

A man, crazed by divorce, returns home only to find that his father has committed suicide and lost the family farm. He intends to avenge this act by killing the banker and the President of the United States.

Prodigal Son

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The Prodigal Son

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The Prodigal Son

Richard Lemmon

CHAPTER 1

Father Parenti's voice sounded bored as he wound down. "And into dust thou shalt return." He cast a handful of frozen Maine dirt atop the simple pine box at his feet, followed it with a hurried spray of holy water and it was done. The funeral of old Amos Harmon was ended. Thoroughly chilled by a cold Canadian wind, the old priest turned up the collar of his coat and stared at the younger man who blocked his way. In need of a haircut and wearing a borrowed overcoat too small for his huge frame, Freddy Harmon brushed back the tears as he flung a clump of gathered wild flowers on his father's grave.

"I'm sorry about your Father, Freddy." The priest tried to brush past and around the broken headstones surrounding Amos Harmon's grave. It was an old cemetery, mostly used to bury paupers and Freddy wondered why his father had been denied burial in the Catholic cemetery just adjacent. That cemetery, better shaded and better cared for, was just uphill from Rockport's a deep water harbor, always filled with rusting lobster boats and home to an aging three-masted schooner

that still managed to ferry tourists out and back to the nearby islands

"How have you been?" A blank stare, so, unable to get by Freddy, the priest buttoned his coat and waited. And waited, until... "Can't stay to talk, sorry,." Another blank stare, but finally Freddy stepped aside and turned to watch the priest hurry down the path to one of the few cars parked alongside the road.

"Glad I caught up with you." Freddy turned back to see Bill Condor, his father's best friend, approaching and together, the two men stood near the grave-site and watched quietly as the smallish crowd dispersed. "The folks around here mean well, Freddy, and that's why they came." The same blank stare that had driven away the priest. "But if you're wondering why Father Parenti refused burial in St. Anne's Cemetery, he...uh...couldn't do otherwise being it was a suicide."

"Suicide?" The stare turned to glare.

"What can I say," Condor confirmed with a shrug.

"Maybe if his so called friends had helped Pop when he needed help, there wouldn't have been a funeral, much less one that wouldn't let lay alongside Mom."

Another shrug. "C'mon, Freddy. We both know suicides aren't allowed in sacred grounds. But that's neither here nor there." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a well creased envelope and thrust it at Freddy. "Your Father wanted me to give this to you, whenever you got home."

Freddy stuck it in his coat pocket. "He knew he was going to die?"

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“It was suicide, Freddy.”

“Why’d he do it?” Freddy eyes suddenly brimmed over with tears.

“Sometime when we have more time, Freddy.” Condor waved toward a woman getting into a car and shook his head. “You remember my wife, Mabel, Freddy. Anyway, she’d got a doctor’s appointment so I’ll have to go. Maybe tonight we can go over my thoughts of why your Father did himself in. Short, sweet and to the point right now, Freddy, I’d say Amos lost it when the bank came down on him to repay the loan, He couldn’t take it.” Condor started toward his car, then paused. “Give your wife Anne my best, Freddy.”

Freddy’s tortured eyes softened and his shoulders slumped. “She couldn’t make it, we kind of...uh...got divorced. As to the bank thing,” he took a deep breath, “I’ll want the details and the names involved.” Turning his back on Condor, he stumbled toward his aging pick-up, ignoring the well wishes from what remained of the crowd. Mud-splattered with a broken windshield, torn seats and balding tires, the pickup was two years older than Freddy’s thirty-one years. Forcing the driver’s door open with a screw-driver, he got in and coaxed the engine into reluctant life. Tires screaming he then barreled down the icy hill, hell bent for the center of town where he took a quick left and barreled into the parking lot of a restaurant fronting the harbor.

Aiming for a distant corner of that lot, he parked near a tree where he’d first kissed his ex-wife and shut off the motor. Still blurry-eyed he stared through the windshield at the horse-shoe harbor tying

Rockport to the Atlantic. A long time ago in high school, this had been his favorite spot to think on and today was no exception. The ocean was calm for this late in November and the summer homes surrounding the harbor were mostly deserted. Turning up the heat, Freddy leaned back and studied the old three-masted schooner near the mouth of the harbor. To his left, further down the shoreline, was the wooden bridge leading to the deserted stone quarry. Cris-crossed with spider webs and covered in leaves, that rickety old bridge had been a great place for fishing, something his Father had done years ago.

Cranking up the pick-up engine to keep the battery charged, Freddy re-adjusted the choke, bring back other memories of the day he and his Father had first installed it. "Can't trust automatic ones," Amos had cautioned. "On a cold day they'll conk out on you." Suddenly recalling the envelope from Condor, Freddy took it out of his pocket and tore it open, staring in surprise as a handful of hundred dollar bills tumbled out on his lap. Along with a note in his Paw's handwriting saying, "This money's from selling the tractor and pawning your Mama's wedding ring. I wanted to get what I could for you, son, and with the farm gone, it was the only thing I could do to leave you something. I reckon you'll be shocked at what I had to do, but it wasn't because I was crazy. Not saying it was right, just not crazy. Me and your Mama worked hard to teach you what's right, but what's done is done and that's all there is to it." Throat swelling, Freddy read on about his hopes for a better day and his disappointment when the bank foreclosed on Harmon Hollow. The note ended with a plea that the

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good Lord go easy on the judging and the same wish that Freddy too wouldn't judge him too harshly.

Freddy sat back and stared up at the heavens, begging, in the name of his Father's God, for the mercy he so craved, whispering, "He meant well and you know it." There. If anybody was listening, there! He balled his hands into fists and squeezed, so tight a thin line of blood oozed under his nails and down on his pants as he wondered why the banker had to do that. And why the God of his Father had to let the whole thing come down like that. Nothing he could do about the God, but the banker...he searched the letter for the banker's name. In vain.

Misty eyes back on the three-master, Freddy next recalled the day he and Anne had returned to Rockport for their son's fifth birthday present. A ride on that schooner. Something his Father had planned on for weeks. And on that fated day, Amos had taken his Grandson down to the harbor. He had double-checked the price in advance and saved for a month for that day, planning to show Timothy first hand how his great-grandfather had come to America. But according to the Captain of that schooner that day, the price had gone up to the summer fare and nothing could be done. The day had ended in tears for everyone.

Once again Freddy's hands clenched tight and once again the thin line of blood could be seen. "Bastard. He was staring at the schooner. "People hurting people when they don't have to. Somewhere it has to stop."

Two hours later the sun was down and the moon was up, bathing the harbor in it's light as Freddy watched the schooner crew

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row ashore for a night at the Anchor Inn. Overcoat collar pulled high against the freshening wind, he opened the pick-up door and reached around to the bed for the five gallon gasoline can that was always there. A few minutes later and Freddy was on the wooden jetty heading for the rowboat the crew had left.

CHAPTER 2

An hour later, Freddy parked under the oak tree with the rope swing and paused to stare at the field now filled with nothing but weeds. Those weeds, more than anything else, mute testimony to his Father's absence from the farm. He'd come home too late for his father and too late to stop the weeds.

He walked toward the farmhouse then. His birthplace. Notched pine logs—his Great-grandfather never nailed anything, the old place hadn't changed in over a century, excepting the slightest of leans to the right. Or maybe not. Underneath the kitchen there would no doubt still be the root cellar they'd used against the really bad storms and passing the well, he paused to drop a stone, counting the seconds for the splash. Seven where it used to be three. Going dry. Water drying up, weeds coming on strong, the whole place was going to hell.

Inside the farmhouse was the stone fireplace his mother sometimes heated coffee over and in the corner the cast iron stove she'd used to cook on. And under that stove no doubt the same rat hole

she'd used to keep her egg money. Everywhere there was sameness, missing only the people who'd created that sameness.

Lighting the kerosene lamp still on the table, he wiped the dust off the mirror near the door and stared back at the face staring back at him. Different from this morning's hopeful look when he hadn't known what he knew now. Harder.

On the porch he found some dry wood and lit a fire in the fireplace and brought the lamp over to the table where it was now bright enough to see the envelopes leaning one against the other as if awaiting his attention. Well they had it. He pulled a chair up to the table and tackled them one by one. The earliest date was the letter he'd written from New York announcing that he'd once again been fired, lamenting, "I know nothing but farming, Paw." Whining. How had his Father taken that? Later in the letter he'd gone on to tell about his divorce and his attempts to borrow enough money to move Anne and Timothy back to Rockport. And failure that he'd been, he'd failed that too. Ten years of marriage and all he'd provided his family was a small two bedroom apartment furnished in broken promises.

Later in that letter he'd warned his father against expanding Harmon Hollow based on the promise of a politician. "Paw, everybody knows that President Bellows is the worst president this country ever had, and the idea of raising corn in Maine won't work." He had ended the letter by promising—he'd always been a good promiser--that when he had enough money he'd return and set things right on the farm, even confessing that his decision to leave the farm for the city had been the

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worst decision he'd ever made. "I need to get back to waking up in the morning and planning what needs doing on the farm, Paw. From now on that will be all I ever ask of life. Your loving son, Freddy."

The big time promise man! He threw the letter down in disgust and picked up the next one. From Anne and it brought another flow of tears as she explained to Amos why she'd left him. "I love him, you know that I do, and I will probably always love him, but as our son, Timothy gets older, it's important that he have a good example of what to do in life. I know now, that I should never have insisted Freddy leave the farm. My love forever, Anne."

The third letter was the formal notice of eviction from the Rockport Savings and Loan Bank, from the office of Mr. C. D. Hedgewick, the fancy heading read. In the body of the text, in much less flowing terms, it implied that the foreclosure was the fault of the Federal Loan Association. But it was the last sentence that caused Freddy's blood to boil over. "Further, I must advise you that you are enjoined by law to leave such possessions as may be suitable for auction, excluding a change of clothes and such bathroom needs as may be necessary. Sincerely, Carter Hedgewick."

Sincerely? He crumpled Hedgewick's letter and threw it across the floor into the fireplace where the flames leapt up to embrace, shrivel and curl it into ashes. "Remember thou art ashes, Hedgewick, and into ashes that shalt return." Eyes burning from the fireplace smoke, he slammed a fist down hard on the table. Hedgewick, pushing an old man off his land, damn him to hell! Sweet Jesus, where does

anyone get the right to do things like that?

He sat back in the chair and stared at the ceiling until the fire had withered to a glowing ember. Thinking. Hating. Then, kerosene lamp in hand, he got up and walked across the kitchen to his Father's bedroom. Dust, a brass bed, a stuffed chair and a wooden dresser with a spider's web across the mirror. On the dresser, four pictures. One of him, one of his parents, one of his Mother with a baby and finally a tin-type of his grandparents. Alongside the last picture there was his father's wedding band. The pictures and the ring went in his pocket as he opened the dresser drawers. Underwear, socks, a white shirt in the closet along with the suit his Father always wore to mass. Fifty years of church, he reminisced, never late for mass and they couldn't bury him in their damn cemetery? Further back in the closet was a shotgun, twelve gauge and he brought it back to the kitchen where he rekindled the fire.

Seated again at the table, he carefully recounted the money he'd found in the letter. Six-thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills, everything his Father had left now that the farm had gone over to that son-of-a-bitching banker!

"Anybody home?" Bill Condor was at the kitchen door. Beckoned inside by Freddy, he stomped his boots outside to shake off the mud before coming into the kitchen. And seeing the shotgun propped up alongside the door. "I see you found it. Sorry I didn't have a chance to clean it after the police brought it back."

Freddy stared in horror at the shotgun. "You mean—" .

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“Yep. That’s how your Father died. Sorry.”

Freddy slumped in his chair. “What’s done is done and what’s yet to be done, is yet to be done. Was the name of the banker who started all this Hedgewick?”

Condor nodded.

“Must have been some others involved, for example, who else was in one persuading an old man he needed to go in debt to buy land he didn’t need?”

Condor sat down and turned up the kerosine lamp. In his mid-fifties with tufts of grey at the temples, he’d been a neighbor longer than Freddy had been a son. “Lighten up, Freddy, and quite trying to blame Hedgewick for what happened. He didn’t pull the trigger and everything hr did was legal and by the books. Otherwise this whole town would have come down on the bank. And speaking of something bad happening, did you hear about what happened at the harbor last night?”

“Nope.”

Condor sat back and lit up a pipe. “Had a hell of a fire down there. I thought maybe you might have seen it.”

“I was there in the afternoon. Guess I missed it. What happened?”

“The Maine Wind caught fire,” Condor continued. “Must be the watchman got drunk and lit something he shouldn’t have. Course he denies it. Paper said they never saw anything go up so fast.” He looked around the house and shook his head. “Your Paw kind of let things run

down at the end, son. Did you find anything you can use?"

"There was some money in the envelope you gave me at the cemetery and that's about it."

Condor studied Freddy closely. "You sound ticked, son. Look, I know things ain't been going right for you, but something else is stuck in your craw and I'm not talking about your Father's death. All these questions of who do what and when to your Father. Way you've been carrying on would have worried Amos too."

Freddy's face signaled a halt to that line and Condor took the hint with a shrug. "Your business I guess, so what'd you think down at the harbor when you noticed not so many lobster boats these days?"

"How come?"

"Too many regulations for anybody to make a living nowadays, be there fishermen or farmers. Drives a lot of us to the wall just like it did Amos. You ask me, Washington ought to get out of the way so we can make a living." On his feet, Condor moved closer to the fireplace, backside first. "Got a chill won't quit. Getting old I guess." He turned and bent over the fire to warm his hands. "What do you say I fix us one of your Father's famous hot toddies?"

Freddy shrugged and watched Condor walk over to the kitchen cabinet that had always held the liquor. A quick look inside and he closed it. "Should have remembered Amos switched to tea when finances closed there at the end. He never was one for the hard stuff though."

"Did he eat okay?"

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“Most nights Mabel and I had him over to dinner.”

Condor filled two peanut butter glasses with water, gave one to Freddy and returned to the fireplace. “Tell you the truth, your Father was feeling worse and worse as time went along. I think he was wondering how to tell you what happened to the farm.”

Freddy sighed and pushed the glass away. “Just before you came here tonight I read a letter from that Hedgewick guy telling Paw he was going to foreclose the house, evict him and take his clothes.”

Condor looked surprised. “Your Paw never mentioned the take your clothes bit.”

“Do you think he really believed the bank could take the clothes off his back?”

“Don't know how to say this delicate like, but at the end, Amos was beginning to look a might tetchd. Covered it pretty well, but Mabel and I could see it. Speaking of which, every now and again, I kind of--”

“Shut-up!” Freddy screamed as he jumped to his feet. “We’re talking about my Father, your friend, committing suicide over a banker who could care less! Who found him?”

“I did and--”

“What does Rockport Savings have to do with the Federal Land Bank Association?”

“You’re talking government now, son, and if I was you I wouldn’t bother going down that path. You never get any satisfaction from them bureaucrats.”

"I asked you what they did, goddamn it!"

"Go easy," Condor whispered, taking a cautious step away from the fire. "When they talked about me expanding my farm, the FLBA guarantees things if you go to your local banker for a loan. The bank likes it because they have nothing to lose and a fat interest rate to gain."

"Paw didn't have any other alternatives after things went down the tubes?"

"Once he got behind in the payment, Hedgewick sent him that letter. No warning, no nothing and I couldn't convince your father to appeal it, although he knew what it meant not to fight them. Near broke his heart because he'd always planned on leaving the farm to you."

Freddy began to pace the room as Condor watched, now just a few steps away from the door. "Hedgewick have anything personal in this, Condor?"

"Rumor, and that's all it is, son, has it that Hedgewick needed your Father's place to go with the Johnson farm he took over last year. Something about a big resort. Even talking about people coming up from New York and down from Canada."

Freddy froze, his mind overwhelmed with the image of a fat banker kicking his Father off the land to make way for a fancy resort.

"You hear what I said, Freddy?"

Freddy snapped back and nodded. "Who else? Somebody had to be directing the FLBA to do this to my Father?"

Condor shook his head. "Hear you go again thinking there's

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some kind of conspiracy against your Father when it's nothing more than a group of bureaucrats doing what they always do, carrying out orders."

Freddy's voice dropped to a barely audible whisper. "What bureaucrats?"

"The Bellows administration. They were the ones who came up with the Corn for Friends deal. Trouble is they never bothered to put any limits on the program. Things like where corn can be raised and where it can't. Twenty years ago your Father would have laughed at the thought of raising corn on Harmon Hollow, but time had taken its toll and he wasn't paying all the attention he should have to Bellows."

"Who besides Bellows?" Freddy hissed.

"I guess maybe his Veep, his Vice-President, a guy named Rosenthal."

"Write their names on this envelope." Freddy shoved the envelope that held Anne's letter forward. "Now!"

Condor came forward, slowly, and scribbled the requested names on the envelope before quickly backed away. "C'mon now, Freddy, this is getting way too deep for me."

"Not for me!" Freddy studied the names, smiled, and then added the name of the banker to the other two. "Thing is, politicians never think of the little guy, just what will help them get reelected. In this case they roped in Hedgewick who in turn convinced my Father to buy more land and then yanked the rug out from under him. Birds of a feather. Corn in Maine? Paw had to be sick."

“Whoa, son. Somewhere along the line this conversation seems to have gone from rotten politicians to a deliberate conspiracy against your Father. And you got a look in your eye, like I never seen before.” He edged toward the door until Freddy blocked his way.

Nose to nose, Freddy said, “Were you in on it?”

Condor backed up and held up his arms. “Never was, never will be, but I’m not going to fight you to prove that. Your Father wanted more than anything else to give you something he never had when he was a kid and he failed. Let it go at that.”

“Shut-up,” Freddy screamed, eyes gleaming in the firelight.

“Relax. Don’t let your Father’s death drive you off the tracks.”

“Get out of here before I forget you used to be a friend,”

Freddy said softly as Condor continued toward the door. “And don’t say anything else about Paw.”

“I wasn’t about to and you’d see that I wasn’t if you didn’t have your head up your ass.”

Freddy’s mouth moved into a thin smile. “How come my Paw got taken in and you didn’t?”

Condor fumbled with the latch, threw the door open and stepped out onto the porch. “We’ll talk later when you’re feeling better. I’ll tell Mabel you said hello and--”

“Hedgewick, Bellows, Rosenthal,” Freddy mumbled, trailing after Condor in the yard. “My Father used to tell me to trust Bellows, he even voted for him, but he got taken for a ride in the end. As for you,” he wagged his finger, “you’re lucky I don’t add your name to the

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mix. Hear what I said? And don't come back!" Freddy waved an axe that he picked up near a woodpile.

Inside the living room again, Freddy picked up the shotgun and studied it closely. He should have seen the blood in the bedroom, but the light had been dim there. And somehow it blended in with the walnut stock. He got a rag from the closet, wet it from his glass of water and sat down at the table where he scrubbed at the blood, washing it away with a blend of tears and water.

He had failed in everything he'd ever tried in the past, but this time, in honor of his Father and Anne, he's follow through to the end on something that would make them proud of him.

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