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The Fletchers were the most influential family in southern of New Hampshire, yet no one answered the estate phone. Matthias Jones placed his cell phone back in his parka pocket and looked back at the pep rally. Lark was on stage too long. The townspeople listened to another recap of his uneventful coaching career at Hamilton College. Jones shook his head. As the present football coach he wanted to give his own speech and then join Nigel Kent at the Fletcher estate for drinks with Hamilton Fletcher. The unanswered phone bothered Jones. He had spoken earlier with Hamilton in his study and promised to arrive at the estate before nine-thirty. It was already nine-fifteen and Lark's rambling antidotes grated on his nerves.

The early September evening charged his spirit. He faced the common and then panned to Nigel, sitting in one of the platform chairs. The college president was dressed more like a business executive in his navy blue Brooks Brothers suit. Nigel served as the Fletchers' mouthpiece at the college and a conduit for the family's

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activities in town. He had hired Jones, expressing his private elation about Lark reaching retirement age.

Nigel shrugged his shoulders as Lark laughed at another one of his own lame jokes. Jones checked his watch, inched over to Nigel and whispered into his friend's ear. " He's been up there for twenty-three minutes. We can't keep Hamilton Fletcher waiting because of Lark."

" Oh, let him go on. Everyone loves hearing Lark reminisce. I'll speak to Hamilton."

" Nigel, if I had a buck for every time I've heard the story of Brownie Plympton intercepting that pass in 1947..."

" Hopefully, he won't bring up the Snookie Mackenzie story. "

" Amen to that. "

Nigel smiled and nodded. " I see you finally got a hair cut."

Jones rolled his eyes. As summer ended, he had looked like a beach bum. At least he had taken Nigel's not so subtle advice and had his light brown hair trimmed at Vinnie's Barber Shop. But in the barbershop mirror he had seen the tension in his deep-set brown eyes. Vacations never helped him relax and the first game of the season made him even more anxious. " Oh, come on, Lark."

" Matthias, honestly, I think this Prouty game has you all upset."

Jones turned away from Lark. Nigel's dark eyes were magnified behind his silver framed glasses. " Me, upset?" Then he smiled.

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The crowd cheered as Nigel stood and held Jones' shoulder.
" He's all done."

" Truer words were never spoken and who says prayers aren't answered?"

Lonnie Hannigan quickly introduced Jones. As he strutted across the platform the swell of applause shook the common. Lark, dressed in a white letterman's sweater, shook his hand, and leaned over. " Good luck, old boy. Tell them to win this one for The Lark."

Jones nodded and grinned. Lonnie shook his hand. " Go get em, Coach."

In the warm night air he faced the crowd, thanked all the appropriate people and raised his hand into the air. " What do you say we win this one for the Lark?"

Lark looked out for approval, and after a fearful lull the cheering began again. When they settled down, Jones went on with his locker room pep talk, modified for public consumption. He could sense he had the crowd with him. For ten minutes he ranted about his team, the town, and the Fletchers.

" My boys are ready for this game. I can't tell you it will be an easy game. But these boys know how to hit and hit hard. They've demonstrated that in the preseason and all week. And we are going to hit Prouty hard!"

That brought the crowd into a frenzy. As he panned the common, past his own white colonial with the white picket fence, he knew how much he loved living in this little New England

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town. It was not just the architecture or the history, but the people, knit together by time, and living together with all their human foibles.

" This town has pride. And my boys have pride. Tomorrow we face a very good Prouty team. I won't deny that, but these boys share the long history of Hamilton College. With that history and pride, we will *demolish* Prouty tomorrow!"

He raised his voice, finishing his talk and as he left the platform they were wild. Tom McGill walked with his petite wife, Susan. McGill moved his gray mustache around in a circle. " Was that, *demolish*? "

" The quote is correct. And I expect good coverage of the game tomorrow, Tommy."

" Depends."

" On what?"

" Inside information. You're going to the Fletchers tonight with Nigel..."

" How did you know what?" asked Jones.

" Lark."

" I don't even want to know how Lark found out."

McGill leaned closer. " I want to look into this problem up there on Fletcher hill. Thurmond Childs keeps telling me Hamilton Fletcher swindled him out of land."

" Thurmond took the law into his own hands," said Susan.

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McGill raised his bushy, gray brows. " Burning the edge of the Fletcher property was not the smartest thing Thurmond could have done."

Jones nodded. " He's a mad man. I heard Hamilton Fletcher used his high powered lawyer to take a good chunk of the Childs land."

" Then old man Childs had the heart attack and Thurmond snapped when he died."

" Poor man," said Susan.

Jones started through the crowd and toward Nigel, but called back to McGill. " Well, I'm sure we'll read it in The Enterprise."

" You will if you get me the inside track when you talk to Hamilton Fletcher."

" You talk to him. This is a social occasion."

" See what you can do, okay?"

" Okay."

" By the way, good speech, Coach." McGill smiled and walked down the sidewalk arm and arm with his wife.

" Thanks. "

Nigel spoke with several of the college's professors. They congratulated Jones as he approached and wished him good luck in the game tomorrow. Nigel pointed at Jones' jeep, parked across the common. " Are you ready, Matthias?"

Jones looked at his watch and took out his cell phone. He dialed the Fletcher estate again.

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" Hello, " answered a low pitched male voice.

" Who is this? " asked Jones. " Is this Hawlings? " The line snapped dead. " What the heck is going on out there? "

" Try again, Matthias. Maybe you dialed the wrong number."

Jones checked the number on the screen and pushed the **SEND** button. " That's weird. You'd think Ham, Hawlings, or one of the servants would at least be there. Something is wrong up there."

" I say let us be on our way."

The line rang as Jones nodded as a wind gust disrupted Nigel's neatly combed gray hair, but he quickly rearranged it as they crossed the grass. Again, no one answered the phone. They stepped off the common and headed to Jones' jeep.

About fifty yards in front of the jeep Lark lingered at the door of his long beige Buick. " Give it your best, Matthias!"

Jones smiled. He gave Lark the thumbs up sign and pushed the Fletcher's number on his cell phone one more time. Lark opened the door and got inside. He started the car, producing a copious mixture of obnoxious fumes. When they reached the sidewalk, Jones pinched his nose and Nigel grinned. He could always get the prim and proper college president to laugh.

" Isn't that car a little old?" asked Jones as the line rang.

" So is Lark."

" Didn't you people pay him when he coached at Hamilton?"

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Nigel grinned. " Given his record, he probably owes the school money. I know Lark does not like to part with the dollar."

As Jones ended the call and opened the jeep door, Lark's taillights moved backward, toward his jeep. Quickly, Jones yanked Nigel into the street. The oversized Buick raced in reverse and like a fanning machine gun, splintered every picket on Jones' fence. Lark came to a sudden stop diagonally across the front lawn and under the dining room window.

Jones ran ahead of Nigel and leaped over the fallen fence to Lark's open window. " Lark, are you all right?"

His glasses hung cockeyed off his ear. " What happened, old boy?"

" You must have shifted in reverse," said Nigel.

Jones opened the car door, fixed Lark's glasses and helped him onto the front lawn. As they brought him up the brick walk, Jones glanced back at the demolished fence and winced as he opened his front door. He flipped on the foyer light and brought Lark into the kitchen. Nigel steadied Lark as Jones filled a glass with cold tap water. He handed the glass to Lark and visually checked for any apparent injuries.

" Lark, maybe I should bring you over to Prince William. To the Emergency Room."

" I'm going to pay you in full, Matthias."

" Don't worry about that. The fence was old. I had been planning to fix it anyway."

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" No, no," he said, fumbling in his pants pocket. " I have a check in my wallet."

" Not necessary."

Lark insisted. Nigel smiled as Lark removed a crumpled check from his wallet. He took a ballpoint pen from the counter and filled out the check. Jones looked at his wall phone, wondering whether he should call the Fletcher Estate again. He punched in the estate number as Lark handed the check to Jones and stood.

" I would think that this would cover the damage."

" Six dollars and thirty-nine cents," said Jones, slowly as the line rang. " Well, that's awful nice of you."

Nigel covered his mouth, turned away and tried not to laugh.

" Not at all. A man has to live up to his debts incurred."

Jones coughed to mask his laugh as someone answered.

" Fletcher es.. Fletcher estate. "

" Hawlings, is that you? This is Matthias Jones."

" Oh, Mr. Jones. It's tragic. Just tragic. He's... gone." Somebody called out in the background and Hawlings hung up the phone.

" Hawlings, what's happened? " As Lark sipped the water and spoke with Nigel at the counter. Jones dialed the estate again, but the line was busy. " Something's really wrong over there! "

" What was that, Matthias? " asked Nigel.

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" Come on, Lark. I'll drive you home. " He looked into Nigel's dark eyes. " Come on, let's hurry. "

2

Lights blazed through the trees atop the hill. Jones shifted the jeep into second gear up the circular front drive. At the top of the hill, the brick mansion's room lights, lampposts and even the auxiliary spotlights lit the grounds. Two white and blue Hamilton cruisers were parked adjacent to the portico's white pillars. Jones spun the jeep around the drive and parked near the open garage door.

" What the hell is going on?"

Once out the jeep door, he leaped into the driveway. Then he jogged ahead of Nigel up the brick stairs and through the open the front door. Wendell Harris held a gun at the doorway. " Matthias, you should stay back. "

" Come on, Wendell... "

Jones jaunted by Wendell and down the hall. He heard Ham Fletcher's voice quiver from inside his father's study, across from the drawing room. " *I don't know who would want to do this!*"

Jones rounded the heavy walnut doors. George Strickland, in his jeans and gray hooded sweatshirt, escorted Ham Fletcher from the study. Ham, his face red and tear lined, staggered to the hall sofa. Hawlings, in his blue bathrobe, stood motionless to the side.

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Hamilton Fletcher was face down on his desk, in front of a dark computer screen. A little round rear skull wound within his silky white hair was crusted with blood, trailing down his neck and saturating his white shirt.

Nigel looked in from the hall. " Oh dear God!"

" Ham..." Jones took two giant steps.

Ham looked up from the hall sofa. " He's dead, Matthias! My father has been murdered!"

" Don't be wandering around the room, Matthias, " said Strickland.

Jones again looked at the old man's body plopped on the desk glass, the computer keyboard partially hidden under his chest. He wondered what Hamilton had on the computer monitor.

" My father didn't deserve this!"

" What happened?" asked Jones.

" Yes, what happened? " asked Strickland, raising his brows at Jones.

" My God, Dad... I was in Prince William."

" Why?" asked Jones.

" Matthias, will you let me ask the questions?" asked Strickland. He turned to Ham on the sofa. " Why were you in Prince William? "

" We... we had a problem at the plant."

" Problem?" asked Jones.

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" The alarm. Something tripped the alarm. I rushed over to Prince William. We searched-"

Strickland quickly jumped in. " We?"

" The police... We couldn't find anyone inside. The alarm company is..." Ham looked closed his eyes.

" It's all right, Ham. Take your time." Jones leaned around the doorway and traced the power cord from the computer across the rug, but the plug was pulled from the power surge box and lay half a foot away on the rug.

" I called Dad from my office. He was going to finish up his work and was looking forward to your arrival." Jones nodded and peered through the rear atrium doors, across the patio, and toward the pool near the carriage house.

" What time did you call your father?" asked Strickland.

" Eight-forty eight on my office clock." He buried his head in his hands again.

Jones looked at the distraught Nigel, sitting rigid in a hallway chair as Wendell moved down the corridor. He leaned toward Strickland. " George, Clayton Morris is on his way over from Prince William. "

Strickland nodded and turned to the butler. " Hawlings, what did you see?"

" Was Thurmond Childs around here? " asked Jones.

" Matthias, one thing at a time. Go ahead Hawlings. "

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" I did not see Mr. Childs tonight... After Ham's call from the plant, I asked Mr. Fletcher if there was anything else I could get him before I retired. He requested another cup of coffee. Then he said I could retire before you gentlemen arrived." Jones saw the empty cup on the desk inside the study. " I left for my quarters above the garage and ran my tub water."

" Did you see anyone?" asked Strickland.

Hawlings looked at Ham before he answered. " No, sir."

" I saw Alex Harmon," said Ham clearly.

" Who is Alex Harmon?" asked Jones.

" Harmon was part of the grounds keeping crew. My father fired him last week. He had a drug problem."

" Where was he?" asked Jones.

" Route 7. I drove onto Route 7 and I saw Harmon on his motorcycle... He was moving down the dirt road next to the stables."

" But not around the estate?"

" No, that's the last I saw of him. I headed through town and over to Prince William." Ham closed his eyes again.

" Wendell! "

" Yo, " said Wendell, peering around the corner.

" Get on the horn. We're looking for a guy named Alex Harmon. "

" Yo..."

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Jones did not dare not return to the study, but the yanked computer cord still perplexed him. " Ham, I'd like to know about that computer."

Strickland creased his brow. " Who else was here, Ham? "

" My sister arrived here from California late this afternoon."

" Where is she now?" asked Strickland.

" In the carriage house. She heard nothing up here. She was swimming in the pool when... when Dad was murdered. I can't believe this is happening."

Jones looked through the rear atrium doors and then to the long side windows; both possible points of entry. He had heard Ham had a sister on the West Coast.

Strickland spoke in a gentle voice. " Ham, let's get you to another area of the estate while we do our job. Nigel, if you would accompany Hawlings and Ham."

" Yes, of course. "

Ham nodded and stood. He moved with Nigel and Hawlings down the hall toward the foyer. Jones kept returning to the computer and wanted to see just what Hamilton was up to when he was murdered.

* * *

Jones peered out the parlor window. Strickland had cordoned the front yard with yellow plastic tape and Clayton Morris had

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parked his green medical examiner's station wagon under the pines near the garage.

" He's really dead, " said Nigel. " Having prominent man murdered puts the pressure on George. "

Jones nodded as Strickland's voice boomed back in the study.

" Where is Ham, Nigel?"

" He went out back with his sister."

Jones looked out the kitchen windows toward the illuminated pool. " I want to talk to her."

" What about this groundskeeper, Harmon?"

" Wendell called Ianelli from the state police."

Jones paced the kitchen. " I can't stand doing nothing. I'm going back to the study."

" Let them finish, Matthias." Jones's frustration grew as he headed across the kitchen and into the hall. " I'm going to find Ham."

Jones walked through the study doors. Tully and Wendell dusted for fingerprints along the books shelves as Strickland talked with the white haired Clayton Morris about the time of death. He jotted something on a piece of paper and the county medical examiner nodded.

" I started calling here at quarter past nine and kept trying," said Jones. " There was no answer."

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Strickland's pumpkin face compressed. " That's a narrow time frame. Twenty-two minutes from when Ham called here from the plant."

Jones stared at Hamilton's frozen body and then at the computer. He needed to know what was on the screen when Hamilton was shot.

" There has to be a recovered document. "

" We'll check that out later. "

Blood, mostly concentrated on Hamilton's shirt, had splattered onto his folded suit coat atop the leather chair, but mostly pooled on the desk glass and dripped into the deep blue rug below.

" One shot, Clayton?" asked Jones.

Clayton squinted his most blue eyes. " One shot. Close range from the rear."

Jones nodded once and looked through the open patio doors. Distant voices carried across the lawn from a brighter area out back. " What about the outside doors, George?"

" Atrium doors were locked at the time. So were the side windows."

Hawlings stepped forward. " Everything was locked. I locked everything, including the windows and the rear doors before I retired."

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" And no sign of forced entry," said Strickland. " Wendell and I have checked every entrance to the house. Even the garage. The last garage bay was open, but the kitchen door was locked."

A sweaty glaze covered Strickland's forehead. His thin brows tightened and his dark eyes darted around the room. Jones looked beyond the police chief, toward the pool in the distance. He wondered why Ham's sister was not in the house. " Why are the doors open now?"

" Ham opened the doors for Anna when she came running up after he found the body," said Strickland.

" He didn't tell me that." Wendell kept dusting on the bookshelves as he spoke.

" What does she say?" asked Jones.

" She was in the pool swimming," said Wendell.

" And she didn't hear a gunshot?" asked Jones.

" Apparently not. "

He looked outside again. " I find that a little much."

Strickland twisted his lips as Jones moved toward the door and almost stepped on the orange and white cat sprawled across the blue rug. He stood inside open the atrium doors. Beyond the patio, the lawn expanse swept down to the Olympic sized, well lit pool near the carriage house. No more than two hundred feet separated the patio and the pool.

Ham and Nigel spoke outside the brick carriage house, but he did not see Anna. Jones remained suspicious about her presence

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near the murder scene. Again, he turned toward Hamilton Fletcher's slouched body and then back to Strickland.

"What is this Anna doing back here anyway?"

"Something about money for a restaurant," said Strickland and he scribbled into his notebook.

Jones nodded. Two young men in green fatigues wheeled a gurney through the doorway. As Clayton directed them to remove the body, Jones felt a deep sadness. Hamilton Fletcher, patriarch of the town, everyone's benefactor, had seemed invincible, and now his carcass was being loaded on the coroner's gurney.

Jones turned away and put his hands on his hips. A woman with short dark hair, probably Anna, had just strolled out of the carriage house. "Where on West Coast does Anna live, George?"

"San Francisco," answered Wendell.

Strickland led him away from the atrium doors as the men rolled the gurney across the study floor and Clayton followed them outside. "I'll call you, George."

"Thanks, Clayton." Strickland looked at Jones. "Anna owns a restaurant with her husband. The old man never forgave her for marrying Tony Ritali. Thought he was beneath her. Made her keep her maiden name."

"And she's back for money? Well, well, well."

"So Ham told us. Don't jump to conclusions, Matthias."

The two orderlies disappeared into the hall with Hamilton's body. Jones walked over to the desk and stared at the blank

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computer monitor. Nigel appeared on the patio with Ham Fletcher. Anna Fletcher trailed behind, wearing a short terry cloth robe, half opened over her dark bikini.

Ham's battered face reflected the severity of the situation. He looked at his father's empty chair and his eyes filled. Jones moved toward him. " I'm sorry, Ham."

" My father had enemies but I don't think anyone wanted to see him *dead*."

" There's always someone out there that wants you dead," replied Jones.

The petite Anna, her dark hair trimmed closely, looked him over. She never bothered to tighten her terry cloth robe, revealing her shapely, well defined body, with enough cleavage to make him glance twice. He wondered why she had come back to Hamilton at this particular time.

" Ham, that alarm... Why would you answer it? Why not the manager or somebody else."

" The plant manager was on vacation and the company controller was out."

" What exactly was your father doing here tonight?" asked Jones.

Ham glanced toward the dark computer screen. " Going over dollars and cents like he always did. He and Malcolm Hayes, our controller, constantly monitor our companies. I handle sales but they actually balance it all."

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" Malcolm Hayes. Okay, was Hayes here tonight?"

" No, I haven't seen Malcolm for a few weeks. He hasn't been well. Caught something down in Mexico. Tonight was the first night he got out. He went with Travis Thayer to an award's dinner at the golf course."

Jones looked down again at the computer tower cord snaked across the rug. " The computer has been unplugged. George. Let me try something. Can I turn on this screen?"

Strickland looked at Wendell.

" No prints on that plug, George. I'm done with it. Go ahead."

" Pulling the plug probably wiped everything out," said Strickland.

Ham stepped forward. " No, it has a battery backup system."

Jones simply turned on the monitor. Without power from the socket, a blue screen with an array of black and red numbers, looked like a company readout. Strickland leaned over. " Incredible. The computer is unplugged."

Ham spoke in a low voice, rubbing his eyes. " Dad installed the battery back up in case of a power failure. He wouldn't lose anything on the screen."

Jones looked closer. On the bottom of the screen was a designation for the account.

Jersey Imports

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" Ham, what's Jersey Imports?"

Ham delayed answering. He looked at the screen and then at Jones. " Jersey is one of our subsidiaries. Imports... to wholesalers."

" Nothing to do with your paint company?"

" No... no..."

Jones looked down at the plug again. Someone turned off the monitor, yet the killer further found the need to pull the plug, but probably did not know about the battery back up. The readout and Jersey Imports remained in his thoughts.

Jones and Anna faced each other. " Anna, what did you see?"

" Not much."

" Where were you?"

" Swimming."

Jones was quickly annoyed with her short answers. " Why you were back here?"

" Mr. Jones, with all due respect. You aren't with the authorities. I don't have to talk to you and I resent your tone."

" Matthias is involved in this investigation, Anna," said Ham.
" He's had... experience. I want him on this case."

Jones's face tensed and with a half smile, looked at her as she tightened her robe. " Well, Anna?"

" I came back here to see my father."

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Ham shook his head from the desk. " She came back here to get more money for her husband's failing restaurant."

Anna did not seem happy Ham had openly divulged the information, but Jones did not want to push her. Anna scowled as he turned to Ham. " Ham, I want you to think about who might have killed your father. Anyone who might have killed your father. Because someone did kill him. What about this guy, Harmon?"

Jones listened to a description, everyone adding bits and pieces, about a young man in his mid twenties, part of the grounds-keeping staff for the last few months. Harmon had dirty blonde hair to his shoulders, brown eyes, and a reputation for smart answers. He drove a motorcycle and Ham had seen him in the area within an hour of Hamilton's murder. Wendell cleared his throat.

" Tully gave that guy a ticket around eight o'clock. He the guy was moving like a bat out of hell from Prince William. Alex Harmon. Colorado license."

" From Prince William?" asked Jones.

" Ain't no other place to come from when you're comin' over the hills," said Wendell.

" Well, can you people tell me whether Harmon was capable of this?" asked Strickland..

" We've run the license," said Wendell.. " There are prior arrests out of state. Drug charges. Assault and battery in Wyoming."

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" Nice guy," said Jones.

Ham slowly looked at Jones. " He was not the most reputable character, but then again."

Jones gazed at Anna. " What about you? "

" How would I know him?"

Again, Strickland assured them the state police had the Harmon information. Jones drew the conclusion like everyone else. Harmon may have tripped the alarm to get Ham out of the house. But Jones knew at this stage of the investigation, he could not draw any conclusions. He addressed his next question to everyone.

" Again, what about Thurmond Childs?"

" That wild man," said Ham. " He tried burning the woods near the new tennis courts! My father had legal right to that land."

Jones nodded in agreement. " That's what I'm saying. Everyone knows how upset Thurmond was. He blamed his father's heart attack on the loss of the land."

" You're right," said Ham. " But my father never caused any heart attack!"

Jones could see things were drifting and he had the important Prouty game tomorrow. Ham became increasingly fatigued at this late hour and no one in the room added anything else. " I'll talk to Thurmond tomorrow if that's all right, George. "

" Why even ask? Let's everyone get some rest. We'll think about this tomorrow. Again, I am so sorry."

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Ham stood, and with gritted teeth, walked up to Jones. It was the grizzly look of a man who wanted revenge. " Matthias, you and George have to find who killed my father. I don't need to hire any high priced gumshoe. I know what your capable of."

" I'll do my best. I will," said Jones.

Ham wandered toward the front of the study, but Jones noticed Anna, followed by the cat, walked briskly across the patio. He had no definitive evidence against her, but did not like her or her flippant answers. She descended the patio steps and started across the lawn toward the pool area.

Nigel held his arm briefly. " I'll be with Ham..."

" Okay, I just want to think about this for a few minutes."

He watched Hawlings, Ham, and Nigel disappear into the hallway. Strickland helped Wendell pick up the equipment and looked over to Jones. " Ianelli has Harmon's description. If he tries to leave the area-"

" Maybe it could be Harmon. But I don't know."

" How is Harmon related to that computer screen readout?" asked Strickland.

" Good question, Georgie."

" You staying?"

" Yeah. For a few minutes."

" You know the routine. Don't touch anything. I'll call you after the game."

Wendell, cases in hand, spoke from the doorway.

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" Thurmond smelled like he hadn't had a bath for a week."

" Well, I guess that's makes him a murderer," said Jones.

Strickland smiled and nudged Wendell. But Wendell was not laughing as they headed into the hall. Jones moved to the outside patio. The luminous pool was surrounded by darkness. Suddenly, the pools lights and the spotlights went out, and he saw Anna glance at him from the carriage house porch before she went inside. Anna's behavior that evening perplexed Jones. Something about her unnerved him, a feeling bordering between distrust and intrigue. He pursed his lips and shook his head as he studied the closed carriage house doors.

He checked the outside of the estate beginning with the slate patio tiles to the lofty pines behind the garage. The killer might have come this way. He took out his notepad. There were three points of entry to the Fletcher Estate; plus the windows. And everything was locked according to Hawlings. Someone either let the murderer in, possibly Fletcher himself, or the murderer had a key.

He returned inside, put his hands on his hips again and walked to the blood caked on the leather chair. The computer file unnerved him. but he sensed Ham's grief. He looked at the empty high back chair; Hamilton Fletcher's chair. The town would never be the same again without the old man's presence. In his anger, Jones wanted answers and he knew people in town would expect him to solve this case. The tiny crystal desk clock's late hour

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reminded him of his important game tomorrow. He would have to postpone his investigation.

3

Jones preferred to lose games by big margins. Losing the Prouty game by a single touchdown after a well-fought ground game, wound him up like a clock's mainspring and having Lark sympathize with losing only added to his frustration. At the end of the game Tom McGill agreed to travel out to Fletcher Hill to find answers. By the time McGill reached his house, Jones had taken to kicking things like the desk and wastebaskets.

" I think Thurmond is the key, Matthias. I've been following this nightmare. Bad thing for this town. Hamilton Fletcher is or was almost legend."

" Ah!" Jones had trouble stuffing leftovers back in the refrigerator.

" I need a larger fridge."

" You need to forget about that game. It's over. Prouty won and that's that."

Jones crunched a peanut butter sandwich in between the milk and a stack of plastic covered pizza slices. " There..." He looked over at McGill. " Hamilton Fletcher was a legend in this town. "

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" He was and he just didn't keel over and die. He was murdered. "

Jones grabbed his keys and headed for the front door. He walked ahead of McGill and took in the outside air. The common's granite posts and connecting black chains were steeped in sunlight, but his thoughts centered on finding Hamilton's killer.

" Since we're going to Fletcher Hill anyway, Tom. Let's talk to Thurmond Childs first. No doubt he's upset about this land thing. I would be too." Jones moved ahead down his brick walk. " I feel bad Hamilton is dead, but confidentially... He could be heavy handed with no remorse."

" Don't forget Hamilton's taking of that land contributed to the death of old man Childs. If anyone had a motive for the murder..."

" True."

McGill and Jones stepped over the fallen fence pickets.

" Too bad about your fence, Matthias," he said, chuckling.

" Don't get me going about the fence."

" I heard Lark paid for it."

" That's a good one. A real good one."

Jones turned one more time. If only he could lift the fence back into position. Lark had snapped every picket from the attaching supports. Jones now noticed tire tracks cut into his new lawn. He closed his eyes briefly and headed toward his red jeep.

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"What about Strickland? He should be along," said McGill as Jones started the engine.

He spun the jeep in a narrow circle and headed north back toward town." George is in Prince William trying to track down Alex Harmon. He said he'd call if he found Harmon."

"You think Harmon did it, don't you?"

Jersey Imports flashed into his mind. "I don't know. The guy I want to speak with is Malcolm Hayes, the controller of the company. If Fletcher was involved in such a big deal type of audit last night, then why wasn't Hayes with him?"

"You think the controller did it?"

"Tom, you're starting to sound like Lark and his theories every time I investigate something."

"That's a cheap shot."

"I stand by it," said Jones, grinning. "Lark is probably trying to track *me* down right now to tell me who solved the Fletcher murder."

"He's getting gas at Pudgy Wilson's when I was on the way over."

Jones looked to the left. Lark, dressed in a bright orange sport coat, stood next to the Buick with Pudgy. He used wide hand gestures, alternately adjusting his glasses as he probably told the fence story. Jones accelerated toward the railroad bridge. "Did he see me?"

"No, I don't think he did. I'll tell him you need his advice."

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" You do and they'll be holding me for murder."

* * *

Thurmond Childs owned the shack and buildings on the land about fifty feet from the Fletcher Estate entrance. Jones downshifted, stirring the dust, and brought the jeep up the wooded road. Portions of bushes and tree leaves had turned color with autumn approaching.

The shack, in a darkened thicket at least two hundred feet from Route 7, looked deserted. Its exterior sheathing was weathered, laden with mildew, and an aluminum roof capped the structure. Rusted cars spanned the decades. Tires and pieces of rotted lumber were strewn about the dirt and grass clumps and trash not on the ground lay in untied black plastic bags plopped on the porch and stairs.

Jones looked at his friend. " Nice place."

" Sometimes you get too judgmental."

" I'm investigating a murder. I have to be judgmental."

" Everyone has his or her own lifestyle."

" You got that right," said Jones and he shut off the jeep. He stepped into the yard. " I don't see his truck anywhere. He drives that 75' blue Dodge."

" Front door's open."

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Jones cupped his hands. " Thurmond! Thurmond, it's Matthias Jones!"

Jones walked up the wood worn stairs and stepped over the trash bags. Inside the ripped screen door a full cup of coffee in a blue tin mug, a half eaten plate of American chop suey, and a nibbled piece of hard bread were spread across the wood table..

" He sure got out of here in a hurry," said McGill.

Jones opened the screen door. The place reeked of garbage. Dishes were stacked in the sink and flies buzzed about the deluge. A stack of newspapers piled on a plastic parsons table under the wall phone got Jones' attention. As he thumbed through each paper, he saw Thurmond had circled with a red crayon, any reports about the Fletcher land grab.

" All your articles from the Enterprise, Tom."

McGill took out his reading glasses. " Some from Prince William, too."

Under the newspapers Jones' found the father's death certificate. Cardiac arrest caused his death just a month ago. Below, letters from Fletcher's attorney, Bernard Roth, from New York, stated neither Thurmond nor his father had any say in Fletcher's decision to claim land title to the edge of their property. New surveyor's reports had moved the boundary hundreds of feet to the south.

" Well, this is certainly a raw deal, I'll say that," said Jones.

" Basically, Hamilton screwed them."

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" Motive for murder?"

" I don't know. I only know that the whole Childs family was kind of odd. But I don't remember them plugging off their neighbors. What do you think?"

" I think it's possible he was pushed. Thurmond started that fire up on the disputed land. After old man Childs died. Then he was arrested. Who knows how much a man has to take before he cracks?"

Jones nodded as he peered into the bedroom. A shotgun leaned against a brass headboard. An unlikely murder weapon, a shotgun would have blown Hamilton Fletcher's head off. More old newspapers were stacked on a rose painted dresser and hunting magazines addressed to the Hamilton Rod and Gun Club behind the high school were left on the side table.

McGill raised his gray brows at Jones. " So, he knew how to use a gun."

" Doesn't make him a murderer."

" We'll have to come back again when he's here," said McGill.

" Oh, he's definitely around." He followed McGill back to the porch. Behind the jeep a trail cut through the dense wooded area up Fletcher Hill. Maybe Thurmond hid in the bushes. " We know you're here, Thurmond. We just want to talk to you. That's all."

" I love going out in the field. Reminds me of when I first started out, working the night beat in Boston."

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" I want a look at that disputed land. There's a trail next to that 57' Chevy."

McGill smiled. " A little trail hike to exorcise the Prouty loss?"

" Thanks a lot, Tom." Jones leaped onto the dirt. " I had forgotten we lost. Come on."

Jones passed the blue and white Chevy and stepped onto the well-trodden trail. The grade gradually increased and soon they hiked up a steeper, rockier area, laden with the late afternoon sunlight through the branches. Occasionally an autumn leaf would float to the forest floor. Ten minutes later, they scaled the first hill and the winded McGill stopped.

" Been a long time since the Boston beat, eh, Tommy?"

" Where the hell is this land anyway?"

" Let's keep moving. Remember, I have to exorcise the Prouty loss."

McGill remained twenty to thirty feet behind, depending on how Jones paced himself. He slowed and helped his friend across the slippery rocks of a fast moving stream. Once they had forded the water, McGill gazed up at a spruce lined ledge, hidden in the afternoon shadows.

" Matthias, what have you dragged me into here?"

" Me?"

" Well, I hope we're almost up there."

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The hill must have led to the Fletcher Estate. Jones was surprised that Hamilton Fletcher had not scooped up this bucolic land, too, but McGill reminded him Hamilton, never known as an outdoors man, spent his hours making money. The power of this New York lawyer concerned Jones. He had reworded and constructed a legal document, hired surveyors, and taken the Childs land.

McGill maneuvered surprising well on the rocks and they soon emerged in the afternoon light above. The brick walled Fletcher estate, clearly visible through the maples, dominated the second hill. McGill pointed to a long green chain link fence near a scorched area where the land sloped to the left. Jones could smell the charred debris and he tried to imagine Thurmond dumping gasoline or whatever he did before he lit the place on fire.

Bernard Roth had proscribed the fence as the new line of demarcation. Below, a stone facade building and the tennis courts, a vivid green and white lined area was sunken into a nook near the woods. Hamilton's huge study windows were positioned in the corner of the mansion.

" All this for tennis courts?" asked Jones.

" Hamilton was stubborn and used to getting what he wanted."

" He had the power."

Jones pushed back some of the smaller maples and gazed across the extensive lawn sloping behind the estate. Thurmond

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could have easily scaled the fence, sprinted across the lawn, and killed Hamilton Fletcher; except Hawlings had locked the doors. Hamilton would not have opened the door for a gun waving Thurmond and if Hamilton did open the door he would not simply sit at his desk and work on the computer while Thurmond lurked about trying to kill him. Either another entry point existed or Thurmond did not do it.

McGill and Jones paralleled the chain link fence behind the clubhouse. Jones casually talked about next week's game with Norwich as a bullet whizzed over his head and hit a pine tree about fifteen feet away. A rifle's crack echoed through the forest as they dove to the ground and more shots followed.

McGill looked up from front the forest floor. " Why is it I always get in trouble whenever I help you?"

" Save your complaints for later. " On his belly, Jones saw no one down the stony slope nor along the fence. " Let's just get out of here!"

They scrambled into the thicket, under cover and headed west from both the Fletcher estate and Thurmond's shack. Leaping like a hurdler, Jones brought McGill off the trail. He thought they had escaped, but more bullets cut through the trees and leaves behind them. Several times he moved back and hovered until the older McGill caught his breath. A short time later the shooting stopped.

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Jones, confident they were safe, tiptoed over the larger rocks upstream. But he still advised they head west and take no chances with the gunman. Evening shadows fell rapidly over the hills. They moved along the trail until the land leveled out and McGill, puffing, nearly tripped over a fallen tree. He had to push out his words. " What do you think of our friend now?"

" I'm not convinced Thurmond was shooting at us."

" What? Come on, Matthias... It's obvious." McGill paused and took in the forest air. " He clearly was hiding at the house."

" Doesn't mean he actually was firing at us." Jones peered back through the trees and looked for the railroad tracks back into town.

" Somebody doesn't want us looking into this. Damn you. You're getting a reputation."

" What do you mean?" asked Jones.

" You're making people nervous with your snooping into murders."

" Well, excuse me! Most people don't shoot just because they're nervous."

" Where are we? " asked McGill.

" I have no idea where we are. I hope we're near the tracks."

" Me, too. Use, your cellular."

" It's back in the car."

Once McGill breathed without coughing, they headed to a point where the stream meandered into a swamp. Jones looked

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back up the hill toward Thurmond's house, then trudged forward, his sneakers soaked in the water and muck. The sun had set and a cold chill moved across the area.

He thought it possible Thurmond, given his crazy nature, might have tried to scare or even kill them. Yet, Thurmond would not have drawn attention. Someone else had fired in the woods. The stars had slowly filled the sky when Jones stepped onto the railroad tracks. Soon, he and McGill navigated the railroad ties and gravel bed.

" At least we'll get back to town. I was having my doubts." McGill held his side. " God, I ache like hell."

Jones remembered McGill chiding him about the game. " It's good for you."

" Oh, right. Susan was asking me what harm could there be, doing a little snooping with Matthias. And I most poignantly reminded her how I was knocked unconscious on Cape Cod when we went looking for information on Webster Howard's killer. "

Jones squinted and saw lights down the darkened tracks ahead.

" We'll, chalk it up to experience, Tom. And this time you got through it unscathed."

" Oh, not unscathed. Conscious, but not unscathed."

* * *

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Fifteen minutes later cars pulled into the Colonial House parking lot as they walked toward the Main Street railroad bridge. They wandered into Dewars Lumber Yard between the tracks and the middle school. Jones moved at a faster clip to avoid any needling by Arnie Dewars. Ten minutes later, they were at the police station. Strickland's cruiser was parked diagonally to the building.

When they walked in, covered with mud and scratched, Strickland, talking on the phone, looked up from the rear desk and laughed. " Guess it was a tough game. "

" Very funny."

" We had some nut shooting a rifle at us up in the woods," said McGill.

Strickland raised his finger and finished the conversation. Jones looked at McGill and shook his head. Then Strickland stood, still smiling as he stared at Jones. " Someone was shooting a gun?"

Jones began the story, adding extra embellishment and emotion at appropriate places. Strickland fought a rising grin, but could not restrain himself when Jones described his sneakers in the swampy muck. " I thought I was going to lose my sneakers in that mud!"

" We used to play up at that swamp when we were kids. I remember Pudgy Wilson making a raft."

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" George, you're starting to sound like Lark. Never mind the stories. I'm telling you we were shot at!

" Yeah. You stick your nose into murder cases, then you get shot at."

" Well, I hope your day was as amusing, " said Jones as he looked down the hall toward the jail cells. " Did you get Alex Harmon?"

" Negative. I was with Kip Bosco all day. We-

Jones knew Bosco from other cases. He was one of those cops who drifted over the bounds of propriety, especially when he was working vice. " Kip Bosco, Prince William's finest. That was your first mistake."

" Dom Pacheco assigned him to me. Pacheco's the chief. Plus, Bosco knows every sleazy joint and low life hang out in Prince William."

" That's for sure."

" I may need you to speak with your buddy, Cocoa Stefani. He has connections on the street. I have a gut feeling that Harmon is over in Prince William."

" He probably left the area, " said Jones.

" Do you think Harmon did it, George?" asked McGill.

" The fact that he was in the area, at the horse stables across from Fletcher Hill at the time of the murder is pretty incriminating. Hamilton Fletcher humiliated Harmon by firing him. And from

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what Ham told me they deprived him of his month's check. Motive and proximity are enough for me."

" This whole thing is becoming more and more bizarre," said Jones.

" George, can you bring me up to Thurmond Childs' place. My jeep is still up there."

Strickland thought for a second and grinned. " You sure you dare to go up there?"

Jones took the cruiser keys from the desk hook. Strickland smiled and grabbed his clipboard. They followed McGill outside and a few minutes later they traveled north on Route 7. Strickland signaled for Thurmond's dirt drive through the woods. The cruiser's headlights shone through the foliage and Jones saw his jeep in the clearing ahead.

Strickland pulled alongside the jeep. He had stopped the jokes, drew his gun when he got outside and checked the jeep. Then moved into the house, calling Thurmond by name and he soon waved them over. McGill stayed in the cruiser, but Jones, looking for Thurmond in the bushes, scurried up the porch behind Strickland.

The chop suey was cleaned off the plate, the tin coffee cup empty, and bread crumbs covered the plastic table cloth. Strickland searched the house and declared Thurmond missing.

" Talk about incriminating," said Jones, his hands on his hips.
" Where the hell is he?"

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" I don't know. I would say this man is running scared."

" Yeah, but running scared from what?"