

1

Disaster has no excuses. Lark's new Outboard Special skimmed Hamilton Bay's velvet blue waters and was on a collision course with the drifting boat. Back at Hansen's Marina he should have accepted Captain Kendall's offer of piloting instruction. As the boat skipped over rougher water, Lark again gripped the jammed ship's wheel. On the lounge at mid deck, Flo, red kerchief flapping in the breeze, glanced up from her romance novel. He raised the binoculars and prayed she did not sense the impending doom. The old white and green boat, the only craft presently in Hamilton Bay, came into focus.

"There's no one piloting this boat!" screamed Flo from the chair.

She quickly steadied herself along the deck railing as Lark adjusted his captain's hat. "Not to worry, Snookems." He yanked the wheel one more time. "Just a little navigational glitch."

Flo covered her mouth. "The wheel is stuck!"

Lark flipped open the plywood supply chest and retrieved the bulky specification book. He thumbed through the pages, frantically trying to solve the problem. "Wheel, wheel. Must be under W. Or it could be under S for ship's wheel. Or maybe steering."

"Lark, do something!"

Lark dipped his glasses. He should have gotten new bifocals and not waited until somebody had a sale on glasses. "Let's see. Automatic Navigational Compensation: ANC. Dislodge ANC activation throttle and replace command with overdrive secondary protector... Hum."

Lark set the manual atop the storage bin near the railing and peered over the confusing controls. He pointed the binoculars through the salt sprayed glass shield. Nobody was on the deck of the green trimmed boat.

"What do you see, Lark?"

"The odds are we will miss it. We have to miss it."

"Miss what?" Flo stood on her tiptoes, but probably could not see the boat without the binoculars. Lark searched for the ANC throttle until he located an orange rectangular plastic piece stamped ANC. He pushed the button without a second thought. The ship's wheel now moved freely after a sudden snap. "You did it, Lark! You did it!"

"I thought we were dead ducks." Lark gripped the varnished wheel and prepared for a course change, but now the wheel, although unlocked, spun freely. "Whoops."

"Lark, the boat up ahead."

"Radio, radio, where's the radio?" As his boat bounced along, Lark stuck his head into the storage compartment, knocked his skull on the edge and his captain's hat fell off. Unable to find the radio, he again reached for the manual on the railing. His voice shook as he scooped up his hat. "The manual, it's gone! It must have fallen into the water!"

"Just steer back to shore!"

"Right-O."

He planted himself in front of the wheel again, adjusted his captain's hat and squeezed the smooth wood, but the wheel rotated like a spinning top. With his clenched fist he banged the ANC button, but nothing happened. "We're stuck!"

Flo looked through the glass shield. "Lark, there *is* another boat out there!"

The older boat he had only seen through the binoculars, was now only a few hundred yards away. He raised his thumb to align his position with the stray boat. " My God, we are going to crash..."

* * *

Jones inhaled the warm May air as Tom McGill scanned the bay waters with the field glasses. Three weeks away from his summer vacation at his Aunt Mae's farm in Indiana, he longed to shed tension accumulated from another year of coaching three sports at Hamilton College. Although the bay was only a few miles from the college, he already felt farther away. To his right Captain Kendall steered their rented boat past vessels moored along the channel. Back at the bridge, along the highway, a woman next to an off road vehicle stared at the bay.

" What the hell is he doing?" asked McGill.

Jones looked back to the Captain. " Bringing the boat to the dock."

" No, Lark."

Jones was so sleepy in the hot sun he did not want to open his eyes.

" Lark is enjoying his insurance claim after the hurricane last summer."

" Matthias, he's headed for that boat out there."

Jones' eyes opened and McGill's mix of brown and gray hair came into focus. McGill handed the field glasses to him. Lark's cruiser moved at a good clip, stirred the foamy waves and headed toward another boat. " He's going to hit that boat."

" It's the only boat on the bay."

Jones gave him the field glasses and ran down the pressure treated dock planks. The white bearded Kendall threw out a long, blue nylon rope

and brought the boat closer to the dock. " Captain, we've got a problem out on the bay!"

The Captain stepped onto the dock and looped the heavy rope around the pole. " You spot some passing whales, Matthias?"

" It's Lark."

The Captain squinted and raised his bushy left brow. " What about him?"

" We just saw his boat heading toward another boat out on the bay."

" I pleaded with him to let me show him how to properly pilot that boat."

They scurried toward McGill in his beige Bermuda shorts. He lowered the binoculars and handed them to the Captain. " Captain, he's going to hit."

The Captain only looked for a second. He motioned them down the dock toward the Harbormaster's orange and white fiberglass patrol boat. They climbed inside and he cranked the engine. Almost immediately they moved away from the dock. The Captain held the radio microphone.

" Lark, this is the Captain. Come in Lark."

Jones leaned forward as the boat kicked to a higher speed. Lark's course toward the second boat looked like a demolition scene in a Hollywood movie. " He drives that boat like he drives his car."

" You got that right," said McGill, eyes pressed to the binoculars.

" Lark, come in. This is Captain Kendall."

The wind pushed Jones' brown hair back as they followed the green buoys along the bay. The Captain scanned through his own binoculars.

" Captain, why is he headed for that one boat?"

" Don't know."

" I see him!" shouted McGill. " He's trying to move the wheel."

Jones gazed ahead as the Harbormaster's boat moved into the bay, but Lark did not change course and was about to ram the only other boat within ten miles.

* * *

" It's broken! It's broken!" Lark raced around the wheel as if his machinations could make a difference. The white and green boat now loomed directly ahead, bobbing gently with every wave.

" You need to shut off the engine, Lark!"

" Right, right. Shut it off. Shut it off." Now he searched for the key. He remembered starting the engine but forgot the ignition location. The older boat was perilously close as he ran his hand under the panels. He felt the metal key and quickly turned it, grinding the starter. Frantic, he twisted it back and the engine shut off. The boat still moved at a high speed and through the glass he saw the faded green letters across the old boat's peeling white bow.

MAINTENANCE FREE

" My God, Lark, we're going to hit that boat!" She grabbed him and they dropped to the deck, nuzzled together against the front wall.

After dead silence and long anticipation, a loud crunch exploded into the sound of cracking wood and Lark's boat lurched upward. For a moment he thought they were airborne. Something broke apart above, raining debris

over the deck. He shielded himself over Flo as his boat skidded and scraped bottom. They were now tilted upward and bobbed at an odd angle.

" Are you all right, Snookems?" He squinted in the sunlit blue sky. The boat's strong wooden mast had snapped into a twisted wood splinter.

" You saved me, Lark. You saved me!"

Lark steadied himself as he stood, not sure what he had done. He tensed his jaw. His glasses were still in place as he edged his way through the debris to the railing. His boat had careened atop the other vessel. Stairs led below the Maintenance Free's dull varnished deck. Lark had seen this boat in the marina. Flo crossed the deck and held him as both boats continued to sway in the water. " This is Webster Howard's boat, Flo."

" The maintenance man?"

" Sometimes he goes fishing... I wonder if anyone is on board." He stroked his chin. " Hum, only one way to find out."

" What do you mean? You're not going down there, are you?"

He cupped his hands. " Hello down there!"

" You think he's on the boat, Lark?"

" No, sir. " He squinted his eyes. " We're dealing with a run-a-way boat."

" You make it sound like a western where the horse breaks away from the coral."

" I assure you, Snookems, no one is aboard this boat."

" Unless we knocked him out or something."

Lark nodded and raised his index finger. " You may have a point, Flo."

He waddled to the box under the panels and pulled out the emergency rope ladder. " Lark, you're in no shape to be climbing ladders."

" A man's got to do what a man's got to do."

Lark straddled the railing and lowered his bulbous body onto the unsteady rope ladder. He longed to be twenty years younger and forty pounds slimmer. Rung by shaky rung he descended the ladder and finally stepped onto the older boat's weathered deck.

" Are you all right, Lark?"

" A-OK. I'm going in!"

" Please be careful..."

Lark heard another boat engine as he crossed the upper deck, but was uneasy as he descended the warped stairs below deck. In the dim light he nudged the faded green wood door and a fishy, filthy odor filtered outward. Light from the bay shined through the dirty window and onto Webster Howard's body, face down on the moistened carpet. Curly dark hair stuck out of his orange and green baseball cap and his glass brown eyes were frozen. Lark recoiled when he saw blood on Webster's olive shirt and jeans.

" Webster?" He resisted getting near the body, but finally inched across the musty jute rug and knelt. " Webster, are you alive?" He studied Webster's dark beard stubble and strong set jaw. His mammoth fists were clenched, but his chest was not moving and even with the blood, no wounds were visible.

" You're dead, aren't you? My God, I've killed you!"

* * *

" That's Webster Howard's boat," said Jones, smiling. He held the railing as the Captain pulled alongside the Maintenance Free. " He was just

at my house last week doing the gutters. We were joking about the baseball team. Or I should say he was needling me. He's at the games sometimes when he's not out fishing. "

McGill nodded. " Good old Web. Makes a living on things falling apart. But he can fix anything. He re-shingled the back of my house last April. Nice guy. Funny. Good sense of humor."

" Practical joker, " said Jones. " With a serious face he told me my roof was on the verge of collapse. Oh, he really enjoyed me getting upset."

" You upset?"

Jones grinned. " He must be coming in from fishing. Four days in, two days out. One day back, one for the Lord. That's his motto... I hope Lark didn't hurt him. How the... how do you crash into the only boat on the bay?" Lark's boat was propped at an angle and both boats moved with the waves.

Flo, red kerchief tied around her hair, appeared on deck. " Lark's on Webster's boat! He killed Webster! He's below in the cabin."

" He what?" Jones climbed over the railing as the boat dipped in the water and leaped onto Webster Howard's fishing boat. He ran across the old deck boards. " Lark! It's Matthias."

" Do you see him?" asked McGill from the Captain's boat.

" I'm going under." Jones raced down the stairs, but met resistance at the door.

" He's dead! Dead, I killed him!"

Jones pushed open the door. Webster Howard lay face down in blood splattered jeans and army shirt. Lark's frantic eyes were opened wide as he hugged the cabin wall. " Web, oh my God."

" Lark, what happened?"

" My boat... I lost control. Poor Webster."

Jones gazed across the body, but suspected something more than Lark's pleasure boat had killed Webster. " He's dead, but his body is just lying there. I don't see where he impacted on anything. This is very strange."

McGill moved through the squeaky cabin door. " What the hell is going on?"

" I killed Webster Howard," whined Lark. " I need a private investigator!"

" Don't be so sure, Lark." Jones first studied the small cabin's table, bolted to the floor and scanned the tiny stainless steel sink under a row of white Formica cabinets. Some of the lower cabinets had sharp edges, but Webster Howard's body was at least ten feet away. Next to the sink was a plastic cup and a white paper napkin smeared with tomato sauce and marked, **R/L**. A coiled microphone cord dangled from a transmitter near the window.

" What are you thinking, Matthias?" asked McGill.

" I'm not sure yet, Tommy." Webster Howard's hands were strong and callused, still tightened as if he were in the midst of a fight. A finely molded body filled his army shirt. Bringing down a man of this physical strength required more than just being knocked to the floor. " Lark, did you see him on deck before the accident?"

" No. I thought it was an empty boat. Oh, dear, God, what have I done?"

" I don't think you did anything besides crash into his boat." Jones knelt next to Webster without touching him. Behind the edges of the orange and green baseball cap, through the dark strands of hair, the dried blood of an expanded, gaping wound indicated a more extensive injury. And the blood on Webster's army shirt and jeans was long since dried.

" Was he murdered?" asked McGill.

Jones studied the ripped jute rug, floorboards exposed, but none of the rug stains contained blood. " Yeah... but not in here."

2

Jones studied the bleachers where Webster Howard sometimes sat during home games. Thoughts of Webster's murder overshadowed Hamilton's dismal performance on the baseball field. He wondered if Webster was murdered somewhere else and dragged onto the boat, and the woman looking across the bay from bluff bothered him. Jones clapped his hands along the third baseline and called out to his freshman pitcher.

"Come on, Craigie. Come on, boy. Pitch your game, kid."

"How can he pitch his game when they're down by eight runs?" Jones turned and saw orange haired Father Gallagher just outside the base path.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Jim. I get more credit from the sports column in the Enterprise."

"How come you're not pitching, Svoboda?"

Jones looked over to the large framed Svoboda at first base and then back at Gallagher. "Svoboda plays first base Perhaps, you'd like to coach the team? "

"Well..."

Nigel Kent, impeccably groomed even at baseball games, leaned toward Jones. "Might improve the record."

Gallagher smiled and winked at Nigel as Jones clapped his hands.

" Come on, Craigie... Nigel, the Fletchers have nominated you for the presidency of Hamilton College, I don't think you want me protesting outside your house."

" You would do that, too," said Nigel, glancing at Gallagher. " What about Webster Howard, what do we know?"

" I talked the Medical Examiner when we got the boat to the marina."

" My old friend Clayton Morris," said Nigel.

" Svoboda is playing back too far, Matthias," said Gallagher.

Jones looked down the first baseline and back at Nigel. " I can tell you what I knew right away. Lark didn't kill him in that screwy boat accident. Somebody hit him hard from behind and dragged the body onto the boat."

" And let it drift?" asked Nigel.

" It would appear that way. Plus, I've got an obnoxious state trooper named Mike Fitzgerald investigating this with George Strickland. He wanted to hold Lark over the barracks until Clayton Morris informed him Webster was already dead when Lark hit the boat."

" The only boat on the bay?" asked Nigel.

" Yup, the only other boat within a ten mile radius and Lark smacks head long into it." At the plate the Riverside catcher produced a perfect drag bunt down the first baseline. Jones kicked the dirt. " Oh, gee whiz."

" Father, would you be interested in the Hamilton coaching job?" asked Nigel.

" Oh, no, no. I have my hands full in this town as it is."

Nigel nodded. " You mean the new chapel?"

" Well, don't take this the wrong way, Nigel. I know you attend the First Parish Church, but your Reverend Bricker has tried to block my efforts to locate a satellite chapel the church off Washington Street."

" One more, Craigie. One more. Force at second!" yelled Jones.

" Yes," said Nigel. " I understand First Parish somehow has the deed to that land."

" We didn't know that at first when I went to the Diocese. I was very hopeful when I learned it was church land. The Reverend was emphatic.

Quote:

' There will be no sale of the Washington Street land, Father Gallagher.'

Unquote."

" Frankly, First Parish could use the money for repairs," said Nigel.

" Exactly, but the best is yet to come, and I thought the days of prejudice were long gone. When I pressed him, he said: ' We don't need any additional Catholics in Hamilton.'"

" Well, I apologize for that, Father, and I will have a talk with Reverend Bricker. I don't think it's all prejudice. He might want to use that land for the Christian Youth Group. They have a camp north of town on the Pocquanticut River, but no area for basketball and youth activities. So, maybe that's it, Father." Nigel turned to Jones as the next player grounded to second and Hamilton headed for the bench. " Matthias, will I see you at The Colonial House tonight?"

Jones nodded and moved toward Craigie. " How's the arm, Craigie?"

" Good, Coach. I'm all right."

" Good. All right boys, this is it. You need one to tie. One more to win." He looked up at his freshman first baseman. " And you, Svoboda, belt one out, will you?" He hit Svoboda on the arm and turned to Nigel. " I'll be at the Colonial House, Nigel. What's that you say about Bricker? He wants a youth camp on Washington Street?"

" Youth area for the Christian Youth Association in Prince William. Maybe a youth center but they don't have the money. By the way, Matthias, I need to speak with you about that video you're making with the Communications Department for the annual faculty meeting."

" You'll like it. Mark Morrison tells me we're ninety percent complete." Steve Bradley lined first pitch for a single to right field. Jones clapped and shouted out to Joe Svoboda as he moved his massive frame to the plate. " Come on, Joey. This is the big one, kid. One duck on the pond. Send it flying."

" Kid has a lot of talent," said Gallagher.

Jones smacked his forehead when Svoboda took two called strikes. He returned to the bench as Lark's long brown car slid to a stop within inches of the surrounding chain link fence.

" Our dear coach emeritus," said Nigel with a sly grin.

" Why is it I think he wants to find Webster Howard's murderer?"

Nigel held his arm briefly. " Must be your lucky day."

The crack of Svoboda's bat echoed across the ball field and baseball sailed high above center field and into the towering maples near the music conservatory. Jones and his players cleared the bench and met Svoboda at home plate. The broad shouldered Svoboda tipped his red cap and the meager crowd applauded. Hamilton had won the final game, easing the lackluster season's pain.

As the small group of fans left the stands and the teams drifted across the field the locker room, Lark marched through the street entrance. Next to him, moving at an equally rapid clip was a lanky man with pin point brown eyes and dark wavy hair. Lark wore a bright orange blazer and the other man

was dressed in a frumpy checkered sport coat and brown polyester pants. Jones turned to his assistant coach. " Here comes trouble, Woosey."

" Lark I recognize. The other guy-"

" I don't know who he is either. I was supposed to meet Tom McGill at the marina to talk about Webster's murder."

" You want me to cover for you, Matthias?"

" No, it's too late now. I'll get rid of them quick and see you in the locker room before I go."

" Right-O," said Woosey, using one of Lark's favorite expressions.

" Oh, be quiet." Jones moved forward and met the two men behind the backstop. " Lark, you just missed the end of the game. Svoboda hit a two run homer to win it."

Lark's tightened his facial muscles and ground his teeth. " I would like to pursue my usual interest in Hamilton sports, but duty calls. I feel responsible."

The other guy had an odd smile as if he were constantly pleased with himself. " Responsible for what, Lark?"

" The Webster Howard fiasco."

" I told you he was dead before you hit his boat."

" Don't jump to conclusions, Jones," said the other man loudly. Jones looked into his tiny dark eyes. " What we see is not always what is there."

" Who are you?"

" Oh, I see I've gotten your attention. Spiffy, real spiffy."

Jones was already annoyed by this guy. " You haven't told me who you are."

Lark stepped between the two men. " He's Clyde Hooper. I hired him last night."

" Detective Hooper."

Jones rolled his eyes as Hooper rigidly extended his hand and dropped his clipboard on the ground. Papers went flying across the field.

" Don't fret! Don't fret, a little wind won't deter me!"

Hooper scampered across the grass and scooped up the papers.

" Lark, where did you get this guy?"

" He comes highly recommended."

" From where, the dog pound?"

" He showed me his credentials," said Lark.

" I'm sure he's chasing them now." Hooper plucked pieces of yellow lined paper from the chain link fence. " Webster Howard was a friend. I liked him. I'm looking into his death and so are the state police and George Strickland locally."

" I appreciate you efforts, old boy," said Lark, raising his hand and whispering. " We need undercover work here."

Hooper, attempting to reach for a piece of paper, perched halfway along a maple branch. He slipped and hung upside down. " You really hired this guy?"

" No, he works on the Bolpine Ratings System." Lark's mouth turned down as he spoke. " I think he's stuck."

Hooper pleaded for help from the branch. " Well, fire him. Get rid of him... What's the Bolpine Ratings System?"

" Used in the intelligence services."

" It is? " Jones furrowed his brow and looked up at Hooper's red face and brown tie pointed to the ground. " Just let go."

" Clyde Hooper will not be defeated." Pens and a small notebook fell into the grass.

Jones scooped up the pens. " Just let go, Clyde."

" *Detective* Hooper." Hooper spoke in a lower voice as he looked down.

" Confidentially, I'm rather afraid of heights."

" You're only five feet from the ground... Oh, boy." Jones placed his hands on Hooper's back. " I've got you. Just let go."

" Are you sure? I don't want to re-injure my back."

" I've got you!."

" I will trust your judgment, Jones."

" I'm glad."

Hooper unclasped his legs and swung into Jones's stomach. " In the words of Confucius: All's well that ends well."

" That was Shakespeare," said Jones, rubbing the pain his abdomen.

" Oh, did he say it, too?" asked Hooper.

" No, I'm sure it was Vince Lombardi," said Lark.

Jones stared at both men, wondering how he could break away to meet McGill at the marina. " Well, I'll be seeing you."

" Wait," said Hooper, grabbing his arm. " You haven't asked about BRS."

Jones took two steps toward the field. " Oh, well."

" The old BRS, used by investigators around the world."

" That's nice. I have to go now."

" Working on the case, eh?" asked Hooper.

" I'll see you later, Lark... Hooper."

" *Detective* Hooper. It will be case closed, problem solved."

" Right..."

Jones broke into a run, increasing his pace across the infield back to the gym. His abdomen still sore, he tried to focus on Webster's murder and forget Lark and the boob he hired.

3

Jones maneuvered his jeep past the flashing yellow light at the end of Shore Drive and continued on the smooth road along the bay. He could not remove thoughts of Hooper hanging from the branch behind the backstop. Both Lark and Hooper could hamper the investigation and Jones was still not sure what happened to Webster Howard. As he rolled across the marina channel's metal draw bridge, dozens of boats were highlighted in the late afternoon sun, but the bay waters were deep blue. McGill's red compact was parked on the grass above the marina near the spot the woman had overlooked the bay.

Jones skidded onto the shoulder behind the compact and got out of the jeep. He snooped around the grass blades for a few moments, looking for footprints or a tire tread from the off road vehicle. When McGill waved from the dock, Jones hiked down the grass-clumped slope to the dock. Webster Howard's weathered white boat was moored further down the dock. " How goes the battle, Tommy?"

" Fitzgerald and Strickland just left."

" Oh, is he still ordering George around?"

" And everyone else. You know, I've seen obnoxious cops in my day, but this guy... George couldn't get a word in edge-wise with the Captain. And Fitzgerald took charge of the evidence and shipped it out to the state police lab. "

" The napkin and the cup?"

" Yeah, the guy is a class-A jerk in my opinion."

" Did George do anything?"

" Wendell and Tully dusted for prints. The state police lab is running tests on Webster's clothes and sneakers. But George did find something interesting."

" Oh?"

McGill motioned him along the dock to Webster's boat. Although the plank leading to the boat was block by two saw horses and yellow police tape, McGill pointed at the hull. " Red paint."

A long red scrape, crossing peeled paint and scuff marks, angled downward into the dark water. " That's new."

" Supposedly, they're testing that, too."

" I wonder what he hit or what hit him?" Jones approached the yellow tape. " Can we go inside?"

" Fitzgerald says no."

Jones nodded, thinking back to the napkin with the **R/L** on it. " Has anybody checked where that napkin came from?"

" I thought about checking the yellow pages."

" Good idea... Who would want to kill Webster? Everybody liked him."

" Everybody did like him. But he did have a bad fight or I should say argument with his wife before he went out. I heard Fitzgerald talking to Strickland about it. The Captain could tell us more."

Jones stared at the scrape in the diminishing sunlight. " That's a good starting point. I'd also like to know whether Webster filled the tank before he went out and when he went out."

" The Captain would know that, too."

Jones gazed up the slope near the bridge. " And I want to know who that woman was... She was staring out toward Webster's boat. "

" You don't know that, Matthias. She probably was just enjoying the view of the bay. "

" Let's go see the Captain. "

* * *

The harbormaster's house reeked of cherry tobacco. Jones looked down at the boats and across the darkening bay before he turned to the white bearded Captain. " Captain did you notice any red boats when Webster went out?"

The Captain puffed on the curved brown pipe and shook his head.

" Nope."

" Did Webster fill the tank?"

" Yup, bout seven Monday night."

" So, this was his usual time to go fishing?" asked McGill.

" Nope. Webster usually left on Wednesday mornin' and came back Thursday night."

" Well, what was he doing out on Monday night?"

" He didn't say." The Captain set down his pipe on the side table's glass ashtray. " But he did seem in one hell of a hurry when he pumped that gas. Usually he comes in and talks to me. Gives me a hard time, but Monday night was different."

" You mean his wife?"

" Yup. Before he pumped the gas. They were goin' at it like cats and dogs down at the dock. Just for a few minutes and then she left. He pumped. I tallied his slip. Then he got right on his boat and that was that."

" I need to check that gas gauge," said Jones.

" For what?" asked McGill.

" See how far he went. We may not be able to know right away where he went but we might be able to figure the mileage."

" I knew Webster's father... Nathan. Wonderful man. Handyman just like Webster. But he lived into his eighties... Family's been in Hamilton for a couple of hundred years."

" Trouble," said McGill from the window overlooking the bay and Shore Drive.

" What's the matter, Tommy?"

" Fitzgerald's state police car is parked on the highway again."

Jones peered over McGill's shoulder. The tall gray haired trooper, in full green uniform, hat squarely on his head, and boots probably spit polished, climbed the wooden stairs to the Harbormaster's house. " Great, just what we need. There was a woman on the bluff, Captain. "

" Yes, there was. "

The sound of Fitzgerald's boots on the wood planks grew louder. He never knocked, the door crashed open, shaking a set of attached bells, and he strode inside. His long face noticeably twitched when he saw Jones.

" Who the hell are you?"

" Matthias Jones, I'm trying to find out what happened to a man we all knew in town."

" I've heard about you. I got a place over the barracks for people like you. People who think they know more than the police. The investigation on

the scene is ninety-nine percent complete. As far as I'm concerned this is an open case right now."

Jones turned from the window. " What about that napkin? Have you checked what restaurant that napkin came from."

" I don't take orders from you."

" He just asked a very valid question," said McGill. He reached out and shook Fitzgerald's hand. " Tom McGill, I own the Enterprise here in town. "

" My people have found nothing and neither has your Chief Strickland."

Jones intended to follow the napkin lead, but did not want to create more animosity with Fitzgerald. He looked down at Webster's boat. The red streak was still visible on the hull even with the sun nearing the western trees.

" What about the long scrape against the bow?" asked McGill. " Has anybody checked out the manufacturer and color of that paint or how about a boat matching that paint."

Fitzgerald's eyes tightened. Tension brewed in his clenched fist and set jaw. " What is this a news conference? You're a newspaper man, you check it out."

" I don't want to duplicate your work."

The trooper's beeper sounded and he reached to his belt. " I have a call."

" Use the phone on the wall," said the Captain, who had taken everything in from his chair.

" Thank you, Captain."

As Fitzgerald stepped to the rotary dial wall phone, Jones moved to McGill and spoke in a low voice. " We won't get anything out of this guy."

" Mr. Personality."

" We're going to have to find out this stuff ourselves."

" Unless Strickland knows something," said McGill.

" True."

Fitzgereld's green uniform bordered the knotty pine wall. His voice, although still loud, became responsive rather than aggressive. " Yes, Mario. This is Mike."

Jones pressed his lips and stared at the Maintenance Free. Whoever killed Webster would need to know about his spending a couple days a week out fishing at sea. More remote was the possibility Webster had a prearranged meeting with somebody or maybe he pulled into port along the coast. " We need to talk with Webster's wife. She might have information about his activities."

Fitzgereld moved behind the corner." Yeah, I'm up here right now, Mario. What? You have to be kidding? That is ludicrous!"

" You going to use Svoboda in football next year?" asked McGill.

Jones turned from the trooper's loud conversation. " Yeah. I think, although Woosey disagrees, we're going to try him at quarterback."

" Good move," said the Captain, removing his pipe. " He has one hell of an arm and he's solid. Good combination."

" That's my point," said Jones, looking toward Fitzgereld.

" Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, I will leave right now. Yes, sir. Good bye, Mario." He set the receiver back on the wall and stepped into the room.

" Okay, I have been called away, but I want to make one thing abundantly clear."

" And what might that be?" asked Jones.

Fitzgereld squinted as he lumbered across the wood floorboards.

" I'm in charge of this operation, Mister. Don't forget that when you're back on the ball field. Is that clear?"

" No."

Fitzgereld was in the process of turning, but his head snapped back.

" What?"

" The last I heard this is a free country, unless that's changed in the last few minutes."

The trooper held up his thumb and index finger as if he were going to pinch salt. " You're this far away from spending the night at the barracks."

" Are you going to arrest me, Mike?"

" *Trooper Fitzgereld.*"

" Everyone's got a title. "

" Watch it, Jones. " He spun toward the Captain. " Thank you for the use of your phone and your cooperation in his investigation."

" Call me if you need me."

" What about me?" asked Jones, with a grin.

" Watch your step." He stomped to the door without looking back, the bells shook, and he scampered down the hillside stairs.

" Well, he's not a bad guy," said McGill, still holding his yellow pad. Jones laughed as Fitzgereld reached the dock and headed up the highway hill to his cruiser. Even the Captain chuckled from his chair. " A little hyper but not a bad guy."

" Not a bad guy? " asked Jones. " You've got to be kidding. That guy is a-

" Matthias, cool your jets, " replied McGill.

Jones watched Fitzgerald get in the cruiser and quickly pull onto Shore Drive. " This guy wants us out of the investigation. That in itself is suspicious."

" First the woman on the bluff and now Fitzgerald. I think that's just his personality," said McGill.

Jones spun around. " So, Captain, we have Webster usually going out to sea on Wednesdays and coming back to port on Thursday evening."

" Correct," said the Captain.

" But this time he left a day and a half earlier."

" Yup."

" And he left in a hurry after filling the tank. I wonder where he was headed?"

The Captain puffed on the pipe. " Could be anywhere."

4

Jones was late he when opened the heavy Colonial House doors. Clyde Hooper blabbered on the lobby phone. He spotted Jones and slammed the receiver. " Just the man I wanted to see."

" Hooper, let's get a few things straight. I am not working with you on the Webster Howard thing. If Lark hired you: that's fine. Do your thing."

" I've encountered jealousy in my dealings with fellow sleuths."

" I knew Webster Howard. He did work for me. And I'm not a sleuth."

" Modest... modest." Jones started for the inside doors, but Hooper blocked his path. " Now, now, let's not be hasty."

" Hooper, you're starting to give me a bad feeling right here in my gut."

" Good, I've got your interest."

" Out of my way."

Jones stepped by him and entered the restaurant. Hooper leaned through the lobby doors. " Remember I have intelligence connections around the world!"

" Good why don't you go connect your booster cables? " Jones rolled his eyes and headed to the rear booth. Father Gallagher was in an animated conversation with Nigel and Mrs. Johnson. Briefly Jones glanced back but did not see Hooper. Gallagher, still in his dark shirt and collar, looked up at Jones.

" Well, finally, Matthias."

" Good evening all."

" We were just talking about Mabel Howard," said Nigel.

" Webster's wife."

" They were married twenty-three years," said Mrs. Johnson.

Gallagher moved his coffee cup and large frame toward the wall as Jones sat down. " What does she say about all this?"

Mrs. Johnson's face tightened. " She's in a state of shock more than anything else. Her sister is coming down from Millbury. "

" They have any kids?" asked Jones.

" No."

" What was the argument about down at the dock before Webster left?"

Mrs. Johnson shrugged her shoulders. " She didn't say."

" I need to speak with this woman."

Jones nodded as Frannie set a cup of coffee, light and sweet, on the table.

" Big level conference?"

" All the heavyweights," said Nigel.

" Now, I have everyone else's order, Matthias."

" I know I'm late." He looked at Hooper in his checkered shirt and pleated beige pants, lingering with a notepad and pencil in front of the Main Street windows. " Oh, no."

" What the matter?" asked Frannie.

" Clyde Hooper."

" Oh, Detective Hooper."

" He's not an detective of anything," said Jones, getting flustered.

" He told me he was a government operative." Jones closed his eyes briefly. Hooper maintained his position up front, but looked away as Jones stared at him. " He said he had world wide intelligence connections."

" I think he should worry about the intelligence connection between his shoulders and his head."

" Now, now, Matthias," said Gallagher. " Let's respect the man."

Jones pretended to bite his tongue. " I'll have the pork special, Frannie."

" A number five," she said smiling and headed across the room.

" What's the latest from Clayton Morris?" asked Nigel.

" Blow to the back of the head with a blunt instrument." Jones wondered why Webster had left a day and a half early. " Why did he sail from the bay on Monday night? And was that woman waiting for him?"

" What woman? " asked Gallagher.

" I specifically saw a woman on the bluffs, looking across the bay, Jim. "

" Well, Lark was about to ram the boat. "

" There was suppose to be a big storm, wasn't there, Father?" asked Nigel.

" That's true, but they didn't mention the storm until Tuesday morning. I remember because we were afraid we would have to move the Woman's Club bake sale into the parish hall."

Hooper was no longer up front nor was he anywhere in the restaurant. Jones turned to his friends. " Webster was an experienced fisherman. He must have had access to the national weather forecasts. Obviously, we didn't get the storm and it went out to sea. *When* they changed the forecast is essential because he wouldn't just sail into a storm coming up the coast."

" Maybe he was trying to beat the storm and that's why he left early," said Nigel.

" True." Jones stroked his chin and let his suspicions travel down the side road. A potential killer, planning to commit a crime at sea, would have the perfect accomplice in a storm; sweeping Webster Howard's body out to sea.

" What are you thinking, Matthias?" asked Gallagher.

Jones let the steamy coffee rise. " Just trying to sort it through, Father."

Gallagher pointed at Jones. " *Where* he was killed is important. There was no blood on the boat, correct?"

" Nothing on the boat. Webster could have been murdered on another boat... anywhere. Then dragged onto the Maintenance Free. "

" Why drag him downstairs?" asked Mrs. Johnson.

" I think he tried to get to the radio. He was still alive." Jones pictured the red bow scrape. " And he almost got to the radio. "

" Maybe he broadcast something," said Nigel.

" We would have heard about it. Somebody would have reported a plea for help."

Nigel pressed his thin lips. " But who would want Webster dead? He had no enemies."

As if he were about to step in the boxing ring, an angry look swept over Gallagher's face. The bearded Reverend Bricker, blonde hair disheveled, alternated grimaces at Gallagher as he waited to be seated. Gallagher spoke clearly. " The reverend has arrived."

" I assure you, Father, I will talk to the reverend. I frankly don't understand his attitude about the land."

Gallagher slowly nodded as he stood. " All I ask is a little courtesy and possibly an explanation."

" Jim, let Nigel talk to him."

" Sometimes things are better settled up front."

As Gallagher crossed the restaurant, Nigel rapped Jones on the arm.

" Matthias, stop him."

" Once he gets his mind set on something he's like a freight train rumbling down the track."

" Well, at least referee it."

" All right." Jones slid from the booth. Gallagher had already reached Bricker and extended his hand, but the reverend did not reciprocate.

" I do not wish to be disturbed," said Bricker in a whining, elite voice.

" Reverend, I can understand it's your private business whether you sell that land on Washington Street. And I know you want it to go to the Youth Group "

The reverend's blue eyes were unusually intense. " You're right, it is my private business."

" Your table is ready, reverend," said the hostess.

The reverend stared at the taller Gallagher for a second and then started across the restaurant. Gallagher turned to Jones. " What's wrong with that man?"

" I would drop it, Jim. You can find other land for the chapel."

Gallagher's eyes tracked Bricker to the table along flowered wallpaper.

" You're talking to a former College Gloves champion, Matthias."

" Round's over, Father."

* * *

After dessert Jones attempted to leave several times. He listened to the boat crash story three times in the twenty minutes Lark and Flo were at the table. Lark wore his flashy orange blazer with a green tie, and Flo's flowery dress closely resembled the restaurant's vibrant wallpaper. She clutched Lark's arm and looked at the ceiling as she spoke in a squeaky voice. " I never want to go out in that boat again."

" Not to worry, Snookems, Detective Hooper has assured me he will offer me an instructional course before we set sail."

" What does Hooper know about boats?" asked Jones.

" Part of his intelligence work, old boy. Navy Seal... "

" No way, Lark. "

" He knows all the connections to intelligence."

" And they're all short circuited," mumbled Jones.

" What was that, old boy? " asked Lark.

" A passing comment about the illustrious Mr. Hooper. "

" Detective Hooper."

" You should fire him, Lark, now that you've figured out the Howard murder," said Flo.

" You should fire him anyway," said Jones. " You figured this out, did you, Lark?"

Lark held a glass of sarsaparilla in his hand and sat upright with a whimsical smile on his face. " I do have figured this out and it's all very simple."

" And?"

He smacked his lips after taking in some sarsaparilla. " A fisherman. A fisherman, get it?"

" Nope, I don't get it," said Jones, thinking about Mike Fitzgerald and his arrogant attitude. Fitzgerald was going to block Jones every step of the way.

" Here's how I see it," said Lark. He leaned forward across the table and again squinted his blue eyes, magnified behind his glasses. Gallagher half grinned and Nigel seemed restless. " At sea mysterious things can happen to witnesses. That's how *they* got him."

" They?" asked Jones, trying not to look at Gallagher.

" The passing trawler."

" Passing trawler?" asked Nigel, transforming a chuckle into a laugh.

" Excuse me."

" I say they *lured* him in," said Lark softly, quickly raising his voice as he grabbed Flo's arm. " *Then they got him!*"

" Oh, dear God don't scare me, Lark!"

Jones visualized the long red scrape, certain it was relevant to the investigation. " Yes, don't scare her, Lark."

" Lark swears the fisherman were Canadian, right, Lark?" asked Flo.

" *Revenge* on Webster for all the fish he caught. Then they *got him!*" he shouted.

" Oh, Snookems, you're such a kidder."

" See," said Lark, gesturing with his hands like a politician showing a vision for the country. " Webster was a mechanical genius."

" He was?" asked Jones.

" Sure, he fixed my toilet." Lark snapped his fingers. " Bingo!"

" Can you beat that?" asked Jones.

" And that toilet is still running, Matthias."

" Well, that's a great story, Lark. I really do have to be going," said Jones. He stood and stretched in front of the booth.

" Do you have to go now?" asked Lark. " I was about to tell you about the 1941 double draw."

" Some other time."

" The double draw was ahead of it's time. Funny... no one ever used it again." Jones picked up the check. " That's nice of you, Matthias."

Jones had not intended to pay tab. Gallagher shook his hand as Jones caught sight of Cora and Courtney Jefferson from Jefferson's Hardware.

" Real nice of you."

" Matthias," said Cora, motioning him over.

" Evening, Cora."

" He's a wicked cheap skate, that Lark Larsen," she said, compressing her wrinkled face as she spoke.

" Mother, he might hear," said Courtney.

" Well, maybe he damned well better hear. He hates to part with a buck."

" Cora, you're a lady after my own heart," said Jones.

" See, when he comes in the store he keeps buying stoppers for his garden hose. Patch kits for his tires."

" I have to re-groove his old house key," said Courtney, shaking his head. " Talk about cheap."

" Maybe if you cut it right the first time. "

Lark dipped his fork into a hunk of midnight chocolate cake. He said something to Flo and she giggled loudly as Jones shook his head.

The Fitton Chronicles

The Handyman's Secret

" Canadian fisherman..."

5

Jones shifted his jeep and passed through the campus into town. Earlier, at St. Bart's rectory, he had made another pitch to Gallagher about halting the plans for a chapel on Washington Street. Helping the Youth Group was a good gesture, but entertaining such thoughts made Gallagher all the more adamant to build the chapel. Reverend Bricker had fought Gallagher when Gallagher had demonstrated sincerity. Jones now prepared himself for the long haul.

He shifted his jeep again near Larsen Field and started up the hill toward Main Street. A lone figure stood in the street across from the Cornucopia theater. Jones braked, downshifted and flicked the high beams. Clyde Hooper raised his hand in the headlight's glare. Jones thought about looping around him, but decided to stop and Hooper marched up to his window. " I figured you'd be returning from Prince William via this road."

" Wouldn't be easier to use a phone, Hooper?"

" *Detective* Hooper."

" What is it you want?"

" Ah, ha. Cut to the chase. No small talk. I like that. Yes, sir. "

Jones shifted into neutral. " Hooper, I'd like to get home and get some sleep."

" We all would like to rest our bones." Jones watched incredulously as Hooper rounded the hood and stood along the passenger side. " Now, let's get down to brass tackles."

" Tacks. "

" Tacks, yes of course. "

" Do you have a reservoir of clichés?" asked Jones. He pulled behind an older red and white Volkswagen van along the sidewalk.

" Be glad I tracked you down," said Hooper, sticking his head inside the jeep window. Then he looked down the sidewalk.

" What are you doing?"

Hooper pulled his head back in the jeep. " Always be prepared, Jones. Webster Howard's murderer is lurking out there."

" That true, but-"

" While you've been living it up at the Colonial House, I have been at work."

" I know I'll hate myself for not asking, but what have you found?"

Hooper squinted his beady eyes. " Well?"

He spoke in almost a whisper. " The wife is very suspicious. I have learned, Jones, that she spends beyond her means."

" Oh?"

" Howard did not make a great deal of money."

" That wasn't his intention." Ahead on Main Street Reverend Bricker's wood paneled station wagon raced around the common and shot out like an arcade cannonball. " Bricker..."

Hooper's head snapped forward. " Who is Bricker?"

" The reverend of First Parish Church." Jones shifted and started to pull out.

Hooper trotted alongside the jeep. " Where do you think you're going, Jones?"

" I need to speak with him." Jones stopped briefly at the Main Street corner as Bricker bounced into Pudgy Wilson's Gas Station.

A winded Hooper approached Jones' window. " Jones, we need to discuss the handyman's murder."

" Discuss," said Jones, inching onto Main Street. Bricker stopped under the pump lights. A young kid emerged from the gas station. Bricker yelled something out the window as Jones pulled next to the pay phone less than a hundred yards from the gas station.

" Now, Jones. I believe Webster Howard had a mission."

" We all have missions in life." Jones stepped from the jeep and meandered down the sidewalk. The kid stuck the gas nozzle into the tank.

" Jones, you're evading me," said Hooper, catching his breath.

" Oh? What made you think that?"

In the warm night air Jones walked onto the gas station cement. Bricker looked up from inside the window. " Coach, Jones."

" Reverend."

Bricker's collar was gone and his powder gray shirt was unbuttoned.

" What's the problem?"

" I didn't know there was a problem."

His yellowed teeth were chiseled and his brown beard curled upward when he smiled. He spoke slowly and precisely, and swept his head with every word.

" You think I don't know Father Gallagher sent you over here to coax me out of my position in regard to the land proposition."

" You sound like you're giving a legal deposition," joked Jones.

The reverend's steely eyes remained fixed. " The land is not for sale, Jones."

" Why not? Who cares?"

" That land belongs to the First Parish Church and as the pastor of that church I have made that decision. And furthermore what kind of arrogant priest does he think he is?"

" Is there more than one? "

Bricker did not flinch and Jones' smile dropped. " He thinks he can just dictate what my church can and cannot do. As far as I'm concern that's a good reason for him to stay in Prince William."

" I guess I understand your position. Reverend. I can only say that Jim Gallagher is my friend and you really don' t know what you have against him."

" Excuse me?"

" And I see no reason why you can' t bend a little bit and sell Gallagher that land. It would mean money for First Parish. Since when do churches not want to fill the coffers?"

The gas nozzle clicked and Bricker looked up at the pump. Pudgy Wilson waddled from the garage. " Hey, Pudge. Didn't know you were on tonight."

" You own the business, you're always on. And Chuckie is on vacation. Hey Leo Crowley told me about Svoboda's home run."

" I really have to go," said Bricker.

" Kid's going to help your teams. I can' t believe he's only a freshman." Pudgy forced in more gas into Bricker's station wagon.

" I'm going to try him at quarterback next fall."

" I have an appointment!" said Bricker.

" Oh, sorry," replied Pudgy. He pulled out the nozzle and placed it back in the pump. " That will be fifteen dollars, Reverend."

" Put it on the church's tab." Bricker started the car and quickly cut a narrow arc back to Main Street. A smoky exhaust trail fanned back to the station as he raced toward the traffic lights.

" That car could use an engine overhaul."

" He could use an engine overhaul," said Jones. " I'm sorry, Pudge. I know you're a member of First Parish."

" The old reverend's got quite a following, but..."

" He's such a... a..."

" Dipstick."

Jones grinned and gave Pudge a tap on the shoulder. " Have a good one, Pudge."

" You, too, Matthias."

Jones smiled, but quickly turned. " Say, Pudge, a woman in an off road vehicle, maybe green, ever pull in here? "

" A lot of people come and go. Can't say anything comes to mind right away. Why?"

" She may be a suspect in Webster's murder. "

" I'll tell the boys. We'll keep a lookout. You say green off road? "

" Green or dark... Thanks, Pudge. "

Jones headed back to the jeep, but he did not see Hooper. He walked around the jeep and checked the rear seat. " Hooper, where are you?"

He climbed back in the driver's seat. A kid's tape playback toy was stuck on the visor. Jones pushed the button and Hooper's annoying voice vibrated on the tiny speaker. " *I'm on the run and undercover. I suggest you follow up on the napkin and other evidence. And then it will be: case closed, problem solved. Hooper out.*"

Jones shook his head and started the jeep. He glanced at the playback toy as he veered onto Main Street, but Bricker's attitude bothered him. Now he understood why Gallagher was so upset. Maybe because of his position within the small town, Bricker was both pompous and arrogant. Jones thought back about the land. Just six months ago, around Christmas time, the blue and red Abrams Realty For Sale sign came down. Nigel mentioned no one had expressed an interest in purchasing the land, yet six months later Gallagher was a legitimate buyer and Bricker would not sell.

Jones had the green light and started around the common, but hit a bump, and the recording on the visor went off again. " *I'm on the run and undercover. I suggest you follow up on the napkin and other evidence. And then it will be: case closed, problem solved. Hooper out..*"

" Oh, shut up, Hooper."

He ripped the toy from the visor, chucked it out the window, and it rolled toward the common. Unfortunately Hooper was right. That napkin was related to the murder and Webster Howard likely was murdered at a place call R/L. Witnesses at R/L might help unfold the investigation. Maybe Mike Fitzgerald knew more than he was saying. Jones looked back uptown. Hooper's van was gone in front of the Cornucopia.

He passed the bank and trekked around the west side of the common. Mike Fitzgerald had an odd antipathy about the whole case. Sharing any evidence, such as why Webster went to sea earlier than usual, seemed remote. Jones sensed Webster tried to beat the pending storm, but his hurried pace and the argument with his wife at the dock was suspicious. Jones imagined Webster sailing out early for nefarious purposes; maybe a drug run. He smiled at the absurdity and shook his head. Webster appeared to be an innocent handyman with no sinister motives nor any bad habits.

Jones peered up at Bricker's huge white church as he turned at the far end of the common. The prodigious pane glass windows were dark and the steeple disappeared into the night air. As he headed toward his own house, he saw the glow from lights in L.G. Bentley's office across the common and he slowed the jeep. Bricker's station wagon was parked in the side alley. The important appointment, alluded to by the reverend back at the gas pumps, was with a lawyer. Jones stopped the jeep in front of his picket fence and got out.

L.G. was visible through the window. He swiveled in his brown leather chair. Bricker waved papers in his face, gestured vigorously, and then hurled the papers onto the desk. L.G. sprang from his chair and pointed at the reverend. He scooped up a piece of paper and held it in front of Bricker's face. Bricker snatched the sheet and the rest of the papers on the desk and bolted out of sight.

L.G. pounded his fist silently on the desk and sat down again. He reached in his desk drawer and pulled out a cigar, lighting it quickly. Jones could almost smell the smoke. The side entrance door slammed across the common. Bricker was not visible, but the station wagon soon started and headlights shone out the alley. He rounded the corner, shot along the common and rolled rapidly into the church's circular drive.

L.G. had placed a phone call as Bricker's red taillights went dark. Jones had little understanding of the confrontation nor of the reverend's adamant attitude against Gallagher, but he knew Gallagher would relish hearing this story.