

Macom Farm—beautiful and sinister—with dark secrets and unique attributes—a developer's dream! Jason & Andrea endure ugly twists and hardships in intense standoffs between developer, townsfolk, and unknown forces with evil intentions.

Macom Farm

By Tom Baldwin

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TOM BALDWIN

THOU SHALT NOT COVET

**MACCOM
FARM**



*“If they try,
they’ll sorely wish they hadn’t!”*

**THE TAKING OF PRANK - THE CHRONICLE
BOOK ONE**

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—Chapter 1—

More than a Sword—a Dagger

We each have at least one purpose that drives us—a dream, a passion, an obligation to fulfill—to ourselves, for a cause, to another.

—i—

May 26th, ten years earlier ...

By around 6:00 p.m., the city park known as Boston Common began to resemble in its tranquility that of a suburban village green. That might change, but not until later, certainly not now, at least not until after the wane of a newly risen moon, appearing this night in late May as a supermoon—its countenance surreal as it rises above the horizon—close up, telescopic, revealing its craters, even the rubble within them could be imagined. Oddly though, while lacking in its customarily yellowed whiteness—this particular moon glowed with an unusual orange brilliance—*burnt orange*, a disturbingly mournful shade—lacking only an infusion of violet to render it a blood tone—a painter would know the formula.

An omen or ominous?

Several dozen moon watchers attracted by the spectacle flocked to the Common and the adjacent Public Gardens, most brandishing their I-Phones or carrying bulkier SLR cameras—several brought

binoculars and a few hurriedly set up telescopes on tripods—scattering themselves about on a broad expanse of park lawn, alongside a dense thicket of flowering Rhododendrons, behind the Swan Boat Pond—away from the trees—each shutterbug angling for the better view—snapping dramatic photos of the haunting orb while it remains poised, posing briefly, seemingly still, partially shrouded behind a foreground of branches just beginning to leaf out with fresh spring growth. Several prized photos would be uploaded to local TV channels, competing for inclusion in an upcoming weather report—each seeking an instant flash of fame. Although its odd spectrum gradually mellowed, its lunar brightness will linger longer—re-illuminating the oncoming darkness—aiding those still about to better distinguish objects, hooligans, and snatchers from shadows.

Following the predictable course of its orbital arc, the paused moon resumed its ascent, its brilliance and coloration diminishing. The crowded walkways began emptying. A group of children who'd gathered to play scratch soccer dispersed, the kids racing away—homeward to unfinished homework and competing video games. Moon gazers and photographers delighted with their digital treasures scattered and began drifting toward other destinations. Joggers were about, politely dodging pedestrians and sweating only mildly in the encroaching coolness of this late spring evening. Dogs were being walked; so is an ocelot. Evening is at its best between day and night, like a pause has occurred, relaxing stress and lightening fear. People become less diffident and more agreeable; not everyone, but more than during daytime stress. There are friendly gestures of greeting, nods, a wave, smiles, and an occasional “Hello. Good evening. Excuse me, would you mind taking a quick photo of us?” People actually making contact with people.

After two roundabouts of the Common, Dr. Clifton Lang found a parking space on Tremont Street. He could be seen visually weary as he locked his car and made his way into the Tremont entrance to the Common, heading across the park toward its West Gate at the base of Beacon Hill. He'd chosen to walk partly to refresh his mind from a strenuous day defending his latest theory and to avoid paying a thirty-dollar parking garage fee. *Usurious*, he'd thought angrily. *Wasn't there a time when I didn't make thirty bucks for a whole day's work?*

Oncoming darkness moderates the pace of everything. As contributory lighting from the supermoon dimmed, the park's recesses darkened, becoming ominous hollows that increased the wariness of passersby. Wildlife that scurried about the park in the daytime now roosted overhead among branches of venerable trees—squirrels, birds, and pigeons especially, were nesting up and out of harm's way, emitting soft rustles within the safety of the canopy above.

The bats were out.

So too, were the late evening strollers, only a few on this Monday evening, wandering the pathways here and there, enduring the oncoming chill in their escape from the confines of the cubicles they lived within—city cubicles—cells, confining—a tradeoff of city-living contrasting with suburban spaciousness. Park benches had been claimed as evening refuges by worn-down souls—the homeless, the indigent—who'd bungled their lives and were now adrift and becoming less meaningful than the pigeons. None of the public statues of historic patronages were lit; their countenances and markers extinguished at nightfall, their presence obscured—

except the bold sculpture of George Washington, appearing nearly noble astride his anxious horse, perched high on a tall granite pedestal at the Arlington Street entrance to the Public Garden, the broad and flowered promenade leading directly to the Common. His stern countenance seemed chiseled to appear intentionally contemplative and concerned, as shouldn't he be?

A gray Chrysler 300 slowed as it passed by the doctor's car before finding a parking room a few spaces away. It had been tailing Lang since his departure from the Green Building at MIT, where he had delivered a promotional lecture seeking prototype funding for a controversial advancement of waveform inversion in 3-D seismic technology. In the gloom, the driver would appear nondescript to anyone bothering to notice, dressed in black jeans and wearing a dark hoodie and white sneakers—furtive, sinister, or just unpretentious in black and white? He'd glanced casually at Lang's Lexus as he passed by before quickening his pace and walking hastily to catch up as he, too, strode onto the Common. As they neared the East Gate, the follower stopped momentarily, perhaps to get his bearings. Dr. Lang was ahead of him by no more than two hundred feet. Lang had paused also to gaze at a tall bronze statue nearly obscured by the oncoming nightfall, standing stoically on its pedestal a short distance off on the right side of the pathway. The follower observed curiously as the renowned earth scientist appeared to acknowledge the statue in a manner of familiarity and then raised his right hand as if in a casual salute.

The follower watched also as Lang looked anxiously at his watch, then reached into his pocket—for his cell phone, most likely—coming up empty-handed. He watched as the man pumped a fist in the air as if in frustration before turning suddenly and beginning to rush onto an intersecting path, only to stop abruptly

at a nearby telephone booth on the right side of the way, one of several lighted phone kiosks still scattered around the Common—existing like quaint vestiges of yesteryear—once convenient for public access before cell phones swiftly made them obsolete for communication—suitable still, then and now—as public urinals adorned with profanity, graffiti, and promising telephone numbers embellished with mostly licentious messages—

—*Call Jill. She's on the pill.*

—*Want more fun? Try Santos, then 911.*

—*Carla says to bring cash.*

—*Dick has one for hire.*

Cliff Lang grimaced at the postings while grumbling audibly as he retrieved some pocket change. *Damn fuckin' phone. Why in hell am I always late?*

He hurriedly entered the phone booth, partially closing the glass door before inserting his coins. As he dialed, he might have sensed a presence, a reflective shadow on the glass, perhaps a tug on the door, for he seemed about to look over his shoulder. Had he done so, it would have made no difference.

“Hey there, Birthday boy! I’m on my way. Ten minutes, I’ll be there—”

Then, one shot, the singular report muffled slightly by the booth enclosure. Then, a pitiful stillness and silence.

The boy dropped the phone and screamed in frantic desperation, his arms flailing wildly, tearing up, eyes wide with terror, screaming, alarming his grandfather standing nearby. Nathan Brown appeared confounded, scowling worriedly as he gathered his shaking grandson to his side before kneeling to pick up the phone, timidly, a sudden premonition overtaking him. He would recall later

that a vision of his departed wife, Theresa, weeping had flashed through his mind.

“Hello. Is that you, Cliff?”

“I have just shot your son, Mr. Brown,” a muted voice replied. “I will tell you only that Dr. Lang has done nothing wrong. It was necessary. I am sorry for your loss and for my part in it.”

With a click of finality, the phone went dead.

Immediately after that fate-filled night in late May, the telephone booth in its entirety was confiscated by the Boston Police Homicide Unit as embodying significant criminal evidence of murder. More accurately, though, the booth was like an envelope that encapsulated the entire crime scene, including splattered skull fragments mixed with brain tissue and remnants of an eye thrust from its socket by the 9mm bullet that had passed through the skull and was found embedded in a two-inch thick *Boston White Pages*—the deformed slug still dampened with a ripe coating of darkening blood from the victim.

It might have been a late-night robbery, but nothing known was missing. Money, his Rolex chronometer, and a heavy signet ring remained untouched. A chance encounter? Possibly. A mistaken identity? A moment of mere impatience or drunken cruelty infected with rage? Or, as surmised by many of his colleagues, a more ominous premise—with several insisting Doctor Clifton Lang’s murder had been premeditated.

A long shot, for sure, but one not lacking in credibility—an assassination of a prominent earth scientist who, in the minds of some, had gone rogue preaching unacceptable philosophies contradicting an ambitious legislative reform effort aimed at corrupting a Constitutional Amendment—certain to benefit a few at the expense of many. Had Clifton Lang put himself at risk also

by collaborating with a collegiate chum, Dr. Norman Higgins, who was on the verge of genetically modifying a cannabis strain with heightened qualities that appeared to cause no appreciable side effects or addictions, heralded as being harmless as aspirin and a breakthrough especially beneficial in legal medicinal applications? If approved by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA), the patented strain could become a significant factor also in reducing the addictive side effects of pot use in general—that so contributed to its ever-escalating demand. The discovery created a sense of impending doom among international narcotics operatives who feared the new science would extend beyond cannabinoids—to cocaine and opioids, to other toxins—seen as becoming a major threat to their ever more addictive money crops. Authorities considered that reasoning a more plausible theory than campaigning for more equality in law—recognizing that those in the drug trade usually gave notice of their discontent by example.

Investigators from the FBI and Boston Homicide dutifully scoured the public phone booth for recognizable deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) and fingerprints, likely commingled with DNA and fingerprints from a thousand recent booth occupants. Clues were few to nil. They turned over what stones there were, plundered the offices of Doctor Lang's most critical adversaries, researched files at the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) where the victim worked, and interviewed dozens of his colleagues and associates, yet they found no threads leading toward anything tangible; none at all. Whatever the motive, it had been a hot and clueless case for a year and a cold one for ten.

The Common has hosted two hundred years of societal discord, impaling itself on the frailties of humanity, it's calm unable to curb the malicious quirkiness of humankind. The Common endured it

all, remaining unscathed, disaffected, and tranquil, a refuge surrounded by the pandemonium of city life.

—iii—

May, ten years later ...

A decade had now passed since the slaying of Doctor Clifton Lang without a glimmer of resolution. The twelve-year-old boy on the phone listening excitedly to his father, promising *but ten minutes longer*, had grown to adulthood.

Jason Lang was admirably his father's son, the mirror image of a man able to grasp the brass ring time and again as if failure was not an option. His effortless charm, academic accomplishments, and prowess on the sporting field endeared him as one who both inspired and exemplified excellence.

As a student, he'd excelled, becoming salutatorian summa cum laude. He was immensely popular and a role model for many of his peers.

In his brief speech to his classmates at Bell University's graduation ceremonies, he'd inspired them all to their feet—

"We now leave our beloved stadium of academia and charge bravely into the stadium of life! If we have the will to play the game, let us be sure we don't defeat ourselves. If you intend on playing well, you must carry on well. Above all, we must determine to finish well. Let us each carry the ball. Be unswayed by political passions or transient philosophies. Preserve our moralities. Help others. Be bold. Play hardball. Grab the ring. Build high. Scratch the sky. Love deeply. Stay humble. Remember each other. Remember our times here. Cherish our bell. Ring it with pride—and KICK ASS!"

He'd felt one hell of a rush that day, one nearly blotting his lingering sadness. He had done it all; indeed, he had done all of it so very well. Yet the familiar stadium, where they'd cheered for their teams—stomping their feet on the stadium bleachers and ringing their school bells in deafening crescendos—seemed suddenly vacuous and irrelevant to him. The pride that should have swelled his soul was missing. Why had he felt so apart from his classmates? Why had he been too consumed with anguish to embrace the moment? Why were his circumstances distinguishable from theirs? Others had losses and sorrows; some he knew of were as agonizing as his.

As an athlete, he'd helped drive his soccer team to three collegiate titles in four years. His senior season was a record shutout. His signature skill at trapping a ball and feinting a pass before firing it at the goal with exacting precision kept his cheering classmates spellbound.

“Jason! Jason! GO! GO!” had been the frantic screams of coeds in the bleachers, erupting any time he was in possession within shooting distance. Watching him outwit a defender with a stop-and-go or a blithely executed play called, technically, a Cruyff—a directional switch sure to send a would-be tackler headlong into empty air—thrilled the crowd like finely executed ballet. Jason enjoyed displaying his mastery of clever tactics. They made his classmates roar. But inwardly, he played the sport deliberately, focused, and dedicated only to a win.

As team captain, he was known for his rousing locker room refrain to inspire his teammates moments before game time, “We are winners! Not players! Shout it now! Every play is the last play!” Winning had become an obsession, his tribute to remembering.

“*Another one for the home team Dad,*” he'd murmur somberly.

He had been proclaimed an all-star and was nominated nationally as collegiate player of the year. Offers to play pro came from Seattle, Los Angeles, and New York. Winning, not playing, would continue to be his goal in life. *Only winning counts.*

Despite his achievements, Jason Lang had led a troubled existence since the day the 9mm slug had blown away his childhood with morbid contemplations. The lingering voice of his father tormented him. *Hey there, Birthday boy! I'm on my way. Ten minutes, I'll be there—*

No one else could share his quandary. His agonies were a mixture of shame and loss fueled by profoundly rooted fury—solitary burdens he carried with him like pockets of sorrow weighing him down, forcing him to become stronger. When the Devil was gnawing at him, he'd withstood the pain. He confided in no one. No one could help him to decide or sway him if they had known. Indeed, had his grandfather known, his gramps would have understood the gravity of it all. His grandfather, Nathan Brown, his only remaining relative, would sympathize with his need to suffer it all, to recall again, and momentarily grieve. Still, had he known the whole of it, his grandfather would never have supported his grandson's throbbing lust for retribution.

His personal agony, his consuming and burning rage remained as intense as it had been throughout most of his adolescence and far too malevolent to be shared with anyone. Out there somewhere, a killer wielding a 9mm artifact, tentatively identified by telltale striations on the recovered bullet as a German Luger of World War II vintage, remained free and unmolested by any cloud of suspicion that might distinguish him or her as a suspect.

The gunman had left the scene apparently unnoticed except by one loitering indigent who hesitantly provided authorities the only

identity clues they would receive. The sharp report of gunfire had shaken the man's malaise, enabling him only to observe a person of moderate stature dressed in a dark hoodie, dark pants, and designer sneakers—the ones that cost upwards of two hundred dollars—walking calmly away. He'd been taken by the sneakers—white, with blue and pink highlights surrounding the shoe near its sole—gay, for sure, he'd decided.

After an intrusive search of the man's gaunt body, he'd been interrogated by a gruff and intense Boston police investigator.

“Damned near blew muh ears into my brain—man!” he'd claimed about the shot noise muffled by the telephone booth enclosure. “Could'a hurt me bad just by him doin' that.”

“Did the shooter run or walk away? Which way did he go?”

“Nope, he walked away slow. I seen him! Fuck I know! Coulda' been a gun under his shirt, in his belt. He sure had one. A real popper! He went that way out, through the gate, and poof.”

“Did he look familiar?”

“Dressed up in black that way, who could tell? Dark night like now. Don't know nothin' more. I never seen his face. He never seen me neither. Fucker mighta' popped me too. People get shot around here. I seen several; nobody cares.”

“White or black?”

“Too dark. Coulda' been either. I'd guess white.”

“You sure he was a man?”

“Hey man, coulda' been a bitch or a turkey. I dunno squat more.”

“Tall or short? Slim or heavy?”

“Like me. Neither.”

“Anything else?”

“Hot sneakers, like new—flashin’ that pink triangle—queer as day—that I know, but he didn’ walk like he was.”

“Did you see the shot being fired?”

“Only with my ears.”

“What’s your name?”

“Call me Sam, but mebbe I ain’t.”

“You want to go downtown?”

“Nope. You got way more’n you had. Leave me be.”

“We need a statement.”

“You got it.”

“You have a cell phone?”

“Yup. One I found under a bench that don’t work. I charge it at Starbucks and spend time working on the password. Makes me look busier than I am.”

“Okay!” Exasperation set in. “Take my card, Sam. if you recall anything more, go find a cop. Tell him to call me pronto. Say it’s really important. Maybe even valuable, Sam. There’ll be a reward, Sam. I’m damned sure of that—real money. Could be yours, Sam!”

Exasperation and frustration were like gut punches to good investigative practice.

—iv—

Jason Lang had planned how he expected his post-graduation events to fall into place. Graduation first. Then, with his academic accomplishments in the bag and sealed on parchment, he’d designated his birth date as the day to reconfirm his covenant with what he imaginably dubbed his *auger of commitment*. It was a silly connotation, to be sure, a lingering figment of his adolescent fantasies, but then, his entire obsession was abnormal. He would

reflect on the decade that had passed by revisiting his personal *ground zero*, where what had happened exactly ten years earlier had driven him to make his father proud.

We each have at least one purpose that drives us—a dream, a passion, an obligation to fulfill—to ourselves, for a cause, to another. Jason knew all of that well, by memory. His grandfather posted those words in a black frame hanging above his office desk. For Jason—now the man who once was that frantic child—his past was unfulfilled and his future undefined. He had been both deprived and blessed. His torments pleaded that he look backward, that he settle up with what had transformed his youth. His visions, though, were urging him otherwise: *move forward, young man, move on! Remember well! Believe in righteous fate—a time for vindication will come!*

He forced himself to arbitrate between his visceral moods, to lighten his unending sorrows with what was to become his inestimable promise. In making his choice, he reasoned with himself, reasoned that he was choosing wisely, settling on what he considered—philosophically at least—a middle ground. With an object of purpose forged by his own hand, he would drive an *anchor* into holding ground, deep into a spot of hallowed earth, a symbolic bower representing his years of deprivation and a childhood blown away by mayhem. Only then could he leave and move on, yet resolved still to return on a day that would come, triumphant, bearing retribution. To be sure, it was an odd compulsion, conceived in the turmoil of the moment, one he had nurtured and allowed to ferment as he grew, to become a mission, its rectification his alone to fulfill.

Until the moment when he received his diploma, Jason remained an aspiring undergrad, a learner, an honors student, a soccer star, and formidable as a debating opponent. He was

disarmingly handsome, ruddily complected, with a bold smallish triangular nose and well-cut facial features chiseled in the Redford fashion. At just over six feet, he was tall enough to be casually dominating, a sandy blonde with glinting azure eyes that habitually locked on and froze the gaze of another with such a disconcerting intensity that anyone unsure or unconfident or insecure was unlikely to endure his sparkling gaze for long. A disarming proclivity he used to advantage, one he had displayed since birth—when folks would glimpse him in his carriage, expecting to exclaim, ‘*Oh, what a handsome boy,*’ finding themselves instead startled by the power of his sharply focused stare.

He had been easily among the most popular of the prominent men on campus, a likable role model for his admiring peers, and idolized by coeds any guy would dream of being idolized by. All of that was prologue, however; all that suddenly changed. The commencement ceremonies meant exactly that—the commencement of new beginnings. Never again would it be like it had been, never again.

Who would want to be stuck on such a merry-go-round anyway...remaining in place and orbiting within an academic existence while others were breathing new air, exciting their minds, applying their knowledge, realizing with enthusiasm that with their academic momentum, with their stimulated minds, they could achieve, excel, move up, and one day, the most fearless amongst them, those who’d grabbed the brass ring and won, who would build the bridges for the rest of those who’d missed the ring to cross and follow? He had climbed one ladder from its bottom rung to the very top. Now he would begin on the bottom rung of a new climb, not one defined by preparation but by his achievements and failures.

He'd smiled bravely when reaching out to receive his new credentials, proud of himself even as haunting sorrows stabbed at his soul. It was his moment to rejoice, not to linger longer amongst his demons. Yet, in that moment, he felt the familiar patterns of his life returning. At that moment, he became glassy-eyed, with an overwhelming rush of loneliness, shuddering from the dark chill that came and went like a silent messenger.

As he descended from the platform, puffy echoes of the president's accolades still swarmed around him—like buzzwords of blustery nonsense—he thought dolefully, grateful as he was for an end to it all.

He'd been greeted then by even more raucous applause amplified by his frat brothers and a few catcalls he knew were the final cries of team respect from his steadfast soccer mates. He searched the crowd for one familial face. There would be only one. When he found him, he raised both his arms and gave a hearty thumbs-up to Nathan Brown, his grandfather, his only remaining family member.

Nate Brown was inconspicuous, as always. He was seated in an aisle seat in the second row amongst a sea of proud and, undoubtedly, financially relieved parents. He was that dull brown blot floating amongst waves of festive clothing, distinguishable only by the unstylish drabness of the brown suit and the less than natty brown Fedora that he insisted on wearing always. Being seen in brown was Nate Brown's personal trademark. There was nothing the least natty about any of it, though. Any shade of brown was the drabest color a man could dress himself in, morning or evening, or even be buried in. However obscure in his camouflage, none among the festive gaiety of attendees could have been any prouder than Nate Brown was of his only grandson. They shared a

molecular bond, an inseparability. They were interdependently knotted. As orphan and widower, they endured the same sorrows and were far and beyond their own best friends.

Instead of returning to his seat, Jason remained momentarily in the stadium aisle, deciding. Again, he'd waved affectionately to his gramps, who returned his second gesture with a brusque but more pensive nod. Had someone been observing Nate Brown at that moment, they would have seen him struggling with his own anguish while staring gravely after his grandson as Jason solemnly walked past his seat, passing by the admiring eyes of his classmates seated in the front rows and a curious audience beyond, to then clamber hastily up the staircase toward an exit archway. Upon reaching the threshold, he turned abruptly—pausing to glance briefly at the ending of his youth—then raced away from the ritual. He boarded an empty elevator and descended to the parking garage beneath the mammoth stadium.

In the quiet of the garage, he deposited his robe and cap and his scrolls of accomplishment in the boot of his grandfather's Porsche 360B Roadster. It was a cherry red one, vintage 1960, rare and nimble, a real roadrunner, and always a head-turner. From the boot, he withdrew a black satchel. It was heavy for a satchel, heavy enough to look heavy and awkward as hell to carry. He wished he'd found its shoulder strap, but he hadn't. He patted the vintage machine lovingly.

When he turned eighteen, his gramps had given him a brassy new key attached to a Porsche pendant. He loved taking the car out late at night, alone, into the countryside west of Boston, where there were stars and no traffic. He'd run it up to a hundred just to hear the rumbling purr and marvel at how smoothly it handled a curve. He'd also used the car occasionally when he thought he had a

particular date, but only when he'd figured he didn't need the car as a perk. If he thought using the Porsche to ride around in would make any difference at all, he wouldn't use it. He did admire, though, how the wind whipping past the windshield would destroy the hairdo of any coed who was riding with him in it. A girl always looked fresher and purer when the wind blew at her like it had blown away any pretense, makeovers, or daffy hang-ups.

"Don't use the Porsche just to get laid!" his gramps once admonished.

He locked the roadster, pocketed his key, grasped the satchel firmly, and strode briskly away from his collegiate life—away from the fun and frivolity of its social content, away from its curricula manifested by others, from its comforts and achievable challenges. He headed away at a determined pace; a poet might say he was heading off toward new chapters he would soon be writing. He was footloose, and, no pun meant, he was free at last, a graduate with high honors from a grand university as esteemed as any.

Again, he wondered. Was this really a proper time for him to skip out—instead of celebrating with his classmates at those post-graduation revelries that were sure to go on all night long, offering who-knew-what memories and even conquests to remember? He'd been invited to just about every party in town and several at posh homes in Weston and Brookline—estate homes with vast pools and bars the size of pubs—bars stocked better than most pubs, where anyone out of diapers could order up. Why was he racing away from all that pomp and fun like some shrinking schmuck?

What was so time-sensitive about this obsession of his anyway that any psycho-shrink would surely question the motivation of, even the wisdom of copping out like he was? He decided again that

he didn't care. Things happen. It had rained yesterday, and that had changed things.

He'd made himself a promise—one he felt obliged to keep—even if it mattered only to him. Maybe it *was* like taking a fruitless walk in a barren wilderness. For Jason, though, it remained an imperative, his first step on the new ladder toward whatever was to become the manner and outcome of his life.

Even after walking a block or more along Commonwealth Avenue—several times clasp ing his head with his hand to cleanse his mind—he could still hear the dull din of the commencement crowd echoing from within the stadium. They'd be applauding vigorously for another hour or more as each graduate received a coveted degree.

For four years, he'd studied to accomplish exactly what he wanted to achieve. He had learned enough to be confident. In the euphoria of collegiate life, he sensed what immortality might be like. He knew well enough that, while he remained mortal, a promising stretch of immortality lay before him. The blunt force trauma he'd been dealt so early in life had strengthened his resolve to set his course with determined purpose, to climb his ladder toward success by looking backward before looking forward, by determining at each rung of the ladder what was opportunity and what was folly.

Carrying only his satchel, Jason detoured onto up-trendy Newbury Street, heading northward, striding without stopping past his own apartment above the Penderman Art Gallery, in a building his grandfather owned, and past the familiar bistros and side streets where quainter sub shops had fed him hastily and cheaply for years. *Budget Meals at Cram Speed* one window placard still promised. Then onward to Arlington, where he turned right toward Boylston Street, arriving moments later at Boston's bastion of the staidly elegant,

for eighty years, the Ritz Carlton Hotel—recently modernized as the equally foreboding TAJ.

On the third Sunday of each month, at 1:00 p.m., he and his gramps would meet at the bistro for brunch. Inevitably, his gramps used the occasion to sermonize about something sage or valuable he believed his grandson should think further about. Jason would happily admit how deeply he'd looked forward to them. They were insightful sermons, the kind of paternal stuff that sticks with you, maybe forever.

From Boylston, he turned on Arlington to Beacon to Charles Street.

He heaved heavily then, struggling with a mixture of apprehension and waves of familiar sadness. It had been two years of waiting for right now.

Directly across the pavement, beyond two square granite pillars flanking the East Gate to Boston Common, his destination lay one hundred yards inward, on the right-hand side of the walkway, within eyesight of a statue of Edward Everett Hale, son of Nathan Hale—son of one-hell-of-a-patriot in anybody's book of national heroes, whose possible last words "*I only regret that I have but one life to give to my Country!*" are taught to every schoolchild.

Ancestry linked Jason and his father, through his grandfather on his mother's side, as Nathan Hale's direct descendants.

"Give me back just one life!" Jason murmured as he passed by the countenance of his famous ancestor. Exactly ten years earlier, though unknown to Jason, his father, too, had greeted his ancestor on that late evening in May, moments before the shot rang out.

No one could ever surmise that Jason Lang's sacred ground was an innocuous patch on a vast grass lawn near the juncture of two pathways on Boston Common. Had his grandfather known, he

might have understood, though in all likelihood, questionably, certainly not approvingly. Nathan Brown surely would have worried had he learned of the dark thoughts his grandson was harboring on his graduation day.

It was two years earlier when Jason first determined its exact location. With sympathetic help from an extraordinarily patient telecommunications engineer at Bell Telephone, whose name was Tipper O'Malley, he'd determined the exact spot where a specific pay telephone booth had been located eight years earlier.

The phone kiosk had not been replaced, perhaps as a gesture of respect to its last occupant; although more likely, its usefulness had passed—perhaps also to avoid predictable damage by curious vandals or souvenir hunters, always ravenous for fragments of the macabre. Jason had asked O'Malley if the underground cabling remained and whether a new booth might one day be erected. Not that it really mattered to him; it wasn't like a monument was missing or anything close to that. He'd just wondered how his grandfather might feel if, one day, they put up a replacement, as if nothing had ever really happened at all—within a thousand feet and in direct view of Nathan Brown's penthouse window, in the new and dazzling high-rise—The Hale Tower on Tremont Street, where now, his powerful Celestron telescope peered wistfully downwards from the eightieth floor, toward the Common, toward pigeons, gloom, and recall.

He'd encircled the booth's location on an *MDC Utilities Installation Schematic* that O'Malley had provided him. Two years earlier, on the 26th day of May, on a dreary and unseasonably frosty predawn morning, on his twenty-first birthday, at exactly 4:43 a.m., the exact moment of his birth, Jason had driven a ten-inch galvanized timber spike deep into the ground at the spot Tip

O'Malley had pinpointed as being exactly where that telephone booth had stood. In that first act of infuriated homage, Jason had pounded the nail head with the blunt end of his prospector's pick, driving it down until it was buried beneath eight inches of turf. In a reverent gesture—as if realizing the finality of it all—he'd gently smoothed the disturbed earth with his bare hands before settling down on a nearby park bench, remaining stoic, motionless, and mostly silent until the sun opened that oddly brisk May morning with a crimson dawn.

During his vigil that day, occasionally, he became moist-eyed; occasionally, too, he might have been heard mumbling harsh and loathsome vows through gritted teeth. As a slumped hulk on a park bench, he blended in as one of the locals, indistinguishable among the park's sparse and desolate population of downtrodden and demented souls—the vagrant homeless castaways who had lost out, who had tripped and fallen, groveling now below the first rung of the ladder—who survived miserably in a beautiful place, wasting their lives, wasting away, cold and lonely, on nearby park benches or cradled by the roots of tall public trees.

In the eerie red of that rising sun, he'd begun an episode of punching his fists fiercely in the cold air, air that was rife with unseen anguish, as if fencing with windmills of times denied. Had a park ranger noticed his actions then, he'd risked being shipped off to Boston City Hospital for observation and his own safety; or, worse, being detained for possessing questionable tools and suspicious intentions.

Today, he would return to upgrade that two-year-old spike. The bereaved will do that. Driven by lingering memories, they return, still seeking solace in their departed memories. As acceptance mercifully lessens grief, returns usually occur with diminishing

frequency. Although for some, visitations become more frequent and more dutiful, to replenish a grave with fresh blooms, to place a small stone, a trinket, a toy, a new photo, framed, tokens of love, regret, respect, and renewal, or to reaffirm a commitment to revenge.

Like Jason was doing by replacing that galvanized timber nail with a brightly polished stainless-steel stake. His new stake measured a full twelve inches in length and over one inch in diameter. It was a handsome stake, one he had handcrafted himself, turning it beautifully on a lathe at the university's workshop, fashioning it to an even taper with a slightly blunted point at its working end. If you ran a finger over it, though, the point itself remained sharp, puncture sharp, sharp enough to puncture flesh, with three longitudinal grooves intended to lessen suction when thrust into a body. He'd formed the hilt in the recognizable shape of an hourglass, capped with a hammerhead like on the original nail. He'd shaped the hourglass hilt as a symbolic totem. Every detail had a meaning that even a decipherer would lack the wit to interpret. Not even his grandfather could figure that one out. All-in-all, it was a rather fancy plunge dagger that was to become a marker intended to be buried from sight, perhaps even forgotten, until a time came that was right.

Grinding out the details of the hourglass feature had taken him hours of painstaking work. He'd sculpted the hilt using a Dremel tool to depict its bulbs as recognizably enclosed in a supporting cage, an authenticating detail he considered essential to accentuate its message. He'd made the bulbs elliptical and of unequal size. They bellowed out like an upended pear. The top bulb was intentionally larger than the bottom bulb—a design inspiration he'd dreamt up to signify that unlike an actual timepiece of similar shape, a moment

would come when the lower bulb would fill up when sand would cease to flow through its thread—when measurable time itself would freeze and stand still. Admittedly, all that was only a fanciful allegory, symbolic of his angst—waiting patiently for that right moment, for the right flesh.

Crafting it in such a manner had been a pilgrimage of spiritual significance for him. More than a symbolic totem, it had become a promise made, a promise that inevitably, a moment would come when time would truly stand still—for someone whose time was up to know and feel what real pain felt like. It was, after all, a real weapon, having the same potential as a 9mm slug fired into a skull from within arm's length.

What had occurred in that phone booth ten years earlier was the prologue of an unsettled matter in his future. On his twenty-third birthday, on the tenth anniversary of hearing the explosive gunshot that killed his father, Jason Lang was climbing to the first rung toward settlement day.

"Hey there, Birthday boy! I'm on my way. Ten minutes, I'll be there—"

Earlier in the week, on the Wednesday preceding his graduation, following a brief rehearsal for honorees to acquaint them with the stage and how the microphones were set up for their remarks, Jason revisited his *ground zero* at dusk, expecting his corner of the Common would be nearly deserted. It was the first time he'd returned there in the two years since he'd planted the original nail. He glanced around with some apprehension. This night was not a time to attract attention. He poked and shoveled about using a thin mason's trowel he'd stashed in his belt. Miraculously, within minutes of searching, his trowel struck iron, and he unearthed his old timber spike. He'd then shot its location, recording its coordinates, using the graduation present his grandfather had given

him for the first time. It was a precise gadget, amazingly so, a *Trimble Geo Explorer* handheld satellite transit, the kind any serious land explorer would crave. It was, as well, a modern version of the Brunton compass that his gramps had given Jason's dad as a graduation present years earlier. On an annotated horticultural chart of the Emerald Necklace he'd been amazed to find among the tomes of the Brattle Bookstore located nearby, he marked the exact location of the driven nail, with coordinates—*Latitude 42°21'19.8"N by Longitude 71° 47.5"W*—using his new transit, which had an astonishing global accuracy of +/- four inches. Later on, he'd frame that chart and hang it in his office when he got one.

His new stake would replace the nail and become the epicenter for wherever his career and his domain in life might take him. It would be his kingpin, the shaft around which he visualized that his visions would gather in force and spin into strength and purpose, the hub from where his future would radiate outwards, reaching and imagining as far as his dreams would stretch, as far as his ambitions, prowess, and luck would take him. He would plant it rightly, Jason assured himself, not only to mark the crime scene but similarly symbolic as being within the historic epicenter of the colonizing states, close to where the concepts of real property first became real, where original titles and ownership of New World lands were first being cataloged and transferred, where the property market in America began and swiftly would become the engine of its new civilization, where his influential father, Dr. Clifton Lang, had led a powerful resistance condemning an intensifying assault on the constitutional rights of private landowners and may have been slain for doing so. That had been the other theory.

“Hunger for land overhangs all other hungers,” Jason remembered how his grandfather had sermonized one Sunday over

their brunch at the Ritz. “There are many hungers, Jason. Natural hungers—for food and flesh, for freedom from pain and shackles. Social hungers—in search of meaning, guidance, redemption, a return to health, a lessening of loss. Yet, above all of man’s cravings, it is the land that matters most. Hunger for land is unappeasable.” His grandfather had gone on, proclaiming, “Unless you have a stake in your own land, in the end you will never be whole, you will not be whole as a man, and you will starve. As my now departed friend Louis Glickman once prophesied, *He is not a full man who does not own a piece of land*. Land is the primordial power base. It is the *under-all* of everything. Everything has its roots in the land. Louis summed it up well when he said *the best investment on earth is earth*.”

In his laden satchel, along with the dagger stake and his Trimble, Jason had packed a hammer, not just any hammer, but his childhood geology pick, a vintage *Estwing*, its leather grip scarred by frequent use. It was a treasured tool he’d retained to remind him of joy-filled days when he and his dad had become close companions as amateur rockhounds when they would make weekend jaunts to scavenge the spoils of old mine dumps for modest treasure. It was the same hammer he’d used to drive the original galvanized timber nail into his hallowed ground. To avoid marring the polished steel of the new spike, he’d brought along a short length of brass rod to use as a punch. Being softer than steel, the brass ramrod wouldn’t mar the shiny hilt of his new stake like an iron hammerhead would—another detail cloaked in his fantasy that a perfect crime deserved a perfect response.

He would wait until after sunset—until the strangely present moon moved on—until the exact moment when the phone had rung in his grandfather’s office at his prior home on Beacon Hill—

when he had picked up the receiver in gleeful expectation after hearing his father tell him—*in ten minutes, I'll be there.*

He found the same park bench he had slept on throughout the night two years earlier. It had been colder then, and he remembered shivering in loathsome misery. Today it was warm, sunny, and peaceably calm. He felt a sense of renewal, weary burdens lifting from his shoulders and soul. It would become a milestone on his journey.

—v—

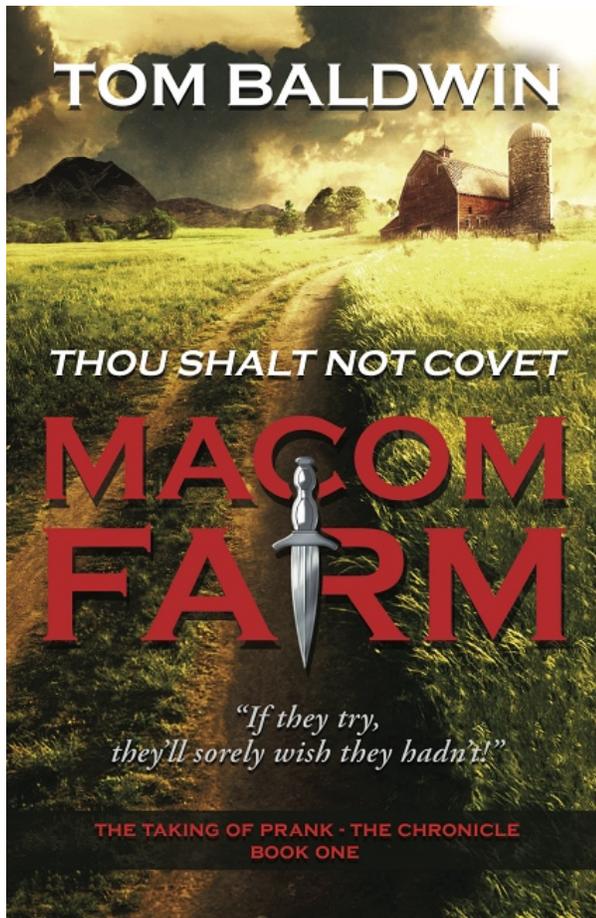
May 26th, 8:16 pm.

Using his Trimble to pinpoint the spot, solemnly he hammered his dagger-stake downward into the soft earth, again to an arbitrary depth of eight inches beneath the turf, where it would remain ominously obscure, alongside a meandering walkway within fifty acres of the most admired gem of Boston's Emerald Necklace, into the firmament of a very public municipal property, at exactly where the attentive Tip O'Malley determined a pay telephone booth once stood, from which, ten years earlier, a caller could still make a local call for a quarter, and be shot dead in the head while dialing his son to promise he'd be there momentarily to celebrate Jason's twelfth birthday at his grandfather's home, scarcely a block away.

He'd gone an extra mile by having his stake engraved at *Shreve, Crump & Low*, the jeweler to Boston's elite. When the store manager seemed slightly taken aback by his project, he mentioned his grandfather's name. The manager had the engraving ready for him the following day, free of charge.

Start from what ended here!

For an unknown someone who had chosen the wrong life to take, that stake was an epiphany in waiting. Now though, it was time for Jason Lang to dream ahead, to get in over his head, into something intoxicating. He'd crammed himself with academic knowledge. Now it was time to let some of it loose. His personal visions of how life was really lived and how he would fit into that scheme of complicated diversity had been forming in parallel with his academic studies. He'd made himself a constant observer of human foible, learning early on, mainly by observing his grandfather in action, how success might as quickly have been a failure, except for some infinitesimal stroke of genius, timing, force, the coincidence of damned good luck or a daringly fine choice.



Macom Farm—beautiful and sinister—with dark secrets and unique attributes—a developer's dream! Jason & Andrea endure ugly twists and hardships in intense standoffs between developer, townsfolk, and unknown forces with evil intentions.

Macom Farm

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