

1

Daniels knew the hooker was employing her trade upstairs again. He opened his eyes in total darkness. Above him the third floor ceiling shook his entire apartment like the rotor blades from battlefield choppers attacking an encampment. The thumps accelerated as he rolled out of bed and reached for the lamp. He flipped the switch and his eyes ached. His wood carved pipe and a gold lettered, blue bound edition of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, the stories he liked to read before sleeping, were strewn across the tiny bedside table. Now he would fatigue would follow him during his shift at the warehouse. " If I ever reported the goings-on up there, there would be serious trouble!"

He reached for his navy, velour bathrobe as the racket persisted and he pushed his arms into the sleeves. Then he tied the robe tightly, pressed his lips together and stepped into his fur-lined slippers. His twisted gray hair stuck up straight in the mirror. He rolled his eyes and combed his fingers through the mess. " Who cares how you look, Daniels? "

He was going to complain about the floozy upstairs. In the dimly lit outside hall he planted his feet on the matted rug and peered up the varnished banister. Now the stereo bass resonated through the plaster walls. " I should be calling the police. So many times I should have called the police."

On the first floor, Mrs. O' Toole's door creaked open and her blue permed hair jutted into the hallway. She was fully dressed in an acrylic white knit

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sweater and green polyester slacks. Three red molded suitcases were lined up next to her door. " My God, Mr. Daniels. Someone is being murdered! Just when I'm about to leave on vacation."

" Go back to your apartment, Mrs. O' Toole, I have the situation well in hand. You and your wild notions... *murder*... You've been reading too many of those supermarket tabloids. Go back inside."

She trudged up the vinyl stair treads. " Not in your life. I can hear that pounding way down to the first floor. Why couldn't you hear it earlier, Mr. Daniels? "

" Because I was sleeping. I was sleeping. And I do put that in the past tense, Madam. *Was* sleeping!"

" Who you calling a madam?"

Daniels ground his teeth and tried not to look at her as they climbed to the third floor. " Proper address, Mrs. O'Toole. Proper address."

" Well, you should have done something about that woman long ago. I hear she's living a wild life," said Mrs. O'Toole, pushing her index finger into his arm.

" Why me?" Daniels stopped on the stairs as the clatter, now only half a flight up, persisted.

" She wears those miniskirts and the knee high boots."

" Mrs. O'Toole. She's a hooker. A Club Max hooker. Step out of your naive existence and see the real world." He trotted up ahead of her and tightened his bathrobe loop again. The sound of a man crying drifted down the stairs along with Miss Quintal's usual seductive perfume. As angry as he was, he hoped she

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was not in trouble. He tiptoed across the worn hallway carpet and through the open doorway.

Within the stereo's jazz music, the wailing mixed with a steady the banging on the floor. Quietly and slowly, he inched his way over the green shag rug near the bathroom. White book shelves extended from the wall, separating the front room from the hall, and he saw long strands of auburn hair through the stacks. He cautiously peered around the corner.

A strapping young man, Daniels recognized as one of Miss Quintal's frequent visitors, knelt and rocked her bloodied body in his wide arms. His face was contorted, tears smeared over his moistened cheeks, and he repeatedly called out her name. "Gina...Gina..."

"My God," said Daniels, his hands shaking as he realized the woman was, indeed, dead. "What the hell have you done?"

"No! No!" shouted the young man, his eyes wide as he looked up at Daniels.

He quickly let Miss Quintal slide onto the rug and leaped to his feet. Panic overtook his face when he glanced at the body and then rumbled like a steer out of the pen. Daniels jumped aside as the young man agilely darted past Mrs. O'Toole and cascaded down the stairs.

"What's in there, Mr. Daniels?" she asked loudly.

"Nothing... Nothing, Mrs. O'Toole." He attempted to stay calm, retreated and abruptly escorted her to the dimly lit outside hallway.

"Why are you pushing me?" She broke free and stomped inside. Her high-pitched scream only added to the confusion. "Murder! I knew it was murder!"

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" I warned you, Mrs. O'Toole!"

" Murder! Murder!"

" I'm calling the police!" Daniels galloped downstairs to his own apartment. Mrs. O'Toole's lamenting continued outside as he scrambled to his bedside phone. He placed his finger on the emergency police number. Something loud erupted outside in the back alley as he dialed the station. He pulled the twisted phone cord to the window as the young man from upstairs, seated on a motorcycle, spun onto Atlantic Ave.

" P.W.P.D. This call is being recorded. Officer Crimmins, speaking."

" Murder. There has been a murder. Apartment, apartment, oh, God, I'm drawing a blank-"

" Slow it down, sir. Slow it down. Where are you calling from?"

Daniels cleared his throat and spoke slowly. " Thomas B. Daniels. Covington Arms Apartments, corner of Covington and Atlantic."

" Who has been murdered, Mr. Daniels?"

" The woman upstairs. Gina Quintal. Her boyfriend ran out-"

" You saw him?"

" I assure you I have noted and will note every detail of this case. Big athletic kid. Looked like a football player. Left on his motorcycle down Atlantic. South. He went south."

" His name is Joe," said Mrs. O'Toole from the doorway.

Daniels turned, squinting his eyes. She annoyed him every minute she was with him. " I have a lady here who said his name was Joe. Joe what? Mrs. O'Toole?"

" Well, I don't know his last name. "

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" Last name?" asked Crimmins.

" Oh, for God's sake, Mrs. O' Toole. What good is a first name?"

" Last name?" repeated Crimmins.

" No, I'm sorry, Officer." He mustered a sharp grimace for Mrs. O'Toole's benefit. " We do not. He was a tall, big framed... Big face. Brown hair. Thick. This case could be cut and dry. Hum..."

" Driving a motorcycle?" said Crimmins.

" Yup."

" We have people on the way. Does anyone require medical help?"

" She needs a psychiatrist." Mrs. O'Toole opened her mouth and folded her arms tightly across her sweater.

" What was that, sir?"

" Nothing. Nothing. We're all right here."

" Personnel are on the way, Mr. Daniels. Stay away from the murder scene... Touch nothing."

Daniels hung up. " They say touch nothing, Mrs. O'Toole."

" The taxi is picking me up. I'm supposed to be at the airport in half an hour to catch the red eye."

" They'll want to question you."

" But I'm going to Arizona!"

Daniels shook his head as she left. " Doesn't know his last name... Unbelievable..."

2

Jones zipped his red parka and trailed his assistant coach out the locker room door. The colder fall air stung his face as he panned the bright foliage lining the practice field to the Shaker style music conservatory and five-story brick library. With the St. Pats and Hamilton both undefeated, Jones was determined to push his team today. Only one squad would emerge in first place after Saturday's contest.

"Woosey, where's Joe Svoboda?"

"I didn't see him, Matthias" answered his wavy haired assistant.

"Or his motorcycle. "

"Joe is usually the first one on the field. Since the whole world thinks I'm going to run against St. Pat's, I need to keep Joe practicing the long ball. What an arm on that kid." Jones trotted by the leave strewn baseball field onto the adjacent football practice field's limed grids.

"Mac says Joe is a brick wall. He's been watching videos of all our games."

"Look, Woose, Mac and I are friends, but competitors, too. I won't let St. Pat's win the division... He isn't expecting Joe to pass. We've run for the past five weeks." They reached the upper practice field, rimmed with red and yellow maples. Leo Crowley, his thick beard rusty in the afternoon sunshine, dragged an olive team equipment bag across the grass. "What do ya say, Leo?"

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Leo's stocky frame filled his red and black Hamilton College wind-breaker. " Coach, Arnie Dewars just heard a rumor from his sister in Prince William. She talked to her friend who is a cop on the Prince William force-

" Excuse me, Leo. One second. Woosey, let's get them warmed up and then we'll run some basic stuff."

" You going live today, Coach?" asked Woosey.

" I think I will. Contact on a day like this would separate the men from the boys. That's for sure." Jones looked past the baseball field's chain link fence to the locker room door. To the right Larsen Stadium was empty and draped in shadows below the town up the hill. He wondered why Joe was late for practice. " Where's Joe?"

" That's what I'm trying to tell you, Coach. Arnie says they're holding some kid for murder at the Prince William police station. Some kid with a motorcycle."

His stomach jolted, Jones spun around. " Leo, if Arnie Dewars told you: consider the source. "

" He seemed sure."

" If your implying Joe is over the Prince William police station then just forget it, Leo."

" Arnie's sister said the rumor was all over town."

" Rumor... I don't believe it. Especially if Arnie had anything to do with it. " Jones walked with Leo along the sidelines. " Leo, when Joe finally gets here I'm thinking of letting him pass. No running game on Saturday. What do you think?"

" I always thought Joe should pass more, Coach."

" Won't be expected, will it?"

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" Nope. Kid's the most natural athlete I ever saw."

Jones nodded as Woosey brought the team through calisthenics, accompanied by a loud verbal cadence. The sunlight filtered through the half bare maples, producing yellow glow through the wide leaves. A shiny black low rider rolled along the outside fence. Jones thought he saw a pair of binoculars in the open passenger window. He turned back to the team as the boys as they went through simple line and passing drills. He waved his assistant over. Woosey, holding his clipboard, ran across from the line.

" Coach, you want to start some plays?"

" What I want, Woosey, is Joe Svoboda out on the playing field. This is a critical game on Saturday," said Jones, rubbing his numbed hands together. The low rider's tinted window moved upward and the car looped around to the fence opening. " That low rider keeps going back and forth along the fence. Mac sending people to spy on us?"

" Probably just some kids. Matthias, you're always too suspicious. You want me to go back to the school to look for Svoboda?"

" No, I'll have Leo check. I need Joe out here practicing. He's the backbone of this team. I just can't use little Larry Resnick against St. Pat's line. "

" Resnick and Svoboda hate each other. "

" I'm not going to base strategy on who does or doesn't like somebody else, Woosey. Start running some plays here." He headed down the grass.

" Leo!"

Leo looked over his shoulder and turned. " Yo."

" Leo, check the locker room for Joe, will you?"

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" You want me to call the police station?"

" Stop with the police station business." Jones shook his head and watched the team. " Arnie has everybody all revved up. Leo, Just track him down."

" You got it, Coach."

As the large framed Leo trundled across the lower field to the gymnasium locker room, the low rider's engine rumbled like a truck along the fence. Jones glanced over his shoulder and approached his team.

" All right guys, we're going live. I need Resnick at quarterback . "

Woosey pressed his lips.

The thin framed Resnick, shoulder pads out of place, ran across the field and squinted his blue eyes in the sunshine. He looked perplexed as his breath streamed into the colder air. " You want me at quarterback? What about Joe?"

" Svoboda isn't here. I'm sure you can see that, Larry. I want you to run through these plays at quarterback until he gets here."

Resnick smiled. " Thanks, Coach."

" Wait a minute," said Jones, holding his arm. " Don't think I'm starting you on Saturday. Joe is going to be the starting quarterback. And just because you two don't get along off the field, I don't want any problems."

" Oh, we get along okay. "

" Right. Just don't rub this in his face when he gets here. " The low rider pulled away from the fence toward Hamilton Street.

" I understand, Coach."

" You're pretty good on the campus radio station, Larry. You'll have to prove yourself on the field."

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" I will."

" Okay, let's try the long yardage game," Jones called out.

" We have no linebacker," said Woosey, looking across the field.

" Just put anybody in there. This is an offensive drill, Woosey."

Jones stood back as Woosey dragged a large kid named Busey from the sidelines. Again, Jones face the distant locker room. He was worried about Joe. Something was not right and Leo's rambling about his star player held for murder shook him.

Resnick ran the long yardage play, but he bobbled the ball. Jones held back any criticism. The cold weather impaired a firm grip on the ball. Resnick scrambled quickly from the next snap, but his pass was at least fifteen yards short of Joe's easiest toss.

* * *

The orange sun lingered within steel blue clouds behind the sinewy branches as colder air sank across the valley. Leo was unable to locate Joe Svoboda. Joe's friends and arrogant roommate had checked the dorm and campus center, but Leo had actually called the police station, but no one would answer his questions. " I can't say the cops were cooperative, Coach. Like they were deliberately holding me back. And that roommate was downright hostile. Told me to mind my own business."

" I'm just trying to pretend Joe being missing and the report from Prince William aren't related," said Jones. His players were tired from two hours of grueling contact. Arnie Dewars's huge blue lumber truck squeaked to a stop

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along the chain link fence. " Oh, no. The last thing I need right now is to listen to Arnie Dewars. "

" Hey, Matth-*i*-as! " Jones realized he was trapped. In his blue striped Dewars shirt, minus a jacket or hat, Arnie ran through the street gate. He continuously pushed his black-rimmed glasses up his oversized nose.

" Matth-*i*-as! "

" What can I do for you, Arnie? We're trying to wrap things up here. "

" Your boy is in big trouble. "

" How do you know this? "

Arnie shivered and then elbowed Jones in the ribs. " Can't keep track of your own players, eh? "

" Do you have definitive information on Joe Svoboda? "

Arnie's hands shook as he lit a cigarette. " Man, it's cold. "

" Don't you believe in hats and jackets? "

" Ah, jackets are for whimps. " His hands shook as he inhaled the cigarette. " Man, it's colder than a witch's-"

" Arnie, what did you hear about Joe Svoboda? "

" See, my sister knows guys on the force. They brought in some kid on a motorcycle. "

" But did they specifically say they brought in Joe Svoboda? "

" Well..." Arnie pushed his finger into Jones's shoulder " Scared you're gonna lose the big game? "

" So, in other words, you know nothing. "

" Hey, don't blame me you centered your whole game around one guy. "

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" Did anybody ever tell you, you're a pain?"

" It's my modus operandus. "

" Operandi. "

" Yeah, yeah, yeah. "

Jones rolled his eyes and then rubbed his hands as he headed back to the team. He removed his cell phone from his parka pocket and found the Dom Pacheco's private number at the Prince William police station on the LCD. The number clicked and rang as Arnie's loud voice filled the cold air.

" Hey, Leo. Why don't you get out on the field and work off some of that blubber? "

Jones faced Arnie and raised his voice. " And why don't you beat it? "

" Excuse me? " asked the voice in his earpiece.

" This is Matthias Jones. "

" Matthias, listen I don't think I can talk to you."

" Crim, is that you? "

" Matthias, listen I can't talk. "

" Why not?"

A familiar gravely voice stung his ears. " Jones, as I have told you many times in the past: Stay out of this and let the cops do their job."

" Herbert Lane. And what do I owe the honor of actually speaking with our illustrious District Attorney?"

" Stay out of it."

" Stay out of what? " The phone bounced on the other end and Jones held the cell phone away from his ear. " Herbert? Herbert! "

Another gruff voice cackled through the speaker. " You Jones?"

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" Now who am I talking to?"

" I know about you, Jones. The coach who thinks he's a private investigator. We have the situation completely under control over here." The guy breathed heavily as if he were gasping for air. " So, let the pros handle this."

" Is Joe Svoboda being held over there? Where's Dom Pacheco?"

" The Chief is downstairs. " His voice tapered away like a passing train.

" Yeah, with extra cheese and fries. Everything on it. And a chocolate milkshake... I'll pay ya when ya get back."

" I want to know who I'm talking to."

" Why don't you hit the showers, Coachy?"

The line went dead and Jones stared at the phone. Arnie leaned toward Leo and cupped his hand over his mouth. " So much for the big connection with Dom Pacheco. "

" I need to find out what's is going on here. Can't get a straight answer. Maybe I need to call that roommate myself."

" The guy sounded like he didn't want anybody bothering him. "

" Ah... " Jones spun away from Arnie. To his right as Travis Thayer, in his wool coat and leather gloves, walked briskly from the music conservatory on the hill behind the practice fields. He wore a Russian fur hat and beige cashmere scarf around his neck. A mental snapshot of the rotund Herbert Lane with his ill-fitting toupee filled Jones's thoughts and he kicked the dirt.

" Practicing your field goals, Matthias? " Travis had a clear, deeply refined voice. " I'm hear to remind you about the faculty meeting in the auditorium."

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Jones looked into his dark eyes. " That's right... I forgot about that meeting. Nigel told me about this morning. I don't think I can go."

" Nigel is President of the college now. "

" I've got so much on my mind here, Travis. I may have to go to Prince William."

Travis gazed across the practice field. " Is the dream team turning into a nightmare?"

Jones smiled at his wit. " It will if I can't find Joe Svoboda. It's not like him to miss a practice. I'm starting to think there's been trouble."

" Oh, I think I know what happened."

" You do?" asked Jones, looking into his brown eyes.

" I believe he has broken up with Miss Wonderful. I spoke with him after class yesterday morning. English is his forte and his grades have plummeted lately. Apparently, he's been seeing a girl in Prince William."

" He has? Nobody tells me anything. Oh, for cryn' out loud. How many times have I told these guys that woman and sports don't mix? You know, now that you mention it, the kid has looked exhausted."

" When you chase the women, you pay the price."

" Does that come from personal experience, Travis?"

His perfectly formed white teeth flashed for a moment as if he were recalling some distant affair. " I will make no comment, least I ruin my image."

" You're image in intact."

" The girl called it quits a few days ago," said Travis as he thought.

" He was quite upset according to the scuttlebutt."

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" They want me to be a Coach, but I've got to be a psychiatrist. Resnick and Svoboda hate each other. Svoboda is chasing after some girl in Prince William. What happened to Marlena Peterson? "

" Their on-again off-again relationship is finite. Matthias, you don't keep up on the college social scene.

" I can't keep track of my own problems, Travis. Any idea where this woman lives in Prince William?" The slobbery voice from the Dom's office kept repeating in his mind like an offensive commercial on TV. He prayed Joe had not done anything stupid.

" Joe's roommate, Clarence Moody knows. Moody is obnoxious and a thorn in Joe's side. "

" More social scuttlebutt? "

"A private matter. " Travis held Jones's arm briefly. " Remember: Faculty meeting: Twenty-five minutes. "

" I have to go to Prince William."

" Nigel wants everybody there in case Hamilton Fletcher decides to show up to listen to the annual reports. And remember, the Fletchers fund this college and everything else in this town."

" I'll see what I can do."

" I'll save you a seat."

Jones nodded, stepped forward and blew his brass whistle, and, as if someone had pulled a power plug, the team quickly finished the line drill. Jones moved directly within the group. " Okay, guys. Good practice! Listen to me. Saturday we're up against a good team. I don't have to tell you, boys what this

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victory means. It means that one team will emerge as the probable champion," he said, increasing the intensity of his voice.

" But they aren't practicing live today like you boys. You're a tough team. You're a fast team. You *will* stop that line and you will out run the defense because you boys have pride. Pride in your school and pride in yourselves. Let's do it!" Jones high fived each one of them as they cheered. Then he directed them to the showers.

Travis remained near the bench. " Shall I meet you a the auditorium?"

" Yeah, sure, Travis. See if you can locate Joe, will you?"

" Joe is one of my favorite students. With the exception of the last few weeks, he tries hard. And I like his sensitivity."

" I like his throwing arm." Jones turned and broke into a run with Woosey. " I'll see you over there, Travis. If I haven't gone to Prince William. "

Travis pretended to salute and Jones's feet stung from the cold as he jogged back toward the gym. Once inside, he passed through the locker room. Lockers opened and closed as the boys shed their shirts and pads Someone had already turned on the steamy showers. Arnie Dewars and Leo Crowley were in his office down the end. " Arnie, get out. "

" You're right, " said Leo. " He is touchy today. "

" Come on, Matth-*i*-as, let me help you find Joey boy. "

Jones stopped at the open door. " Arnie, if you don't get out, they're going to be locking me up murder. "

" Okay, okay. Boy, some people can't take the pressure. "

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Jones stared at Arnie, now wearing a heavy coat and orange stocking hat as he backtracked into the locker room. Leo half smiled as he followed behind. Jones shut the door and went right to his desk phone. He dialed Dom's office again as he sat in his chair, but the back spring was still loose and he almost fell back against the filing cabinets. Arnie pointed and laughed from the first set of lockers as Jones balanced the chair. The line rang and he now regretted having promised he would keep Lark Larsen's chair for good luck.

" Bosco. "

Jones sprang from the chair. " I want to speak with Dom Pacheco. "

" You again... Hey, pal. We gut better things to do than to take your calls."

" Where Dom Pacheco?"

" What are you some kind of name dropper? Good night, Irene."

Woosey knocked on the door and entered the office.

" This is ridiculous. I'm coming over there right now. You tell me whether Joe Svoboda is being held, will you?" Again the line clicked.

" Oh, come on!" Jones plopped himself into his swivel chair, but lost his balance again. " Stupid chair."

" Coach, what's the matter? Rough day?" asked Woosey, setting down his clipboard.

" Rough day? " He lowered his voice. " I have to go to Prince William. "

Woosey moved closer. " Joe Svoboda? "

The desk phone rang and Jones picked it up. " Jones. What is it? "

" Well, you're in a foul mood," said Nigel through a rift of background conversation.

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Jones stood and the chair fell onto the floor. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes briefly. "Nigel, about the meeting."

"Yes, I just spoke to Travis. Matthias, Hamilton Fletcher may be here when we're discussing the athletic budget. There are several questionable expenditures even I don't understand. I need you here."

"But, Nigel."

"We all report to the Fletchers. I'll see you in a few minutes."

Jones set down the phone and looked at the toppled chair.

"Matthias, we're going to chip in and get you a new chair," said Woosey.

"You mean replace, the Lark Larsen chair and all its history?"

"You just be glad Lark is retired from coaching, on that cruise and not trying to help you run the team."

"Amen to that." He put on the speakerphone again and dialed George Strickland at the Hamilton Police station.

"Are you going to the meeting?"

"I don't know."

The line rang quickly. "Hamilton, Ned speaking."

"Neddy, is George there?"

His voice was tinny on the speaker. "He's out."

"Well, where is he?"

"Dunno..."

"Great. Tell him I'm at a faculty meeting in the auditorium. I'm trying to find out if one of my players is being held in Prince William."

"Dunno."

"Have him find out."

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" Sure..."

Jones hung up and stared at the receiver. " Is it me or doesn't anybody know anything?"

" Dunno."

" Don't you start." He reached into his desk for a notebook. " I don't know what Bosco in Prince William was mumbling about. I'm real worried Joe is in trouble."

" Until they confirm anything-"

" I'll be at the meeting," said Jones, rolling his eyes as he stood and checked the locker room. Arnie's voice, as he talked to players down the end, carried the length of the locker room. " I hope I won't be going to Prince William. You hear anything, call me. "

" Have a good meeting."

" You'll pay for that remark, Woosey."

3

He tightened his face in the cold air as he pressed his cell phone to his ear. The front desk at the Prince William station had him on hold all the way across campus. As he climbed the granite stairs between Boynton Auditorium's tall white columns, the front desk officer finally came on the line and told him Homicide was questioning a prisoner, but the cop would say no more. Jones jammed the cell phone back in his parka and opened the heavy auditorium doors.

The warmer air soothed his skin, but the frustration mounted as he moved up the lobby stairs and trekked to the auditorium. Travis raised his hand from a seat halfway down on the right as Nigel, clad in his smooth gray suit and red tie, spoke on the stage. He glanced at Jones, but did not interrupt his cadence. Jones sat down in aisle seat next to Travis, crossed his arms and debated whether to bolt the meeting and head to Prince William.

" You look like a dog waiting for a late supper."

Jones nodded and watched Nigel. " Accurate as usual, Travis."

" ... is what I think is needed here at Hamilton. As President and Dean of Students, I feel we have to reach out not only to the town, but we must bring a sense of recognition to the other colleges in the state and beyond. This school has much to offer and the outside world should know about it."

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" Nigel has great plans for Hamilton now that he's President," whispered Travis.

Jones tapped his fingers and moved his leg like a piston in overdrive.

" I have to leave."

" What's the matter? "

His thoughts centered around Joe Svoboda and the homicide activity at the Prince William police station. Nigel introduced someone from the auditor's office. Armed with an arsenal of facts and figures the auditor's monotonous dribble was almost enough to send the anxious Jones from the hall.

He had just checked his sports watch's luminous face when George Strickland and Wendell Harris, heavy blue coats covering their police uniforms, appeared at lobby entrance. Strickland scanned the audience and he made eye contact with Jones. Jones' stomach sunk. Strickland motioned him from the auditorium.

Travis gazed back at the two police officers. " Here comes the grim reaper himself."

" That's my fear. Someone is dead." Jones rolled into the aisle and, under Nigel's watchful eye, scurried toward the exit.

Strickland's solemn face indicated trouble. " Matthias, I got your message. I have some bad news for you."

" It's Svoboda, isn't it?" asked Jones.

" How did you know?"

" He's missing. Did he do it or is he dead?"

Strickland, holding his police hat in his hand, tightened the crow's feet around his dark eyes. Then he exhaled. " I don't know how to tell you this..."

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" Tell me, George."

" Joe Svoboda is being held in Prince William for murdering a hooker, his girlfriend, last night. I just got off the phone with P.W.P.D. "

" No way. " Jones wondered how Joe Svoboda could be driven to kill anybody. All thoughts of the game on Saturday, winning, or even playing, vanished with Strickland's pronouncement.

" I'm sorry, I know how much you like the kid and I know what a gifted athlete he is. They're questioning a guy named Cocoa Stefani."

" Joe Svoboda isn't a murderer. Who's Cocoa Stefani?"

" Owns a night club in Prince William. He may have been pimping out the girl, but he's very slick, this guy. "

" When did this murder take place? " asked Jones.

" Happened yesterday or last night," said Wendell.

" And I've been on the horn to the Medical Examiner's office. Clayton Morris said the girl was killed around eight o'clock last night," said Strickland.

" Pretty easy call. One knife wound in the chest. Hit her aorta."

" Blood everywhere," said Wendell.

Jones staggered to the cold plaster wall. His star player, playing football by day, was bedding down a Prince William hooker by night. He remembered what Travis had just told him less than an hour ago. Joe had broken up with his girlfriend. Jones prayed the ending of the relationship with Marlena Peterson had not resulted in murder. He peered back into the auditorium. " I need to talk to Travis."

Travis had already draped his wool coat over his arm and climbed the auditorium incline. He approached the three men. " What happened?"

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" Svoboda killed a hooker," said Wendell.

" I find that incredulous."

Wendell furrowed his brow. " Yeah, and hard to believe."

" It's true," said Strickland. " Svoboda's roommate, Clarence Moody, claims Joe left the dorm before seven. Roommate was very evasive and pushy. "

" That's what Leo said. Is he a suspect? "

" Who Leo? " asked Wendell.

" The roommate, Wendell, " said Jones.

" I don't know. He sounds evasive enough. I'm sure he has an alibi. As far as Joe goes... The girl was murdered last night and they found Joe locked inside some Boston hotel."

" Boston? What was he doing in Boston?" asked Jones.

" Running away," said Strickland.

Jones turned to Travis. " We don't know that. Travis, what did you say about Joe breaking up with his girlfriend?"

" He told me she said it was over and he was devastated by the news."

" Devastated enough to kill her?" asked Jones.

" No, I would say Joe was more despondent than anything else," said Travis " I thought he would wither away. I would not describe him as angry at any level."

" We're going over there right now," said Jones. " I've had enough speculation. I want to talk with Joe directly.

" I'd like to tag along," said Travis

" I think that would be a good gesture," said Strickland.

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" Joe is one of my favorite students," said Travis " I can't see him killing anyone."

" Agreed one thousand per cent," said Jones. " George, where are the witnesses? Did anyone see Joe kill this woman?"

" Oh, they have witnesses. Two witnesses."

They all lumbered down the dusty stairs and Jones pushed open the outside doors. Strickland directed them to the cruiser parked across the quadrangle. Jones opened the cruiser door and closed his eyes, rubbing them briefly as he shook his head. " Svoboda is the last person I'd expect to be held for this."

4

After driving Wendell back to the Hamilton police station, Strickland maneuvered his cruiser at high speed through the campus and up Route 32 over the Devonshire Hills. Jones made several vague references about the absurdity of Svoboda being booked for murder.

" Did you actually speak to a police officer, Matthias?" asked Strickland.

" Bosco," said Jones, staring out the window. " The guy had an attitude."

" I've heard of him. He's in vice. " Strickland pointed in the rearview mirror. " I would just concentrate on Svoboda and check out his story."

Jones nodded and Strickland turned on the radio. After a short jazzy tune, Larry's Resnick's voice filled the darkened cruiser. " Good evening, I'm Larry Resnick and this is the Larry Resnick Show. "

" My starting quarterback now, " said Jones.

" We'll be taking calls tonight on the death of a Prince William woman and the arrest of football star, Joe Svoboda..."

" What's he doing?" yelled Jones. " How did he find out about that?"

" Matthias," said Strickland, turning. " The last time I looked we live in the United States of America. There isn't a news blackout. It's on all the stations."

Jones yanked out his cell phone. " Not one of my players."

" Who are you calling?" asked Travis.

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" The station. I'll nix this thing right away." The line rang as Jones stared across the murky outlines of the quarries at the crest of the Devonshire Hills.

" WHMT," answered a young woman. " This is Cindy."

" This is Matthias Jones. I want to speak with Larry Resnick right now."

" I'm sorry, Coach. He's on the air."

" Well, get him off the air. Put on a commercial. I don't care."

" One moment, please."

Syrupy elevator music pinged over the phone speaker. " Joe doesn't need this."

" Matthias, let it settle," said Strickland. The radio broadcast a public service message over the cruiser speakers. " People will talk. I deal with it all the time."

" Larry Resnick."

" Larry, what the hell are you doing?"

" Coach?"

" I don't want this thing about Joe smeared all over God's creation. Come on, it sounds like you're prosecuting and convicting him on the air."

" Coach, we're just discussing it. Everybody is discussing it. It's unbelievable what happened."

" I'm just concerned about Joe and this whole mess. Please."

" Okay. I have to go back on the air."

Travis glanced at Strickland as Jones tucked his cell phone away. Strickland lowered the radio volume as the public service commercials ended.

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" This is Larry Resnick. We'll listen to more cool jazz from New Orleans and switch to some sports talk in a few minutes. Bear with me, folks. We'll get through the night."

The cruiser leveled out and, on the far side of the Devonshires, sped into the more developed part of Prince William. Jones was certain he had done the right thing by limiting Resnick's discussion. He watched the trees, houses, and storefronts whip by as Strickland made numerous turns into the center of the city. He finally slowed the cruiser at the large stone quarried police station and veered into the adjacent parking lot filled with Prince William cruisers and unmarked cars.

Jones sprinted ahead of Travis and Strickland, crunching the autumn leaves scattered on the stone steps. He pushed the oak precinct doors, grit his teeth, and looked the stairs up the toward the Homicide offices on the second floor. Through the constant chatter, he crossed the spacious downstairs area and a myriad of thoughts filled his head. He wondered if the black low rider was related to the hooker's murder. And why was Joe involved with a hooker? Strickland overtook him at the front desk and stood before Crim and several Prince William officers in blue uniforms behind the counter. " Crim."

" Hey, George," said the square jawed, gray haired Crimmins as he moved toward the counter. He looked over Strickland's shoulder.

" Matthias. "

" Crim. "

" Crim, you're holding a Hamilton College football player. "

Crim looked directly into Jones's eyes. " Svoboda..."

" I'd like to speak with Dom," said Strickland.

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" If he's still here, George." The officer turned and lifted a heavy black telephone off the nearest desk.

" Svoboda being held here is insane," said Jones. " I want to know the details on this thing."

" Hold on, Matthias" said Crim, raising his index finger.

" Joe isn't a murderer. That's the bottom line."

Crim listened on the phone and nodded before he hung up.

" It's late, Dom's gone home, guys. "

" Oh, come on," said Jones. " Then we'll talk to Kevin Phillips."

" Kevin is out. You'll have to talk Sergeant Bosco. He handles vice. Go right up."

" Bosco. That guy's a moron! "

" *Matthias*," said Strickland.

" Oh, then you know Kip? " asked Crim.

" No, but what does he know about Svoboda and this hooker?"

" If anyone know about hookers and vice, it's Kip Bosco. " Crim looked at the second floor stairs. " George, bring them right up to Homicide. "

" Thanks, Crim, " answered Strickland.

Jones moved with Travis across the station and started up the stairs. Travis held his forearm. " Slow down, Matthias. Let's just take this one step at a time. "

" Everything is all fouled up, Travis, " said Jones, turning at the landing.

" What about his parents? Joe is from Michigan right?"

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" Andover, Michigan," said Jones, scaling the stairs. " He led everyone of his teams to the state championships his senior year. Three great years at Hamilton and now this."

" We'll have to ask Bosco if the parents have been contacted," said Travis.

" I can't believe this is happening to a young man like Joe."

" I'll second that," said Jones, waiting at the top of the smooth wooden stairs. Although he dreaded seeing Joe under these circumstances, he knew Joe needed support to survive the accusations. Not knowing anything about this case troubled Jones and needed facts.

* * *

Strickland stepped up to an older woman with pursed lips, typing on a desk keyboard. " We're here for Sergeant Bosco."

" What did he do now?"

" Nothing," said Strickland, appearing at the doorway. " I just need to talk to him."

" Oh... I'll get him." The woman swung her nimble frame from the swivel chair, faced the back office and barked like a raspy drill sergeant.

" Kip! Kip! People want to see you!"

Jones leaned on a faded green filing cabinet and stroked his chin. Two witnesses actually observing Joe holding the dead woman and the fact Joe fled to Boston, strained his star player's claims of innocence. In the back office he heard someone coughing. An overweight, mustached man with disheveled sandy red hair, strutted through the doorway. He wore a maroon blazer, stained at the

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upper pocket and his short yellow paisley tie, loosened at the neck, followed the curve of his round belly over his solid blue shirt. A smoldering cigarette butt was stuck between his cracked lips and his eyelids hung heavy. " Yeah."

Strickland extended his hand. " Sergeant Bosco, I've talked to you on the phone a few times. I'm George-

" Call me Kip." He balanced the cigarette in his yellowed teeth and raised his bushy brows as he spoke.

Jones sniffed potent cologne.

" Kip, I'm George Strickland, Hamilton Police Chief. "

" Hamilton. The sticks over the hills," he said laughing, but soon coughed again. " I know who the hell you are."

" The sticks," said Strickland, smiling perfunctorily. " Funny."

" What do ya have two cops or somethin'?"

" I have eight men on the force. "

" Right. Suppose you're here about that Svoboda kid?"

Jones stepped forward, brushing Kip's cushion belly. " As a matter of fact, we are. Did I talk to you on the phone?"

" And who the hell are you, smart boy?"

" Matthias Jones," he answered, folding his arms.

" Jones. Jones. Oh, ya. The coach who thinks he's a PI. Your football hero has got himself in deep do-do. I thought I told you to hit the showers."

As Kip laughed again, Jones fought his anger and tried to concentrate on Joe's problems. " Where's Joe?"

" I could have you thrown out, Coachy."

" Jones is with me," said Strickland.

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" What was Svoboda doing, linking up with some hooker?" asked Jones.

" She found the kid, ah, well, you know how it goes, Coachy."

" No, I don't know how it goes. You ever talk to her about Svoboda?"

" I knew she had a relationship with him but she never stopped turning tricks either," said Kip, chuckling. " Woman was gorgeous. Tall, long brown hair. Slim with all the right proportions. She had a set of-."

" That's great, Kip, but how did she find Joe Svoboda?" asked Jones.

" Don't know exactly." Kip furrowed his brow and his fat face compressed into a confused expression as he thought. Then he raised his index finger. " I do know they were in Club Max all the time. I suppose they met in there."

" Where is Club Max?" asked Jones.

" Across town. On River Street about a mile from the Crosstown Bridge," said Kip. " Hangout for low-life. They get in my way, I just beat em up."

" You beat them up?" Jones grinned. " That I'd like to see."

" You're asking for it, Coachy."

" So, you think that's where he met the woman?" asked Travis.

" If there's a place to meet a hooker, that's the place," said Kip, laughing until he coughed.

" I suppose you know all about that, too," said Jones.

" It's my job, Jack."

" Who do I talk to down there?" asked Jones.

" You don't. I think the place might be a little tough for you. "

Jones moved closer. " Who do I talk to, Kip?"

" Bill, the bartender. Don't bother Cocoa. "

" Who?"

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" Local hood, " said Strickland.

" Cocoa Stefani owns Club Max, Chief. Coachy, you tell Billy that Kip Bosco sent you down. I don't want you to get hurt. Or we'll go down together. They all know me downtown. I'd like to get the hell out of this hole tonight and have a drink. You wanna see the kid now?"

" About time," said Jones..

" Have Svoboda's parents been notified?" asked Travis

" Yeah, Pacheco talked to them earlier. They've already left Detroit. They're pretty torqued off."

" Well, that is certainly understandable, sir."

" Who the hell are you? Some kind of Prof from the college?" asked Kip.

" I am. Travis Thayer."

" Never heard of ya."

" Everybody knows Travis. He's a writer, Kip, " said Jones.

" Yeah, so what? "

" You know, you're a pain in the neck. "

" Ha, ha. You're funny, Coachy. "

" So, what do you think, Kip, of all this?" asked Strickland.

Kip put out his cigarette in one of the desk coffee cups. The woman at the computer pursed her lips and then Kip dragged his polyester pants higher up his stomach. " I'll tell you guys right now. This kid is off the wall. He claims he didn't do it. But we got witnesses. Lieutenant Phillips talked to them."

" Who are the witnesses?" asked Jones.

" Jones, for your info, and I know you're taking this all in, a guy named Daniels. Thinks he's a P.I. just like you do. Lived right below the dead woman,

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Gina Quintal." Kip waddled to the repainted, yellow elevator doors. He pushed the button and everyone piled inside.

" Gina Quintal, right out of a dime novel," said Travis

" Dime? " asked Kip.

Jones was uncomfortably pinned between Kip and the paneled wall. The elevator doors closed unevenly and the car rumbled downward.

Kip turned to Strickland and moved his pudgy, freckled hands as he spoke. " Another lady at the apartment complex, a Mrs. O'Toole, saw quite a bit. But she split to Arizona on vacay. "

Jones spoke over his shoulder. " Listen, Kip-

" I know your next question, Jones. Where are the apartments? Covington Arms. Corner of Lincoln and Atlantic. Quintal was up on the third floor. Apartment 17."

" Svoboda's football number," said Jones, shaking his head.

The elevator rumbled past the first floor and into the basement. The doors opened to exposed pipes, peeling beige paint on the corridor bricks, and an intense urine odor.

" This is where we keep em on ice," said Kip.

" More like a barnyard, " said Travis. His fine wool coat was a marked contrast to the deteriorating basement. " This is disgusting. How can you keep human beings down here?"

" We call it home," said Kip, in a cough forced laugh.

He led them under a row of faded green metal shade lights hanging on chains from the cracked plaster ceiling. Upon seeing the stained ceramic urinals and compacted, and ripped mattress inside the cells, Jones wanted to get Joe out.

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In only twenty-four hours Joe Svoboda had gone from football hero to accused murderer.