

1

When it came to money Lark held onto the buck like a tough fisted first lieutenant, fighting to the death for a chunk of strategic ground. Jones dragged the phone cord tight as Mookie pinged the steel hammer against the exposed copper pipes. “ I can’t hear you, Lark. What are you saying?” He stepped onto the gray patio stones and closed the slider door, but the hammering persisted. “ You’re saying Professor Neusbaum owes you money?”

“ That, Matthias, is the understatement of this year, last year, and every year!”

“ Calm down.”

“ How can I calm down? Ten thousand of my hard earned dollars have gone down the drain to purchase some... some *Steinway!*”

The barrel chested Mookie pushed open the slider with his work boot. In the morning sun, his bristly, unshaven cheeks and short, matted haircut gave him the appearance of a criminal having just escaped the penitentiary. His rounded, frog blue eyes blinked slowly, but his protruding lips never moved when he spoke. “ You gut problems.”

“ Mookie, I brought you over her to fix the washers in my kitchen sink. Now, you’ve got the whole wall torn apart and that brother of yours-”

“ My twin brother,” he said, raising his index finger.

Jones pinched the bridge of his nose as Lark came back on the line. “ Well, what should I do?”

“ You’ve known Neusbaum for years. He’s your big buddy. You knew him when he played piano at weddings. Now he conducts the Prince William Symphony. Can’t you reason with him?”

“ Reason with him? I want to kill him! He has my money!”

“ Call L.G. and take legal action. Very simple.”

“ You gut big problems,” said Mookie.

“ Will you just hold it, Mookie?”

Mookie pushed his lips downward and stepped back inside.

“ Touchy, touchy. Arnie said you’d be touchy.”

“ Now, listen, Lark. I suggest you and Flo get into your car and take a long drive somewhere. Cool off and talk to L.G.” The ensuing dead air on the line unnerved Jones even more. “ Lark? Hello, Lark.” He closed his eyes, shook his head and moved back inside as Mookie banged the pipe again.

“ You gut big problems.”

“ You said that,” said Jones. He went to hang up the phone, but the wall phone now lay on the counter next to the jagged hole in the kitchen wallpaper and plaster. He maneuvered the receiver into place. “ I hope you guys know what you’re doing.”

Mookie opened his blue eyes wide and tilted his head. He had the annoying habit of pushing air into one cheek, inflating the cheek, and moving the air into the other cheek. “ My brother and me, we’ve been in business for twenty years. Bisbane Plumbing, Twice as Nice.”

“ What exactly is the problem?” asked Jones.

“ A.P.S.”

Jones grabbed his clipboard off the counter. He did not want to arrive late at baseball camp. “ What’s A.P.S.?”

The cellar door opened and an exact replica of Mookie, down to the blue eyes, whiskered cheeks, and scruffy hair, stepped into the kitchen. “ A.P.S. Everybody knows about A.P.S. Sooner or later you’re gonna get A.P.S.”

“ Guys, I’m on my way to my baseball camp.”

“ Listen to him, Kookie. *His* baseball camp. Everybody knows Arnie Dewars put up the cash for that camp.”

“ Don’t remind me,” said Jones. “ Now, what’s A.P.S.?”

“ I heard Arnie got Ricky Johnson from the Padres to run the camp,” said Mookie.

“ I wanted Ricky. I went to school with him. But he couldn’t make it with his schedule.”

“ He dump ya, huh?”

“ No, he didn’t dump me. Now, what is A.P.S.?”

“ Antiquated Plumbing Syndrome. Hey, you gut bad pipes, Yakima,” said Kookie.

“ Real bad,” said Mookie.

Seeing duplicate copies of both husky guys with their prison cut, peppered hair and pudgy blue eyes, pushed his patience. Kookie started pushing air between his cheeks. “ So, what’s the upshot?”

“ You’re lucky ya didn’t burst ya pipes,” said Mookie.

“ Can I have another orange juice?”

Jones stared at him. Then Kookie moved forward, tracking dirt from the cellar across his kitchen tiles. “ Me, too? And more cereal.”

“ Don’t you guys eat breakfast? I have to go. Do whatever you have to do. Just fix the plumbing.”

“ What about breakfast?” asked Kookie.

“ Help yourself. I’m out of here. I have twenty-five boys waiting for me at my camp.”

“ Arnie’s camp,” said Mookie at the refrigerator.

Jones shook his head, grabbed his cell phone off the table and headed out the front door as the pounding began again. The air had warmed and morning shadows cut across the common’s carpeted grass. He took a deep breath and hurried down his brick walkway walk to his red jeep. The

stout stone clock tower's tarnished brass hands toward nine o'clock.

He pushed the picket fence gate. A car engine as loud as a passing jet, caught his attention beyond the common's granite posts. Lark's long faded brown bomber ran the stop sign and his tires skidded as he rounded the Main Street corner. An oncoming compact's high-pitched horn sounded several times and the little car veered toward the sidewalk. Lark accelerated past the storefronts, but did not stop at L.G.'s law office. The car tires again screeched against the asphalt at the Hamilton Street traffic lights. Luckily the lights changed, but Lark fishtailed, nearly sideswiping a small blue pickup truck and a yellow Volkswagen parked along the curb. Then he raced down Hamilton Street toward the college.

The rapping inside his house continued as Jones attempted to start the jeep. He had a slight skipping problem until Arnie Dewars fiddled with the wires yesterday afternoon. The engine backfired and sputtered out. He set the clipboard on the seat and pumped the gas. Like a slow sunrise, the engine finally caught and blue smoke pushed along his fence. The jeep threatened to stall along the common as he shifted. He wanted to find Arnie, but baseball camp was about to begin.

Not landing Ricky Johnson was a major disappointment. Ricky was supposed to tell him today

whether he was available for a speaking engagement to benefit Hamilton's athletic programs later in the summer. Jones stopped at the corner and glanced at the Hamilton Street lights. He shook his head at Lark's erratic driving as he brought his jeep up the far side of the common, but he also hoped Lark would not embarrass himself in front of the distinguished Neusbaum.

At the traffic light, the baseball diamond's green grass, dirt infield and bright white bases were visible beyond the little bowl shaped football stadium named after Lark. Jones slowed and as the light turned green he cautiously released the clutch through the intersection. Only a few cars moved along Main Street on this quiescent summer morning.

His backfiring jeep dipped down the Hamilton Street hill into the shadows of the towering hemlocks and maples. The road swept by Larsen Stadium. Jones put on his blinker for the service road, cutting between the gym and the baseball field's long chain link fence. The kids were scattered across the grass and smooth infield and Mac Conners's white Honda was parked along the fence. As coach of St. Pat's Mac had always opposed him on athletic field, but while on vacation at a Hamilton Bay cottage, agreed to help him run the camp for a week. He spotted the hefty Mac, wearing a blue sleeve baseball, shirt, up at bat against one of the kids.

Jones' grin dropped as his jeep strained along the fence. When he finally stopped and turned off the key near the gate

behind the aluminum bleachers, the engine stayed on and sounded like the bubbles in a pot of boiling water. When the jeep finally shut off, he shook his head, grabbed his clipboard and stepped outside. The crack of the bat echoed off the brick library walls to the right. A long fly ball went sailing over the three kids in right field and bounced up the grassy, tree lined hill to the Shaker style music conservatory. Jones cupped his hand at the gate. “ The old duffer still has it!”

Mac turned to the right and pointed the wood bat toward the fence. The kid lobbed the ball. Mac swung hard and fell on his knee. He quickly got up and the kid fired another pitch. Again Mac connected and the arching fly ball cleared the yellow and green three hundred foot sign behind the center field chain link fence. Mac walked up to Jones and with a cocky look, handed him the bat.

“ Match that one, big guy.”

“ Not bad for an old man,” said Jones, looking across the field. Arnie Dewars’ powder blue pick up looped around the library parking lot beyond right field.

“ Maybe you’d like to take a few swings,” said Mac, wiping his brow.

“ I have camp to run,” said Jones, smiling.

“ We’re lucky we even got the field this morning,” said Mac.

“ This idiot comes running on the field screaming about not having an official permit.”

“ What?” asked Jones.

“ Yeah, a mealy mouth little guy with glasses and a Bermuda shorts. Police shirt. Looked like he was on his way to summer camp. He drove a beat up little brown car marked, Campus Security.”

“ Bucky Driscoll,” said Jones.

“ He threatened to write us up,” said Mac. “ He said we needed written permission to be here.”

“ I hope you told him to beat it,” said Jones.

“ Well, he wrote this ticket and said the tow trucks were on the way.”

Jones shook his head. “ Bucky would get in trouble standing still... Let’s round up the boys.” He blew his brass whistle. The group converged around the coaches. Arnie Dewars, cigarette hanging from his mouth, clawed his way over the right field chain link fence. He was stuck for a few seconds before he fell onto the right field grass. When he stood, he picked up his dark rimmed glasses and quickly lit another cigarette.

“ Who the heck *is* that?” asked Mac.

“ The sponsor of this camp. I can still see him bugging Ricky last month at the Colonial House.” Jones exhaled.

“ Mac, can you get the boys set up? I’ll take care of Arnie.”

Mac nodded and Jones trotted into the outfield. Arnie wore a Yankee's jersey and waved in a wide arc. "Matth-i-as!"

"Arnie."

"Looks like I'm right on time."

"Time for what?" Lark's car now zoomed past Arnie's pickup and continued toward the music conservatory.

"You look like you could use some help," said Arnie, elbowing Jones in the ribs. "Not as young as you used to be, eh?"

"Look, Arnie, we appreciate the funding for the camp."

"Everybody knows you couldn't raise the dough."

"That's not true. We had plenty of pledges"

"Right." Arnie blew smoke around Jones' face.

"And put out the cigarette."

"Can't take the smoke, eh?"

Jones raised his index finger. "Look, Arnie..."

"Do you know who you're dealing with, Matth-i-as? I played semi-pro ball."

"You?" Jones could not halt Arnie from trekking to the infield. "Where did you play semi-pro?"

"The Yankees team in Roswell, New Mexico."

They reached the infield dirt. "Isn't that where the all those alien stories started?"

"True stories," said Arnie, exhaling again.

"Arnie, *put out the cigarette.*"

“ Oh... yeah,” he said, throwing it on the dirt. Jones shook his head and snuffed out the cigarette with his sneaker. “ Hey, Maccer!”

A different sound cracked off the library bricks. Jones looked to the kids passing the baseballs by the third baseline. Then he heard a dog barking inside the open conservatory window. “ That sounded like a gunshot.”

“ You’ve been on too many cases, Matth-*i*-as.” Jones shook his head and turned toward the conservatory.

“ For once, Arnie, I might agree with you.” He turned toward the kids. “ Come on, Arnie, we’ll get you a glove.”

“ Glove? I want a few swings,” said Arnie as they crossed the infield.

“ Let’s start with the glove, hot shot.” Jones flipped over the roaster page on his clipboard while Arnie pontificated about his playing days.

“ I led the league in doubles. Old double dare Dewars.”

“ Double dare?” asked Jones, looking up.

“ They’d give me the intentional,” said Arnie as he pounded the glove with his closed fist.

“ I’d like to give you the intentional.”

“ What did you say, Matth-*i*-as?”

“ I said let’s get this camp going.” Jones spun around when a distinct gunshot emanated from the conservatory and the dog barked again. “ That was a shot.”

“ Little nervous about runnin’ the camp without Ricky Johnson?” asked Arnie as he poked Jones in the arm.

“ I tell you that was a shot.”

Jones retreated across the infield and picked up speed once he hit the outfield grass. Bucky Driscoll spun his little car across the library parking lot and disappeared behind the conservatory. Jones broke into a sprint and vaulted the fence like a gymnast in competition. He heard a loud car engine start on the far side of the building as he jaunted up the tree shaded slope. Lark’s clunker raised the dust and careened onto the adjacent the athletic fields.

“ What the hell is going on here?”

He reached the trees as Lark’s car knocked over a soccer goal and scraped the curb onto Hamilton Street. The conservatory’s windows facing the library were open, but the only entrance was around the parking lot side. As Arnie cackled from the outfield, Jones paralleled the octagonal building’s stone facade, and Lark fishtailed down Hamilton Street toward Route 32.

Bucky’s compact brown security car, front fender dented, was parked near the conservatory entrance’s cement walk. Jones leaped up the weathered wood steps under the columns. He ran through the open barn board doors and up the inside stair treads. “ Bucky! Bucky!”

Gray quarry tile lobby rimmed the locked outside pane windows and the inner barn board walls. The area was

deserted and the lower white paneled doors to the music hall were closed. Jones slipped across the red lobby runner, but when heard barking, he veered toward the main conservatory doors. Bucky's voice was muffled behind the door panels.

“ Identify yourself.”

“ Matthias Jones, what's going on in there?”

“ Who?”

“ Matthias.”

Now Bucky's voice was on a megaphone behind the doors.

“ Clear the area! All personnel will exit the building.”

“ Bucky, I'm the only one in the building! Open the door. What's going on in there?” After a long silence Jones pounded the door. “ Bucky, I heard shots.”

“ Oh, it's you, Matthias. The battery is dead on my short wave.”

“ Open up!”

“ I can't do that. We have a murder scene here!”

Jones shook his head and pulled his cell phone from his back pocket as Arnie Dewers entered the lobby. “ Hey, Matth-*i*-as!”

“ Do we need paramedics, Bucky? Who was shot?”

“ Said individual has expired.”

Jones dialed George Strickland's number at the police station.

“ Who? Who’s dead?”

“ Hamilton. Ned.”

“ Ned, get George.”

“ He’s playing checkers with Wendell. Wendell’s lost four in a row. Although sometimes I think George lets him win.”

“ Ned, there’s been a murder.” The phone dropped, rattling Jones’ ear. Arnie lit a cigarette as he approached.

“ Arnie, stay at the outside door and don’t let anyone inside.”

“ You a little shaky?”

“ No, I’m not shaky... I’m trying to get inside, but Bucky won’t let me in!”

“ I’ll get ya in.”

Strickland came on the line. “ Matthias, what happened?”

“ Somebody has been shot up here in the conservatory,” said Jones as Arnie gripped the brass doorknob. “ Arnie this is a crime scene!”

“ Huh?” he asked and pulled open the door. “ Hey, Buckster, what happened?”

Bucky assumed a firing position and aimed at Arnie. “ Get back, A.D.”

“ What’s going on up there?” asked Strickland.

A brisk air current through the open library side windows cooled Jones’ arms as he moved alongside Arnie. Professor Neusbaum’s white hair flowed over the grainy

floorboards. His arm was cuddled over a cello and the drawstring was two feet away, near the gray paneled wall and closed windowpanes. A wide maroon blood splotch radiated outward from a tiny bullet hole in the center of his pale green shirt. Four feet diagonally from the wall, a snub nosed handgun with a back handle and chamber, surrounded by a silver or aluminum frame lay on the wood. Neusbaum's German Shepherd watched Jones' every move from a position between Neusbaum and the glossy black piano. Jones remembered Neusbaum playing Frisbee his daughter and dog on the common. "George, the maestro, Professor Neusbaum. He sure as hell looks dead."

"I'm already on my way."

"Wait, George. Lark was in here and just cut across the fields in his car toward Prince William!"

"Lark?"

"Lark."

"I'll talk to you when I get there."

Jones cut the line. Bucky was still in a firing position.

"Everybody outside."

"Chill out, will you, Bucky? Is he dead?" asked Jones.

"Said victim has been immobilized."

"But is he dead? Lark was in here," said Jones. "I can't believe Lark would actually shoot him."

"Get in the corridor or I will hold you in criminal contempt."

“ Shut up,” said Jones, walking by Bucky.

“ Yeah, Buckster. Shut up,” said Arnie and then he produced a honking laugh.

The dog reared up and showed his teeth. Jones stayed a dozen feet back. “ Okay, boy. Okay, good dog.”

“ Hey, I know about dogs,” said Arnie.

“ I would stay back, Arnie. He’s not going to let you near his fallen master.” Neusbaum was not breathing.

“ Whaddaya afraid of the dog?” asked Arnie, laughing as he traipsed forward.

The dog lunged, frothing at the mouth, and with a vicious growl snapped his sharp canines at Arnie. Arnie quickly scampered toward the orchestra’s surrounding rehearsal rim. “ Dog is nuts.”

Back at the door Bucky zigzagged yellow crime scene tape across the door jam. “ How is George Strickland supposed to get in here?”

“ We don’t need the blue boys. This is a campus security investigation.”

“ No it isn’t...” Jones panned the terraced orchestra rim back to Neusbaum, the cello, and the gun. The piano keys were exposed, but the rear of the piano was closed. From behind Jones felt the breezes from the library side windows again yet the windows behind Neusbaum were locked. “ Why kill him and leave the gun?”

“Larsen whimpered out. The ex-coach is guilty of murder,” said Bucky. He unclipped his belt radio and banged it against a chair near the door. “Stupid battery.”

“Did you see Lark in here? Did anyone see him in here?”

Bucky flipped his notepad. “Said vehicle departed area via athletic fields at eight o’ six am.”

“Bucky, it’s nine-fifteen.”

Bucky looked at his humungous sports watch. He pushed a few of the pointed orange buttons, producing a number of tones, including a Westminster chime. “Correction, time adjusted for Daylight Savings.”

“Don’t you change the time in April?”

“I never believed in daylight savings,” he said, hitting the radio with the butt of his hand. The speaker crackled. “Chief Strickland, Chief Strickland.”

“I’m right here, Bucky,” said Strickland over the radio. Through the closed windows Jones saw the cruiser outside in the conservatory parking lot.

“I have a 965 in the college’s music conservatory.”

“Why don’t you start by getting this damned tape off the door.”

Strickland and two younger cops were in the lobby. The cops chopped away the tape and moved into the conservatory. “Wendell is headed up 32 to Prince William. PWPD is coming the other way.”

“ Good, Larsen just killed the maestro,” said Bucky.

Arnie squatted down, snapped his fingers and tried to talk to the dog. Again the dog’s body tensed and with his teeth exposed, shot toward Arnie. Arnie backtracked and hid behind Jones. “ Crazy mutt!”

“ What is that dog doing in here?” asked Strickland.

Jones stared at the gun. “ Neusbaum’s dog.”

“ Killer dog,” said Arnie, now standing with Bucky near the broken tape at the door.

“ Bucky, did you see Lark in here?” asked Strickland.

“ Negative. Suspect left in a 1978 Buick Electra.”

Strickland peered out one of the library side windows. “ Anybody else in the area that might have crawled out this window?”

“ Negative.”

Strickland continued to look outside. “ Then you really didn’t see anyone in here?”

“ Negative.”

“ What?” asked Strickland as he turned and winced.

“ Affirmative.”

“ Did you or didn’t you see anyone inside the conservatory?”

“ Crime scene was vacant, except for the stiff.”

Strickland rolled his eyes. “ All right, boys, let’s get to work.”

“ What do you want me to do?” asked Bucky.

“ Get the hell out of here.”

“ I’m campus security.”

“ Then go keep the campus secure,” said Strickland, looking at Jones, near the gun. “ Clayton and the rest of the Medical Examiner’s people will be here within the hour.”

Strickland creased his brow and turned toward the piano.

“ Shot in the back at close range. I wonder who the hell owns that gun.”

“ I’ll trace it,” said Bucky with his arms crossed.

“ I thought I told you to beat it, Bucky,” said Strickland.

Bucky grimaced and spun around. “ I’m filing an official letter of protest with Nigel Kent!”

“ You do that,” said Strickland as Bucky waved his arms and tripped over the broken crime scene tape.

Strickland put his hands on his hips and stared at Arnie. “ I’m goin’. I’m goin’. That dog is dangerous.”

Arnie joined Bucky in the hallway. As both men moved away, Strickland faced Jones. “ Why are you here so fast, Matthias?”

“ I was out at my baseball camp. I heard a shot, but there was a long pause between the first and second shot. I mean maybe a minute.”

“ That’s odd. Unless the killer checked the Neusbaum’s body and then made sure he was dead.” Strickland bent over Neusbaum. “ I see one hit from the rear and that’s it.”

Jones put his hand on Strickland's shoulder. " You know we're talking about *Lark*, George."

Strickland shook his head back as he stood. " Lark, has trouble remembering what day it is."

" You don't understand. Neusbaum owed Lark money. Ten thousand bucks."

Strickland's expression soured. " Lark is cheap with the buck. But to say he killed Neusbaum."

" You don't understand. I just talked to him no more than half an hour ago. Neusbaum refused pay back the loan right now. Lark asked him for the money and he said, ' What's your hurry?'"

" Does Lark own a gun?"

" I doubt it," replied Jones, looking at Neusbaum. The dog stretched out again and placed his head on his front paws.

" If Lark really killed him, it's the dumbest executed murder I've ever seen."

" It has all the earmarking of Lark as far as that goes," said Jones.

" Wendell or the Prince William boys will track down Lark before he crosses the notch. Lark is a tower of jelly. He'll tell us everything we need to know."

2

Outside the conservatory's stonewalls Nigel Kent repeatedly told the reporters the college would defer all questions to Herbert Lane. The District Attorney had just arrived, minus his toupee, from his bay cottage. Lane put his hand in his pocket and stepped up to the microphones. His tanned baldhead was oversized on the TV monitors and his sport shirt's bulging belly made his pale legs even scrawnier. To his left two orderlies from the Medical Examiners Office wheeled the body bag containing Neusbaum's body to the waiting van. "Ladies and gentlemen, preliminary and quite cursory inspection would indicate Professor J. Arnold Neusbaum was shot once in the back from a relatively close distance. It would appear Professor Neusbaum was killed instantly, possibly by a direct bullet track through the heart. But I must state this is all preliminary and Dr. Morris will have a more detailed statement after a complete autopsy."

"Is it true a former Hamilton College coach was seen fleeing the scene?" asked one of the reporters.

Nigel's eyes opened wide behind his thick glasses. Lane shook his finger. "Now, you people know it would not be

appropriate for me to comment about an ongoing investigation.”

Strickland spoke with two of his officers near the blue and white Hamilton cruiser. Jones sidestepped away from Lane’s press conference. “ What’s up, George?”

“ They have Lark.”

“ Good.”

“ But there is a complication,” said Strickland, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“ What do you mean?”

“ Tell him, Rick.”

The blonde cop pressed his lips and faced Jones. “ Coach Larsen got on the Interstate in Prince William.”

“ Oh, boy. I can see this one coming,” said Jones.

“ He got on the wrong way,” said the other cop.

“ But they got him, right?” asked Jones.

“ Not until he caused a thirty-five car pile up in downtown Prince William,” said Strickland, opening his eyes.

“ Oh, great. Is he all right?”

“ Of course. Not a scratch, but you have twenty-five people treated, most for minor injuries.” Strickland again pinched his nose. “ Thirty-five cars dented and mangled. Ruined.”

“ At least Lark’s bomber can finally go to the junkyard,” said Jones.

Strickland opened his eyes. “ No, that’s just it. A few minor dents. Lark and the bomber... both unscathed.” Jones grinned.

“ What’s so funny?”

“ Nothing... nothing. You say Wendell is bringing him back now?”

“ They should be here in a few minutes.”

Jones moved by the other cops. “ George, you really don’t think Lark killed Neusbaum, do you?”

“ It doesn’t matter what I think. Herbert is running this investigation.”

“ I thought Bucky was.”

“ Don’t get smart.” Strickland’s face tensed. “ I had to send a man over to Neusbaum’s house.”

“ Why?”

“ Bucky was trying to question Mrs. Neusbaum and the daughter. He just starts in about the murder and these poor people didn’t even know Neusbaum was dead. Herbert was livid and I don’t blame him. He had Bucky alone in my office for five minutes. Bucky slithered down the back corridor.”

“ Who else would want Neusbaum dead?” asked Jones.

Rick tightened his brow. “ The son in law, Steve Corbett is a janitor here on campus. I guess we’ll have to check all the family members. Even the Prince William Symphony members.”

“ I know who Corbett is,” said Jones.

“ Herbert’s guy, Roland Chance is on his way over.”

“ Roland the Great. Mayor Picata put him in the D.A’s office. Man has an ego the size of the Crosstown Bridge in Prince William.”

Strickland wrote something on his pad.. “ Corbett needs to be found. And Neusbaum’s wife and his daughter.” He stroked his chin. “ Flo is going to be hysterical when she hears Lark is under suspicion of killing Neusbaum.”

“ Better get her a sedative,” said Jones.

“ Make it a double: One for her and one for Lark.”

Another one of Strickland’s men hurried down the conservatory steps. “ What have you got, Tully?”

The gray hair cop, older than Strickland took a deep breath, and then spoke in a low voice out of the corner of his mouth as the coroner’s van pulled across the athletic fields. “ I just talked to one of the other music professors. The maestro was very close to Lenore Picata.”

“ Mayor Picata’s wife?” asked Strickland.

“ Lenore Picata is a patron of the arts in Prince William,” added Jones. “ She attends all the social functions.”

Tully checked his notes. “ She is President of the Prince William Symphony.”

“ Where was she when Neusbaum was shot?” asked Jones. He watched the green Medical Examiner’s van turn toward Prince William.

“ I don’t know. Mick Dumas said she worked closely with Neusbaum,” said Tully.

“ Mick Dumas?” asked Strickland.

“ Yeah, the Mick Dumas Quartet plays on Wednesday nights at Club Max in Prince William and he’s in the music department here at the college,” said Jones. “ Cocoa Stefani wanted to get a different crowd in weeknights. I’ve heard them. They’re not bad.”

“ Okay,” said Strickland. “ Two things. I’m sure Herbert knows about the Mrs. Picata link to Neusbaum. Find out where she was during the last hour. And Rick, find this Corbett janitor.”

“ Steve Corbett. Not a bad guy. Good looking. A little slow and I don’t mean that in a bad way,” said Jones. “ He gets the gym ready before the basketball games.”

“ Right. Question Corbett, Rick, and get back to me. We’ll see if Roland Chance needs to talk to him.”

Rick nodded. “ We can check the custodian’s office at the physical plant.”

Jones looked Strickland in the eye. “ What bothers me is the timing. The minute between shots. I heard it myself.”

“ Then where’s the other bullet?” asked Strickland.

“ Good question. Gun tests will show what I heard.”

Jones turned as the short, floppy gray haired Mick Dumas, wearing a red sports shirt, walked briskly along the walkway bricks under the trees surrounding the conservatory. He had

a large jaw, big blue eyes and a toothpick was stuck between his teeth. “ There’s Dumas. I recognize him from Club Max.”

Dumas’s blue eyes were red as he jogged forward.

“ They’re telling me Arnold is dead?”

“ Shot in the back,” said Strickland. He extended his hand.

“ I’m George Strickland. I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“ Mick Dumas,” he said slowly shaking Strickland’s hand.

“ God, this is awful... Who did it?”

“ The investigation is underway.”

“ Sure, sure. I just can’t believe it. ” His watery eyes swung toward Jones. “ Coach Jones.”

“ Mick.”

“ This is just terrible. I’ve known Arnold for five years. A wonderful cellist... perfectionist. ”

“ Who would want him dead?” asked Jones.

Dumas raised his bushy brows and wiped away the sweat with his blue handkerchief. Then he shook his head.

“ Arnold Neusbaum had no enemies.”

“ Everybody has enemies if they exist in this world,” said Jones.

“ Like I say, he was a perfectionist and a big spender, but I don’t know anyone who hated him or had anything against him.”

“ You’ve worked with him for five years?” asked Jones.

“ I have, but I’ve accepted a new position with a school in Santa Fe now that I’ve sold my house in Newton.”

“ Oh, you live over the bridge?”

“ I live just on the other side of the Crosstown Bridge. Great view if you like Prince William. I didn’t get the position I wanted but I’m not complaining.”

Jones folded his arms as Strickland slid in the cruiser and spoke into the radio. “ Why are you leaving? I’ll miss the Club Max thing.”

“ Sometimes, it’s time to get back to your roots. I left New Mexico years ago when I got out of the service. I’m not getting any younger,” he said, squeezing Jones’ arm. “ They say you can’t go back, Coach, but going to prove you can. I just hate to be leaving... with Arnold dead. One more gig next Wednesday and then I’m flying out of Manchester on Saturday morning.”

“ I’ll catch the show.”

“ Thanks. Please tell me if you find out anything.” Dumas glanced at Strickland inside the cruiser and then started back along the walk. Jones wanted to talk to him further. Working with Neusbaum for five years might shed some insight into the maestro’s friends and associates.

Strickland set the radio microphone back on the dash.

“ Wendell just crossed over the notch. He and Lark will be at the station in five minutes. ”

“ You want some coffee and sandwiches?”

“ Get *me* the sedative. I guess Lark is a basket case.”

3

“ I’m doomed! Doomed, I tell you,” said Lark, his face red as he removed his glasses inside the crowded jail cell.

Strickland squeezed between Rick and Jones. He loosened the top button of his sweaty uniform. “ Listen, Lark. Herbert Lane is sending-”

“ Herbert Lane! My God, I am doomed!”

“ Herbert is sending in one of his people to speak with you.”

“ And pressure a confession! I won’t stand for it! I won’t!” shouted Lark. He stood quickly and put on his glasses.

“ Where is Flo? You said Flo was on her way over here!”

Jones cleared his throat. “ I guess she had to stop at the bridge club.”

“ I’m being charged with murder and she’s off playing cards!”

“ No,” said Jones. “ She said she was getting Sid’s number. Whatever that means.”

“ Thank the Lord.”

“ Lark,” said Strickland. “ You need to answer Mr. Chance’s questions honestly and completely. Is there

anything you want to tell me about what happened this morning... And I've told you ten times you need a lawyer down here."

Lark sat on the bed again and leaned his head against the green plaster wall. "I have to tell you."

"Okay. Tell me," said Strickland.

"I'm doomed! Doomed!"

Strickland rolled his eyes at Jones and motioned him outside. He walked Jones down the corridor toward the outside offices.

"We're getting nowhere. Why won't he just tell us what happened?"

"Because," answered Jones.

"Because what?"

"Because he's doomed! Doomed!"

"Don't you start," said Strickland. "This is no laughing matter, Matthias. A man was shot to death this morning. On campus. I've already got a call from Hamilton Fletcher telling me to keep this hush, hush."

"Hamilton funds the college."

"And I work for the town, not Hamilton Fletcher," said Strickland.

"Same thing."

They moved into the main office. Wendell leaned against the counter, legs outstretched and hands folded. He spoke to a middle-aged woman with an olive complexion and

styled black hair. Her eyes were moist and lined with green mascara. She wore new jeans and a pink jersey with bold black letters:

SUMMER CONCERTFEST

“ That’s Mrs. Picata,” said Strickland.

Wendell’s monkey laugh filled the room. “ We keep busy around here.”

“ That’s a change,” said Strickland. “ Can I help you, Mrs. Picata?”

With a saddened countenance she slowly peered over Wendell’s shoulder. As she meandered around Wendell, he caught the metal wastebasket with his shoe and sent the contents across the wood floor. Her dark eyes were glazed, perhaps drugged. She smiled a subtle smile at Jones and extended her little hand to Strickland. Even her voice was mellow. “ Chief Strickland, I worked with Maestro Neusbaum at the symphony.”

“ Were you were called to the station, Mrs. Picata?” asked Strickland.

“ No, sir, I was not. I have come here under my own volition to see if I can be of assistance in finding the truth about dear Arnold’s death.”

“ And what do you think the truth is, Mrs. Picata?”
asked Jones.

She wrinkled her pink frosted lips. “ I assume
someone shot him to death.”

“ Who?” asked Jones.

“ Well, I do not know who would be capable of
murdering such a...” Her eyes filled and she turned away. “
He was such a wonderful man.”

“ But who would want to kill Professor Neusbaum?”
asked Jones again.

She raised her dark, trimmed brows as she wiped the
tears off her cheeks. “ Is this an official investigation? Do I
need a lawyer?”

“ Why would you need legal representation, Mrs.
Picata?” asked Jones.

Her eyes tightened. “ I don’t know who would want
Arnold dead. Maybe his son-in-law.”

“ Why the son-in law?” asked Strickland as Wendell,
holding the wastebasket, moved behind Lenore.

“ Oh, everyone knows Steve Corbett and Arnold hated
each other.”

“ What brought that about?” asked Jones.

“ You need a ride anywhere, Lenore?” asked Wendell.

“ No, I have my Jaguar.”

“ Wow, a Jag?”

“ Wendell, see if Lark needs anything out back,” said Strickland.

“ Sure, George. Good bye, Lenore.”

“ You take care, Wendell.” Wendell moved by, still carrying the wastebasket. He set it near the counter, glanced at Lenore and headed toward the cells. “ Steve Corbett was a lieutenant colonel in the marines.”

“ Maybe you’re thinking of another Steve Corbett.” Jones furrowed his brow. “ Steve Corbett is a custodian here at the college.”

“ Yes. He had a promising career.”

“ What happened?” asked Strickland.

“ Munitions accident at Camp Pendleton in California during maneuvers.”

Roland Chance, in an open silk with an exposed thin gold chain against his tanned skin, stepped inside the station. His hair was moussed heavily as if he just stepped from the shower. Lenore glanced at Roland and the three men in suits accompanying him into the station. Then she looked back at Strickland. “ Head injury. He was never the same.”

“ Lenore, why are you here?” asked Roland.

“ I wanted to see if I could help.”

Roland’s snooty voice was as aggravating as his cologne
“ Where’s Larsen?”

“ Out back.”

His brown eyes caught Jones, but he faced Mrs. Picata. “ Lenore, you need to return to the Mayor’s mansion.”

“ But Arnold is dead. He’s dead!”

Roland motioned to one of his men. “ John, bring Mrs. Picata out to her car.”

“ Yes, Mr. Chance.”

Lenore moved up to Strickland and Jones. She blinked her droopy eyes as she spoke in a shaky voice. “ We have suffered a great loss.”

“ I understand your feelings,” said Strickland.

“ Find Arnold’s killer.”

“ We will attempt just that,” said Roland. He turned to Strickland as Lenore was brought outside. “ Herbert was livid, George, when you didn’t keep the TV people away while he wasn’t wearing his hairpiece. The Prince William stations all broadcast his statement.”

“ About the hair piece?” asked Jones with a smile.

“ Always with the quip, Jones. I’m sure I echo Herbert’s and the Mayor’s sentiments when I ask you to stay out of this investigation.”

“ You’re so kind.”

“ We don’t need trouble,” said Roland, adjusting his collar. He looked quite pleased with himself.

“ Lark is out back and knows you’re coming,” said Strickland.

“ Herbert may want him transferred to a more secure area. Like the county jail.”

“ Lark isn’t exactly an escape artist,” said Jones.

“ Our office has learned he lent Professor Neusbaum ten thousand dollars and was laughed at several times when he demanded his money. And may I point out he was in the music hall-”

“ Conservatory,” said Jones.

“ Larsen was inside when the fatal shots were fired.”

Jones stepped closer to Roland and looked him in the eye.

“ Lark, no matter how stingy he is, wouldn’t commit murder. I don’t even think he could fire a gun.”

“ We’ll see.” Roland motioned with his head and the three men followed him into the back corridor. “ Where’s his lawyer?”

“ Refuses representation,” said Strickland.

“ Good. Good work, George.” He pressed his lips and marched down the hallway.

“ He’s a piece of work,” said Jones.

“ Let him do his thing,” said Strickland. “ Lenore Picata stepped back inside the station. She carried a little white poodle.

“ Mrs. Picata, I think you’d better go back to Prince William.”

“ I have to reiterate: Steve Corbett and the maestro never got along. He was the son-in-law who never lived up to Arnold’s stature.”

Jones looked down the corridor where Roland was questioning Lark. “ How long ago was he injured?”

“ Eight years ago. Bernice moved to Hamilton five years ago and Arnold got Steve the job at the school.”

“ Bernice is the daughter?” asked Strickland.

“ Correct. Steve and Arnold never were of the same ilk anyway. But at least Steve had a career in the military and money coming in. Once Steve was back here the differences between the two men exacerbated.”

“ We need to talk with him, George, and see where he was at the time of the murder.” He turned to Lenore. “ What about the wife and Bernice?”

“ Loyal, adorning... Bernice worshipped the ground her father walked on.”

“ So, Steve was a letdown to her?” asked Strickland.

“ Sure, even before the accident. Confidentially, I think he liked the women. And, gentlemen, you can check the medical records. He was on medication and was subject to violent fits.”

“ How violent?” asked Jones.

“ Assault back in California. But the medication has been effective since they came back here. Arnold told me all this. I knew the man for eleven years.”

“ I see,” said Strickland. “ Should I call you right at the mayor’s mansion?”

She opened her pocketbook and retrieved a white Prince William Symphony card with raised maroon lettering.

The Prince William Symphony

413 South Bay Ave

Prince William, New Hampshire

Lenore Picata 603-555-1212

President

“ Good,” said Strickland.

“ You can reach me on my cell phone.” She handed the card to Strickland.

“ Thank you for your help, Mrs. Picata” said Strickland.

“ I want the truth to come out.”

“ We all do,” said Strickland.

She nodded and left via the front screen door. A high-pitched door lock sounded and she opened a long red, shiny Jaguar’s driver’s door. Strickland pivoted toward his side office and Jones followed

“ I find her presence here suspicious, George.”

“ She’s grieving.”

“ No, she’s too cooperative.”

“ Oh, Matthias, what other motive would she have in coming over here?”

“ Sounds like she came over here to nail Steve Corbett.”

Strickland shuffled through some papers. “ I am calling him in, but it’s all irrelevant if Lark fired that gun.”

“ Come on, George.”

Strickland’s dark eyes slowly moved upward from the papers. “ Now that you mention it, why would she finger Corbett like that?” He picked up the phone, punched in a few numbers and rolled his tongue around his cheek. “ Yes, Brenda, this is George Strickland. Would you get me maintenance?”

Jones retreated to the widow behind Strickland’s desk. Arnie Dewars and Bucky Driscoll waltzed down School Street. “ Oh, no.”

“ What’s the matter?” asked Strickland.

“ Bucky and Arnie,” he said peering out the side.

“ Coming over here.”

“ Shut the door, Matthias.”

Strickland lifted the phone closer to his ear. “ Yes, this is George Strickland. I’m trying to get in contact with Steve Corbett. Oh, hi, Dan. He what? I see... Where was he this morning? Yes, I’ll wait.”

Jones pushed the door shut, but listened near the wood panels. Arnie's voice grew louder as the station screen door slammed. He asked Ned if he could speak with Strickland.

"He wants you, George."

"Tell him to go play in traffic," said Strickland, placing his hand over the mouthpiece. "Corbett went home after he heard news of Neusbaum's death."

"Not surprising," said Jones. Outside Bucky instructed Arnie enter to Strickland's office.

"Yes? He was working in the library this morning?" asked Strickland, looking up at Jones.

"Right next to the conservatory," said Jones. A loud rap on the door startled him.

"Georgie, it's Arnie Dewars."

"And security officer Driscoll," said Bucky.

Jones rolled his eyes. "Oh, boy."

Strickland gripped the phone and slouched as he spoke

"Yes, I understand, Dan. He reports to work at eight. Okay. Good. No, I'll call him. Just some preliminary questions. What? Is who going to fry? Come on, Dan, we're talking about Lark." He hung up the phone. "Some people don't know when to shut up."

This time both men knocked on the wood paneled door. "Georgie, I have important news."

"What do you want to do?" asked Jones.

“ Let em’ in. Get it over with.”

Jones raised his brows and turned the lock. “ You’ll regret it.”

“ I know that.”

When Jones twisted the knob, Bucky fell forward and stumbled into the office. Arnie exhaled cigarette smoke and trailed behind.

“ Georgie, I have this thing under control.”

“ Arnie, you can’t smoke in here,” said Strickland.

“ I you that, A.D.,” said Bucky, placing both hands on his gun belt. “ Regulation sixteen point five of the town council ordinances-”

“ Sixteen point five is a restaurant closing ordinance,” said Strickland.

“ Hey, Georgie,” said Arnie, putting out the cigarette inside a coffee mug on Strickland’s desk. “ I’ve solved this.”

“ Really?” asked Strickland, evidencing a grin at Jones.

“ We both came up with this,” said Bucky. His eyelids drooped and his lower teeth stuck out as he spoke. “ Using ballistic and crime scene evidence.”

“ Ballistics aren’t back yet,” said Strickland.

“ Hey,” said Arnie, moving face to face with Strickland. “ That dog was right there when the music man was plugged.”

Jones smiled. “ You saying we have our first witness?”

“ No.” said Arnie turning. “ That ain’t it.”

“Come on, Arnie,” said Strickland. “I’m a busy man.”

Arnie held his glasses and cleared his throat. “The dog shot the professor.”

Jones burst into a laugh and fell back on the couch across from Strickland’s desk. “The dog killed Neusbaum. That’s a good one.”

Bucky moved closer to Jones and pointed his finger. “Said dog was in close proximity of the deceased.”

Even Strickland’s eyes were moist and he seemed as if we were going to laugh. “You’re saying... you’re saying the dog fired the gun? Clever dog.”

“I figure the dog hated the old man,” said Arnie.

“How do you figure that?” asked Jones, wiping his eye.

“The dog in question was left stateside while his master was in Europe,” said Bucky.

“Animals sense things,” said Arnie. “They ain’t stupid.”

“Well, that is an interesting theory, Gentlemen,” said Strickland. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to check in on our lead suspect.”

“Lark was framed,” said Bucky.

“By whom?” asked Jones and then he giggled. “The dog?”

“You laugh,” said Arnie. “You’d better get your own house in order.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jones.

“ Mookie says they’ve got most of the water out now,”
said Bucky.

“ What water?” asked Jones, looking at Strickland.

Strickland grinned again. “ Twice as nice.”