

1

Dr. Povitch should have died long ago. His heart problems left him confined within death watches for months last year, and now, although miraculously recovered, his condition remained questionable. Father Gallagher, after years of antipathy with Povitch, invited him to St. Bart's rectory for a dinner of reconciliation. Matthias Jones worried whether Gallagher's temper might break through his priestly demeanor and rattle Povitch's fragile heart.

Jones slowed his jeep at the narrow road leading up Mount Polaris. A chained gate was open and a single lane was plowed, producing lumpy snow banks from last night's storm. The birch branches hung heavy with swollen snow and the pines stooped toward the road. He had always wanted to look into deep space from the large telescope atop the mountain, north of Hamilton, but did not think he would have to drive up Mount Polaris in the aftermath of the biggest storm to pelt the area in ten years. Fred Dempsey had told him the clear, cold night would provide an excellent viewing opportunity.

He shifted his jeep into four-wheel drive and turned to Duff. " So, how did you end up in Prince William on a Tuesday night, Duff?"

Duff said nothing for a few moments and stared out the window. " I was supposed to meet a girl."

Jones looked in the rear mirror, back toward the street gate as he moved up the incline. " Women, they can make ya or break ya. Especially if you don't have a car. "

" Yes, coach."

" Let's face it, Duffy, you were leading all scorers last year. But now something's affected you playing."

" I have a lot on my mind... Dr. Povitch says I need to focus."

The snow banks were highlighted by his headlights. He swerved the jeep slightly but easily negotiated the steep road. " You and the doctor are close. I heard that. He's your mentor."

" He is. And advisor. He knows my story."

" Yeah, but what does he know about outside jump shots?"

The freckled face Duff smiled, but continued to look out the jeep window. " I've never been up here in a after a big storm. You sure it's cleared at the top?"

" I guess they plowed the top. I called Campus Security to unlock the gate. Bucky, you know Bucky."

" Campus insecurity." Duff balanced his chin on his palm and stared silently into the trees lining the snow skimmed, outside guard rail. Jones smiled. Duff was edgy

ever since he got in the jeep at the Hannibal Mall in Prince William. Jones held the wheel with one hand and kept his right hand on the stick shift, as if his removing his hand from the lever might cause some great tactical problem. " Bucky, has his own ideas about police work. We have to keep reminding him that he's in charge of the campus security and not a real cop."

Duff stretched his long legs. " He gave me a parking ticket two weeks ago."

Jones shifted again, moved the jeep around the turn and started up a new hill. " You don't own a car."

" Well, I was driving Bernie Gauzinski's Toyota. I parked it like everyone does next to the gym."

" So, what was the problem?"

" I'm still trying to figure that one out. Bucky steps out of his little brown Campus Security car, pad flipped over, and pen in hand."

Jones nodded and laughed. " I can see the whole thing."

" He waddles over in his uniform and he tells me I'm in violation of section twenty-six of the campus parking code. He said if I didn't move the car he was going to have it towed off campus."

" Bucky had Dean Kent's car towed. Of course he didn't know it was Dean Kent's car," said Jones, shifting again. " Never mind Nigel is also the President of Hamilton College has the license plate marked **DEAN**. So what happened with the Toyota?"

Duff pointed to Jones' blue parking sticker on the driver's side of the windshield. " I showed him Bernie's sticker. It's good through the academic year."

" So, what was the problem?"

" He bends down on his hands and knees and starts crawling around on the pavement. He told me I was straddling the handicapped space. I guess was: by a couple of inches. So, he moves his pen around that little pad of his and rips off the sheet. Twenty-five bucks!"

Jones round the corner for the final hill to the observatory. " Oh, come on."

" Seriously."

Jones winced as he thought of traveling to an auto body in Prince William with Nigel and finding Nigel's Mercedes stuck between two rusted Ford Pintos from the 1970's. " Duff, let me speak with Dean Kent. See if I can clear this ticket thing up."

" I think Bucky went a little overboard," said Duff, pausing and looking at Jones. " Coach, I'm sorry."

" For what?"

They moved along the snow bank now covering the guardrail, high above the valley. " Things are bothering me."

Jones shifted again. The narrow plowed road leveled in the headlights.

" You want to talk about it?"

Duff shook his head. " I will."

" Okay." Jones tried to change the subject as he moved through the plowed snow. " Dr. Povitch looked healthy when I talked to him at the last game... when he invited me up here."

" Dr. Povitch is lucky to be alive," said Duff.

" He's been through it all, that's for sure."

" Everybody thought he was a goner last year when he was in that hospital in Boston."

" He was in there for months, wasn't he?"

" When he came out of it, Professor McIntire was shocked."

" Oh, yes, his art professor friend. He's got a good twenty years on her." Jones flicked the high beams as the road darkened through a birch thicket ahead and the jeep's large tires crunched the snow tracks.

" Thirty-four years old and he's sixty-two. I heard she likes to spend his money," said Duff. " I guess Dr. Povitch's wife had some bucks and his college texts are popular."

Jones laughed and zipped through the woods. " You know all the dirt on campus, Duff. You ought to start a gossip column for the school paper. Maybe start with the way this telescope was refurbished. But I guess that feud was smoothed over tonight. I'm very surprised Father Gallagher asked Povitch over to the rectory."

" They hate each other," said Duff.

" The money from the Elton Foundation set to refurbish St. Barts." A tawny fox turned in the road ahead, his eyes glowing in the headlight's glare. He ran between the snowy spruce and disappeared into the darkness. " I can't believe Povitch took on Father like he did. Every cent went into this telescope. Elton's governing board leans toward churches and non-profit endeavors. Povitch convinced him of the observatory's merit."

" Well, it might be more complicated than that. What did Father Gallagher say to him?"

" Oh, you don't want to know what exactly Father said," replied Jones.

" I thought he was a priest."

" He is, but he don't ever back him into a corner. He used to box and was a football player at Notre Dame. Without the Elton money he was left to raise six hundred thousand for the church renovation himself." Jones gazed across the Hamilton lights twinkling across the valley. The brighter

Prince William glare unfolded beyond the Devonshire Hills to the west. " I would have liked to have been fly on the wall at that rectory tonight."

Duff tapped his fingers on his thigh and looked out the side window. Jones shifted along a cable fence, supported by cement posts, half buried in the snow near the cliffs. He made a turn into a long straight wooded stretch. In the field beyond, two cars spewed smoky exhaust into the cold night air and cast their headlights across a chained gate.

" Oh, no," said Jones.

" What?" Duff turned. " Bucky Driscoll, why is he still up here?"

Fred Dempsey's maroon minivan was to the left and parked diagonally across the mountain road was a beige Ford Escort. The door was marked in bold green letters: **CAMPUS SECURITY**. " Oh, he's probably supposed to unlock the gate for us. "

Jones pulled alongside the minivan and rolled down his window. He was about to lean over to talk to Fred when the rotund Bucky, in his blue and gold security uniform, swung a huge sledgehammer through the air. " What the hell is he doing?"

" They don't call him Campus Insecurity for nothing," said Duff.

Bucky, his glasses slipping down his nose and his foggy breath billowing into the night, grunted and groaned as he bashed the gate lock. His heavy winter coat was draped over the Escort's hood. "Hasn't he ever heard of a key?"

"Matthias, welcome to Mount Polaris," said Fred Dempsey, smiling from the minivan.

Jones stared at Bucky. He turned to the dark haired Dempsey.

"Fred, don't you have a key?"

"The Fletchers want Campus Security to have the keys."

A sudden crunch and the sound of glass breaking sent Jones from the jeep. Duff followed him around the minivan. Fred Dempsey looked in astonishment as Bucky pulled the sledgehammer out of the van's smashed headlight. "Bucky, you just hit my headlight!"

"Hey, I ain't one to give up. I'm just glad to be alive to live another day." Bucky lifted the hammer into the air again and everyone moved back. He growled like a distraught bear, swung again, but missed the lock and fell backward into the snow. Sitting in the icy road he pointed at the lock.

"You stupid lock..."

Jones rushed forward and rubbed his hands in the cold. "Bucky, where's your key?"

Still sitting in the snow, Bucky shook his head and pulled a cluster of keys from his coat pocket. He pushed his wire rim glasses back up his nose and with his mouth hanging open, stared at the keys. "Nope, she ain't here. Gut em all numbered."

Jones zipped his parka. He tightened his face in the cold as he looked at Duff and Fred. Fred alternated glances between the broken headlight and Bucky. "Why don't we all get back in our cars? Dr. Povitch will be along shortly. He should have a key."

"Nope. I took it away," said Bucky, using the hammer handle to leverage himself up. He grabbed both sides of his belt and tried to yank his trousers higher over his stomach. "You see, Dr. Povitch having that key would be a violation of school policy."

Jones' fingers were numb and his nose stung. "I'm going back in the jeep."

"Come on in the minivan, Matthias" said Fred.

Fred gawked at the broken headlight as he passed and slid the van's side door. Big band music shook the speakers as Jones and Duff crawled inside the warmer air. Jones slid the door shut. Once Fred was back inside, he leaned forward and squinted. "What a loose cannon."

"Nigel hired him. Apparently he had a good record at some school in New York."

" Yeah, Ding Dong School," said Jones. Bucky, the back of his pants now soaked, returned from his car with a hacksaw. " What is he going to do now?"

Duff leaned forward.. " Coach, he's going to try and cut that thick chain with a little hack saw."

Jones pushed the illuminated dial on his watch. " Mercy... Fred, why don't we just walk the rest of the way?"

" Another mile, Matthias. If it were summer I would."

Jones closed his eyes for a second and reclined in the seat. He thought about the open chain on the bottom gate. " Wait a minute, didn't he open the bottom chain? Wouldn't they have the same lock?"

" That would be logical, wouldn't it? " asked Fred. Jones nodded.

" Except Bucky changed them last week for security purposes."

" And he lost the key," said Jones, looking out at Bucky, hacking furiously at the chain.

" No, he lost the key to the old lock." Fred turned down the radio as the music ended and an AM station out of Portland, Maine began a news broadcast. He pushed the FM switch and twisted the dial for the campus station. " Nice van, Fred."

" You like the van?"

Jones checked the mileage. " Is that a Two-hundred and seventy-fifty thousand? Van looks newer."

" No, no, you're looking at the elapsed mileage. Two hundred and seventy-five. I always push it to zero when I fill up on gas, so if something goes wrong with the gauge, as it has on occasion, I know how many miles I have left before I'm running on fumes. But I did cross the hundred and forty thousand mark. This van owes me nothing. I change the oil frequently."

" That's the ticket," said Jones, peering out the side mirror. Headlights shined down the cleared snow road. Jones checked his watch. It was seven thirty-two. " Good, maybe this is Dr. Povitch."

The car switched to low beams. Duff turned quickly. " It's Sergi's BMW."

" Sergi?" Jones smiled, glancing briefly at Bucky still hacking the thick chain out front. " Unless, the doctor has a key, I don't know why we're all so enthusiastic. Bucky's still sawing out there. We could be here all night."

The gray BMW slowed and stopped behind Jones' jeep. Jones slid open the van door and hopped into the frigid air. The BMW's driver's window electronically moved downward and the bearded Dr. Povitch, bushy brows, blending into his fur lined hat, peered up at Jones.

" Problem, Matthias?" he asked tersely.

Jones moved closer to his puffy brown eyes. Povitch was usually a congenial man with a good sense of humor, but he did not seem happy now.

" The security guy, Bucky. He... he lost the key to the gate."

Povitch rolled his eyes, adjusted his cashmere scarf and put on his brown leather gloves. Then he opened the door, slowly swung his body around and stuck his feet into the snow. He grabbed the edges of the door and lifted himself up. Jones was not sure whether he would insult Povitch by taking his arm, but readied himself in case the doctor fell. Povitch shuffled in slow motion across the snow to the front gate where Bucky was still sawing wildly and swearing openly. Jones could see no progress as he cut the cold metal.

" Excuse me, Mr. Driscoll," said Povitch.

Steam moved upward from the elongated sweaty stretch along Bucky's back. In the cold air, he curled his lip upward and breathed heavily. " Huh?"

" I believe you misplaced the key."

" Don't you worry, Dr. Povitch. I've had years of experience in security."

Jones rolled his eyes and jumped up and down to negate the effects of the cold. He had coached football games in colder weather than this, but at least he could run up and down the sidelines.

" Your hat," said Povitch.

" Oh, I don't need no hat. The cold and me, we're good buddies," said Bucky and with saw in hand, faced the thick chain again.

" No, the other day in my office. You taped the key to the visor of your hat."

Jones looked to his right and retrieved Bucky's hat from the car hood. Under the visor was a long piece of masking tape. The key was stuck to the adhesive. When he peeled it back. Bucky, still looking confused, held the hacksaw in his hand. Jones pulled the key from the tape and handed it to him as Povitch slowly returned to his car.

" No wonder I couldn't find it."

Jones pinched the bridge of his nose. Bucky walked back to the chain and was about to place the key in the lock, but he dropped it in the snow. He bent over and scoured the ground. Jones threw his hands up in the air and then stomped across the snow, almost slipping. He spotted the key near the gatepost, bent down and pinched it between his fingers.

" You have an eagle eye, Coach. An eagle eye."

Jones thrust the key into the lock and popped it. He and Duff dragged the chain back across the road, but Bucky gripped the links and ran through the snow. Jones fought to maintain his balance. With the gate now open, he moved precariously to Povitch's car and the electric window came

down again. He handed the key to the doctor. " Here, I think you'd better hold on to this."

" Hold it! Hold it!" called Bucky as he ran from the gate. " Let's not violate school policy. I need that key! I don't want to have to file a negative report."

" Bucky, how about we let the doctor keep the key?"

" But we're out of compliance!"

Povitch's window went up and he drove forward over the snow pack. Jones followed Duff into the jeep as Fred Dempsey started forward, one headlight now illuminating the road ahead. Jones leaned out the jeep window. Bucky stood with his hands on his hips. " Tough break, Buck. You'll just have to wing it."

He shifted as Bucky kept ranting at the gate. In the side mirror he kicked the snow near his car. " *Bucky Driscoll....*"

2

An intricate mass of brilliant stars stretched across the cold winter sky. Jones and Duff walked through the snow toward the huge white dome, housing the college telescope, set within a long cinder block building.

"Where's the big dipper?" asked Jones. He gazed up again and followed Duff's extended arm upward. The familiar group sparkled just above the Devonshire Hills and the Fletcher estate. "I've always wanted to learn the constellations. What about that series of bright stars?"

"Orion, watched by Cassiopeia."

Jones scanned the sky as they reached the door. "Orion's the one with the stars in his belt, right?"

"What?" Duff opened the metal door.

"Duff, I'm trying to learn something. You're out to lunch tonight." The warmer air inside filtered out the door. "How do you know which stars are hot, which ones are cooler..."

"You can tell the temperature of each of those stars by the color. The blue ones are hotter."

Jones followed him inside the white cinder block foyer. Hanging metal shade lights blazed from the high galvanized ceiling and a group of offices faced the long white telescope.

Povitch clutched the metal frame of an open elevator and slowly rose fifteen feet to the telescope platform.

Jones banged his boots on the cement. " You all right, Doctor?"

Povitch was unusually pale and breathed heavily. Jones feared the confrontation with Gallagher and the confusion at the gate might have shaken him. " I'm afraid I'm just a little fatigued this evening."

" We can cancel."

" No, I'm all right, I am." He paused, stepped onto the metal grid and trekked to the black vinyl observation chairs at the telescope's base. He carefully lowered himself into the front chair. Once settled, he lifted an adjacent long clipboard into his lap.

" Duff, is he all right?" Jones asked in a lower voice.

" You know how he's been sick, Coach. I sure this is just the effects of his disease. He really has been sick."

" So, Matthias," said Fred Dempsey, emerging from the first side office in his khaki chinos and blue button down shirt. " As Dr. Povitch's assistant, I must pose the official question to all our visitors. Have you ever looked at the stars?"

" I've seen the stars but not through a telescope like this."

" Completely refurbished. Big bucks," said Fred loud enough for Povitch to turn.

As Fred crossed the room toward the spiral staircase. Duff leaned over and whispered. " That's taking away a lot of stain glass windows at St. Barts."

" That reminds me," said Povitch from above. " You were supposed to finish the report on the expenditures here, Fred."

" I'm aware of that, Sergi."

" Procrastination will be your downfall, Fred."

Povitch was still angry, perhaps from his dinner with Gallagher. Jones looked the lighted computer screen and books scattered around Fred's office.

" Come on, coach."

Duff motioned Jones to the metal staircase next to the elevator. Jones climbed behind his lanky player. When Jones reached platform Povitch sat with his eyes closed. " You are all right, Doctor?"

" Yes, fine," said Povitch, opening his glassy eyes. He leaned back in the contoured chair near the telescope's eyepiece. " Just a little indigestion."

" Shall I tell Father Gallagher he needs to send for takeout next time?"

" There will be no next time. That man is about as much a priest as I am."

Fred appeared at the top of the metal staircase. He raised his brows and shrugged his shoulders. " Well, at least we have a clear night."

" About time," said Povitch, squirming slowly in the chair. He rubbed his shoulder. " Duff, prepare for observation."

" Yes, Doctor."

" Then I wish to speak privately with you. " Povitch swiveled in the chair and perked up. He gazed down as if he were in the lecture hall.

" This telescope is capable of looking halfway across the galaxy. Most people don't realize that we work all night, fight the storms, and progress is measure in centimeters not kilometers. Meticulous observation, gentlemen. Right, Fred?"

" Meticulous."

" Can you really see the craters on the moon?" asked Jones.

Povitch smiled. " Of course, Matthias. But you need the moon in the sky."

" Oh." Jones turned as the outside door slammed and Bucky coughed.

" What is your specialty, Doctor? You know, an area of expertise."

" Cepheid Variables."

" Sounds like something swimming under Hamilton Bay," said Jones.

" Actually, we are talking about quickly orbiting, high gravity stars that output tremendous energy at periodic rates. I am fond of measuring those rates."

" Bursts of energy?" asked Jones.

" Yes, like lighthouse beacons. Now my contention has always been-"

" Hey, fellas, I put that gate out of action!" shouted Bucky as he dragged snow across the floor.

Povitch seemed annoyed, watched Bucky cross the room and then looked back at Jones and Duff. " As I was saying. My thesis over the years has been variable, no pun intended. If we extrapolate the data-"

" You wanna know how I did it?" asked Bucky, now wearing a thick knitted cap and heavy wool coat inside.

" Bucky, Dr. Povitch is trying to tell us about Cepheid Variables," said Jones.

" I ran it down. Got in my car, revved up the engine and got mad at it. Damage wasn't too bad," he said, looking at Fred.

" I still have *one* headlight," said Fred as the phone rang. " Excuse me." He quickly moved to the wall phone at the far end of the grid and picked up the receiver. " Fred

Dempsey. Yes. He did? Tibbets or Grunyn? Okay, great. Okay, I'll call you back."

Jones studied the telescope. " You were saying, Doctor."

Bucky walked in a complete circle below them. " Anybody seen the head? I've got to go so bad I can taste it."

Fred closed his eyes and pointed toward the entryway. Bucky lumbered across the observatory and rounded the corner. With a grin Jones stared at the entryway. The he turned toward Fred. " Tell me this guy really doesn't work for the college."

" He does." His smile fell when he looked at Povitch.

Gears and wheels turned as Povitch adjusted something in the telescope mechanism.

" Come over here, Duff," said Povitch. " If you gentlemen will excuse us for a few minutes. I apologize."

" Sure," said Jones and he followed Fred down the staircase.

Jones stood in the office doorway as Fred shuffled some wire rimmed notebooks on the counter. Above, Povitch turned in the chair. Duff sat in the adjacent chair as Povitch leaned forward, elbows on his knees, pointing. Duff appeared uncomfortable.

Fred held some reports as he emerged from one of the side offices.

" Matthias, welcome to the world of astronomical observation."

Jones tilted his head and tried to read the papers in Fred's hand.

" Looks like you have to record what you do. Observations, etcetera."

" Writing and research. Someone has to do it. Let me show you around here while those two kibitz."

Jones glanced upward again. Povitch briefly held Duff's wrist.

" They seem to have a close relationship. More than just a professor and student. Povitch talks like he's Duff's father."

Fred pushed his lips together and looked down. " Without Sergi, well, Duff would have lost everything."

" What do you mean?"

Fred's pulled Jones into the cinder block office. " You're his coach. I shouldn't spread stories but you should know the truth."

" Know what?"

" Pills."

" *What?*" Jones roared. He peered around the corner and stared his auburn haired player. " I don't believe it. Where did you hear something outrageous like that? Rumors can be deadly, Fred."

" Sergi told me himself. If it wasn't for Sergi helping that kid, he probably would have died. I think he's clean now."

" The kid is on my basketball team. No way. I don't believe it. His play has been off this year, but... I can't believe this." Bucky rounded the cinder block corner, tried to zip up his fly, but the zipper was stuck. Jones turned back to Fred. " I'll keep this confidential of course."

" Stupid zipper." Bucky entered the office, still yanking at the zipper, and finally pulled it up. The heat from the long metal wall units warmed the office, but Bucky positioned his stocking cap over his forehead and zipped his heavy coat to the neck. " There. You know, Matthias. My sister wants to go out with you."

Jones studied Bucky's large nose and protruding teeth and wondered what the sister looked like. " Great."

Bucky maneuvered himself between Jones and Fred. " So, Dr. Dempsey, I want you to know that I've been doing some observing in my back yard telescope."

" Oh?" asked Fred, smiling at Jones.

" Yeah, been studying Tranquillity Base. You know, Tranquillity Base where Buzz Armstrong landed on the moon in '69?"

" Neil Armstrong," said Jones.

" Flag is still flapping."

Fred edged Jones toward the door. " That is quite impossible. The moon has no air."

" There's a lot of hot air around here though," said Jones as they passed a befuddled Bucky and headed back into the main observatory. Povitch was still speaking with Duff. Jones remained stunned Duff had a drug problem. It was hidden very well.

" Are you ready, Sergi?" called Fred, but Povitch did not appear to hear him. " We'll start the observations. Providing you're feeling all right. I don't want to push you."

" I don't think he looks well," whispered Jones.

" Sergi!"

" One minute, Fred." Povitch again jammed his finger at Duff.

" Tonight we will be scanning M-13 in Orion's belt," said Fred.

" What is that? A galaxy?" asked Jones.

" Exactly. You've been studying up."

" Lucky guess." Jones shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

Duff stood quickly and asked Povitch if he was all right. Povitch took deep breaths and complained of being dizzy. He made an attempt to stand, but staggered on the grid and collapsed. Duff bent over the fallen doctor as Jones sprinted

across the cement and leaped up the spiral staircase. He scrambled across the platform.

" He's dead, Coach!"

" What?" Jones put his ear against the Povitch's chest. When he did not hear a heartbeat, he tilted back Povitch's head, moved his tongue back and pinched his nose as he breathed into the doctor's lungs. Then he began compression's on the chest and brought the air out. " Fred, call the fire department. Get the EMT's up here. Tell them: No heartbeat. No breathing. Nothing."

" What's the matter, the Doc have too much bubbly?" asked Bucky.

" Out of the way, Bucky!" yelled Fred.

" We have a medical emergency here."

* * *

Jones continued the CPR, furiously repeating the cycle of compression and breathing. He looked up when he felt Fred's hand on his arm. Fred's eyes were moist and he shook his head. " Matthias, you've been at it for ten minutes. He's not coming back."

" Where are those EMT's?" shouted Jones.

Bucky started down the ladder. " Cancel medical emergency."

Fred squatted beside Jones. " He was sick for a long time. He was lucky to have recovered and had the time he did."

Jones stood, slightly winded by the CPR. Duff cried from behind the telescope as Jones walked by Fred and glanced back at Povitch's body, sprawled over the grid. Duff hid his eyes as Jones approached. " You all right, Duff?"

" Oh, God..."

" Apparently, he still had problems with his heart."

" He's dead. "

Bucky strutted from the inner office and yelled through cupped hands. " I just contacted the said parties by land based en route. ETA has been canceled. Said parties have alerted Chief Strickland."

" What did he say? asked Jones. Then he turned to Duff. " Come on, Duff. There's nothing more we can do up here."

Duff wiped his eyes with his sweatshirt sleeve and nodded. Jones put his arm around him and they moved toward the spiral stairway. He passed Povitch again. A heart attack was a heart attack. As Medical Examiner, Clayton Morris would confirm the cause of death.

Jones found Fred Dempsey alone in Povitch's adjacent office, staring out the darkened window as headlights hit the wall. "Sergi was a brilliant man."

Jones nodded, but looked over his shoulder at the doctor's body above them. He did not want to start asking questions while everyone was grieving. After all, this was not a murder investigation. Yet, something was not right.

Bucky's grating and arrogant voice echoed from Fred's office. Jones stepped around the corner. Bucky was in Fred's chair and his feet were propped up on a stack of papers. "I don't care who you think you are. This is Campus Security, Mister. We have an emergency here."

"Who are you calling?" asked Jones.

Bucky covered the receiver, almost falling back in the swivel chair.

"Hamilton Fletcher."

"Hamilton Fletcher?" Jones raced through the office and quickly pushed the door down the hook. "The Fletchers fund Hamilton College!"

Bucky's face reddened as he held the phone and struggled to get out of the chair. "I have to inform you, Coach Jones, that you are interfering in an official Campus Security investigation."

"Investigation? Bucky, you don't call Hamilton Fletcher about this. Especially at this hour."

" I have my obligations." He tried dialing again. Jones reached around the desk and pulled the module from the wall. Bucky leaned forward. " Nice try, Mr. smarty pants, but there are other phones in existence."

" I've got some advice for you: *Buzz off.*"

Bucky mumbled and marched into the observatory. Jones studied the scattered notebooks, stacks of paper, and computer discs. Even books were not put back on the shelves. He looked through the blinds. George Strickland's cruiser was now parked next to his jeep. The observatory's outside door opened and cold air rushed inside.

Strickland, bundled in his blue coat, banged his boots on the front mats and started inside. His brow furrowed when he looked at Jones.

" What happened, Matthias?"

" Looks like a heart attack, George. I think... " Jones pointed to the platform as the crossed the cement. " I tried CPR."

" What did he do, climb the stairs and collapse?"

" No, he took the elevator. He was up there ten or fifteen minutes. He was just talking to one of my players and he fell over and died. No screaming in agony. He was just dead."

" He had a heart condition," said Fred. " He's been ill for some time."

Strickland nodded and they climbed the spiral staircase. Jones thought murder as moved onto the grid. "George, we need to call Clayton Morris."

Strickland reached the body, bent over and listened. "I remember reading in The Enterprise how Povitch almost died in Boston last year. What we need to do it notify his wife."

"His wife is dead," said Fred. "He has a girlfriend."

Jones stared at Povitch's bristly bearded, dropped jaw and hands spread on the metal. "One of the professors, right? Younger than he."

Fred moved closer. "Sergi was close to the art professor, Elsie McIntire."

"I'd better call Gallagher," said Jones. "This will send him into a tizzy."

Strickland stood. "Father Gallagher will have to restrain his joy. After all, Matthias. All that money from the Elton Foundation was that was supposed to go into the church went into this place."

"That's not what I'm, concerned about, George. Gallagher had Povitch to dinner this evening. They had an argument and Povitch left upset."

"No need to make Father feel guilty about this."

"Something's wrong here, I can feel it." Jones wandered over to Povitch again and squatted. Inducing a

heart attack in a man with known cardiovascular problems was easy. " Just an increase in potassium would do him in."

" Matthias, I would just keep any speculation to myself. Everyone that dies isn't murdered." He stood next to Jones, looked him in the eye and spoke in a low voice. " There's no basis for... *murder.*"

" George, there is always a basis for murder."

3

The lead changed five times in the quarter. Jones returned to the bench. A somber Duff Davis, in his red and black Hamilton uniform, shuffled along the sidelines as the cheerleaders' chant rocked the gym. For seventy-two hours Jones tried to convince himself Fred Dempsey's report of Duff using drugs was not true. Unless Fred had direct evidence, Jones was reluctant to pursue it, but he also knew in his state of denial he was falsely protecting one of his best players. " Duff, take Chet's place. Chet, take a rest."

He patted Chet on the back and was surrounded by an improvised team huddle. With two minutes left on the clock he needed something bold.

" Listen, boys. You're down by seven points. You've got to go inside. Outside you're all cold as ice."

All the students and assembled faculty studied his every move. This team lacked the talent of past years, but they gave everything to win. The buzzer sounded, the team put their hands together and broke. The nimble Tammy Welch climbed atop the cheerleaders' human pyramid as the teams moved to center court, but Jones' eyed a blonde

haired woman back in the bleachers. She smiled and so did he. As the cheerleaders finished, Bucky in his beige and brown Campus Security uniform held a megaphone in his hand and paced behind the far basket.

" The heavy artillery has arrived," said his assistant coach.

" This guy, Driscoll is a walking time bomb, Woosey."

The pyramid collapsed, but Tammy Welch toppled onto the hard wood floor. She sat up crying and held her ankle. The crowd produced a distinct hush as Jones ran along the bleachers and through the gathering crowd of players and other cheerleaders. He looked at her twisted ankle. Her little round face tightened. " Are you all right, Tammy?"

" My ankle, it's broken!"

Jones spotted Leo Crowley. " Leo, cold pack. Get a cold pack from the bag!"

Leo, a large man with a rusty beard nodded and lumbered back to the bench. One of the players threw the cold pack to Leo and he hurled it under hand to Jones. Jones broke the inner liquid seal and set the pack against Tammy's little ankle.

Tammy winced. Her luminous blue eyes closed. " It hurts so bad."

" I'll get my truck," said Leo.

" Good, we'll get you over to the infirmary. Tammy. Looks like a bad sprain."

" No, it's broken."

The tall woman with long blonde hair quickly moved out of the crowd.

" Excuse me, I'm a nurse."

Jones smiled, trying to keep his mind focused on the game. " Then please start nursing, Miss."

" Sure."

Jones instructed his players to help move Tammy over to a bleacher seat. The nurse checked over her ankle as a number of professors and the other cheerleaders sat with her. As the game was about to begin. Bucky blasted an inaudible dribble through the megaphone. The buzzer sounded and the final two minutes began.

The game was over in less than a minute. Duff chanced a long looping shot, missing the rim altogether. Norwich exploded with an outside flourish, putting the game out of reach. Duff also wasted a couple of lay-ups and Jones wondered if Fred's accusation about the pills was affecting Duff's play on the court. Maybe had started popping the pills again. It was time to confront Duff and have him tested.

The bleaches emptied when the buzzer sounded and Jones closed his eyes. He walked through the crowd on the

gym floor and shook Milt Wilson's hand. " Good outside game, Milty."

" Your cheerleader all right, Matthias?"

" She sprained her ankle. Bad day all around."

" You're building your team."

Jones rolled his eyes. " These guys are all seniors, Milty... but they never give up."

Before Milt could say anything else Bucky appeared to his right and moved along with Jones. " Coach, you know you need to push your players a little harder. Being Mr. Nice Guy won't win ball games. If it were my team, I'd begin practice drills on Sunday mornings. Now, if you take into account the poor defense-"

" Bucky, why don't you go direct traffic or something."

Jones turned to Milt. " You have time for a coffee, Milt?"

" We have to get back on the bus, Matthias. But I will take a rain check."

" You didn't let me conduct a proper investigation at the observatory," said Bucky as they dodged the crowd.

" We'll leave that for George Strickland, *Bucky*."

Milt shook hands with Jones again and headed for the locker room. As Jones turned to check on Tammy, the feedback from Bucky's megaphone pierced his eardrum. He grit his teeth and was about to yell, but Bucky squeezed through the front doors.

Bucky pointed the megaphone back to the crowd. " Now hear this! Now hear this! Clear the way! Everyone will exit said facilities in a reasonable way in single file."

Jones stood next to Leo Crowley. " That guy is a blithering idiot."

" But how do you really feel about him, Coach?" asked Leo.

Two members of the team helped Tammy in her white Hamilton sweater onto her feet as Leo picked up the cold pack. " I'll get her over to the infirmary. My truck is right outside."

" I'm sure it's just a sprain," said Jones.

Tammy nodded. " Can't do cheerleading with a cast, Coach."

Jones nodded as Woosey moved across the gym, signaling an incoming telephone call with his thumb and little finger against his ear and mouth.

Jones stepped forward " Who is it, Woose?"

" Father Gallagher calling from St. Barts."

" About time he returned my phone calls."

" He doesn't sound like himself."

Jones scurried across the gym and entered the locker room. No doubt Gallagher was distressed about Povitch's death following the abruptly ended dinner. Duff looked

directly at Jones before entering locker room. Jones moved inside. Woosey, behind the glass in his office, handed the phone to Jones.

" Jim, I've been calling you for three days." Jones sat down, balancing in his chair, but Gallagher had not answered. " Jim, are you there?"

" Matthias," he said in a low voice. " Matthias, I have to be held responsible."

" No, Jim. Povitch had a heart attack."

" You don't understand. I started in on him again. You know how he diverted the money from the foundation. He *got me so mad!*"

Jones stood and then sat on the edge of the desk. " Listen, we just finished the game. "

" I don't know what I'm going to do. Please, I need your help."

" Okay. Let me just wrap things up here at the gym. I'll be right over."

" I don't know if I can stay here."

" What do you mean by that?"

" You don't understand. For three days this thing has been eating away at me"

" Stay put, Father. Give me half an hour."

Jones set down the phone as Bucky leaned in the doorway to his office.

" Father Gallagher shouldn't have got the doctor so upset."

" Bucky, I don't appreciate your listening to my private conversations."

" Unless... he deliberately tried to get Povitch upset." Bucky extended his lower teeth over his upper lip. " That might be it. Don't worry, Coach. I'll solve this."

" There's nothing to solve. Don't you have parking tickets to write? Cars to tow..." Jones grabbed his parka from the wall hook and passed Bucky. Across the locker room he dragged Woosey away from a couple of the players near the lockers. " Woose, I'm going over to St. Barts. Jim seems pretty upset. I need to talk to him."

" You think Povitch was murdered?" asked Woosey.

" Your as bad as..." Jones turned but Bucky was gone. " Well, thank God for small favors, he's gone. No, the coroner hasn't said that Povitch had a heart attack."

Jones scanned the other locker alcoves for Duff. He spoke out of the side of his mouth and held Woosey's wrist.

" Listen, I'll be in Prince William." Jones threw his parka over his suit, took his keys from his pocket and headed out the side door. But talk of murder sent his mind scrambling. With Povitch's long history of heart problems and because almost died last summer, a scenario of an induced heart attack now seemed a side road theory. He put on his stocking cap and pushed up his parka hood as he hit the cold air.

As he crossed the gym parking lot's hard caked snow, the brilliant sunset fired rays through the deep blue clouds above the bare trees. A line of cars, headlights glowing, proceeded out the gym parking lot toward town. Jones placed his key in his jeep's icy door lock. The jeep, less than a year old, was in the cold air since this morning. He turned the key and smiled as the engine quickly turned over. As the wipers swiped a thin layer of snow and frost across the windshield, Bucky's little beige security car, fishtailed across the gym parking lot and onto the street.

Jones fiddled with the heater switch, shifted the jeep and pulled out his cell phone. For a moment he hesitated but then he placed a call to Clayton Morris's office. By now his old friend would have completed the autopsy reports. A secretary answered, but put him on hold as he started through the snow lined college streets toward the highway.

" One minute."

" Tell Clayton it's Matthias Jones."

Clayton's assistant came on the line. " Matthias, Clayton definitely wants to talk to you about Dr. Povitch."

" What about Dr. Povitch, Hal?"

" I can't say right now, but we're waiting for the rest of the lab reports. We were delayed because of Ms. McIntire."

" The art professor?"

" She held up the autopsy. She didn't even want it. It won't be much longer... Call Clayton back in ten or fifteen minutes. We could have something important. He has to talk to George Strickland first."

" What the hell is going on here, Hal?"

" Matthias, don't get me in trouble, just call back."

Jones skidded at the Hamilton Street stop sign near the Science Building. He agreed to call back in a few minutes, but now sensed Povitch was murdered. On the illuminated cell phone dial, as the heater warmed the jeep, he punched in Fred Dempsey's number.

The line rang and he was about to hang up when a winded Fred answered. " Hello."

Jones was reluctant to share thoughts about Povitch being murdered. He needed more information. " Fred this is Matthias Jones."

" Matthias, I heard your team lost."

" Word travels quickly. Listen, my friend Father Gallagher is upset that he might have provoked Dr. Povitch into having a heart attack."

" Sergi did have dinner at St. Bart's rectory. The two men were enemies. I was surprised Sergi agreed to meet with Gallagher. "

" His heart was bad, right? I mean, he was a sick man, right?"

" Are you asking whether Sergi was ill?"

" Was he?"

" He was very ill. And I know they hated each other, and like I say, I'm surprised they even dined. Excuse me, I have someone on call waiting." Jones heard a click but Fred came back on the line. " Do you want me to pick you up, *cutie?*"

Jones laughed. " No dear, I'll drive myself."

" Sorry," said Fred as he, too, chuckled. The line clicked again and Jones heard nothing for a few seconds. " Matthias, I have to pick up my wife."

" All right. Sure, I'll talk to you later."

Jones drove off campus and was actually near Fred's development off the Route 32. Unlike the town, the highway through the Devonshire Hills was sanded and salted, but Jones kept the jeep in second gear up the incline. He passed high snow banks at the development entrance. A few seconds later, in his rear view mirror, he saw Fred's van, still minus a headlight, stop at the corner of the street. Jones shook his head as he thought of Bucky bashing the light with the sledgehammer. As Fred's taillights disappeared toward Hamilton, Jones checked highway, just in case Bucky had decided to follow him to St. Barts.

4

The lights of Prince William spread over the sloping basin to the ocean. Again he pictured Povich collapsing under his telescope, and with Clayton's office awaiting lab results, he contemplated the possibility of murder.

Obviously Povitch was not shot, stabbed, or beaten to death. The doctor had avoided the spiral staircase and had taken the elevator. For a man of his age and recent poor medical history, even climbing the steep stairs would be an arduous task. What if something was in his blood? Perhaps, he had not taken his medications or he might have taken too much medication. He checked his rear view mirror. The road back to Hamilton was clear. He flipped on the college radio station as the dry heat flowed from the dash vents. More snow had fallen on this side of the hills. What if someone poisoned Povitch?

" You've been involved in too many murder cases, Jones." The college disc jockey was preparing the local news. " Guy was sixty-two years old. He had a history of heart problems. He almost died last year."

" Good evening. I'm Larry Resnick and this is the local news." Resnick was a freshman football player with little athletic talent. " Still topping the news this evening is the sudden death of Dr. Sergi Povitch, who died at the Hamilton College Observatory Tuesday evening. Dr. Povitch suffered an apparent heart attack while making observations at the observatory with students, Professor Fred Dempsey and Coach Matthias Jones." Jones winced at the sound of his name in the report. " Dr. Dempsey had this comment."

A poorly recorded audio recording of Fred crackled over the speakers. Students chatting and laughing threatened to drown out what he had to say. " Of course, we are saddened not only in the Astronomy Department, but Dr. Povitch's death will reverberate off campus and in the astronomical community where his research was greatly respected."

" Do you hope to carry on the Doctor's research?" asked another student reporter.

" I certainly will carry on Sergi's research. Yes, that is very important."

Jones looked at the radio. " Cepheid Variables."

" We worked closely in studying Cepheid Variables."

The highway leveled out but was not as well sanded. He downshifted the jeep and moved over a compacted layer of snow and ice.

" He will surely be missed," added Fred.

Resnick's clearer voice came back on the air. " Dr. Povitch was chairman of the Astronomy Department, a chair he held for the past eighteen years. Funeral arrangements are incomplete at this time..."

" Sure, Clayton is still got his body on the table!"

" In other college news, Hamilton College President Nigel Kent continues meeting with student leaders at the Hamilton College auditorium. Students have voiced concern with the added fees due to athletic budget increases. Coach Matthias Jones has been unavailable for comment on the increased student fees."

" Nobody asked me!" Jones twisted the dial to a jazz concert. He picked up his cell phone and dialed the Medical Examiner's office. The road ahead was not plowed very well and he slowed as the line rang.

Hal's raspy voice filled the crackled transmission. " Examiner's Office."

" Hal, this is Matthias. I've been thinking about this Povitch thing. Listen, did the lab find something in his bloodstream?"

" Clayton has now requested.... I can't comment on this."

" Come on, Hal," said Jones, slowing for the short cut to Prince William, but the car skidded and spun in a circle across the road. " Stupid thing."

" You don't have to get personal."

" Hal, you don't understand."

The line clicked off and Jones's jeep was pointed across the road. He turned the wheel and started toward Prince William. The snow covered road widened as more houses appeared ahead. His thoughts focused on Father Gallagher. It seemed Gallagher's argument with Povitch probably did not induce the heart attack at the observatory. Jones knew he was making a big leap assuming Povitch's death was murder. Maybe Gallagher could recount Povitch's last hours. Something the doctor said or if he failed to take medication might illuminate the circumstances of his death. " Jones, you don't know Povitch was murdered."

The jazz concert continued as Jones turned onto a sanded city street. St. Barts and the rectory were only two blocks away. The snow banks, tainted with dirt were at least a foot higher in Prince William. Through the trees ahead, near the traffic light, the stone spires of St. Barts rose into sky glow. He put on his blinker, downshifted and turned into the parking lot between the church and the rectory's snow coated, salmon clapboards.

Jones stepped outside and locked his door. The air bit his ears and he moved up his parka hood. He gazed around the empty plowed lot, lit by a single white halogen bulb on a pole above the blue metal dumpster. The rectory itself was

dark except for the yellow blaze from lamps in the first floor's front rooms. Jones trekked across the compacted snow and up shoveled walk. Povitch had probably taken this course on Tuesday night. What was going through the doctor's mind as the trudged up from his BMW? Had he taken medication for his heart condition or a combination of other pills for assorted problems? Jones climbed the icy wooden porch stairs and stepped up to the storm door. He pushed the bell and a cascade of melodies sounded inside. He bounced up and down, trying to keep warm as he waited in the cold.

5

The inner frosted glass door opened and the orange haired Gallagher, wearing a blue sweater and jeans, pushed open the storm door. His large teeth shone through a continuous smile, but his circles ringed his blue eyes.

" Matthias, doing a little jig? Perhaps you should consider the parish talent show in April."

" Very, funny, Father. Are you going to let me inside or should I keep dancing?"

" I haven't decided yet." His eyes were bloodshot and he motioned Jones forward in one sweeping gesture.

Jones stomped his sneakers on the foyer mat as Gallagher closed the door. " I know how meticulous you are about your floors. I'll remove my sneakers, Father."

" No, no. Come in, Matthias," he said, taking Jones' arm, and led him into the front parlor. Jones did not need to see the clear bottle of gin, half full, the ice cube bucket, and the empty glass on the side table to realize Gallagher had consumed more than his usual bedtime Martini.

" Jim, how much have you had to drink?"

He produced a loud barroom laugh. " Probably not enough."

" No, you've done justice to that gin."

Gallagher grabbed the remote to his large TV. " The game's on from the coast. Maybe you can take notes... Hint. Hint."

Jones shook his head as Gallagher fell into his leather recliner and pushed the remote. The TV blasted across the room. Jones had to raise his voice. " Jim, I didn't come here to watch the game."

" Movie perhaps? They're running The Thornbirds complete."

" Jim, you're drunk. I've never seen you drunk."

Gallagher's face flattened and he nodded. He shut off the TV and the room was silent. " Yeah, I'm drunk. You bet I'm drunk."

Jones opened his mouth to speak but was unsure what he would say.

" Listen, let me get you some coffee. Is your housekeeper here?"

" I sent her home."

" I can see why." Jones wandered through the dining room and into the kitchen. He opened the old white refrigerator and spotted the gold foil bag, Gallagher's special coffee blend, on the top shelf. Jones called back through the crowd noise on the parlor TV. " I'm making the coffee, Jim."

" Make it strong."

Jones held the cold bag in his hands. " Oh, it will be black and potent." He moved over to the white coffee maker on the center island and opened the center drawer. Quickly, pulled out a spoon, popped the lid and scooped out several spoonfuls of the rich Colombian coffee into the filter. He filled the carafe and yelled back to Gallagher as he poured the water.

" Tell me what happened last Tuesday with Povitch."

His voice was muffled between the rooms. " What's to tell?"

Jones pushed the coffee maker button, the red light popped on, and he walked back through the dining room. " The man is dead. You had supper with him. Was he sick at supper?"

A clump of Gallagher's orange hair was visible in the recliner. " He was in fine spirits. When he arrived."

" And..." Jones walked around the recliner and Gallagher, his face somber, looked up.

" The subject came up as we sat down." Jones had never seen his friend so bleak. " The Elton Foundation money. I dismissed it, but he started lecturing me about the allocation to the telescope and the observatory. Do you know how much money I had to personally raise to refurbish St. Barts because of him? Elton was a parishioner in the 1930's."

" Oh, when you first took over here."

Gallagher's faced remained flat and his lips curled over his teeth.

" I can tell you this because you're my friend, Matthias. I hated him. I'm not supposed to hate people. The man listened to that... that woman. Money grabber."

" What woman?"

" The art professor, McIntire. Elsie McIntire. She's the one who made him to go after the money. I'm convinced of it. Povitch might as well have stolen it. And he used a smear campaign against me with the Elton family."

Jones sat on the arm of the side chair. " I wasn't aware of that."

" They kept it hush within the foundation. Povitch accused me of using money for my own personal expenses. It got back to the Bishop. There was a thorough audit. They found nothing improper of course. But the money was long gone to that telescope of his."

" Povitch never seemed so vindictive to me. I didn't know him that well but he seemed congenial enough. Very sure of himself. Projected authority. He even helped one of my players with a drug problem."

" That's nice." Gallagher shook his head and kept his eyes closed for at least half a minute. " I am sure Elsie McIntire was his cohort. She was his companion because of

his money anyway. He had money from the sale of his college texts and his first wife left money. I hated the man. I haven't acted properly."

" Why invite him to dinner? This Elton thing happened over a year ago before Povitch got sick.

" I have to be held accountable for my actions."

" What happened at dinner? An argument about the money?" asked Jones. He stood and walked around the recliner. " I'm trying to help you, Jim. You're my friend."

" I blew up. I told him exactly what I thought of him as an individual and I really laid into his hoity toity art professor girlfriend. She used him. She used him for the money and I told him that. I made remarks about his age and how she was younger. Why would she bother with him?"

" So he left?"

" No, he became enraged and started in again about me absconding with parish funds. I was livid. It went on for ten minutes. You know I was a fighter in college, Matthias. I was this close..." Gallagher held his index finger over his thumb.

" To smacking him. And you know what?"

" What?"

Gallagher pushed himself out of the recliner. He stood a full two inches higher than Jones. " I have to be accountable for his death and I gloated when I heard the news."

Jones looked into his moist eyes. " Jim, we all are human. We can't sit back like robots when somebody accuses us of things we didn't do."

Gallagher closed his eyes again. Then he walked to the front window. The fresh coffee aroma meandered into the parlor. He pulled back the curtain and the old Venetian blinds. " My God, what have I done?"

" Listen, let me get the coffee." Jones left him at the window and hurried across the dining room. He pushed open the swinging white door to the kitchen. Gallagher's attitude bothered him as he removed two mugs from the cupboard and poured the steaming coffee. He set the carafe back on the hot plate and as he turned toward the refrigerator, his cell phone sounded. Fumbling, he scooped it from his pocket. " Jones."

" Matthias, this is Clayton."

" Clayton good. What's this about a Professor McIntire trying to hold up Dr. Povitch's autopsy?"

" Yes, that is true."

" Why?"

" She said she didn't want him cut up."

" Oh."

" There's a bigger problem here. I just got off the phone with Herbert Lane about the lab results."

Jones leaned against the refrigerator. He pictured Lane's huge frame and fluffy toupee. " Why is our illustrious District Attorney involved? What happened?"

" Povitch had lettuce, potatoes, pork... some milk and-"

" Clayton, what happened?"

" Toxicology's report states that Dr. Povitch had massive quantities of Labetalol Hydrochloride in his stomach. It's a drug used in the treatment of hypertension but it can induce a heart attack in person with heart disease. I have spoken with Dr. Pierre Holland, Povitch's cardiologist in Boston. Holland had not prescribed Labetalol Hydrochloride. I think Povitch was poisoned and his heart gave out. "

Jones slowly turned toward the single white door separating Gallagher's dining room from the kitchen. He tried to fight the obvious. Povitch ate his dinner at the table behind that door. The two men's long-standing hatred and the argument between them last Tuesday evening was well documented. " I don't understand how that drug would be in his body."

" Neither does the District Attorney's office. You were with Povitch when he died. As well as a Professor Fred Dempsey... Duff Davis, a student. And some security guy."

" Bucky Driscoll," said Jones, wincing.

" I'm sure George Strickland will be calling you. The word I have is Povitch had dinner with Jim Gallagher of St.

Barts. It makes perfect sense that Povitch would suffer a heart attack. Dinner was at six-thirty. He died at eight twelve after feeling dizzy and having shortness of breath."

" Exactly what a person having a heart attack would experience. Somebody got him." Jones' stomach swirled with emotion and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

" Father Gallagher has some explaining to do, but it's in the hands of police now."

" Clayton, let me ask you something. If this autopsy was stopped... would Dr. Povitch's death have looked like a heart attack?"

" You mean if we hadn't sent the fluid to the lab?"

" Yeah."

" On the surface it does look like a heart attack. I know where you're headed Matthias. I'm sure Professor McIntire's reluctance about the autopsy was genuine. "

Jones pursed his lips. In a short time either the Prince William police or George Strickland would arrive at Gallagher's front door. " I appreciate your calling me, Clayton."

" Anytime."

He set down the phone. Gallagher's hatred of Povitch was bizarre, but atypical. Gallagher, although he had a quick temper, never let things fester. Any confrontation was usually smoothed over within a few minutes. But the Povitch

feud had gone on for years. Jones opened the refrigerator and poured milk into the coffee cups. Gallagher losing his temper, and at the most extreme, committing an act of passion, put him within the realm of suspects, but constructing a premeditated scenario was difficult. He scooped out sugar from the canister and let it sift into his cup. Gallagher took his coffee unsweetened.

Jones held both hot coffee cups and moved into the dining room. He stopped next to the cherry wood table and scanned each of the high-back upholstered chairs. Povitch had sat at this table only three days ago. Jones shook his head. Gallagher would not poison Povitch. It was that simple. " I have the coffee, Jim."

Gallagher stood beyond the opening between the dining room and parlor. " About time I sobered up, what do you think?" Jones half grinned and moved forward with the two cups. " Did I hear your cell phone?"

Jones approached the doorway and entered the parlor. He handed the unsweetened coffee to Gallagher. " Jim, I think we'd better talk." Gallagher's face was frozen like Jones' players on the bench when time was running out and they were about to lose the game. Jones held his own coffee in his hands but did not drink it. His eyes locked with Gallagher. " That was Clayton Morris on the phone."

Gallagher lifted the cup to his lips and squinted. He spoke in a clear, concise tone. "What did he say?"

Jones set his cup on the end table and spoke through gritted teeth.

"Damn it, Father, what's going on here?"

Gallagher had the face of an experienced poker player. His brow gradually creased but he did not panic. "I don't know, but I'm beginning to think it has something to do with me, doesn't it?"

"You bet it does...Dr. Povitch's stomach was filled with Labetalol Hydrochloride, a hypertensive drug, potentially fatal to people with heart disease."

Gallagher raised his brows and savored the coffee as if it were a fine wine. "And his last meal was right here at the rectory. Well... Well."

"Excuse my arrogance, Jim, but this is rather incriminating? He wasn't prescribed the drug. Who prepared the meal?"

Gallagher thought and gripped the cup. He raised it to his lips again. "I prepared the meal."

"What about your cook?"

"I cooked the meal." He drank the coffee and then ran his knuckles along his upper lip. "Are you sure he didn't just have a heart attack?"

Jones marveled at his matter of fact attitude. " I think you'd better go over this before the police get here."

" Sure." Gallagher smiled and returned to the recliner, crossed his legs and watched the game without the sound.

Jones threw his hands into the air and started pacing. " I can't believe how calm you are!"

" I'm just trying to sort this out."

" Sort it out? The guy was poisoned! He ate at your table, you two had another argument, he leaves for the observatory and then he collapses by the telescope." Jones exhaled and raised his hand to his forehead as he paced.

" Okay, let's start from the beginning. When did you first invite Povitch to dinner."

" Two weeks ago."

" Why?"

Gallagher raised his voice. " For all the right reasons. I thought all this animosity was something I could not allow in my life."

" Then you wanted to smooth things over."

" Exactly." Gallagher puffed his cheeks and exhaled. Then he drank some more coffee. He was remarkably composed. " I placed a call to his office. He called me back that evening."

Jones grabbed the pad and pen next to the phone. " That was when?"

" Two weeks ago Friday."

Jones moved closer and hovered over the recliner. He studied Gallagher's straight nosed profile as he watched the game. What bothered Jones the most was Gallagher's lackadaisical attitude about Povitch's death. It was almost as if he welcomed the doctor's demise. " Jim, please don't be so calm."

" What do you want me to do, start pounding the walls?"

" Well, yeah. The cops are going to be all over this place real soon."

Gallagher nodded and leaned back in the recliner. " I suppose you're right."

" So, he personally said he would accept the invitation?"

" He hesitated. Really thought about it. I think he didn't like having our feud continue either. He said it was time we talked. I told him I would personally prepare dinner. I thought that would be a noble gesture."

" Strickland is going to ask why your housekeeper didn't make the meal."

" Purely altruistic, I assure you. I wanted to make the man's meal. You know I like to cook."

Jones wrote his answer on the pad but quickly looked up. " Who else was around here?"

" No one. I sent my housekeeper home around two. Right after her soap opera. She'll verify that. Then I began

preparation of the meal. Very simple meal. I put in a pork roast with the potatoes. You heat the oven to four fifty and-

" But she went home." Jones sat on the edge of the chair and rubbed his eyes. " Great, nobody else here. Only Father Gallagher preparing the meal personally. The guy had the drug in his stomach. Everybody knew about his heart problems. That drug directly impacted people with heart problems. He was poisoned, Father."

" I didn't poison him."

Jones rolled his eyes and began pacing again. " Somebody got in here and put Labetalol Hydrochloride into Povitch's food."

Gallagher aimed the remote and turned up the sound on the TV.

" What are you doing?"

" Watching the game." He moved his hands around the end table.

" Where is my watch? What time is it?"

" Nine fifteen... You need to come up with a story."

" Celtics are rebuilding this year. Not like the old days. Sam Jones, Russell, and Heinson." He looked up at Jones and smiled. " Matthias, I'm glad you came over. I feel better."

" Feel better?" asked Jones, staggering back to the arm of the other chair. He watched the teams fight for the rebound. " How can you feel better?"

" I know the argument didn't precipitate his heart attack."

" Well, yeah, but if the guy was poisoned with food you prepared. Jim, how could he have been poisoned?"

Gallagher pointed at the set. " Good shot." Then he leaned back in the chair. " You know, I've been thinking about it. How can they say for sure that drug was in the food? I didn't get sick. They can't prove I did anything."

Jones' head snapped to the right. It was almost as if Gallagher were gloating over the cleverness of Povitch's death. " You haven't got a heart condition. It wouldn't affect you. This is all very clever!" Jones stroked his chin.

" There had to be somebody here."

" Possible. They're up by two. Come on, Matthias, you like the Celtics."

" Yeah, I like the Celtics. How can you be so calm?"

" I have nothing to fear."

Jones walked to the window and stared at the street lamps lighting the plowed drifts. He glanced at Gallagher and for a moment wondered if his friend really did do it. Having nothing to fear was a great distance from overwhelming guilt. Maybe Gallagher had some foolproof way of getting the drug

into Povitch's bloodstream. Yet, Povitch left the rectory in a huff some time after six-thirty; long enough for the drug to be in his system. Unless Povitch popped the pill himself, the poison had to be in the food. Under the pretense of an argument between to enemies, a heart attack would be the logical conclusion. Jones caught Gallagher's eye. " Listen, Jim..."

" Do you think I would kill Povitch? Come on. I was livid at the man and I didn't like him. Give me more credit, will you?"

At the window Jones scanned the snow banks under the street lights. " I give whomever killed this man a lot of credit. How did the drug get in his body?"

Gallagher shut off the game. He pulled the side lever raising his feet on the recliner. " The only time someone could have got in here was when I went to the supermarket to get the lettuce."

" Supermarket?" Jones looked away from the snowdrifts. " When was that?"

" After four. I was back by four thirty. The roast was in the oven. I drove to Rizzo's."

" Why wait until the last minute to get the lettuce?"

Gallagher lifted his index finger. " Povitch's secretary called and apologized for not calling earlier. She said the doctor requested his lettuce because of his diet. Well, I didn't

want to upset the apple cart. After all, I'm trying to make peace with the guy. Rizzo's is five minutes down the road. I simply drove down and got some lettuce."

Jones scanned the room. The red motion detector lights flashed within a white box, located in the corner between the gold wallpaper border and the white plastered ceiling. " Did you put on the alarm when you left for Rizzo's?"

" I... I don't recall." Gallagher stroked his chin. " I doubt it. I was so concerned about getting back and getting everything ready. The roast with the potatoes was in the oven. I hadn't started the beans. And if I recall, I hadn't mixed my cinnamon applesauce. I don't know if I set the alarm."

" Well, pardon the pun, but that leaves the door wide open, Father. Someone could have come in here and put the drug into the food."

Gallagher's face grew serious again. " I don't think I set that alarm. My God, someone *could have* walked right in."

" But you're not sure."

" No."

Jones pressed his lips and inhaled. He looked at his old friend with an unusual and uncomfortable scrutiny and spoke in a lower voice. " The alarm company will have a record."

" I suppose they will."

" Jim, I don't care how innocent you are." He walked up to his friend and leaned on the recliner arm. Gallagher folded his hands and stared at the wall. " This thing does not look good for you. Herbert Lane will have a field day. He loves the gory facts. And the plain fact is that Povitch ate food from your table, laced with a drug designed to kill him."

" No, Matthias, it doesn't look good at all."