah, I guess I am,” said Jones.

“ Just remember this is only a small college in the corner of New Hampshire.”

“ I understand that,” he said through gritted teeth. “ This college has been good to me.”

“ Isn't that wonderful? I wish you more years of bliss.” In a graceful move, she turned on the tiles, and Jones watched her silky blue dress as she sashayed back inside the house.

" Hey, Coach," said Carl, still in the pool. The water had matted down his dark wavy hair. He folded his arms on the pool's tile berm. " New love interest?"

" No." He crossed the tiles, eager to defend himself as he hovered over Carl. " And you should talk. I haven't seen you all night."

Carl produced a wide grin. “ Well... I met a woman from administration.”

“ I saw you leave with Mary Thompson.”

“ Well, we took off earlier and-”

“ You're a big party boy, Carl, but I guess when you're twenty something, you're entitled.”

“ Hey, can I ask you something, Coach?”

“ If it's a question about women, forget it.”

“ No, what Professor McCay said about coaching. Doesn't it bother you to be stuck at this level? There are other horizons out there.”

“ I like it here. I like my job and the town. I know you want to take the fast track... And you have big ears, Carl.”

Nigel's housekeeper leaned out the far atrium door. “ Matthias, George Strickland is on the line for you.”

“ Oh, good. Thank you, Mrs. Johnson.”

“ Your trip?” asked Carl.

“ I can't wait to get away. It's been a long year. George and I have to meet Tom McGill in Maine tomorrow morning.”

“ If I don't see you. Have a good trip.”

“ Thanks, where you headed this summer?” asked Jones.

“ I'm going home to Seattle for a few weeks. I may drive.”

“ In that run down MG?”

Carl smiled. “ I know. I know. I've had that car since college. I'm looking at a SUV like Ms. McCay or maybe a van.”

Jones sneered and thought of McCay's belligerent attitude. “ Forget Ms. McCay.”

“ She's an attractive woman.”

“ Have a safe trip, Carl.” Jones reached down and shook his wet hand. “ And behave yourself.”

“ Do I have to?”

“ Good night, Carl.” Jones scurried inside the doors and headed into the kitchen. Mrs. Johnson pointed to the red phone on the kitchen counter. Jones smiled and picked up the receiver. “ Let me guess, you're backing out of the vacation, George.”

“ We’re not going,” he said as Nigel walked into the kitchen with the caterer.

“ Oh, I knew it.”

“ There’s been a murder.”

“ A murder?” asked Jones as Mrs. Johnson turned. “ Who?”

“ A biology professor at the college, Brad Davis.”

“ Nigel will flip.”

“ Murder? Did I hear murder?” asked Nigel, stepping away from the caterer.

“ Professor Davis, Biology,” said Jones.

Nigel closed his eyes. “ Oh, dear Lord, how many times have I told Hamilton Fletcher about that man? Hamilton will want to contain this. I know he will.”

Strickland yelled something to his deputy. “ We have a student, Amy Pollard, in custody.”

Jones leaned toward Nigel. “ He has a student in custody.”

“ Who is the student?”

“ An Amy Pollard.”

Nigel opened his mouth and staggered to the kitchen chair. “ The media outlets will be all over the town. I’m feeling ill.”

“ Do you want a drink, Nigel?” asked Mrs. Johnson.

“ Whiskey, straight up.”

Nigel looked up at Jones. “ Where did it happen?”

“ In the cottage colony at Tolby Lake,” said Strickland.

“ Tolby Lake, Nigel.”

“ Look, Matthias. Call McGill and tell him what happened. We’ll have to postpone the Maine thing.”

“ He’s at the cabin. There is no phone. I’ll have to check with his old boss, that guy he left running the paper. Can I come out there?”

“ Give me a couple of hours. People across the street saw Pollard enter the house, but they’ve seen a whole raft of people coming and going over the past week. Look, Clayton is here doing the forensics with his people and we’re still sweeping the lake house.”

“ I’ll head over to the paper now and see if I can contact Tom. See you later.”

Jones hung up the phone and Nigel sprang from the chair. “ A disaster. A unmitigated disaster.”

“ What do you mean?”

Mrs. Johnson handed him a full whisky snifter. “ This is a burgeoning problem. Brad Davis has a notorious reputation.”

“ Oh?”

Nigel sipped the liquor. “ He’s a womanizer. He’s had charges filed... warnings. We gave him a chance. I thought it was all behind him. And now this.”

“ Why did you let him off?”

Nigel stood, set the glass on the table and motioned Jones out to the pool. They moved along the hedges. “ He’s engaged in genetic research. The Fletchers wanted the school have a specialist in that area.”

“ If I know Hamilton Fletcher he wants to make money out of the deal.”

“ Maybe, but Brad Davis was supposed to add to the school’s prestige. I managed to contain the scandals.”

“ Not too prestigious now.”

“ Absolutely correct. I should have pushed to get him out while I had the chance.”

“ Sounds like this could get messy. I’m going to head over to the paper and see if McGill left a number in Maine. Then I’m going out to Tolby Lake.” He put his hand on Nigel’s shoulder. “ Maybe you should call Hamilton Fletcher.”

“ You’re right, Matthias: nip it in the bud.”

3

Jones needed to contact McGill before he drove over to Tolby Lake. Maybe McGill's old boss, running the paper in his absence, could help. He twisted the radio volume when he heard the disc jockey announce a commercial for the re-election of Herbert Lane for District Attorney. Lane had clashed with Jones on nearly every murder case Jones had investigated. Jones pictured Lane in his office, stomach bulging from his vest and gray toupee flat on his large head. The commercial was set to Row, Row, Row Your Boat.

Her... Her... Herbert Lane
For District Att-orney
Vote, Vote, Vote, Vote
For Herbert Lane, DA

Jones clicked off the radio and abruptly stopped his jeep in front of the Enterprise's brick building. He exited the jeep and shook his head as the Herbert Lane commercial repeated in his mind. From the sidewalk the office lights shone through the blinds and over outside shrubs. A lanky man in a light blue suit and hat was hunched over a typewriter

and cigarette smoke draped the air around his crumpled, rimmed hat. Jones climbed the cement steps and rapped on the aluminum-framed door.

He waited, wondering if the student in custody was romantically involved with Davis. Inside the lobby, the man from the typewriter, his wrinkled powder blue suit, as creased as his face, appeared at the door with keys in hand. A multicolored feather pierced his matching cockeyed hat and a smoldering cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth. He fiddled with the lock, twisted the keys and opened the door. The heavy lobby smoke irritated Jones' eyes.

“ Three shots in the chest?” asked the man.

“ I don't think we've met. Matthias Jones.”

“ Jerry St. Clair, how are ya, Bub?” He locked the door and stepped back into the lobby. For a few seconds he was unsure where to tuck the keys and finally dropped them in his pants pocket. “ And a Hamilton student in cuffs?”

“ That's right.”

Jones followed him into the side office. Jerry returned to the typewriter, sat at the creaky wood chair and pounded on the keys. His gritty voice was sanded by time. “ Word's out on you, Jones.”

“ Me?”

“ Tom gives you the thumbs up,” he said, typing with both index fingers.

“ Tom got his start with your paper.”

“ He worked the grind for me on the city desk in Philly twenty-one years ago.” Jones raised his brows as the typing continued. “ Sounds like we’ve got a homicide to investigate.”

“ What do you mean?” asked Jones.

“ Tom said you’re an old gumshoe.”

Jones raised his brows. “ Look, Jerry, I’ve investigated a few murders, but-”

“ We’ll take the friends and associates angle on this one. Seen it a hundred times. People like Davis come and go over the years. I worked on a case in '47. Downtown Philly. The guy was taping every broad he could get his hands on. He liked the skirts.”

“ Listen, Jerry. Did McGill leave any number up in Maine?”

“ Incognito, pal.”

“ I’m going over Tolby Lake to meet George Strickland, but I think I’ll stay clear of investigating this one. We’re both eager to leave for Maine. But I think we’re leaving late.”

Jerry nodded and set the cigarette in a dirty glass ashtray loaded with spent butts. He leaned back produced a raspy laugh. “ Bowing out, huh? I’m gonna detail this murder in a series of page one exclusives. Didn’t think you were yellow.”

“ What?.”

Jerry stopped typing and swiveled around. “ Don’t think the old duffer still has it, do you?”

“ I never said-”

“ Listen,” he said rapping Jones in the ribs. “ I spent forty years on the streets, hot shot. I know how to develop a story and bring in the readers.”

“ I’m sure you do.”

“ What do you know about newspapers?”

“ I don't-”

“ What?”

“ I said-”

“ What?”

“ Jerry. I don’t care,” said Jones in a louder voice.

“ Ah, the Coach has a temper. Everyone has a character fault, bud.”

Jones grit his teeth as Jerry sat down again and started typing.

“You been in retirement?”

“ You gut something against old people?”

“ Oh, boy. I can see this is going to be fun.” Jones looked up at the large wall clock above the table. Another half hour and he could head out to Tolby Lake.

* * *

At the edge of the marsh, less than a mile past Hansen's Marina a Hamilton cruiser's lights flashed blue across the brown and white sign for Tolby Lake. Jones wanted Jerry back at the news desk, but the old reporter had grabbed another pack of cigarettes and climbed inside Jones' jeep. Jones ordered him not to smoke until he left the car, but the stale smoke permeated his suit. For fifteen minutes he listened to stories from the Philadelphia streets as witnessed by Jerry St. Clair during the past forty years. Jones slowed at the cruiser and the gray haired Tully, toothpick in his teeth, stepped from the cruiser. "Matthias."

"Tul, what's up?"

"The party boy got blown away."

"Great headline. I'll use it in the morning edition," said Jerry.

"Morning edition?" asked Jones in a low voice. "There's only one daily edition."

Jerry leaned out the window. "Tell me, Officer. What's the dirt on the broad under arrest?"

"Dirt? What dirt? She's a student and I'm watching the entrance. Ask George about details."

"The copper wants money," said Jerry, grinning.

"Hey, watch it, old timer."

"They bring her downtown yet?"

"What?" asked Tully opening his eyes wide to Jones. He spoke in a lower voice. "This guy's right out of a dime novel."

“ I need a butt,” said Jerry from the passenger side. “ Stop stalling, Jones. Come on, get this jalopy moving.”

“ It’s a ways in there,” said Tully.

Jones, his anticipation about leaving on vacation nixed, waved to Tully and shifted the jeep onto the sandy road through the woods. The jeep bounced over the ruts and potholes carved into the constricted road. He crawled in first gear for at least ten minutes, the jeep bounding deeper into the woods. In the mirror, Jerry held a fresh cigarette between his fingers and a transparent butane lighter ready in his other hand. More cruiser lights through the branches alerted Jones to the activity near the lake cottages. The road leveled out under the pine trees and he maneuvered the jeep toward an A-Frame house with open sliders and a screen door, fenced in with yellow police tape. Lights from a single cottage across the road cut the darkness toward the woods.

He grabbed his cell phone and exited the jeep. Two Prince William cops, guarding the sliders, stepped forward as he vaulted the police tape. Jerry's butane lighter ignited to his right and the veteran newspaper man puffed the cigarette red. Jones turned toward the sliders but another vehicle caught his attention beyond the cruisers. Professor McCay's huge shiny black Expedition was parked under the pines next to a yellow Volkswagen.

“ What's she doing here?” asked Jones.

Jerry, cigarette stuck in his mouth, pushed past Jones. With notebook open and pen in hand he approached the two officers at the sliders. “ You need to run a make on the junk boxes in the yard.”

Jones recognized the blonde cops. “ How you doing Rick?”

“ Matthias, you’re usually here before Clayton.”

“ I’ve got company,” said Jones, twisting his lips.

Jerry exhaled, but left the cigarette in his mouth as he spoke. “ Your boss know you're halting the press from an official investigation?”

“ Come on, Jerry, chill out,” said Jones, moving up the stairs. He saw Strickland talking with Wendell Harris behind a striped sofa. “ They’re not halting anything.”

“ Nobody needs to tell an old street reporter how to do his job.”

Jones winced and shook his head. Rick brought them both through the sliders. Jones scanned the lake house. A massive stone fireplace extended up the wall to cedar slats, neatly fitted in the cathedral ceiling. Upstairs bedroom doors were closed behind a balcony rail. The place had a fresh cedar smell and was clean. On the sofa was a thin, wood pole wrapped in clear plastic. A chalk outline and dark blood on the braided rug, indicated Professor Davis's demise.

“ Happy vacation, Matthias,” said Strickland, glancing up from the clipboard at the kitchen table.

“ Are we still going?”

“ Yeah, we're going. Maybe later in the morning.”

“ Good,” said Jones, looking at the pole. “ Somebody hit him?”

“ That’s the door wedge. He was shot not hit.”

Jerry’s smoke slowly masked the fresh cedar. He plucked the cigarette from his mouth, gripped his pen and held out his notebook.

“ So, I can quote you on that””

Strickland turned from Jones. “ What?”

“ I said can I quote you on the fact you're abrogating your duties as Chief and leaving on vacation?”

“ Who the hell are you?”

“ St. Clair, the Enterprise.”

“ He’s taking McGill’s place.”

Strickland half grinned as Jones shrugged his shoulders. “ Yeah, you can quote me on that and whatever the hell else you want to quote me on.”

“ What happened up here, George?” asked Jones.

“ Pretty cut and dry. What concerns me is the report from Mrs. Nickerson across the street. A Lincoln Continental was up here from Massachusetts. We traced it to a Bertram Trainer. He works for Albert Fiore.”

“ Fiore? You mean the crime family?” asked Jones.

“ Yes, the crime family. Look I just want to go to Maine. I don’t want to be checking out lead on Albert Fiore.”

“ Ditto.”

“ And another car. Silver Porsche. Owned by a Samuel Weiss.”

“ At least it’s not Fiore.” Strickland put his hand on Jones’ shoulder and nodded. “ He works for Fiore, too. Any other questions?”

“ Two cars are out front. One of them is Professor McCay’s-”

“ Davis's Corvette is out back,” said Strickland.

“ Well, why is Maggie McCay's Expedition up here?”

“ I didn’t know you kept such close tabs on her. Then again Arnie Dewars said you and she-”

“ Well, Arnie Dewars should mind his own business.”

“ As far as McCay goes.” Strickland walked around the sofa, and glanced at Jerry, clutching his pen. “ Apparently, the girl knows her. She called for Dr. McCay before she called for a lawyer.”

“ *Doctor McCay?*” asked Jones, still miffed at her attitude at Nigel's party.

“ Are you comments a part of the record?” asked Jerry. The ash on his cigarette had grown long, flaky, and top heavy.

“ What is this? I don't want everything I say coming out in the Enterprise.”

“ You covering up something?” Jerry asked.

Strickland's dark eyes opened wide and his pushed his teeth together. Jones moved by Jerry and escorted Strickland to the back

sliders. Strickland's deputy smirked as they passed and Strickland pointed at him. "Don't you start, Wendell."

"Who me?"

Outside, Jones put his arm around Strickland. "George, calm down."

"I thought we'd be getting ready to leave for Maine. It could be a couple of days. Did you get through to McGill?"

"No. We'll have to wait for him to get to a phone." Jones furrowed his brow. "So, what did happen up here? Did Amy Pollard confess?"

"No, no, not at all."

"Did she do it?"

Strickland furrowed his brow and was about to answer when he looked inside the sliders. Jerry's cigarette ash fell near another plastic bag on the thick pine table. Strickland shot back inside "Hey. St. Clair. Get away from that!"

"Saturday night special. The broad own the gun?"

"I don't know yet."

Jerry stepped forward and held out his pen. "What about the shells?"

"Wendell has the shells."

Wendell waved another plastic bag with the brass shells. "Right here."

"What about prints?" asked Jerry.

“ No prints on the gun or shells,” said Strickland.

“ I need forensics, Chief. Angle of entry, range of the killer.”

Strickland pursed his lips. “ This isn't a press conference. Call Clayton Morris. He's the Medical Examiner.” He wandered back to Jones on the rear deck. “ Where, the hell did McGill find him?”

“ His first boss in Philadelphia. So, what do you think happened?” asked Jones.

“ We recovered a gazillion foot prints on this deck and slider glass. I can't make heads or tails out of it, but I think she came in front sliders. Both sliders were open.” He gazed at Jerry, talking to Wendell. “ No prints on the slider handles either. Wiped clean. Davis had a reputation with women. We were called to his old apartment off campus last year. He attacked a Prince William woman. Charges were dropped. I think Hamilton Fletcher paid her off and then shipped Davis out here. There's more about Hamilton and Davis, but I can't tell you right now.”

“ Relating to the murder?”

“ I can't say. And I don't need Ace in there reporting that info... I think Pollard entered the house to deliberately kill Davis.”

“ Why, do you say that?”

“ Neighbors across the street. The woman saw Pollard over here all the time. Pollard was wild about Davis, but he may have abused her. Mrs. Nickerson has a whole list of license plates. She says exotic dancers,

Mafia people... Wendell will check out the plates once we get the notebook.”

“ This may be more complicated, George.”

“ She was here, the gun was on the floor, and Davis was dead.

What's complicated?”

Jones gazed across the darkened beach area. The outlines of the lake and shoreline were indefinite under the stars. He stroked his chin.

“ Then why are the slider handles and the gun wiped clean?”

Strickland closed his eyes. “ I haven't talked to her, but I'm convinced she'll confess once Dr. McCay calms her down. Maybe she wore gloves and started to cover her tracks, but panicked.”

“ Come on.”

“ I say latex surgical gloves,” said Strickland.

“ Maybe somebody else did it.”

Strickland held the bridge of his nose. “ You know I've been waiting for this vacation for a year and a half. Isn't that when we first planned it?”

“ Yup...”

“ I called Herbert Lane.”

Jones smiled. The pudgy Lane hated Jones's involvement in murder investigations. “ Wake Herbert from his beauty sleep did you? I heard his silly commercial tonight.”

“ Actually he was at Club Max. Having dinner.”

“ Liquid dinner. He isn't coming over here, is he?”

“ He'll be over the station in the morning.”

“ How does McCay know Pollard?” asked Jones.

“ One of her students.”

Jones moved to the deck railing. “ What about the beach out there?”

“ Need daylight, my friend.”

As he stared into the starry sky, Jones was troubled about no finger prints on the gun. Without bothering Strickland further, he wondered why Amy Pollard would have hung around if she had worn gloves to cover the crime. He followed Strickland back inside the house.

Strickland wrote something on his clipboard pad as McCay's testy voice and a prolonged sobbing leaked out the cracked bedroom door. Jones requested to speak with Pollard. Strickland hesitated until Jones insisted. The police chief recanted and led Jones to the door. Before he fully opened the door, the Strickland panned the lake house. “ Where the hell is Jerry?”

“ He stepped out for another cigarette,” said Wendell.

“ Dr. McCay,” said Strickland as he knocked.

“ You make it sound like she's an MD, George.”

“ That's her title.”

“ She's an professor of literature.”

The door opened quickly. The rusty haired Amy Pollard, eyes blood-shot and moist, sat on the edge of a yellow quilt bedspread and

clutched a dainty white handkerchief. McCay had changed into jeans and her long dark hair brushed her teal sweatshirt. She moved forward and blocked the open doorway. “ Yes, what it?”

“ Matthias and I want to talk with Amy.”

“ What is *he* doing here?”

“ Me? What are you doing here?”

Strickland stepped between them. “ Matthias has worked with me before. I know this is irregular, but sometimes he has insights into these things.”

Amy Pollard, blue mini skirt tight over her petite body, stood. “ I didn’t kill Brad.”

“ Amy you need not say anything until Ms. Merkle-Brown is present.”

“ I told her that,” said Strickland.

McCay’s heightened green eyes darted between Jones, Strickland, and Amy. Her fingers were whitened at the knuckles. Either she was always high strung or the trauma of the murder had shaken her. Jones’ smile seemed to irritate her as he faced Amy. “ Then who killed him?”

Amy’s eyes veered toward McCay. McCay creased her brow and shook her head. “ Chief, this questioning by a lay person is unconscionable.”

“ How do you know Amy, Ms. McCay?” asked Jones.

“ She is a student of mine. Now, that is irrelevant, Chief! I say we forget about any questioning until her lawyer arrives.”

Strickland moved closer to Amy. “ This is your call Amy, not Dr. McCay’s.”

“ Amen to that,” said Jones.

“ Matthias, that isn’t helpful.” He faced Amy. “ Well? “

“ I have nothing to hide. I will talk to the Coach.”

“ Excellent,” replied Jones. McCay rolled her eyes and paced the bedroom. “ Would you like to sit down, Amy?”

“ No...” She wiped her nose with the handkerchief. “ Brad called me and I drove over here around nine-thirty. I’m not exactly sure. I pulled in and walked through the front sliders.”

“ The front and not the rear sliders?” asked Jones.

“ Yes, Brad always said-”

“ Brad? Then you were quite familiar with Professor Davis.”

“ What is he driving at?” shouted McCay.

“ I’m trying to see what kind of relationship-”

“ I did some outside research on his work at the college. I was one of his students as well as Maggie’s.”

“ Maggie?” Jones grinned.

McCay raised her voice again. “ You have a certain arrogance, Jones.”

“ And just what kind of arrogance is it?” asked Jones.

“ Stop it,” said Strickland. “ You did work for the professor and he called you up to come over. You had no other type of relationship?”

Again she looked in McCay’s direction. “ Maggie?”

“ She doesn’t need to be answering questions like that.”

“ Then the relationship with Davis was more than just student-teacher?” asked Jones.

“ Can’t you see she’s upset?” McCay stomped over to Jones. “ She doesn’t need your prurient inferences!”

“Don’t spin your words at me, Professor. What happened when you walked inside, Amy?”

Amy raised the handkerchief to her face and tears erupted. Her wailing intensified when McCay accompanied her to the bed and held her. “ You don’t have to continue, dear.”

“ I want to know what she saw,” said Jones from the door.

“ Brad, he was on the floor,” she whimpered. “ Dead, Brad was dead!”

“ Are you sure?” asked Jones.

McCay still held Amy. “ What did she just say, Jones?”

“ I stepped back. It didn’t hit me for a few seconds and then I screamed.”

“ Where was the gun?” asked Strickland.

“ On the rug.”

Jones walked slowly toward the sofa. “ And you didn’t own or use that gun?”

“ No.”

“ Is that all?” asked McCay, leaping to her feet.

Strickland turned. “ Yes, Wendell. Bring Amy down to the station.”

McCay raised her hands in the air. “ Why?”

“ I’m holding her for suspicion of murder.”

“ She says she didn’t do it!” yelled McCay.

“ Your Merkle-Brown can talk to the DA about that.”

McCay nodded once but sent Jones a vile look. Strickland and Jones drifted onto the deck again. “ George, she’s in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“ What? Come on, the gun was on the floor.”

“ Trace it.”

“ I will. Gloves or no gloves. She was involved with Davis. And it sounds like he had it coming. And we’ll check out the riffraff passing through here.”

Jones leaned on the deck railing again. “ It took me fifteen minutes by jeep to get in here... When was he killed?”

“ Not much later than nine-thirty according to when Mrs. Nicker-son heard the scream. Clayton will verify the time of death. Mrs. Nicker-son saw Davis fifteen minutes before.”

“ So, the neighbors saw Amy Pollard arrive?”

“ Yup.” Strickland dragged his notebook from his pocket and scanned his notes. “ Pollard arrived during Wheel of Fortune.”

“ But she didn’t hear the shots.”

“ Irene heard the scream.”

Jones faced his friend. “ George, how long was Amy Pollard in here before the Nickerson woman heard the scream?”

“ I see your point. If she didn’t walk right in and discover the body...”

“ Then she must have seen or committed the murder or not been too upset about seeing Davis dead.”

Strickland looked back inside. “ A few weeks from now and the cottages will all be open. But now the Nickersons are the only people up here.”

“ What’s the matter?” asked Jones.

“ That old reporter.” Strickland flew through the slider opening. Jerry argued with Amy Pollard and McCay on the sofa. “ St. Clair, what do you think you’re doing?”

“ Ever heard of the first amendment, bub?”

Strickland waved him out of the room. “ I’m in no mood for this! Get out of here!”

Jerry looked up, cigarette smoldering. He put away his pad and stood. “ This is going in the morning edition. And I wuz at the sliders, Chief. I gut notes.”

Jerry wandered out the screen door. “ He's an old wind bag,” said Jones.

“ He prints anything, I'll lock him up.” Strickland turned to McCay and Amy Pollard. “ Miss Pollard. Tell me again what you did when you drove up here.”

Amy was more composed and cleared her throat. “ I drove up and finished listening to my tape.”

“ How long was that?” asked Jones.

“ Couple of minutes. Then I went inside.” Her eyes filled again. “ I didn't kill him. Help me, Coach.”

Jones pressed his lips and glanced at Strickland. “ Who would want him dead?”

“ Brad knew a lot of people. I don't know.”

“ Wendell,” called Strickland.

Wendell looked up from a newspaper. “ Yo.”

Strickland faced her. “ Sergeant Harris, here is going to bring you back to the station.”

Jones thought she would be devastated by the news of being locked up, but she tearfully nodded and seemed to accept her circumstance. “ I understand.”

“ Again, you can talk with your lawyer-”

“ We will be using Susan Merkle-Brown,” said McCay.

“ Campus legal aid?” asked Jones. “ I know another lawyer.”

“ Why, have you needed a lawyer before, Mr. Jones?” asked McCay.

Jones squinted. “ No, I haven't. L.G. Bentley is right in town.”

“ Sure, a male lawyer.”

“ Oh, come on. What difference does it make? L.G. is an experienced man... I mean lawyer.”

“ May we use the phone to call Ms. Merckle-Brown?” asked McCay.

Jones rolled his eyes as Amy grasped his wrist. Her moist brown eyes drooped up like a puppy looking for food at the table. “ Coach, I didn't kill Brad. Please... please help me.”

Jones paused. He wanted to leave for Maine and relax for ten days, but he did not think Amy Pollard killed Brad Davis. “ All right, I'll see what I can do.”

4

Hawlings stood at the open door as Nigel glided to a stop along the well-lighted Fletcher Hill portico. He crossed the asphalt and climbed the brick stairs. “ Good evening, Hawlings.”

“ I must say it is not a good evening, sir.”

Nigel stopped in front of the open door. “ I don’t understand.”

“ Apparently, we’ve had several complications involving the Davis murder.”

“ Complications?”

“ Mr. Fletcher and Ham will elaborate. Please come in.”

Nigel’s thoughts remained back at the party when Matthias received the call about Davis’s death. He followed Hawlings across the glossy white foyer tiles and down the hallway. Light from Hamilton’s study doors swept into the corridor. Hamilton’s connection to Davis, beyond his initially recruiting Davis to work at the college, eluded Nigel.

Hamilton, seated behind his wide wood desk, his back to the computer screen, talked with his son. Neither man saw Nigel standing with Hawlings. The butler stepped forward. “ Sir, Mr. Kent is here.”

The white haired Hamilton wore a blue sport coat and no tie, but as he turned Nigel saw a narrow beige Band-Aid strip along the corner of

Hamilton's mouth below the thin, gray mustache. "Nigel, thank you for coming over. I know you had the faculty party this evening,"

"Hamilton, are you all right?"

"I've had better days." He looked at his son. Ham's lips were tightly pressed. "I won't keep you in suspense about the injury to my mouth."

"Nigel, this is to be kept confidential," said Ham, folding his arms across his checkered shirt. "If anyone in town found about this afternoon, everything could fall apart."

"Ham is entirely correct. I'm sitting on a powder keg." He walked around the desk and motioned Nigel to his leather sofa. Hamilton sat in the leather recliner but leaned toward Nigel as he spoke. "I made the mistake of going out to the lake house this afternoon."

"*You were at the lake house?*"

"I do own the house," said Hamilton, balancing his elbows on his knees. "And I have made a grave mistake in bringing this man to Hamilton College. He is at the top of his game professionally and I, well both of us and Mal Hayes, our controller, believed Fletcher business enterprises could greatly benefit from the results of Brad Davis's work. And we all knew of the man's past. You knew of the man's past."

"I expressed my reservations, sir."

"You did. And you still maintained your loyalty to us. I haven't forgotten that. I went over to throw him out of the lake house. Things

were wild over there and on The Pride of the Hill. Nefarious characters, Nigel. People I did not want tarnishing my reputation.”

After a prolonged silence Nigel spoke clearly. “ What happened when you told him he had to leave?”

“ He was livid of course. I found his attitude condescending and his overall behavior, repugnant. I informed him a timetable would be set up for his research. I wanted results to be translated into profit. He laughed at me. I know I shouldn’t have grabbed him. But the man insulted me and more than that, he ruined my investment.”

“ Father used to be a boxing champion in his class at Harvard.”

“ Ham, that is neither here or there,” said Hamilton, swishing his hand through the air. “ He threatened me physically and, more importantly, refused to cooperate on my prescribed time table. I have told Ham I believe Davis was drunk. But that does not excuse his attacking me.”

“ Then he was responsible for your injury?” asked Nigel.

“ I immediately left, my mouth bloodied. And I know what you’re thinking. Was I angry enough or vindictive enough to have committed or ordered Davis’s murder? Of course not. But a plethora of questions will explode should the story become public. I feel we can keep Herbert Lane in our camp.”

“ We certainly contribute enough to his campaigns,” said Ham.

“ And he’s running for office right now. To reiterate: What concerns me more is my standing in the community and innuendo that may erupt if the general public is aware of my efforts on Davis’s work.”

“ What can I do, sir?” asked Nigel.

“ First, please monitor Matthias Jones’s involvement in the investigation.”

“ I do not believe Matthias wants to be involved. He was about to leave on a trip to Maine.”

“ That would be good.”

Ham turned to Nigel. “ My father and I like Matthias. We respect his abilities as a coach and as an investigator.”

“ That’s just it,” said Hamilton. “ You must speak with him. I’m sure he’ll uncover all of this if he starts snooping.”

“ I will speak to Matthias in the morning. Hopefully, he and George Strickland will be off to Maine.”

Hamilton looked at his son. Ham grit his teeth and tapped his fingers rapidly on his pleated trousers. “ And the student is now in custody.”

“ What are they saying about her guilt?” asked Hamilton.

“ Only that she was there, standing over his body. It does not look promising for her.”

Hamilton stood. “ I need to receive any inside information that may come out of the investigation or whatever you may hear.”

“ We may hire someone ourselves,” said Ham. “ This is not a good situation.”

Hamilton crossed his arms. “ I have, of course, consulted with L.G. on all potential legal ramifications. That is why containment is paramount.”

“ I understand,” said Nigel.

Hamilton retreated to the liquor table at the rear of the office. He mixed three tall drinks and spoke of his days back at Harvard as he escorted them onto the patio. As Nigel studied Hamilton’s thinning white hair and tanned skin, he was concerned whether Hamilton was telling him the whole story. Hamilton represented the accumulated wealth and power of countless generations. The family fortune originated back in Great Britain with the Hall family shipping empire of the seventeenth century. Hamilton’s temper was well known and he had perfected the art of retaliation against his enemies, but Nigel could not bring himself to believe Hamilton Fletcher fired three shots at Brad Davis nor would he resort to hiring a killer. As Hamilton’s upper crust accent cut the stillness of the warm night air, Nigel wondered whether Brad Davis’s murder could topple the Fletcher power and prestige.

The Fitton Chronicles

The Lake House Murder

5

Jerry locked the hotel room door and walked to his vintage red T-Bird. He checked the small rust spot under the rear fender and snuffed out his cigarette on the asphalt. The murder investigation kept him flipping through the cable stations during the night. He grabbed the stomach medicine bottle in the glove compartment and swigged the chalky liquid. Working again as reporter brought back his stomach problems, but breaking this case meant speaking with Amy Pollard directly. McGill would respect him if he personally solved the murder.

He wiped the medicine off his mouth with his compacted handkerchief as he backed around the parking lot and moved onto Hamilton's main street. The police station was diagonally behind the drug store block. He lifted his directional signal and jammed his brake pedal, nearly hitting a guy in a red sports jersey. His hands shaking, Jerry slid out his cigarette pack and stuck a new cigarette in his mouth, but did not light it. " Watch where you're going, Bub!"

The guy climbed into a green sports car and sped by him toward the beach. Jerry clamped his teeth and steered his car toward the side road. He brought the car up to the tiny brick station and took the space next to a Hamilton cruiser. Once he was outside he lit the cigarette, held

his notepad and headed for the screen door. A little bald cop behind the front desk smiled. “ Can I help you?”

“ Yeah, St. Clair, the Enterprise.”

“ Oh, yeah. Tom McGill’s old boss.”

“ How’d you know that? You boys got a file on me?”

“ Small town, word gets around. Ned Hobbs, what can I do for you?”

“ I want an exclusive with the kid in the slammer.”

Ned smiled. “ George should be in any minute. I can’t let you back there.”

“ You don’t like the press?” asked Jerry.

“ I didn’t say that.”

“ I have power, Ned. Power in the pen. I’m sure your chief isn’t going to like a bad report on the editorial page. All I’m asking is a byline.”

“ I’m sorry, Mr. St. Clair. I, I... can’t.”

“ Okay, Bub. It’s your rear end.” Jerry marched to the door, but turned abruptly as he held the knob. “ Remember, I know that gun is registered to her.”

Ned opened his eyes wide. “ How did you know that?”

“ I have my sources,” answered Jerry, smiling as he opened the door. He was surprised the cop fell for the old routine. Now he had

something substantive to print on his front page exclusive in the afternoon paper.

* * *

Jones slept in late. McGill had yet to place a call from Maine. He and Strickland would have headed north if Brad Davis was still alive. Instead of breakfast in the woods, he poured orange juice into a large clear glass on his kitchen counter. He headed out the sliders to his outside patio table and settled into the metal chair. McCay's inordinate attention to Amy Pollard was unusual. He crunched a piece of toast, sipped the juice and cringed at McCay's belligerent attitude. As he scanned yesterday afternoon's Enterprise an article concerning corruption on the local school committee, written by Jerry St. Clair, was printed boldly on the front page. Accusations were sharp and a long list of charges were leveled against the chairman of the committee.

The kitchen phone rang just as he scooped his spoon into the cereal. He sprang up and reached inside the sliders. " Jones."

" Matthias, things are not good," said Nigel quickly.

" Tell me about it. I should be in the wilds of Maine right now."

" Hamilton Fletcher has advised me he owns the lake house."

" What? That won't get him into trouble unless it gets out."

" L.G. is handling all aspects of this for him."

“ He *is* the Fletcher attorney. I don’t understand.. Why does Hamilton need an attorney now?” asked Jones. “ Nigel, something else going on here? What is it?”

“ Nothing is wrong. Who do you think killed Professor Davis?”

Jones inched his way onto the patio and squinted his eyes in the late morning sun. “ I don't know, but I do know Amy Pollard didn't do it.”

“ I see. I see.” Jones sensed constraint in Nigel’s voice. “ Maybe you should let this run it's course with the official investigation.”

“ You sound like you don't want me involved in this.”

“ I would prefer not.”

“ You or the Fletchers?” Jones pulled the cord around the slider frame. For the next few minutes he listened to a blitz of rationalization why he should not include the Fletchers into the investigation. Jones maintained he had no intention of dragging the Fletchers into any inquiry and really wished he were on vacation in Maine.

“ Matthias, please keep me advised.”

Jones was confused when he hung up. Nigel's partisan attitude had now heightened his interest in the murder. Half an hour later he headed down his front walk to his jeep. From the steering wheel he gazed back at his colonial. The white clapboards had gray mildew spots and patches of hardened paint also peeled on the green louvers. Along the side of the property a mass of overgrown shrubs, bushes, and weeds surrounded his

roses bushes. He opened the front gate, knowing as he got inside the jeep, he would have to clean up the mess sometime this summer.

Before he drove out to the lake house, he decided to check Strickland's progress. The common's tall stone clock chimed as he headed for the police station. For a moment his mind drifted back to Laura and how they had walked the common together. Rarely did he think of her murder, but on this hazy summer morning her death swept over him like a strong wind off the bay. He drove behind the store fronts to the small brick station.

He stepped from the jeep and entered the station through the screen door. Wendell's worn shoes were propped on a desk behind the counter as he slobbered on the phone. Jones stepped up to the counter as Wendell continued the syrupy conversation. "No, Baby. I'll be in charge once he's in Maine. We'll use the cruiser." Wendell's eyes opened wide when he saw Jones at the counter. He dropped his feet and sat rigid. "So, I will have to get back to you on that matter. Goodbye."

"Mornin', Wendell."

"Matthias, did you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"George is in Prince William at Herbert Lane's office. George tracked down the gun."

"Great. Now we can make some progress here," said Jones. "Well, who owns the gun?"

“ She does,” he said, pointing down the side corridor toward the jail cells.

“ No way.”

“ Oh, Yeah.”

Jones sat down and shook his head. “ That makes no sense.”

“ I told ya, George is meeting with Herbert Lane as we speak. I think they're gonna officially charge her.”

Jones balanced his chin on his folded hands. “ I just don't think she did it... How is she doing?”

“ All right. Her parents and sister were by last night. They live in Prince William and love the woman attorney. But George is livid about Jerry St. Clair.”

“ Why?” asked Jones.

“ He somehow knows about the gun being registered to Amy Pollard. George is afraid he's going to print it.”

“ McGill will have a fit with this guy.”

“ And Dr. McCay was here. You just missed her.”

“ She not a MD...”

“ Arnie says you two are hot and heavy.”

Jones stared at Wendell and shook his head. “ You know, if I wasn't all wrapped up in this I'd head down to Dewars Lumber right now and give him a piece of my mind.”

“ Then it ain't true?”

“ No, I asked her out and she said no. That’s not hot and heavy.”
As much as McCay upset him, he was more worried about the gun being registered to Amy Pollard. “ You have to get me back there, Wendell. I have to speak with her.”

“ Awe, come on, Matthias. George will take the cruiser away from me again if I get caught letting you back there.”

“ Listen, Wendell. You know those tickets I got you last year for football. Tell your girlfriend on the phone there you have tickets for the whole season.”

“ What about basketball?”

Jones spoke through his gritted teeth. “ Don’t push you’re luck. Just get me back there. George isn’t going to know.”

“ All right, all right.”

“ You will have no contact with my client,” said a short woman with permed gray hair and glasses. Her rounded body filled her faded jeans and her magenta sweatshirt advertised a campaign to save a rare bird along the shore. “ My people are ready to advise her now.”

“ Ms. Merkle-Brown,” said Wendell.

“ Mr. Jones, I would advise you that my client is fully represented.”

“ What about the gun?”

“ What about it?”

“ It's *her* gun,” said Jones loudly.

Merkle-Brown's face fell blank. “ Excuse me?”

“ They just discovered it was Amy’s gun. What gives?”

“ That, Mr. Jones is a very relevant question. Sergeant Harris.”

“ Mam’ ”

“ I would like to speak with my client again.” She appeared to fight both astonishment and anger.

“ Yes, Mam’. Let me get the key.”

Jones awkwardly leaned against the plaster walls. “ Why would she leave the gun there, Ms. Brown and at the same time apparently wear gloves to hide fingerprints?”

“ I have no comment... I just... I don’t know.”

Wendell, the keys jingling in his hand, moved back into the corridor. Jones faced Merkle-Brown again. “ Can I accompany you in the cell?”

“ No, absolutely not.”

Wendell raised his brows as he passed with Merkle-Brown around the corner, leaving Jones standing alone. Jones waddled to the side door and drifted outside. Amy Pollard could have panicked once she shot Davis. But where were the gloves? How could the Nickersons not hear shots and have only detected a scream? Why was the slider handle wiped clean? He climbed into his jeep, donned his sunglasses and started the engine.

As he shifted onto Shore Drive, he kept thinking about Mrs. Nickerson's logging the license plates. He needed descriptions of the car

owners and the wide range of characters associated with Brad Davis. He was fearful of the Fiore family as he sped toward Hamilton Bay and did not want to confront them about Davis' death. Maybe the Nickersons could give a full account of the past twenty-four hours, including the comings and going of the Fiore organization.

6

Jerry took the unsteady elevator from the second floor. He wanted a cigarette, but the Registry of Deeds and the entire town hall did not allow smoking within town buildings. With a minimal amount of effort he had found more significant information about the lake house in the thick bound record books. As he kicked open the outside door and ripped his cigarette pack from his pocket, he knew the town would explode once he branded Hamilton Fletcher as the owner of the lake house and potential murderer of Brad Davis. He grinned, lit the cigarette and gazed toward the Hamilton College's stadium bleachers. "I'll nail the old man with the scoop."

Smiling, he rounded the town hall's brick facade and trudged under the spreading maple branches, up the sidewalk to the Enterprise Building. In his thoughts he composed the rough outline of an article he would place full face on page one. McGill would understand this was something big, something requiring precise wording and specific charges. He moved up the stairs, opened the lobby door and put out his cigarette in the sand urn. Inside the main office a few of McGill's people worked at the word processors. Jerry headed straight for the typewriter.

"Jerry," said a young woman up front.

“ What is it, honey?”

Her lips wrinkled “ I am not your honey.”

“ Listen,” he said, rapping her arm. “ I'm gonna be busy preparing a page one exclusive.”

“ I was going to tell you Chief Strickland called. He was livid.”

Jerry took off his hat and sat at the typewriter. “ He'll get over it.”

“ He was not happy about your tactics with Officer Hobbs and getting the info about Pollard's gun.”

“ Cops always get upset when they're scooped.” He rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter. “ He's gonna even get more upset when he sees page one.”

“ He asked you not print the information.”

“ Tough... And I have more that's gonna make this town spin.”

“ I have to tell you, when Tom calls I will inform him what you're doing to his paper.”

“ Tom can still learn a thing or two.” Jerry lit a cigarette. “ I'll have this cranked out in half an hour. Tell the boys downstairs we're squeezing it in.”

“ This is a non smoking office.”

“ Right,” said Jerry, letting the cigarette hang from his mouth. He started the first paragraph.

“ You are impossible!”

“ The only way to be... *honey*.”

* * *

Jones raced quickly over the marina draw bridge. A few hundred yards ahead a large brown and white sign for Tolby Lake was stuck in the high grass bordering the marshes. He tapped his blinker, downshifted and brought the jeep along the elevated blue stone road cutting through the marshes. He figured he should travel to the lake and check the trails himself. Although his theory of the killer crossing the lake was not conclusive, he still believed bringing a boat across the lake provided the perfect cover.

A parking area, surrounded by a brown rail fence was nestled within the green marsh reeds. He turned onto the narrow, sandy road connecting the marshes and a scrub oak ridge. The monotonous road wound directly into the woods, but the smooth dirt deepened with mud dried potholes and scattered rocks. He had traveled ten minutes when his cell phone sounded. Sunlight flickered through the branches as he pulled the phone from the holder. “Matthias Jones.”

“Matthias, this is Nigel.”

“Nigel, the gun...”

“I don’t understand,” said Nigel.

“George identified it as belonging to Amy Pollard...”

“Then she did it.”

“No, I don’t think she did it.”

“ Matthias, I must again tell you things are going on behind the scenes with the Fletchers.”

“ That's fine, but...” Jones raised his voice as he moved up a long hill. “ I'm more concerned about Amy Pollard sitting in that jail cell.”

“ We all are.”

“ Really? How competent is the school lawyer, Merkle-Brown?”

“ She has done a top notch job for the students over the last three years.”

“ But she isn't a criminal attorney,” said Jones.

“ I could call L.G.”

“ This could get tricky. Even L.G. would tell you that.” Jones removed his sunglasses in the shade. “ I'm going to make some calls.”

“ What do you mean?”

“ I mean I'm calling Cocoa Stefani.”

“ Matthias, I have told you associating with a man of the ilk of Cocoa Stefani can get you in trouble.”

“ He knows the right people or the wrong people, and he knows how to get things done. We may be dealing with the Fiore organization.”

“ Dear Lord.”

Jones moved over the knoll and the blue outline of Tolby Lake appeared a few hundred yards away through the forest. “ I just don't think she did it.”

“ I implore you. Hamilton needs this kept low key. The report on the media outlets was minimal. We can't have Hamilton dragged into this.”

“ Why would Hamilton be dragged into this? Are you asking me to back off?”

“ I'm once more asking you to keep Hamilton out of this.”

Jones moved into the smoother pine tree forest. “ I get it. Their investment in the research stuff.”

“ I would ask you as a personal favor to let this sit.”

Small vinyl sided cottages dotted the dirt roads beyond the pines. To his left the yellow police tape between the trees flapped in the breeze near the orange stained lake house. A Hamilton cruiser was parked out front, but Jones did not see any officers. “ Nigel, I'd honor your request if I thought that girl was guilty. I have to look into this. And what's the big deal with Hamilton Fletcher?”

“ Things that really shouldn't come out. The Fletchers could be made to look very bad.”

“ What things?”

“ I'm not at liberty to divulge anything. Goodbye, Matthias.”

“ Wait, Nigel...” Jones edged the jeep along the dozen or more cottages, lining three dirt roads extending into the woods. He threw the phone back in the holder and stopped the jeep next to a silver box with **NICKERSON** painted in black on the metal.

Hamilton Fletcher's role within the scenario of Brad Davis's murder bothered Jones as he left the jeep. He rubbed his fingers along the mailbox, pushed open a chain link gate and moved up the cement walk. The front aluminum storm door was locked and he saw no one inside when he knocked. For a moment he feared the Nickersons might have gone home.

He retraced his steps and skirted the chain link fence into the backyard. A wooden staircase rose along the back of the green vinyl sided wall. He saw no one inside the rear door window. Questioning these people was essential in order to clear Amy Pollard of murder and focus on the people going into the lake house. He was about to head down the staircase, but saw long spent cigarette ashes on the pressure treated boards " Jerry St. Clair..."

Jones bounded down the stairs, turned several times and stared at the ashes. He had a bad feeling as he trotted back to his jeep, but cautioned himself against thinking Jerry was over here. As he headed toward the lake house, he wished McGill would check in from Maine and stop Jerry from doing any further damage.

John Tully stood next to a Rick Puntas behind the cruiser under the pines. Tully pointed toward the Nickerson's cottage as Jones approached. " Matthias, the Nickersons left during the night and she had a notebook."

" So, I heard."

“ With Albert Fiore’s guy’s plate number. See, they must have slipped out without their lights on. Wendell was on duty and never saw them leave.”

“ Why does that not surprise me? Did you guys see an older guy in a wrinkled suit and hat?” asked Jones.

“ You mean that newspaper guy?”

“ Yeah, Jerry St. Clair.”

“ If I do I’m liable to pop him one. What a piece of work.”

“ I don’t even want to think about him now...Where’d the Nickersons go, Tul?”

“ We called Concord PD. They’re probably headed home.” Tully leaned toward Jones and opened his blue eyes wide. “ Matthias, let the state police handle this if they do. You don’t want to be messing with Albert Fiore.”

Jones pressed his lips. “ Fiore could have ordered this. How would we ever know?”

“ What do you think of the girl? She do it?” asked Rick..

“ I don’t think so.” Jones peered around the lake house and contemplated the possibility of someone entering from the beach area. “ Besides, no prints. We’ll have to wait for what Clayton has in his report, but I like alternatives, Gentlemen. Off the beaten track theories. Down the side road.”

Tully ran his fingers through his gray hair and moved the toothpick between his teeth. He had not shaved. “What’s your side road theory?”

“You guys find anything out back?”

“Nah, a ton activity in the sand but George couldn’t make anything out of it,” said Rick.

The murderer could have arrived by boat, but could have also hiked around the lake. Jones gazed toward the lofty trees surrounding the lake. “There must be trails around the lake.”

“Maybe somebody drove in,” said the Tully. “I mean besides the girl.” He leaned against the cruiser. “It would have to be without headlights. Irene and Gus, the couple across the street, they only saw one set of headlights.”

“Ah, yes, the vanishing Nickersons,” said Jones. “That’s just it. Pollard would have seen somebody fleeing the murder scene and, boys, there’s only one way out of here... by that road.”

“You’ve got a point, Matthias. Maybe your theory isn’t too side road after all.”

“Listen, if Jerry St. Clair comes around here-.”

“Don’t worry about Gumshoe Gramps.”

Jones grinned. “Why do I have this feeling he’s got something to do with the Nickersons being missing. Can I look out back, Tul?”

Tully nodded and chucked the toothpick across the sand. “ Rick, we’ll be out back for a few minutes.”

“ Take your time.”

Jones and Tully paralleled the yellow tape under the pines. To the left, the knoll’s weathered ledge extended to the dirt road and formed a larger hill beyond. The beach shore followed the ledge to the water. A few hundred feet around the lake rim was a boat and cabins in a wooded thicket. The vines and scrubs brush outlined the lake for several hundred yards and merged with the taller pines and maples up the hill.

“ Nobody would hike around the lake at night,” said Jones.

“ Doesn’t look that way. Unless they came on foot down the road.”

“ I’m going to check the exact time, but it has to be fifteen minutes by car, Tul. On foot it could take three times that.” Jones leaned over the police tape. The sand ripples and indentations covering the beach made identification of footprints difficult, but he was more interested several long gouges extending in the sand toward the lake house. He immediately thought about the boat near the cabins. “ Using the boat or a boat would cut the arrival time. The killer could sneak right in and sneak right out.”

“ From where?”

Jones scanned the distant wooded shore. “ I need to know if there’s a trail across the other side of the lake.”

7

Jones pushed the timer button on his digital watch. His arrival at the marsh parking lot had taken fourteen minutes and sixteen seconds. The killer, if the murder was premeditated in his side road theory, would have checked that out long before planning the murder, and Jones instinctively now believed the shooting was well thought out. Details were covered too nicely and a methodical killer would not risk traveling down the dirt road to the lake house. The Nickersons had only seen one set of headlights through the deserted woods and Amy Pollard would have seen another vehicle on the narrow road. Again he thought about trails back toward the marina.

He stopped his jeep in the marsh parking lot and stepped into morning sunlight. Behind the log fence, at the edge of the blue stone, a trail indeed dissected the marsh reeds to his left. The killer would only head this way at night if this trail provided a more direct route to the lake house. Jones had trouble inserting Hamilton Fletcher in this scenario.

Between the reeds, he tried to place himself in the killer's head. Davis' murderer would know the distance to the lake as he gripped Amy Pollard's gun in his hand and ran along the wooded trail. But why would he have Pollard's gun? Maybe Amy Pollard was lying.

Jones glanced at his watch timer as he darted from the reeds into a patch of hemlocks and maples, rising above a fast moving stream. He tripped on an open space between boards of an unstable, rotted foot bridge over the rock strewn waters. Balancing across the sagging boards, some missing, proved difficult and probably impossible at night. He reached the pine needles on the far side and for the next eight minutes the trail hugged the gushing stream.

The rocky stream was connected by a weathered concrete spillway to the brilliant blue lake beyond the trees. Jones paused in the sunlight and listened to the water crash onto granite boulders below the cement ramp. His attention was diverted by a darting red form between the white birches about a hundred yards away. Maggie McCay, on her knees, pawed through the bushes at the top of the spillway. Jones's heart pounded under his jersey as he carefully hid behind a large maple trunk. Confused, he hesitated confronting her. For five minutes she searched the bushes, paced the grass, and finally crossed over the spillway. Not only was Jones curious about her activities up here, but immediately suspected her in the murder. Yet, she was unfettered at Nigel's party. She raised her hands to her forehead and gazed over the bright lake.

Jones tiptoed down the tapering trail through the bushes. McCay continued to survey the lake. Thicker bushes narrowed the trail as he neared the spillway. She put her hands on her hips, but soon clenched her fists as she peered across the water. The wooded shore twisted back

to the boat camp and lake house half a mile across the glazed surface. Jones stepped onto the grass along the concrete. “ You look lost, Ms. McCay.”

She spun around, her mouth open, and her hands shook. “ What is your problem?”

“ I couldn't resist.”

“ You're real funny. And why are you spreading rumors around town about us?”

“ You're dreaming.”

“ Really, one of my students said we were about to move in together. You knock it off or I'll... I' take legal action.”

“ Arnie Dewars...”

“ What?”

“ Nothing,” answered Jones.

McCay's eyes darted between the lake and Jones. “ And I suppose you're wondering why I'm out here.”

“ Thought crossed my mind. But I didn't see your car in the lot. Out for a little morning stroll, are you?”

“ I'm trying to formulate a murder theory.”

“ Great minds think alike,” said Jones.

“ You're half right.” She crossed the plank over the fast moving lake water, and she again scanned the lake. “ I thought the killer would be able to hike around the lake, but the shore is one thorny thicket.”

“ You been out here before?”

“ What's that supposed to mean? Are you linking me to this?” Her green eyes repeatedly blinked as she moved closer her thin lips tightened. “ I don't need some football coach linking me to Brad's murder.”

“ Brad? Another woman is on a first name basis.”

“ Oh, be quiet.” She strutted by Jones, still looking him in the eye, and stepped through the bushes on the adjacent hill, blocking the other shore.

“ Why don't you tell this football coach why you're so close to that girl?”

“ I'm not listening,” she said, trudging up the hill.

Jones crunched the bush branches, maintaining a discreet distance from her as she searched for something. Once on the top of the hill, she forded a marshy swamp to the shore thicket. He cupped his hands.

“ You need some help?”

She never turned, her clean, white sneakers pushing into the muck as she crossed. “ I don't need you help, Mr. Jones. I know my own limitations. I am fully capable of making my way through.”

“ Suit yourself.”

Jones studied the sloping land to his right. Although intertwined with bushes, it was passable and avoided the swamp. He rushed forward, scraping his legs as he hurtled the bushes, and sunk down into the glen. Determined to beat McCay, he scrambled up the other side just as

she emerged from the swamp. Her legs were mud coated and her white shorts splattered with dirt.

“ You!” she said, stomping her sneakers on the dry ground.

“ Me...” Jones leaned against a maple. “ Where ya been?”

“ Stuck in that damn swamp.”

“ Again, let me ask you: Ever been out here before?” asked Jones.

She squinted and brushed the dirt off her long legs. “ I don’t have to answer your questions.”

“ Okay, you must know about the gun.”

“ What?”

“ The gun is Amy’s gun.”

“ Listen, she didn’t kill Brad Davis.” Her eyes bounced between Jones and the winding coves leading down to the lake house beach across the lake.

“ You don’t seem surprised she owned a gun. Like you already knew it.”

“ You never give up, do you?” She faced him this time and repeatedly pushed her long dark hair out of her face.. “ Keep badgering until the other guy cracks... Fine. I’m going back to speak with Brad’s neighbors.”

“ Forget it.”

“ You don’t tell me what to do.” She started back toward the swamp.

“ The Nickersons are gone.”

“ Where are they?” she asked from the mud.

“ Are you going to traipse through that mud again?”

“ What about the Nickersons?” she asked, moving onto dry land.

“ Where are they?”

Jones shook his head. “ I don’t know. The house is locked up. Cops are checking their house in Concord.”

“ They could be dead.”

“ That’s a leap. You want them dead?”

“ Oh, sure and I wanted Brad Davis dead.” She decided to take Jones’s route through the bush and up the hill. “ I’m just a born killer.”

“ Wait, I’m sorry.”

She stopped and waited until he caught up. “ McCay, why is Amy in the middle of this?”

“ I’m sure you know Brad Davis’s reputation .”

Jones peered into her eyes. “ Someone could have rowed a boat from the spillway.”

“ How do you drag a boat through the woods? You’ve taken the trail. Getting across that unsafe foot bridge with a boat is ludicrous.”

“ Where is your car?” asked Jones.

“ Back on Route 7. There’s a trail along the blue stone road.” She pushed her hair back. “ So, your theory doesn’t make sense.”

“ What if that boat was taken from the camp near the lake house and left here by the spillway. But why isn't it still here? ” She stared at him and a coolness swept over him as he again envisioned her as the killer.

“ Something wrong?” she asked.

“ No... Listen, Regardless of how the killer got in the lake house, and I'm as you say just a coach and not a ballistics expert, I think some kind of silencer was used. Irene Nickerson would have heard gunshots.”

“ Anyone else around?” she asked, biting her lower lip.

“ Nope. The rest of the cottages aren't open yet. Why are you so concerned?”

“ That... is none of your business.” She started forward again and the bush branches scraped her legs.

“ Why do I get the feeling your hiding something?”

“ I have nothing to say.” She slipped, but sprang to her feet and started up the hill.

Jones watched her slim legs vault the bushes as her hair swayed over her blue jersey. When they reached the spillway, he moved along side her. “ Where are you going now?”

She raised her brows. “ I don't know.”

“ Why don't you come with me back to the camp. We'll check out the boat.”

“ I really don’t think I want to spend the afternoon with you in a boat, Mr. Jones.”

“ If we clock the time in the boat, we’ll know exactly how long it would take a potential killer to hike to the lake and row to the lake house.”

“ Who cares at this point and why are you so sure about that theory?”

“ Because Irene only saw Amy Pollard’s lights,” said Jones.

“ So, somebody comes in without their lights on.”

“ Wrong, Amy would have seen a car. It takes fifteen minutes both ways. Too much time. *She would have seen the car.* The only other alternative is crossing the lake.”

McCay turned toward the spillway trail. “ Well, you check it out.”

“ Unless you’re in the thick of this, Ms. McCay.”

“ Oh, you are so clever. Go take your stupid boat trip. For all the good it will do.”

8

Jones parked diagonally along Sal's Grill's cinder block walls. He walked around the cedar picnic benches and watched the waves break off shore. Maggie knew more than she was saying. On some level he liked her, but she shrouded herself with a pugnacious attitude. He sensed something hiding behind the animated green eyes and gruff exterior.

Sal's loud voice boomed out from behind the grill as Jones headed inside. Left over students and people now arriving on vacation filled the picnic tables. Green soda pop bottles, red and white boxes of French fires, and the smell of hamburgers sizzling on the grill signaled summer had arrived. Jones crossed the black and white vinyl floor tiles and approached the counter. Sal, white apron tied over his jersey, plunged a spatula under the grill burgers.

Jones was about to walk to Sal when Arnie Dewars called out from the table behind him. "Hey, Matth-*i*-as."

Jones winced and turned. Arnie and Muddy Jacobs both waved and Jones reluctantly walked over to the table. "All right, Arnie. What are you doing spreading rumors about me and Maggie McCay?"

"Ain't ya supposed ta be in Maine?" asked Arnie sarcastically.

“ All I did was ask the woman out.”

Arnie stood and gripped one of the soda pop bottles. “ Sounds spicy.”

“ Listen, Arnie. Anybody ever tell you your big mouth will get you in trouble?”

“ Yeah... Yeah... Yeah.” Arnie rolled his eyes and then focused on Jones. “ So, you nailed Hamilton Fletcher.”

“ What?”

Muddy put on his baseball cap. “ Yeah, it’s all over town you’re gonna be fired for opening your mouth to the Enterprise.”

“ What?” he asked, glancing at Sal behind the grill.

“ St. Clair got you to rat on the old man, eh?” asked Arnie, pushing his finger into Jones’s arm.

“ Arnie, as usual you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Muddy cupped his hands. “ We’ve got Deep Throat here, Arnie.”

“ I wouldn’t admit it either if I nailed Hamilton Fletcher,” said Arnie.

“ Would you guys clue me in?”

Arnie elbowed Jones’ ribs. “ Playin’ dumb, eh?”

“ Old man Fletcher could have killed the professor,” said Muddy.

“ No way.” Jones turned toward the green newspaper vending machines near the door. “ What did he write?”

“ As if he didn’t know,” said Arnie with a honking laugh.

Jones dropped two quarters into the slot, lifted the lid and ripped the paper from the machine. With both hands he took the paper and read Jerry's article.

Questions Raised by Presence of Family Patriarch

HAMILTON FLETCHER BLOODIED AT MURDER SCENE

By Jerry St. Clair

Hamilton... In lieu of Professor Bradford Davis's gunshot murder at a Tolby Lake house last evening, investigators are asking questions about an afternoon altercation between Hamilton Fletcher, owner of the lake house, and the murder victim. Sources have told the Enterprise Mr. Fletcher suffered numerous mouth and cheek wounds after a violent argument between the two men. Mr.

Fletcher would not respond to phone calls and an inquiry at his Fletcher Hill estate.

In other developments, Hamilton Police Chief, George Strickland would not comment on reports the murder weapon is registered to Hamilton College student, Amy Pollard. Pollard was found next to the gun at the murder scene. District Attorney, Herbert Lane will arraign Pollard for Davis's murder this afternoon in Prince William.

Witnesses have observed Massachusetts vehicles parked at the Tolby Lake house. Attempts to trace the identities of the automobiles is on going. Davis was hired three years ago to engage in genetic research for Hamilton College.

Jones backed to the door. " I never talk to him. This is unbelievable!"

" Guy knows how to dig," said Muddy.

" Dig his own grave."

" Where ya gonna look for new job?" asked Arnie in loud, annoying voice.

“ Arnie, shut up.”

“ You’re the one who opened your mouth.”

Jones pulled out his cell phone and stepped back into the hot sun. He dialed the police station and paced the concrete as the line rang and clicked. Ned Hobbs answered the phone. “ Hamilton.”

“ Neddie, this is Matthias. Is George there?”

“ He’s down at the paper trying to find Jerry St. Clair. The Fletchers are ready to run him out of town.”

“ I don’t blame them. What a dumb headline.”

“ Yeah, why did you finger Hamilton Fletcher?”

“ Didn’t.”

“ Arnie says-”

“ Arnie doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Jerry must have talked to the Nickersons and now they’re gone. This guy is a loose canon.”

“ Yeah, but he's right.”

“ What?” Jones looked at the article again. “ What about Amy Pollard?”

“ George is bringing her to Prince William for arraignment in forty-five minutes. If you want to talk with her.”

“ What about her lawyer?” asked Jones.

“ Oh, she won't be here until they leave.”

“ Really?” He looked back Arnie and Muddy back at the table.

“ I'm on my way.”

He tucked the phone in his pocket and backtracked through the fast food restaurant. Jerry had stirred up trouble and Arnie further fanned the fire. Hamilton Fletcher's role in this murder case was murky and needed explanation. Not getting results for his investment in Davis directly impacted his company's bottom line. He ran to the jeep, determined to use the time with Amy Pollard to gather more information. She had lied about the gun and maybe more. He threw the newspaper with Jerry's incriminating story on the seat and quickly pulled onto Shore Drive. Jerry had annoyed him when they first met back in the Enterprise office, but Jones secretly admired his persistence and his ability to extract the truth.

* * *

As much as he wanted to confront Jerry St. Clair about the whereabouts of the Nickersons, Jones needed vital information from Amy Pollard. He slowed the jeep as he drove into downtown Hamilton, signaling before the Main Street buildings, and cut the engine as he rolled toward the station. Neither Strickland's cruiser nor Merkle-Brown's BMW were at the station. He exited the jeep and flew in the side door. “ Neddie!”

Little bald Ned rounded the front counter and headed down the darkened side hallway. “ That was quick, Matthias.”

“ I appreciate this. I know this isn't exactly procedure.”

“ Matthias, this is Hamilton not Boston.”

Jones smiled as Ned led him to Amy's cell. She sat in the corner, reading a romance novel. When she saw Jones, she set down the book.

“ Coach, I' m being arraigned for murdering Brad.”

“ I know. That's why I'm here. We don't have much time.”

Ned opened the cell door. “ I'll keep a lookout up front.”

“ Thanks, Neddie.”

Jones took a deep breath, sat down and looked into her blue eyes.

“ This gun thing is a problem. You lied, Amy.”

“ What could I do? Somebody stole the gun, I knew it was missing a day before Brad's murder.”

“ Why would you need a gun?” asked Jones.

“ Brad said I needed it. He made the arrangements, but I signed the paperwork..”

“ Why?”

“ Because of some of the people he knew.”

“ Great.” Jones stood and paced the cell. “ I keep hearing about people coming and going over there. In fact, there was something in today's paper.”

“ Brad knew a lot of people. Scary people. People from Boston.”

“ Albert Fiore?”

Her face tightened. “ I can’t say.”

“ I’m going to need names. What about Maggie McCay? You’re close to her.”

Amy nodded. “ Maggie is my friend.”

“ She have access to your apartment? Where do you live?”

“ Parkview off of Shore Road. And, well she has a key.”

Jones turned from the window. “ McCay had access to your apartment? Did she know you had a gun?”

“ Yes.”

Jones stared at Amy’s pale drawn face. “ Was the apartment vandalized?”

“ No. And the gun was in my dresser drawer the day before Brad was murdered.”

“ Interesting... Somehow, the gun got from your dresser to the lake house rug.”

“ That’s what I keep telling Ms. Merkle-Brown. And I know you’re thinking Maggie took that gun.”

“ That is exactly what I’m thinking. Parkview is owned by Abrams Realty. They’d be the only other people with the key. And I don’t see Marcia Abrams stealing your key. Although the more I hear about Davis’s reputation, nothing would surprise me.”

“ Maggie did not kill Brad.”

“ Then who did? Amy, Herbert Lane is going to arraign you in less than an hour. You had a relationship with Davis, your gun was on the floor-”

“ I loved Brad. I know he was involved with woman.” She seemed disgusted, yet her eyes possessed an odd longing. “ He brought me around to those high flyers in Boston. We were on boats and went to clubs.”

“ I'm going to need names and places.” Jones raised his index finger. “ That's where this is going.”

She nodded. “ We usually sailed right out of Hansen's Marina. It was always a wild party. Women, drugs and liquor.. And in Boston. I have names.”

“ Good. Have you informed Merkle-Brown of these names?”

“ No, but Ellen is so sympathetic.”

“ Sympathy isn't going to keep you out of prison.” Jones sat next to her again. “ Tell me about Boston.”

“ Lounges, strip joints all owned by Albert Fiore.”

“ I knew it.”

“ Brad was involved with Fiore and his people. I'm scared of his people.”

“ You think they're involved in Davis' murder, don't you?”

“ Yes...”

“ How do I find these guys?”

She shook her head. “ They all talked about a place called The Glass Slipper in Boston. I never went to Fiore’s office. It’s in Boston, too. Coach, these people are dangerous. That was a part of all this. I could feel the power. Brad was a part of it that power. Do you understand?”

“ I understand. I’ll call some people about Fiore. See what I can do. What was McCay’s relationship to Davis?”

“ She knew something. She and Brad were always talking about something. Like they already knew each other.”

“ I need to find Fiore.”

“ Don’t put yourself at risk, Coach.”

“ Did you kill Brad Davis?”

“ No.”

“ Then I’ll find answers...”

9

Strickland's cruiser, parked at an odd angle, blocked the entrance to the Enterprise building. On his cell phone, Jones waited on hold for Cocoa Stefani. Because of Cocoa nefarious activities in Prince William, Jones believed he might know Albert Fiore. The line clicked and music cranked within background conversation. "Jonesy, haven't heard from you for awhile."

"I need a favor."

"People always need favors."

"Albert Fiore."

For a few seconds Jones only heard the music. "What about him?"

"I need a meeting with him."

Cocoa laughed. "Come on. Do you know who this guy is?"

"Owns strip joints, lounges... The Glass Slipper."

"Don't be naive, Jonesy. Why do you want to meet with Fiore?"

"I think he or his people may be involved in a murder."

"It happens. Stay away. You don't want Fiore to even know you suspect him or his people. Sometimes, Jonesy, you gotta let things drop. This guy has power. Real power."

"Then you know him?"

The phone bounced and Cocoa paused. “ Listen, I’m on Fiore’s short list.”

“ Why?”

“ Never mind, why. I’m tellin’ you for your own good to stay the hell away from Albert Fiore and any of his people. They’d blow you away in a second if you threaten them. Let the cops worry about it.”

“ Maybe.”

“ Never mind maybe. I like you, Jonesy. Wise up, will ya?”

Jones stared at the Enterprise building. His fear of Fiore intensified and knew Cocoa was right. “ I hear what you’re saying.”

“ Yeah, you hear, but I know you. Before you start down to Boston or the Slipper you call me.”

“ Thanks.”

“ And I’m tellin’ you: Watch your step.”

“ Okay.” Jones tucked his cell phone in his back pocket as he rushed up the front steps. He opened the glass door and immediately heard Strickland yelling in McGill’s office. “ Well, I really don’t care about you and your damned sources, St. Clair! Where are the Nickersons?”

“ I’ve taken police harassment for forty years.”

“ I’m not harassing you, although I should after what you printed!”

“ Cool your jets, Bub!”

“ I’m trying to find out answers about Davis’ murder!”

Jones edged closer to the McGill's office. Many members of McGill's staff were listening from the larger offices to the right. Strickland shook his finger as he spoke, but Jones did not see Jerry. "Irene Nickerson has a notebook with license plate numbers and what else?"

Jerry answered from somewhere in the office. "No comment."

"You're really getting on my nerves, St. Clair. You wait until McGill checks in, I'll have your ass back to retirement home."

"I have a luxury home in Florida."

Strickland rolled his eyes and saw Jones. "Matthias." Jones crossed the lobby and entered the office. "Any word from Tom?"

"No, he's probably still expecting us and we're stuck with Damon Runyon here."

Jerry's gray cigarette smoke billowed from a metal ashtray on the desk. Jones moved closer. "So, where did you take them, Jerry?"

"I have nothing to say."

"There's a girl in George's jail cell about to be arraigned for a murder she didn't commit. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"No comment."

Jones gnashed his teeth and gripped the edge of the desk. "You screwball. There are people involved here who have no conscience."

"I am aware of this."

"Then you have the notebook?" shouted Strickland.

"No comment."

Strickland put his hands on the desk next to Jones and leaned toward Jerry's face. "As soon as I talk to McGill I'll run you out of town!"

Jerry pinched the cigarette between his fingers and inhaled deeply. "You don't bother me, Strickland. I've seen hacks like you before."

"You may not have to deal with this hack, but I'm sure that article in today's paper has the Fletchers enraged. See how fun it is to have Hamilton Fletcher as an enemy."

"Oh, yeah?" Jerry exhaled and ground the butt into the ashtray, chuckling as he spoke. "I've dealt with hometown heroes before."

Jones, his hands still on the desk top, looked at Strickland. Strickland pointed at Jerry from closer range. "I'll give you five hours, St. Clair. Either produce the Nickersons or the notebook or I'm going to lock you up."

Jerry's lighter flared and he lit another cigarette. He inhaled and exhaled quickly. "I can take the heat."

"We'll see."

Jones followed Strickland from the office. "So much for our camping trip."

"Kiss it goodbye." Strickland motioned him outside the building. When the front door closed the police chief spoke through gritted teeth. "I'm sick of his attitude, the cigarette smoke and wrinkled suit... the little hat."

“ Tom will have him back off.”

“ If he ever calls...”

“ And I have news. The Nickersons never arrived in Concord. They are missing.”

“ Great.” Jones crossed his arms in the sunlight. “ Well, I have news, also. Amy Pollard confirmed involvement of Davis and Albert Fiore.”

Strickland’s dark eyes opened wide. “ She never told us that.”

“ Herbert Lane needs to know this.”

“ Herbert won’t move against Fiore. Probably has Fiore donations in his campaign war chest.”

" What about Hamilton Fletcher? He's in this up to his billfold in this."

" And Herbert won't touch him either, believe me."

They walked down the steps to the sidewalk. “ So, he'll arraign Amy Pollard. She really needs a new lawyer.”

“ I told her that,” said Jones as they reached the cruiser. “ I can’t believe she told you about Fiore.”

“ She’s scared.”

“ I know. I’m calling Mario Ianelli at the state police about Fiore.”

“ Cocoa thinks these people are dangerous.”

“ I take that statement seriously,” said Strickland.

Jones stopped next to his jeep. “ I’m beginning to take this whole thing very seriously.”

10

As he left the station Strickland was not surprised Hamilton Fletcher called him on the cell phone to request an immediate meeting at Fletcher Hill. Strickland then placed a call to Mario Ianelli. As he passed the town golf course he listened on the phone to Ianelli's warnings about Albert Fiore. "George, I'm not saying don't investigate the Fiore connection. You should know Fiore can beat any rap. You ever heard of Walter Hutton?"

"He's nationally known."

"And he has a team of lawyers to protect Fiore. When you hear about gangland killings, drug running, prostitution, it's all true."

"Where is he in Boston?"

"He owns The High Tower Building,. Let me do some leg work. If Fiore's men were at that lake house on the afternoon of the murder, then we need to talk to them. And the stripper Irene Nickerson mentioned."

"Did they ever get back home?" asked Strickland.

"No, and that's bad."

"I've got a reporter up here whom I think knows where they are, but he won't say."

“ Oh, really? That's ridiculous. This murder is looking more and more suspicious.”

Strickland signaled left and veered up the road winding through the woods up Fletcher Hill. “ It's too blatant, the Pollard girl shooting her lover with her gun, Mario.”

“ If you hadn't mentioned Fiore, I would say let Herbert prosecute her, but there are too many loose ends. Call me after you talk to Hamilton Fletcher. His actions bear scrutiny.”

“ They sure do. I'll talk to you, Mario.”

Strickland was actually glad Jerry St. Clair broke the story. Ahead, the brick wings of the Fletcher estate appeared through the pines. Strickland slowed the cruiser at the wide turn and steered toward the three car, attached garage. The outside grounds crew worked in the side flower beds and a sit down mower's engine hummed across the wide grass expanse. Strickland headed to the side door near the garage, removed his hat and rang the bell.

A young lady working with the kitchen staff moved to the door. A few seconds later Ham Fletcher, dressed in light shorts and a yellow jersey, hurried into the kitchen. “ George, I appreciate your coming over. My father is down at the pool house. I can brief you in the study.”

“ Sure.”

Ham led him down the foyer hallway. Once they were in the foyer Ham spoke as he walked. “ My father is considering legal action against

St. Clair and the paper. Father's reputation has been tarnished. One thing about father... You don't want him as an enemy."

" Was he at the lake house?"

" I'm not here to discuss legal matters," said Ham as they entered the study.

Strickland stepped forward. " If you excuse me, Ham. Why are you here?"

Ham stopped at his father's desk. " I here to tell you my father has done nothing wrong and should not be brought into this investigation."

" Ham, he's already involved. What's all this talk about genetic research? "

He leaned on the desk. " My father wants his role minimized."

" It's all over the papers now. How am I supposed to do that?"

At the patio doors Hamilton Fletcher, green tie loose around the neck, tripped at the threshold and spilled his drink on the study rug.

" I'll tell you how you're supposed to do that, Strickland..."

" Father, I thought you were resting at the pool house."

" Stash the old man away. I won't hear of it, Ham. Sure, I've had a few drinks, and I don't care anymore!"

" Maybe we get L.G. up here."

" I don't need a lawyer. What I need is another drink." He lifted a half filled amber bottle upward and replenished his glass. " Look at Strickland. Look at him thinking if I was really over the lake house in the

afternoon. And he's carried a bit further. Was the old man over there at night? Did I kill the little bastard or perhaps I ordered it. Am I right?"

"Those questions are all valid."

Hamilton smacked his lips and swished the liquor in his glass.

"Yes, I suppose they are. But they are meaningless, Chief. Your investigation of me is going nowhere. I will do whatever I have to do in order to stay clear of this. I would advise you to keep that in mind as you go forward."

"Who do you think killed Davis?"

Hamilton gazed at his son and then raised the drink to his lips.

"You're the cop. Find the answers."

"I intend to try." Strickland stepped closer to Hamilton. "But I need some help. Do you personally know Albert Fiore?"

"Don't know him."

"Fiore had people over your lake house. Did you know that?"

Hamilton set down the drink. His eyes assumed a quizzical appearance. "I don't have to comment."

"What were you going to get out of this genetic research?"

"Money... It was an investment. Now just put a lid on this, will you?"

"I can't stop Herbert Lane from asking you these same questions," said Strickland.

“ I’ll take care of Herbert Lane. He’s going to need funding in his campaign. How much will it take to keep me out of your investigation?”

Strickland shook his head and smiled. “ Hamilton, I don't want your money. I would say I’m not the one you should worry about. I’d put the lid on Jerry St. Clair.”

“ He makes a good point, Ham... As soon as Tom McGill gets back in town, get him on the horn. In the meantime try again to find St. Clair. Every man has his price.”

Strickland faced both men and tried to compose his thoughts before he spoke. “ If you’re worried about being at the lake house on the day of the murder, or the fact you own the lake house... It will blow over. Unless there’s something more.”

Hamilton exhaled. “ I have nothing more to say. You know my position. Let’s bring this forward before somebody gets hurt.”

“ I know I’m beginning to think there’s a hell of a lot more to this than a student shooting a professor with her gun.”

" You've got that right." Hamilton clutched his drink and retreated to the outside doors. “ I’m sleeping it off in the pool house.” His dark sport coat was silhouetted in the sunlight. Ham motioned Strickland back toward the hallway. Neither man said anything down the hall and across the foyer. Strickland turned at the foyer door. “ Ham, I’m not going to mention your father’s money offer. I know he’s upset. All I’m

saying is if you know more about this murder, it might be smart to tell me.”

Ham paused as if he were going to say something. His brow tightened. “ From this point forward.... all questions will have to be handled by L.G.”

“ Come on.” Strickland looked into his dark eyes. “ You really don’t want it that way, do you, Ham?”

“ What I want is irrelevant, George. We should have handle things very differently.”

Strickland opened the door himself and stepped on the portico without looking at Ham. The thought of the Fletchers trying to bribe him was almost laughable and not unexpected. He returned to the cruiser and started the engine, but before backing out he panned the Fletcher estate. The work crews worked feverishly around the grounds. He wondered what action Hamilton was ordering right from the pool house. Hamilton would try the most heavy-handed tactics, but what concerned him most was the extent of Fletcher involvement in Brad Davis’s death.

11

Nigel requested to meet Jones later in the afternoon. Even with Amy Pollard officially charged with Brad Davis's murder, Hamilton Fletcher focused on Jerry St. Clair. Since Jones was traveling back to Tolby Lake to check out the boat along the shore, he asked Nigel have lunch at Sal's Grill. Jones carried a hamburger, fries, and a Coke back to the outside table. Nigel spread a fish platter on the checkered table cloth. "I don't control Jerry St. Clair and neither does George. I don't know what Hamilton Fletcher expects."

"He expects to get this menace to journalism out of town."

"You shouldn't talk about Tom McGill like that."

Nigel was not smiling. "I would think Tom or Susan could remove this man with a single phone call."

"Susan is in the Caribbean. She and Michelle Bentley headed south when we planned our trip. Tom should have called when we didn't arrive at the cabin."

"The inferences against Hamilton were unforgivable."

"I'm sure Hamilton will have Herbert Lane nail Pollard and save his fanny," said Jones, munching into the hamburger.

"Matthias, please..."

"Use the Fletcher power to push through the case against her."

Nigel gently banged his fist on the table. “ They have her gun. St. Clair never should have reported about Hamilton owning the house nor the trouble with Davis. Both those facts are irrelevant to the murder case.”

“ Are they? There’s a whole range of people who visited that lake house.”

“ Gangsters and I don’t frankly see how Hamilton could be connected to them,” said Nigel.

“ Something happened between Davis and Fletcher in the afternoon and that looks bad. I’ll grant you Jerry St. Clair should have had more discretion about the front page story.”

“ I assure you I did not speak with Hamilton about the attack.”

“ Somebody needs to,” said Jones. “ And I think there are other things to be considered. Other possibilities like traveling across the lake by boat.”

Nigel ate slowly, finally looking up at Jones. “ I don't mean to insult you, Matthias but such a plan would be cumbersome to say the least... I should have gotten Davis off campus while I had the chance.”

“ Maybe...”

“ And Pollard unfortunately looks guilty. Any plan about using a boat doesn’t make sense.”

“ Depends on the time factor. The Nickersons, if we ever find them.”

“ They never arrived home?”

“ No, But they had verified only one car drove to the lake house that night. I think Jerry St. Clair knows where they are.”

“ As long as Hamilton is left out of this.”

“ I'm sick of listening to Hamilton Fletcher's edicts. He's going to have to tell George what happened.”

“ Hamilton Fletcher answers to no one.”

Jones gazed over the bay and chuckled. " I think the key to this lies with the other people who frequented the lake house, how they planned this murder and why.”

* * *

Jones arrived at the lake house as shadows sliced the forest. He chuckled when he saw Maggie McCay's black Expedition parked near the three cabins down the street, but Tully's police cruiser was gone. Jerry St. Clair's attitude bothered him as he drove slowly past the abandoned Nickerson cottage. Talking to the Nickersons could have expanded his own knowledge of the Fiore connection to Davis. He stopped the jeep, but did not see Maggie McCay in the pine grove.

He opened the jeep door and headed for her Expedition. A flashy green fifteen speed bike was balanced on a rack strapped over the rear window. Fitness magazines and a tennis racket were strewn over the

rear seat and a sticker to the Women's Fitness Club and Triple A were neatly sealed over the driver's side window. Jones peered between the pines down to the blue lake and saw her dragging the boat over the sands toward the water. He broke into a run to the beach.

"Maggie!"

She dropped the boat and stood upright. "Do you always make a habit, Mr. Jones, sneaking up on people?"

"What are you doing with the boat, Ms. McCay?" Jones slowed as he reached the sands.

"Doing your test of course."

"Ah, the lady listened to me."

"Don't ingratiate yourself."

"What about the oars?" he asked.

"Don't be any more insulting than you already are."

Jones leaned on the boat. "Suppose you're destroying evidence?"

"Oh... so it's back to making me the killer again?" She rounded the boat and strutted up in her cut off jeans and olive top. "Again: I had nothing to do with Brad's murder."

"You keep calling him Brad."

"And you keep being a pain in the ass."

He watched her slip into the sand and nudge the boat again.

"And I think you're in the middle of this!"

Jones jogged down the beach and retrieved the urethane-coated oars as she turned over the boat and slid the bow into the water. “ You don’t have a watch.”

“ An estimate doesn’t require a watch,” she answered quickly.

“ And an answer for everything.”

With a subtle smirk she took the oars and climbed into the boat. After she fumbled with the oars and finally secured them in the metal side brackets, she looked up at Jones. “ Well, are you coming?”

“ Sure.” Jones grinned, pushed the boat forward and leaped inside as it floated onto the lake. He positioned himself on the bench and clicked on his watch timer as McCay rowed rhythmically away from shore. Her well toned muscles, steady motions and images of the fitness magazines across her front seat showed her much more physically adept than he had first thought. She was not even winded as the boat steadily cut through the twilight waters, farther away from the lake house. The lake had a fresh water odor and peepers chirped near the swamp. Mid-way across the lake his digital watch flipped past the six-minute mark. Sweat built up on McCay’s olive tank top as her muscles tensed during each stroke. “ Six minutes.”

“ You *are* timing this.”

“ And why were you snooping around the boat?” McCay tightened her dark brows, but before she could answer something puckered and pierced the water behind the boat. “ Down!”

With the distant rifle crack several more bullets hit the water, McCay stopped rowing and looked unhinged. Jones leaped forward and pushed her down in the boat. He shielded her body as more shots echoed around the lake and surrounding ridges.

“ They’re after me!” she yelled.

He could feel her heart beating under his chest and she wore a fresh scent, perhaps from a shower or perfume. “ We’re sitting ducks out here.”

A bullet pinged the boat and water leaked inside. “ I knew it.”

“ Who’s after you?”

“ Nobody.”

During the interlude in the shooting Jones remained over her body and closed his eyes as the peepers screeched louder beyond the spillway ahead. He plugged the bullet hole with a piece of plastic. “ Amy Pollard was framed with her own gun. You want to tell me about that?”

He looked into her green eyes as she slowly turned over in the dim light. “ Would you kindly get off of me?”

“ Stay down,” he said, rolling to his right.

“ What direction did the shots come from?” she asked, still lying down.

Jones furrowed his brow and looked up, but was hesitant to lift his head over the edge. “ Who the hell knows? We’re drifting toward the spillway.”

Her face was pale and fearful. “ That was not just an attack to scare us, Jones.”

“ Yup, they could have hit us. They still could. Who fired the shots, Maggie?” Jones grit his teeth, but she did not reply. “ My guess is Albert Fiore. Did you know Fiore?”

“ I didn’t.”

“ And so we wait, Ms. McCay.” He pushed his hands against the bottom and turned over. She rolled slightly and he clasped his hands behind his head. The first few stars brightened in the diminishing light across the wide sky. Her perfumed scent faintly swept the cooling evening breezes. He felt her warmer skin next to his legs as the boat drifted and the sky darkened. “ They may think we're dead.”

She spoke in a softer voice. “ Tell me about this guy, St. Clair. Does he know where Irene and Gus Nickerson have gone?”

“ I'm sure he does.” Jones panned the stars above the lake. “ You know, Maggie, if I were the police and I saw you looking through those bushes by the spillway, I'd categorize you as a suspect.”

“ You were up there, too.”

“ What was in the bushes?”

“ The birds and the bees and poison ivy.”

Jones smiled. “ Where were you before you arrived at Nigel's party?”

“ In my room at the Marlboro Inn.”

“ Really? What about Brad Davis, you knew him.”

Maggie sat up and her face tightened as she leaned toward him.

“ Yeah, I knew him.”

Jones quickly sat up and held her wrist. “ Come on, stay down.”

“ My students were assigned to do written journalistic accounts.”

“ All right.” He continued to hold her wrists. “ What was the nature of his work?”

“ My entire journalism class did the assignment. Each student chose a professor. Unfortunately, Amy chose Brad Davis. I tried to dissuade her but she chose him. ”

“ And she fell for his charms,” said Jones.

“ Let me tell you something, *Coach*. And you can take it for what it's worth. I would simply back out of this. Some things are not worth getting involved in.” She looked down at his hands, still firm around her wrists. Jones slowly released his grip. “ Brad Davis is better off dead.”

“ Really? That’s a strong statement. I can guarantee the DA is going to question you in great detail when they try Amy Pollard.”

She wrapped her arms around her chest. “ I’m cold.”

“ Maggie, did you hear what I said?”

“ I'm aware of that.” She moved closer. “ Why do you think I'm out here?”

“ Well, that was my original question.”

She rubbed her arms in the cooler air. “ We can't go back to the cars. They could be back there.”

“ You keep saying *they*.”

“ Whoever shot at us.”

“ I wish I had my cell phone... We're going to have to hike that spillway trail and get to a phone at Hansen's Marina.”

“ Agreed.”

“ We agree on something? This could be a moment of great historical significance.”

In the starlight he detected a slight grin. “ Just an aberration.”

12

Carl Rogers trailed Jones through the locker room. “What did George Strickland say?”

“What can he say?” asked Jones, stopping in front of his office. “I’ve talked to Mario Ianelli from the state police. How do you trace bullets lying somewhere at the bottom of Tolby Lake?”

“What do they think?”

“I’ll tell you exactly what they think.” He looked at a black and white photograph of himself and Lark Larsen after a basketball game last year. His aging predecessor had a huge grin and his white brows were raised above his glasses. “At least Lark is out of town and not involved in this.”

“Do they have any theories?” asked Carl, folding his arms across his sweatshirt.

“Sure, stay away from Albert Fiore and let them handle it. Aren’t you hot in that sweatshirt?”

“You sweat, you keep in shape.”

“Well, I have an aversion against people who shoot at me. At least Tom McGill finally called.”

Carl sat on one of the locker room benches. “Is he coming back?”

“ Oh, yeah. He really let Jerry St. Clair have it over the phone. Jerry lights another cigarette, inhales and makes the wrinkles on his face even deeper.” Jones produced a gravelly voice. “ We have a story to tell, Tom. I thought I would have taught you that.”

“ Did McGill fire him?” asked Carl.

“ He was never hired. This was supposed to be a favor... Some favor. The Fletchers are livid. Hamilton has been questioned by officially Herbert Lane at Fletcher Hill, but you know as well as I do, that questioning is meaningless. And Jerry claims, although he knows where the Nickersons are, he won't reveal their location. Lane is ready to jail him and George isn't far behind.”

“ So the Maine vacation is officially canceled?” asked Carl.

“ Yup. What about you?”

“ My family is expecting me in Seattle in the next few days. No set time table.”

“ At least one of us will relax before football starts in August.”

Jones shook his head. “ I'm not backing out of this. Lane has everything in place to convict Amy Pollard.”

“ Maybe she really did it,” said Carl, moving his sneaker in a circular motion.

“ What's the matter with your foot?”

“ That jogging injury in front of your house. I need to rest it.” Carl scratched his arm and opened his eyes wide. “ Not enough to break date with the secretary in admissions.”

“ Mary Thompson.”

“ What about you and Maggie McCay?”

“ What about us?”

“ Rumors abound now that you two were up at the lake together.

“ Don’t listen to everything Arnie Dewars says.” Jones moved out of his office and stood next to the bench. “ That was pure coincidence. That woman is... is. She’s just a pain. And I’m sure she feels the same way about me.”

“ I heard you piggybacked her down a trail a Tolby Lake.”

“ I lifted her over some brush. Man, things get twisted around.”

Carl grinned. “ And she was wearing your windbreaker at Captain Kendall’s house at the marina.”

“ Arnie...”

“ No, Wendall.”

“ Wonderful.” Jones shook his head as he retreated into his office. He sat down behind his desk and folded his hands. “ Are people really talking about me and Maggie McCay?”

“ Bring her to dinner. The Marlboro Inn has the best meals in town.”

“ You’re trying to upset me, aren’t you?” asked Jones.

“ I’m sorry, Matthias. You don’t like her, do you?”

“ No, of course not.”

“ You have no feelings toward her.”

“ Absolutely not.” Jones exhaled but as he looked up, Jerry St.

Clair entered the other end of the locker room. He wore the same creased blue suit and hat, and carried a small notebook in his right hand. A ball point pen was wedged between his hat and ear and a new cigarette, probably lit outside the locker room door, was propped in his mouth. Jones stood. “ Jerry, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“ I didn’t expect to be here. I’m gettin’ the squeeze. I need your help.”

“ This is my assistant coach, Carl Rogers. Jerry St. Clair.”

“ Rogers... You were a track star at Florida Western. Played ball, too. Maybe four or five years ago.”

“ I’m impressed. I didn’t know you followed sports.”

“ When you’re in the news business, you follow everything ticking over the wires.” He moved closer to Jones and removed his billowing cigarette. “ I need to talk with you in private, Jones.”

“ I need to head out anyway,” said Carl.

“ Carl, if I don’t see you, have a good time in Seattle.”

“ We’ll get ready for August. Those sweating practices.” He started out of the office.

“ And take care of that foot,” said Jones.

“ Yes, sir.”

Carl saluted and veered into the connecting corridor to the lobby doors. Jerry slammed Jones’s office door. “ We’ve got to act and act fast. I’m sure I’m being trailed.”

“ Where are the Nickersons, Jerry?”

“ I’ll get to that. This story is bigger than the local cops and Tom McGill’s rag. Brad Davis was a bright bulb with big time flaws. They reeled him in from Cornell.”

Jones leaned forward. “ You’ve been doing your job.”

“ Davis was having one long joy ride on old man Fletcher’s money. Even had access to a yacht at the marina. My take is the old man came over to the lake house to nail Davis’s hide.”

“ Good thought.”

“ See, there’s more to this than just the Fletcher prestige in the school. Davis was researching genetically altered life bacteria. A money making application in agriculture and medicine and a hundred other uses.”

“ For the Fletcher money.”

“ Diversifying their paint profits, Bub... according to Malcolm Hayes.”

" Who?"

" The Fletcher controller. Listen, that’s why the old man put up with that wild man Davis and stuck him in the lake house,” said Jerry.

“ How do you know all this?”

“ I cut a deal with the old man. No more stories involving him and he'd give me the low down and maybe more. He let me pump the controller for info and Fletcher, Junior.”

“ Now, what?”

“ It goes from bad ta worse,” said Jerry, pulling out his cigarette pack with one hand while he put out the spent butt in a Styrofoam cup.

“ Davis was a party boy and linked up-”

“ With Albert Fiore.”

“ Exactly. Irene Nickerson has a notebook. Tags of the cars at the lake house. Tom deep six me off this story, but this old dog ain't gonna to lie around. This is my last hurrah, Jones. I'm gonna nail the bastards responsible for knocking off the punk, Davis.”

“ How?”

“ Start at the marina.”

“ Never mind the marina. Where are the Nickersons and that notebook?”

“ I gut em in a hotel in Revere.”

“ Revere, Massachusetts?” asked Jones.

“ I'll chauffeur you down there in my jalopy.”

“ How about first you telling the police exactly what hotel-”

“ Nah,” he said exhaling more smoke toward Jones. “ First we chit chat with the old man and the sea, the Captain, Kendall at the Marina.”

“ I was just there last night,” said Jones. “ What’s at the marina?”

“ I told ya, one of the old man’s yachts, The Pride of the Hill. The party boys had unlimited use. The Captain is claming up. He might have seen something else. I want to join forces, Jones. You and me.”

“ All right. As long as you don't print anything I do. Everything is purely off the record, Jer.”

“ Off the record, Bub.”

13

As he opened the door the Captain held his pipe, stuffed with an aromatic cherry tobacco. Jerry marched ahead of Jones and flashed some form of identification in his face. “ St. Clair, the Enterprise, I think.”

“ Where’s Tom McGill?” asked the Captain.

“ Tom’s on a bee line from Maine,” said Jerry.

Jones jingled the attached bells as he closed the door.

“ How are you doing, Matthias? They find the people who shot at you?” asked the Captain.

“ Nope.”

“ Coopers been by here?” asked Jerry, a fresh cigarette in his exposed teeth.

“ The last time police were by here was when Wendell set up the radar past the draw bridge and had the defective radar gun. George had to call a lot of people to call and void their tickets.”

“ Listen, Cap, we’re here to get the goods on Davis, the party boy” said Jerry.

“ What do you mean?” The Captain puffed his pipe as he retreated into the kitchen.

“ Captain,” said Jones, trying to out maneuver Jerry. “ Jerry’s learned Brad Davis had access to one of Hamilton Fletcher’s yachts.”

The Captain removed a cup of coffee from the counter microwave.

“ Can I get you anything to drink?”

Jerry shook his head and Jones pulled up a stool. “ I’m all set... Did Davis use that boat much?”

“ Oh, he had the boat all right. The Pride of the Hill. Packed with party animals. Davis would arrive in his Corvette and park it across the street. They’d all be waiting for him on the dock. Drinks in hand. When he came down the hill, they’d start buzzing. Especially the women. He had real charm, he did.”

“ You seen Pollard’s mug in the paper?” asked Jerry.

“ The student, yes.”

“ Ever see her party on that boat?”

“ Sure, but she was only Davis’s recent edition. The man always had women around him... Listen, I’ve been meaning to tell George. Davis was-”

“ Know anybody named Fiore?” asked Jerry.

“ No.”

“ You were going to say something about Davis, Captain.” said Jones.

“ That night he was shot. He left here like a bat out hell in one of the smaller boats. North past the Pocquanticut River and Henry’s Hill. No sooner was he gone, he came back. I don't know what he did, or if he picked up something.”

“ Time line, Cap?” asked Jerry.

“ He left before seven and came back after seven-thirty p.m.”

“ Seven and a half bells, good.”

“ He brought the boat in and carried something up to his Corvette.

It was parked in the grass before the draw bridge. I don’t know if it means anything.”

“ Could, Cap. Could.”

“ Anyone else around here?” asked Jones.

“ Just the student’s professor.”

Jones stepped forward. “ Maggie McCay?”

“ Tall, dark hair and green eyes. Real looker. She was introduced as the student’s professor. Was on the boat a few times.”

“ Come on,” said Jones.

“ She seemed to know Davis because she would always be talking with him. Not just flirting like the others. Like she was arguing or lecturing him. As a matter of fact, I’m sure I saw the professor on that boat *before* the student was ever around.”

“ Are you saying there was a prior arrangement?” asked Jerry, pen ready to scrawl into the notebook.

“ If I were in court. Yes. Yes, I would testify to that.”

Jerry bit his cigarette when Jones looked at him. Jones scribbled his cell number on the back of one of his cards and handed it to the Captain.

But Jerry stepped between the two men. “ Cap, you buzz me if anything comes up. Or you see woman professor around here.”

“ You think I should call George?”

“ You tell George everything you told us,.” said Jones. “ I don’t want the police left out of this.”

Both men shook hands with the Captain and moved into the fresher air outside. Jones scanned the marina. The Pride of the Hill, a prodigious vessel with a glossy white hull and ample cabin space on deck, floated in the secure waters inside the jetty. Jerry immediately lit his cigarette.

“ We need a background check on your friend, McCay.”

“ The Captain must have it wrong. McCay is a college professor. Did she know Davis in the past?”

“ Davis liked the women.”

“ Not McCay.”

“ You sweet on her?”

“ No, of course not.”

“ Good. One phone call, my friend, and Gordy will get the low-down on her.” Jones stared at The Pride of the Hill’s towering masts. He did like McCay, but refused to admit it nor was he admitting to himself she had some kind of prior relationship with Brad Davis. “ What do you say, Jones? Should I make the call?”

“ Do it.”

14

Jerry's 1956 red T-Bird zipped down the interstate at high speed. He had not smoked since Jones had reluctantly agreed to travel down into Massachusetts to meet the Nickersons. His constant checking the rearview mirror rattled Jones. "Why do I keep thinking the police don't know about this, Jer old buddy."

"You one of them worry warts?"

"Did the Nickersons really agree to a meeting?"

Jerry chuckled as he passed a fourteen wheeler. "A C-note will get you lunch, Jones."

The broken white traffic lines shot like flying arrows below the T-Bird. "You're going eight-five miles an hour."

"Yeah, so what?"

"What's the hurry?" asked Jones as he saw a sign for Boston. He pulled out the crumpled map and put his finger on the city of Revere, north of the city. "I wish I had my cell phone. I'd like Strickland to be involved in this."

"I don't trust the heat."

“ Yeah, and I don’t trust Fiore to be taking target practice at me again.” Jones rolled his eyes. “ How much are you paying the Nickersons to stay down there?”

“ Confidential.”

“ Didn’t George tell you are obstructing justice?”

“ Not the first time I had to slip some snatch to witnesses.” He checked his rear view mirror again. “ Once we get to the hotel, Gordy will send the fax and we’ll have the run down on your sweetheart.”

“ She ain’t... she’s not... my sweetheart.”

* * *

Jones paced the carpeted lobby of a sixteen-story hotel on the ocean as Jerry hovered over a fax machine inside the hotel office. For fifteen minutes Jerry had promised the fax would arrive. Maggie’s involvement with Davis unnerved Jones. Such a relationship seemed out of character and the nature of her arguments or lectures with Davis was baffling. He walked to the lobby windows. The surf crashed against stone sea wall across the street. He did not believe Jerry had alerted George Strickland nor any other law enforcement personnel about the Nickersons presence in the hotel. Getting Irene’s notebook would turn the investigation and illuminate the Fiore-Davis connection. Davis’ quick jaunt around Henry’s

Hill on the night of the murder demanded answers. He glanced back at Jerry in the office and then moved to the pay phones along the wall.

Calling Strickland would verify Jerry's story. He dialed in the long distance number and entered his credit card. The line hissed, clicked and finally connected. "Hamilton."

"Wendell? I'm sorry, we have a bad line."

"Matthias?"

"Yes, I'm in Massachusetts. I need to talk to George."

"He's right here. He was just over your house, but you weren't there. Probably because you're there. Well, where else would you be if you said-"

"Wendell..."

"George!" Jones pulled the phone back from his ear. "George, he's down in Mass!"

"Wendell, don't shout into the phone..."

In the background Strickland yelled something and picked up the line. "Matthias, where the hell have you been? Your cell phone keeps ringing."

"It's a long story."

"You're in Massachusetts?"

"George, did Jerry St. Clair give you the location of the Nicker-son's hotel?"

“ No, we’ve been trying to locate them. I’m going to lock that St. Clair up.”

“ I’m at their hotel.”

“ Oh? Where?”

“ Revere... The Concord Towers. I’m about to meet with them.”

“ No, wait. I’m calling Ianelli. There’s a court order for that notebook.. You know Fiore may be involved in this Davis thing.”

Jones pressed his lips. He wanted to see the notebook himself. “ I’ll be right here in the lobby. I tell Jerry to keep them upstairs.”

“ *He’s* there? Mario will probably arrest him on the spot. Don’t tell him that. Just stall.”

“ He means well... The guy’s been around merry-go-round.”

“ You’re starting to sound like him.”

“ This is his last story. Come on, George.”

“ He’s obstructing justice!”

Jones could not see Jerry from this angle. “ When will somebody be here?”

“ I’ll send some local officers over first. Just make sure Jerry doesn’t do some dumb thing like drive the Nickersons away. We might have solved this if he hadn’t brought them from the cottage.”

“ I know...”

“ Stay right there.”

“ I’ll talk to you, George.”

Jones set the phone on the hook and started back to the office. The door flew open and Jerry raced forward with a roll of fax paper in his hand. “ Your Maggie McCay is a smart girl!”

“ What?”

“ Gordy sent me her background. He hacked it out of the college computer.”

“ Jerry, you’re really skirting the law. And you never called the police. You know, I’m sick and tired of your not leveling with me.”

Jerry exposed his tainted teeth for several seconds as he thought. “ Jones, I’ve been on the battlefield before you were born. Sometimes you’ve got to take the law into your own hands to get a scoop.”

“ I don't care about your scoop!”

He fingered Jones in the ribs. “ Listen to this: McCay applied to Hamilton College from the University of Chicago. She was at USC before that.”

“ She applied to Hamilton?”

“ Yes, sir. She wanted to come to New Hampshire. It’s in her records. Graduate work was down in San Francisco City College. Graduated from U Conn and grew up in New Jersey. She had a 4.0 grade point average. She was on the swimming team and track team.”

“ You’re right, she is a smart girl and athletic.”

Jones looked at McCay’s impressive record. “ Dr. Gaylord Balsam, City College. And I quote. ‘ Maggie McCay has character beyond re-

proach.’ Unquote. He speaks well of the family in Atwell, New Jersey. Strong Irish Catholics. Parents brought up seven children. Father owned a grocery business. They summered in the Finger Lakes region of New York. All the children were active athletically.” Jones looked up. “ Even her high school references are perfect.”

“ Don’t sound like a murderer, Jones. Or even an accomplice.”

“ Never mind that now. You have a lot of explaining to do.” Jerry placed another cigarette between his teeth. “ Jerry, you take too many risks.”

“ I’ll take that as a compliment, Bub.”

Jones clenched his fist and shook his head. The yellow elevator doors opened and a tall man in blue shorts and a flowery yellow shirt walked arm in arm with a stout woman in a purple polyester pants suit. She carried a canvas bag over her shoulder and smiled as she approached.

“ Mr. St. Clair, here we are!” yelled the woman.

“ She’s just looking for the next hundred,” said the man.

“ Yeah, I wanna see Bennie Franklin in my hand.”

Jerry fished out a worn brown alligator skinned wallet from his pants pocket. He pulled out a thick wad of cash that made Jones look twice.

“ One hundred smackers.”

Irene grabbed the crisp one hundred dollar bill and handed it to her husband. “ You hold it Gus. If somebody robs us you’ll get the knife.”

“ Hardy, hah, hah.” Gus tucked the bill in his own wallet.

“ Have you people talked to the police?” asked Jones.

“ You Jones, the PI?” asked Irene.

“ No, I’m just a guy looking into this. I think we have an innocent girl in jail up in New Hampshire.”

“ The Pollard girl?” asked Gus.

“ Don’t be stupid, you old hoot. Of course he’s talking about the Pollard girl.”

“ I’m hungry. Where’s that meal you promised us, Mr. St. Clair?” asked Gus.

“ Down in the mess hall. Let’s go.”

* * *

As Jones watched the next full fork of lemon pie disappear into Gus’s mouth, he realized this could be his last chance to speak with him or his wife. “ All right, let’s talk about the night of the murder. You only saw one car arrive, right?”

“ A Volkswagen,” said Gus with his mouth full.

Irene hit her fist on the table. “ She came over like she always did.”

“ Hanky panky,” said Gus. “ We could see it all.”

“ You can’t see ten feet in front of you without your glasses!”

“ I saw the stripper. They dragged her out of the lake house. The Professor beat her up. And Amy Pollard. The guy was a brute.”

“ Just like Gus,” said Irene, covering her mouth as she laughed.

“ Did he hit Pollard the night of the murder?”

“ Didn’t see it,” said Irene.

“ What about the notebook, Irene?” asked Jones.

“ Is he paying us or you, Mr. St. Clair?”

“ I’ll spot the cash,” said Jones.

“ Oh...” She reached into her canvas bag and removed a wire rim worn red notebook. “ I started writing down the plates when we came down from Concord a couple of weeks ago.”

She set the book in Jones’s hand and he slowly flipped up the cover. Six digit plate numbers were written in red ink on the creased white, lined paper. He was immediately drawn to Maggie McCay’s Expedition’s plate number. Over the next few pages he counted at least eight McCay arrivals at the lake house.

“ The English Professor,” said Irene, pointing at the number.

2K-6747

“ Why was she over there?”

“ Mostly with the Pollard kid,” said Gus.

“ No, I seen her come over alone. Usually for a short time. She had her briefcase with her.”

“ I didn’t see that,” said Gus.

“ I told ya, you’re blind as a bat, Gus. I saw her drive up in the Expedition.”

“ Were they lovers?” asked Jones, not really wanting the answer.

“ Everybody was a lover. The guy was a nut,” said Irene. “ But, no I didn’t actually see anything. I don’t know why she came by.”

“ She’s in the thick of it somehow,” said Jerry.

Jones glanced at the book again. “ I want to make copies of this.”

“ I saw a copier in the office.”

“ Just stay right here,” Jones as he stood.

“ Can I have some more pie?” asked Gus, scraping his plate with the fork.

“ Sure,” said Jones from the door.

“ How about you, Mr. St. Clair?”

“ No, I’m battling a shaky stomach.”

Jones had given Maggie too much slack. As he walked toward the office, he would insist Strickland question her about her obvious associa-

tion with Davis. He checked the revolving lobby doors for the police and opened the office door. An older woman listened to his request and allowed him to make copies of the notebook. As the copier top slowly hummed across the machine, Jones nervously tapped his fingers on the desk and wondered where these license tags would lead. He kept thinking about Cocoa Stefani's warnings about trying to take on Fiore directly.

“ This thing is slow.”

“ You can go somewhere else.”

Jones looked into the corridor and waited. He yanked out the notebook once the last page was copied. “ Thanks.”

“ That will be fifty cents,” said the woman.

“ Oh...” Jones pinched two quarters from his pocket. “ Thanks.”

“ The owner requires me to account for every copy. There's a counter on the side.”

“ The owner needs a faster machine,” said Jones, opening the door.

He counted fifteen different license tags on the copied sheets. The police could handle tracking down the owners. Getting rid of Jerry St. Clair was top on his priorities. He looked up as he passed the restaurant register. Jerry's hat and a cut of lemon pie were on the table. Ten or fifteen people were inside the restaurant. Quickly, he rushed to the one of the waitress in the nonsmoking section. He pointed across the restaurant. “ Excuse me, there were three people sitting over there.”

“ Not my area.”

Jones frowned and dodged two patrons before crashing into the kitchen. Two waitresses were standing near the food trays to his right. “ I’m looking for the older couple and an even older guy in the blue suit.”

“ You mean the guy who wanted the second piece of pie. I just brought it out but I didn’t see them. Check the restrooms.”

“ Right.” He nodded and glanced at the empty table as he veered to the restroom alcove behind the register. The hoppers were vacant as he kicked open the door and the air was smoky. Somebody abruptly pushed the door behind him, knocking him into the wall. A little bald guy motioned to a larger light haired hulk who slammed his fist into Jones’s jaw. Jones knew he had hit the floor, but could not feel it. He heard shuffling, but was too traumatized to stand. Within a blur the two men disappeared out the door.

His jaw now throbbed and his head rested on his shoulder. The toilet flushed. Time moved in spurts. He opened his eyes several times and finally took deep breaths. The notebook and copy sheets were gone. “ Sucker punch. They suckered you, Jones.”

“ They’ve got her notebook and the copies!” Jerry extended his hand and haphazardly pulled Jones to his feet. Jones staggered toward the door. “ Come on.”

His senses rebounded as he scurried across the lobby rug. Jerry, cigarette, jutting from his mouth, dallied behind. Jones emerged into the

parking lot as a black Lincoln Continental raced out the alley toward the state highway. A winded Jerry called from the T-Bird. “ Over here!”

Jones sprinted across the asphalt as Jerry looped the car around. The T-Bird was moving as Jones leaped inside. “ They’re out on Route 1.”

Out of breath, Jerry sounded like a jury-rigged machine, kicking and wheezing as he spun out of the parking lot, leaving a long rubber skid. “ I need a butt.”

“ You’re losing air as it is.” Jerry turned abruptly and Jones bounced off his arm as they reached the state highway.

“ Which way?”

“ Boston. Head toward Boston,” said Jones rubbing his jaw. “ If I ever see that little rodent who walloped my jaw...”

Jerry cut in front of an oncoming red mustang. Jones shielded his eyes and somehow they bounced into the southbound lane toward Boston. “ I’ll blow the doors off that bastard.”

“ I need a cell phone. We need to call the police.”

“ Coppers were late at the hotel.” Jerry wove into the right lane, around a slow moving van, and shot back to the outside. “ I hope they haven’t plugged the timers.”

“ You should talk... Why did you leave them alone, Jerry?”

“ Stomach cramps. Bum stomach.”

“ I would have been right back. For all the good it would have done. Those guys must work for Fiore and on some level Maggie McCay is in this.”

Jerry fishtailed over the old concrete highway, hugging the steel barrier rails. “ Why did Davis take the motor boat cruise just before he was knocked off?”

“ He carried something to the Corvette.”

“ I gut an old hound dog sense about these things,” said Jerry. Jones leaned toward the windshield. “ I have to call Cocoa.”

“ Who the hell is Cocoa?”

“ Friend with connections.”

As a row of Boston skyscrapers rose into view, a yellow sign for the harbor tunnel whipped by Jerry’s accelerating car. “ Two bucks for the tunnel. Can you spring for it?”

Jones winced and caught sight of the Lincoln, stuck in a long line of traffic backed from the toll booths. “ There they are.”

Jerry braked with the traffic. The T-bird rolled to stop about three hundred yards behind the Lincoln. Jones thrust open the door and darted frantically between the stalled cars. He sprinted for a few dozen feet and brushed a car bumper. Only two cars separated the Lincoln from the toll booth as he squeezed between a long truck and a school bus. Irene’s blue gray hair and Gus’s flowery shirt were visible in the back window as the next car left the toll booth. With a clear hundred-yard stretch ahead he

hurtled forward as the Lincoln inched to the toll collector. An outstretched hand fanned bills to the collector. Irene and Gus sat motionless in the back seat as Jones closed the gap to less than a hundred feet, but the Lincoln took off down the tunnel incline. He slowed near the booth and was winded outside the fluorescent lined tiled tunnel. The Lincoln followed the traffic flow dipping below the harbor. The notebook was gone and so were Irene and Gus.

15

Jerry St. Clair slouched in the restaurant phone booth's hanging cigarette haze. Occasionally he would jot something onto his folded notebook pad and answer Jones in one-word cadences like sporadic gunfire in a protracted battle. Jones panned the grassy, tree lined Boston Common where they had just parked the T-Bird in the underground garage. People lounged in the sun and mothers walked babies in carriages with upright brightly colored balloons. Beyond the spreading tree shadows the gold state house dome glistened in the remaining afternoon sun and honking cars pulsed down Tremont Street.

Jones tightened his parched lips. He was not sure whether the guys in the Lincoln had injured the Nickersons. Jerry now insisted Irene saw the Lincoln numerous times at the lake house over the past few months and the two guys responsible for his bruised jaw were the same two guys that dragged a half-naked exotic dancer from the lake house on the afternoon of the murder. Davis, according to Jones' reasoning, headed for Hansen's Marina after the two men left with the stripper. The Captain saw him make his quick spin around the bay. The gap of the next few hours culminated in Davis's death by three quick shots to the abdomen with Amy Pollard's gun.

On a phone call, only minutes ago, Strickland blamed Jones directly for the Nickersons kidnapping. Jones said very little to his friend, taking some of the responsibility for the abduction, and relating what relevant facts he could. He stressed the involvement of Maggie McCay. All of her visits to the lake house were well documented by Irene Nickerson and Captain Kendall had seen her on the Fletcher yacht several times. Strickland, through his anger, agreed with Jones and would speak with Maggie at the Marlboro Inn back in Hamilton.

The interview by the Revere police had only wasted time. Without the license plate, tracking down the Lincoln, even though it probably belonged to Fiore, presented a problem. He turned from the window. Jerry's choking smoke wafted into the corridor. "Jerry, come on I want to use the phone."

"Hold your horses. I'm talking to Gordy."

"I need to make an important call."

"Cool your jets. What's that, Gordy? No, Jones wants to use the phone. It is imperative you find out more. I'll check in at eight. Good. Shake a leg, Gordy." He hung up the phone abruptly and turned to Jones. "It's your nickel."

"I wish I had my cell phone."

"Cell phones create sense of urgency."

"Maybe some things are urgent." He lifted the phone. Even the receiver reeked of smoke. "Listen, you want something to eat, Jerry?"

“ No chow for this guy.”

“ After I make this call, we're heading over to the Glass Slipper.”

Jerry raised his brows and produced a dumb grin. The ash on his cigarette was now longer than the cigarette. “ Nice work if you can get it.”

Jones rolled his eyes and placed a call to Cocoa Stefani in Prince William. Cocoa's street office, a three-decker on Crescent Street, always rocked with loud music, boisterous people, and confusion. He waited as somebody went upstairs to track down Cocoa and he watched Jerry ignite a new cigarette at the window. “ Jonesy, what's up?”

“ Cocoa, I'm in Boston at the Silversmith Pub.”

“ Bad... Don't be taunting Fiore at the Slipper.”

“ That couple from the lake. Fiore's people took them out of a hotel in Revere while I was making copies in the office.”

Cocoa said nothing. “ Kiss em' goodbye.”

“ The cops are looking for the Lincoln.”

“ Don't be naive, Jonesy. They own the cops. These people are tough. Fiore's always sending somebody up here to get a foothold, but he never presses it. Too much going on down there. Listen, just get out of there.”

“ No... it's my fault the Nickerson's were-”

“ What would you have done if you were in the hotel restaurant? Played the hero?”

“ That's not the point... I need the name of that stripper from the Glass Slipper. You have connections.”

“ All right, so you find her. Then what? What are you gonna do to Fiore? I'm telling you right now. You head in that place, you're asking for trouble. And how do you know Fiore killed the professor anyways?”

“ Davis was in deep with him. His people were over the lake house constantly and on Hamilton Fletcher's yacht. Including the stripper. Fletcher wanted to use Davis's genetic knowledge to start a new business enterprise. But Davis was a wild man with the women.”

“ Jonesy: Go home.”

“ I can't.”

Cocoa exhaled. “ Geese... All right, all right. I'll make a call. But I can't guarantee anything. Hold on.” As Cocoa spoke in the background Jones leaned against the booth wall and rubbed his eyes. Several minutes passed until the Cocoa returned. “ The stripper's name was Desiree Paradise. I only know she hung out with Davis. I didn't ask nothin' else. I don't want Fiore on my tail. Keep your cell phone on.”

“ I don't have it.”

“ What the hell are you doin' down there without a cell phone? Hey, I'm not the CIA: you're on your own.”

“ I'll be careful.”

“ You'd better be.”

Jones hung up the phone and headed across the room. Jerry stared through the rising blue smoke layers, rising from the ashtray on the window table. “ Whaddaya gut, hot shot?”

“ Davis’s stripper’s name was Desiree Paradise.”

“ Atta boy.”

“ Look, Jerry, why don't you stay out of this. Get your T-Bird and head back to Hamilton?”

Jerry's blue eyes looked younger than his weathered half-shaven face. He smiled and sipped some coffee. “ You don't understand. I ain’t got nothing to go back to.”

“ Go back to your wife in Philadelphia or your house in Florida.”

His eyes moistened. “ Listen, Jones. My wife died last August. The big C: Cancer. I don’t have no house in Florida.”

A jolt traced Jones's stomach. “ I'm sorry. Look, don't put yourself at risk here.”

“ I need risk, or I'll just fade away.”

Jones nodded and produced a sympathetic smile. “ I understand. Sometimes I feel the same way.”

“ I read the back issues about your wife. You solved her murder.”

Jones, his brow furrowed, stared into the twilight coating the common toward Beacon Hill. “ Hey, let’s get out of here, have some dinner and find Desiree Paradise.”

16

The taller buildings were punctuated with light squares along the skyline as the darkness settled the city. Jones accompanied Jerry down the noisy sidewalk. He checked his watch. Side bars sent a variety of food aromas into the traffic clogged narrow street. He gazed at the huge transparent, illuminated glass slipper above a theater lobby surrounded with frosted round light bulbs. Long glass cabinets contained glossy color photos of numerous strippers in a variety of poses. Names of the strippers were printed in bright blue ink below the pictures.

“ I don’t see Desiree.”

“ Maybe she ain’t here.” Jerry crushed his shoe across the glowing cigarette on the pavement. “ They look real nice in the glossys, Jones, but from what I’ve seen their lives are a mess. During the war we used to hit the old vaudevillian houses. But you got a show for your money back then. This is just raunchy.”

Desiree’s photos were pinned inside the last glass cabinet. Jones tilted his head and stared at her curled blonde hair hanging upside down over her well-formed naked body. “ I didn't think anyone could twist into that position.”

“ Ya can see why Davis had the hots for her.”

They stepped into the brightly lit lobby and Jerry removed his wallet at a ticket booth at the end of a long dim hallway. Pounding music and flashing blue and red lights leaked outside. Jerry handed Jones an orange ticket and they blended into the low light. A long shiny wood stage, only a few feet off the ground, packed with goo-goo eyed, beer chugging men, cut across the black walled lounge. Long ultra violet tubes brightened the dancer's fringed two-piece outfit. She flowed with the beat from prodigious wall speakers and accepted dollar bills tucked into a lavender laced garter belt wrapped around her smooth skin.

" I guess this is the place," said Jones. He shifted his feet at the rear bar, strewn with glum faced guys and long legged women ready to dance.

Jerry lit a cigarette and ordered two beers. " I don't see the blonde."

" She could be dead or gone for all we know." Jones thought about Cocoa's warnings, but opted to talk to the bartender. " I'm looking for Desiree."

The little gray haired man in black pants, shirt and shiny vest slid change to a patron across the bar and then sneered at Jones. " Excuse me?"

" I said I'm looking for Desiree."

" You and everyone else." He lit a cigarette and shook the match. " She ain't here."

" How do I find her?"

The bartender smiled. “ You like being alive?”

“ Is she alive?”

“ Whoa. Whoa. You hear what I said? She ain’t here. She ain’t been here for days.”

Jerry set his cigarette on the ashtray. “ How much scratch you want?”

“ What?”

“ I said, how much do you want, Bub?”

“ You can’t afford it.” He filled another beer pitcher from the tap and slid it to a young guy at the end of the bar. Then he grinned. “ You guys are amateurs.”

“ What about Brad Davis, you know him?” asked Jones.

The bartender’s smile descended like a theater curtain. He bit his upper lip and extinguished the cigarette. “ I think it’s time you two get the hell out of here.”

“ How about giving us some answers, ” asked Jerry.

“ Don’t push your luck, old timer.”

Jerry stood and took a few steps down the bar. “ Davis knew the stripper and Davis came in here all the time. Two plus two, Bub, what’s the answer?”

“ Four.”

“ Where’s Fiore?” asked Jerry.

The bartender nodded to a thin man with a silver earring in his left ear. “ You clowns are all done.”

“ We were just leaving,” said Jones. The thin man blocked the lobby door. Jones looked at Jerry as a short greasy man with a linear mustache and a shiny blue pin striped suit stepped from a hidden black door at the far end of the stage. A towering black man in cut-off jersey strutted behind a stocky white man with no neck. Jones wished Jerry had kept quiet.

The little man scanned them with beady black eyes. “ Back room.”

The man with no neck pushed Jones. Jones grabbed the black man’s arm when the man reached for Jerry, but a prodigious thud on his back pushed the air from his lungs and he collapsed to his knees. Jerry hobbled behind the guy with the cut-off jersey. Jones, trying to catch his breath, was lifted under the armpits and carried past the gawking patrons. His feet dragged on a plush red rug as they entered a wood paneled office with three wood chairs and a desk.

“ Why you looking for Mr. Fiore?” asked the little man.

“ Because of the stiff up north,” said Jerry. “ You all right, Coach?”

“ Yeah...”

“ Too bad,” said the little man, smiling and finishing a drink on his desk. Somehow he had Jones’s wallet. “ My heart goes out to you.”

“ How can we be a threat to you?” asked Jones, catching his breath.

“ That’s what I intend to find out. Jones, Hamilton College.” He thumbed through the contents of Jerry’s billfold.

“ St. Clair, AARP,” said Jerry.

“ Shut up, old man.” He reached back and lifted the phone without looking. “ Get me Mr. Fiore.”

Jerry started to pull out his cigarette pack and both large men whipped out long barreled handguns. “ Drop it.”

“ What, my smokes?”

The little man waved his hand. “ Let him smoke.”

Jerry lit a cigarette and blew the smoke across the room. “ We know people.”

The little man ignored him and turned as he spoke. “ Yes, Mr. Fiore. Hernando. I am fine, sir. I have a dude named Matthias Jones here asking questions about Desiree and Brad Davis. Yes. An old coot named Jerry St. Clair. Yes, sir. Sure, anything you say, Mr. Fiore. Goodbye. ”

“ What did he say, Bub?”

Hernando again ignored Jerry and faced the black man. “ Ernest, get the car and bring them to the warehouse.”

“ Excellent,” said Ernest and he smashed his fist in to his large open hand.

“ What do you mean, the warehouse?” asked Jones.

“ Sometimes it’s best to keep you nose clean, Mr. Jones.”

17

Ernest pushed Jones through the open warehouse door and Jones stumbled across creosote soaked floorboards. As Jerry was brought quietly in through a side door, Jones clenched his fists and stared boldly at Ernest. The harbor wind rushed into the empty brick warehouse and chilled his skin. He was unsure whether the two thugs were instructed to kill or just do physical damage. Ernest lowered the rusted, corrugated warehouse door, stepped outside and locked the door. Jones and Jerry stood alone under green shaded ceiling lamps.

“What now?” asked Jones.

“The head honcho.”

“Fiore?”

Jerry lit a cigarette. “I’ll bet dollars to donuts he wants to know what we know.”

“Why?”

“Listen, he doesn’t want to be fingered in the Davis thing.”

“Especially if he was involved in the murder,” said Jones.

“You ready shake hands with St. Peter at the big pearlys.”

Jones’s words echoed around the long warehouse. “St. Peter can have a rain check... I’m starting to sound like you.”

“I rub off on people.”

“ You got that right...” He thought about McCay snooping at the lake. “ Why was Maggie McCay on the boat and at the house?”

Jerry stroked his chin with his cigarette hand. “ She had the goods on Davis.”

“ What makes you say that?”

“ I trust what I feel in my gut. If I were you, Coach, I would worry about Fiore.”

“ His men were at the house, too.”

“ And Desiree.” said Jerry, exhaling a smoke trail. “ What a knock out.”

The half painted door at the other end of the warehouse opened slowly. A tall, gray haired man in a dark suit strode deliberately over the floorboards. A silk red handkerchief was neatly tucked in his suit coat pocket and he smiled as he approached. “ I apologize for the odd arrangement here and I hope I haven’t sent the fear of God in you guys.” His blue eyes had a sparkle incongruous with his reputation. He placed his smooth hand into Jones’s palm. “ Albert Fiore.”

“ Matthias Jones.”

“ Jerry St. Clair.” Jerry shook his hand.

“ You guys were unusually persistent about the Davis thing. Let me take this opportunity to let you know I had nothing to do with his murder. Oh, we phoned death threats to him, but I didn’t kill him.”

“ Come on,” said Jerry.

“ I’m merely stating I didn’t order nor did I kill Davis.”

Jones cleared his throat. “ Did your men fire shots at me and Maggie McCay at Tolby Lake?”

“ Don’t know anything about that.” He bit his lower lip as he pondered Jones’s words. “ Interesting. The killer wants you out of this.”

“ What’s your connection to Davis?” asked Jones.

“ Matt,” he said, putting his arm around Jones. Jones looked at his hand and raised his brows. “ Davis was out of his mind. He couldn’t get enough. I mean it was sick. We all like the woman, don’t we, Matt?”

“ Yeah, well...”

“ See, this guy had the Fletchers by the short hairs. And I think he would have delivered on all that genetic stuff. So, they gave him the house and the boat. He was a regular in the Slipper. And other dives. He had women all the time... My people don't think the kid killed Davis. I’d pay a reward to whoever did, I’ll tell you that.”

Jones stood back. “ Davis went out in a boat before he was murdered. Short trip north of Hamilton Bay. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Fiore smiled and pretended to hit his shoulder. “ I will tell you this. You need help in solving the murder thing, I’ll try and help you, but don’t ask any more questions about my connections to Davis. Unless it directly relates to the murder.”

“ This mean you’re not going to knock us off?” asked Jerry.

“ I like this guy. You’re an old newspaper man, aren’t you?”

“ I am.”

Fiore nodded. “ You know I always liked newspaper men. The media today is too cocky. I’ll take an old newspaper man any day of the week. You could say things off the record and not worry about it.” He looked over his shoulder. “ Walter, you can come in now.”

" What about the Nickersons?" asked Jones.

" The Nickersons are on a well deserved vacation," said Fiore. " A delayed second honeymoon."

" You put em on ice," said Jerry.

" Until this is over."

A young man, dark hair cropped straight, in his shirt sleeves and suspenders, carried a brown leather briefcase through the doorway. His voice was clear and Ivy League. “ Good evening, Gentlemen.”

“ Walter handles all my legal work.”

“ Gentlemen, while I cannot divulge certain aspects of Mr. Fiore’s finances, I can only tell you certain events have transpired harming Mr. Fiore financially.”

“ Relating to the murder?” asked Jones.

“ Indirectly or maybe not. What I am about to tell you could cost you your life.”

Jerry moved forward. “ Maybe we wanna be fat, dumb, and happy..”

Fiore raised his brows. “ Jones?”

“ Will it help me solve this?” asked Jones.

“ It may...”

“ Okay, let’s hear it,” answered Jones and Jerry rolled his eyes.

“ Mr. Fiore requests this remain confidential. Sharing this information will indeed cost you your lives.”

“ It’s just business,” said Fiore.

“ Davis owed us money. A great deal of money. We required he picked up certain items north of Hamilton, dropped by plane the afternoon of the murder.”

“ I knew it. What did he pick up?” asked Jones.

“ That is not relevant,” said Walter. “ What is relevant is the package was never delivered to us by Davis. We’re talking about a substantial sum.”

“ Are you saying somebody killed him to get this package?” asked Jerry.

“ Exactly.” Walter popped the briefcase. He handed each man a card. “ Memorize this number. It connects to an internal voice mail system. When you think you’ve gotten close in the investigation, you call the number.”

Jones creased his brow. “ You must have some thoughts about Davis’s murder, Mr. Fiore.”

“ Matt, I don’t. I can tell you I’d like to know the Pollard girl’s circle of friends. I’m very concerned about the English professor, McCay. My people tell me she was always badgering Davis. I’d like to know why. You guys can find that angle. I’m offering twenty-five grand if you find the package or who took it.”

“ We don’t even know what we’re looking for,” said Jones.

“ You’ll know. Good luck, gentlemen,” said Fiore. Walter retrieved both cards. He and Fiore retraced their way across the warehouse, but Fiore called out as he left. “ Remember what I said about confidentiality.”

Jones looked at Jerry’s craggy face as the door closed at the far end. Jerry shook his head. “ I’m ain’t sure I wanna know nothin’ about that package.”

“ I’m sure I don’t want to know. You have to call your friend Gordy. What I need to know is more about Maggie McCay.”

“ Why?”

“ Her relationship with Davis is just too cozy. Let’s find out just how deep she’s into this.”

18

Fiore's detailing Brad Davis's activities on the afternoon of the murder further frustrated Jones' investigation. He awoke the next morning to the sound of his telephone reverberating in the bedroom. It was ten-thirty on the red clock radio digits and the warm summer air drifted into the bedroom as he lifted the receiver. " Jones."

" Rise and shine, sonny boy," said Jerry. He exhaled into the phone. " You've got five hours under your belt."

Jones rubbed his sticky eyes. " Come on, Jerry."

" We've got things to do."

" You know, Jerry," he said, sitting up in the bed. " Even though it was the middle of the night, you drove that T-Bird a little fast from Boston."

" T-Bird's are meant to go fast. As a matter of fact you and I are hightailing it out this morning."

" I'm not going back to Boston."

" I gut info, Bub. I gut info."

Fully awake, Jones rolled out of bed. " What kind of info?"

" You remember the background on Davis? Fletchers grabbed him from Cornell."

“ Right,” said Jones, pulling the shade up fully. Only a couple of cars moved around people sunning on the Hamilton common grass.

“ Not far from Cornell, something happened with McCay's best friend and Davis at Harrison’s Cabins.”

“ What do you mean?”

“ Gordy says McCay's family summered in the Finger Lakes Region at Harrison's Cabins on Lake Cayuga.”

“ Well, well.” Jones gazed past the stone clock tower to the Marlboro Inn’s white clapboards across the common. McCay had lived at the inn since last September. “ But what happened?”

“ Don't know. Her friend's name was Florence Albright. They called her Floey.”

“ Let me get dressed, Jerry.”

“ I thinks McCay had the goods on Davis, like I told ya.”

Jones again stared at the inn's columns and balcony. “ I just don't want to believe Maggie had a motive to kill Brad Davis.”

“ We need to check it out, Coach.”

* * *

“ Time to get a new suit,” said Jones, gawking at Jerry’s stained and creased powder blue suit as they walked up the inn's wooden stairs.

“ And ruin my image?”

“ Has Strickland called you?” asked Jones. He looked along the balustrade, past the row of wooden lounge chairs and glass tables along the gray painted porch.

“ Nope, but McGill wants to know what I know and he was cute about it and said very nicely that I don't represent the paper.”

“ They were both on my answering machine. Strickland only for a few seconds, asking me to call. McGill and he wanted to know what we learned in Boston. I told both Strickland and McGill we couldn't find the Nickersons. Strickland says Amy Pollard is pretty depressed and he wants to see me. I'm having lunch with Strickland at Sal's Grill.”

“ I don't think she did it.”

“ Neither do I. Look, Jerry, we have to be discrete about what Fiore told us.”

Jerry nodded his head and stuffed his cigarette into a sand-filled urn. “ Mum's the word, Bub.”

Jones opened the inn's black-framed screen door. He motioned Jerry inside. “ I always feel I'm back in time when I come in here.”

“ La di dah.”

Brushed blue trim surrounded striped wallpaper and wide pine wood boards extended to the open parlor windows and a corridor to the first floor rooms. A small staircase with a blue oriental runner rose next to the front desk. Jones drifted over to the young blonde woman behind the counter. “ Could you tell Maggie McCay, Matthias Jones is here?”

“ Sure.”

“ Thanks.” Jones leaned on the counter as she picked up the house phone. Then he crossed into the parlor where Jerry looked out the window. “ Jerry, who had access to Amy Pollard's gun?”

“ McCay.”

“ Besides McCay and that is not proven.”

“ Don't discount Fiore's people,” said Jerry.

“ What do you mean?”

“ The guy is a smoothy. He probably did send the Nickersons on vacation somewhere, but I'll tell you, he still could have ordered Davis killed. Fiore wants his package back, whatever that package is.... If he can use us as suckers to that end he will. Don't matter if any of his guys plugged Davis. They could set up Pollard very easily. Piece of cake.”

Jones nodded as the young women looked at him from the stairs. “ She's not answering. Let me check her room.”

“ Thanks,” said Jones, but he spun toward Jerry. “ You don't think anything's happened to her?”

“ You like the broad, right?”

“ Right,” said Jones, moving to the window. He looked past the thick bushes, bees buzzing in the warm sunlight, toward Larsen Field, where he would begin football practice in a couple of months. “ I wish I didn't like her, Jerry. It would make things a lot easier.”

“ Mr. Jones,” said the woman, bounding down the stairs. “ Apparently, Ms. McCay left yesterday afternoon.”

“ Where to?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “ She didn't leave any forwarding information. Just a note, saying she would be away for a few days. Nobody seems to know exactly where she went.”

“ Great... Thanks.”

“ If I hear from her I can call you. I can check with other people when they come in.” Jones reached in his shorts pocket and pulled out a card. Jerry handed him a pen and he scrawled his cell phone number on the back. “ We need to talk to her.”

“ I understand,” she said, taking the card. “ Like I say, some guests and help are out for the day. Maybe they'd know. ”

“ Call me.” As she headed back to the desk, Jones turned to Jerry. “ She's fled the area. Now what?”

19

Jones licked the cold vanilla ice cream, fully packed into the sugar cone. The wind blew up from the bay and across the picnic tables outside Sal's Grill. During lunch Strickland hammered Jones about his trip to Boston, but Jones spoke in generalities and emphasized unimportant parts of the trek southward. "George, can I just ask you a question?"

"No. You mean to tell me that Lincoln had no plate and just disappeared into the tunnel?"

"I told the Revere police the story."

"Those people didn't deserve this." Strickland exhaled. "What about that old spit ball shooter, St. Clair? He certainly got Hamilton Fletcher's hair standing on end."

Jones stared at the sailboats trekking across the bay. "Jerry made a mistake printing that story, but he's okay."

"Tell that to McGill. Was Hamilton Fletcher involved in any of this? I just have a bad feeling."

"No, no." Jones debated whether to tell Strickland about the Cornell information as he focused on an orange and blue sailboat.

"That looks like McCay out there."

"I thought you said she left Hamilton."

“ I just need to question her further.” Maybe McCay’s relationship with Davis was innocent. He looked more closely at the sailboat. “ I’m just tired... I guess that’s not her.”

“ Matthias, you aren't telling me the whole story. I have Nigel Kent and Hamilton Fletcher all over my case. Hamilton is demanding this thing get wrapped up.”

Jones looked back from the bay. “ Sure, even if Amy Pollard is convicted.”

“ Whatever.”

“ Oh, yeah, whatever. I'm sick and tired of Hamilton Fletcher worrying about covering his own fanny. The point is they brought that pervert, Davis to the college and put up with his shenanigans purely for money. You know it and I know it.”

Strickland put his elbows on the table. “ Maybe she did do it. Don't ignore the fact that gun had no prints on it. I want to know if Maggie McCay had access to that gun. I know Amy Pollard isn’t telling me everything.”

“ We need to go over to the Parkview Apartments. Ask around.”

“ Your buddy, Arnie lives at Parkview.”

“ On the other hand... maybe we won’t. If McCay got into Amy Pollard’s apartment, George, and I strongly think she did, she is a prime suspect. Especially since she’s left the area.”

“ But where did she go?”

“ I don't know where.” He squinted toward the bay and shielded his eyes as the boat came around.

“ Follow my cruiser, Matthias. Let's go to Parkview.”

“ I'll met you over there.”

* * *

When Arnie Dewers stood blabbering to Strickland outside the cruiser, Jones cringed and hesitated turning into the apartment complex. Arnie's annoying laugh and an equally aggravating ability to needle people inundated Jones' thoughts as he pulled along the blue and gray townhouses, and parked on the far side of Strickland's cruiser.

“ Hey, Matth-*i*-as.” Jones closed his eyes and stayed behind the wheel. “ Matth-*i*-as!”

“ What's up, Arnie?”

Arnie, still in his blue striped Dewers Lumber shirt, swung as arms as he strolled toward the jeep. Strickland got out of the cruiser and shut the door. “ Heard you need some help.”

“ What do you mean?” asked Jones through the open window.

Arnie banged Jones's elbow. “ Case got you stumped, eh?”

“ Come on, Arnie, just tone it down, will you? Haven't you caused enough trouble?”

“ Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Jones tried to open the door but Arnie leaned on the open window and stuck his huge nose and dark rimmed glasses inside. His stale garlic breath pushed Jones back. Strickland smiled as he took off his hat and wiped his brow. “ Admit it, you need my help.”

“ Why do I need your help, pray tell?”

“ My girlfriend and me, we saw the dude in the Corvette pickin’ up Amy-wayme.”

“ Who, Davis?” asked Strickland, placing his hat back on his head.

“ Yup.” Arnie placed his hand near his mouth and leaned in again.

“ Heard the guy was a stud.”

“ Yeah, that’s nice, Arnie, but we’re here for other reasons,” said Jones. “ Let me get out, will you?”

“ Too raunchy for you, huh?” He hit Jones in the shoulder. “ Come on, Matth-*i*-as, don’t be a prude.”

“ Say, Arnie,” said Strickland from the curb. Arnie turned and Jones saw the opportunity to open the jeep door. “ A woman, college professor named Maggie McCay, visit Amy Pollard?”

“ Oh, yeah, the Prof. She was a pain in ass. Told me I was... crude.”

“ Oh, I wonder why?” asked Jones.

“ What was that, Matth-*i*-as?”

“ Did she have a key to Amy Pollard’s place?”

Arnie's brow tightened until his nose crunched into a mass of convoluted skin under his glasses. "I never saw her open Amy's door. Let me check with the little woman."

"You do that, Arnie," said Jones shaking his head. Arnie started up the asphalt walk.

"What's the matter, Matth-*i*-as?" asked Strickland, laughing.

"I don't want this whole thing to rest on the word of Arnie Dewars and his girlfriend."

Strickland smirked and slouched against the cruiser. "My guess is this Fiore character is in this more than we think. Too many people were in that lake house." Jones shrugged his shoulders. "Why do I get the impression you also know more about this than you're saying?"

"Who me?" Fiore's admonition about keeping quiet echoed inside his head. "It could be McCay, it could be Amy Pollard."

At the doorway, a behemoth of a woman in a pink tight tank top, stepped onto the porch. "Arnie says you're snoopin' around here."

"I never said that," said Arnie through the open window.

"Oh, boy," said Jones, shaking his head again.

"You spyin' on the professor?"

Jones's head snapped to the left. He and Strickland moved in unison like two military men up the walk. The woman, hair frosted and glasses tinted pink, squinted. Jones stopped about fifteen feet away.

"Tell me about the professor."

“ Maggie, Amy called her. Arnie says you wanna know if she broke in.”

“ Wrong,” said Arnie from the doorway. He sucked down the contents of a green and white beer can. “ Hey, you guys want some brew?”

“ Not now, Arnie,” said Jones. He turned to the girlfriend. “ Did she have a key?”

“ Yup.”

“ Well, well,” said Strickland.

Jones spun around. “ Damn. That certainly gives her the opportunity.”

“ So the professor babe knocked off Davis?” asked Arnie.

“ Shut up, Arnie,” said the girlfriend.

“ I’ll second that,” said Jones.

Strickland took out his pad and stepped closer. “ Did you ever see Maggie McCay talking with the murdered man, Davis?”

“ Sure, sometimes when he would pick up Amy, Maggie would come out with her to the Corvette. She swore at him.”

“ Anything else?” asked Strickland. Jones had walked back to his jeep and put his foot on the bumper.

“ That’s all I saw of her.”

“ Please call me if you remember anything else about the professor or anything unusual about Amy Pollard.”

“ Sure, is there any reward or anything?” asked Arnie.

“ Forget it, Arnie.”

“ Hey, Matth-*i*-as. I heard you’re looking for someone to paint your house.”

“ Thanks, Arnie,” said Jones, still considering Fiore’s role in the murder. “ I’m sure I’ll find someone.”

“ Muddy Jacobs.”

“ He works at the dump. He’s not a painter.”

“ Muddy’s got paint in his blood.”

Jones looked at Strickland. “ That’s not all he has in his blood.”
He turned back to Arnie. “ It’s not a priority right now. Thanks, Arnie.”

“ Your house is peeling. I did an inspection.”

“ You what?”

Strickland moved back to the cruiser as Arnie and the girlfriend trundled up the walk. “ Arnie, thank you.”

“ Matth-*i*-as, I’ll call Muddy.”

“ Don't bother,” said Jones.

Strickland faced Jones. “ We have to find McCay. The fact that she left town is not good.”

“ No, George, it’s not good at all.”

20

Tom McGill sat across from Jones at The Marlboro Inn and told a joke, substituting Jerry's name for some drunken sailor. Jones leaned back and laughed for the first time in three days. He wiped his eyes as the waitress crossed the room with two dishes of pecan pie. "That is funny, Tom. I really can't picture Jerry doing that."

"I can't picture anyone doing that. If I hadn't got back he would have turned the Enterprise into a supermarket tabloid."

"Everything he said was correct," said Jones. The waitress set the pie on the table. He thanked the waitress and sipped his coffee.

"Maybe, but you don't go pointing the finger at Hamilton Fletcher. At least not in this town."

Jones tightened his brow. "Somebody should. If he hadn't brought that wild man to the college, none of this would have happened."

"I agree. I agree."

"But you won't take sides."

"No. And Jerry has promised me he is officially off this thing. He's staying on vacation for another week and then he goes back to Philadelphia." Jones nodded and panned the tavern's wood beams and white flowered wallpaper. McCay had lived here for the past nine months. She

ate here evenings and left here when she contacted Brad Davis. “ You think Maggie McCay tried to frame Amy Pollard?”

“ Darned if I know, but it doesn’t look good with her having a key to the apartment.” Jones pushed his fork under a heap of creamy pecans and lifted the rich mixture into his mouth. “ This tastes good. Have to watch it if I’m going to stay in shape. You can pack it away and it doesn’t show.”

“ It shows.”

Jones’s cell phone sounded and he slid it from his shirt pocket.

“ Jones.”

“ Jerry.”

“ Yes, Nigel, how goes it?”

“ You're with McGill, right?”

“ Yes, *Nigel*.”

“ You sitting down?”

“ As a matter of fact I am. What’s up?”

He finished the last full fork of pie, scraped the plate and got every last swipe of pecan pie. “ I know where Maggie McCay went.”

“ Oh, really?” asked Jones, chewing the last pecans.

“ She’s a member of Triple A. It was on her side window. I called up and pretended I was her father. I had a nice conversation with the woman at the office in Prince William. Maggie McCay asked for maps on for the Finger Lakes Region in New York.”

“ That’s weird.”

“ Remember those cabins, where she summered?” Jones sat at the table again. McGill raised his brows and folded his hands on the table as if he knew Jones was not talking to Nigel. “ Well, I’m sure the faculty will appreciate your efforts.”

“ That’s where McCay was headed.”

“ Interesting.”

“ I’m warming up the T-Bird.”

“ Count me in, Nigel.”

“ I thought so. I’ll be outside your house at three-thirty.”

“ Are you saying, a.m.?”

“ We need to get up there, Bub, and put the squeeze on McCay. Turn up the volume and people crack.”

“ Okay.”

Jones cut the transmission and McGill stared at him. “ I suppose you want me to believe that was Nigel.”

“ Tommy, that is exactly what I want you to believe.”

* * *

Jones finished the chicken sandwich as Jerry rolled along the New York Thruway. From the time they left the Berkshire Hills in western Massachusetts and crossed the wide Hudson River in New York, Jones

attempted to construct a composite of Brad Davis's actions at the cabins along the lake. Given his behavior and bizarre track record, Jones suspected Maggie's best friend was murdered by Davis. That scenario would have required an extraordinary amount of power and money to extricate Davis from prison. Other possibilities included rape or assault. Maggie McCay had applied to teach at Hamilton College. Maybe she had stalked Davis and sought the ultimate revenge.

"I need a butt."

"You just had one back at the cafeteria," replied Jones, lifting the Coke to his lips.

"I'm one nervous cowboy."

"Hey, Jerry. You never smoke in the car. Why can't you just stop?"

"I can stop at any time."

"What are you nervous about?" asked Jones.

"That she's guilty as hell."

Jones nodded and gazed at the rolling green landscape.. "How much further?"

"Another hour. We need a play book and know what we're going to say to her."

"I should have told Strickland," said Jones.

"Nah, the coppers will mess it up." Jerry's cigarette was not lit in his mouth. "It's the truth, Coach, whether we like it or not."

* * *

Harrison's Cabins dotted a tree lined, grass slope adjacent to the lake and the winding rural highway. Jerry drove his T-Bird up the dirt road connecting the log cabins and divided at a central cabin up the hill. Jones checked the cars parked in each cabin drive, but did not see McCay's Expedition. Several vans and a truck were parked down the hill, near picnic tables, a swing set, and smoking barbecue grills.

“ Wonderful, she's not here.”

“ The schmoe on the phone said she was staying in one of the cabins.”

“ Let's check the office,” said Jones, again, looking back at the cabins. “ I'd also like to know just what happened to Floey Albright up here.”

Jerry parked the T-Bird below the office carport. Jones stepped outside, Jerry's lighter ignited a few seconds later and he inhaled quickly. Jones walked up to a pine framed screen door. A man with flipped over gray hair and reading glasses checked in a young couple at the counter. Jones opened the door and Jerry waved him inside.

The painted green and brown plywood map contained brass hooks for cabin keys. Only two cabins had keys still hanging. He walked by a full rack of pamphlets and advertising for local and state attractions and a large red no smoking sign. “ May I help you, sir?”

Jones turned to the man behind the counter. Jerry put out his half smoked cigarette, stepped by Jones and leaned in the guy's face. "What the hell kind of story you spinnin', Joe?"

"My name is John Harrison."

"Ever hear of the power of the pen, *Joe*?"

"What?"

Jones pressed his lips and pushed by Jerry. He winced at Jerry and then faced Harrison. "Mr. Harrison, I apologize for my friend's abruptness. My name is Matthias Jones. I'm looking for Maggie McCay."

Harrison glanced at Jerry and furrowed his brow before facing Jones. "Maggie stepped out, but didn't say when she was coming back."

"Oh, then she is registered?"

"Yes, sir."

"What else you coverin' up?" asked Jerry, pointing at Harrison.

Jones physically pulled Jerry back. "Jerry, shut up." He raised his brows and turned back to Harrison. "Does Maggie come her often?"

"I don't have to be badgered," said Harrison as he stared at Jerry. Jerry mumbled, rolled his eyes and wandered over to the pamphlets.

"To answer *your* question, Mr. Jones, Maggie's been up here a few times since I took over two years ago. Before that I don't know. Nice girl."

Jones nodded and rolled his tongue around his cheek as he wondered about McCay's complicity in the Davis murder. "She have relatives in the area?"

"I don't think so. She said she used to come up here with her family when she was a girl."

"What about Floey Albright?" "Who?"

"Her best friend. Something happened up here to Floey," said Jones.

Harrison removed his reading glasses and stroked his chin.

"Never mentioned a Floey Albright..."

"Okay."

Harrison's eyes opened wide as biting cigarette smoke filled the lobby. "Can't you read the sign?"

Jerry turned with the cigarette in his mouth. "I can read just fine when somebody plays ball... *Joe*." He straight-armed the screen door, but it swung back quickly and smacked his shoulder as he headed outside.

"Is that guy for real?" asked Harrison.

"You know, Mr. Harrison, that is a very good question."

"You guys want a cabin?"

"As a matter of fact... I see you have two left."

"Forty-two a night. Three nights it drops to thirty-five."

Jones flipped his credit card. "One night."

21

Jerry lifted the Styrofoam food trays off the picnic table and deposited the remains of the fast food breakfast in the metal playground trash barrel. All night Jones had grappled with the logistics of the murder. As he lay on the cot in the pine cabin he retraced what he believed was the trail of the killer. It was not beyond McCay's abilities to jog down the trail of the parking lot near the state highway back in Hamilton. At most, the jaunt to the spillway would take fifteen minutes, but with her SUV hidden back at the highway, no one would ever see her drive up to the lake house. Jones figured the row boat, previously stored in the bushes, would be easily launched from the spillway concrete. Crossing the lake at night was easy. Although she was equipped with the gun, stolen from her student's apartment, a pair of thin surgical gloves could erase her involvement. With the rear sliders open, McCay could slip in very easily and fire the weapon into the gut of a man who had done something to her best friend so many years ago.

Jerry lit a cigarette at the trash barrel and paced around the swing set. As Jones continued to ponder the murder, he realized a flaw existed in his own murder theory. Whether he suspected McCay or still implicated Fiore's people in Davis's murder, no one had lured Amy Pollard

over to the lake house nor had she discussed going over to there at that specific time. Maybe the murderer knew of the ongoing relationship between her and Davis. Framing her would only require knowledge of Amy's regular presence at the lake house. Linking the gun to her would evolve during a murder investigation. Her arrival on the night of the murder was a perk not anticipated by the murderer.

“ Wake up, Sunshine,” said Jerry, snapping his fingers at the picnic table. He had the morning newspaper tucked under his arm.

“ I'm trying to figure this out.”

“ You and me both. Listen, you should stay here in case she shows up.”

Jones stood and stretched. “ Oh, yeah, and what are you going to do, swim the lake?”

“ I used to be a good swimmer in my day.”

“ Did they have swimming during the Civil War?”

“ I get it, Bub.”

“ Right. You know Harrison is still miffed. Why don't you back off? And stop calling him Joe.”

The ragged skin around Jerry's blue eyes tightened. “ Forty years on the streets tells me ya gutta make em' crack.”

“ Jerry, he's just the owner of the cabins. Back off.”

“ I've got a rendezvous with destiny.”

“ Catchy.”

Jerry smiled and put his foot on the table bench. “ As an old newspaper hound, I'm going into town and do a little digging in the local newspaper archives of the Daily Gazette. There should be a story about what happened to Floey Albright somewhere in the vaults.”

“ You do that.” The morning sun warmed the humid air sufficiently to produce a soothing haze. Jones could easily settle back in one of the hammocks stung between the trees along the playground. “ McCay might show up here or maybe not.”

“ That's just it,” said Jerry, dropping the cigarette to the dirt. He crushed it with his shoe. “ You need to ask her direct if you see her.”

Jones bit his lip as he gazed through the trees to the gray lake. “ My gut feeling is Maggie didn't kill Davis and I still don't trust Fiore.” Jerry's wrinkled face compressed. “ What's the matter now?”

“ Nothin'. Fiore *is* still a prime suspect. Davis got sucked into whatever Fiore made available to him. Remember, Fiore's people dragged the broad, Desiree Paradise, out of the lake house, and Davis picked up something on that boat ride. Plus, how can you trust a slicker like Fiore?”

“ You can't.”

“ Okay, I'm splitting. I'll call you at the main office if I find something at the Gazette.”

Jones half waved and walked over to the first hammock. “ Or call the cell phone.”

“ Right. Be careful.”

He yawned and checked the hammock's stability. “ I don't think snoozing in the hammock is going to constitute combat pay, Jerry.”

Jones crawled onto the knotted rope and settled back. He closed his eyes in the warm air. The T-Bird 's engine turned over and the tires soon crunched the pebbles on the dirt road. A gentle relaxation swept over him with the afternoon breezes. He smiled, relieved Jerry had temporarily left, and half opened his eyes to the sky.

His cell phone rang in his back pocket. In slow motion, as if he were intoxicated, he reached around and lifted the phone to his ear.

“ Matth-*i*-as.”

“ Arnie?”

“ Muddy looked all around and couldn't find you before he started the job.”

Jones opened his eyes wider. “ What job?”

“ I told ya. For a PI, you ain't got no memory,”

“ Arnie, this call is going to cost me roaming charges. I'm not a PI.” The signal drifted for a moment and Jones thought he heard Arnie say something about Muddy painting his house. “ Did you say Muddy is painting my house?”

“ You don't listen too good, do ya? He's got the front all set and is moving around the side.”

“ I really don't want Muddy Jacobs painting my house!”

“ He’s gonna give you a flat price. Right Muddy? Yeah, Muddy says flat price rather than by the hour... Man, this itchin’ is getting to me.”

“ Itching?”

“ You must be raisin' poison ivy bushes in your yard, Matth-*i*-as. I picked some roses for my girlfriend and-”

“ Arnie, you picked roses out of my garden?”

“ Yeah, yeah, yeah. You’d better pay Muddy or he’ll paint it white again.”

Jones sat up in the hammock. “ What do you mean? What color is it?”

“ Sort of a... Hey, Mud, what color did it come out?” Jones heard Muddy yell something in the background. “ Was suppose ta be salmon but I guess it’s pink. I must have grabbed some already tinted paint up at the yard.”

“ Pink?” Jones leaped from the hammock. “ You tell him I want that house white!”

“ I can’t hear you... Oh, and you owe me for the paint.”

“ I owe you nothing. Fix that color,” he said as the signal faltered again. “ Arnie? Hello, Arnie?”

The transmission ended and Jones closed his eyes. He thought about calling back, but tried to dismiss the fiasco. With everything else going on he was not going to worry about something simply corrected.

The image of his colonial on the common, painted bright pink, threatened to ruin his afternoon siesta. He settled back in the hammock and closed his eyes, but just the idea of Arnie taking the liberty of painting his house, sent his head spinning.

Unable to rest, Jones tried reading the newspaper at the picnic table. He wandered throughout the complex, and even hiked the small wooded hill trails behind the grounds. Near noon he purchased some food from the vending machine by the main office. After stuffing himself with prepackaged high calorie junk, he returned to the playground where children now arced into the air on the galvanized swing set. Across the field he found an isolated hammock between two large oaks and gave sleep another chance. As he stretched his body across the intertwined thick white rope, a weightless feeling set in, and he swayed in the warm breeze. The strain of the investigation and the culmination of the past months at the college seemed to burn away in the summer sun encroaching through the leafy branches.

He floated in and out of a light sleep as the sound of the children playing sporadically drifted across the playground. An occasional car would enter the cabin road and he would open one eye, scanning blurry image for Maggie's Expedition. When he was not thinking of Muddy painting his house pink, he went out, sleeping deeply for undetermined gaps. A cooler air surge and a sweeping darkness roused him later. The

playground was empty. Heavy, fast moving black clouds pushed the chilling breezes over the silver treetops.

He rolled off the hammock and searched Jerry's T-Bird. Across the playground lightening flashed and distant thunder skipped over the rolling hills across the lake. Occasional dense raindrops pelted his face as he jogged up to the cabin. He reached the porch as the rain exploded from the skies. Water soon gushed off the roof and cut into the dirt below. Jones folded his arms in the cooler air and pictured Jerry hunched over a table in the Daily Gazette's basement, listening to the thunder and thumbing through old papers or moving microfilm records over a projection screen.

Headlights shone through the rain-drenched air down the hill. As the hum of the engine grew louder and wipers swished waves of water over the windshield, Jones recognized the dark SUV as Maggie's Expedition. The large vehicle sailed through the rain sheets about fifty feet away and veered toward the main office. She slowed and left the car running under the carport. In a blue hooded raincoat McCay hurried up the office porch's stairs and entered the building.

Jones debated running through the rain to the office. His heart pounded at the thought of confronting her about Davis's murder. Just the idea of his being up here would send her reeling. She emerged a few seconds later, ran back to the Expedition and drove away from the office. Jones ducked behind the porch support as she chugged up the road by

his cabin. The taillights glowed in the pounding rain outside the third cabin.

He opened the screen door and grabbed his wind breaker from the chair. When he stepped back on the porch, the Expedition's lights and wipers were shut off. He flipped up his nylon hood and trotted onto the mud. Lightening brightened the cabin grounds and rain pattered against his hood like rounded copper bebbies shot from a gun. He slowed near her cabin. The inside lamps cast a warm glow and McCay set her blue rain parka across the chair back. As he climbed the porch steps, he still refused to believe she had killed Brad Davis.

The rain cascaded into linear puddles as Jones spoke clearly in front of the screen. "Maggie."

She was not rattled and turned almost as if she expected him there. Her green eyes were glazed as she shuffled toward the door, her jeans wet at the sneakers and her slim body accentuated by a loosely fitting olive tank top. "Very good. You're very good. How?"

"Your car has a sticker... You went to Triple A..."

"I did."

Jones pulled back his wind breaker hood. "Maggie, I know about your visits to the lake house and the boat."

"I figured."

They faced each other on either side of the screen door. Her eyes were distant up close. Jones wondered what she was thinking. He had the urge to hold her. “Maggie... what happened up here?”

She raised her dark trimmed brows for a moment and half grinned.

“You found out everything else, I’m surprised you don’t know.”

“I don’t.” Jerry might have found something by now, but Jones wanted to hear it from Maggie. She slowly pushed open the screen door and he looked into her eyes again as he stepped forward. “Thank you.”

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“No...”

“Take off your coat, Matthias. Sit down if you want.”

Jones pulled the chair across the wood floor, but remained standing with his hands on the back. “Davis hurt your friend. Did he kill her?”

She shook her head, lingered at the door and folded her long arms across the tank top. “What Brad Davis did was worse than murder...”

Jones released his grip on the chair and inched across the room. In the silver light of the thunderstorm, tears descended her smooth white cheeks. She reached out slowly and held him tightly as she cried into his wind breaker.

“It’s all right, Maggie.”

She quickly regained control and still held him as she looked into his eyes. “ She lay in a coma, Matthias. For what? Because she didn’t do what he wanted her in the boat. Right out there on the lake.”

“ Then he raped her?”

“ No, he smashed her with an oar. And... and pushed her into the water. She fought to stay afloat as he rowed away. But she couldn’t stay above water. She was under the water long enough to sustain permanent brain damage. You know ... oxygen deprivation. It’s my fault.”

“ Why is it your fault?”

“ Because I insisted that my parents bring Floey up here from New Jersey.”

“ Wait... did Davis save her?” asked Jones as she wiped her eyes.

“ No, a man on shore saw her in the water. Davis had rowed around the cove. The guy dove in the lake, swam out and made repeated dives. He brought her up, but she had been down there a long time.”

“ My first question, Maggie,” he said softly, “ relates to Davis. I don’t understand. Why didn’t he go to jail? That’s attempted murder in my book.”

“ He did go to jail, but he only served five years. You now, good behavior, the whole bit. He went back to his work because besides being a perverted lush, Brad Davis was brilliant. Funny how it works that way. Genius dismisses character flaws.”

“ And the Fletchers brought him to Hamilton College.”

“ Oh, yeah. Knowing what he did!" She stared at him as the storm persisted. " And Floey is institutionalized. That's where I've been. She recognizes me, but her cognition is minimal. Floey wanted to be a doctor. She was a straight A student. Am I glad Brad Davis was shot to death? I would like to give the person who killed him a million dollars. ”

“ You had a key to Amy Pollard's apartment.”

“ Still do. And I was out at the lake house. Amy was doing a story for my journalism class about Brad Davis's research. I never told her about Floey. Brad laughed at me when I threatened to pressure the Fletchers publicly. And the Fletchers would never receive me. I had my own story about Brad Davis written and was ready to go forward with it to discredit him. But somebody killed him.”

Her put his hand on her back and guided her to the table. They both sat and she wiped her eyes again. “ I apologize for the emotional outpouring.”

Thunder shook the cabin. “ You're entitled.”

Maggie propped her elbows on the table. Her moist, lively eyes were bordered by thin dark brows and her subtle lips neatly outlined a smile Jones had never seen. “ I gave you a lot of grief.”

“ Look, Maggie-”

“ Nope, I did and for that I'm sorry. I just didn't want you to know all this. I tried to push Davis but it never worked. I continuously harassed him. Justice has been served. But not by me.”

“ Who?”

She flattened her lips and shook her head. “ I don’t know that. There were so many people. So many women. Obviously Amy was framed.”

“ Who fired at us on Tolby Lake?”

“ Again, somebody who wanted us away from the investigation. Probably the people from Boston... Lennie The Falcon and Billy. They work for a guy named-”

“ Fiore, Albert Fiore. I know. I’ve met him.”

“ You are thorough. I’ll give you that.” Oddly her eyes filled again. “ I’m so sorry. This is all my fault.”

“ I don’t understand why this it your fault?”

“ Not telling her about Brad was worst thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

Jones assured her, as the storm pummeled the landscape, everything said in the cabin would remain confidential. She stood abruptly and returned to the door. Her tall form was silhouetted against the dark and the continuous lightening flashes. She gripped the door frame and as emotion surged, her voice quivered.

“ I tired to tell her about Brad Davis.”

Jones held her shoulders from behind. “ She put herself in harm’s way, Maggie. I’m sure she sensed what kind of guy he was from the get-go.” Jones turned her around and she gazed strongly into his eyes.

“ Now we have to find out who framed her.”

She held him again, and her long, fresh scented dark hair swept over his arms. Jones tried to remove his feelings for her, but did not want stop holding her. They talked at the door and watched the rain splatter into the spreading puddles. She got drinks from the refrigerator and they sat on the couch and temporarily avoided talk of the murder as the storm passed.

The skies remained dark, but the rain and thunder had subsided when they stepped into the fresher air. They walked together over the wet pavement, down the hill toward the playground. When she recounted her summers by the lake Jones had the odd feeling he had known Maggie longer than a few weeks.

He checked the road. Jerry was due back and perhaps had new information. Jones pushed Maggie on the swing before climbing on the adjacent swing. “ Where were you when you discussed Davis' background with Amy Pollard?”

“ At the Marlboro Inn dining room.”

“ I'm just wondering if someone overheard your conversation. Who else was there, do you remember?”

“ No... No, I don't. I was so nervous about telling her about Brad and when she mentioned she had the gun-”

“ She said that?”

“ Yes, but it was noisy. Who could have heard it?”

“ The killer or someone who ordered the killing. Maggie, you have to remember who was in that dining room.”

“ I don't know. You think the killer would sit right there?”

“ Never underestimate the ability of a killer to make stupid mistakes or do obvious things.”

She stood and they started around the wet grass. Jones talked about his life in Indiana, but did not mention Laura or her untimely death in Hamilton. He told her he had excelled in sports even at a young age. Although she was brought up in New Jersey, Maggie lived in a rural township and became a good athlete in her teenage years, engaging in soccer and track.

“ You see, Maggie. You and I have more in common than we thought.”

“ I wanted to keep you distant.”

“ You did a good job,” said Jones as they reached the edge of the drive, about a hundred feet from the road.

“ How did you get up here? Where's your car?”

“ Jerry St. Clair drove me up here. He should be back soon.”

“ The newspaper man. Ah, yes.”

“ He went into town to check the newspaper accounts about Floey.” Maggie nodded and held onto his arm as they rounded the field. Pale yellow haze was enveloped by deeper blue clouds to the west and the sun cut orange rays over the water glazed treetops. Water dripped from

the tree leaves as Jones scanned the hills, but a flickering fire caught his eye back toward the cabins. “ Looks like an old fashion bonfire. I like bon fires. Bands on the common. Gazebos.”

“ Sounds like Hamilton.”

Jones faced her “ You thinking of staying?”

“ Well, I don’t know. The only reason I came here was to ruin Davis.”

“ And the only reason you stay is to free Amy Pollard.”

“ The town is rural enough but still near Prince William and not too far from Boston. I like it.” She looked up the hill. “ That fire is in a weird place.”

Jones turned. The flames fanned upward near the trees midway up the hill. “Wait...”

She grabbed his hand and they ran across the field. “ That’s the cabin!”

“ They’ve torched the car and the cabin!” Jones held her back..

“ My Expedition!”

“ No, hold it. They’ll still be up there.” They ducked behind a wide oak trunk.

“ Who? Who?”

“ I don’t know.” Aggressive yellow-blue flames shot out of the car windows and Jones feared an explosion. The porch was engulfed by

more a more extensive orange fire. “ I didn’t tell anybody, but somebody knew!”

Figures appeared within the glow back at the main office. Other people ran out of the side cabins and someone yelled out orders in the dark. Helpless, Jones held Maggie behind the tree as the fire burned with no resulting explosion. He felt the tension in her arms and she said nothing as anger and sadness inundated her glassy stare.

“ This time they wanted us dead,” said Maggie in a low voice.

“ You got that right.” The low wail of a siren wavered through the woods. Cars slowed on the highway and people ran up the drive. “ Maggie, you didn’t even tell them at the inn where you were staying.”

“ Nobody. But you figured it out.”

“ Jerry figured it out. Where the hell is he?”

* * *

Jones let his teeth glide into a jelly donut and quickly lubricated it with a cup of hot coffee. A stunned Maggie sat between Jones and Jerry in the T-Bird as they neared the highway. Earlier, Jerry had returned amidst the fire trucks and police cruisers. He smoked a cigarette on the playground, while Jones and Maggie were interviewed by state police officers. The bright police lights shined over the smoldering cabin and charred Expedition as the officer’s walkie talkies punctuated the air with

chatter from the police teams sweeping the woods. One witness saw a teal van parked in a rest area a mile down the main road, but no one was seen in the van or around the cabins.

“ Maybe we should stay on the back roads,” said Jones.

Maggie’s face had a washed out look and she spoke slowly. “ They must think we're dead.”

“ *Who* thinks we’re dead is the question,” said Jones. He finished the donut and wiped his fingers with the napkin. “ I've got a good mind to call Fiore directly.”

“ We must have stepped out of the cabin minutes before they threw in the gasoline. The insurance won't fully replace my car.”

“ We could be dead,” said Jones. Jones looked over at Jerry, slouched toward the door and gripping the wheel. “ You're not saying much, Jer.”

“ I know when to clam up.”

“ Where is Fiore's office, Jerry?” asked Maggie.

“ Penthouse: High Tower Building: harbor view.”

“ Fiore has a lot to answer for,” said Jones.

“ And the dynamic duo is going butt heads with the most powerful crime figure in New England?”

“ The man obviously sent his people up to kill us!” yelled Jones.

“ Jerry may be right,” said Maggie. “ What can we accomplish?”

Jones clenched his fists as Jerry approached the interstate ramp. “ I

just don't understand. Fiore must have had people shadowing us up here.”

“ That makes sense,” said Maggie, her eyelids heavy. She yawned, leaned back against the convertible top and closed her eyes.

“ What's the time frame to get back to Hamilton?” asked Jones.

Jerry lifted up his gold watch. “ Figure twelve hours, Bub.”

“ Now I have to look at a pink house.”

“ A pink house?” asked Jerry.

“ That idiot, Arnie Dewers had Muddy Jacobs paint my house:
pink! ”

“ Crummy color,” said Jerry as he brought the car up the ramp and easily shot onto the deserted highway.

“ And then he picks roses out of my garden for that girlfriend of his. Serves him right he got poison ivy all over him. “ Jones grit his teeth.
“Arnie Dewars...”

“ Poison ivy ain't no laughing matter,” said Jerry.

“ Well, he's going to have to repaint the house white.” Jones looked back in the darkness down the highway, unsure whether Fiore was aware he and Maggie were still alive.

22

In a turnpike restaurant in Western Massachusetts Jones finished a hefty breakfast. He had driven the T-Bird since the Hudson River back in New York, but the coffee as well as thoughts of the fire had kept his mind buzzing. Jerry had not eaten breakfast and said very little at the window table. Morning traffic pulsed down the highway as Jones still debated calling Fiore. Contacting Strickland and informing him about New York was the logical action, yet Jones hesitated removing his cell phone from his pocket.

“ I'll tell you. All I want to do is shower and get out of these clothes,” he said.

“ We'd all appreciate that,” said Maggie, munching on a cantaloupe slice.

Jones grinned. “ Your wardrobe could stand some improvement at this point.”

“ You mean you don't like the matted down look?” She pretended to comb her long dark hair. Even without makeup and lacking sleep, Jones still found her attractive. “ Who needs deodorant?”

“ You want me to answer that?”

“ I don't,” she said, opening her green eyes at him.

Jones looked at Jerry, hands folded and peering out the window.

“ You all right, Jerry?”

“ A-OK. Listen, I'm going to get some gas.” He took out his bill-fold. “ How much was my portion of this?”

“ What, a cup of black coffee? I got it, Jer.”

Jerry nodded and Maggie stepped from the booth so he could slide out. “ Catch you outside.”

“ Okay.” Jones watched his stunted gait. He leaned forward to Maggie. “ Something is wrong with him.”

“ Maybe he just doesn't feel good.”

“ No, it's something else.” Jones watched Jerry through the window as he walked down the concrete toward the T-Bird parked in the lot.

“ Matthias, promise me something.”

Jones looked tired eyes. “ What's that?”

“ When this is over I want to bring you to dinner. Make up for my lack of hospitality.”

Jones's contained smile threatened to explode across his face. “ I'd like that...*McCay*.”

“ Then it's a date, *Jones*.”

* * *

Jerry sat in the T-Bird at the edge of the station, near the connector back to the turnpike as Jones waited outside for Maggie to emerge from

the ladies room. She had combed her hair and her face was flush when she walked out. " Why is it women take forever in a bathroom?"

" A woman requires work."

" Ain't that the truth?" With a raised brow Jones was about to put his hand behind her back when two men in light colored summer suits raced from woods. A long white limo edged up the curb. Jones stepped in front of Maggie and faced the two men.

" Good morning, Mr. Jones. Mr. Fiore sent us."

Maggie held his arm. " Why not just kill us now? Since you messed up last night."

" Mr. Fiore requested we bring you to Boston."

" Why?"

" Purely business, Mr. Jones. Everything Mr. Fiore does relates to his business."

Jones glanced back to the T-Bird. " We're traveling with Jerry St. Clair."

" Mr. St. Clair will not be accompanying you to Boston."

" Then somebody should tell him."

" Not your problem," he said, removing a compact .38 from his suit coat. " Let's go."

He held Maggie's hand tightly as they walked the fifty feet to the limo. The driver opened the rear door and they climbed onto a smooth cream colored leather seat. Jones worried about Jerry, confused why

would Fiore burn the cabin and Maggie's car and now bring them to Boston. The two men settled into the facing seat and like the thud of a refrigerator door they were all sealed inside.

They were offered use of 19-inch TV monitor and drinks from a small wooden center bar's mix of liquor bottles. Through the tinted windows, as the limo looped around the restaurant and gas station, Jones saw Jerry slouched behind the steering wheel. The limo accelerated out of the lot and onto the turnpike. Still holding Maggie's hand, he questioned Fiore motives and wondered why he and Maggie were still alive.

* * *

He first saw Boston skyscrapers, including the High Tower's green glass, rise over the suburban hills west of Boston. Maggie's head rested on his shoulder as she slept, but Jones remained revved up. Both men in the suits had long since refused to answer any questions. He stared out the window as the urban landscape soon devoured the wooded hills. White sailboats dabbled the Charles River and on the grassy banks people played Frisbee and lounged in the warm sun. He thought about Jerry and what they might have told him.

The limo passed through toll booths, but no one paid the toll. Once off the highway, they whisked past the endless brick townhouses on Commonwealth Ave. and dodged the traffic toward the reflecting High

Tower Building glass. The limo lurched at the dip of an sloping ramp below the building, stirring Maggie. She peered into the dimly lit garage as the driver stopped quickly and opened the side door. Everyone exited onto the concrete and were immediately escorted to a small stainless steel elevator near the stairwell.

During the rapid rise into the building Jones again attempted to extract information from the guys in the suits. “ It would be nice to know what a man like Albert Fiore would want with us.”

“ I have nothing to say,” said the sandy haired man.

“ Did you people try and kill us?”

“ Jones, just drop it, will you?”

Jones looked at Maggie. She shrugged her shoulders and grinned. “ It could be worse.”

“ Oh? ”

“ It could have been you jeep.”

* * *

Fiore’s office was as large and ostentatious as Jones had imagined. The mahogany paneled room was coated with a thick finely sheared, taupe wool rug. Plaster ceilings were bordered by mahogany beveled molding. Fiore’s glass topped desk, the size of an average ping pong table, had a small TV monitor, computer screen and keyboard. The wall

embedded bookshelves were separated by a deep, luminescent glass tank filled with bright yellow and blue fish.

Jones wandered over the window overlooking the meandering sailboats and traffic pulsing across the bridges. To the east the silver Atlantic spread to the horizon, and a portion of the airport was blocked by more buildings to the south. Outside the spreading suburban sprawl, Mount Monadnock's lofty stone edifice outlined the skies above the southern New Hampshire forests. Jones sat on the window sill and stared at the jets angling into the skies over East Boston.

"The view is unmatched," said Albert Fiore, stepping inside from a side-paneled door. He wore a striped shirt with gold cuff links, wide blue suspenders and a solid blue tie. He headed over to Maggie. "I'm Albert Fiore, Miss McCay."

"Are you responsible for ruining my Expedition?"

"Cut to the chase. Very good." He opened the top desk drawer and held out a box of cigars. "Cigar, Matt?"

"Matt?" asked Maggie.

"No, thank you. Mr. Fiore, I am in no position to be challenging you and please don't take this the wrong way, but—"

"I'm just an average guy, Matt. An average guy who clawed his way to the top. You have questions... ask your questions."

Jones moved away from the window as Fiore lit the cigar and puffed it red. "Are the Nickersons all right?"

“ Still on their cruise.”

“ Second question: What happened in New York at the cabins?”

Fiore’s blue eyes remained fixed and he spoke with the cigar between his incisors. “ We are aware of the fire.”

“ How did you know we were on the turnpike?”

“ I make it a habit to keep tabs on people important to me.”

Maggie stepped forward. “ We’re important to you?”

“ Yes, especially you, Miss McCay. I believe you have information beneficial to my operation.” He turned to Jones. “ And to your investigation.”

“ You’ll forgive me if I don't trust you,"

“ I wouldn’t respect you if you trusted me, Matt.”

“ Your people were not responsible for the fires?” asked Jones.

“ Not under my directions and I’ll explain.”

“ Please do.”

“ Lennie The Falcon and Billy...”

“ Oh, boy,” said Maggie. “ Here we go.”

“ See, Miss McCay knows, don’t you Miss McCay?”

“ I know these men because they were on the boat and at the lake house.”

“ I’m sure one of them sucker punched me,” said Jones.

“ Right on both counts. Word is out to bring them in, after which I will personally kill them.”

“ Why?” asked Maggie.

“ As I told Matt, I milked Davis for all he was worth or should I say the Fletcher family is worth. The man’s weakness with women and booze made him an easy mark. I gave him access to the best women, the best gambling halls... everything. But the guy kept coming back to the Slipper. He was obsessed with Desiree Paradise. Here’s my problem: Just before his death, Davis spent recklessly. I have copies of his bank accounts. Two checks are prominent. One check to The Falcon and one to Billy. They both hung out at the Slipper all the time.”

“ What’s the catch?” asked Jones.

“ The catch is software, air lifted a small Cessna from the North Shore and dropped in Hamilton Bay. Market value: twenty-two million dollars. My cut in this is six and one half million dollars, but I get nothing unless I deliver the goods.”

Jones tilted his head. “ What happened?”

“ Oh, he went to make the pick up, all right, and we watched him find the parachute in the water. But he was killed and the box with the software was gone. ”

“ I don’t understand, why wouldn’t you have sent your people to pick up the goods?”

“ It was risky... I have people watching me and my people all the time. I told you we would have killed Davis if he was caught. I agree to erase the hundred and ten grand on his tab. One ten for six point five.”

“ Where are Lennie The Falcon and Billy now?”

“ That's the scam. I don't know where they are nor do I know where Desiree disappeared. We have a Chelsea address, but she's not there. They may have just killed her.”

“ I know what he wants,” said Maggie.

Fiore's eyes brightened as he turned. “ I thought so.”

Maggie raised her brows. “ You want to know if in my travels to Davis' boat and the lake house, whether I knew Desiree.”

“ Very perceptive. She lived in the hotel above the Slipper and the place in Chelsea,” said Fiore.

“ She had an apartment outside of the city. Herndon, forty-five minutes from Prince William,” said Maggie.

“ Very good. Not too far from Software Enhancers.” Fiore set the cigar in a large ashtray. A wide smile slowly rose his smooth face.

“ She lived off and on with a guy named Cando. I never met Cando.”

“ Cando?” asked Jones, turning to Maggie.

“ Do you know where in Herndon?”

“ Yes.”

Fiore smiled again when Maggie did not elaborate. He sat on the edge of his desk. “ As I told Matt, I have a briefcase full of money for recovery of the software. I'm raising that my reward to one ten just like

Davis's debt. See, I think Desiree, if she's alive, knows where the software is or The Falcon and Billy are hiding."

"What about this Cando?" asked Jones.

"He may be involved, who knows?" asked Fiore.

"Someone stole Amy Pollard's gun and framed her," said Jones.

"Matt, it happens. My concern is getting back the software. I will cover for you with people up in Herndon, but the state cops and federal investigators might have people watching me. All you need to do, Miss McCay, is find Desiree and the location of the software."

"And what if Lennie The Falcon and Billy or the boyfriend show up? It's damned risky," said Jones.

"A hundred and ten grand says it's not that risky."

Jones leaned against the cold window glass and looked across the river toward Harvard's brick buildings. "I don't care about the money. My concern is Amy Pollard."

"The two objectives are not mutually exclusive, Matt."

"I'll do it," said Maggie.

Jones leaped from the window. "Maggie. We're not talking about a convenience store hold up. These people will kill at the drop of a hat. They may have tried to get us already."

"Matthias, there's more to this."

"What do you mean?"

“ Floey Albright. The hospital she’s in is private. That money would supplement other things. I owe it to her.”

“ You don’t owe her. It wasn’t your fault.”

Maggie eyes moistened and she held Jones’s hands. “ Will you come with me to the apartment?”

“ Yeah, but I think this is very risky.”

“ Life is risky.”

Fiore folded his arms as he smoked the glowing cigar. “ Life is risky. Very risky.”

23

Jones was relieved when Jerry's raspy voice vibrated in the restaurant phone. "Coach, you split."

"Just left Albert Fiore's office."

"I hightailed it back to Hamilton."

Jones looked at Maggie, on the other phone with Desiree Paradise. The two Fiore bodyguards from the limo stood in the hall. "Jerry. Does Strickland know what happened?"

"He don't know nothin'."

"Good, I need you to check out some guy that lived with Desiree. His nickname was Cando."

"Cando... shacked up with the stripper?"

"Right... And the missing Fiore package. The reward is up to a hundred and ten grand, Jerry. I'm on my way to meet with Desiree."

"I'll call Gordy and do some checking myself."

"Good. But don't call Fiore. I'll call you," said Jones.

"I'll find out who Cando is."

Jones hung up the phone, hoping more to divert Jerry rather than actually have him track down Cando's identity. He turned as Maggie set down the phone and the two Fiore men moved forward. "Desiree

agreed to meet me, I told her you'd be with me. It's a large apartment building in Herndon, used to be an old factory, now luxury apartments. She said she knows where Lennie The Falcon and Billy are held up."

" Good. What about Cando?"

Her eyes opened wide and emotion choked her voice. " He's with her now, but she wouldn't tell me his name. She sounded scared."

" *He's there?* This guy could have information," said Jones.

" Maybe we should called your Chief Strickland."

Jones stroked his chin and one of the Fiore guys stepped down. " I don't think Mr. Fiore would be happy about that."

Maggie held his hand and they started back into the lobby. " I hope Fiore's telling us the truth."

" Mr. Fiore always tells the truth," said the shorter guy.

" Don't you have a name?" asked Jones.

" Yeah, I gut a name. It's sir. Now get in the car. We're headin' north."

* * *

Maggie pointed from the sedan's side window. From the highway the old ten story factory, now converted to apartments, dominated city's the long brick warehouses and aluminum sided tenements. She advised the driver to exit at the overpass and they quickly sped onto the asphalt

patched streets. While Jones wanted to satisfy Fiore's inquiries about the stolen software, his main focus was Brad Davis's murder. Desiree was dragged out of the lake house only hours before Davis' murder and just before his trip around the bay. She had spent enough time with Davis to have pertinent information.

They rumbled over cobblestones along an old granite slab lined canal leading to the apartments. Jones gazed up the ornate facade and new, tinted windows. The driver parked the car on the curb as the other guy quickly opened the door. Jones and Maggie marched with the two men up to the iron gate entrance. Maggie pushed the silver button for apartment 642. Jones's eyes darted between old brick buildings across the murky canal and back to the inner apartment lobby. Maggie pushed the apartment button again, but no one answered. "She was just here an hour ago."

"I don't like this," said Jones, hitting the office button. Anything just slightly out of place in a high stakes game meant trouble.

A shrill voice came through the tiny metal grill. "Yes, this is Wendy."

"We're trying to get into 642. Can you see if she's in? We just talked to the woman. I think something is wrong."

"I'll call security."

The other guy pulled open the gate when the office buzzed. Jones followed Maggie into a spacious tiled wall lobby with a diamond

graphic rug, surrounded by a solid border. Upper recessed lights brightened the gray walls.

A Latin looking uniformed security officer and a well-dressed woman in a silky red dress rounded the corner. The guard trotted ahead.

“ What’s the problem?”

“ We just talked to Desiree in 642 and now there’s no answer,” said Jones. He studied the cameras above the lobby. “ You record with those cameras?”

“ No, we have a room with monitors... Who are you people?”

“ Friends of Desiree and Cando.”

“ Cando. He just left.”

Jones looked at the Fiore men. “ I think we better check upstairs.”

“ No... I’ll check this out.” The guard turned to the woman.

“ Wendy, log this at the police station. Get a cruiser over here.”

She nodded and ran back into the corridor.

Jones pleaded with the guard but was advised he would need to stay behind. “ Cando is a nickname. Do you know who he is?”

“ I only know him as Cando,” said the guard he rushed to the elevator.

“ Where is he from?”

“ I just saw him in passing. Nice guy.” The guard pushed the elevator button and waited. The doors opened and he disappeared inside.

Jones debated whether to follow him up the stairs, but Maggie grabbed his arm. “ Matthias, this may be nothing.”

“ I’m not so sure of that. I’m going upstairs.”

“ What if something is wrong?”

“ Then it’s probably already happened. Stay with them down here. I’ll be right back..”

The blonde guy turned to Jones at the stairwell. “ By the way, my name is Boggs. ”

“ Yes, sir.” Jones saluted and sprinted up the concrete stairs, thinking about Cando and his sudden departure from the apartment complex. Boggs raised his gun when they reached the sixth floor. He opened the door and fanned the gun in the well-lit lobby. The green and white wall sign indicated apartments 600-650 were down the left corridor. The end door was open.

“ Stay here, Jones.”

“ No way.” He ran behind Boggs down the length of the hall as the security guard, his face ashen, burst into the hallway. He raised his gun, but used it to gesture. “ She's dead!”

Jones was stymied by the anxiety racking his body. “ What?”

“ Somebody slashed her throat!”

“ You'd better tell the police. You said Cando was just up here,” said Jones, peering inside. Desiree’s long yellow hair flowed over the pink sheets. A rounded blood saturated area across her motionless torso

confirmed the security guard's admonitions. He turned to the guard, taking on the hallway phone. “ Who the hell is Cando?”

“ Boyfriend... Wendy, this is Wilfredo. Call the cops! Now! She dead!” he listened and hung up the phone. Then he ran to the corridor window. “ She was so beautiful. I can't believe this.”

“ We need to get out of here,” Boggs whispered to Jones. “ Cops will be all over this place!”

With each step through the indirect corridor light, the image of the lifeless Desiree froze in his mind like a surreal painting in an dimly lit art museum. Cando killed her. Whether he was working for Lennie The Falcon and Billy did not matter. Fiore's software seared anyone who came too close. Boggs pushed the elevator button and the doors opened. Jones tried to piece everything together as he stepped inside.

The car hummed downward through the building. He looked into Boggs' solid eyes as the first floor light popped on and with a single ding the elevator doors slid open. Boggs' eyes widened and his face contorted. Jones turned toward the lobby. The office manager hovered over the other Fiore guy, sprawled across the lobby rug. Jones ran out but he did not see Maggie. “ Where's Maggie?”

“ I heard a gunshot!” screamed the office manager. “ Now this man is dying!”

Boggs yanked out a cell phone. Jones could hear him talking to emergency personnel a few seconds later. The other man's eyes were

glassy and his shirt was pierced with a clean hole at the waist. Jones squatted down. "Where's Maggie?"

He lurched and stared at the ceiling as he spoke. "Took her..."

Jones did not wait for further descriptions of the assailant, now kidnapper. He sprinted down the lobby stairs and careened through the alcove door. Once outside on the concrete, he scanned the quiet side street, pushed the iron gate and ran onto the sidewalk. At the narrow canal road, a distant compact car approached, and in the other direction the street was empty up to the turn. He glanced at the parked cars and ran across the street to the canal's long granite slabs along the greasy water.

Boggs ran through the iron gate and into the street. "Jones!"

"I don't see anything."

"He's dead."

Jones studied the each bush and shrub. "Maggie..."

"Mr. Fiore wants us out of here."

Jones was startled as a teal Bubble top van's tires spun from behind the maintenance wall. The tinted windows blocked his view as the van sped along the canal. Jones followed Boggs back into the Lincoln and Boggs veered onto the road, cutting off the approaching compact. The van rounded the corner and disappeared between two brick buildings. Boggs pushed a preprogrammed button on his cell phone.

" Cando has Maggie!" yelled Jones. " Teal van. It was a teal van somebody saw up in New York!"

Boggs gripped the wheel and Jones buckled his seat belt as the car dipped at the corner. The road was clear up to the traffic light. Boggs ran the light and rolled into the intersection. Jones spotted the van moving south in heavy traffic on the interstate, but Boggs was bottlenecked by a front end loader backing up from the pipe laying construction site ahead.

" Get by him!"

" I can't. We're stuck."

Jones leaned against the windshield, trying not think about Maggie's abduction. Maybe she was gunned down back at the apartment complex. More likely, Cando was cornered and needed a hostage. Boggs, on his cell phone, tried several times to squeeze between the cars now backed to the light.

" Mr. Fiore has left his office. He'll meet us on Route 128."

" I never should have left her down there! What a stupid move!"

" Don't blame yourself. No way you could have known Cando would come back."

" I just shouldn't have left Maggie! I shouldn't have left her..."

24

As the wee hours passed Jones had not showered or changed his clothes. Without looking at McGill, he fidgeted with the sugar bowl on his breakfast nook table. He tried to forget Maggie was missing and his house's pink clapboards and shutters had caused a citation from the historical commission. Strickland brought him a steaming cup of coffee and a sandwich as Nigel spoke on the kitchen phone. In the six hours since Maggie disappearance, state police throughout New England were on alert for the teal Ford Econoline van. Jones did not doubt they would find the van, but feared Cando might have brought Maggie back to Lennie The Falcon and Billy. Before he brought Jones back to Hamilton Boggs had said Fiore, unbeknownst to the police had sent the word out that he wanted all three men killed. Only a select few people knew about the software. Jones, concerned about Maggie's life, refused to betray Fiore's confidence.

“Matthias,” said Nigel, hanging up the phone. “I just finished speaking with Hamilton Fletcher.”

“Hamilton Fletcher started all this by bringing Davis to the college.”

Nigel squinted and did not complete his thought. “Is there anything

you need?"

"No." He sucked in a full gulp of coffee and let the warmth soothe his throat.

"Mario Ianelli got a report from the Mass. State Police," said Strickland. Jones kept his lips to the edge of the coffee mug. "He reports the office manager says you entered the apartments in Herndon with Professor McCay and two men. One of the men is dead. Matthias, they want to know who those two men are."

"Well, that's just too bad, isn't it, George."

"Come on, Matthias."

"There are other things going on here."

"What things?" Jones looked over the mug rim at his friend but did not answer. Strickland shook his head. "These guys aren't going to fool around. It's one thing if you start messing around with our investigation, but now you're in the middle of the stripper's murder."

"Cando did it. Amy Pollard says she heard the name."

Strickland shot out of the chair. His face brightened red. "Well, I don't know who Cando is either! And I'm sorry Professor McCay was taken away. I am. But how are we supposed to do anything if we don't know what kind of connections you made. This dead guy--"

"I'm not talking."

"That's damned stupid!"

McGill stood at the other end. "George, drop it."

“ You’re talking about obstruction. They won’t mess around. They’ll jail him!”

McGill stroked his bushy gray mustache. “ Matthias-”

“ Tom, don’t start.”

The wall phone rang and Nigel answered it. He acknowledged the caller and turned to Strickland. “ Mr. Ianelli from the state police.”

“ I hope your ready for what they’re about to do to you, ” said Strickland. He walked around the kitchen table and Nigel handed the phone to him. Jones carefully tried to gauge his facial expressions. His lips remained fixed as he nodded.

“ What happened? George?”

Strickland held up his index finger and took out his pen.. “ That is very unusual. Definitely a van though? What are the names of the dead men?”

“ The van?” This time Jones raced for the phone. “ What happened?”

“ Yes, Mario, he’s here. I told him. He won’t say. I will tell him.” Strickland handed the phone back to Nigel and pointed at Jones. “ He wants to see you tomorrow morning at nine.”

“ What happened?”

“ Two men were gunned down gangland style outside a restaurant in Worcester half an hour ago. The teal van was reported in the area but not at the exact time of the murder.”

“ Who was killed?”

Strickland looked down at his notebook. “ Guys named Leonard Sabin and William Craig. You know them?”

Jones tightened his brow. “ You have to find her!”

“ What do you mean? You won't even cooperate!” said Strickland, grabbing his hat. “ I'm out of here. And I'll tell you, Matthias, you're walking a thin line right now.”

“ I understand that...”

Strickland did not look back and was out the front door immediately. McGill stood and approached Jones. “ Matthias, maybe you should do what they say.”

“ I *can't*, Tom.”

“ Do you need the Fletchers help?” asked Nigel.

Jones shook his head. “ Where's Jerry? I want to talk to him.”

“ Jerry? I haven't heard from him since yesterday afternoon. I don't know where he is now,” said McGill.

Jones sat motionless at the table and kept his composure until the two men left a few minutes later. The strain of Maggie's disappearance pushed his emotions over the edge. He still blamed himself and debated telling everything to Strickland, but detailing Fiore's involvement would not help find Maggie. Fiore's people must have closed in on Cando and Lennie The Falcon and Billy were dead. He moved over to the wall

phone and punched in Fiore's number. The lined clicked and soon produced a distant ring. “Walter Hutton.”

“Mr. Hutton, this is Matthias Jones.”

“Mr. Fiore was about to call you. Please hold the line.”

Jones flipped off the overhead light and stared across the moonlit yard. He sat on the counter stool and his temples throbbed as fatigue settled over his body. More than anything he feared bad news about Maggie.

“Matt.”

“Mr. Fiore, what happened?”

“My men found The Falcon and Billy,” he said in a clear voice.

“I know. They're dead. What about Maggie?”

“The cops were involved, but Cando is still at large.”

Jones closed his eyes. “So, we don't really know whether Maggie was in the van.”

“And my software. I don't even know who this Cando character is, but he has my software! The Falcon opened up. Cando has the software...”

“He can't get away, Mr. Fiore. The police are alerted all over New England.”

“Cops find him before me, I'm screwed. Not only do I lose my investment, but they start asking questions.”

Jones stared across the silver light covering his patio breakfast table.

“ What can you do?”

Fiore's angry voice shot back through the phone. “ Not a damned thing. That's what's killing me.” Jones held the phone to his ear. Fiore spoke again, but in a lower voice. “ I've appreciated your not saying anything to the authorities. Walter can help you if you need legal representation.”

“ I just want to see Maggie walking out of that van alive.”

26

The phone call shook him from a light sleep. Cars whipped by as Maggie's voice shook. “ Matthias...”

Jones sat up quickly. “ Maggie... You're alive! Where are you?”

“ I can't say.”

“ Has he hurt you?”

“ No... Matthias, he wants passage out of the country or... or he *will* shoot me.”

“ Who? Who is this lunatic?” asked Jones, leaping out of bed. He jumped as he spoke. “ You tell him I will personally-”

“ I can't tell you! I have to be careful. He has a gun pointed at my head. We're one step ahead of the police. He knows things are closing in and he want to deal.”

“ What do I have to do?”

The cars continued to pass the phone. “ You need to call Fiore and not the police.”

“ Fiore wants this guy dead.”

“ He has Fiore's software. Here's the deal: He will reveal the location of the software if Fiore gets him out of the country, to a location of his choosing.”

Jones grit his teeth. “ Let me talk to this guy.”

“ That... that isn't going to be possible.”

“ Why not?” Someone mumbled in the background. “ Where are you?”

“ He has just told me you will do what he says now.”

“ How do I contact him?” asked Jones.

“ He will call you...”

The phone cracked against something solid. Maggie called out as the line went dead. “ Maggie! Maggie!”

Jones quickly pushed the illuminated digits on his bedroom phone. The Fiore line rang quickly, but kept ringing. He paced in front of his bed as the connection shifted and clicked. Walter Hutton answered the line. Jones spoke quickly, explaining what Maggie had just told him, and Walter immediately phoned Fiore. All three men were soon connected on a conference call.

Fiore's anger was heightened with a plethora of expletives punctuating the stillness of Jones's darkened bedroom. At first he refused to comply with Cando's ultimatum, but Walter convinced him to remove the emotion out of the request and equate it to simple business proposition. Arrangements were possible if the software could easily returned to Fiore. Jones was ordered to instruct Cando to implement the escape plan. Details would be needed and the police would stay out of the operation. Jones insisted no deal take place unless Maggie was released unharmed.

Walter agreed quickly. Preliminary flight preparations would commence once Cando called again.

* * *

When Jerry awoke he was thinking about the putrid pink paint on Jones' house and how one of the men contracted poison ivy. He sat up and pictured the foliage around spillway. The killer may have touched the tiny poison ivy bushes scattered along the trail. Jones' theory about stashing a boat in the bushes, if valid, would have to expose the killer to hundreds of leaves. He did not know the odds of someone having allergic reaction. Nor did he know if this Cando would think such a reaction nondescript enough to simply walk into Hamilton's local drug store and purchase skin medication. He may even have seen a doctor. Jerry's years of experience on the streets gave him gut feeling both scenarios were possible.

He dressed and drove his T-Bird from the motel parking lot. After absorbing a cup of black coffee and three jelly donuts, he let a cigarette languish. Then he crawled back in the car and flashed his blinker at Main and Shore Drive. The corner brick building was built in 1927 according to the cement stone above the second floor windows. He spun his huge, plastic steering wheel in a huge arc, performing a U-turn and he parked at the Shore Drive entrance to J.J.'s Drugs.

He pushed the door and stepped into the air conditioned drug store. To his left a young kid behind the soda fountain counter spoke to two giggling young girls on the stools. He scanned the aisles, past the summer toys, the antacids and cold medication. A dark haired pharmacist chatted with several older ladies at the prescription counter at the rear of the store. Jerry envisioned the cocky Cando, seemingly innocent because of his elaborate planning with the boat, casually walking into the drug store, scratching his poison ivy lesions as he crossed the floorboards to the third aisle containing the sunburn and skin medications.

He removed his reading glasses and lifted a bottle of matted pink calamine lotion in his hands. The pharmacist appeared at the end of the aisle. “ How bad is it?”

Jerry grinned, still holding the bottle. “ Who me?”

“ If it’s severe you might want to consider seeing Dr. Bradgate for a prescription.”

Jerry held the bottle and glanced at the benefits and precautions as he shuffled down the aisle. He held out his right hand. “ Jerry St. Clair.”

“ Oh, *the* Jerry St. Clair. I read you article in the paper.” He checked Jerry’s hand and exposed skin. “ I’m Sam Brenner. You don’t seemed to be affected.”

“ I ain’t. Listen, Bub, I need some information.”

“ Someone you know?”

“ That remains to be seen. Anybody come in for this during the last week?”

“ Mr. St. Clair. It's the end of June. Every kid in town has gotten into poison ivy.”

Jerry looked at the label again, stroked his chin and let the bottle hang in his hand. “ An adult, Sam old buddy, named Cando.”

Sam pushed his teeth into his lips as he thought. “ No Cando. Let's see. Arnie Dewers was in on Tuesday. He picked a bouquet of flowers for his girlfriend and thought the waxy green leaves would look nice next to the roses. He's a mess. All over his nose and face. And a couple of other places.”

“ Who else?” asked Jerry, gripping the plastic bottle.

“ Mrs. Jefferson had touch of it on her arm. She blames Arnie because Arnie brushed the bouquet against her arm at the hardware store. Carl Rogers from the college. His arms and legs. And a couple of people passing through. They-”

“ Carl Rogers?” Jerry pictured Jones's athletic young assistant. How would this guy be linked to Brad Davis's death? “ Did he say how he got poison ivy?”

“ No. He didn't say much about it. I saw him pick up the bottle and pay for it up front.”

“ Anyone else?”

Sam shook his head. “ Just mothers buying the lotion for their kids.”

“ Thanks, Bub,” said Jerry, tapping Sam’s arm. He set the bottle back on the shelf and moved to the wooden phone booth in the corner. On a crumpled piece of paper was Jones’ cell phone number. He could not turn the rotary dial fast enough. As the line clicked he realized he could not specifically link Rogers to the murder.

27

The phone ring sent a chill down Jones' back. He pivoted and swiped his cell phone off the outside table. " Jones."

Jerry St. Clair's voice crackled over the line. " Matthias, your assistant coach, Carl Rogers."

" I thought you were Fiore. You don't understand what happened, Jerry. What about Carl?"

" Carl Rogers is Cando."

Jones' heartbeat accelerated. " No way. Jerry, Maggie is being held by Cando. I need the line free."

" I tell ya I know these things."

" I haven't got time for weird theories. This is a matter of life and death! Besides Carl is in Seattle."

" Then I suggest you call Seattle, my friend."

" Come on, Jerry. Carl Rogers was a star athlete at Florida. Why would you even suspect him? Why would he kill Brad Davis?"

" The poison ivy bushes by the Tolby Lake spillway. Carl bought calamine lotion at J.J.'s Drug Store downtown."

" Jerry, I need the line free."

“ Most of the people buying the calamine lotion were kids or older people. Carl was the only one who could match the parameters of your crossing the lake by boat theory.”

Jones sat on the stool and pinched the bridge of his nose. “ That only proves Carl got into poison ivy. Jerry, I need the line free. Fiore is trying to book passage for Cando out of the country. Goodbye.”

He stuffed the cell phone in his shorts. His arms and legs tensed into a mass of confined energy ready to explode as he strode through his back- yard and around the house. Even the pink clapboards did not bother him. As he stepped into the front yard the haze hung over the newly mowed common grass and the tower clock neared the top of the hour. But Jerry had him thinking. Carl Rogers left Nigel’s party with Mary Thompson from administration. Jones was sure Carl left before the murder, close to nine p.m. Jerry was right about Carl being able to cross the lake at ease. But why would Carl murder Brad Davis? Unless he knew about the software. “ This is crazy.”

Jones retreated up his brick walk and entered through the front of the house. He went directly to the phone book and turned the residential pages rapidly, still wondering why he was listening to Jerry at all. When he located Mary’s number he dialed it on the wall phone. Now his heartbeat pounded as the line rang. He talked briefly to Mary’s roommate. Mary came on the line and chatted for a few minutes before Jones finally interrupted her. He asked her about leaving the party with Carl.

She said she walked out the wall gate with Carl and thought they might go out for a drink. When they reached Nigel's driveway, Carl apologized and said he had to go home. She got in her car, but he soon drove around her. At the Main Street lights the sports car accelerated down the Shore Drive straight-away.

Jones hung up less than a minute later. Carl left Nigel's party before the murder and raced in the direction of Tolby Lake. He never returned until just before the party broke up; after Brad Davis was shot dead. His cell phone rang and he reached in his pocket. " Jones."

" Jerry."

" Listen Jerry..."

" I got bad news for you, Bub. I just called Carl Rogers' parents' house in Seattle. He never came home and he never called to come home."

" Damn... Damn him."

" And his boyhood nickname... Cando. Jackpot."

" My God..." Jones closed his eyes and hunched over the counter. " Somehow he linked up with Davis and Desiree. He knew about the software."

" I guess I'm a day late and a dollar short."

" No, perfect work, Jerry. Perfect work." Jones still had trouble believing Carl was the killer. He vividly pictured Carl at the party, but

now he viewed him as a murderer returning from shooting Brad Davis.

“ He saw the opportunity to make money.”

“ You'd better call Strickland.”

“ I can't. Fiore wants his property back.”

“ I understand and you can't be bucking Fiore. Want my advice as an old reporter?”

“ What?”

“ When you're backed against the wall, go with the guys with power. Or...”

“ Or what?”

“ Or you'll be dead.”

28

Jones paced his patio and awaited Fiore's phone call. The haze thickened over his back lawn and shrubs as he sipped his coffee. His hair was a sweaty flattened mass and his eyes ached. He remained stunned Carl Rogers was Cando. Carl stashed some kind of boat in the bushes and easily traversed the lake. Stealing Amy Pollard's gun was the only thing not making sense. He swished the Colombian blend around his mouth and tried to think back to last fall when Carl first arrived at the college. Carl had given no indication of hanging around places such as the Glass Slipper nor had a violent streak evidenced itself, but ambition did. Carl always talked about coaching at a higher level, but Jones never equated ambition with monetary gain.

When the phone rang he spilled the coffee on the glass tabletop. Forty-five minutes had passed since he placed the call to Fiore. He opened the screen, grabbed the phone and pulled it outside. "Matthias Jones."

The shaky signal indicated a cell phone transmission. "You couldn't leave it alone, could you?"

"Carl..."

"You're so clever, Coach. So smart."

"Where is Maggie?"

“ Shut up!” Jones did not hear a radio or a car engine. He tried to sort out whether Carl was aware Jones knew he had the software. “ It cost Desiree her life. Now everything is closing in. I have no options.”

“ Where is the software, Carl?”

“ Very good, but it will do you no good. The Falcon tried to take it and now the Falcon is dead. I’ve had the software and it’s going to save my life.”

“ I want to speak with Maggie now!”

“ I call the shots here, *Coach*.”

“ You touch her and I’ll kill you. I don’t care what it takes!”

Carl said nothing for at least ten seconds. He spoke in a low disoriented voice. “ I have your new found love right here.”

“ Put her on the phone.”

“ I told you. I hold the cards and I’ve just given your love a Matthias Jones history lesson. I think it’s a good idea she know your past.”

“ Just let me talk to her.”

“ It’s only right she know about dear sweet Laura.”

“ Don’t bring Laura into this,” said Jones.

“ Dear little Laura who was murdered before she could live out her life with her great husband, Matthias Jones.”

Jones ripped the screen door back hard enough to throw it off the track. He stormed into the kitchen. “ *You bastard!*”

“ I killed Davis and took the software. They never would have sent Amy away. And I have Fiore’s software. It was perfect. Fiore is a criminal.”

“ The software was stolen, Carl. ”

“ Breaks my heart.”

Jones’ hands sweat as he gripped the phone. He walked in arcs around his counter. “ I want to speak to Maggie. Now!”

“ You had the cops after me and you had Fiore after me.”

“ Never mind you killed two people...” Jones knew he needed to stop badgering Carl. Maybe Maggie had become his third victim. “ Carl, the only way out of this is to turn yourself in.”

Carl produced a long mournful laugh away from the phone. “ Sure and I go to jail. If I survive being executed. And then Fiore’s people kill me. I have no options other than hurting you if I don’t get what I want.”

“ No, there’s always hope.”

“ I thought you would be gone to Maine... Why, why didn’t you leave with McGill? I only wanted the software. I didn’t want to kill Brad.”

“ Carl, listen. You have to turn yourself in. It’s your only hope.” Jones heard the common clock, but was not sure whether the chimes sounded through the front window screens or on the telephone. Maybe Carl was in Hamilton. “ Carl, please.”

“ You always talk a good game. I’ve noticed that about you.”

“ This is no game.”

“ You wanna deal, Coach? Maggie is here.”

“ I don’t believe you,” said Jones.

“ I will give her the Laura Jones treatment if you don’t deal.”

“ What do you want?”

Again he laughed away from the phone. “ You lose. You lose.”

“ What do you want?”

“ Tell them all to back off. Fiore gets me flown out of the country and he gets the software. Nobody touches me.”

“ I don’t have that control over Fiore or the police.”

“ He’ll listen,” said Carl.

“ And if I don’t?”

“ Then you again lose your love.”

Carl’s frightening verbal clatter evaporated as the line was cut. Jones set the phone slowly back on the hook and methodically stepped through the kitchen. He went directly to his living room desk. Rational thoughts were erased by an overwhelming anger against Carl Rogers and the horrific thoughts of Laura dead back on Columbia Street. He removed the silver key from under one of the desk alcoves and stuck it in the second drawer brass lock. As he slowly pulled open the drawer, a compact black automatic, once given to him by Cocoa Stefani, was nestled within the furrows of an worn green towel. He squeezed the cool metal handle in his hands and slowly lifted the weapon. With a sudden

click, he checked the fully loaded ammunition clip and snapped it back in place. Wasting time with Carl was no longer an option.

He burst out the open sliders, held the gun upward and stormed over the patio. Carl was calling from somewhere near the common. He sprinted over the grass and leaped onto asphalt. A hundred feet away the stone clock tower stood like a directional beacon. Jones slowly panned the common. Carl could be anywhere if he was driving the van. But he had continuously referred to Laura's murder. His hunch was Carl had taken Maggie to the very house on Columbia Street where Laura was murdered.

Images of Laura lying face down on the bloodied white bedroom carpet catapulted back into his head. Every emotion buried deep in his mind, now surged into his body as he ran faster under the sidewalk tree branches. The bedroom's flowered wallpaper overlapped his thoughts and the houses ahead. He wrapped his hand around the revolver and jaunted toward Columbia Street.

Jones guessed Carl was in the old gray Victorian, now used during the school year as a fraternity house. Entering the yard from the rear lot's hedges would provide him cover. From the corner, the shingled turrets and slate roof were matted bright in the midday sun. Jones wanted to yell until he hurt his voice and ram open the front door. He sprinted past the houses separating Columbia and Maple Street. Because he had not

heard Maggie's voice, he wondered if Carl was just toying with him now.

He darted into the third driveway on Maple and slowed at the thick hedges behind the Victorian's unattached gray garage. The outlines of the slate roof and second floor windows appeared through the junipers. A narrow pressure treated deck extended from the wooden bulkhead near the rear kitchen door. He and Laura had breakfast on that deck in the weeks after they arrived in Hamilton.

Along the garage he held up the gun and ducked under the hedges out back. On his belly in the dirt and grass, he focused on the glossy gray wood bulkhead. The kids from the fraternity were gone for the summer and all doors were locked. He would try every window if the bulkhead was not open. On his stomach he slowly rocked forward toward the empty yard. Carl would not be so stupid to park the van near the house. As he stood within the branches, Jones was certain Carl had brought Maggie here. He remembered as he tightened his hand on the gun and scooted up to the bulkhead, how last fall he told the story of his wife's murder to Carl over dinner at the Colonial House.

He clawed at the wooden edges of the bulkhead, but the doors were jammed. Gritting his teeth, he ripped off his sweatshirt and wrapped it around his hand. He crushed the orange tiger lilies and impatiens as he viciously swung his arm into the dark cellar window glass. The impact was sudden and silent. He knocked the remaining

jagged pieces into the cellar and kicked the separating wood frame with his sneaker.

Immediately as if he were executing a gymnastic maneuver, Jones fell to his knees, spun in the dirt and backed through the open window frame. He lowered himself into darkened basement and the cooler dank air further revitalized the vivid memories. The gun shook in his hands when he hit the dirt floor. Across the indistinct basement light the cobwebs drooped between the bulky banister and the dusty unpainted kitchen stairs. He visualized the yellow tiles in the kitchen above and the stain glass sidelights at the polished upstairs wood door where he had carried Laura over the threshold when they arrived in Hamilton.

He thrust the gun outward, wondering if he should have called George Strickland, but he feared repercussions from Albert Fiore. The common clock tower chimed on the quarter hour through the open cellar window. Jones shuffled past an assortment of garden tools, rope, and a push lawnmower. The sun cut a brilliant swath through the front cellar window across the first wooden step. His heart thumped as he placed his sneaker into the light and gazed up to the white beveled door at the kitchen.

His gun hand steadied with each creaky step into the low light. He grasped the smooth glass door knob and placed his ear to the door. A rapid, sputtering dialogue, perhaps a radio talk show, was muffled by the door and distance. Jones slowly spun the knob and edged open the

door. Maggie's quivering voice was muted by Carl's intense scolding upstairs. His worst fears confirmed, Jones edged into the kitchen for the first time since the day Laura was murdered.

His thoughts crystallized into a rational strategy. Outmaneuvering Carl was the only way to save Maggie's life. He remembered a second floor attic stairway near the first linen closet. Sneaking up that stairway and successfully crossing the attic would allow him to carefully descend the alternate curved stairway to the bedroom. His breathing erratic, Jones crept across the kitchen tiles to the wood paneled hallway near the banister. The bright stain glass sidelights cast a collage of color across the tiles and the rich wood odors brought back every hidden feeling.

He figured, as he leaned closer to the banister, they were in the second floor bedroom. Carl's voice now assumed a crazed, higher tone as he repeatedly lashed out at Fiore and the police. Without interference he would have escaped out of the country.

Maggie's voice shook. " You're just lucky you got the software back."

" Lennie was gutless trying to take it in Worcester. After I killed Billy, he buckled."

" What are you going to do with me once Fiore arranges the flight?"

" Kill you."

Jones gripped the banister and peered up the brighter second floor hall. The bedroom door was only cracked open. His eyes followed the varnished balustrade bordering the second floor hall, but he could not see the attic door next to the closed linen closet.

Maggie cried out again. " I don't want to die!"

" Shut up!" shouted Carl. A smashing slap was quickly followed by a loud scream and a thud across the floor. " I hold the cards here, Maggie!"

Jones crushed his teeth together, trying not to lose control. He quietly placed his sneaker on the carpet runner, pointed the gun upward and slid his open hand on the glossy banister. Maggie sobbed only twenty feet ahead. With the gun now angled toward the bedroom door, he precariously lifted his sneaker to the next step. He rose into the light cast by the wide stain glass window above the balustrade. The bedroom wallpaper's wispy green vines and pink flowers pedals slowly appeared through the thin door opening. Jones fought the urge to run forward, but trekked precariously along the balustrade to the thin attic door.

Maggie's crying sent Jones scurrying toward the bedroom door. He fanned the gun toward the flowered wallpaper pedals inside, but confronting Carl by crashing through the door would not work. As Carl walked casually through the doorway, Jones reversed his course back along the balustrade and the gun still shaking in his hands. Carl's face

became contorted and he aimed his rifle. Jones discharged his own weapon three times and dove into the side bedroom.

" *You're a dead man, Coach!*"

Jones rolled behind a small bed and held the gun over a quilted bedspread. Maggie screamed. Something shook the floor. " Carl, let's reason this out! "

A door slammed inside the bedroom and he sensed Carl had dragged Maggie up the bedroom stairs to the attic. He held both hands around the gun handle as he marched from the side bedroom. Guided by outrage and propelled with anger Jones stormed down the hall into the bedroom. He masked the fact Laura's body once was sprawled across the floor near the end of the bed. Thinking quickly, he twisted the attic door's brass door lock and it clicked shut. Then he returned to the hallway attic door.

Sweat gathered and smudged his hair, neck, and jersey. His hands were now slippery on the gun. Slowly, he twisted the glass knob and light glow entered the angled plastered hall to the attic. He controlled his breathing, but his heart pounded as he slid his sneaker onto the unfinished wood stairs. Maggie was stuck in the attic with a cornered man awaiting Jones' next move.

He gently closed the door and retreated downstairs. Once in the kitchen he moved faster down the cellar stairs and grabbed the wound yellow nylon rope off the wall hook. In his bizarre plan, he would loop a

slip knot around the hallway attic door and drape the rope back down the stairs, through the hallway and into the master bedroom. Once he unraveled the line up the other attic stairway from the bedroom, he could tug abruptly on the rope, rattling the hallway door knob. It allowed him the only advantage to storm the attic.

Jones lifted the rope off the cellar hook and hurried back into the kitchen. He pictured Carl waiting in the attic as he climbed the second floor stairs. At the base of the hallway attic door he tied a slip knot, checked it on his hand once, and tiptoed up the stairs. Very gently, he placed the loop over the attic knob and tightened it slowly. He left plenty of slack down the stairs and into the hall. Maybe he should have rushed Carl when he had the chance. With Maggie's life in the balance, Jones was not even sure this scheme would work.

Once at the top of the bedroom staircase, Jones slowly pulled the rope taut. He grasped the revolver and kept his index finger on the metal trigger. Carl would hear the tugging at the other door, but would it be enough to distract him? Gritting his teeth he wound his fingers around the wound nylon. He cocked his arm and yanked with considerable force. Gunfire erupted in the attic and Jones kicked open the door. In a firing stance, Carl faced the hallway door, but Jones unloaded the weapon clip, puncturing Carl's green and black nylon jogging top at the chest. Carl staggered behind a row of sheet draped boxes and the frater-

nity's athletic equipment. A bullet whizzed past Jones and pierced the roof. Jones dove behind a cedar chest.

“ It's a no win, Carl! You'll die if you don't get help.” Not seeing Maggie sent Jones into a rage. “ Where is she, Carl?” For over a minute Jones heard no movement. Either Carl was unconscious or waiting to shoot. He needed to lure Carl out. “ You screwed up, Carl because you never had the ability. You never advanced because you were too stupid. Anyone with half a brain would have taken the software and have left the country! In the game of strategies, you're a loser, Carl!”

Three muffled shots smashed the boxes behind Jones. Jones checked the clip. He only had two bullets left. Carl fired again. Maybe he had multiple clips.

“ She's dead, Coach!” Jones clamped his fists and dove onto the plywood floor. “ I blew her away!”

“ He's lying!” cried Maggie from the far corner.

Carl's azure eyes were heavy and his hung mouth open as he pointed the gun at Jones. His weakened voice whispered lightly. “ You put up a good fight, Coach.”

“ Carl, let me save you life!”

“ I should have killed you on the lake... I planned it so well. I used a kayak and Davis gave me the key to get Amy's gun because he was afraid of what Amy would do with it. The same gun used to kill him.” Carl produced an odd smile as he raised his gun again.

Maggie appeared to the left and quietly reached into the athletic equipment. Jones looked away when she lifted a red crossbow into her hands. She plucked an arrow from the holder and placed it on the string. Instantaneously she snapped the bowstring and the projectile whooshed across the attic. Carl was hit center chest. The gun and a small box fell to the floor and he dropped into the sheet-draped boxes. With the arrow embedded in his chest he lay motionless.

Jones moved in quickly. He took the small gray box marked, Software Enhancers in his hand. When he opened the clip the inside was stuffed with newspaper. “It’s gone.”

“He... he thought he had the software,” said Maggie.

“If he knew it was gone he might have killed you,”

Maggie dropped the bow and ran across the plywood. With Carl dead on the sheets, Jones dropped the empty box, locked his arms around her long dark hair and rocked her slowly. Her arms shook as she cried softly. He stroked her fine hair, softly reassured her and vowed this time never to let her go.

Epilogue

The August heat sunk over the practice field. Jones knew he had driven the team hard during the week. Having Woosey back motivated both Jones and the team. His assistant coach ran defensive plays near the goal line as Jerry St. Clair lit another cigarette. Jones looked for Maggie new Expedition beyond the chain link fence.

“ Listen,” said Jerry, hitting Jones’s side. “ So, Albert Fiore got that software from wherever Lennie The Falcon hid it. Or he'd be looking for it now. The Falcon double crossed Carl.”

“ And Fiore doesn't pay out the reward,” said Jones.

Jerry inhaled, shook his head and spewed smoke toward Jones.

“ What would you have done with a hundred G’s?”

“ I didn't want his money,” said Jones, cutting the smoky swath with his open hand.

“ Come on.... Whaddaya nuts? You’re going to have to pay for that repaint on your house.”

“ I’m not paying a cent for Arnie Dewars’ mistake. White claps. Green shutters. I told Arnie you were going to do an article on him.”

“ See, now ya learnin’ the game. What about the Pollard girl? I heard she transferred out.”

“ Maggie helped get her into a school out west.”

“ What a story. McGill is going to let me write a byline, under his editorial guidance of course. ”

“ I look forward to reading it.” Jones checked the street again and then blew his whistle. “ All right boys! Good job! Two laps around and hit the showers.”

Woosey, his gray Hamilton jersey darkened with sweat, jogged over to Jones. “ They look good, Coach. Those boys can really hold the line.”

“ Good, Woose. I’m glad you’re back.”

Jones patted him on the shoulder and Woosey jogged toward the gym.

“ At least he won’t be stealing software,” cracked Jerry.

“ I don’t know, I thought a couple of my CD-ROM’s are missing.” He grinned and scanned the street. “ Carl was a good coach. I can’t take that away from him.”

“ With big ambitions,” said Jerry.

Jones raised his brows. “ He almost pulled it off. Just make sure this whole Fiore thing remains hush, hush in your article.”

“ Mum is the operative word, my friend. And I have news for you.”

“ Yeah? What’s that?” Jones started down the field, wondering if Maggie would show up. Again, he looked back to the fence.

“ I put a deposit on a house. A house that nobody wants. A house I got for a song from the owner.”

“ Really, congratulations. Where?”

“ The lake house. I cut a deal with Hamilton Fletcher. A couple of complimentary articles about him.”

Jones stopped. “ Then you’re not going back to Philadelphia?”

“ Nah, the kids are all around the country. I like it here. As a matter of fact I talked to the Nickersons this afternoon. Gus put on ten pounds on that cruise.”

“ And Irene never let him forget it.”

“ She was brutal. Said Gus wasn’t the brightest bulb at the food table. And he answers, ‘Hardy, hah, hah.’ ” Jerry put out his cigarette and tightened his facial wrinkles. “ You’re waiting for Maggie, aren’t you?”

Jones nodded. “ Yeah. She was going to inform Nigel whether she would continue teaching here at the school.”

“ She teaches at the school and you have her here with you.”

“ I guess that’s the bottom line, isn’t it?”

“ I’m gonna have some chow. Let me give you some advice.”

“ I could see that coming,” said Jones.

“ Stay out here. Wait for her. If she said she would be here, she’ll be here.”

Jones nodded and gave Jerry a tap on the shoulder. “ Thank, Jer.”

“ You got it... Bub.”

Jerry moved like a sputtering car toward his T-Bird parked outside the fence. Jones thought about Maggie’s ambivalent attitude when she called from Chicago two days ago. She had feelings about being with some of her family, yet, like Jerry, she genuinely liked Hamilton. Jerry started the T-Bird, beeped the horn, and spun around back toward town. Jones waved and debated whether to return to the locker room.

As he retreated across the grass, his cell phone sounded in his back pocket. He lifted the phone to his ear and pushed the **SEND** button. “ Matthias Jones.”

“ Hi.”

“ Maggie...”

“ Give up on me yet?”

“ Would I ever give up on you?”

“ I was talking with Amy Pollard. She’s already at San Francisco City College. I spoke to the state police, but they never asked me about Fiore.”

“ Fiore made some phone calls and they haven’t asked me anything either.”

“ Amy said thank you.”

Jones spoke into the phone as he walked toward then fence. “ The District Attorney's people found the kayak Carl used. It was in a Prince William storage garage. And he has the drug store slips for the poison

ivy. He had the medical examiner check the splinter traces in Carl's foot to match it to the spillway boards. That's gone out to the FBI, but the witnesses at the Slipper linked Davis and Carl as well as Carl and Desiree Paradise."

Maggie's new black Expedition trekked down the Park Street.
" Hello, Matthias."

" I see you." Jones veered toward the gate as Maggie stopped the SUV along the fence. She held her cell phone as she stepped from the vehicle. Jones smiled broadly. " Aloha."

" I thought it might be a good idea to come over to the ball field." She wore jeans and a red jersey and stepped through the gate onto the grass.

" Really?" He slowed and faced her as she held the phone.

" I have to hang up."

" Oh?"

She pushed the **END** button and tucked the phone in her bag. " I think it's a good idea to support my school team." Jones grinned and shut off his own phone. Her long dark hair brushed his face as she threw her arms around him.

Jones gazed into her green eyes. " Supporting your school team is commendable, Ms. McCay."

Maggie moved closer. " I can't help it. I'm in love with the coach."

" Oh, really?"

“ Really...”

“ Welcome to Hamilton, Maggie... Welcome home.”