

# Trinity

A Haydn & Speaker Mystery

## Chapter 4



The Lutheran Church was filled with the mournful and the inquisitive on Saturday morning, May 13. The weather outside was unfittingly sunny—the most brilliant and warmest day of the week—but the atmosphere inside was magisterially solemn. Norman Wilkinson had been a presence in Humboldt, the focus of admiration and respect and, in some instances, fear. People were curious to see what his daughter would wear, curious too to learn what she'd say. And they were also drawn by the prospect of hearing Mayor Proctor and President Morrison eulogize the man who had been such a prominent benefactor to both the town and the college. Shrug sat on the right of the large church, closer to the front than the back. Connie, who attended church only for weddings and funerals, sat in the balcony.

After various prayers and scripture readings, the mayor stepped up to the pulpit. He reflected on the many years he had known the deceased, said that the

town owed him a debt of gratitude beyond paying (“That’s surely true,” thought Connie), and was pleased to announce that the park that was being built near the grade school would be named after him. A murmur of assent rustled across the congregation. The president followed the mayor. Her deliberate speaking style contrasted with the mayor’s down-home delivery—he had once been an automobile salesman—but her theme was parallel to the mayor’s: the deceased had given gifts to Humboldt College that had been indispensable to the rise in the reputation of the college and in particular to its success at becoming more diverse and academically rigorous. “That last point is a bit of a stretch,” thought Connie. She then was pleased to announce that the life sciences building currently under construction would be named after him.

The last person to address the congregation was Eleanor Wilkinson Trout. She wore the same black outfit that Connie had seen the previous day, but her hair showed the effects of the ministrations of an early-morning visit to a professional coiffeur. She spoke of her love for her daddy, she alluded—more obliquely than the curious in the congregation might have wished—to his forgiveness of incidents of waywardness in her youth, she thanked those in attendance for attending the service, and then she unexpectedly broke down in tears and had to be led back

to her pew seat by the Reverend Peter Schneider. Almost everyone felt sympathy for her, but more than a few noted that there was no sign of the mysterious Mr. Trout.

After the service a long line of cars made its way to the town's chief cemetery. At the grave site a few more memorializing remarks were made, the words that chill the ages—"ashes to ashes, dust to dust"—were pronounced, and Norman Wilkinson's physical remains were covered by shovelfuls of hard Ohio clay. Then, the radiance of the sun still belying the solemnity of the occasion, the mourners began to drift away to their cars. Presumably some had been invited back to the Castle, but Connie Haydn and Shrug Speaker were not among them.

As Connie walked toward the parking area, he heard his name called out. Turning, he saw President Morrison approaching. She wanted to talk with him.

Beatrice Morrison was a person whom most people, including Connie, liked. Though now sixty years old and a twenty-seven year veteran of the presidency of Humboldt College, she still bore her tall and sturdy frame without any stoop and she still exuded forcefulness. An historian by training and author of a study of the American plains after the Civil War, she had been lured away from a deanship in Nebraska in 1973 when the presidency of Humboldt had come

open. Although many had expressed doubts about her hiring (even though she was not the first woman president in the college's history), she had won over the skeptics by the resoluteness with which she defended the college's secular tradition and the energy that she committed to fund-raising. She had led the college through three capital campaigns, overseen the construction of residence halls, a library, and now a science facility, and become a visible figure on the national higher education scene, often visiting other small, private colleges to serve as a cheerleader for the mission of the liberal arts education in a nation increasingly enamored of "practical" learning. She had provided vision for Humboldt at the end of the twentieth century, and although she had not achieved all she had set out to accomplish, Connie knew from conversations with colleagues at other schools that Humboldt was fortunate to have a president who labored, listened, and laughed.

"I see you so rarely these days," she began, "that I didn't want to pass up this chance to say hello. Besides, I've just finished your book on Hume, and since I learned a great deal from it, I wanted to thank you."

If Connie Haydn was a competent social flatterer, Beatrice Morrison belonged in the big leagues. Connie knew as much, but the president's kind words had the effect she had wished for, and

Connie's eyes brightened slightly but perceptibly.

"Thank you," he said, smiling. He began stroking his beard, as he often did when he was self-conscious. "Your remarks at the service were nicely pitched," he said. "As for the book on Hume, I worked hard at it, and so I appreciate your taking notice of it." And he did. But he also wondered if she knew that the reviews of the book had been rather harsh, concluding (in aggregate) that the book was pedestrian, not very original, and (according to one cutting review that Connie could almost recite from memory) "misleading for the novice philosopher and useless for the old hand." His earlier book on Kant had received a kinder reception and had helped earn for Connie a local reputation—undeserved, he knew—as one of the small number of Humboldt faculty members who was a figure of consequence on the national scholarly stage. "Are you set for commencement?" he said, deliberately changing the subject.

"Oh yes," President Morrison replied, "we've finally gotten a commitment from Archibald Davenport to deliver the address. I know the students are a bit disappointed that we couldn't get a more famous figure—they hoped for Madeleine Albright, but she wasn't available—but Archibald is an old friend of mine—a fellow book collector. He's going to talk about the importance of scholarly passion."

Beatrice Morrison's enthusiasm for old books was

celebrated on campus, not least because she loved to talk about the subject. Most faculty members thought it a somewhat endearing avocation, and in any case no self-respecting academic would criticize a president who visibly loved books at a time when so many college and university presidents seemed unaware of the location of their campus library. But Connie knew he was not alone in worrying that what had begun as a hobby was becoming an obsession with President Morrison. And there was no way to dodge the subject of old books now.

“I just acquired a first edition of Parkman’s *Lasalle and the Discovery of the Great West*,” she confided. “It’s particularly handsome, and I hope you’ll drop by to see it some day. And you probably haven’t seen my copy of Hume’s *History of England*.”

That was a remark clearly designed to catch Connie’s attention, for he was known to believe that to appreciate the skepticism of Hume the philosopher you needed to be acquainted with the moderation of Hume the historian. “I’d love to see it,” he said with enthusiasm, pausing in the hope that Beatrice Morrison would suggest an occasion for viewing the books. But the president apparently had other things on her mind, and so Connie had to take the initiative in getting himself invited to the president’s house—Monday evening at 7:30 turned out to be a convenient

time for both—before the conversation moved on to the investigation.

“I read where you’re looking into the death of Vincent d’Amato. Have you come up with anything interesting yet?”

“Not really. Shrug Speaker and I are in this together, and right now we’re just trying to ferret out information. I don’t suppose you know anything that might be useful to us.” He said that light-heartedly.

But Beatrice Morrison’s reaction was not quite right. For although she laughed at the suggestion and quietly said “no,” Connie thought he detected something puzzling in her voice or her face and felt briefly nonplused. “Why can’t I be more observant about these things?” he thought, with a bit of grimace. All he could think to add—and this was lame—was a hope that Morrison would pass on any relevant information that might occur to her.

Besides, he had a topic of his own to raise: the science building project. Connie was concerned that the small and old brick building which provided office space for retirees like himself sat so close to the construction site for the new facility that it was fated to lose its view out on the hills beyond the town once the new structure began to rise. He took the opportunity of this chance meeting to express his regret. Beatrice Morrison replied with some-

thing about the inevitability of change, and Connie rejoined with something about the growing attractiveness of older days and ways, and the two friends, realizing that they were at an impasse, parted with a brief hug. But Connie couldn't shake the sense that Beatrice Morrison had been quietly disturbed by his question, and he was left to wonder whether it was possible that upright Beatrice Morrison had had some contact with sleazy Vincent d'Amato?



Shrug Speaker returned home immediately after the funeral to eat lunch. He found a voice mail message from Rita Grabek waiting for him. She regretted that she'd missed him during the morning and said she'd try again about 3:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. The mention of the time zone reminded Shrug that Rita Grabek, calling presumably from Seattle, had placed the call to him at a very early hour. "She must have a busy schedule or be a pre-dawn jogger," he mused.

Shrug prepared himself for the call by reading carefully through the notes he had been taking. He realized that George Fielding's tale had transformed Grabek from a mere source of information into what he was inclined to call "a person of interest." The tale also

suggested that she might not be entirely forthcoming when confronted with Shrug's questions.

The call came through at 3:10, and Grabek, who gave the sense of being a person who ran her life by a strict schedule, apologized for being tardy. She explained that she had her personal notes about the d'Amato murder laid out before her on her desk, and she sounded like a person who wanted to be helpful.

Shrug began by letting her know about how he had come to be interested in this four-year-old murder case. He told her how Norman Wilkinson had asked Connie Haydn to look into the conviction of Jason Bigelow, how Connie had invited Shrug to join the investigation, how they had talked with many of those most closely involved with the matter, and how they would appreciate input from the reporter whose articles had turned a closed accident investigation into an open murder investigation. He then began his questions. "How did you get interested in the case in the first place?"

"Mr Wilkinson encouraged me to look into it. He said he thought that Mr. d'Amato might have been murdered."

Shrug was thinking fast. Norman Wilkinson had not mentioned that he had provided the impetus for the re-opening of the matter. That omission seemed odd. He had represented himself to Connie as a man

who thought Jason Bigelow had been wrongly convicted. Now it turned out—always assuming that Rita Grabek was telling the truth—that even before that point he had suspected that the initial death was not an accident. What was his interest in all of this, and where did he get his information from? But his next question revealed none of this rapid cogitation. “What did Norman Wilkinson tell you?”

“Not a whole lot. He came by my office at the Herald and Examiner one day in the fall of 1996 and said that he was unhappy about the negligent way the law enforcement people had investigated Mr. d’Amato’s death. He said he thought there might be a riveting story here for an ‘assiduous reporter’—those were his words, ‘assiduous reporter.’ I suspected he was teasing me, or maybe hitting on me. But remember, he was a demi-god in Humboldt and I was a young reporter, in my first real job, trying to make a name for myself. So I didn’t see any reason not to look into Mr. d’Amato’s death. And I did good investigating on that case.” She was suddenly more obviously prideful. “The success of that story got me to Austin, and my articles about scandals in Texas’s preparations for dealing with the millennium bug got me my current job with the Seattle Challenger. So I’m pleased with my work in Humboldt, even if it was a lucky break that got me launched. Everyone’s lucky at some point in their career.”

“Why do you think it was that the police missed the evidence that you managed to locate?”

“Well actually I didn’t locate all that much new evidence. It’s true that my articles made public the fact that Mr. d’Amato had had a string of visitors that day, but the police already knew that.”

“And how did you find out about them?”

“Simple. In my first article I asked the people who had visited Mr. d’Amato that day to make themselves known to me. Five then came forward. That’s a fuller list than the sheriff’s. I always said there might have been still more.” Her voice fell briefly silent, and Shrug heard the shuffling of papers in distant Seattle.

Then Rita Grabek continued. “What I did—and this is what I kept saying in my articles—was put things in a new light. Although it was interesting that a bunch of people visited Mr. d’Amato on the afternoon of the fire that killed him, the real question was to try to figure out who had been in the house that evening, at about the time the fire started. I envisioned this scenario: maybe one of the afternoon visitors had a quarrel with Mr. d’Amato and came back in the evening to settle a score by torching the house. I was thinking about other scenarios too, including the default possibility that some homeless guy had stumbled in to burn the house down, for some reason we’d never fathom. But the main scenario became

attractive when I was able to show that one person who'd been there in the afternoon—Jason Bigelow—couldn't account for his activities that evening. Or, more accurately, wouldn't account for them. As for the pen, here's the one place where the police really were careless. But my advantage was that I was new to Humboldt. I spent lots of time looking through the items gathered in the basement and noticed that the pen had the name of Mr. Bigelow's hardware store on it. The police thought that fact inconsequential because they believed the pen was one of the complimentary ones that the hardware store distributed to customers. But when I visited the store and showed a sketch of the pen to an employee, he identified it as a special pen of the sort that Mr Bigelow himself used. And that was it. The pen made it likely that Bigelow had been in the basement, and the refusal to provide an alibi looked basically like an admission that he was unable to provide an alibi. Oh, and did I mention that Mr. Bigelow thought that Mrs. Bigelow had been screwing around with Mr. d'Amato?"

Shrug thought the moment ripe for moving into edgier territory. "George Fielding was the deputy who handled the case. Do you think he mishandled it?"

Grabek's hesitation suggested that she was trying to decide if Shrug knew of her affair with Fielding. She chose to treat the question as non-ironic. "No, surely

not in any way that could be deemed culpable. He was kind of inexperienced, the staff wasn't large, and law enforcement people have to make judgments about how to use their time and energy. I guess he didn't make the best one."

This was, Shrug thought, far too generous. He pushed ahead. "I talked with Mr. Fielding yesterday. He thinks you used him."

The silence at the other end of the phone line was so protracted that Shrug feared Grabek had hung up. Then she spoke, coolly and crisply. "You haven't been exactly straight with me, Mr. Speaker. You obviously know more about my private life than you let on. Yes," she answered to an unspoken question, "I was in a relationship with George at that time. Yes, I can imagine that in retrospect he thought I used him. But I was really quite fond of him. He was, of course, married, and he made it very clear that he wouldn't leave his wife. We enjoyed each other's company. But there was no future in it for me, even if I'd wanted to get married then, which I didn't. The opportunity to move to Texas resolved everything, and I haven't talked to George since. I hope that's all you want to know"—her tone had been growing steadily chillier—"for it's all I'm going to say about it. Oh, except this: our relationship did not affect my investigation—George didn't give me any information that wasn't available to any curious person."

Shrug knew that George Fielding's complaint about Rita Grabek did not involve any effort by her to pump him, but he let it slide, preferring to work on another puzzle.

"Do you know why Mrs. Bigelow didn't testify at her husband's trial? That seems a pretty good sign that she wasn't the alibi he didn't want to invoke."

"That's what everyone concluded, of course. And I don't know why she didn't testify. I don't even recall her being in attendance." ("Now that's interesting," Shrug thought.) "But maybe I'm not remembering right. I attended the trial, but my notes and memory are both focused on my investigation and the articles I wrote. I do recall that it was a quick trial."

"What was your impression of Jason Bigelow's lawyer? His name was Thomas Kerwin. Did he do a good job? a poor job? Did he leave you uneasy in any way?"

Grabek thought about that for a moment, then ventured a reply. "Oh yes, Mr. Kerwin. Well, he certainly did a quick job. I don't recall much about him actually. From Columbus, I think. And no, he didn't strike me as doing a poor job. As a matter of fact, I thought he made a noble effort to persuade the jury to disregard the fact that Mr. Bigelow had no alibi. Maybe it's standard fare in this kind of situation, but he was very good about reminding the jury that the defendant did not need to prove himself innocent, only that yadda yadda. But the

jury obviously was quite satisfied that the prosecution had met its obligation of proving him guilty.”

Shrug picked up a new theme. “In your investigations, did you try to find out where Bigelow was on the evening of the fire?”

“A little bit,” Grabek replied. “But without any help from him it was hopeless. I did establish that he was often out on Saturday nights—often but far from invariably. His wife told me he liked to go to the Elks club or a local sports bar. Remember, the big Columbus golf tournament was going on at that time. She said he sometimes just liked to walk or drive about in the evening. By the time I was looking into all of this, six months had elapsed, so maybe no one would have recalled seeing him that night anyway. But he didn’t offer any help, so I didn’t know where to turn. Neither did she.”

“How about friends? Were there any people who could have served, let’s say, as character witnesses?”

“I identified three or four—right, four. I’m checking my notes. One was Jimmy Lomax, the high school baseball coach. And since you’re prowling around, I’ll tell you right away, so you don’t have to find out on your own, that Jimmy Lomax and I had a thing going for a bit at the same time that I was dating George Fielding, and that, unlike my affair with George, this one didn’t end happily.”

Shrug Speaker was not, in a general sense, unaware of how the younger generation conducted their lives, but hearing it directly from a participant made him realize how old-fashioned he was.

Grabek continued. “A second was Andrew Stonehurst. He was a higher-up of some sort in an Ohio association of hardware retailers, and when Mr. Bigelow needed to work with that group, his wife said he found Mr. Stonehurst a helpful liaison. I reached Mr Stonehurst by phone and all he could say was that Mr. Bigelow was the sort of man who gave hardware retailing a good name, whatever that might mean. The third was Tyler Delsin, the chiropractor who had visited Vince d’Amato on the afternoon of his death. He struck me as really woolly-minded. The fourth, and the hardest to track down, was an older guy, Billy Esterhazy. He didn’t have a local address, but when I finally found him at his sister’s in a nearby town – is there a Newark “in central Ohio?” Shrug noted that she didn’t say “Nerk.” “He said that he owned an appliance store in Humboldt. None of these four was useful to me, and since the defense didn’t call them as character witnesses, I guess Mr. Kerwin didn’t think they’d be helpful either.”

Shrug paused because he was scribbling names down rapidly. “Is there anything else that comes to your mind, now that we’ve been talking for a while.”

Rita Grabek chuckled. “Here’s where I’m supposed to say ‘Oh, there is one more thing...’ and it turns out to be vital. But I think you’ve drained me. If something comes up, I have your number. And Mr Speaker, I’m sorry I ragged on you earlier about not revealing all your cards up front. I’m a reporter, and I’ve been known to do the same thing. It goes with the territory. And I must say, you’re pretty good at it.”

They concluded the call, “friends” as far as Shrug could tell, though he couldn’t decide whether she’d been buttering him up at the end or expressing her real view. He promptly called Connie, saying he’d had a fruitful two days and proposing that the two men get together at his house that evening to compare notes and see how their preliminary assessment was taking shape.

Since Connie had also had some productive conversations, he agreed right away. The prospect of filling each other in was a delightful one, and both men actually had the same image in mind as they hung up: they were about to have the first war room session on the d’Amato-Bigelow case.



“The Second-Best Club convenes its most important session in years,” Shrug said, beaming as he raised his

glass. This odd term was a private joke between the two friends. It derived from the fact that each bore the name of a famous also-ran, Haydn being second to Mozart in everyone's mind, and Speaker being second to Cobb. Each friend took satisfaction from the thought that he was good but not the best, and each recognized that that kind of satisfaction was really very healthy, since few could even hope to be the best.

Shrug had set up several card tables in his cluttered living room for the laying out of items that were contained in the shoe boxes that Bianca d'Amato had given them. He had stocked up on pencils and pads of paper. He didn't know how he and Connie would choose to proceed, but he wanted to be ready. He thought it likely that they would jot lots of things down, make lists, and maybe even fill a sheet or two with names and arrows. Being a detective was new to him, and so he was inventing procedure as he went along.

"Aye, that's true, Sherlock," said Connie in reply to the reference to the club, "and we sure are having a lot of fun for second-besters." Both men laughed. They had found the past few days surprisingly energizing. It had given them new things to do, confronted them with novel challenges. And thus far it had all seemed so easy, for as they began sharing information, they realized that the conversations they'd had might have proceeded far more testily, or even—if someone had

been out of town—not proceeded at all. “It’s not so hard being Lord Peter, after all,” Shrug remarked at one point early in the evening.

When the friends turned to serious business, the first step in their war room session was to share information. Shrug told of his conversations with George Fielding and Rita Grabek, Connie of his with Eleanor Wilkinson Trout and Teresa Espinosa. Shrug worked from extensive notes, taken down as he interrogated his sources; Connie worked from notes jotted down after his conversations. They agreed that the results of these sessions opened up many more questions than they answered, but before setting out to identify those questions, they felt impelled by both their sense of good procedure and their curiosity to look at the contents of the boxes that Bianca d’Amato had lent to them.

Connie untied the strings around the boxes and dumped the miscellaneous items they contained onto one of the card tables. They fingered through them, at first without any obvious purpose and then by separating them into two groups—those items with writing on them and those that would have to speak for themselves. What immediately stood out in the former category was a paper-clipped set of seven 5” x 7” cards. On the top one were the penciled letters “IBM.” On the six other cards were musical themes, one to a card.

The two men looked at them in puzzlement. So far as they knew, Vincent d'Amato's interest in music did not extend beyond the conventional one that keeps rock music stations prospering. Why would he jot down tunes? Shrug Speaker looked at each card in turn, humming its brief melody to himself. They didn't remind him of any songs he knew. They weren't even notably pretty. And in every case they were just five quarter notes long, with no bar lines or time signatures, and all were in the key of C. "Let's hope these don't mean anything," Shrug said, "because I sure don't know what it is."

"And what do they have to do with IBM? Is IBM manufacturing recordings these days? Or could they have something to do with IBM stock?" Connie's perplexity equaled Shrug's.

"I do like a puzzle," Shrug finally said, jotting down the tunes. "I'll think about these melodies for a while. I know it's not likely to be useful to our investigation, but I enjoy musical conundrums and musical diversions. This could be both."

They then turned to other items on the table. A "Bob Dole for President" pin, newspaper clippings evaluating computer products, a receipt for a chair, a whistle, a set of post-it tabs, several pencils, a ruler, a box of condoms—"in his desk?" Connie wondered aloud—a calculator, rubber bands, and an array of

similar and apparently irrelevant items.

“Remind me again of what we’re hoping to find,” Shrug muttered, clearly unable to see anything of significance in this collection of desk items.

Connie concurred. “I can’t see anything here—aside I suppose from those indecipherable and bizarre tunes; and they’re your task now—I can’t see anything that might suggest a reason for killing the person who owned them. Or anything that points at Jason Bigelow or anyone else. So why don’t we shift our attention to the general state of the case. Where do we stand right now on the investigation?”

They decided to first put together a list of hypotheses about what might have happened on June 1, 1996.

“Well,” said Shrug, after taking a deep breath, “it seems to me it’s still likeliest that Jason Bigelow set the fire that killed Vince d’Amato. So one hypothesis is that the police got it right.”

“Merely suspecting his wife of having an affair with d’Amato is a pretty flimsy motive,” said Connie, “but I agree. The spirit of Norman Wilkinson won’t be happy to hear us talking that way.”

“A second possibility,” Shrug continued, “and the saddest, is that the first conclusion of the authorities was the right one—that the fire was an accident and that Jason wound up getting wrongly convicted.”

Again Connie agreed.

“A third possibility is that Vince committed suicide.”

“Oh come on,” Connie interrupted. “Suicide by fire? That seems really unlikely to me. I agree it’s a logical possibility and belongs on any list of possibilities. But its probability is very low.”

Shrug ignored the criticism. “A fourth possibility is that the death was a murder, as the court concluded, but that Jason didn’t commit it. This is the interesting hypothesis, because it means there’s somebody still out there who so far has escaped justice.” With that declaration, Shrug fell silent.

Ever the logician, Connie noted immediately that this fourth hypothesis had two subsets. “The unknown murderer might be someone we’ve encountered or will encounter in this investigation. But on the other hand it might be a true stranger—someone who for some reason decided to set the house afire and didn’t know Vince d’Amato.”

“That’s true,” replied Shrug. “And I suppose we’re far less likely to catch a stranger than a friend or acquaintance.”

Both then paused, each in his own world of thought. After half a minute or so, in a quieter voice, Connie resumed the conversation. “I want to suggest a fifth possibility. It just could be that the target of this set of events wasn’t really Vince d’Amato at all. Vince could have been just a means to another end. Maybe—it’s just

possible, as I say—maybe the real target was Jason Bigelow. Maybe someone was trying to frame Jason.”

“Sounds pretty far-fetched to me,” said Shrug. “And if that’s true, then the plan almost failed. But the possibility certainly enlivens an already enlivened game.” He grimaced almost immediately. “I know I shouldn’t talk like that, but the trouble is, so far this whole investigation has seemed, well, like a sport. I know that serious things like lives and justice may be at stake, and so maybe I’m using light-heartedness as a defense mechanism. But so far, I can’t help it: this is fun!” The two friends smiled at each other.

They then turned their attention to the matter of unanswered questions. They agreed that there were lots of them, and they decided to make a list of the ones that vexed them the most.

“I’d like to know how Bianca d’Amato lives beyond her apparent means,” said Connie. “She told us her husband had been a cheat. Maybe she somehow lives off money he got in some underhanded way.”

“Tyler Delsin remains a puzzle to me,” said Shrug. “Everyone agrees he’s a genuine flake, but he’s also the only name we’ve come upon with ties to both our primary dead figures—a visitor to Vince’s place on the day of the fire and a close friend of Jason’s. I’d like to ask him some questions.”

“And don’t forget Thomas Kerwin.” Connie began even before Shrug had finished. “He’s the one central player we haven’t talked to at all. What, I wonder, was his defense strategy? Does he have any thoughts about the unrevealed alibi?”

“And I’d like to know who this Maria Tedesco is,” added Shrug. “Hers is the one name that has come up that we know nothing about.”

“Well, that’s not quite so,” Connie replied. “Thanks to Rita Grabek we now have a list of four friends of Jason’s, three of whom are new to us and two of whom don’t live in Humboldt.”

“That’s true,” Shrug admitted. “And since all of them are men, I wonder if Jason’s homosexuality will turn out to be significant.” Shrug paused with this reflection and then continued. “I’ve assumed that the reason Jason wouldn’t reveal his alibi—always assuming he had one—was that he was shielding someone or some thing. If he was gay, that possibility becomes somewhat stronger.”

“Maybe,” said Connie. “But it’s still hard for me to imagine that any activity, however embarrassing—and I think it’s likelier to have been something criminal—would be worth getting convicted for. But then again, returning to the gay hypothesis, if he was protecting a person he deeply cared for, perhaps he’d do it.”

“Greater love hath no man than this...” Shrug didn’t need to continue, for he knew that Connie, non-believer though he was, was familiar with scripture.

“And there’s still another puzzle,” Connie noted, a frown briefly covering his face. “I’d like to know what Norman Wilkinson’s interest in this whole affair really was. He certainly wasn’t completely candid with us. First he prodded Grabek, then he prodded us. I wonder if he tried to nudge anyone else? It’s too bad we can’t ask him.”

The two friends had not exhausted their imaginations or curiosities, and so the rambling conversation spun itself out for some time still, often circling back into familiar territory. They noted their puzzlement over Beatrice Morrison’s apparent uneasiness at the mention of Vince d’Amato’s name, over Gene Simons’s odd position in the life of Patricia Bigelow Simons, over Patricia Simons’s peculiar silence about her husband’s accusation of adultery, and over George Fielding’s unnecessary admission of an affair with Rita Grabek. Finally, however, Shrug said that they needed to bring order to their musings. “It seems to me that we have to prioritize our goals and that the first one, if we’re fulfilling the terms of our commitment, is to establish Jason Bigelow’s innocence or guilt. And it also seems to me that the best way to try to establish his innocence is to see if we

can figure out what his unused alibi—assuming he really had one—was.”

Connie had to agree. Much as he loved the rich amorphousness of their speculations and observations — “this is like conversation in the faculty lounge,” he thought happily—he knew that if they hoped to accomplish anything concrete, they needed an action program.

Shrug was still a step ahead of him. “Tomorrow is Sunday. We probably can’t reach Thomas Kerwin or Andrew Stonehurst until Monday—and let’s try to set up Tuesday appointments with them—but there’s no reason why we can’t try Jimmy Lomax and Tyler Delsin tomorrow. And we can’t forget Billy Esterhazy.”

“Or Maria Tedesco,” Connie added.

They apportioned out the assignments (Connie took Stonehurst, Lomax, and Tedesco; Shrug took Kerwin, Delsin and Esterhazy), consumed a final drink, and spent a moment on the front porch admiring the changeless sweep of stars from the Big Bear’s tail through Arcturus down to Spica. As Connie left, the two friends laughingly agreed that it had been a fruitful evening. But later that night, as each settled into bed, neither could recall why they’d thought that. The war room session had left the scene seeming murkier than ever.