

1

Leo Crowley's compressed body was chipped out of a foundation north of town. Jones sat at the jet window somewhere over Nebraska. While at his brother's Redondo Beach home, George Strickland's untimely call from the construction sight trailer shook him. Leo had helped Jones' teams at Hamilton College by lugging equipment and performing duties such as painting the field lines before games or just providing support with a timely cup of coffee. Now, framers on one of the new houses in the Applegate Development had seen part of a boot sticking out of the concrete. Lee Anne Crowley wanted Jones to return from his California vacation to find her husband's killer.

Everyone in the tiny hamlet of Hamilton, New Hampshire knew him as the coach of three sports at the college and he sometimes dabbled in murder investigations. He looked at fourteen-year-old nephew, slated to spend the summer back east, and remembered how he had emphatically promised his brother, Chip would not be a part of Leo's murder investigation. Then he leaned back in the seat, remembering Zelda back in California. Jones thought she was one of his brother's excuses for a blind date, but her natural blonde hair blowing in the beach air lingered in his thoughts. She expressed an interest in visiting New England, but had other commitments in California. Why did Leo have to go and get himself killed?

* * *

Jones studied the white caps churning under the plane as the jet approached Logan in mid afternoon. Then he looked up at Boston, under a sunken haze. With a bounce and a jolt the plane touched down. Chip leaned across his lap and looked out the window.

Jones rapped his shoulder. " It's not L.A., Chippy. Listen, I'll see if I can get you into Fenway Park again. Maybe when the Angels are in town."

" Uncle Matthias, whoever stuffed Leo Crowley's body in that cement must have worked at Applegate."

" Listen, Chip. " Jones pulled him back from the window as the jet braked abruptly. " I told your father. No investigation. You're going to summer camp and maybe find a girlfriend."

" You told him that?"

" Well, not the part about the girlfriend. Listen, when you get older you can help me."

" How much trouble could I get into?"

" I don't want to even address that question. Lots..."

" Uncle Matthias, I'm fourteen years old. "

" I rest my case. George Strickland is going to meet us here. You remember him, Hamilton's police chief..."

The jet slowed and taxied toward the terminal. " I remember that weird old guy who coached before you."

" Lark Larsen."

" Yeah, that's the guy. He brought me fishing, remember?"

Jones pinched the bridge of his nose. " Yup. Lark fell in the Pocquanticut River when he was casting off."

" But he held onto that log for fifteen miles!"

" I know. I chased him the whole way along the river bank."

" You broke you ankle."

" Let's forget about Lark. Leo is dead... and even worse George says he has no suspects."

The jet nudged back to the terminal. Once they were safely in place, Jones stood, retrieved the carryons from the overhead and moved within the passengers toward the ramp. He patted Chip on the shoulder and talked about the college baseball season, just concluded last month.

Strickland, still in his blue police shirt, tie loosened, stood at the top of the ramp. His round face looked pensive as Jones brought Chip up the ramp, but managed a smile as he met them. " Matthias, having a good vacation?"

" Was... Three thousand miles across the country and-" He blocked Chip's ears. " And leaving a gorgeous, but intelligent blonde haired beauty."

" I know about Zelda."

" Zelda?" asked Strickland. " Sounds interesting."

" It was."

" George, you know my nephew, Chip."

" You going to help us solve this crime?" asked Strickland as they moved in the crowd toward the baggage section.

" George, don't encourage him. "

" It's like getting your license, Mr. Strickland, guess you have to be old enough."

Strickland grinned as they moved through the airport. " Chip, you're even getting Matthias' sense of humor."

Jones rolled his eyes. " Ha. Ha. If he gets into trouble, I get into trouble with his father. Listen, this Leo thing is bizarre. What did he ever do to anybody? Leo was a nice guy."

" No sign of a murder weapon. No sign of a struggle. No sign of blood on the sight. They took Leo's body to Clayton Morris's office. What a mess."

" What was going on in his life? Obviously, he wasn't tending his orchards or farming anymore. I want to know what he was doing for the last two weeks. I'll ask Lee Anne."

" I don't think she would know that answer, Matthias. She's been at her sister's house in Florida for the last month. I kept telling Bobby Bonner that..."

" Bobby Bonner?"

" Bonner is the builder at Applegate."

Jones nodded and moved across the terminal toward the baggage stairway. All the way to the baggage carousel he remained several steps ahead of Strickland and Chip. He stopped at the carousel and put his foot up on the edge. " What do you know about Bobby Bonner, George?"

" Bonner is based in Prince William. Hasn't built much in Hamilton and is associated with Bill Haywood, the developer."

" I'm surprised they squeaked that development into quiet and sleepy Hamilton."

" I guess Leo wanted to sell his apple orchards."

" Who else is involved here?"

" They're in this thing together with the bank, Prince William Credit Union. Bonner is a typical loud mouthed salesman."

" Is he on the up and up?"

Strickland squinted and ran his teeth over his lip. At that moment the baggage carousel started turning. Jones lost his footing and quickly stepped back. Chip smiled. Jones grinned and pointed at his nephew. " LA is one ticket away, Chippy."

Strickland's half smile dropped. " Bonner has been involved in some questionable activities. I've checked with Dom Pacheco and some of the cops in Prince William. You know the usual. Not paying the subs. Sleazy materials in construction. There are reports from his Prince William developments that he never follows up on any complaints with the houses."

" Doesn't make him a murderer, George... Anything else? Did he ever threaten anybody? Specifically Leo. What kind of guy is he?"

" Loud. Pushy. Very pushy," said Strickland.

" Uncle Matthias..."

" One second, Chip."

Strickland nodded and raised his finger. " That could be something to look into. Subcontractors would know more about him."

Jones turned to Chip. " Yeah, Chip."

" Your luggage, it just went around."

" Nuts," said Jones. He raced after the brown suitcases and scooped up each of the five suitcases on the other side and handed Chip two of the suitcases.

" Matthias, you could have just waited until they came around, " said Strickland. " Your uncle is hyper, Chip. "

" George, I can send you to LA, too. "

" Good, Mary and I can use the vacation. "

" Where is your cruiser, Mr. Strickland?"

" Parking garage. We'll walk unless you want to run, Matthias."

" Very funny. Come on. Let's go home. "

* * *

Outside Jones stepped onto the curb, gazed at the busy underpass and stepped between the parked taxis and cars. Strickland spoke from behind. " I just want to give you the heads up, Matthias: Arnie Dewars is running around telling everybody you had a blow-out with your brother and that's why you're coming back to Hamilton. "

" Arnie doesn't affect me, " said Jones, but his right eye twitched.

" When I called you at your brother's house, I was going to tell you that Lark was on his way out to Los Angeles."

Jones thought about his bumbling predecessor, the white hair, glasses, and gaudy clothes. How everything Lark touched started chain reactions that usually ended in disaster. " You'd do that, too."

" There is some very spicy news about Lark though."

Jones led the way to the parking garage. " Spicy? Let me guess, Lark's gout is acting up again..."

" Lark and Flo have broken up..."

" *What?* " Lark and his girlfriend of twenty plus years were like two halves of a horse costume with Lark taking up the rear. They were virtually inseparable and talk of them breaking up made no sense. He turned to Strickland. " I don't believe it."

" That's not the upshot, Matthias."

" There's more? What more could there be?" Jones smirked and started walking again. " George, this must have hit the Boston papers... Time Magazine... Cable news..."

" Lark is sweet on Cora Jefferson."

Jones stopped again and set down his suitcase. " Who in their right mind could be sweet on Cora Jefferson? Plus, she hates Lark..."

" They're dating. Really. The old boy still has it."

" Yeah, he's got it all right." Jones picked up the suitcase and moved forward again. " It's what he's got that's the problem."

Strickland chuckled from behind. " Oh, the town is buzzing about it, too."

" Why would Lark and Flo break up?"

" Something about money. Actually, something about her buying a house in Bonner's development. Nobody is saying much, Matthias. You know how Lark is when it comes to money."

" The moths come out of his wallet every time he opens it."

" He made me pay for my ice cream at the beach when I was eleven years old," said Chip.

Jones nodded as he led them across the road and toward the parking garage elevator. " Yup... that's Lark. When he passes the birds on the common, they're all chirping... Cheap. Cheap. Cheap."

Strickland and Chip laughed as the elevator doors opened. Strickland let them move inside. " And he's walking around town with Cora Jefferson, the world's most cynical woman."

Jones shook his head. With summer's arrival he would have no coaching or school responsibilities and could find out who killed Leo. The

loud mouth, Bobby Bonner came to mind. But Bonner would not have direct responsibility for the land sale to Leo Crowley. That might fall to lawyers, the bank, or Bill Haywood.

Strickland stepped out of the elevator and into the parking garage. The cruiser was a few spaces to the right. He quickly opened the trunk. " Everything should fit in back. "

Jones hoisted his suitcases and then lifted Chip's two cases. " George, what do you know about Haywood?"

" You know, I should have an answer to that and I don't. " Strickland unlocked the doors and headed to the driver's side, thinking as he got in the car.

" I've seen his yellow and blue **FOR SALE** signs in Hamilton and Prince William and I've heard he has an elaborate office in the city filled with woman."

Chip slipped across the back seat as Jones nodded and got inside. He looked out the window as Strickland backed around. Finding out how much they paid Leo Crowley for his apple orchard was a good starting point. Land deals could cause hard feelings. Somebody always came out on top or there were complications. He took out his little black notebook and wrote down Bill Haywood's name in bold red letters.

On the next page he started a column called, " *Homeowners*. " He needed to know who lived in that development, where they were last week, and what they thought about Leo. As a veteran, Leo and spent time with his friends at the VFW hall near the town dump and marched in all the town parades, carrying the flag with his fellow soldiers. Jones pressed his lips and tightened his fists. He liked Leo Crowley.

The Fitton Chronicles

The Applegate Murder

At the attendant booth he handed Strickland some money for the parking, but the police chief waved him off. Jones stared at Boston's skyward buildings over the water, but soon looked northward. An hour and a half away, Hamilton was racked by Leo's murder. Leo's easy goin personality was an enigma. The man had no real enemies. Yet, somebody had murdered him and dumped his body into foundation forms.

2

Jones looked over Hamilton Bay's smooth blue waters as Strickland turned left onto Shore Road. The land deal bothered Jones. How much did they pay Leo and where was the money? Jones would even suspect Lee Anne Crowley if she was out of town. Talking with Bill Haywood and Bobby Bonner as well as every subcontractor working at Applegate

Jones had only a small meal on the plane. His stomach rumbled as he and Chip passed through his picket fence gate and up the brick walk to his white colonial on the common. The first thing he did was to make arrangements to meet Nigel Kent and his housekeeper at the Colonial House restaurant. He then punched in Clayton Morris' number at the Medical Examiner's office. The line rang as he reached in the refrigerator for a soda. He balanced the phone on his shoulder and poured the carbonated soda into a glass. Chip leaned forward as Jones pushed the tall glass across the counter.

Clayton picked up the line and Jones immediately began the questions, but Clayton was ready. " Matthias, Crowley was hit on the head with a long, blunt object. Things were messy, but... He was in that foundation over the weekend. Now, from what I understand, P. W. Concrete poured that foundation Friday morning. The men framing the house spotted a portion of Leo's work boot in the cellar cement. From what we can determine, Leo was

killed Thursday night between ten-thirty and midnight, judging from his stomach contents."

" What did he have to eat, Clayton?"

" Roast beef. Probably a submarine sandwich. What concerns me is the head injury. One blow. Solid."

" Somebody really clunked him?"

" Yes. There was no sign of the body being dragged toward the foundation, but then again, it was raining Friday morning and the trucks crisscrossed the area. However, the marks on the body would coincide with impact points from being stuffed into the foundation forms. No pressure points on the back that you might see during transport. It is likely that he was killed on the lot and *was* dragged... Numerous marks under the arm pits."

Jones tightened his jaw. He had hoped for something simple like a trail with footprints and a long line across the dirt where Leo's shoes had been pulled to the foundation, but only had speculation. The person who killed Leo Crowley possessed enough strength to kill Leo with a single blow and get the body into the foundation. Or the killer had help. " Any thing unusual in this, Clayton?"

" Well, most of Leo's injuries were internal. A small amount of blood around the impact wound, but there was a spot on his pant leg, just below the knee."

" I don't mean to be rude, Clayton. But so what?"

" Blood on his pants doesn't match. Leo was type A. The blood on the pants was O."

" Really?"

" Not only that, the pants leg blood was fresh. I mean fresh in the sense that it had been there a short time. Maybe even the same night."

That revelation baffled Jones, but Clayton mentioned nothing about a struggle. Leo was hit once from behind. Why was someone else's blood on his pant leg? A knock on the front door prompted Chip to head down the hallway. Jones continued speaking with Clayton and Chip opened the door. The afternoon light shot across the hallway wallpaper and Jones heard someone crying. He looked to his right. Flo Nightingale stood on his front steps, her face buried in a white lace handkerchief, and her blue-gray hair blazed in the sunshine. She would not stop whimpering.

Jones had difficulty hearing Clayton's description of the head wound. He covered his right ear as Chip shut the front door and Flo shuffled into the hallway. Clayton described the swelling and what happened to Leo's cranial cavity when the object slammed into his head. " I'm sorry, Clayton... You're saying he went out, but not killed instantly. "

Flo related her woes to Chip and how Lark had taken her words the wrong way. But Jones still could not hear Clayton and had to ask him a third time about the internal injuries. His frustration grew and he told Clayton he would call back. He set the phone on the wall, and Flo, seeing he finished, trotted across the kitchen floor and threw her arms around him. She cried and mumbled into his chest. " It's all right, Flo. I'm sure Lark will come running back."

She pushed him back and lowered the handkerchief. " No, he won't! No, he's gone forever. Cora Jefferson stole him away."

" Oh, well..." Jones, overloaded with thoughts about Leo Crowley's murder, closed his eyes. Maybe she needed to get all her feelings out, but he only wished she would do it somewhere else. " I'm sure he'll be back."

" My Snookems... With another woman."

" Look, Flo. Maybe you need to talk to Lark."

" I will never talk to that man again. All because I asked him to co-sign, Matthias."

" Co-sign on what?" asked Chip.

" Yeah, co-sign on what, Flo?"

" Oh, it's so terrible. Everyone knows."

Jones shook his hands. " I don't know!"

" My house. I needed Lark to co-sign with Mr. Haywood's people at Applegate..."

" All I keep hearing about is Haywood and Applegate."

" I need a new house, Matthias. Why shouldn't I have a new house? I've worked hard all my life..."

" Listen, Flo, I really-"

Somebody else knocked at the door. He motioned Chip down the front hallway as Flo cried into the handkerchief again. Jones glanced to his left. Lark, dressed in a lime green sport jersey and white pants, stood outside with the shorter Cora Jefferson, who wore her white knit sweater even in the summer.

Jones rolled his eyes.

" Heidi ho, Matthias!"

Jones looked at Flo and then marched down the hall. He imagined the confrontation if Lark waltzed inside with Cora. Instinctively, he closed the

door, and was dazed they had all converged on his house. As he prepared to get Flo out the back, sliders, Lark pushed open the front door and the brass knob went crashing through the hall wallpaper, producing a jagged hole.

Lark strutted forward and Cora followed him into the hall. " Guess the door shut a little hard, Matthias."

Cora, her arms folded across her sweater, scowled. " He wanted you outside, Lark. You nincompoop. Flo is in the kitchen."

" Oh, Snookems. Snookems, what have you done?" asked Flo, clutching the handkerchief.

" Mercy..." Jones rolled his eyes again and headed back to the kitchen. He took a second beer from the refrigerator as Lark locked arms with Cora, but she yanked her arm away.

" How... have you been, Lark?" asked Flo.

Lark pursed his lips and moved his shoulders. " A little wiser, a little *richer*."

" One out of two ain't bad," said Cora from behind.

Flo's eyes flamed. " Don't you pick on Lark like that! You always had the mouth, Cora Jefferson!"

" Coming from a little mouse, that's really something!"

Jones moved forward as the insults continued. He tried to break up the argument, which now included Lark, babbling something irrelevant to the discussion. Then the phone rang. Jones closed his eyes briefly, gazed over at his baffled nephew, and then ran to the phone.

" Jones," he said over the verbal barrage.

" Matthias, this is Nigel. I'm calling about tonight."

" I'm sorry, Nigel. I'm having trouble hearing you..."

" What's going on over there?"

" Oh, Lark and Cora... Never mind. Never mind, Nigel," said Jones as he turned toward the open front door. He saw Arnie Dewars throw a lighted cigarette across his lawn as he moved up the brick walk. With him were two men from the lumber company in their blue striped work shirts. " Oh, boy..."

" What was that, Matthias?"

" Nothing, Nigel. Nothing."

Jones covered his other ear as Arnie immediately yakked with Lark. But Cora and Flo were still in a cat fight.

" I'd like our dinner this evening to be about seven... Mrs. Johnson has prepared a list of activities for your nephew's summer vacation..."

" Nigel, that's very nice of you. Seven would be-"

" Matth-*i*-as!" Arnie Dewars shook his hand vigorously. His black frame glasses slid down his oversized nose. " So, who did it? Who knocked off Leo?"

Nigel, in a more eloquent voice, asked the same question. Jones was about to answer when Courtney Jefferson, Cora's myopic son, opened the outside picket fence gate. He was followed by his friend, Muddy Jacobs, who worked at the town dump. As soon as Courtney reached the front steps, he chided his mother.

" Mother, I really don't understand *why* you persist in this behavior with Lark!" Then he addressed Jones's concerns. " Matthias, I was a hundred yards from the murder, but I was asleep in bed. I didn't kill Leo."

Cora pointed at Jones. " I can verify that. I make sure Courtney is in bed by nine every night!"

" You live out there? "

" Well, mother, half the time you call, I'm just dozing off!"

Jones covered his eyes briefly and exhaled. When he looked up Muddy Jacobs, in his undershirt, still grimy from the dump, adjusted his baseball cap and marched into the living room with the Dewars guys. They all sat on Jones's clean sofa.

" Matth-*i*-as, you're not listening! Who killed Leo?"

" I haven't got a clue, Arnie."

" Losin' your touch, eh," said Arnie, elbowing him in the ribs.

" Mind if I get a beer?"

Jones threw his hands up. " Sure...Why not?"

" Hey, guys, beer's on Matth-*i*-as!"

Nigel chuckled on the other end. " That is so noble of you, Matthias."

Jones's house buzzed as if he were holding a large party and he continued speaking loudly. " Don't be funny, Nigel."

" Shall I see you and Chip at seven?"

" That sounds good. Thanks for calling."

Jones hung up the phone. Muddy Jacobs, now smoking a stubby cigar, and the two Dewars guys returned to the kitchen and were laughing as Cora cursed Courtney. Lark pontificated to no one in particular. But Flo now joined forces with Courtney and attacked Cora. Jones blocked his ears as he looked at Chip. Then he took his nephew by the arm and dragged him down the front hall.

" Where are we going?"

" Away from this zoo."

Jones counted seven cars in front of his house, including the Dewars Lumber truck. He brought Chip down the brick walk, through the picket fence gate, and over to his red jeep, pinned between the Dewars truck and Lark's long tan Buick.

Somehow, he managed to extricate the jeep and headed around the town common. In the side mirror he again looked at the line of cars in front of his house and turned the corner. Then he brought the jeep up Main Street and into town.

" Looks like you're a popular guy here in Hamilton, Uncle Matthias."

" Just plain lucky, Chip."

3

Jones traveled north of town on Route 7 and pictured Leo carrying water across the gridiron to Hamilton football players or clearing the snow off the field with his pickup after the November storm a few years ago. Even during baseball practice Leo might shag outfield baseballs for the team. He remembered picking apples one fall at Leo Crowley's apple orchards on the hills overlooking the Hamilton Country Club. He rounded the bend before the entrance to the hilltop Fletcher estate. The land beyond the orchards was cleared like a buzz haircut. Someone stuck a massive red, white and blue sign about the size of a Prince William billboard next to a long white sales trailer.

APPLEGATE ESTATES

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" Affordable?" asked Jones. " Doesn't look too affordable to me, Chippy."

Chip leaned forward and studied the countryside as Jones put on his blinker. To the left, Leo's three story, white farmhouse with a long front porch survived new construction. Apple trees still surrounded the farmhouse, but most of the hillside portion of the orchard was leveled.

The development had a simple layout. An outer road, dotted with a few remaining apple trees, wound through the hills, and circled back toward the entrance road. A second road bisected the circle. Jones drove to the left, passing the orange spray painted lot signs. Up the hill, near the end of the middle road, were completed houses adjacent to a battered green construction trailer.

Two houses, compacted updates of his historical colonial on the common, painted in brighter pinks and blues impressed Jones. To his right, one finished dwelling and three foundations lined the center road.

Chip pointed across the street. " There it is! Lot 8."

Mammoth concrete chunks and framing lumber were strewn around a half demolished foundation. A few boards remained in a pile next to a maroon dumpster and a large yellow bulldozer. Jones stopped the jeep and they got out.

" Why hide his body in the foundation?"

Jones smiled at his smooth skinned young nephew. " Why indeed... The very heart of the matter. Good question."

The workers had left for the day and the place was quiet. Jones and Chip moved across the sandy lot and over smaller concrete sections. They stepped up to the demolished foundation. The cellar floor was still intact and the jagged wall was sealed black along the outside dirt. The lot tapered into a

cluster of apple trees and a grassy area, about a hundred yards distant from the circle road.

A downpour after Leo's murder and numerous bulldozer tread marks in the dirt added to Jones' problems. Clayton had thought the murder occurred on the lot. That was critical. Placing Leo on the lot might mean something. He turned to the completed house across the street and then scanned the other two houses back at the circle. " People are living in those houses."

" Witnesses?"

" Courtney for one, but I wasn't about to get into a protracted conversation about where he lives now. " Jones wrote down the lot numbers in his little black book as he slid in the sand around the foundation. Chip jotted notes into his own notebook. Jones smiled, but the nature of this crime bothered him. A blow on the head meant violent emotions and would not indicate a planned killing. Or was it? Leo must have known something or upset somebody. The land deal might prove a valuable component with the cast of characters including lawyers, real estate people, and all the accompanying documents.

A car zipped up the middle road. He turned and ahead of a dust swirl spotted a cream colored Lexus. The tinted windows hid the occupant, but the license plate revealed the driver's identity.

BONNER

" The illustrious Mr. Bonner," said Jones.

Chip stepped around the foundation rubble. " If I had a Lexus, I wouldn't drive it like that."

" Agreed."

The Lexus skidded to a stop by the construction trailer. A average sized man with brown hair, open shirt and wearing a suit matching his Lexus, trotted up the stairs, unlocked the trailer and disappeared inside.

Jones took Chip's elbow. " Our first witness."

He brought Chip back to the street and they walked the hundred yards to the trailer. Bonner, his back to the open trailer window, talked on the telephone and his high pitched, annoying voice, leaked outside. Jones climbed the thin metal stairs and pulled open the dented door.

Bonner leaned against a coffee stained white counter, covered with house blueprints. He had little brown eyes and a mop of straight auburn hair. A shiny gold chain and medallion hung inside his open shirt and cheap cologne hung in the stuffy trailer air. He chattered like a wild bird, but when he saw Jones covered the receiver. " Who the hell are you?"

" Jones, Matthias Jones."

" Yeah, so what? You want to buy a house?"

" Should I?"

Bonner gawked at him. Jones could see him lusting after a potential sale. " I'll call you back, Billy. No, hell no... You tell that bastard he doesn't get paid. Screw him. I run a business here not a daycare service. Stupid bastard. No, call me on the cell phone, Billy. Yeah. Bye."

Jones studied the construction books on the shelf above. The lot map covered the paneled wall. Sold lots had orange stickers and the completed

houses had the homeowner names written on the roads. " You're Bobby Bonner?"

Chip moved inside the next to the window.

" You said your name was Jones. Sounds familiar. Damned familiar. You live in Prince William or somethin'?"

" No, I coach at the college here in Hamilton."

" No shit?" he asked, looking at Chip. " Sorry, kid."

" You say something?" asked Chip.

He put his arm around Jones. The cologne threatened to choke him.

" Smart kid. Smart, Listen, Coach, I've got deals up here. And I can get you a better deal. Having a prest.. prestig... pres... a popular type of guy such as yourself ownin' one of my houses would add some prest-"

" Prestige," replied Chip.

" Yeah, yeah, that's right, kid. See, I need you up here, Coach. I'll cut you a deal... What kind of house you lookin' for?" " What kind of house do you have?"

" All kinds. We'll build whatever you want. We still have lots on Cortland and Macintosh."

" Isn't there a building code?"

" Building codes? Who the hell cares about building codes when you're buildin' what the people want."

" I'd have to think about that."

He hit Jones in the ribs and produced a shiny gold card. " Listen, Coach. I'm giving you Scott Gleason's card. He's my job super and lead salesman here."

" You seem as though you can handle sales yourself."

" I have to..." He leaned closer and whispered. " I built this business from nothin'. Nothin', Coach. Where else but in America, huh?"

Jones nodded, uneasy with being this close to Bonner. His beard stubble chaffed Jones' face several times and undigested garlic smothered the cologne.

" Know anything about the murder on one of your lots, Mr. Bonner?"

Bonner's dark eyes popped open, the arm retracted and he stepped back from Jones. He paused. " I don't know nothin' about it."

" It happened on your lot, Mr. Bonner. Your foundation. Any ideas on who did it?"

" Who the hell are you anyway?" Bonner gathered his papers off the counter and loaded them into his briefcase.

" I'm a guy who wants answers."

" Yeah? Well, if I were you, I'd mind my own damn business."

Bonner closed his leather case and pushed the brass locks shut. He grabbed the case and moved Jones and Chip down the stairs. Bonner locked the trailer, but Jones noticed the forward side of the leather case had been scraped and dented.

" Ruin your case?"

Once outside, Bonner, no longer animated, looked Jones squarely in the eye and pointed his finger. " You stay the hell off my development, Jones."

" Why?"

" I gut friends, Mister. They ain't gonna be happy if they know I've been bothered. You know what I mean?"

" This is a public road," said Chip.

Jones raised his brows and smiled at what would have been his next words. " Thanks, Chip."

" And it's time you were back in school, Junior."

Bonner headed for his Lexus and popped the door locks before he got inside. He started the car, and again skidded out. The tires spun in the dirt, as he headed directly down Cortland and straight toward the front entrance.

" Got any ideas, *Junior*?" asked Jones.

He thought Chip might grin, but his nephew squinted. " He could have used that briefcase to kill Crowley, Uncle Matthias."

" Possible. He knows something, that's for sure."

Jones wanted to question Bonner further. Especially, he wanted to know the homebuilder's alibi for last Thursday night. He looked at the two completed houses, side by side on the circular Macintosh Road. Ahead a single house, lawn not seeded, was built across from the lot where Leo was killed. According to the inner site map, Courtney Jefferson owned one of the homes. Jones had no doubt Courtney slept through the murder. Three houses, two potential witnesses. " Come on, let's see what these people might know."

" But Mr. Bonner kicked us off his development."

Jones put his arm around Chip and they started toward the two houses on Macintosh. " Chippy, don't believe half you of what you hear and the other half is subject to change."

4

The name Gleason was scrawled on the mailbox. Maybe Bonner's lead salesman had bought a house for himself. Across the lawn, tiny grass blades pushed through the soil. Jones walked past a small gray car in the drive and up the salmon tinted colonial's brick steps and pushed the doorbell.

" Uncle Matthias, I'd like to help you with this."

" I promised your father that I would minimize your exposure to this case, Chippy. I'm already pushing the limits."

The front door opened and a petite blonde woman with bright red fingernails produced a fixed smile. " Yes."

" Does Scott Gleason live here?"

" Scott is my brother. He's the job superintendent and lead salesman, but he lives in Prince William."

" Oh, you're the owner..."

" Judy Gleason." She extended her little hand and smiled again. But she stayed by the door as Jones made small talk about the development. She praised Bonner and her house. Jones quickly learned she worked in the Prince William library and was only in her house for three weeks. Sociable, in a mousy way, her demeanor, like Bonner, changed when Jones brought up the murder investigation.

Jones had not pressured her and merely wanted to know what she had seen last Thursday night. She held her fingers to her temples and closed her

eyes. " I have listened to your police chief's annoying questions for three days. If you have any questions, Mr. Jones, why don't you ask him?"

" What did you tell him?"

" Well, I have nothing more to add. Now, if you will excuse me I am eating dinner." She headed back toward the door.

" You don't strike me as someone who would keep information to herself."

She opened the door wider and smiled again. " I have nothing to hide. Please come inside." She pulled her light green sweatshirt over her jeans as she walked into a breakfast room to the right, sat in a high back wooden chair and leaned her elbows on the pine table.

" You don't have to talk to me, I know that, Miss Gleason."

" Judy... Now what do you want to know?"

" I want to know what you saw last Thursday night."

" A documentary on butterfly migration. A symphony performance by the Boston Pops and the ten o'clock news. Then I went to bed. That's it, Mr. Jones. I didn't see Mr. Crowley get murdered. In fact, I wouldn't recognize Mr. Crowley if he walked in here right now."

" Leo originally owned this hillside."

Judy contorted her lips. " My brother told me I could get a deal here."

Jones turned as Chip spoke up. " Where did you live before, Judy? In Prince William?"

" Exactly."

" Where in Prince William?" asked Jones.

" Wharton Apartments near the library. I used to be able to walk to work. Now I have a commute."

Jones nodded and tried to size her up. She appeared tense and careful about what she said. But she also spoke emphatically, pronouncing every syllable as she spoke. With a lull in the talk, Judy stood and veered toward the refrigerator. " I have beer, I have Chill Coolers, or soda."

" Beer for me," said Jones. " Chip will have a soda."

She was more relaxed once she brought over the drinks. She spoke more in depth about her employment at the Prince William Library. Over the past seventeen years she was an assistant librarian and had no desire to run the library. And, at age thirty-eight, she liked the single life and valued her independence. Jones steered the conversation toward the development. He wanted to know about the neighbors.

" Well, that Courtney Jefferson is the biggest pain. He keeps asking me out."

" I know Courtney, Judy," said Jones. " I'm surprised his mother gave him permission to buy a house away from her and the hardware store."

Judy covered her eyes briefly and shook her head. " The mother never shuts up. And that new boyfriend of hers... Link or whatever his name is."

" Lark."

" Right... He keeps talking about things that happened forty years ago."

Jones winced. " Is there anything you can tell me about that murder. The lot or the people working around here."

" I wish I could, but I'm away from eight to five-thirty and work Wednesday nights. Maybe Mr. Trumball on Lot 16. Why, Mr. Trumball flips

on the porch light when a June bug flies near his house. Nothing gets by him."

Jones rubbed his clenched fist over his beard stubble. Judy Gleason provided little useful information. He stood, pushed the chair under the table and looked at Chip. " I will talk to Trumball and maybe again to good old Courtney."

Chip took out his notebook and looked toward Judy. " What about your brother, Judy? Where was he on the night when Leo was killed?"

Jones had slipped on that question.

" Baseball game."

" At the baseball game?" asked Jones.

" No, he was in his condo, watching the game. He will tell you the same thing. You can usually catch him during the days in the sales trailer up front or working on the houses."

Chip wrote Scott Gleason's name in his notebook. As they headed toward the door, Jones thanked Judy and moved onto the steps. He gazed into the sun behind Trumball's vacant driveway. Judy slowly closed the door and Jones headed for the street. He turned to Chip once they reached the road. " That was a good question about where Judy lived and about her brother, but I promised Phillip that I would keep you out of this."

" Guess you shouldn't have had that blow out. "

" In case you hadn't noticed: Arnie has a big mouth. But I told your dad-."

" I'll stay out of the way."

" Nigel has Mrs. Johnson, lining up things for you to do, Chip. Listen..." Jones looked down at his notebook and pen.

" Well, in between times, let me just help you. I'm not going to get in the middle of a gun fight or anything."

" Oh, I don't know, " he said, turning toward Trumball's house. " I want to leave a note for Trumball."

" Okay, you do that and I'll go over to Lot 8. Just look around. You can see me from Trumball's house."

Jones pursed his lips. Walking around Lot 8 would not put Chip in danger. " All right... Go ahead."

Jones watched his nephew sprint around the circle and onto Cortland Drive. Lot 8's decimated foundation was covered with unreal orange sunlight and stood like a fallen war memorial to Leo. Jones walked down to Cortland, by Courtney Jefferson's split level house and over to Trumball's long, red ranch. In the distance, Hamilton Bay, not as panoramic as the view from the Fletcher estate atop the hills about a mile north, brightened in the sun's fiery glow. The Fletchers controlled everything in Hamilton; even the view.

Jones thought his nephew was becoming a clone of himself. Chip wrote down things at a furious pace and picked up debris and rubbish from the ground. Jones took out his own notebook and scrawled a quick note to Trumball. He left his phone numbers and requested Trumball call about Leo Crowley's death. Chip kept busy around the lot as Jones stuffed the note in the storm door. Then he moved down the drive and crossed the street.

" Keeping busy, Chippy?"

" Writing down evidence."

" We have to meet Nigel at the Colonial House. "

Chip wrote a couple more things in the notebook. Then he tucked the notebook and the pen in his back pocket. Jones did not want to discourage

him and ruffled his hair. Then he put his arm around his nephew. " I don't think your dad would object to you writing about the murder. Come on, let's get something to eat."

5

Trumball drove his tiny yellow import up Cortland. Jones flashed the jeep lights and the car slowed. Trumball filled the front seat and devoured a huge double burger, spilling mustard on his gray beard as he ate. He smiled, minus a front tooth, but seemed affable. Jones had seen him at the college and introduced himself.

" Good baseball team this year, Coach."

" Thank you, Mr. Trumball. I appreciate that."

" Call me Jack. You've probably seen me around. I'm the janitor in the science buildings. You got tickets for Stevie Corbett and me once. "

" I don't remember. "

" And if you want to know about me and the night of the murder, I'll tell you what I told George Strickland when he badgered me for an hour in my house. Nobody came through here."

" No one, Jack?"

A little uneasy, Trumball sat with his mouth open. Then he grabbed a large milkshake and drank it without the straw, leaving a white residue on his beard. He wiped it with his hand. " Listen, there, Coach. I don't wanna get nobody in trouble."

Jones shut off the jeep engine, glanced at Chip. He rounded the jeep and leaned in Trumball's open window. Trumball had already started the second burger. " Who are you protecting, Jack?"

" Shit..."

" Jack, it will come out sooner or later."

Trumball, chewing the burger, looked in his rear view mirror toward the newer, more elaborate trailer across from the Crowley farmhouse. Bonner's beige Lexus was at the curb. Trumball looked up at Jones. " Bobby Bonner."

" You didn't tell Strickland that?"

" No, but Bobby didn't kill Leo Crowley."

Jones glanced at the Lexus. " What makes you so sure?"

Trumball spoke in jumbled jargon as he mashed the burger in his mouth. " I can't tell you."

" Why not?" asked Chip.

" Listen, I ain't gonna start any trouble."

" If you have something critical to the investigation..."

Trumball pushed open the door and squeezed outside. He gripped the food bags. " I just wanted to feel important. "

" What do you mean? " asked Jones.

" Forget it." Trumball slowly waddled toward his house.

" But Jack. " Jones stood with his hands on his hips.

" He knows something," said Chip.

" He sure does."

Jones looked toward the newer trailer and crossed his arms. Then he turned back to Trumball's house. " Trumball is a liar by omission. I wonder if he knows anything else. Let's go see Mr. Bonner again."

Jones spun the jeep down the road to the trailer. He popped out and walked ahead of Chip. Then he climbed the pressure treated stairs. Ripped

open the door and moved into the cooler air. Unlike the construction trailer, a plush carpet covered the floor. In one of the rear offices Bonner prattled on the phone. His shoes were propped up on one of the desks and he smoked a pungent tiperillo. He may not have seen Jones talking to Trumball. Jones debated whether to bring up what Flo had said about co-signing the bank notes and he wondered how many more people were involved. He marched toward the open doorway and Bonner squinted.

" Excuse me, Billy... Jones, what the hell are you doing in my sales trailer?"

" I'm here for clarification, Bobby. A few things you might not have told the cops."

Bonner listened on the phone, nodded and then hung up. He balanced the tiperillo in a glass ashtray and swung his feet back to the floor. Then he stood and traipsed across the rug to Jones.

" Who the hell do you think you are, Jones? I told you to get the hell off my development. You want to talk about the cops, Jones. I have friends in Prince William who will have your ass off this place in ten minutes."

" Where were you on Thursday night, Bobby?"

" Getting laid. You want to know the details? "

" My nephew..."

He waved his hand through the air. " Hey, charming boy. If you were out of here like I told you, you wouldn't have to worry about your nephew hearing things he's probably already heard anyway."

" Did you kill Leo Crowley?"

The outside door opened and a slender man in his twenties, casually dressed with brown hair, mustache, and iridescent blue eyes entered the sales trailer. Jones saw a small silver truck outside.

" You take back that question!" yelled Bonner.

Bonner leaped to attack Jones and grabbed his shirt, but Jones sent his knee sailing into the larger man's jaw. The homebuilder was stunned for a few seconds, but soon screamed at Jones again from a distance as he tried to rub the pain from his chin.

" Were you over here on the night of the murder, Bobby? What about the next morning before the foundation guys poured the concrete?"

" I always check my houses before they pour. Isn't that right, Scott?"

The guy had Judy's thin face and blue eyes. He took two steps forward and grinned. He was smooth, had a self assured smile and a mellow voice. " Hey, Bobby. You're the best."

" Don't bullshit him, Scott. Tell Jones. I check the foundations!"

" He checks the foundations."

" And you didn't see a body there Friday morning?" asked Jones.

" No... I mean, I don't even have to be talking to you, Jones!"

Scott picked up one of the sales brochures and moved over to Jones. He still had a glint in his eye and smirk on his face. " You want to buy a house in here, Jones Baby?"

As Bonner mentioned calling his lawyer and the police, Jones faced Scott Gleason. " I'm sure that you're the guy who can sell it to me."

" I can build your dream house, Jones Baby." He handed the thick sales packet to Jones and then shoved a business card inside.

" Where were you Thursday night, Scott?"

" Busy."

" Don't answer his damned questions, Scott. You're under no obligation. None. I'm calling my lawyer. Enough of this crap. We're talking assault and battery!"

" You came at me!"

" I saw him," said Chip.

" Life is full of illusions," said Scott.

Jones now moved aggressively toward Scott. " Listen, pal. Don't play games with me!"

" Did I say something?"

" Both of you listen to me. Leo Crowley was a friend of mine. I want answers and I'll get them! "

" Sure, sure. I've got all the answers you want," said Scott. " And I'll get you a deal if you want to buy."

Jones tightened his fist and bit his lower lip. Bonner got off the phone and stood back with his arms folded across his chest.

" You're all done, Jones. My lawyer is preparing a restraining order against you. You won't be able to set foot on this property without breaking the law."

Scott chuckled. " Tough break, Jones Baby."

" Bad move, Bobby," said Jones. " Bad move."

Jones grabbed Chip and they slowly exited the trailer. His nephew seemed taken aback by Bonner's attitude. Jones started the jeep. Now they were late for the Colonial House meeting with Nigel and Mrs. Johnson. As he headed toward Route 7, he turned to Chip as he checked the highway traffic.

" The closer you place someone near the body, the faster they try to distance themselves from that body."

6

Twenty minutes late, Jones pulled his jeep across the railroad bridge and into the Colonial House parking lot. Chip trailed behind as he hurried to the wood door and stepped into the lobby.

The red haired Frannie eagerly moved over to Jones. " Evenin', Matthias."

" Frannie, how are you tonight, kid?"

" Fine, this must be Chip. This place is a little different than Los Angeles, eh, Chip."

" Slightly."

She smiled. " You want the usual, Matthias?"

" Yeah, that would be great."

" Me, too."

" You don't know what the usual is, Chippy."

" I trust your judgment."

Jones rolled his eyes and looked across the restaurant. " Not many people here tonight."

" They heard you were coming," said Frannie. Jones smiled and Frannie pretended to shoot him with her index fingers. " Gotcha."

" You did..."

She smiled as Jones spotted Lark rambling to Cora Jefferson, seated with her elbows propped on the table and fists clenched. " Oh, no. Lark..."

" Oh, yes, Lark. And he's probably looking for you, Matthias."

" Great. Just great."

Frannie moved quickly toward the kitchen and Chip turned to his uncle.

" Why don't you take her out, Uncle Matthias?"

Jones looked back to the tall waitress, moving back to the kitchen.

" Playing matchmaker? Come on."

Jones brought Chip in a wide loop around the restaurant and successfully avoided Lark as he neared Nigel's booth. The silver haired college president, dressed in a blue blazer, gray slacks, and a silk red tie, stood as they approached. " Welcome back, Matthias."

" Nigel, I was only away six days. You remember Chippy."

Nigel shook Chip's hand and looked him over. " The last time I saw you was when your dad brought you over to my house. You were no more than ten."

" Eleven."

" Good memory, son."

Nigel introduced the elder, Mrs. Johnson, her dyed brown hair recently curled. Chip shook her hand and they all sat in the booth. Mrs. Johnson leaned toward Chip. " I have loads of fun planned for you, Chip."

" Oh, boy..."

Jones gave him a serious look as Nigel turned. " Anything on Leo Crowley's murder, yet?"

Jones shrugged his shoulders. " I have to talk things over with George Strickland. I have a couple of leads, but nothing concrete... Bad pun."

" Odd they would try to bury him that way."

" Someone wanted all traces of Leo gone forever. It was just a freak thing. If the framers hadn't seen the boot... Leo would still be in there and nobody would ever know."

" Anything involving the college, Matthias? You know how particular the Fletchers are about any scandal. And the Fletchers fund the college."

" No, nothing... Except I've talked to Jack Trumball."

" Janitor... science building. He's been with us for fifteen years. Honest type. Quiet and likes to eat."

Jones tilted his head. " Trumball bought one of the first houses out there. How did that project get through Town Hall anyway?"

Nigel thought for a few moments and raised his finger. " I can look into it. That is a good question. So near to the Fletcher estate."

" Mt. Olympus... I wonder about that project. Something isn't right out there."

Lark turned around and Cora pointed to Nigel's booth. As Lark pushed his way out of the front booth, Cora looked at Jones, wiped her forehead and followed Lark.

" Here come trouble, " said Nigel.

Jones pasted a smile on his face. " Well, Lark, how are you and Mrs. Jefferson tonight?"

" Fine, old boy. You left the city by the bay?"

" No, that's San Francisco, Lark."

Lark squinted and pursed his lips like he was going to kiss somebody. Then he bent over and whispered in Jones's ear. " I know who killed Leo Crowley."

" You do?"

" Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Leo was an apple magnate."

Jones pinched the bridge of his nose. " He owned an orchard, Lark, that's all."

" Here's how I see it." Lark looked to Cora for approval but she rolled her eyes. He spread his hands out as he continued. " Leo upset the wholesalers when he sold out to Haywin."

" Haywood," said Jones.

" Whatever... He had them mad as hornets because he was their supplier and he... *Cut them off!!*"

Cora shook her head. " Lark, that's the most dumb-ass theory I've ever heard."

" Then they traveled in the dead of night back to Hamilton in their apple trucks... See, they made a deal with the concrete people to bury Leo in the cement."

Cora folded her arms across her chest and then pointed to her head.

" Cuckoo...cuckoo..."

Mrs. Johnson set down her coffee cup. " Let the man tell his story. Cora."

Jones put up his thumb and slid from the booth as Lark sought approval. " Excuse us. I need to talk to Lark."

" We'll go over Chip's activities."

" Thank you, Nigel."

" Uncle Matthias..."

" I'll be right back."

He escorted Lark across the restaurant and into the lobby near the rest-rooms. " Lark, what are you doing with that smart mouthed woman?"

" We're dating. And having a ball."

" Flo misses you."

Lark puckered his lips again and looked upward like an upset child; his face an unusual shade of red. " Flo, had her chance."

" Had her chance? Lark, all she did was ask you to co-sign with her on an Applegate house."

" Flo abdicated her fiscal responsibility. Taking out that loan was not a sound fiduciary judgment."

Jones did a double take. " Excuse me? Fiduciary judgment?"

" Well, I gave a detailed analysis of the situation and determined that this man, Haywin."

" Haywood."

" Whatever. He and George Ralston from the Prince William Credit Union. It was hanky panky of the highest degree, Matthias. I did not want my Snookems... Flo, participating in a land scheme."

Jones tried not to laugh. " Land scheme?"

" You can fool some of the people and the rest of the time."

" That's not the quote."

Lark nuzzled closer. " How is she, Matthias?"

" She wants to make up, Lark. I think a little forgiveness is in order."

Lark creased his brow. He looked at Cora, but shook his head as he crossed his arms. " No, she has to apologize to me. She's being stubborn."

Jones winced. " Lark, you two are like peas in a pod. Call her up and better yet, just walk over to her house. She only lives a few hundred feet away."

" She will have to trust my judgment in these matters."

" Who's being stubborn now?"

" Stubborn is as stubborn does."

Jones had nothing left to say and brought him back to the table. Cora gave him a dirty look as he went back to Nigel's table. As Jones sat down Mrs. Johnson continued with her description of the camp at Tolby Lake. Chip seemed interested, but Jones' mind was over at Applegate and the demolished foundation at Lot 8. Maybe Lark was right. Bonner had acted like a man who wanted Jones away from the project. Something, whether illegal or not, was wrong at Applegate.

7

It was one of those days where the sun worked on the thick fog early. But the air remained stuffy and moisture hung heavy as Jones prepared breakfast for Chip and himself. The heat and the time change from California, combined with trying to solve Leo Crowley's murder had Jones stirred up. That someone had brutally attacked this congenial guy and tossed his body into a cement foundation was reprehensible.

He called Strickland before he brought Chip to camp. The police chief had talked to Bonner at his house, nestled in the hills west of Prince William, about his activities Thursday night. Bonner admitted up front he had left a party given by Bill Haywood down at the cottages along Hamilton Bay. He claimed to have left around 10:15 p.m. and said he was off with a woman he had met at the party.

" George, why is it I don't believe that story?"

" Maybe because it sounds phony."

" Who is the woman?"

" He says a woman named Kim Rose."

" He's lying," said Jones.

" Well, I'll find her and verify it. She works over in Haywood's office."

Jones held out the phone. " Interesting."

" She hasn't been to work in four days and her phone line keeps ringing."

" If she's alive, she'll lie for him. Listen, I have a gut feeling that Bonner is lying."

" Okay, he's lying and he killed Leo. Why?"

Jones paused and leaned on his kitchen counter. He closed his eyes as he spoke. " Leo knew something... Somebody smashed his skull because he knew something."

" If it has to do with his land deal... that's all on record in Prince William."

" I need to talk to Lee Anne and Leo's friends. Somebody must know if Leo got taken. Later, I'm going to Prince William if you want to-"

" I wish I could, but I have a selectman meeting at noon. Call me if you get anything."

When he hung up, Jones stared out the window. Watching suspects after a murder proved more than just a spectator sport. Bonner was defensive and nervous out at the development. Although Jones had never met Haywood, Bonner and Haywood had convinced clients into signing questionable bank notes and he wondered about the involvement of the bank. He needed to talk with Bonner again, either at the development or at his Prince William office and jotted down a reminder to speak with Bill Haywood. First, he had to chat with Lee Anne Crowley. Strickland said her husband's death had shaken her emotionally and had told him Leo had been upset about the land deal. Lee Anne might bring that deal into focus.