**The Cross-up Capers**

**By**

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**Based upon the Cross-up TV miniseries:**

**Created & Written by Dennis F. Stevens**

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**The Las Vegas Cross-Up**

**Part One**

**Chapter One**

**Hi. My name is Jonathan Moore.**  I’m a sixty-three-year-old, physically fit black man with short gray hair, and I plan capers, heists, and the like for my partner, Robin Templar. Templar, of course, is his *nom de bataille.*  You’ll discover his real name later on – once I get to know you better. And, yes. My real name is Moore. As the planner, I don’t need a *nom de bataille* since I never take part in an actual mission and thus am never in harm’s way.

Each of Templar’s three team members also uses aliases. I’m actually the only one who knows their true identities and what their day jobs are. There’s a reason for this. Should one of the team get caught, he or she could not divulge the true identity of another team member. Simple, eh”

Right now, I’m seated inside a late model sedan, parked across and slightly down the road from a Greyhound Racing Track, peering intently yet discreetly through binoculars at the entrance to the Track which is located on Nevada Highway 604, south of Las Vegas.

The Track is closed at the moment and looks deserted. Multiple signs on the impenetrable fence surrounding the park read "Clark County Greyhound Racing – Pari Mutual Betting." A hot, evening wind is blowing around some trash on the pavement, newspapers, betting material, food wrappers, etc. Otherwise, everything is silent.

Suddenly the quiet evening is interrupted by two Clark County Sheriff units racing up to the Track's entrance, then rushing into the park grounds. This, of course, is what I was waiting for. I needed to determine the Sheriff unit’s response time to a call that a robbery was taking place; the call of which I recently made on my *burner* cell phone.

It's funny. You always start off trying to do the right thing, trying to save the world. Then you find out that sometimes, just sometimes, you can only get there by doing the wrong thing.

At the San Francisco Marina, it is a typically lovely summer night, quiet and dark. Boats of all types, including sloops, ketches, schooners and luxury power boats are moored to the maze of piers at the marina. The most expensive, live-aboard craft have power hookups to the 220-amp boxes alongside. The harbor is placid on this warm, windless, moonlit night, with the Golden Gate Bridge in the background.

Docked at the end of one of the many piers is a 90-foot, twin mast yacht, with an enclosed wheelhouse. The name on the fantail is "Sweet Charity,” of San Francisco registry.

**There I was,** seated comfortably in the fantail deck lounge of my yacht, being served Eggs Benedict, by my British butler, chauffeur, cook, dishwasher and all around good guy, Jason. Of course, the Eggs Benedict were being washed down by a hopelessly expensive champagne.

It was then that I noticed the group on the pier, approaching the yacht. I recognized them immediately. Obviously they intended to come aboard. But why was this cause for concern. It wouldn’t take long to find the answer.

Led by the dashing 36-year-old Robin Templar, I recognized three team members and the mysterious Raoul Donavan. In contrast to Templar’s sharp dress and physically fit body, Donavan is a disheveled, overweight man in his mid-to-late 40s – with a moustache, full head of equally disheveled hair and wearing a corduroy jacket and pair of dark slacks – both in need of pressing. Tucked in his right arm is his ever-present laptop. Donavan is with the CIA. That’s right, the Central Intelligence Agency.

Everyone, including Donavan, appears to be carrying a gift wrapped package the size of a liquor bottle. As they approach the gangway and prepare to board, it finally occurs to me as to why they are here. It’s my birthday and those gift wrapped packages are probably for me.

I called out to Jason and told him it might be a good idea to prepare some hors d’oeuvres.

After boarding, the group of well wishers headed for the fantail lounge where I greeted them one-by-one.

First, of course, was Robin Templar, whose real name is Harry Fletcher. Harry is married and has a Cliffside home on the beach of the Pacific Ocean near Carmel, California. His lovely wife is a Carmel high school teacher. Fletcher is also my partner in a highly successful import-export company, based in San Francisco, named Universal Imports. Now, don’t get confused, the James Bond entity was known as Universal *Exports*. Unwrapping Templar’s gift I found a quart of Gentleman Jack, my favorite adult beverage.

Second is Chardonnay Rogers, whose real name is Andrea Parker. Unmarried, in her day job, Andrea is a highly decorated detective-sergeant with the San Diego

Police Department. In keeping with her nom de bataille, Chardonnay’s gift was a bottle of Domaine Leflaive Chevalier Montrachet 2018 – one of the best bottles of chardonnay wine that can be bought.

Third is the 30-year-old Patrick Palmer, whose trim figure, charm, and good looks, is known to have made many a female heart go pitter patter. His real name is Louis “Duke” Osgard. “Duke” was his call sign as a navy fighter pilot until his forced retirement due to a medical condition known as Atrial Fibrillation. But civilian life has brought wealth to Osgard that a military career could not possibly have. In addition to owning several manufacturing businesses, Duke owns a number of successful sports bar and grills throughout Florida, and Georgia. His flagship restaurant is the popular Duke’s Bar & Grill, in Jacksonville, Florida. Opening Patrick’s gift, I wasn’t surprised to find a bottle of champagne but the champagne itself delighted me to no end. It was a bottle of Louis Roederer Cristal Brut 1990 Millennium Cuvée Methuselah.

Fourth was Douglas Shinaman, the Irishman known for his skill in breaking into things, including safes of all types and makes. In his day job, the 50-year-old is the owner of a popular Southern California theater chain which he operates under his real name, Sean Easton. Sean was a Marine gunnery sergeant who, as a sniper, explosive expert and world-class safe cracker ran covert ops in Afghanistan, where I first met him. He had joined our Merry Band partly for the money that could be provided to his favorite chari-ties but mostly the jazz. He missed the adrenalin rush. But getting shot? I don't think that was on his bucket list.

Like Patrick’s gift, Shinaman’s gift was another mind blower; a bottle of Jameson Triple Distilled Reserve Irish Whiskey which retails for nearly $4,000 per bottle; when you can find it.

Finally, there was San Francisco PD inspector David Morgan. Good looking, early 30s. Well, you know the type.

The party winding down, and with Chardonnay Rogers, Patrick Palmer, Inspector Morgan, and Douglas Shinaman bidding their goodbyes, Templar and Donavan find themselves huddled in the fantail lounge with me, a retired Marine Corps. Lt. Col.

Turning to me, Templar asks, “You wouldn’t be planning our next caper?”

Trying to remain poker faced, I inquired, “Why do you ask?”

“You were spotted in Las Vegas taking a special interest in a certain dog racing track,” Templar replies.

“Your sources never cease to amaze me,” I admitted.

“So, what were you doing in Vegas,” Templar persisted.

I turned and look at Raoul Donavan. Understanding my concern, Templar offers, “You needn’t worry about Raoul. Remember, he’s the only one who figured out my true identity and those of my crew. If he wanted to make something of it, he would have done so before now.”

. “Alright, here’s the story,” I confided. “In simple terms the owners of the track need to be taken down. And here’s why.”

In front of Templar and Donavan I outlined my case for going after this particular dog track. I pointed out that the owners of the track were part of a group of developers who plan to evict a women's shelter in Southern California. The shelter is run by some people who, once aware of their plight and, needing immediate help, contacted me. It seems that the property owner died and the heirs are auctioning off the land. The developer lined up to bid on the property plans to bulldoze it and cover the land with luxury condos.

"And that developer also owns this dog track?" asked Robin.

“They all work for the same...syndicate,” I said.

"What did you tell the women at the shelter?" .

Robin Templar’s question reminded me of my first visit to the Camarillo shelter which is located on a mountainside south of the 101 freeway, west of Newbury Park. A complex of low, rambling structures and surrounding campus, it's enclosed by a 12-foot-high razor-wire fence, clearly a place of high security. Walking among the women, young and old, some with infants in arms, I observed the simple, yet immaculately kept grounds.

Inside the shelter's community center, I stood at the podium and addressed the packed room of the shelter's residents. The only question the women wanted answered was “will I be able to raise enough money to help them keep their place.” The women were especially pleased when I told them, "Yes...and the money never need be repaid."

Templar asks the obvious, "Can we raise enough money to save the shelter?"

I replied, "I figure it'll take one-and-a-half to two million. And the armored car at the Greyhound Race Track in Las Vegas should be carrying twice that amount ....maybe more."

"And you explained that the money never need be repaid?"

"Yes, they especially liked that part," I added.

**Chapter Two**

Its late afternoon outside Las Vegas and the racing at the dog track is winding down for the day. Inside the track, in the main office, the owner of the track, a slinky, former showgirl in her late 30s, Gloria DeMornay is chatting with a tall, thin, geeky-looking, late 20s, Bat Bartholomew. They are in the process of zipping up various canvas bank bags and snapping on the miniature padlocks that act as seals.

"Ms. DeMornay," Bat asks, indicating several similarly locked canvas bank bags stacked on a table in the corner, "I don't understand why we don't separate the track deposits from the other deposits instead of listing everything under the track's deposit slips."

Gloria, with a wry smile that is alluring and sexy, answers, "Bat, I love your cute little butt, and I know you're a good techno geek, but let me do the thinking on this one. It's a simple transaction. We keep accurate books for both sources of income. So, what the hell are you worried about?"

"Cleaner, that's all. Anything goes wrong, there's less risk."

"That's adorable, my pet. But let me worry about the risk. The armored car will be here shortly to make the pickup. I've got to get home. The boyfriend and I are celebrating my birthday with a few close friends," says Gloria as she exits the office and heads for the employee parking lot.

It's sundown by now but still hot as DeMornay walks quickly to her SUV, in her usual hip-wiggling walk. She climbs in, fires up the engine, and exits the lot just as the Brinks armored car arrives and drives into the park, up to the office. After leaving the park, Gloria heads south on Nevada Highway 604. Driving rapidly, she does not notice a dark-colored Ford Taurus parked next to the track entrance, on the opposite side of the highway.

Inside the Taurus are four of the five partygoers from Jonathan Moore's birthday party aboard his yacht, in San Francisco. Missing is Raoul Donavan. The occupants, waiting patiently, are watching the entrance intently. They are all wearing funeral-parlor-supplied cloth gloves, dyed to the color of their skin.

"These gloves are a bit restrictive," complains Chardonnay.

“We can't leave any fingerprints. At least they’re not white, which would draw even more attention,” insists Harry.

The armored car driver remains in the secured cab where he has access to both radio and cell phone while a male guard, along with Bat's help, carries out the locked canvas bags and loads them into the back of the armored car. The other guard, a fit young woman, stands on alert with a pump action shotgun at the ready and a .357 magnum holstered on her hip.

"OK, I think that's it," says Bat.

"Thanks," says the guard. With that, Bat returns to the office.

After all the bags are loaded, both guards climb into the back of the armored car and close and lock the door behind them. The female guard keys the intercommunication system and notifies the driver that they're ready to go, "we're secure," she says into the microphone.

The driver presses a button on his cell phone and listens to the auto dial tones. Following a ring, the call is answered by the dispatcher who says, "Code in."

The driver reports "Zero four seven one ...Leaving the greyhound track, en route to home plate."

"Roger that,” is the radio reply.

The driver presses the accelerator and heads the armored car toward the distant entrance to the park.

Inside the Taurus, parked across the street from the entrance, Robin Templar, sitting in the driver's seat, is holding a small radio device in his hand. Watching the park entrance closely, his thumb is resting on the detonation button. The armored car comes out of the park, stops at the entrance and then turns onto the highway, to head north towards the Las Vegas city limits. At this point, Templar presses the remote-control button.

Suddenly a temporary steel cover, used when making utilities repairs, blasts away and lifts the heavy armored car high into the air. The armored car comes down on its side with a big thud, driver's side up.

Templar exclaims, "Wow!! The mine hit just right. The armored car has flipped but it hasn't blown apart. Everyone, get out now."

Templar remains in the driver's seat of the car while the rest of the team is all over the armored car. Chardonnay runs to the rear door, slaps a packet of explosives against the metal near the lock so that the auction cups grab. Then she pulls the cord and steps back to get out of the blast area. This explosion is short, flat and unimpressive, with only a little puff of gray smoke, but it gets the job done. Chardonnay steps close in again and finds the door hanging open.

Templar pulls the Taurus into position so its rear is next to that of the armored car, but out of sight of the two guards within. He pops the trunk open and exits the vehicle just as Shinaman, now wearing a huge fake mustache, oversized sunglasses and an orange road crew vest (upon which is clearly printed "FILM CREW"), returns from checking the driver.

"Templar," says Shinaman, "be watching that driver...he's on his cell phone!"

"Let him be, Doug. Check on the guards and tie them up."

"Palmer, start tossing out the money."

"Aye, aye, sir." Palmer responds. Then he pulls a large scarf from his pocket and ties it in place across the lower portion of his face, like the stagecoach robbers of yesteryear. Putting on aviator sunglasses, he disappears into the back of the armored car.

Shinaman, with his FILM CREW vest and roadwork flag is waving the light traffic through the scene when one automobile stops and confronts him. The man in the sedan pulls up next to Shinaman, lowers his window and introduces himself.

"Hi, my name is Steve. I'm a paramedic. Anything I can do to help?"

Shinaman adopts a California surfer speech pattern, "No need, dude, just a film crew getting ready for a night shoot. You know how crazy that can be. Thanks for your concern, bro. Peace."

Shinaman gives him a fist bump and, with a nod, Steve drives on.

Templar and Chardonnay are still tossing canvas bags loaded with money into the trunk of the Taurus when suddenly everyone stops. Sounds of sirens are piercing the air but no vehicles are seen on the highway yet.

Templar shouts, "Get the rest of these bags loaded. Let's get the hell out of here now."

The team slams the trunk lid shut and pile into the Taurus, with Templar starting the car and driving toward the track entrance. As he pulls up to the highway, sirens are getting louder, clearly coming from the south.

"We have bogeys at 6 o'clock," reports Palmer.

"Didn't expect them to come from the south. Must've been on patrol out there," responded Templar.

Palmer comments, "This may be more exciting than we thought."

"We'll have to chance going north, towards the city," replies Templar.

The Taurus takes off fast to the right, heading north, on Nevada Highway 604 (South Las Vegas Boulevard), away from the sound of the sirens.

At the same time, Bat's Dodge Ram arrives at the Park entrance too late to see where Templar has gone. Bat jumps out of the pickup and looks both north and south on Highway 604. Patrol units approach from the south. Bat quickly checks on the guards who are tied up in the back of the armored car.

"Are you two all right?"

The two guards nod affirmatively.

"Did you get a look at any of them? See which way they went?" Bat asks as he unties them.

"No, but it sounded like they went north," said the female guard.

"We only saw one of them and he wore sunglasses and had his face covered with a bandanna. He took our weapons," said the male guard.

The armored car driver is struggling to get his door open. But with the vehicle resting on its side, the driver's door is pointed skyward, making it difficult to lift its weight and swing it open. After some time, he finally manages to climb out.

Bat greets him, "What did you see?”

"All I know is that a dark Ford Taurus was parked near the track entrance when everything suddenly got turned upside down. I called it in. Would've seen them through my windshield if they'd have gone south."

Three squad cars from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, each with two uniformed officers, roll up to the park entrance, two units coming from the south and one from the north. The officers exit their vehicles with guns drawn.

Sgt. Johnson, a laconic westerner type, and his partner, the eager young Corporal Jimenez, draw down on the civilian Bartholomew while the other officers check out the disabled armored car.

"Police. Hands in the air!" says Jimenez to Bat, pointing the gun at him.

Bat complies, standing next to his RAM 2500, raising his hands. "Easy, guys! I just work in the track office. I’m the one who called you soon as I heard the explosion.”

Sgt. Johnson steps behind him and pats him down, discovering that Bat is unarmed. He then pulls out Bat's wallet and reads his ID, "So, Matthew Bartholomew is it?"

"Yeah. Most folks call me Bat."

"What's your story?"

Lowering his hands, "The armored car had just made a pickup. I was locking up the office when I heard an explosion. By the time I phoned you and I got in my truck and drove here, what you see is what I found. …What about the money? Is it safe?"

Carter, the first officer, enters the armored car and calls out, "No sign of any money bags."

The metro police officers gather together and begin comparing notes.

"Nobody passed us heading south and the guards think they headed north," comments Officer Carter.

"And no one passed us heading north, so they had to turn off somewhere," says Corporal Jimenez

"Call it a hunch, but we might've accidentally spooked them into doubling back," adds Sgt. Johnson. "East Larson Lane. There are only two entrances to the track here and a service gate on Larson. I want patrol units at both. Corporal Jimenez will be in charge."

Bat asks, "Am I free to go?”

"Sure. Just stay out of the park."

"But I need to finish locking up!

"We think the perps may be somewhere inside. Bat. Legally, I can't order you to stay out, but I strongly suggest it."

"Guess I should check with the owner, Mrs. DeMornay," replies Bat.

Night has fallen and the area is fairly dark with not much traffic. Templar is heading for St. Rose Parkway in the Taurus, with the entire team crammed inside. While still quite a distance from Las Vegas city limits, flashing red lights suddenly appear out of the night, ahead of them. Templar makes a sudden right turn, onto East Larson, a side road that parallels the northern end of the dog track park with its high, impenetrable, prison-type, razor-wire fence. The sudden turn knocks the team onto their sides.

"Whoa. Robin, not to be complainin', but where the hell are we going? Is there anything at the end of this fine alley besides the Grand Canyon?," asks Shinaman.

Templar is busy minding his rear-view mirrors but then says, "The Park’s service entrance is just ahead. We'll duck into the park and try to find some cover in case they send a chopper overhead. Doug, you jump out and pick the lock on the gate as soon as I stop."

The Taurus pulls up and stops at the locked gate to the park's service entrance. Shinaman jumps out with his satchel and goes to work quickly picking the padlock securing the chain to the two gate sections.

With the gate unlocked, the Taurus passes through then stops while Shinaman recloses and relocks the gate.

**Chapter Three**

In the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, Sgt. Johnson is giving Sheriff Douglas Gillespie a rundown on the armored car heist. For those who aren’t aware, the Las Vegas Police Department is a joint city-county police force for the City of Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada.

"I posted men at both entrances," claims Johnson.

"Good. At this point it's our only play. If they're not in the park, they're in the wind."

Sheriff's secretary, Amanda, entering the office, tells Gillespie, "You asked for Captain McGraw. He's on a three-day leave and not answering his cell."

"Keep trying!" I need him on this.

"You're going to put McGraw in charge of the armored car investigation?" asks Amanda.

"Is there a problem?"

"Sir, he's no longer a detective and after nearly 10 years he's become just another paper pusher."

With a look from the Chief, Amanda quickly adds, "And a fine one at that. But why him?”

“Ted McGraw is still the best detective I've got. Ten years behind the captain's desk haven't dimmed his lights any. And if we don't solve this case pronto, it's going to get real high profile in a hurry. Case like this, makes certain people in this town really nervous."

"Okay, I get it. I'll take another go at his housekeeper. I hope I don't have to talk to Lucy. She won't be thrilled to see him back in the field," replies Amanda.

At the Venetian Hotel’s Bouchon Restaurant, Captain Ted McGraw, mid 50s, dressed in plain clothes, is entering the elegant restaurant with his attractive, mid 40s wife, Lucy, on his arm. Renowned owner/chef Thomas Keller greets them graciously, kissing Lucy's hand, "Lucy, my dear! How have you been?"

"Thomas, I could be on my death bed and all it would take is one of your per-sonally cooked meals for me to miraculously recover."

Smiling, Keller responds, "I will be delighted to personally handle your order."

A little later, as the McGraws are enjoying their dinners, Chef Keller approaches the table and hands Ted the handset to a wireless phone, saying, "Call for you, Captain."

McGraw thanks the chef and speaks into the handset.

“McGraw. …Hi Douglas. How'd you find me?"

"I didn't," Sheriff Gillespie replies. "It was Amanda. She's got more informants in this town than I do. Anyway, Ted, I need your help."

The McGraws finish their dinner then go outside the hotel, where they wait for the valet to bring their car.

Lucy is not happy and lets her husband know it, "It's not fair treating you like a lieutenant. When you were a lieutenant, I hardly ever saw you. Tell me, when will you be home?"

"Honey," says McGraw placating, "you know better than to ask. I'll be home when we arrest whoever knocked off the armored car."

Lucy gives her husband a peck on the cheek, tips the valet, gets in and drives off just as a sheriff's marked unit, driven by Sgt. Johnson pulls up. McGraw opens the passenger door and climbs in.

As the police car heads south on the strip portion of South Las Vegas Blvd., Captain McGraw is brought up to speed by Johnson, "Sheriff has put you in charge. I've been assigned to work with you, although, as you can see, I'm not a detective. If that's a problem --"

"Couldn't ask for a better partner," says McGraw, smiling.

"Thank you, sir. Won't let you down."

**Chapter Four**

Outside the Greyhound Race Track's concession stand, it's quite dark in the area, with only a few of the Track's lights on. Inside the stand, Templar and Shinaman are watching Chardonnay as she listens intently while tapping the walls of the stand.

Suddenly Palmer bursts excitedly into the complex, "Okay, I hid the Taurus and checked out that pickup with the oversize canopy. It has a large, 2-door rear entry. From the debris I'd say it's used to transport the greyhounds. Good news is the key was in the ignition."

"Very good, Palmer," declares Templar.

"Bingo," exclaims Chardonnay as she indicates the large blackboard hanging on the wall that lists the food and beverage prices. "These walls are reinforced by your typical 2 x 4s. That means there are four inches between the walls. If we take down the blackboard, carefully, so that it can be re-hung, then punch out the wall behind it, we can hide the money in the four-inch gaps."

"Perfect. We can come back and collect it when the hounds have returned to the kennel," states Shinaman.

The menu board is removed from the wall, exposing the inside of the drywall. On a nearby counter, using one of the concession's butcher knives, Robin Templar cuts open the locked canvas bank bags and extracts the cash, checks and deposit slips. The cash is carefully bound in stacks with a bank wrapper showing the amount in each bundle. Palmer and Shinaman form a line to stuff the cash into the four-inch gaps between the outside wall and the inside drywall. Chardonnay separates the checks and deposit slips, stacking and securing them with small binder clips and recording the totals from the deposit slips in a 3 x 5 memo book.

"Can't wait to see your totals," says Templar. "Seems to me we've got way more cash here than we expected," as he cuts open the last of the canvas bags and extracts the loot, handing the checks and deposit slips to Chard, who is now focused on one particular deposit slip.

"Wow!! This is interesting," Chard tells Templar.

"What's that?"

Waving a deposit slip, Chard asks, "Guess how much money the Greyhound Track was depositing?"

"Judging by the crowds, I was thinking, maybe a million, tops. Why? How much is the deposit?"

"Nearly eighteen million."

"Whoa," says Templar, taken aback. "That can mean only one thing."

"They're laundering money."

Shinaman and Palmer stash the remainder of the loot and then re-hang the blackboard.

Moving over to Templar and Chardonnay, Palmer asks, "So, we're talking mob money?"

Templar nods, "Likely from drugs."

Chard chimes in, "Or identity theft."

"Of course!" adds Templar. "What was I thinking? Easiest crime in the world these days."

"Drug money is still a big item, but the flavor of the month is hacking bank databases of customers with prepaid debit cards," says Chardonnay.

"It's just too damn easy," maintains Shinaman. "Can be done with a couple of computers, from anywhere in the world."

"A dog track is a perfect place to clean money -- make it legit," asserts Chardonnay.

"We should look into this," affirms Palmer. "Sounds safer than pulling heists."

"What? And rob innocent people?" asks Templar incredulously.

"How about robbing guilty people. Isn't that what we're doing here?" asks Palm-er, with a wink toward Chardonnay.

Smiling and chuckling, Chard explains, "I think what Palmer means is, how about we lay this heist off onto the dog track itself."

Templar nods, seems interested, and then begins to smile.

At the dog track’s main office, the 3/4 ton pickup with an enclosed, oversize commercial aluminum truck canopy (with 2-door entry at the rear), pulls up and Templar and Chardonnay exit while Palmer and Shinaman (tool kit in hand), climb out of the enclosed

Templar, Chardonnay and Palmer begin grabbing up the empty canvas bags while Shinaman reaches into his tool kit and goes to work on the multiple locks for the main door. He has the door unlocked just as the others step up; their hands filled with empty bank bags.

The foursome enters the dark office where Chardonnay takes charge telling Shinaman to follow her to the huge safe near the rear of the office. Indicating the safe, Chardonnay asks, "Think you can open this without leaving tracks?"

Shinaman produces two small but powerful flashlights and examines the safe, declaring, “But you'll be having to wait a mite.”

"Go to it then. We haven't much time." To Templar and Palmer, she directs, "Bring in the rest of the bank bags."

While waiting for her orders to be carried out, Chard begins examining the interior of the office building. She tries several locked cabinets and a bathroom and finds nothing unusual but begins to look very uneasy.

Shinaman gets the huge safe open just as Templar and Palmer enter, each carrying an armload of empty canvas bank bags. As they unload the bags into the safe, a frustrated Chardonnay addresses the group, "Am I the only one that has noticed the interior measurements of this building don't match the exterior?"

Chard follows her hunch and begins pushing against different sections of the office's back wall paneling. Suddenly a hidden door pops open, revealing a large room full of a dozen very advanced computers. Without the room lights, the blush from the large monitors makes for an even eerier effect, prompting Chard to exclaim, "Hello?”

They are astounded: a state-of-the-art IT facility buzzes with twelve advanced, liquid-cooled-computers with over-sized monitors in an air-conditioned room.

"Okay, Toto, we're definitely not in Kansas anymore," announces Chard.

"Saints preserve us!" says Shinaman.

"Identity theft? Hell, with this setup, they could hack the Pentagon," adds Palmer.

**Chapter Five**

Gloria DeMornay's Henderson home is located in the elegant Seven Hills development. Tonight it is lit up, with music blaring and lots of noise, indicating a raucous party inside. Bat pulls up to the house and parks his Dodge Ram 2500 among the many other parked cars. Entering the house, Gloria grabs him and leads him into her home office. Closing the door, she motions for Bat to pull up a chair, while she sits behind her desk.

"Alright, what is it?"

"We've got a problem. We need to get back to the track but the cops are preventing anyone from getting inside. Worse yet, they think the robbers may have entered the park from the service entrance and are still in there," bemoans Bat.

"Okay, you're right. We need to get inside the track immediately. Get your truck now and let's go," orders Gloria.

At the dog track**,** the armored car is still on its side and the crime scene is roped off with yellow crime scene tape. Three Las Vegas police officers are guarding the main entrance as Sgt. Johnson and Capt. McGraw pull up. Both climb out and approach the officers.

"Anyone try getting in or out, since you arrived?" Capt. McGraw addresses Cpl. Jimenez, who answers, "No, sir."

"What about the service entrance?"

"Checked with the two officers guarding the north entrance just five minutes ago. Gate is undisturbed. They've seen no one."

Capt. McGraw, addressing Sgt. Johnson, "Get additional men on both entrances. And get me four other units to patrol the entire perimeter of the fence, in case they try to cut a new exit."

"Yes, sir," replies Sgt. Johnson.

Just then, Bat drives up, with Gloria DeMornay in the passenger seat, and they stop at the park's blocked off main entrance. They are attempting to make their case to McGraw and Johnson for being allowed access to the park, but Gloria's overbearing attitude isn't helping.

"No cop is going to keep me out of my own facility. I have every right to be in there and if you don't get that damn patrol car out of the way, I'll tell Bat here to knock it out of the way!"

"Ms. DeMornay, we know you have the right to enter but our only concern here is for your safety."

"Ma'am, we have reason to believe that the robbers doubled back and reentered the park through the service entrance," affirms McGraw.

"That's a crock! That gate is secured with a heavy chain and padlock. No way they could get in through there."

"Often, the bigger the padlock, the easier it is to pick," answers McGraw.

"Sir, we have to inform the insurance company of our losses. We just want access to our records," Bat chimes in with a disarming smile.

McGraw nods his assent to Johnson, who in turn heads for the patrol unit blocking the entrance.

McGraw maintains, "Just don't claim you weren't warned.

**Chapter Six**

Templar, Shinaman, Palmer and Chardonnay exit the office and jump into the 3/4 ton pickup. With Templar behind the wheel, Chard in the passenger seat, and the others in the canopied back, he races for the track's service entrance. Before reaching it, Templar stops and pulls over to the side.

Turning to Chardonnay, Templar says "I better check out the service entrance. Things may have changed since we entered."

"Let me do it," Chard asks.

"You sure?"

If I get caught, I'll just do a ditzy-drunk bimbo on them. You know -- 'Oh, Officer. I drank too much beer, fell asleep and I'm just trying to get a ride home. Can you please help me?' Yadda Yadda Yadda. They'll be only too happy to get rid of me."

"Think that'll work?"

"Did the last time I tried it. A long time ago, of course."

Before Templar can say no, Chard slips quietly out of the pickup and into the night.

Careful to keep herself hidden, Chardonnay approaches the park's service entrance. She spots one patrol car with two armed deputies and another unit cruising the exterior of the fenced perimeter. She beats a hasty, but stealthy, retreat back to the pickup.

She finds Palmer and Shinaman gathered around Templar, still behind the wheel, the driver’s side window rolled down. She delivers her report.

"Two uniformed officers are posted. At least two units are patrolling the fence perimeter.”

"Well, we can't shoot our way out," responds Templar.

"So, we're stuck like a fox in a burrow," protests Shinaman.

"For now, we need to make sure it's a good, safe burrow, until we figure out how to get out of here," says Templar. Chard climbs into the cab while Shinaman and Palmer position themselves in the rear.

Templar and Chardonnay, looking for a place to hide, approach the bleachers containing the announcer's booth on the top tier.

Pointing to the top of the bleachers, Chardonnay speaks softly. “The announcer’s booth might be a safe place to hide. From there, at least we have a full view of the park.”

Templar stops the pick-up and taps on the window to the rear compartment, bringing Shinaman and Palmer to the driver’s side window.

“Palmer, park this pick-up back in its original spot so than no one will ever know it was moved. Doug, it looks like we might need your skills getting into the announcer’s booth.”

Inside the announcer’s booth, the team settles on the floor. Templar confides to the team. “Things aren't going as well as planned. Alright, nothing is going as planned. There are just some things you can't plan for. …When we started this caper, it looked to be relatively easy, a walk in the park, and a way to save the battered women's shelter. These women know we are protecting them from being evicted. They just don't know how we're getting the money. It's going to be a long night. The sheriff may put a chopper overhead. We'll see. Meanwhile we'll take turns standing watch. I'll be up first. The rest of you get some sleep."

The group settles down and attempts to sleep.

This is Jonathan again, speaking to you from my yacht. Robin Templar resides, as Harry Fletcher, with his beautiful wife Nicole in California’s Carmel Highlands. The estate sits on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Just off the main house is a hangar that houses Fletcher’s rare MD 500 helicopter.

When I began fleshing out a plan to save the shelter that involved the Greyhound Race Track outside Las Vegas, I called and asked him to fly up here to San Francisco and see if he thought I had a workable plan.

It is a typically beautiful morning at Carmel Highlands, on an isolated bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Inside the large home, with its four-car garage and adjacent helicopter hangar, Harry Fletcher is still in bed.

The phone rings and a half-awake Fletcher, answers, announcing "Harry Fletcher."

"Harry, good news. I've found a way to save the battered women's shelter in Camarillo."

"I'm listening, Jonathan."

"These women know we are protecting them from being evicted. They just don't know how we're getting the money."

"And how are we getting it?"

"Meet me for lunch in the City, Harry. We can go over the details."

As Harry hangs up the phone, his wife Nicole, a beautiful woman in her late 20s exits the bathroom wrapped in a towel. She comes over to the bed and gives her husband a loving kiss.

"Harry, my high-school students loved the talk you gave on international trade. They want to know when you're coming back. They were hoping that next time you would talk about your days in the Marine Corps Special Forces."

"No time for that now, Nicole, my darlin'. I have to go into the city now. Not sure when I'll be home. It's about the funding for the women's shelter."

"I understand, sweetheart," says Nicole, kissing her husband warmly. “But, I worry so much when you go on these assignments, as you call them."

"Not to worry, Jonathan says, this one is a walk in the park."

"He can say that because his ass is never in harm's way."

Smiling, Harry says, "His tush can't afford to be in harm's way. He knows too much. In fact he's the only one who knows everything."

"Yeah, I get it. Very clever design," remarks Nicole.

"It's for my protection, too."

Fletcher exits the house, approaches the helicopter hangar and slides open the hangar door. He fires up the helicopter’s five rotor blades and flies the chopper to the Monterey Regional Airport where he settles to the ground in an area specifically designated for long-term visiting aircraft. After the chopper is tied down by the local crew, Fletcher proceeds to the boarding area where, after presenting his boarding pass, boards the SkyWest flight to San Francisco.

After a short trip, the aircraft settles onto the runway at SFO and rolls out. Flet-cher exits the airport and, looking around for his limousine, spots his limo driver, Jason Burrell. Fletcher follows him to the black limousine where he climbs into the back. Jason gets behind the wheel and they take off for the city.

The black limo pulls up in front of a tall, financial district building. Fletcher gets out and enters the building. He takes the elevator to the 19th floor where he steps out and into the huge lobby of a busy company, with a sign on the back wall reading, Universal Imports.

As he enters, the crisply tailored receptionist, Marianne Valton, smiling, calls out: "'Morning, Mr. Fletcher. Mr. Moore is waiting for you in his office. I'll let him know you're here."

"Thank you, Miss Valton," says Fletcher as he moves to one of the two sets of tall double doors, where he opens one and enters the inner sanctum. He passes an office door marked Harry Fletcher, Chief Operating Officer, proceeding to the next door marked Jonathan Moore, Chief Financial Officer.

He opens the door leading into Moore's posh, windowed office and enters whereby he is greeted warmly. "Harry, have a seat. Made a reservation at Swan's Oyster Depot at 1:30 as the crowd should have died down by then. Meanwhile, look over these plans."

Fletcher, perusing the documents, asks, "Map of a dog track, Jonathan?"

"The investors of the track happen to be part of the group who plan to evict the women of the shelter. Apart from that, well, there are many reasons they need to be taken down."

Seated at a booth in Swan’s Oyster Depot, Harry and I were enjoying a large serving of fresh oysters washed down with our customary premium Champagne. The booths forward and behind us were empty.

At the Greyhound Track**,** it’s now Chardonnay's turn to stand watch. She asks Templar what is causing the look of consternation on his face. Receiving no answer, she shares her own thoughts. "I was thinking about this messy situation Jonathan has gotten us into and then I was reminded of when I first met Major Jonathan Moore of the U.S. Marine Corps. It was in Afghanistan, I was a Corporal sent to arrest Major Moore for an incident regarding a terrorist."

"I’m aware of the incident but would love to hear your first hand version," says Templar.

Outside the mess tent at an Afghanistan military outpost, a Jeep-like military vehicle pulls up and stops. Climbing out and heading for the tent was Marine Corporal Andrea Parker, wearing the customary military police armband. Entering the tent, CPL Parker checks with the Mess Sergeant, "I'm looking for Major Moore."

The Mess Sergeant points me out -- seated at a table with both officers and enlisted. CPL Parker approaches my table and as I looked up, she pronounces, "I'm Corporal Parker and I'm placing you under arrest for the incident that occurred three days ago."

I nodded and said, "I've been expecting you," and then I held out my hands so Parker can cuff me.

"Don't be silly, Major. It's only a house arrest. You're confined to your quarters with the exception of taking your meals at the mess hall. Soon as you're done here, return to your quarters."

"Understood."

As CPL Parker exited the large tent she was confronted by a Sgt. Dundee, who has followed her from inside the tent, "Corporal...I'd like to see the copy of your order to arrest the Major."

Parker responded, "Sorry, Sergeant, but that's not going to happen."

Dundee insists, "What the Major did saved lives and we're not going to let him get railroaded."

"You're going about it the wrong way. I'm just following orders. You need to take your case up with headquarters."

"I'm taking it up with you!"

"Sergeant, if we get into a pissing contest, you're going to lose. I will arrest you and believe me it will not be a house arrest. I'll handcuff and escort you to the brig."

By now, many fellow marines have exited the mess tent and are cheering Dundee on. The burly Sergeant pursues the confrontation, "To quote you, 'that's not going to happen.'"

"If you want to try me, do so. Regardless of the outcome, I promise it will not be a part of the record. It will be just between you and me."

Parker removed her Model 1911 .45 cal. semi automatic from its hip holster and tosses it to the ground. Egged on by the supporters of both the Sergeant and the Major, Dundee invites her to take her best shot.

Hearingthe commotion from outside the tent, I stepped outside just in time to see it go down. It's over in a matter of seconds. In a series of moves that would make both Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris proud, Dundee ends up unconscious on the ground. The audience is stunned and Parker has won the grudging respect of all present. Even I allowed myself a slight smile before returning to the mess tent.

In the Announcer’s Booth, both Chard and Templar are careful to keep their voices just above a whisper in order not to disturb the snoozing Shinaman and Palmer.

"So that's how you and Jonathan met. Wish I'd been there to see that takedown.” Templar yawns. "Think I’ll try and get a little sleep. …It’s your watch." Templar lays back and slowly nods off.

Chardonnay takes a look out the window at the park below. Finding nothing unusual she settles into one of the announcer’s chairs and reflects on her life, a mere week ago.

At the San Diego Police Headquarters, Andrea Parker, whose nom de bataille is Chardonnay Rogers, is walking down a hallway to a door marked William Lansdowne, Chief of Police. She enters to find her partner, Detective Jerry Kelley, waiting along with the Chief. "Detective Sergeant Andrea Parker reporting as requested, sir."

Chief William Lansdowne rises from behind his desk and comes around to shake Parker's hand warmly. "Andrea, I have to tell you, the work you've done on the latest run of ID theft and drug cases represent a proud moment for the department."

"Thank you, Chief, it's always good to be appreciated, but my partner, Detective Kelly here, had as much to do with it as I did."

"He claims he was just following your lead. In any event, he's getting a week's leave as a result."

Parker responds, "Well, that's great. I was going to ask for a week myself. I’d like to visit my family up in Prosser, Washington."

"Of course, Detective. ....Prosser, Washington? Wine country, isn't it?"

"Yes," replies Parker. "My folks recently sold their winery to Ste. Michelle for an obscene amount of money. No longer having a winery to run, I just want to see how they're handling it."

At San Diego’s Bertrand at Mr. A’s Restaurant, Andrea finds herself seated at a prestigious window table with fellow plain clothes detective Jerry Kelley. Both are enjoying an elegant dinner with some exclusive wine. The twelfth-floor restaurant, atop a hill in the financial district, is known for its view of the flight path for aircraft landing at the San Diego International Airport.

Suddenly there is a slight shaking of the building as an airliner passes by their window, at about the same height as their restaurant window. The passenger airliner settles onto the nearby main runway of Lindbergh Field. Detective-Sergeant Andrea Parker smiles like a child as she watches the plane go by.

Kelley laughs and says, 'You know, you really are a pistol."

Puzzled, Parker asks, "Why would you say that?"

"You like the buzz of danger....even during dinner."

Parker shrugs and smiles.

Kelley adds, "I understand you're visiting your family during your leave."

"It's been a while since I've seen them."

Kelley is looking around the restaurant, somewhat nervously.

"What're you looking for?"

"Honey, you know the department policy....This isn't like coffee and donuts."

"You're right. This does look like a --"

"Like a date. 'Cause that's what it is. …A big departmental no-no."

Kelley says, "Which reminds me, since we're both taking our vacation time next week, perhaps I can come to Washington and we can spend time together."

"Jerry, I wouldn't have any time for you," Andrea says apologetically, shaking her head sadly. "My parents have my itinerary locked down to the last minute."

"No leeway? Oh, well, looks like I'll just have to spend my vacation alone," Jerry replies smiling.

**Chapter Seven**

Shortly after the pickup is parked in its original spot, Bat's SUV arrives. Bat and Gloria exit the vehicle and enter the Race Track office.

Gloria DeMornay and Bat Bartholomew enter the Race Track office. DeMornay goes directly to the phone and dials a number. Bat unlocks one of the cabinets Chard had examined earlier. Inside, an arsenal of weapons and ammunition are neatly stored.

DeMornay is speaking into the handset. "Rudy, listen," insists Gloria, "I'm at the track. Yeah, well, that...but we have a bigger problem. Get hold of your computer geeks and get your asses over here soon as possible. The cops are guarding both entrances, but you tell them you're the track accountants. That's right, track accountants, and that I asked you to come in to make an audit to determine the amount of our loss. Got it?"

Hanging up the phone, Gloria turns to Bat, "Actually it's easier for us if they're in here. But whether they're in the park or not, we have to find them before the cops do."

"The last thing we need is for anyone to find a certain deposit slip," says Bat.

Finally, Bat lets Rudy and Archer into the office. Gloria is all business and menace when she addresses the two men.

"Don't know for sure, but the cops think these bastards that stole our bank deposit are hiding inside the park. We're gonna search every inch of this place until we flush them out."

"And when we find them?," Rudy asks.

"They don't get out alive," says Gloria emphatically.

Bat reaches into the arms cabinet and hands Rudy and Archer a 9mm semi-automatic pistol.

Heavily armed, Gloria DeMornay, Rudy, Bat and Archer are gathered at the entrance to the grandstand. From the way Bat and Archer hold their weapons, it’s obvious that they are not comfortable around firearms. By contrast, Rudy looks like he could brush his teeth with a .45.

"I'm going to throw the track lights on. When I do, we'll split up and cover every inch of the park," declares Gloria. "Keep your weapons at the ready."

As Bat and Archer move away into the night, Gloria takes Rudy aside and whispers, "If nothing else, we've got to find and destroy that deposit slip. Our inside man at the bank won't be able to cover for this SNAFU.”

Gloria then heads for the electrical shack, located under the grandstands and turns on the lights. Guns in hand, Gloria, Rudy, Bat and Archer split up with each taking a separate section of the grandstands.

In the announcer’s Booth, Templar, Shinaman and Palmer are still sleeping while Chardonnay stands guard. Suddenly, the nighttime is broken by the dog track's powerful lights, as they come on, one bank at a time. Chard sounds the alarm and in a flash the team is awake and aware as they jump to their feet.

Palmer mutters, "Time to get outta Dodge!"

"Hold on," insists Chard, "I need to do a recce and see what we're up against."

Chardonnay exits the announcer’s booth and climbs stealthily up the stands until she reaches the top where she can watch unseen the individuals involved. She then climbs back down and re-enters the announcer's booth and gives her report.

"Four of them, heavily armed. The woman and one of the men seem to know what they're doing, I'm not so sure about the other two. Either way, they're bound to find us. And soon."

Shinaman says, "Aye, and 'tis sure if we don't get the hell out of here, we may be forced to shoot somebody. Maybe kill 'em."

At the park’s main entrance, Capt. McGraw outlines his strategy to Sgt. Johnson, "if they're in there, there's no sense in flushing them out at night and placing ourselves in harm's way. Best wait until daylight and then go in with full force."

"Sir, I couldn't agree more," replies Johnson, greatly relieved.

"I need to start quizzing my sources to find out who could have pulled this off. Take me to headquarters."

After McGraw leaves, the remaining cops witness the entire park lighting up, one area at a time. Cpl. Jimenez calls Capt. McGraw on his cell phone, "Captain, the whole park is all lit up bright as day. I haven't seen this since they stopped nighttime racing to cut expenses.

"McGraw asks, "How many men do we actually know of are now in the park?"

"Only that former showgirl, DeMornay, that kid Bartholomew, and the two bookkeepers."

"Bookkeepers?" asks McGraw.

"Said they needed to do an audit to determine their losses for the insurance company."

"Strange. Why didn't they merely keep a duplicate deposit slip?"

"I wouldn't know about that, sir."

"I don't like the smell of this. It almost looks like, like they're doing our job, going after the perps. Don't let anyone out! Even the four you mentioned. Hold them on suspicion of trespassing, if you have to. I'm on my way back."

Back in the announcer’s booth, Templar tells the others, "We need to douse those lights fast, otherwise we're naked out there."

Chard says, "Okay, I'll go turn them off."

"You know where the switches are? You can't just shoot out all the bulbs."

"I can't?" replies Chard, feigning innocence. "Look, a place like this will have an electronics shack somewhere, protected from the weather. Under the grandstands would be a good place to start.

Chard turns to Doug, “I’ll need some wire cutters. Have to disable the fuse box otherwise they’ll just turn the lights back on.”

“Got just the thing.” Shinaman reaches into his tool kit and comes up with what Chard was looking for. “Rubber tipped handles. Good for cutting live wires.”

Templar announces, “When the lights go out, we all head for the pickup. We'll hole up in the canopy until the right moment."

**Chapter Eight**

Under the bright park lights, DeMornay, Rudy, Bat and Archer are closing in on the announcer's booth. Suddenly the bank of lights goes out and the park is again thrust into darkness. Templar, Shinaman (tool kit in hand) and Palmer make their move, slipping quietly out of the booth, making their way out of the stands.

DeMornay spots the shadowy figures of the threesome stealthily moving down the grandstands, away from her. Acting on emotion, Gloria fires two rounds at the fleeing shadow with her 9mm Glock.

Shinaman is hit in his left rear shoulder and goes down, dropping his tool kit. Templar grabs the kit and together he and Palmer pick up their wounded colleague and rush him from the area, into the shadows.

The threesome disappears into the night.

The Sheriff's vehicle is approaching the Race Track, when Captain McGraw receives a call on his cell phone. "Sir," says Corporal Jimenez, "we just heard shots fired from inside the park."

"Check on the officers guarding the service entrance and the perimeter. See that they're alright. We're only minutes away."

When the vehicle pulls up in front of the track's main entrance, both sergeant and captain climb out quickly to greet CPL Jimenez, who says, "Sir, there's been nothing happening other than the gunfire."

McGraw tells him, "I've called for reinforcements. Two additional Sheriff Patrol units should be here shortly. Only way the *perps* can get out is through one of the park's two openings. That is unless they have explosives left to blast a hole in the fence which, if you take a look at that armored car, is a definite possibility."

Near the grandstands, Gloria, Rudy, Bat and Archer are grouped together. Gloria says, "I'm sure I hit one of them."

"Then we'll find either a body or a trail of blood," says Rudy. To Bat, he says "Go back to the office and get us some flashlights."

With Templar and Palmer on each side, Shinaman is being helped in the direction of the 3/4 ton canopied pickup. "Robin," whispers Palmer, "He's losing a lot of blood. Could bleed out if we don't do something fast."

Considering his condition, Shinaman's voice, even though a whisper is surpris- ingly strong, "Oh, don't be pratin' on with that bloody nonsense. You just get me to the pickup and do as I say. I'll be just fine."

Templar, also whispering, "There's another matter to consider. We're leaving a trail of blood."

Palmer looks at the ground behind them, spots the telltale blood drippings and nods his understanding. Templar whips off his jacket and wraps it around Shinaman's left shoulder, saying, "Keep pressure on the wound. I'll try to buy some time."

As the three near the concession area, Templar breaks off and enters the stand. He quickly moves to one of the commercial refrigerators containing the hot dogs, hamburgers, and other items. He grabs a large bowl of ketchup and picking up a tablespoon, retreats back into the night.

At the hidden pickup, on top of Templar’s jacket, Palmer lays Shinaman out on the truck’s bed, where he is hidden by the oversized, enclosed windowless commercial aluminum canopy. Shinaman tells Palmer, "Thanks for bringin' my toolbox. It just might be the thing that saves me."

"How do you mean?" asks Palmer

"You'll be knowin' soon enough."

Shinaman is giving instructions to Palmer. The more distressed he is, the thicker his Irish accent gets. "Fortunately, the bullet went all the way through my shoulder, so you won't have to go diggin' for it. In my tool kit, you'll find a small bottle containing a chemical mixture of chlorhexidine and hydrogen peroxide. Also you'll find a packet of large Band-Aid adhesive pads."

Palmer finds the chemical mixture and large adhesive pads, "Got 'em."

"Good. You'll be needin' to pour a generous amount of the chemical mixture into the wound; dry it with a cotton pad, then take three of your 9mm bullets and, usin' the pliers, pull the heads off and pour the gunpowder into the wound. Now, listen carefully. This is the most important part. You then take a match and light off the powder."

"You got to be kidding!!

"Don't I wish. But that's not the end of it. After applying the adhesive pad to the wound, you flip me over like a trout on a griddle and do the same thing on the exit wound."

At this point Templar opens one of the two rear doors and climbs into the enclosed space, closing the door behind him, asking "How's he doing?"

Palmer hands the chemical mixture and adhesive pads to Templar and extracts three bullets from his Glock's magazine then, using the pliers, pulls apart the lead portion of the bullets.

DeMornay, Rudy and Archer are at the spot where Shinaman was hit by one of Gloria's 9mm slugs, when Bat runs up carrying two flashlights, saying, "All I could find."

Rudy takes one of the flashlights for himself and hands the second to Gloria. They search the ground and quickly find what they were looking for...blood. The four of them, weapons drawn, begin following the trail of blood droppings, leading them towards the park's concession area. As they get a little closer, Rudy is becoming increasingly suspicious. He bends down and sticks his finger into what is thought to be a blood droplet. He rises with the substance on his forefinger, takes a sniff and then puts the finger to his tongue for a taste.

"Fuggedaboutit! It's ketchup! We've been played. These bastards know what they're doing."

"Whoever they are, they're dead men walking," announces Gloria.

With Shinaman still lying on his back, Templar lights off the gunpowder poured into the exit wound. The powder flashes up and cauterizes the wound, as intended, after which Templar applies the large adhesive pad.

"I'm worried about Chard, should've been here by now," says Palmer.

Templar replies, "Chardonnay can take care of herself. I'm more concerned about Shinaman right now."

"He's going to be just fine," reports Palmer.

Templar says, "If only we can figure out how to get him home. I’ve got to contact Jonathan."

First, help me roll him over. We’ve still got to cauterize the backside of the wound.

**Chapter Nine**

**This is Jonathan, again.** I was sitting in the fantail lounge of my yacht, working on my laptop when one of the three burner phones situated next to the laptop pings to indicate a text message. The text read, "D.S. wounded. Need to get him home to his wife A-SAP." Of course we have no idea where that home is. The message was correct, only I have that information, unless Shinaman, in the emergency, has broken protocol and outted himself.

That text message was followed by a second reading: "Wound is GSW. D.S. needs care of his own physician. Please advise."

“GSW” referenced a gunshot wound. Templar was asking for me to come up with a plan to get him home, preferably without reporting the GSW.

Since doctors are required by law to report all gunshot wounds, the question becomes how in the world does a doctor report the wound, but have the investigation go nowhere?

At the race track, Templar and Palmer are doing their best to make the nearly unconscious Shinaman comfortable. Palmer confronts Templar. "I’m still worried about Chardonnay. Maybe I should go look for her."

At the hidden Ford Taurus Chardonnay pops open the trunk and begins rummaging through the bags left behind when the team abandoned the vehicle. From one of the bags she pulls out the radio transmitter used to bring down the armored car. From another bag, she extracts a packet marked C-4.

Back at the pickup, Shinaman is now sleeping peacefully when suddenly there is a familiar tap at the canopy door. Glock in hand, Templar cautiously opens one of the doors. Chardonnay climbs in as Templar quickly closes the door.

"There are four people closing in on us, armed to the teeth," Chardonnay reports.

Palmer asks, "Any thoughts on how to get us out of here?"

Producing the small, handheld radio transmitter from her pocket, Chardonnay extends the transmitter's short antenna, responding, "Of course."

"Let's go for it," declares Templar.

Suddenly a vast, high energy explosion lights up the nighttime sky and blows a hole in a section of the park's eastern wall large enough to drive an 18-wheeler through.

At the main entrance to the Dog Track, Sgt. Johnson, Capt. McGraw, Cpl. Jimenez and two Las Vegas police officers simultaneously react to the explosion and giant fireball to the east. Cpl. Jimenez crosses himself, exclaiming, "Madre de Dios! They're making their break. They'll head cross-country into the desert."

"They do and they'll get bogged down in the sand, unless they're driving a military half-track," states McGraw.

Suddenly a radio squawks, "Carter here. Appears the *perps* have breached the eastern wall and are escaping into the desert. We're in pursuit. Request backup."

Cpl Jimenez and the other two uniformed officers look to McGraw for the order to respond. McGraw is pondering the situation. Jimenez, getting antsy, asks, "Sir, are we not responding to the call for backup?"

"Not to worry, Corporal, we're going to respond... but in our own way. This is what I want you to do."

Holed up in the canopied bed of the pickup, the group listens to the sound of sirens heading toward the breach in the park's eastern wall. Templar turns to Palmer, "Yeah, we got their attention. They're heading for the breach. Think you can get us through that service entrance?"

Palmer, smiling, "Watch me."

With no further encouragement, Palmer hastily bails out of the rear door of the camper and rushes towards the truck's cab. But he's been spotted. Gloria DeMornay, Rudy, Bat and Archer run toward the canopied pickup with weapons drawn.

Palmer jumps behind the wheel, shoves the key into the ignition, fires up the engine, puts the pedal to the metal and roars off. Bat and Archer, hands shaking, take aim but it’s Gloria and Rudy who open fire, each of them squeezing off five or six rounds.

As Chard pulls the lock pick kit from Shinaman's tool kit, bullets rip into the pickup's enclosed, oversized canopy. The pickup charges up to the service entrance gate and slams to a stop where Chardonnay jumps out the back and rushes over to the gate. Taking the large padlock in hand, Chard goes to work, using the lock picking tools she found in Shinaman's kit.

DeMornay, Rudy, Bat and Archer, guns drawn, are closing in on the service entrance.

Finally, Chard opens the padlock, removes the heavy chain and swings open the two gates. She clambers back into the pickup's canopy bed and yells to Palmer, "Go! Go! Go!"

**Chapter Ten**

At the main entrance to the dog track, Sgt. Johnson and Capt. McGraw are seated in the sheriff's unit, blocking off the main entrance to the track. The two units that were previously there are gone.

At the intersection of East Larson and the Highway 604, two marked sheriff's vehicles are parked end-to-end, blocking off East Larson and preventing any westbound automobiles from entering South Las Vegas Boulevard. CPL Jimenez and his partner, together with the reinforcement unit, climb out of their vehicles, brandishing shotguns. Standing behind the protection of their vehicles, the deputies have their locked and loaded weapons aimed at the approaching pickup.

In the pickup, Palmer is faced with a decision, surrender or try to break the blockade. He pulls the pickup to the far right, off the road where there is almost, but not quite enough room to get through without a collision.

As the deputies pump away with buckshot, the canopied pickup clips the front of CPL Jimenez's patrol unit, spinning the car around and destroying the unit's right front wheel; but also making a pathway for escape.

With CPL Jimenez scrambling out of the way, the dog track pickup makes a right turn onto Nevada Highway 604 and heads north towards the nearby St. Rose Parkway and the Las Vegas Strip.

Hearing shotgun fire coming from the intersection of East Larson Lane and Nevada Highway 604, Sgt. Johnson fires up his engine and he and Capt. McGraw head in the direction of the gunfire. Going northbound on the 604, McGraw is on the radio, "Ten-four Corporal. We're en route. Stay where you are and send the other unit to replace us at the main gate. We're in pursuit of the pickup. And get verifiable IDs on anyone entering or exiting East Larson Lane. This could be a ruse to draw us off, like that explosion on the eastern wall."

The only damage to the pickup resulting from the collision is a smashed left front headlight and a slightly bent fender. Palmer heads full throttle northbound on the 604, towards McCarran Airport and the Las Vegas strip, the landscape of flashing lights whipping past in a blur.

Still pedal to the metal, the pickup passes under the Bruce Woodbury Beltway, with no sign of anyone in pursuit. Inside the canopied bed, Chardonnay is caring for Shinaman. Since there is no view into the cab, Templar pulls out his cell phone and calls Palmer.

Approaching the Vegas strip, Palmer, still exceeding the speed limit, answers the burner cell, "How's Shinaman doing?"

"Good as can be expected."

"Can he walk," questions Palmer.

"We'd have to get on each side of him and pretend to be helping a drunken friend." Palmer responds, "I'll get us as close as I can to the hotel before giving the bailout signal. When I give the word, get as far away as you can, as fast as possible. I'll lead them as far from you as I can before abandoning the pickup and hopefully disappearing into the crowd.

Palmer eases up on the gas pedal as he approaches McCarran International Airport on his right.

Sensing the slowdown, Templar calls Palmer again, "Why are we slowing down?"

Palmer replies, "We're at McCarran. We have a headlight out and the airport is heavily patrolled. Surprised we haven't heard any sirens."

"Does seem strange," adds Templar.

In the overhead helicopter**,** Sheriff Douglas Gillespie is seated to the left of the pilot. He keys the radio transmitter and speaks into the microphone attached to his aviation helmet, "We have him. Pickup with a canopy and the left front headlight out, passing McCarran, heading towards the Strip.

On the ground, inside the sheriff's patrol car, with Sgt. Johnson behind the wheel, Capt. McGraw grabs the radio's microphone and keys the transmitter in answer, “Sher-iff. Answer, Sheriff, we're holding back until we see where they're going. I'd rather not start a high-speed chase on the Strip, putting the public in harm's way."

"That's a ten-four, McGraw."

"I’d put two Metro units ahead of the pickup and another flanking us on Paradise Road," McGraw suggests.

As the pickup approaches the Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino, Palmer is working his cell, "we're passing Mandalay Bay, heading for Tropicana Avenue. In case we're being followed, or somehow tracked, here's my plan.

Templar responds, "I'm listening."

"I'm going to pull into the MGM Grand, into the ground floor of the multilevel parking structure and then exit back onto the Strip, still heading north."

"And this is going to accomplish what?", queries Templar.

"It's going to establish a pattern. I haven't seen them, but I know we're being tracked. After getting safely past Flamingo Road, I'll do the same at the Flamingo."

"I follow you. Go ahead."

"As we pass Sands Avenue, I'll duck into the Wynn Resort then take the access road to the Encore parking structure, where you, Chard and Shinaman bail and make your way to Templar’s suite."

"Question is, after dropping us off, what will you do?"

"Continue on to Circus-Circus, pull into their parking structure, abandon the pickup out of sight of the security cameras and enter the casino like anyone else.”

Palmer turns into the MGM Grand's huge parking structure.

In the back of the pickup, Templar grimaces and laments to Chardonnay, "A fine mess we got ourselves into."

**Chapter Eleven**

**Jonathan, again. I had made the Encore Resort & Casino** reservations for the team members earlier in the week. Knowing Templar’s propensity for fine living, I booked him one of the resort’s best suites, all secured by a draft on our Macau bank.

At the Encore's registration desk, the hotel clerk is very obliging, as Templar tells him, "Robin Templar. I have reservations for four rooms."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Templar. Three rooms and a premium suite, all in your name, for an undetermined length of stay and secured by a Macau bank draft. Welcome to the Encore. Let us know if there's anything you need during your stay.”

In the large, luxurious Templar suite, Templar, Chardonnay, Shinaman, and Palmer are gathered together, enjoying gourmet hors d'oeuvres, all of which are being washed down by an expensive champagne. Templar announces, "Jonathan laid out the rules at our meeting. Any of you packing?"

Except for Chardonnay, there is a shake of heads. With a *give me* hand signal, Templar asks for Chad’s weapon. She hands over her Model 1911 .45 Colt semi automatic. “I’ll have it placed in the hotel’s safe. I'll provide each of you with a 9mm Glock, which, if lost or confiscated, can only be traced to the government. Before heading home, you will return your weapons and I will see that they are properly taken care of. Doug, do you have our transportation?"

Shinaman answers, "Aye, sir, indeed I do. Ford Taurus, freshly stolen this morning from a rental agency that won't even be missing it for several days. Original plates have been replaced with a set of recent ones taken off a same make vehicle from a wrecking yard in North Las Vegas. And here's the beauty of it," he continues, chuckling, " the stolen plates have current tags."

"Good job! You have the box of gloves?," asks Templar.

"T' be sure," reports Shinaman, pulling out his ubiquitous tool kit and producing a 6 x 12 inch cardboard box. With a pocket knife, he slits the seal. Then he gets up from his seat and hands the box to Templar. From the box, Templar pulls out numerous skin-colored, funeral-style cloth gloves.

Templar continues delivering instructions, "With few exceptions, from the time you leave this room until you're safely on your way home, you will wear these cloth gloves. Each of you take at least three sets. And make sure to carefully wipe down your rooms, especially the bathrooms where you're most likely to take off the gloves. Note that these are skin-colored so as not to draw undue attention.

Chardonnay chimes in, "And try not to leave any hair follicles that might easily be found."

"Good point, Chard," states Templar. "Vegas has one of the best CSI units in the world, and a very determined sheriff heading up Metro. We don't want to give either a leg up. It's no one's business how you got to Vegas nor how you intend to depart. If you need assistance, don't rely on each other, and that includes me. You're supposed to have memorized the disposable cell number to call or text. Okay? Now, if there're no questions, we'll depart for the track 6:30 pm tomorrow."

The dog track’s pickup approachesthe Wynn Resort & Casino. Palmer is on his cell, "We're nearing Fashion Show Drive and the approach to the Wynn Resort. Time to get our Irishman ready."

Chardonnay tells Templar, "Shinaman is looking better."

Templar, on his cell with Palmer, "He'll be ready."

Sheriff Gillespie, looking down on the Strip, keys the radio transmitter, "McGraw? I don't like it. They keep ducking in and out of certain casino parking lots, randomly, it would appear."

McGraw, from inside the patrol car, keys the transmitter, "But you're not sure. Is there a time when they're not visible?"

"They enter a structure and then quickly exit. During that period they're out of our sight."

"Sounds like they know they're being tracked and preparing to bail."

Gillespie says, "If they haven't already!"

"Time to move in," states McGraw.

"How do you wanna handle it?," asks Gillespie.

The pickup turns off onto East Wynn main Gate Drive, makes the circle but instead of returning to the Strip, keeps to the right and takes the access road to the adjacent Encore Resort & Casino. The access road is hardly lit at all. Palmer rolls down the driver's side window, takes out his 9mm Glock and throws it into the tall grass.

Palmer, is on his cell phone, "Approaching the parking structure. I'll try and find a blind spot from the security cameras. Stand by for my signal."

While looking down on the Strip, Sheriff Gillespie speaks into his transmitter, "May have lost them. They turned onto the Wynn Resort, made the circle and it looked like they were going to re-enter Vegas Blvd. ...But I don't see 'em."

McGraw responds, "Probably turned off on the access road leading to the Encore. It's not well lit and it's not surprising you can't spot them. Do I have your permission to have all units close in on the Encore?"

The pickup enters the parking structure for the Encore. With the cell phone to his ear, Palmer slams on the brakes and gives the signal, "Go! Go! Go!"

The rear doors of the pickup's canopy suddenly fly open and under cover of the Encore parking structure, Chardonnay, Shinaman and Templar bail out. After closing the canopy's doors behind them, with Doug’s tool kit in hand, Chardonnay and Templar help Shinaman toward one of the resort's entrances. Once his passengers are clear, Palmer wastes no time in getting the pickup on the road again. .

Palmer enters the Strip at East Desert Inn Road and continues north.

**Chapter Twelve**

Captain McGraw's patrol car is pulling into the Encore Resort and Casino, followed by three other patrol units.

Sheriff Gillespie, speaking into the microphone attached to his aviation helmet shouts, "Abort! Abort! Stand down! They're back on the Strip, heading north from East Desert Inn Road. Give chase. Let's end this now!"

The canopied pickup being driven by Palmer makes a left turn off the Strip onto Circus-Circus Drive, heading for the casino's multilevel parking structure. He rolls down his window and tosses his burn cell phone.

"The *perps* have turned onto Circus-Circus Drive. Probably heading for the parking structure. If that's the case, there's no easy way out for them. Now's the time," insists Sheriff Gillespie, speaking into his microphone.

The sheriff's car turns left onto Circus-Circus Drive followed by three Vegas police units. McGraw, speaking into the car's radio transmitter, reports, "This is McGraw with three support units. We're right behind them. Break! Break! McGraw to support unit one! On the third floor of the parking structure, there's a causeway leading to the hotel. You get up there and block it off. Detain anyone who looks suspicious or appears nervous. McGraw to support unit two... block off the east, ground floor entrance. Unit three! ... You block off the western entrance."

In hot pursuit of the pickup, the sheriff and three Vegas police support units make the left turn off Circus-Circus Drive onto the lane leading to the hotel casino's parking structure.

The sheriff's patrol unit chases the pickup into the westernmost entrance of the free parking structures two southern entrances. Support Units One and Two peels off and race for the easternmost entrance to the structure. Support Unit Three pulls up and partially seals off the westernmost entrance, through which McGraw has just entered.

Vegas patrol Units One and Two approach the second (southern) entrance to the huge structure. Unit One enters and heads for the third floor causeway to the hotel. Unit Two pulls up and straddles the entrance with the patrol car. The car isn't long enough to completely block the structure's wide entrance/exit, but the two officers, male and female draw their weapons and take up positions covering the front and back gaps.

With McGraw's sheriff's patrol unit in hot pursuit, Palmer's pickup is racing towards the third floor of the structure. With Sgt. Johnson doing the driving, climbing from level to level, Capt. McGraw keys the radio transmitter, "Support Unit One, are you in place? Heads up. They're coming your way."

"We're ready."

On the third floor of the structure, Vegas police Unit One is parked in such a way as to block off both elevator and causeway from the parking portion of the structure. Palmer, rounding the turn to the third floor of the huge parking structure, sees the patrol unit blocking the entrance to the causeway and the two officers with guns drawn.

The pickup performs a spectacular turnabout, reversing direction and rushing back down the parking structure. As the sheriff's unit, with Sgt. Johnson and Capt. McGraw, is heading up to the third floor, the pickup is barreling down, heading for the easternmost entrance/exit. The two vehicles barely miss one another.

As Sgt. Johnson whips his sheriff's unit around to give chase, Palmer races to open the gap. Rounding the down ramp, the pickup charges towards the exit; blocked by Vegas Patrol Support Unit One.

On the first floor, Palmer sees the five-foot gap between the police unit's rear end and the parking structure. Picking up speed, the 3/4 ton pickup is closing the gap when suddenly the female officer steps from behind the parking structure, her weapon pointed at the oncoming pickup's cab. As she opens fire at the approaching vehicle, Palmer corrects his course by turning the pickup's wheel slightly clockwise. The pickup slams into the right center side of the patrol unit. It's a devastating crash; bringing the pickup to an everlasting stop.

Sheriff Gillespie is speaking into his microphone, "McGraw, I'm waiting for your report!"

Sgt. Johnson is applying first aid to the seriously wounded Palmer, while Capt. McGraw responds, "There was only one *perp* in the pickup, the driver, and he's wounded. I doubt he's going to make it. Took a bullet from one of the officers. She said the driver was headed straight at her but, at the last second, turned and drove into the center of the police unit."

"He T-boned a patrol car? Intentionally?"

"That's what she claims. Said it was clear to her that he did it purposely to avoid injuring or killing her." To the sound of a siren, Capt McGraw continues, "Ambulance is arriving. I'm going to make the trip with him to the hospital, take down any statement he might make. It'll likely be a deathbed statement. I'll get back to you soon as I know anything."

The ambulance pulls up and the driver and paramedic Steve waste no time in getting Palmer on the stretcher and into the rear of the emergency vehicle.

McGraw turns to Sgt. Johnson, asking, "Got an ID?"

Sgt. Johnson answers, "No sir. Only thing in his wallet is nineteen hundred in cash, mostly 100s and a few 50s. Hardly accounts for the amount taken in the heist. No weapons, no ID, not even a hotel key card, nor any receipts. Obviously, a pro."

Paramedic Steve, the driver who stopped to lend assistance when Shinaman convinced him that the site was merely a movie set, jumps into the rear of the ambulance with McGraw just before the driver closes the door and steps quickly towards the cab.

**Chapter Thirteen**

At the door of his Encore Resort suite**,** Templar is on his cell phone as he and Chardonnay help Shinaman into the suite. Chardonnay gets him some Cognac from the service bar. Finally, Templar hangs up and turns to Chardonnay, "Jonathan says we need to get him to the airport and send him to Mexico City. Sooner he sees his own physician, the better."

"His physician is in Mexico?" asks Chardonnay.

"We don't know that and..."

"And we don't want to know. Got it. I'll get him there. You stay here for when Palmer shows up. Now, if you'll give me his passport."

Templar opens a desk drawer extracts a passport and hands it to Chardonnay, "Good thing we bring our fake passports for just such an emergency."

Chardonnay replies, "I know, and we never bring any identification, real or not, to the crime scene."

Jonathan again. You’re wondering why I was sending Doug Shinaman all the way to Mexico City when he lives on a two-acre estate high up in the wealthy section of La Canada Flintridge overlooking the Los Angeles basin. Having met Sean Easton’s lovely wife, Marilyn, I was somewhat surprised he accepted my call.

Sean Easton, AKA Doug Shinaman, is still asleep in his huge master bedroom when awakened by his perky and pretty 42-year-old wife, wearing the flight attendant uniform of a major airline, "Sean, you should be dressed by now. I have to leave if I'm going to make my flight."

"My angel wife, the flight attendant. I do wish you'd give up this position that keeps you so long away from me."

"You know I can't do that as long as you insist on helping the world's unfortunate at the risk of ending up in prison for the rest of your useful life. I only have one more year before my pension kicks in. And I need that security. You know this!"

Easton nodding wearily, gets up, dresses, exits the house and gets into his SUV. Driving down to the Los Angeles basis, in the Glendale area, he passes by a prominently advertised Easton Multiplex Theatre listing eight current features on its marquee. The SUV gets off the 101 Freeway, passes Universal Studios and prepares to get on the freeway south into Hollywood. Easton heading west on the Sunset Strip, finally pulls into an office building with a sign identifying it as Easton Theatres.

Entering his outter office, Sean’s secretary, still holding the phone handset, announces, “A Jonathan Moore on the phone for you, sir. Do you wish to speak with him?”

“I’ll take it in my office.

In the ambulance, paramedic Steve applies the ubiquitous facial oxygen mask to Palmer but McGraw waves it off.

"That necessary?," asks McGraw. "I suppose not," said Steve removing the mask. Officer Edwards, who shot this guy is an excellent shot. I'm surprised he's still alive."

"Which hospital are you taking him to?"

"Sunrise, sir. It's less than 15 minutes away."

"Looks like he's at least conscious," says Capt. McGraw.

"Can't say for how long," asserts Steve.

Notepad in hand, McGraw turns his attention to Palmer and looks him in the eye, "Name's McGraw. Must say it doesn't look good for you. Want to tell me your name and what happened to the rest of your gang?"

Due to his wounds Palmer has difficulty speaking, but makes every effort, "I'm a former naval officer," he says haltingly. "My prints are on file so I won't insult you by lying. My name is Louis Osgard. I'm well known in Jacksonville, Florida. As for my 'gang,' as you call them, they should still be back at the greyhound track." He continues very slowly and with great effort, "Had a difference of opinion and I decided it was time we parted company."

"Let me get this straight. You took the pickup on your own. By yourself?"

"That's right. I was a new hire and my boss was trying to eliminate me as a witness, so I took off in fear of my life," gasps Palmer.

"And your boss. Just who might that be?"

"The owner, or manager of the dog track, of course. I'm not sure of her relationship to the track..."

Taking notes, McGraw asks "You're fingering Gloria DeMornay, the major shareholder and manager. Why would she rob herself?"

Gasping, Palmer utters "I suggest you ask the minority shareholders."

"You're a smart fella, Osgard. You'd have made a fine police officer."

"I was a pretty good aviator. Which brings us to the subject of what's going to happen to me should I live?"

"Depends on what you're charged with. If they prove you had anything to do with that armored car heist, then you could be looking at some serious time."

"Here's my bit of advice," said Palmer speaking with greater effort. "Do a raid on the track's main office. Check out the safe. Then there's a hidden panel on the wall behind DeMornay's desk that you should open. Listen carefully while I tell how."

Approaching the emergency entrance of the hospital, the ambulance cuts its siren and pulls into the appropriate spot where it is met by other emergency personnel.

As Paramedic Steve and the ambulance driver roll in the gurney with the now unconscious Palmer, Capt. McGraw asks Steve, "What do you think his chances are?"

Steve shrugs, "He's going straight to surgery."

At McCarran International Airport, Chardonnay is accompanying Shinaman as far as she can before he enters the TSA area.

"Was a delight working with you, again, my dear," says Shinaman. "I'll say one thing for Jonathan, he puts together a smashing team. And I rather fancy that the recipients of our largess truly appreciate what we do for them, even though I'm certain they have nay the faintest idea of the nasty details."

"Listen, when you get to whatever city you finally end up in, see your doctor immediately. There may be internal damage. You're going to need antibiotics and careful monitoring. I'm sure you'll find some inventive way to explain to your doctor the unusual cauterization process. …Got your fake passport?"

Shinaman grins mischievously to Chardonnay as he steps to the security check.

In his office, Sheriff Gillespie hands Capt. McGraw a set of papers and reports "Here's the warrant. Based on your notes, the judge agreed we have probable cause to raid and search the Greyhound track. You think this Osgard was telling the truth? That he was working for Gloria DeMornay?"

"We'll know more tomorrow, won't we?" shrugs McGraw.

**Chapter Fourteen**

There's a signal knock at the door of Templar's Encore suite and Templar lets Chardonnay into the suite. He has been watching one of the local news channels recapping the incident in the Circus-Circus parking structure. The images of the wreck of the canopied pickup are deeply disturbing to both Chardonnay and Templar.

"They say Palmer is in critical condition. I suggest you sanitize his room and then, as Mrs. Palmer, check him out and bring his luggage back here to the suite." Opening the desk drawer and extracting Palmer's Encore key card, Templar continues, "Here's his room's key card."

Three sheriff's patrol units pull up in front of the Greyhound Dog Track's main office and the six officers pile out and enter; among them Capt. McGraw, Sgt. Johnson, Cpl. Jimenez and Officer Carter.

Gloria DeMornay is sitting behind her desk. Gathered around are the thug, Rudy, and the computer nerds, Bat and Archer. Everyone is taken aback when McGraw and five other police officers burst into the office.

"Everybody stay where you are," demands McGraw.

DeMornay and crew obey and the police proceed to make sure everyone is disarmed., which they are. Gloria raises her hands in the gesture of surrender.

McGraw tells DeMornay, "Put your hands down. You look ridiculous." Laying the warrant on her desk, he says, "This warrant says we have the right to look inside your safe. Will you open it or shall we blow it?"

"Blow it? Whatever turns you on," smiles Gloria, nodding to Bat, who then steps over to the large safe and begins working the combination dial. Within seconds he has the safe unlocked and pulls the door open.

Bat's mouth drops at what he sees. Even Sgt. Johnson seems surprised as he pushes Bartholomew aside and grabs one of the empty, canvas bank bags, with the hole cut in the side.

"What is this?" demands Sgt. Johnson, as he tosses the bank bag on the desk, in front of DeMornay. Then Cpl. Jimenez pulls out the telltale stack of checks and deposit slips and thumbs through them, saying, "Captain. Look what we have here," then tosses his find on the desk, next to the canvas bag.

"Well, Gloria, what do you have to say for yourself?" asks Capt. McGraw. With no response, he continues, "Jimenez, log all this in at headquarters and fill out the paperwork. And be sure to get signatures. We wouldn't want to break the chain of evidence."

As the cops swarm around the desk of the track manager, Sgt. Johnson, pops open the hidden panel behind DeMornay's desk. The opening door reveals the massive computer room, in all its high-tech, sinister glory, populated by a dozen cyber criminals, who all rise and raise their hands as they look shocked to be discovered and trapped by the police who, despite being almost as shocked, move quickly with drawn weapons and handcuffs. And then the officers begin taking apart and confiscating the computer’s hard drives. DeMornay sinks lower in her chair with a look of mortification on her face.

In Templar's suite**,** Chardonnay and Templar are seated, watching the TV news report on the raid by the Las Vegas Metro police. Photos of Gloria DeMornay and her henchmen are displayed on the screen. Templar jumps up and shuts off the suite's large set and turns to Chardonnay, saying, "I think it's time we go back and collect our money. What do you think?"

"Definitely. Since they'll be searching airport and bus baggage and agricultural border stations, all with the proverbial fine-tooth comb, I assume we'll be getting the money out of town the usual way," replies Chardonnay.

"That's right. We're going to deposit it."

In the Sheriff's office, Sgt. Johnson and Capt. McGraw are assessing the raid. Sgt. Johnson reports, "We know DeMornay has the money hidden somewhere. It was smart not to arrest her. Long as we follow her every move, eventually we'll find out where."

"I'm not so sure. When we opened that safe, and showed the empty bank bags and casino deposit slips, what I saw on DeMornay's face was total shock," comments McGraw.

Pondering this, the Sheriff affirms, "Johnson's right. …Continue shadowing her."

Sgt Johnson then asks, "Sir, what about that computer center?"

"Obviously used for cyber crimes of some sort. You don't hide a room like that so you can play video games," responds McGraw.

"Cyber forensics is going through the hard drives, with a warrant, of course. We'll see what they come up with," states Gillespie. "And what about this Osgard?"

"We're guarding him around the clock, with instructions to hold, interrogate and get background checks on anyone who tries to visit," says McGraw reassuringly.

**Chapter Fifteen**

The Greyhound Race Track is open and the greyhounds are chasing the bait as the sparse crowds in the stands shout their encouragement. Rudy, Bat and Archer are gathered around the enraged DeMornay in the track's main office. Shouting at Rudy and Archer, DeMornay declares, "News reports say Osgard is at Sunrise in intensive care. I want you to go there and get him to tell us where's the money and our deposit slip. Do whatever it takes. That fathead Sgt. Johnson was curious why our deposit slip wasn't included among the others. I want that slip destroyed!"

"Boss, I don't know. Osgard's obviously under heavy police guard. So, are we going to shoot a cop just to get at Osgard?" asks Bat.

"You don't get it, Joe College," snaps Gloria angrily. "If they get that deposit slip, we're done. All of us. Now, the paper says he's from Jacksonville." To Rudy, she instructs, "Get hold of our contacts in Florida and find out where he is vulnerable: wife, family, girlfriend, children, whatever. Then get some proper wardrobe and a stethoscope. One of you can pose as a doctor to get into his room. Then, make him an offer he'll understand!"

The track is empty and totally dark. A Ford SUV pulls up to the track's concession area. Chardonnay gets out from the driver's side and Templar from the passenger side. They head towards the concession area, Templar carrying a small box containing 30-gallon trash bags and ties. They remove the blackboard that serves as a menu, propping it up against another wall and then kick in the drywall that was behind the blackboard to access the money. Chardonnay is holding open a trash bag as Templar deposits bundles of cash. He will repeat this process until the bag is half full, at which time Chardonnay ties it off and opens another.

"I wouldn't have guessed that Palmer's real name was Osgard, or that he was from Jacksonville," says Chardonnay.

"Neither would I. Which brings us to your *nom de guerre,* Chardonnay. I always suspected you chose it because it was your favorite wine."

"Actually, I prefer champagne. But Champagne just doesn't work as a name."

"Ah, yes, but you chose Rogers as a nod to the Champagne House of Pol Roger?"   
 Smiling, Chardonnay says, "Pol Roger, yes, it was Winston Churchill's favorite. Then there's the name Robin Templar. Robin Templar, the Knights Templar, that's all plain enough, but let me guess... you're a fan of *The Saint* books by Leslie Charteris, Simon Templar?"

"Busted," says Templar, grinning.

Chardonnay is inside Templar's suite stacking the last of the black trash bags in a corner of the room. The door to the suite opens and Templar enters, with Jonathan carrying a large suitcase.

**"Good morning, Chard, I said.** My plane landed on time at McCarran and, Robin here was there to meet me, saving me cab fare."

Andrea Parker greeted me with a warm hug. "Hello, Jonathan. Good to see you."

"Same here, my dear."

It's then that I spotted the half-filled, black trash bags with their white ties stacked in a corner of the room. I walked over and lifted one. "Heavy. Didn't realize how much paper weighed."

"That's why the bags are only half full. Didn't want to chance anything breaking open."

"Good thinking. So, when do we start making the deposits?"

"You did bring our bank bags, deposit slips, currency wrappers," asks Templar.

"Mr. Templar, please. I'm the CFO."

"Sorry. There's a lot of loose currency where the binders were broken, but most is intact so it shouldn't take long to wrap. I also got a bunch of the casino currency wrappers. Thought they might come in handy."

**In Bouchon’s Venetian Tower Restaurant,** Chardonnay, Templar and I were enjoying lunch.

I opened the conversation. "This time, because it's Vegas, I'm going to run the money through Macau before transferring it to our account in the Caymans."

"The word Macau is magic in Vegas," explains Templar to Chard, "It implies large gambling companies, to be specific. And gambling produces a lot of cash deposits, which don't get a lot of scrutiny."

I was thinking, before being drummed out of the Marine Corps, I got my experience setting up similar accounts for CIA black ops. How I miss the Corps, the camaraderie, the danger, the pride, the sense of accomplishment.

However, there are some things I don't miss. Unfortunately, Chardonnay or Corporal Andrea Parker, was there to arrest me for an incident that involved enhanced interrogation of a terrorist. While it saved lives, unfortunately, the board of inquiry did not care. It caused me to be court marshaled and ousted from the Corps even though no one was actually hurt.

It all started in a Marine Corps field tent in a combat zone in the Middle East. Inside the large tent, several of us Marine Corps officers were interrogating a captive who was tied to a chair. To put a scare into him, I pulled out my handgun and put it in the captive's face. I could see it scared the daylights out of him so I moved my weapon to a spot just behind his ear and pulled the trigger. With a loud report, the bullet slams into the dirt floor, kicking up a dust cloud.

At that point, the captive began spilling his guts, babbling and blubbering hysterically.

Naturally, the other officers were taken aback, relieved to get the information, but

looking askance at me.

So, it all ended for me in one day, quick as a flash. Generally, I don't believe in torture, or enhanced interrogation, as they call it now. Most of the time it's counter-productive. But sometimes, to save lives, you gotta go with your gut.

The prisoner was not hurt, simply terrified into blurting out the information we were seeking; and that information saved countless lives; all of which seemed beside the point to the board of inquiry. As a ranking officer, twenty years in, I was court marshaled and dismissed from the Corps for putting my weapon next to a captive's ear and pulling the trigger.

Having tasted a life of combat and covert ops, civilian life was a demotion and not one I could accept. So I reached out to some people I trusted and created the Merry Band -- my own special ops team, so to speak.

As we left the restaurant, walking along the Venice Canal, I explained the deposit process to Chard, "When I was setting this up, I took out a Clark County business license and opened three bank accounts at three different Vegas banks, all with proper Macau tax IDs, of course. Our deposits will be reported to the IRS as are all cash deposits over $10,000. But as long as they appear reasonable, they'll pass muster."

Inside Templar's Encore suite, Chardonnay, Templar and I are filling out deposit slips. We count and bag the cash into the canvas bank bags which I had provided.

Then Chardonnay comments, "I'm a little confused. You have accounts at three different banks, but we're not only making deposits to these banks but to several of their branches on the same day. Won't that defeat the purpose of keeping each deposit at or below the so-called reasonable amount?"

"Tellers generally look at the total in the account," I said reassuringly. "They don't focus on the date of the deposits. Besides, all they can do is report it to the IRS. And all taxes due, if any, will be declared in the Caymans."

Smiling, Templar says, "Where there is no tax." Noticing that Chardonnay still has a frown on her face, I asked "Something bothering you?"

"It's the math. Even with each of us making daily deposits, with the amount of cash we have here, this could take two weeks. I have a job to get back to. I can only give you three, maybe four days."

"That'll be enough. Templar and I will finish the job."

"In the meantime, there's nothing we can do for Palmer tonight, so why don't we all relax and go out to a show? I mean, we're in Vegas, right?" I stated.

Templar, however, bowed out. "You two go. I need to get some rest, phone my wife and let her know I'm all right. News reports must be driving her crazy."

**Chapter Sixteen**

**In one of the hotel’s entertainment lounges,** surrounded by the large, well-lubricated audience, Chardonnay and I were seated together near the stage at one of the small tables. We were enjoying cocktails while a popular musical group was performing. After the group finished a fast, upbeat tune, the leader addressed the audience, "How about a change of pace? Any singers in the audience?"

Chardonnay, having consumed a few drinks, laughs aloud at the question. The group leader sees her and calls out, "You! Hot-looking lady! Yeah, you!" Wireless microphone in hand, he quickly moves to our table. "Tell me, lovely lady, you ever sing in public?" Holding the microphone close so that the audience can hear her, Chard responds, "Of course, every Sunday, in the church choir." This elicits a giggle from the audience. The leader asks, "So are there any sultry ballads in your hymn book?"

The audience laughs and Chard laughs with them, replying "Maybe a few."

"Would you sing one for us?" asks the leader as he motions for applause from the audience to put pressure on her – to which the audience complies.

"Well, if you're going to harass me like that," Chard and the group leader head for the stage.

Sitting by himself in the back section, but too stunned to applaud, is Detective Jerry Kelley of the San Diego Police Department.

"Sweetheart, tell us your name, where you're from, what you're going to sing and in what key?"

"Chardonnay Rogers and I'm from right here in Las Vegas." Chard then leans towards the leader and whispers the name of the song in his ear.

As Chard begins singing the ballad, it's evident that she has hidden talents. The audience is spellbound at the sultry, engaging and sexually charged performance. I was especially blown away. Chard returns to our table to wild applause from the audience, including myself. "Chard, I had no idea," was all I could say.

The group leader tells the audience, "After that performance we're going to take a short break….and perhaps a cold shower." This, of course, get’s laughter and even more appreciative applause.

The one person who isn't clapping and cheering is Jerry Kelley, who approaches our table. Chard, looking up, is shocked to see this person standing before us. .

Recovering, she blurts out, "Detective Kelly, how delightful to see you. Won't you sit down?" gesturing to the empty chair at the small table. Kelly sits. "Detective Jerry Kelley," Chard says indicating me, pausing slightly before saying, "I'm sorry, I don't believe I caught your name."

"You can call me Jonathan."

"Jerry, what are you doing here?"

"I would ask you the same thing. I thought you were in Washington visiting your parents. And what's this Chardonnay Rogers all about?"

Chard turned to me and said, smiling, "I hope you will excuse me, but Detective Kelley is not only a colleague but a dear friend."

Chardonnay Rogers/Andrea Parker and SDPD Detective Kelley are walking through the outdoor, scenic site of the Venetian Resort when Chard tells him, "Jerry, I'm doing a little moonlighting. My father has been spending a lot of time here in Vegas. My mother asked me to make sure he wasn't losing the family fortune at the tables."

"Chardonnay Rogers. …I admit it has a certain ring to it."

"I couldn't give my real name and take a chance on my father learning I was in town, checking up on him. And what if some nut case traced me back to San Diego and showed up at my apartment late some night."

"Yeah, I see your point. Still, why lie to the Chief about where you were going on your leave? If he were to find out, no matter how innocent, it could come back to bite you."

Chard seductively placing her arm on her partner's shoulder coos in his ear, "But he's not going to find out, is he? Do you have a room?"

"Why, yes. I'm staying here, at the Venetian."

"How convenient."

Detective Kelly, folding back the sheet on the king-size bed, reaches out a hand to Chardonnay and both fall onto the bed. Chard presses her face to the detective's chest, with both breathing quickly. They begin kissing softly and slowly while Kelley pulls the sheet over them.

In his Mexico City Marriott Hotel Suite, enjoying a room service breakfast, Douglas Shinaman (Sean Easton) is struggling to make a cell phone call. The television in the background is tuned to CNN. Finally, the call goes through, "Hi, honey," he says to his wife, Marilyn Easton, the flight attendant.

"Sean! Where are you? I've been worried sick about you."

"Mexico City!"

"What on earth are you doing there?"

"Awaiting my flight home. What time does your flight get into LAX?"

"I get in at 3:55 pm. Are you alright?"

"I'm booked on an Alaska Airlines non-stop scheduled to leave Mexico City at 1:30 pm and arrive at LAX at 4:40 pm. Can you pick me up?"

"Of course, darling."

As Shinaman clicks off his phone and goes back to his breakfast, the CNN reporter on the television begins discussing the armored car robbery in Las Vegas.

"As of yet, no money has been recovered from a daring armored car heist in Las Vegas. Under arrest, in a local hospital, is Louis Osgard, from Jacksonville, Florida, who is suspected of being involved. But so far authorities have only filed charges related to purposely ramming a police vehicle."

Shinaman clicks off the TV, selects a number on his burn phone and presses the cell’s pre-programmed auto dial button.

In Templar’s Encore suite**,** my burner cell phone rang as I was arranging the briefcases stacked in a corner of the suite in the order in which they will be taken to the bank and deposited.

I answered, "Yes?"

On the other end, Shinaman asks, "So, what can we be doing to help poor Palmer?"

"Templar wants to get a message to him but isn't quite sure how to go about it," was my answer.

"That's easy. Go in as a nurse," suggests Shinaman.

"Not as a doctor?"

"Nah! Everybody knows all the doctors but the nurses, not so much. Anything else?"

"If you were to plant something in the upscale home of a mutual acquaintance that you wanted to eventually be found by certain parties, how would you go about it?"

"Well now, I wouldn't try to plant it inside the house, what with alarms and all," responds Shinaman.

"Yes, that was my thought as well. Outside definitely. Like, say, in the garden. And in plain sight. For a container, we were thinking at first, maybe some potted plants."

"Too complicated. Especially with the volume of the goods you're moving."

"Exactly, I said. “We need something larger, but something that would fit in to a backyard setting,"

"I'd get one of those diamond-shaped tool boxes, the kind they make for pickup trucks, and use that to contain whatever you wish to plant. You can plant it in plain sight in the backyard. The homeowner will think it's something the gardener left there to store his yard tools or something, and the gardener will think it's something put there by the homeowner. Most likely, neither one will pay any attention."

"Have a good flight, Doug."

**Chapter Seventeen**

In Sheriff Gillespie’s office Captain McGraw is giving the Sheriff a heads-up. The Sheriff asks, "Who's shadowing DeMornay?"

"Corporal Jimenez and Officer Carter. They're in plain clothes and an unmarked car,” is McGraw’s answer.

"They good?"

"Good enough."

"Remember, no wire taps or listening devices unless signed off by a judge. Anyone tried to visit Osgard?" asks the Sheriff.

"Not yet."

Along with Gloria DeMornay, gathered in the main office of the greyhound dog track, are Rudy, Bat and Archer. Gloria is demanding results from the background check on Osgard.

"What've we got on this Louis 'Duke' Osgard?, asks DeMornay.

Rudy, checking his notes, responds, "Contributes heavily to charities like Wounded Warriors. Never married, owns a few sports bars in Georgia and Florida, all very successful. Our contact in Jacksonville got chummy with one of the bartenders and learned that Osgard recently hooked up with a lady officer in the JAG Corps, Lieutenant Commander Janet Fisher, who's stationed nearby and the bartender says they're a hot item. Marriage could be in the works."

"That's a useful item, Rudy. So Bat, my dear, what have you found out about getting to him in the hospital?"

"Posing as a doctor appears to be the only way, ma'am."

"That's the way I figured it. Rudy, you'll be the doctor and Archer the armed security guard, who will escort Rudy to Osgard's room. Bat and I will await your call as to where the money is hidden."

The elevator door opens and Chardonnay and I enter the hallway of the Encore Resort & Casino carrying a smart looking, diamond plate tool box about 48 x 13 x 18. With one of us on each end, we continued carrying the box down the hallway towards Templar's suite. The discussion between the two of us is about the night before.

"I'm surprised Templar hasn't confronted me as to what happened last night," says Chard.

"That's because I haven't told him."

"Why not?"

"Didn't see the need. I happen to know your employer has a strict non-fraternization policy. Take my word, Detective Kelley will never admit to having seen you here, or anywhere else during his leave."

Templar opens the door and Chardonnay and I carry the large, smart-looking tool box inside and set it down on the floor next to the remaining half-filled trash bags.

"Let's count out and wrap the remaining money in the original casino wrappers and stack them into this fine looking tool box," states Templar.

"Nearly half a million. At least the casinos will be getting some of their money back," reports Chard.

"What's half a million when dealing with well over twenty million?" I asked.

"And all for a weekend's work in the best resort city in the world," retorts Templar.

At the Sunrise Hospital, Rudy is dressed as a doctor, and the computer nerd, Archer, dressed as an armed hospital security guard. They are walking down one of the hospital's corridors. Rudy comments, "I don't understand, why we don't just check with the nurse's station and ask what room he's in."

"Because, genius, we don't want a record of our having been here or being asked to show ID."

"Then how're we going to find him?"

"He'll be in the room with a uniformed officer standing guard. All we have to do is find that officer, who might be in plain clothes."

Just outside Palmer's room, Chardonnay Rogers, dressed in a nurse's uniform, approaches the uniformed guard sitting by the door to the room where Palmer is recovering from surgery. With an air of complete authority, she says to the officer, "Need to make a medication change on his chart."

Palmer is asleep as Chardonnay walks to the foot of the bed, grabbing the chart in its holder, and pretends to make changes while the guard gets up from his chair and peeks into the room. When Chard smiles at him he smiles back and then goes back to his chair, out of sight. Chard moves quickly to Palmer's bedside. Taking a burner cell phone out of her pocket, she reaches under the covers and places the phone inside, getting him to clasp it in his hand. Palmer opens his eyes, even though drugged, seeing Chard, who whispers, "It's a disposable, on the pulse setting. Expect a call from Templar. No time to explain. Can we get you an attorney?"

Palmer whispers back, "Lt. Commander Janet Fisher, JAG office, Naval Air Station Jacksonville."

Just then the hospital guard appears in the doorway. Chard smiles and hastily leaves the room, closing the door behind her. She exits the hospital from one door just as Capt. McGraw and Sgt. Johnson enter through another. Able to avoid being seen by them, Chard calls Templar on her burner cell, "You were right, I didn't have time to give him any information. The disposable was a good idea. He's waiting for your call."

Lying in his hospital bed, Palmer recalls when he first met Lt. CDR Janet Fisher at Duke’s Sports Bar & Grill. Jacksonville, Florida. It's lunch hour and the lounge and adjacent dining room are full. Louis "Duke" Osgard is hobnobbing with his customers. While his manner is slightly cocky, he is charming and well-liked. Noticing a drop-dead gorgeous woman in her early to mid 30s, that he seems to recognize, he sits down on a stool alongside her. Smiling, he says, "Pardon me, Miss, I'm Duke Osgard. I want to welcome you to Duke's Bar & Grill. The first drink, or course, is on the house."

Lt. Cdr. Janet Fisher looks up, a bit startled but smiling back, also appears to be trying to place a vague memory, says, "That's very kind of you. I'll have a glass of your finest Chardonnay."

"No, Miss, I know you and I have met before. And it wasn't just in my dreams."

"You've used that line before?"

"Not with much success, I'm afraid. I only know we were both wearing white when we met. And it wasn't our wedding."

"I remember. On the carrier!"

"Yes, you're right. We met on the carrier. You were defending Major Moore."

"That was a long time ago."

"I was Lieutenant Louis Osgard."

Extending her hand, "I was Lieutenant Commander Janet Fisher, with the JAG Corps. Was then and still am."

"And I was an aviator but am now an ex-aviator."

"What happened?"

"Atrial fibrillation."

"Sorry," comments Fisher sympathetically.

"May I buy you lunch?"

"I don't know," says Fisher. "It looks a little crowded."

"Well, it helps to know somebody," replies Osgard. "Fortunately, you know me."

Duke and LCDR Janet Fisher having moved to a prime table have ordered lunch. A healthy, juicy thick cod and Southwest salad accompanied by iced tea for her and a juicy hamburger piled high with lettuce, tomato, mushrooms and caramelized onions, served with French fries and a bottle of Guinness for him.

"I respect any aviator, especially a fighter pilot," asserts Janet in between bites.

"Why's that?"

"In the Navy, just the simple task of landing the aircraft is an adventure, because you're laying it down on a carrier deck that when you first see it, looks the size of a postage stamp. And it's moving! You loved it, didn't you?"

"Every minute. I lived for those moments. But my life ended when the flight surgeon gave me the news."

"That's so strange because A-fib is not that big a deal any more. They put you on a blood thinner and you can lead a normal life. That's what they did with my uncle who was a lawyer with JAG, like me."

"Maybe if I were a lawyer, the Navy would've let me stay," responds Duke in a scoffing tone. "But lawyers don't fly seventy million dollar weapons systems that carry enough ordinance to blow away the Eastern Seaboard."

"I can see their point. So, what do you do for excitement now?"

**Chapter Eighteen**

In his Sunrise Hospital bed, Palmer, feeling something vibrating under the covers, reaches and grasps the phone which he puts up to his ear. The call is from Templar, who announces, "Palmer, listen up. Cut yourself a deal with the police. Tell them where DeMornay has hidden the loot. On the grounds of her home. Not in the house but on the grounds and in plain sight. Understand?"

At this point, Rudy and Archer arrive outside Palmer's room where a uniformed police officer is on guard. Over the intercom system, is heard the voice of the hospital receptionist, "Doctor MacDonald, call your office. Doctor MacDonald, call your office."

Archer, indicating the officer, "Looks like that could be the room."

Rudy says, "Introduce me as Doctor MacDonald."

Rudy and Archer approach the officer, who rises from his chair. Archer makes the introduction, "Officer, this is Dr. John MacDonald. Osgard's physician asked him to check the patient's wound to determine when he'll be ready for physical therapy."

The guard says to Rudy, "I believe I heard a page for you, Doctor. You're to call your office."

"Thank you, officer. I'll take it inside," entering the room, while Archer remains outside.

Closing the door behind him, Rudy steps over to Palmer's bed and looks down on the patient, speaking quietly, "Listen up, Osgard. You're going to turn over that stolen deposit slip and tell us where the money is, or that hot girlfriend of yours is going to get a bullet in her head; or worse yet, a bottle of acid in her face. Yeah, I'm talking about your Lieutenant Commander Fisher. We have men following her, even on the Navy base. They're spring loaded to perform. I'm waiting for your answer. If I walk out of here without knowing where the money is, or you lie to me, or anything happens to me, your woman is either dead or disfigured. What's it going to be?"

Palmer replies with the icy calm of a Navy pilot under fire, "My gums bleed for you, but that's all you get from me."

Taken aback, Rudy asks, "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means you can kiss my ass. You and I both know you've got nothing. My guards have her covered 24/7. You think you can come in here and make threats to me?"

Rudy's jaw falls as he is stopped in his tracks.

Palmer calls out, "Guard! Help!"

Archer spots Capt. McGraw and Sgt. Johnson approaching the uniformed police officer and quickly walks away in the opposite direction. But he's already been made and the Sergeant gives chase while McGraw bursts into Palmer's room, weapon drawn. Hearing the door open, Rudy spins around to face McGraw and his Glock-9.

"How nice. We're visiting the sick today, are we?" asked McGraw.

The armed, uniformed guard has followed McGraw into the room, his service weapon also drawn.

Palmer's attitude suddenly changes from that of the cocky warrior to that of a milquetoast, "This guy threatened me."

McGraw nods to the guard who steps up, cuffs Rudy, and hustles him out of the room.

"Alright, you got me. I'll tell you where the money is hidden, but you gotta give me a deal!" says Palmer.

**Chapter Nineteen**

At DeMornay’s Seven Hills estate**,** McGraw, Johnson, Jimenez and Carter arrive in the backyard to begin the search for the stolen casino money. McGraw is giving instructions, "Osgard says that he doesn't know exactly where the money is, but DeMornay told him that it was hidden 'in plain sight.' Not in the house but somewhere on the property. Search warrant is good for anywhere on the estate except inside the house. Spread out and turn over every stone."

Sgt. Johnson spots the diamond plate tool box in the yard and moves to take a look. As there is no padlock on it, he opens the lid and looking inside, yells out to McGraw, "Captain!"

In Sheriff Douglas C. Gillespie's office, Capt McGraw and Sgt Johnson are sitting with Gillespie giving him a verbal report.

"So, we only recovered four hundred eighty-five thousand. Where do you suppose the remainder is?" asks Gillespie.

"Frankly, Sir, I don't give a damn. Probably went to DeMornay's partners in which case we'll never see it. The casinos are insured. They're not suffering," explains McGraw. "When I was a detective-sergeant, Nevada outlawed those damn pari-mutuel tracks, but DeMornay's track was grandfathered in," he says passionately. "Frankly, I looked forward to this day, the end of greyhound racing in Nevada! To me that's a positive."

Sgt. Johnson interjects, "Sir. Four men are in jail, five if you count Osgard, and we did shut down one of the biggest cyber crime operations in the country."

"I hope you two don't mind if I keep this investigation open until we find the rest of the money," says Gillespie.

"It's the right thing to do. It's what I'd do if I were running for Sheriff," insists McGraw.

"And you get to continue pushing papers as a captain. Actually since you didn't recover the entire loss, I should bust you back to lieutenant."

"If you do, you'll have a fight on your hands. Not from me. But my wife might come after you," replies McGraw smiling.

Gillespie also smiling, "Might be worth it having you back, doing what you do so well."

Jonathan again, sorry to interrupt, but I thought you’d want to get a little background on how this caper was finally resolved.

Since their chance meeting at Duke’s Sport’s Bar & Grill, Osgard and Fisher continued fleshing out their relationship; often having lunch together. At one such luncheon, sitting opposite one another at a prime table, Duke and LCDR Janet Fisher were enjoying lunch. Janet was working on a Caesar salad with iced tea, while Duke was munching on his usual juicy hamburger, fries and a Guinness draft.

Indicating the burger, "You keep eating those heart attack specials, you're not going to live long," is Janet’s concern.

"Don't expect to live long. I take life one thrill at a time. Don't deny me my thrills."

"You consider me just another thrill?"

"Oh, no, *ma cheri*, I consider you my greatest find, the one remaining hope I have that will keep me going; whatever the future may be."

Fisher half rises so that she can reach across the table and give Osgard a warm kiss which, without rising, he returns.

"Are we still set to spend the weekend at the Breakers,” she questions Duke?

As the good humor suddenly fades from Osgard's expression, he answers, "I'm afraid that something has come up. Hope you will forgive me."

This time Osgard half rises in order to lean across the table and give Fisher a warm kiss which, without rising, she returns in kind.

"Just come back safe, and I'll forgive you almost anything," reassures Janet, smiling.

Thanks to the money we provided, not only will the women and their children of the Camarillo Women's Shelter have a place they can go to be safe from abusive spouses or ex-boyfriends, but the shelter can now expand, purchasing adjacent property.

Regarding our band of Merry Men, Shinaman, Sean Easton, finally made it home and got treatment from his doctor, who, of course, reported the gunshot wound to the police. But since he got shot in Mexico, where such things are common, and since he could verify that he had actually been in Mexico, there was nothing to investigate. You may be wondering, how did Shinaman get into Mexico without leaving a paper trail? Well, that's something that, fortunately they never checked on.

Detective Sergeant Andrea Parker returned to duty with the SDPD. No mention of Vegas ever came up in any conversations between her and Detective Kelley, or anyone else, as she knew it wouldn't. Harry Fletcher, AKA Robin Templar, returned to his home in Carmel Highlands. His wife was most relieved to see him. Those were the big winners.

Then we had the one big loss, no one was supposed to get hurt or arrested, but Palmer is now residing in a cell at Lovelock Correctional Center. Louis Osgard, our Patrick Palmer, without whom none of us would have been winners, ended up taking the fall; sentenced to three years for intentionally ramming a police car.

So, we're working to get him an early release. I'm working with Janet Fisher, who is now a full Commander. While he's gone, I'm managing his business interests, which are doing great. His legal case, not so much. The state is trying to add more charges, tie him to the robbery. It's what they do. Janet, of course, is fighting it!

And, of course, as usual, Harry Fletcher has vowed that Robin Templar is retired. He doesn't know this yet, but I've got a plan to take the Merry Band completely legit, and I've got an excellent target for our next caper.

**THE LAST FLIGHT CROSS-UP**

**Part Two**

**Chapter One**

**Here I was, Jonathan Moore**, sitting on the fantail deck of my yacht, relaxing with my dear friend, Raoul Donavan. My British chauffeur, limo driver, cook, butler and all around good guy, Jason Burrell is serving finger food and pouring Dom Perignon champagne. Raoul Donavan, CIA Agent, late 40s, the polar opposite to me, appears disheveled and overweight, wearing a corduroy jacket and dark slacks, both wrinkled. Yet his mind is every bit that of mine.

“Jonathan, I never tire of hearing the adventures of Robin and his merry band," Donavan opines. "Tell me, the team members all seem to be ex-marines with combat or special operations experience. Take yourself, for instance, a planner of seal and other special ops operations; together with having served as the aide-de-camp to a two-star combat general. I assume this similar background was a factor in your choosing Robin’s team.”

“It was.”

“I sense there’s a whole other story here. …Am I about to be enlightened?”

“You are.”

“It started aboard an aircraft carrier flying combat missions over Syria.

“A beloved pilot is shot down, triggering guilt among the crew of a surviving aircraft, causing things to get heated, resulting in an emotional and climatic conclusion; it’s the stuff of which best sellers are made.”

“I first met “Duke” Osgard and Andrea Parker while aboard that carrier.

Duke was an exceptional pilot, flying the F/A-18F Super Hornet. As I mentioned earlier, I felt we were very similar in many ways. I knew from the get go that Duke was someone who would put his life on the line for you. That's a guy you're never going to abandon, no matter what. Duke’s story takes place at the Naval Air Station Air-Wing Training Base in Fallon, Nevada, which is host to Pacific Fleet Adversary and the Fighter Weapons School, better known as *Topgun*, located east of Reno.

In the air over NAS Fallon, Nevada, 24-year old LTJG Louis “Duke” Osgard is in the front seat while WSO (Weapons Systems Officer) LTJG Joe “Blue” Blueberry is performing his duties from the rear seat of the F-18 Super Hornet.

The intercom system (ICS) is keyed to the open position so that the pilot and WSO are in constant communication. Duke states, "Okay, Blue boy, give me a heads-up. Unless we stay out of his kill envelope, our ass is grass.

"Three o'clock! Slightly higher. Turning into us,": Blueberry calmly replies.

Looking over his right shoulder, Duke spots the MIG-29 in the distance "Got him!"

"Don't give him any shooting angles."

The MIG-29 Fulcrum, partially named for its turning ability, is in a wide left turn. Painted on the Fulcrum's tail is the red star of the adversary squadron. The MIG pilot, 42-year-old Andrew "Sergei" Bonime, wearing a special targeting helmet with the eyepiece able to merely point his helmet at the intended target in order to fire missiles or guns. Unlike the Super Hornet, the MIG-29 has no backseater.

Spotting Duke's Super Hornet off his nine o'clock, slightly below, in level flight, closing head-to-head in the wide circle, Sergei adds power. Suddenly reversing course, he puts the MIG's nose slightly up then rolls the Russian fighter onto its side, and into a right climbing turn, momentarily exposing his six, or tail, but not long enough and from too far a range to give Duke an advantage. During the turn, Sergei turns his head, trying to keep sight of Duke, but the MIG's high-backed pilot's seat, causes him to temporarily lose sight of the Hornet.

"He's turning away from us," reports Blueberry.

"We're in his blind spot," states Duke, whipping the Super Hornet onto its side and into a tight left turn, reversing its original course. "If this baby will only turn tight enough, the MIG pilot is going to feel like one dumb son of a bitch when he climbs out of his turn and we're not where we're supposed to be."

"Keep an eye on him. Lose sight, lose the fight!"

The two aircraft are flying in opposite directions, each in one circle of a figure eight formation, with the MIG climbing in the turn and the F/A-18F descending. Duke's G-suit inflates as he tweaks the control stick and works the rudders, keeping an eye on the Super Hornet's "G" force indicator. The indicator climbs from 6-Gs, inching toward 7-Gs. Duke twists his head around to keep sight of the MIG, the job made easier because the Russian fighter is actually above him, rather than below.

Duke's visual on the MIG is becoming blurred, with tunnel vision slowly ensuing and color is starting to fade.

"Don't ...know about you," utters Blueberry haltingly and slurring his words, "but... I'm about ...to lose it....don't over stress...even though she'll take it."

"Question is...can we?" asks Duke.

The two aircraft complete their respective reverse circles, leveling off, with the MIG about 900 feet above the Super Hornet and just over a mile away. Sergei's targeting helmet swings from side to side, looking ahead and downward in an attempt to spot his adversary but the sky where the Super Hornet should be is empty. Looking below, over his right shoulder, Sergei sees that the Hornet has made a much tighter turn and now has its nose pointed upwards towards the MIG's right wingtip and is closing, less than 1200 feet away.

On the heads-up display of Duke's Super Hornet, the radar gun sight is indicating a "lock." "Guns....Guns....Guns!", asserts Duke into his microphone. "Sorry, Sergei....You're dead! See you at the postmortem!"

The nose of the Super Hornet drops as Duke hits his burners, passing beneath the Fulcrum in an "X" formation, emphasizing the totality of the kill. The shockwave from Duke's fly-by causes the MIG to suddenly buck upward. Unsnapping his oxygen mask, Sergei's expression is one of total disbelief. But then he shakes his head and smiles.

In the training center’s visual display room, at NAS Fallon’s Air-Wing Training Base, CDR Robert "Bumper" Deans is doing a run-through for the pilots. Among those present are: Louis *Duke* Osgard, Joe *Blue* Blueberry, and fellow Super Hornet teammates LT Terry "Tank" Sherman and his female WSO, LT Margaret "JJ" Johnson. On the large TV monitor, the ground radar coupled with the computer software is showing the respective images and positions of Osgard's Super Hornet to that of the MIG-29, during the recent air combat maneuvering exercise.

"Duke Osgard! Joe Blueberry!" calls out CDR Deans, "I don't want this going to your heads, but that was one of the finest one-on-one air combat maneuvers I've ever seen."

Capt. Andrew Sergei Bonime, commander of the adversary squadron, entering the room, affirms, "I couldn't agree more. Duke, I believe you're the first to get the best of me since I was a nugget. But that's not why I'm interrupting your postmortem. We've just received orders. The President wants another carrier battle group in the Middle East. They've formed a new air wing group for immediate deployment. But there's good news and bad news. The good news is that most of you will be rotating out and reporting to NAS Oceana for Carqual assignments.

As Sergei starts to leave the room, Blueberry pipes up, "Sir! What's the bad news?"

Sergei, stopping in his tracks, turns and smiles, saying, "The bad news is that Commander Deans will be your squadron CO.

CDR Deans smiles as he gets a round of applause from everyone in the room. Sergei, heading for the door again, turns and grins, saying, "One more bit of bad news. I will be your ship's captain." This gets even bigger applause.

Duke, on his way out of the room, stops at the bulletin board by the exit, smiling jovially as he reads the list of command assignments for the upcoming deployment. Then his face drops as he sees on the list: "Commander, Air group (CAG): CDR James C. Cue." Whispering to himself, "Commander James C. Cue?" Duke looks as if he's been gut-punched.

Blueberry, on his way out the door, looks at him quizzically, "Duke, what's wrong? You okay?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing," replies Duke holding up his iphone. "I just got an email from home. Family stuff. I'll be okay." Then, muttering to himself, "It's not like I should be surprised."

**Chapter Two**

With the super Carrier off the coast of North Carolina**,** the airborne Super Hornet reaches Marshall, a rendezvous point where all aircraft scheduled for recovery aboard an aircraft carrier report in and wait to be turned over to the Air Boss in Primary Flight.

In the cockpit, CDR Cue keys his UHF transmitter and checks in with the super carrier's Air Traffic Control Center, "Marshall, this is CAG-100, Rhino Hornet, fuel state 7.5."

"CAG-100, Marshall. Four carqual pilots already in the pattern. You are fifth in line."

"Roger Valor. CAG-100 fifth in line," responds CDR Cue as he moves his left arm in an attempt to relieve the pain and stiffness. He then keys the ICS to his backseater, where WSO 29-year-old LCDR Melbi "Mello" Stevens sits in the rear seat of the two-place cockpit, "Be glad to get on the deck. Got a stiffness in my left arm that's crying for some exercise."

"Yeah, I'm starting to cramp up a little myself," replies Melbi.

In primary flight, overlooking the flight deck, the Air Boss, CDR Kelley and Mini Boss over see the continual arrested landings, called “traps.” The female public affairs officer (POA), LT Barbara Reynolds, enters Pri-Fly with a civilian in his mid-50s, Frank Stevens, in tow. As the Air Boss looks up, LT Reynolds makes the introduction, "CDR Kelley? This is Frank Stevens, the Hollywood writer who's researching a book based on our upcoming deployment. He's aboard courtesy of the Navy Office of Information."

As the Mini Boss takes over, Air Boss CDR Jack Kelley turning his chair stands to face Stevens. Shaking his hand, he says, "Welcome aboard. We've been expecting you. I understand your daughter is a member of our air wing."

"She's the Weapons System Officer for the air wing commander, whenever the CAG flies a Super Hornet," replies Stevens.

Then you're about to see her in action. CAG is due to trap within the next five to seven minutes."

As the various aircraft trap on the angled deck, they make a right turn, backtrack until they're behind the blast deflector shields of the No. 1 and No. 2 cats, located directly in front of the island, then turn left to clear the deck and await their turn for another launch.

"Today our pilots are flying Carquals -- that's carrier qualifications," says Air Boss. "In order to join a carrier squadron, each pilot has to qualify by making ten daytime and eight nighttime landings...which we call 'traps.' They trap and launch in continuous rotation. We'll shut down flight operations late this afternoon, then conduct nighttime operations between 10 pm and 2:30 am, when everything is pitch black, even at altitude. It normally takes two or three days for a pilot to complete all his or her Carqual flights.

"When the air wing deploys, how many women will you have flying?" asks Stevens.

"Right now, we have three pilots and two WSOs. Your daughter is one of the WSOs."

The Mini Boss, checking the call sign sheet, interjects, "Sorry to interrupt, Boss. Mr. Stevens, if you're interested, in my opinion, the pilot of that Hornet landing now is the best pilot in the whole damn navy."

The Air Boss, agreeing, "Ah, yes. Lieutenant Commander Mary Ann Miller, call sign "Killer."

"I'm just glad she's on our side," the Mini Boss concurs.

On the glide slope, the three vertical lights on Mary's Hornet's nose gear briefly glow, from the top green light, to the middle amber light, to the bottom red, then back to amber. The amber light remains lit.

"Those changing colored lights on the nose gear. What do they indicate?" asks Stevens.

"The altitude of the aircraft as it descends on the glide slope...Green means the attitude, or position of the aircraft, is too high...the red, too low. And the amber means everything is okay," explains the Air Boss. "Proper attitude is critical in order for the tail hook to catch one of the four cables. Otherwise, the aircraft has to go around for another attempt."

"How do you manage that?"

"Watch closely. As Miller touches the deck, she will go to full 'military' power. If she catches one of the four wires strung across the deck, she will idle back her engines. And, if she misses and becomes a *bolte*r, she'll have the thrust and speed necessary to become airborne."

LCDR Mary Ann "Killer" Miller catches the coveted number three wire and retards her throttles. She unsnaps one side of her oxygen mask revealing the stunning beauty of the 29-year-old professional.

"Wow! All that and killer looks to boot," states Stevens.

Smiling and nodding, the Mini Boss agrees, "My favorite pilot. Just too bad we're all in the Navy."

"Ah, yeah...No fraternization,” is Stevens’ comment.

CDR Cue is still holding at Marshall when he gets the go ahead from the Center, "CAG-100....Marshall....You have a Charlie...Contact the tower."

"Roger Valor.....CAG-100.....entering the pattern," answers CDR Cue in a lazy, somewhat slurred voice.

Melbi, the WSO, recognizing that something is wrong, keys her intercom, "Sir. Are you alright?"

"I think...so. Hell of a...pain in my....left arm,"

Melbi clears the decks and goes into action, "Sir? Engage the ACLS. It's imperative that we make a Mode 1 arrest. Do you read?"

"Understood. Engaging Automatic Carrier Landing System....now!"

The WSO keys the radio transmitter and contacts Pri-Fly, "Tower....CAG-100 Rhino....Declaring an emergency. Request an ACLS Mode 1 trap."

"CAG-100.....Tower.....Are you engaged?"

"Affirmative."

"Permission granted....State your emergency."

"I believe the pilot may be suffering a heart attack....This is not a training aircraft. I have no backseat flight controls."

"Understood. Is the pilot conscious?"

"Affirmative."

"Roger. We'll alert the deck crews and have the medics standing by."

Up in Primary Flight, the Air Boss, Mini Boss, spotters, and radio operators all go into action. At the same time the Air Boss explains the situation to the anxious Frank Stevens, "Your daughter has just declared an emergency. CAG may be suffering a heart attack. What you're going to see is an aircraft making an autopilot, hands-off landing."

Stunned by the news about his daughter, Stevens asks, "What if the pilot manages to go to full power on touchdown, catches a wire, but then is unable to retard his throttles?"

"We have a procedure for dealing with that."

"And if he misses all four wires and becomes a bolter? You have a procedure for that?"

Duke’s F/A-18F, Super Hornet enters Marshall as Duke reports to the Center, "Valor...Sundance 207...Rhino. At Marshall....Fuel state 5.7."

CATC calls, "Sundance 207....Valor....Hold your position, emergency developing. deck may become fouled for extended period. Will keep you advised."

"Roger....Sundance 207 awaiting further instructions," replies Duke.

To better communicate with his backseater, Duke keys the intercom system (ICS) into the permanent, open position and says, "Maybe we'll get lucky and be ordered to bingo to Oceana."

"Return to the base? I wouldn't call that being lucky," responds Blueberry.

"That's 'cause you don't have my list of Virginia Beach phone numbers."

"The only number I'm interested in is the number ten. Get this daytime and one more nighttime trap logged and we complete our carquals."

"The *'boat'* doesn't return to Norfolk until noon tomorrow. You wanna ride it in? Or, spend the night on the beach?"

On the super carrier, some of the flight deck crew are manning fire hoses, ready for the worst possible scenario. Aviation Boatswains Mate Aircraft Handler John Patrick Giannini, who is the Crash and Salvage Leading Chief, and his First Assistant climb into the rescue basket of the forklift. Once in the basket, the Chief continues briefing his crew on procedures. The team of yellow shirts wears cranials (headgear) with earphone radio receivers tuned to a compatible frequency. They are listening to the voice of Giannini on the cranial radio system.

"Listen up! We're going for a rescue from the port side. We don't know the condition of the pilot and the aircraft has no backseat controls. The Mode 1 will bring the bird to a touchdown with the throttles at full power. If the pilot's capable, he will retard the throttles and speed brakes. If unable to do so, our job becomes a little more tricky."

In Pri-Fly, the Air Boss explains to a worried Frank Stevens, "If it's a *'bolter'* then once the aircraft is clear of the ship, the *'backseater'* opens the canopy and will eject the both of them. It'll be up to the plane guard helo to pull them out of the water."

On the flight deck, over the cranial radio system, Giannini says, "If she remains at full power, you'll have to get the chocks in place before the nose starts bouncing and swinging all over the place."

From the rear seat, Melbi attempts to determine the condition of the pilot, "Sir? We're four miles astern of the *'boat'* and the data link has full control of the aircraft, at least until touchdown. If we catch a wire, you'll need to throttle back. Are you able to do that? Answer me! Do you understand?!! Can you handle it?!!

There is no answer from the front seat.

Back in primary-flight, Frank Stevens is anxiously looking out at the spot where the aircraft is expected to break out of the scud layer and become visible to the naked eye. Just then the F/A-18 Super Hornet becomes visible, the amber light on the nose gear glowing. It drives onto the deck, the rear engines going to military power, but the Hornet makes a perfect *trap*, catching the #3 wire.

Inside the cockpit, which is bouncing all over the place, the engines roaring at full power, CDR Cue can't move his left hand in order to pull the throttles back to ground idle. Finally, he is able to swing his right hand across his chest and retard the throttles. Then, with the same right hand, he flips the switches that shut down the fuel to the two jet engines.

The chocking crew completes their work as the towing tractor quickly moves into place. As the canopy opens, LCPO Giannini and his assistant ride the forklift into position on the Hornet's port side. They carefully begin rescue procedures. Giannini secures the safety pin on the pilot's ejection seat, disconnects the CAG's mask, leg and shoulder straps, and then pulls him out of the cockpit and into the rescue basket.

As Melbi exits the plane on her own, the rescue basket descends to the Hospital Corpsman waiting below. The Super Hornet is then towed from the angled deck and the firefighters begin standing down. A medical team is loading a gurney aboard a Sea Hawk helicopter.

On the gurney, CDR Cue tells LCDR Stevens, "I'm fine, thanks to your being alert."

"They're taking you to Norfolk. Ship will be coming in tomorrow. I'll look in on you then," replies Melbi.

A much-relieved Frank Stevens turns breathlessly to his FAO escort, LT Reyn-olds, saying, ”I'd like to see my daughter."

"We can catch her in the ready room."

At Marshall, Duke's F/A-18F Super Hornet is still holding when he is contacted by the Center, "Sundance 207...Valor...The deck is clear. You can enter the pattern. Contact the tower.

"Roger, Valor. Sundance entering pattern."

Duke is now under control of the Primary Flight (Pri-Fly), "Tower...Sundance 207...Rhino...Ball... Fuel state...5.4."

Duke is lined up on the *'meatball,'* the gyro stabilized (Fresnel Lens) Optical Landing System. Towards the rear of the deck from the meatball is the Landing Signal Officer, maintaining communication with Duke, the pilot.

"Roger, ball....Working thirty-two knots across the deck! Hold what you have."

From inside the cockpit, Blueberry declares, "Hook down....Gear down....But NOT LOCKED!!”

The right gear indicator goes to 'barber pole,' then back to 'gear down' position....then back to barber pole.

"Sundance 207...waving off,” states Duke.

The gear is down as the Super Hornet screams past the flight deck. Duke, speaking over the Pri-Fly Speaker, reports, "Got an unsafe gear indication. Checking it now."

Inside the cockpit, speaking to Blueberry, Duke says, "Told you to keep the faith. This is our ticket to the beach."

"Come on, Duke. It's gotta be the light! All other indications show the gear is down and locked. Try recycling it."

Duke keys his UHF transmitter button, "Tower...this is Sundance 207...Can't tell if it's the indicator or not. Request bingo to Oceana."

At the Oceana Naval Air Station, fire trucks and crash crews move to take up strategic positions alongside the runway.

The gear comes down on the Super Hornet.

Inside the cockpit, Blueberry shaking his head, says "Gear shows safe. I knew we shouldn't have diverted!"

"There you go, Blue. Sounding like an Academy grad. Relax and think about tonight."

"I'm thinking about tomorrow, when the C.O. calls us before the green table."

"Aah, the Skipper wouldn't do that. But he might put us in hack for a couple days. Let's be sure it's worth it."

The fire trucks and crash crews are waiting. From the Tower, "Sundance 207. You are cleared to land. Runway Two-Two Left."

Blueberry glancing down, gets a look at all the crash equipment, "Look at all those fire trucks. We're in for it now!"

On the transmitter, Duke reports, "Aah, Roger. I ah-believe we're okay, now. Gear shows down and locked."

The Super Hornet touches down and is followed along the runway by all the emergency equipment. With the canopy up, Duke shuts down his two engines, pulls off his helmet, and is immediately confronted by an angry Blueberry, "You're crazy, you know that?!"

"Lighten up, Blue boy. We check into operations, get cleaned up, make some calls---"

"You make your calls. I'm gonna check out that micro switch."

Outside the Ready Room, aboard the super carrier, the POA, LT Barbara Reyn-olds, escorting Frank Stevens to the squadron's ready room, tells him, "Your daughter should be in here," as they open the door and enter the room.

Inside the #1 Ready Room, Squadron members are trading lies about their exploits (lots of arm weaving), while others are merely watching the TV monitor showing the landings of fellow squad members and rating their performance vocally. Frank, looking around the room, quickly spots his daughter, Melbi, at almost the same instant she sees him. Rushing toward each other, they embrace with a big hug. Breaking off the hug, they look each other in the eye.

"They just told me that you had come aboard on this morning's COD," said Melbi.

"I was in Primary when you declared your emergency; worst time of my life."

"Oh, Dad. I'm so sorry. It must have sounded worse than it was. Believe me, it was nothing."

"Sounded bad enough. But, if that's the case, why is it that pilots don't routinely make autopilot landings?"

Melbi, hesitating and looking around discreetly, speaks quietly, "The official story is it's because not all carriers are equipped for such landings and so, pilots don't want to rely on a series of computers, talking to each other over a non-secure radio frequency. But really, I think it's just a macho thing."

**Chapter Three**

Duke Osgard is engaged in sex atop a curvy, attractive, 30-something female named Beverly. Abruptly he rolls off her onto his back, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. Beverly, sitting up, and lighting a cigarette, complains, "I just wish I could figure you out. You're so tense. I know you're a warrior, but, I'm not the enemy."

Duke springs from the bed and begins dressing, asking "What's the problem?"

Brooke shaking her head wryly and taking a long drag from the cigarette, stares intently at Duke as she wraps the sheet around her ample breasts asking, "Is this about your finding out about the CAG? Is that the war you're really fighting?"

"Forget about it. Sorry I blurted that out. Look, if this isn't working for you--"

Interrupting him, Brooke asks, "What? You mean us? A weekend two or three times a year? Not hearing from you in the meantime? Sure, every woman wants that dream. Okay, I know. I told you, I'd accept you on your terms. Be easier if you let me know what those terms are."

Finishing dressing and snapping on his watch, Duke starts to leave then pauses, "Maybe we'd be better off, if we didn't see each other again."

Breaking the still unfinished cigarette and stabbing it forcefully in the ashtray, Brooke retorts, "Finally, something we can both agree on."

At the Oceana Officer’s Club Rock music fills the room. At the bar, competing with the music, a group of aviators are enjoying their drinks and reminiscing about their feats of daring-do. As usual, the air is full of weaving arms the way it always is when aviators are exaggerating their exploits. The club is filled with male and female officers from all over the base, most attired in their civvies. The pilots at the bar, the most boisterous squadron commanders, include CDR C.E. 'Buddy' Brown (the EA-6B radar jamming squadron), CDR Ivan 'Ike' Mortinson (in charge of the plane guard and other helicopters aboard the ship), and CDR Robert 'Bumper' Deans, a WSO, commanding one of the Hornet squadrons.

The attractive barmaid, sets another round of drinks in front of the tail hookers, who all wear the command-at-sea badge above the breast pocket, indicating current command, then asks, "What's this? A squadron commanders' meeting?"

"We just got word that our Air Group Commander is being released from the hospital. …Heart attack must not have been too serious," comments Brown.

"I hear he's on his way to join us," says Deans.

"Really? After a heart attack? Two to one, he doesn't show," asserts the barmaid.

At this point, CDR Cue enters the room, spotting the aviators, he moves to join them. His gold wings sit atop five rows of ribbons, including the Navy & Marine Corps Medal, Bronze Star, Combat Action, Navy PUC, Navy Unit Commendation, National Defense Service, Desert Storm Service, and the Distinguished Service Order USN Desert Storm.

Cue passes several tables occupied by carrier personnel, with LCDR Mary Ann Miller and LCDR Melbi Stevens, dressed in civvies, sitting at one. Both women are watching the CAG in utter amazement, as he works the room, displaying very evident charisma.

"I'm surprised to see him on his feet so soon after such a medical emergency," remarks Mary.

"I'm not," replies Melbi, with a worried look on her face. "His whole life is the Navy. I wouldn't be surprised if he bribed the doctor into releasing him."

Reaching the bar, Cue is greeted warmly by the squadron commanders and a drink is thrust into his hand.

"Okay, guys," says Deans lifting his glass. "Let's say hello to our leader!!"

A chorus from all in the room, *"Hello, Asshole!!"*

The traditional toast draws applause and cheering from all those in the club. CDR Cue taking a sip from his drink and tossing a wad of bills on the bar, gestures to the barmaid, "Give these clowns the lousiest booze you have."

Inside CDR Deans office aboard the super carrier, now docked at the Norfolk pier, Deans is sitting at his desk, with Blueberry and Osgard standing before him, "According to Maintenance, you had a faulty indicator. Did you recycle your gear before requesting the bingo?"

"No, sir," answers Duke.

Deans, slamming the file on the desk and rising to his feet, stands eye to eye with Osgard, stating angrily, "Osgard!! You've put me through this crap a couple of times back at Top Gun and I've been patient. Your talent has saved you. But school's out now, mister! You're here to fly airplanes. Either you do it right, or the next time you stand here, I'm pulling you out of the cockpit and making you the squadron's first, permanent duty officer! You got that?"

"Yes, sir," replies Duke, with all cockiness gone.

Deans, turning back to his desk, anger having subsided, says, "The new Air Wing Commander wants a written brief on my pilots." Then facing Duke again, continues, "You're a damn good pilot, Osgard. But your attitude is lousy. And that's the way CAG's going to read it. Now, since you've had your big evening, you won't mind standing the S.D.O., so all your squadron mates can have one last go at it, before we deploy."

"Aye, aye, sir," responds Duke, sounding defeated.

"That's all, mister!"

Duke and Blueberry start to depart, until Deans asks, "Blueberry? …Like a word with you."

Duke, glancing at Blue, then Deans, shrugs and exits, closing the door behind him.

"If you want me to assign you another pilot, I'll understand," says Deans.

"Sir, I can understand why you would say that, but, with all due respect, Sir, I don't quite read him that way. I think I'm in good hands with Duke. Yes, he has an attitude problem. But it's only superficial. When it's on the line, he's the best."

"It's your decision, Blueberry. I hope you're right. As far as I'm concerned, the jury is still out."

**Chapter Four**

With the super carrier headed into the wind, Duke is standing near the Island, watching a plane approach for a landing. The COD C-2 Greyhound Aircraft twin turboprop breaks out of scud layer. Among the passengers seated in the rear facing seats, two seats on each side of the aisle, are Major Jonathan Moore, USMC, JAG LCDR Janet Fisher, USN and Marine Corporal Andrea Parker, the latter wearing an M.P. (military police) arm band.

Yes, it was me, Jonathan, landing aboard the carrier. Communicating with my JAG attorney, I said, “It's pretty creative of them, isn't it? Holding my court martial aboard a carrier?"

"Only because a number of senior JAG officers happen to be aboard," said Fisher.

"I guess I just got lucky. So, you were saying something about a rarely used defense?"

"Yes, I mean, first of all, you're guilty, right?"

"Whoa, you got there pretty quick!'

"Well, did you or did you not fire your weapon next to your prisoner's head?"

"Yes. Of course. There were many witnesses."

"So, by the letter of the law, there's no way you'll get an acquittal. The only chance we have is to explain why you did it. And hope somebody has some common sense, says Fisher.

"I see. So, I'm screwed," I said.

"Pretty much," was my attorney’s answer.

On the flight deck, the Carry-On-Board (COD) turbo prop lines up on the meatball. The nose comes up and the Greyhound catches the number two wire.

The next aircraft lined up on the meatball is the CAG aircraft, the Super Hornet with the number 100 painted on the nose. Inside the rear cockpit of Cue's Hornet, LCDR Melbi Stevens noticing the pilot moving his left arm in a motion that indicates it might be giving him some trouble. She keys the intercom, "Sir, your shoulder giving you trouble again?"

"Just a little numbness. Feels fine, now."

Cue's Super Hornet drives into the deck in a perfect trap, catching the number three wire. Cue pushes the throttles to military and retracts his speed brakes. The speed brakes are retracted and the arresting wire stretched, absorbing the full force of the fighter's forward motion. In slow motion, the arresting hook-point parts from the fuselage and springs toward the ship's fantail. The sudden deceleration has the Hornet's nose pointing downward when suddenly, the nose pops up! Cue slams the throttles beyond military, into zone 5 after burner and calmly advises his backseater of the situation, "Hook point failed!"

White hot flames shoot from the tailpipes as the CAG-100 aircraft begins accelerating (from a severely reduced rate of speed) down the short remainder of the angled deck.

LCDR Melbi calmly reads out the airspeed, "Ninety knots!!"

The Air Boss shouts into his headset, "Eject!! Eject!!"

Maintaining correct (nose up) pitch, the Hornet reaches the bow. The Landing Signal Officer is also shouting into his headset, which virtually cancels out the same advice being conveyed by the Air Boss, "Eject! Get out now!!"

"Negative," insists Cue, calmly.

In the rear, the WSO wisely keeps one hand on the ejection handle as she calls out the airspeed, "Hundred ten knots!"

The Super Hornet dips to within mere feet of the water, churning up a rooster tail and steam. Then the 'ground effect' kicks in, giving added lift to the aircraft.

"One twenty," calls out Melbi.

The compressed layer of air keeps the fighter from hitting the water until the aircraft has enough speed to climb. All eyes in Primary are glued to the CAG aircraft, including Duke, who is standing to the side and observing with careful concern.

Slowly the altitude of the aircraft improves.

"One twenty-five," calls out Melbi.

The Air Boss shakes his head in wonder. The LSO is equally amazed. A small smile is growing on Duke's face.

As the Super Hornet climbs, a voice so calm as to make Chuck Yeager envious, announces, "CAG-100 bingoing to Oceana for a quick repair. Should be back aboard before sundown."

**Chapter Five**

In the fourth berth, two-bunk, junior officer stateroom, the Hollywood writer is at the desk, entering notes into his journal, when Duke Osgard and Joe Blueberry enter. Rising, the writer introduces himself, "Hello. Name's Frank Stevens. Here to research a book about a modern fighter squadron preparing for war. Navy Office of Information arranged for me to spend some time aboard."

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Stevens. I'm Joe Blueberry. This is Duke Osgard," indicating Duke.

Everyone shakes hands warmly.

"You've gotten short-changed, sir. The ship has two VIP suites which are a lot more spacious and comfortable than these quarters." states Duke.

"I asked to berth with a flight crew. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. Have you picked out a bunk? asks Blueberry.

Indicating one of the two lower bunks, Frank replies, "At my age it's tough to make the climb. I'm just getting used to all the steep ladders."

At this point, the door opens and LT Willy "Sticks" Wigglesworth enters, wearing a flight jacket. Clearly in an excited, garrulous mood, he replaces his electronic key card in his wallet and then tosses his gear into an empty, lower bunk.

"This here beekeeper goes by the name of William Wigglesworth but we just call him Sticks, his call sign," says Duke to Frank. Indicating Frank, "This here fellow is Frank Stevens. A writer going to make you into another Tom Cruise."

"Great! Listen, if you're looking for excitement, it's too bad you missed what I just saw. Hook came apart on CAG's aircraft, after catching the wire. He was ordered to eject. But does he? No. Instead, he goes to Zone 5 and rides it out! Couldn't have had more than 110 knots when he went off the bow,” explains Willy.

Frank, turning white as a sheet and sounding horrified, asks "This was CAG?"

"Yeah! In hindsight, he hit a home run," says Willy.

"His WSO is my daughter. Just glad I didn't see it."

"For what it's worth, Frank, I think he should have ejected. It wasn't fair to put your daughter in harm's way," comments Willy.

Duke, giving a slight shrug, interjects "Ejection from deck level carries its own risks. Besides, you're assuming he was gambling on whether or not he could make it."

"You're assuming he wasn't?" asks Willy.

"He wasn't. Actually, I was there. I saw it. It took him a millisecond to consider the wind across the deck, his pitch and rate of acceleration and the added lift obtained from the ground effect. It was no gamble," reports Duke turning away, organizing his gear as Willy's jaw hangs open.

Looking impressed and also vaguely suspicious, Willy comments, "You seem to know him quite well. Ever served under him?:

Duke, nodding ruefully, says "I've served under him, all right."

"And just when was this?" asks Willy skeptically.

"About seventeen years ago."

Seventeen years ago, on a long sandy beach, two low flying F-18 Hornets scream overhead as James C. "Curly" Cue and his seven-year-old son Louis walk along Virginia Beach, in Virginia. Father and son sit down on a suitable log next to each other. The father, a young lieutenant, in his Navy tan CNT uniform, is looking anxiously as he turns to his son, who is entranced by the jets flying nearby.

"I want to fly one of those someday. Like you," says Louis.

"Louis, I hope you understand this. There is no easy way to say it."

"What?"

"Your mother is getting remarried and her new husband is going to adopt you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Dr. Osgard is going to be your stepdad, I guess."

"Why?"

"Your mother thinks it's better this way."

"Do you think it's better?"

"She's probably right. I haven't been much of a father. Gone all the time."

Tearing up, Louis laments desperately, "It's okay if you're gone some of the time."

"You'll be better off. The Doc will spend time with you, get to know you, take you places. And dentists do make a lot more money!"

Louis, climbing to his feet, steps over to the still seated Cue, and throws his arms around his father's neck, pulling him close, "I don't care about money, you're my Dad! I don't need a stepdad! I just want to be with you!"

Cue, surprised by the affection, does not know how to handle it. Wiping a tear from his eye surreptitiously, responds sternly, "Here, now, listen to me, none of that." Grabbing his son's wrists and lifting the hands from his neck, declares "You're going to have to start handling yourself like a man."

Louis is fighting back tears as he looks up in agony and follows two Hornets screaming overhead, away towards the horizon.

**Chapter Six**

It's nighttime and the giant carrier is heading into the wind. On the flight deck, the plane guard helo lifts off. Hornet # 207, with Osgard and Blueberry aboard, moves into position on the #1 catapult.

CAG and the Air Boss are keeping an intense watch over the Launch Ops. Cue, glancing at his stopwatch, reports, "I'd like to get our launch time down to one aircraft every twenty seconds."

"I think that's doable."

As the folded wings of Duke's plane drop into place and the ten-foot-high, blast shield rises out of the deck; the cat crew goes to work. A handler is attaching the shuttle's holdback brace to a T-bar on the Super Hornet's nose gear while another holds up a placard confirming the aircraft's weight. At the same time, another handler, monitoring the operation, gives Duke the signal to go to full power.

Inside the cockpit, easing the brakes off, Duke and Blue brace their heads and monitor the gauges. A nozzle indicator for the port engine afterburner is flickering. Duke, tapping the offending gauge with his finger, reports to Blueberry, "Nozzle gauge for the port engine indicates we may not have an afterburner." Duke shakes his head NO to the cat officer, who then executes suspend procedures, after which Duke throttles back to ground idle.

"Better down the aircraft!," says Blueberry. "Why? Probably just the indicator," replies Duke. "Besides, our gross is only fifty-two thousand and we have thirty knots down the deck. Cat officer will give us 15 knots above stall. We can make it even if it's not the indicator."

"I'm going to have to report it."

"Do what you have to do."

Duke indicates he's ready for the tension to be reestablished. So once again, the cat crew goes to work. Up in Pri-Fly, James Cue puts his binoculars on the Super Hornet on the number one cat. Inside the cockpit, Duke moves the throttles against the stop, salutes the catapult officer, then grabs hold of the bars on each side of the windscreen, allowing the computer to launch the aircraft without the pilot attempting to override the system.

On the flight deck, the V-1 handler takes a second to check everything out, then in an exaggerated gesture, crouches toward the deck, motioning forward. There is a snap, as if a giant chain had suddenly broken, and the F/A-18F is catapulted down the 300-foot-long track. Cue, watching the launch through his binoculars, sees that of the two engine exhausts, only the starboard one shows the telltale orange flame indicating an active burner.

Later at the Carrier Intelligence Center, CVIC, a large compartment normally reserved for joint squadron briefs, Cue is critiquing the morning's mission with his six key squadron commanders. Among those present are Deans, Mortinson, and Brown.

"And another thing, last night it took 23 minutes to launch 16 aircraft. That's unacceptable. Your 'drivers' are going to have to do their part. Mortinson? The delay in getting your plane guard helo off the deck accounted for two of those precious minutes. And Brown, don't let your gunslingers tunnel in on the target and miss the other threats out there? It's a good way to get jumped!”

"Yes, sir," says Brown.

"Deans, some of the practice bombs your Hornets dropped barely made a splash. Not getting enough momentum for good penetration. You need to tweak your weapons system."

"Yes, sir" says Deans.

"And your second cruise guys are gonna have to pitch in and spend more time working with the nuggets. Okay, that's all."

As Cue rises, they all rise. Cue then motions for CDR Deans to remain.

"I noticed one of your drivers had a problem with his afterburner, during the launch."

"Yes, sir. Pilot thought it was a faulty indicator."

"You better straighten him out."

"I'm having a talk with him soon as I'm finished here."

"What's the pilot's name?"

"Osgard. Lieutenant junior grade Louis Osgard."

Appearing startled at hearing the name of the offending pilot, Cue repeats, "Osgard, you say.”

Entering the outer CAG office, finding the yeoman absent, Duke steps toward the inner office and knocks on CAG's closed door.

Seated at his desk, Cue calls out, "Come in!"

Entering the room, Duke says "Lieutenant junior grade Osgard reporting as requested, sir."

"At ease, mister."

"Don't think I could be at ease, under the circumstances, sir!"

"I don't expect you to be relaxed. Just don't stand there; looking as though someone had stuck a cattle prod up your rear."

As Osgard still does not budge, Cue orders, "Sit down." As Duke sits, Cue states, while glancing through the folder, "Been going over your record. Entered MIT at age 18. Graduated Cum Laude. Aviation Candidate School at 21. Top in your class. Commissioned at 22. Received your wings at 23. Not bad."

"Thank you, sir."

"A lot more impressive than the stunt you pulled last night, wouldn’t you say?"

"I don't understand, sir."

"Let's not play games! I will accept no excuses for not aborting last night's mission."

"Sir. I analyzed the situation and felt -- "

Interrupting, Cue insists, "It's not open to analysis. You ignored a fuel nozzle indicator that suggested you were short one burner. This is not good headwork."

Fighting to control his temper, Duke insists, "As a pilot, I have to make decisions."

"You miss the point, mister! As CAG, I'm responsible for the actions of all my pilots." Taking another look at Osgard's folder, Cue says "I see you're no stranger to being called on the carpet. Closing the folder and tossing it on the desk, Cue states, "Mister, you better get your act together. Any more grandstand stunts and your ass gets raked over the coals. I'll write a fitness report that'll make it difficult for you to find work as a crop duster! Understand?!"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me hear it!'

"Next time lieutenant Junior Grade Osgard shows signs of immaturity, CAG's gonna have barbecued ass.

"You got it! Then emotionally, Cue says "Dammit, what would you have done if you had suddenly lost the burner in your starboard engine?"

Startled at the sudden emotion, Duke stutters, "Uh, sir, I uh--"

Recovering his emotions, Cue waves Duke off, "Never mind. That's all."

Duke, getting up, starts his retreat. As he opens the door, Cue calls after him, "Lieutenant! How's your mother?"

Duke, turning and facing the CAG, feeling awkward, takes a deep breath and responds, "Fine, sir."

At this point, Cue's eyes momentarily drop before he refocuses on his son. "Next time you write, give her my regards."

Registering a softened expression, Duke says "Yes, sir," before he turns and exits, closing the door behind him.

In the outer office, momentarily pausing outside the door, his eyes moistening up, Duke wipes them quickly; glad that no one has seen him. He finally moves on out to the passageway.

In the inner office, Cue, sitting at his desk, is visibly upset, head in his hands for several moments. Finally, angry at himself for the way he handled the confrontation with his son, he throws his pencil onto the desk.

**Chapter Seven**

**Jonathan here. Hate to interrupt this narrative**, but I need to tell you about the first time I set eyes on Louis “Duke” Osgard. It was in the main wardroom. Duke had just come through the chow line and was looking around for a place to sit. He must’ve thought we looked like an interesting group because he came over to our table

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

While the JG officer looked hesitant, I gestured to the empty chair. After sitting down, as the ranking officer, I made the introductions. “I’m Major Jonathan Moore. This is JAG officer Lt. Commander Janet Fisher. And the MP guarding my every movement is Marine Corporal Parker.”

“I’m Lieutenant Osgard.” Looking at Corporal Parker curiously, he adds, “Guarding your every movement? Afraid I don’t understand.”

“I’m under arrest, pending a court-martial”

“That explains a lot.”

“How so,” I asked.

"We get Marine pilots aboard all the time, but you're not wearing any wings. And then we have a marine corporal wearing an MP armband dining in the officer's mess."

"You're a very observant young officer.”

Glancing at the JAG insignia on Fisher’s shoulder blades, Duke tells the LCDR, "I assume you are either his prosecutor or --?"

"I’m his defense attorney," answered Fisher somewhat reluctantly.

Shoving a spoonful of gravy-covered mashed potatoes into his mouth, Duke is staring into the eyes of the attractive attorney, commenting, "I'm sorry, I know it's none of my business, but is he guilty?"

Bemused by this attractive young officer's brassiness, and against her better judgment, Fisher engages him, "Uh, yes."

"What's your defense?"

"That what he did saved the lives of his fellow Marines."

At that point, I piped up. "She tells me that's considered a novel defense."

"It’s rare," Osgard added. “In any case, it’s a low percentage shot.”

Personally, Lieutenant, I'm inclined to agree. But that's the way the Code spells it out," responds Fisher.

"Yeah, but if you know in your heart you're doing the right thing, what choice do you have? Protect the team, I always say."

In any event, an animated, rambling and lengthy conversation of seemingly kindred spirits ensued.

As the meal stretched out, I felt a spark, albeit discreetly, but unmistakably, growing between Duke Osgard and Janet Fisher. The irony, of course, was that Osgard’s Navy days were all but over. He just didn’t know it.

Still, in the main wardroom, Blueberry, Wigglesworth and Frank Stevens, having come through the food line, are sitting down at one of the vacant, circular tables, capable of seating up to six. The Hollywood writer is now wearing a tan CNT uniform, devoid of insignias, except for a name tag worn over the right breast pocket. The name tag reads: Frank Stevens, VIP.

"Great food," exclaims Frank. "They tell me you can be served up to four meals a day."

"Great as this is, it's nothing compared to the Chief's Mess. Everyone tries to finagle an invite, which can only be authorized by the Master Chief. And that rarely happens," says Willy.

"Difference is we pay for our own food. Officers contribute so much a month to the ward room fund. The more we contribute, the better the chow," Blueberry adds.

Willy, glancing up, stares at two female lieutenant commanders exiting the line and looking around for an empty table, LCDR Mary Ann Killer Miller and LCDR Melbi Mello Stevens. Blueberry, noticing the direction of Wigglesworth stare, asks "Isn't that the officer you were asking about? Lieutenant Commander Mary Ann Miller, one hell of a pilot. Transitioning to the F-35C Lightning II, soon as a new squadron is formed. You know her?"

"Slightly, but I know someone who knows her a lot better." Nodding towards the table where Duke Osgard and LCDR Fisher are sitting with the highly decorated Marine Major, Jonathan Moore.

"Duke and I were roommates at MIT. Besides, I got the story from Miller herself," reports Willy.

In the graduate student housing for MIT students, one of the apartments is that of Mary Ann Miller. Dressed in typical campus attire for the time, Duke enters the apartment and is surprised to find Mary Ann Miller packing her suitcase.

"You're leaving?" asks Duke.

"Good guess. I'm a lieutenant in the US Navy, remember?," responds Mary somewhat testily.

"Why would I not remember? I just thought you'd registered for the summer semester."

"Changed my mind. I asked to be reassigned to a squadron.”   
 "I don't understand. …Thought we had something."

"So did I. But it takes two people, Duke. I spent nine months waiting for you to open up, to trust me, to know I'd never hurt you."

"Whadda you want me to say?"

"See, that's the whole point. If I have to tell you what to say, that tells me you've got nothing to say," responds Mary exasperated. "Duke, I really don't know who you are. I don't know what's going on in your mind. I've never once heard you say, ‘I love you.’”

"Now, come on. You know how I feel about you," insists a bewildered Duke.

"No, I don't. How would I? Okay, how do you feel? Inside? About me?"

Duke's eyes drop to the floor and he is silent.

"That's what I thought," replies Mary zipping her suitcase and wheeling it to the front door, where she stops and, turning back, says, "I hope you get your shit together, Duke. You're a good guy. But you're messed up in your heart. And I just can't wait any longer to start living." With that she turns and walks out.

In the main Wardroom Blueberry asks. "Does Duke know she's aboard?"

"Doubt it. We're in different squadrons," replies Willy.

"The one on the left is Lieutenant Commander Stevens, a close personal fantasy of mine, and the CAG's WSO."

"And my daughter, I might add," says Frank smiling, "You want me to invite them over? We have a couple extra chairs."

**Chapter Eight**

In the passageway outside #2 ready room is found the emblem of a bee on the door, indicating one of the Hornet squadrons. Inside the room, CDR Robert Deans is briefing his squadron, "The yellow rubber life rafts are in place. You'll each drop one practice bomb. I expect direct hits. Don't worry the government's not going to make you pay for the raft."

Osgard and Blueberry are sitting next to LT Terry “Tank” Sherman and his WSO, LT Margaret “J.J” Johnson, listening to Deans speak, "Watch your approaches. Don't overfly the target. When you do that, the FLIR image flips 180 degrees. That not only disorients your WSO but also can break the weapons lock. Drop before the target and turn away. Watch for clouds. Even a scud layer can break the laser beam and cause a 'smart' bomb to go stupid. Squadron One will play adversary. You'll not only have to deliver your bombs but defend yourselves from bandit aircraft with only your guns and sidewinders."

"No sweat, skipper," asserts Sherman.

"Won't be as easy as you think. CAG will be leading the Resistance Force!"

"We can handle CAG!," retorts Johnson.

"Ah, the confidence of youth."

Inside #1 ready room, CDR Brown is at the podium speaking, "Listen-up gunslingers. This is what you have been waiting for! An Air Combat Maneuvering, simulated guns.”

CDR Cue is standing off to the side. The squadron members gathered include: LCDR Mary Ann “Killer” Miller and her WSO, LT Mike “Football” Mercy; LT Willy “Sticks” Wigglesworth and his WSO Bill “Snowball” Nagy. Also present is LCDR Melbi “Mello” Stevens, CAG's WSO whenever he flies the Super Hornet.

"No missiles, so you'll have to get in close," continues Brown. "The scenario is we've dropped our ordinance and used up our Sparrows and Sidewinders on the egress. We're returning to Home Plate when jumped by bandits. Now a few words from CAG."

"Teamwork! Teamwork! Teamwork!. That's the purpose of this drill. Without it, in 1982, the Israeli Air Force would not have shot down 85 Syrian MIGs and destroyed 23 SAM batteries, without a single loss due to enemy aircraft. You'll all monitor the guard frequency but use the Have Quick for transmissions – is Cue’s message.

In paraloft compartments, pilots and WSOs are climbing into their flight gear. Duke and Blueberry are strapping on the "G" suits that keep them from blacking out during the high "G" turns.

"Why is it that we always get stuck out on the barrier while everyone else gets to have their fun? I'd so love to go head to head with CAG," states Duke.

Having donned his flight gear, LT Wigglesworth wanders over to LCDR Mary Ann Miller, who is just finishing putting on her "G" suit. Stepping up next to her, Willy asks "Did you know Duke Osgard is aboard?"

"Saw his name on one of the rosters. Somehow, I wasn't surprised to find him in the Navy, considering who his father is."

"Although we're in different squadrons, somehow we ended up being roommates,” volunteers Wigglesworth.

Inside the Combat Direction Center, the Air Ops Boss, CDR Danny Deever, is switching channels, listening to the aircraft radio traffic on a headset. Suddenly, Deever pulling off the headset, picks up the BAT phone and presses the button for the captain's cabin.

"Captain," acknowledges Andrew Sergei Bonime.

"Deever, sir. You asked me to personally let you know if CAG were to hold school. Well, sir, from the sound of the radio traffic coming from First Squadron's Have Quick and guard frequencies, "Curly" is teaching from a lesson plan that none of our nuggets are likely to forget."

"Thank you, Deever. Pipe it through to both Hornet ready rooms," says Sergei from his main cabin, located forward on the 03 deck. Sergei punching two buttons, is monitoring both the 'guard' frequency and the super secure Have Quick channel, the latter with its computer controlled, synchronized rapid frequency hopping changes.

In the air, the Hornet and Super Hornet join in a right echelon at ten thousand feet, Mary's Hornet, carrying the number "107" on its nose, is flying CAG-100's wing position. The two aircraft slide into a combat spread.

Inside the cockpit of CAG-100, Cue, using the UHF-HQ, calmly says, "Two....Lead. Contact coming hard right. Start your turn. I'll see if I can lead him across your nose. Okay, it's working. He's coming to me."

Inside the cockpit of Gunslinger 107, Mary, also tuned to the UHF-HQ, reports "Tally! Getting my nose on him now. ...In firing position!"

"Your six is clear. Go get 'em!," insists Cue.

"Guard frequency - Guns! Guns! Guns!," says Mary.

"Break left. One coming outta the sun," interjects Cue. "Engaging! Swing around and cover my six! I'm putting my nose on him from the west."

"Roger. Your six is clear!"

Aboard the carrier, the Air Boss and Mini Boss are also listening to Cue's voice over the speaker. "Hope the Captain is able to pick up the Have Quick frequency. This is too good to miss," says the Air Boss.

"If we're reading it, he's reading it," replies Mini Boss.

Back in the air**,** Cue’s voice comes over the Have Quick channel. "Keep your turn coming. I'll set him up then break left. You hit him from the right."

"Roger," Mary calmly responds.

On the HUD (Head-Up Display), the computer-generated image of the two fighters dance into the death dot.

"Getting my nose on him now! Break Left," commands Mary.

On Mary’s heads-up computer image, CAG-100 breaks, leaving the tailing bandit exposed in the cross hairs of her death dot.

"Guns! Guns! Guns! Two down," says Mary over the guard frequency.

"Gunslinger 'Sticks'.... Lead.....Bandit closing on your six. I want you to break left and lead him across my nose. Ready.....Break!," announces Cue.

Three Hornets are at altitude. Gun fighter 111 breaks left and dives. Sticks is followed by the Bandit, sucked in by the possibility of an easy kill. Then CAG-100 suddenly turns up on the Bandit's tail.

Inside the cockpit of CAG-100, the computer image is drawn into the death dot on Cue's Head-Up Display.

"Guns! Guns! Guns! …Lead to Sticks. Your six is clear," says Cue keying guard frequency.

Inside the Captain's Cabin, Sergei keys a button, connecting him to the CATC Center, which is answered by Deever, "Yes, sir."

"That was real teamwork. Let's hope the lesson made an impression," states Sergei.

Inside the cockpit of CAG-100, Cue's WSO LCDR Melbi Stevens reports, "We're at bingo fuel."

"Sticks, this is Lead. You head for Home Plate. Killer and I will hook up with the Viking and then take a quick look at area Tango," says Cue.

"Roger," is Willy’s calm reply.

The three aircraft, Gunslingers 107, 111 & CAG-100, are skirting a cloud in a tight, right echelon when Willy “Sticks” Wigglesworth's aircraft breaks off and heads for the ship.

In another part of the sky**,** two Super Hornets are at 13,000 feet, in a right echelon, with Sherman leading and Osgard in the echelon. The sky is filled with huge, billowing clouds. Inside the cockpit of Lt. Osgard’s Super Hornet, Duke asks Blueberry, "Any search or fire control emanations?"

"Neggits. If anyone's there, they'll stay passive, using their Infrared Search and Track," replies Blueberry.

"What we've got to do is show some initiative. Let's give them a target. Get Tank on the secure channel."

Blueberry punches the button, giving the computer a second or two in which to lock in to the time-code for the preset, synchronized series of frequency changes that makes the ARC-164 Have Quick radio so secure.

Duke's aircraft is tightening the echelon with Sherman's Super Hornet. Sherman spotting the lit button on his ARC-164, punches the button that will activate the channel, "What's on your mind, Duke?"

"Let's see if anyone's on our tail. Give me 45 seconds then start blasting away with your fire control radar. I'll hang out on the sun side of those storm clouds, where it'll be difficult to get a signature."

Cue is at 15,000 feet, using the Infrared Search and Track system to help him spot the 'enemy,' without giving away telltale radar emanations. Inside the cockpit, Melbi reports, "Nothing on the Infrared Search and Track."

"Let's transmit for a few seconds. They're out there somewhere," says Cue.

"Ahh, no need, sir. I'm picking up radar transmissions hearing two-two-five."

CAG-100's Hornet turns toward the new heading.

Duke putting his Super Hornet on the sun side of a large cumulus cloud, hears Blueberry say, "You were right! I'm now getting a second band of fire control emanations! Has to be a hostile. But without transmitting friend or foe, there's no way of confirming. Whoever it is, it's closing on Sherman's six."

Cue's F/18 Super Hornet drops in on Sherman's six, just short of common range.

"I'm starting to feel 'pipper burn.' Keep a sharp eye on those storm clouds," commands Cue, as he comes within cannon range of Sherman's Super Hornet.

"Second target. Coming up on our six!! Must have been hiding out in the storm clouds," Melbi calmly reports.

"Figured as much," replies Cue.

Inside the cockpit of Sherman's Super Hornet, he hears Duke's voice booming in the headset, "Break left!!"

In the cockpit of CAG-100, Cue is about to put his cannon fire pipper on Sherman when the Super Hornet suddenly breaks left and dives. Undaunted, Cue moves his control stick and follows Sherman's F/A 18F down to the deck, which in this case is the Atlantic Ocean.

"207. Told you to break left, not hit the deck! Could've had my name on him! Level off and start your climb. Not too steep, you don't wanna bleed off your energy. I'm getting in position."

Both Super Hornets level off at 8,000 feet.

In the cockpit of CAG-100, Melbi reports, "Second target's trying to get a lock on us."

"Yeah, I spotted the attempt to set us up. Not a bad maneuver. At least he's showing initiative. Curious to see how this pilot in front of us manages his power and fuel assets."

As Sherman begins his slow climb, Cue has no trouble staying with him. In the CAG's cockpit, Melbi exclaims, "Damn. Second bandit is about to get a lock!"

"Clever maneuver. Too bad the pilot's developed a bad case of tunnel vision," responds Cue.

"Sir, I know you're having your fun, but don't you think we ought to send this beekeeper back to the boat, and start setting up the intruder?" asks Melbi in a concerned voice.

"You're right. Getting my nose on him now."

Suddenly, Sherman whips his Super Hornet on its side and initiates a split "S," momentarily catching Cue off guard. He rolls out at 1,000 feet. Cue initiates the same maneuver but does it slightly tighter, rolling out at 2,000 feet. He's still trailing Sherman, but with the advantage of altitude. At his altitude, Sherman has nowhere to go. The telltale orange glow is visible in the twin tailpipes as Sherman goes to afterburners in an attempt to power his Super Hornet out of the danger zone.

"There he goes, using up precious fuel in an attempt to get himself out of a situation of his own creation," mutters Cue.

Because Cue has the altitude advantage, he also has the energy advantage. Without the necessity of going to burners, Cue easily gets his nose on the climbing, fleeing Sherman.

"Guns! Guns! Guns! 'Rhino' in burners, coming off the deck. This is CAG. Your mission is over. You can return to Home Plate."

Sherman comes out of burners and initiates a 45 degree turn and slow climb to altitude.

Monitoring the Guard Frequency, Duke hears CAG's exchange with Sherman, "Roger, CAG! Three-oh-seven. Heading for the boat!"

"Blue. Hear that?” asks Duke. "We're about to get our nose on CAG! I've got him on position and I've got him on altitude!"

"Don't get cocky! You can bet he's not going gentle into that good night!," says Blueberry.

Duke is giving chase and manages to maneuver in on the gunslinger, looking down on his six, even though CAG begins a controlled left turn climb giving him an altitude advantage.

Suddenly, the ECM warning begins flashing and sounding.

"Damn! That hotdog almost has a lock on us!!" exclaims Melbi.

"Better make it look good. Pop some flares," suggests Cue.

"But the mission requires he use guns," interjects Melbi.

"Go ahead, it'll confuse the hell out of him."

Cue, yanking the control stick, whips the aircraft onto a new heading while continuing to climb. Finally, the ECM gear goes silent as Cue avoids a lock.

Duke, watching as flares, on little parachutes, begin dropping from CAG's ECM pod, is forced to maneuver in order to avoid sucking one of the flares into his intakes. Twisting and turning, the two aircraft approach the billowing cumulus clouds, with Duke's Super Hornet glued to CAG's tail.

"He's toying with us, seeing how close he can cut the envelope without our getting a lock," reports Blueberry, while they circle a large, puffy cloud. Suddenly a solid tone!. Blueberry exclaims, "We've got a lock. Take the shot!" Then the tone goes quiet.

Suddenly, Duke's own threat receiver begins flashing and sounding!

"What the hell?!" asks Duke.

Without warning, the CAG-100 Hornet stands straight up on its tailpipe, losing over 200 knots of airspeed. Unprepared for the maneuver, Duke's Super Hornet overshoots. Then, before he loses too much of his precious energy, Cue initiates a split "S," rolling to the left, out of harm's way. He quickly recovers, getting his nose pointed in the general direction of Duke's now vulnerable aircraft.

Inside the cockpit of Mary's Hornet, Mary is looking around, carefully noting everyone's position, seeing that the pursuer is now the pursued. Keying her secure, Have Quick transmitter, with its own EOD setting, Mary says, "CAG, this is Killer. Got a lock. Thanks for setting him up for me."

Cue's aircraft is below her at about the seven o'clock position and Duke's tailpipes are directly in front of her.

"Looks like we've been had!" says Blueberry.

But, not one to give up without a fight, Duke whips his stick sharply, rolling the F/A-18F into a dive. Mary follows the Super Hornet down. The Super Hornet is bracketed squarely in the HUD's radar gun sight's death dot. Mary keys the microphone button for the guard frequency, "Hold it....smile. Guns! Guns! Guns!." Also on the guard frequency, Duke responds, "Roger my demise! Nice teamwork. Too bad I didn't see it coming."

At that the two aircraft break off and head for the ship, side-by-side.

"That was the lesson of the day," remarks Mary.

"Let me guess. Since we only have two female pilots on board, and one of them is a Viking driver, you must be Killer?" asks Duke.

Mary, in an attempt to stop this unprofessional radio discipline, insists, "Identify yourself and clear the channel."

"Identify myself? Just think of me as the guy you once bagged," replies Duke.

Inside the cockpit of CAG-100, Cue keys the ICS and says, "Let's get back to the barn before my arm starts acting up again."

"Sir, what did the flight surgeon say about that arm?" asks Melbi.

"It's nothing he would be interested in."

"Well, I'm interested and I would like to hear what he had to say. Sir?"

"Since your request is reasonable, I'll make sure I see him before my next flight. Agreed?”

"Agreed."

**Chapter Nine**

Nighttime finds things relatively quiet on the flight deck. In the #2 Ready Room, some of the squadron members are hanging out, sipping coffee. In one corner, Sherman is having it out with Osgard and Blueberry.

"We could have nailed CAG had you not insisted on playing a lone hand!," argues Sherman.

"We could have nailed him if you had obeyed my order to 'break left,' instead of diving!", retorted Duke.

Sherman angrily pointing to the single silver bar on Duke's CNT shirt collar, then to the railroad tracks on his own collar, asserts "I was flight leader! Where do you get off giving me orders? Face it, Osgard, you blew it!"

In Duke's stateroom, Frank, Willy, and Blueberry are kibitzing when a frustrated Duke enters. The angry lieutenant junior grade pulls himself up onto his bunk and closes the blue curtains, isolating him from the others. Blueberry says loudly to the other two, "We had CAG locked up but before I could simulate a firing sequence, he escaped. Then his wing nailed us from behind. It was my fault for tunneling in and not monitoring for other threats."

At this, Duke, snapping open the curtain and dropping to the floor, faces Blueberry, "Blue, it wasn't your fault. It was mine. I was the one with tunnel vision. I was too focused on nailing CAG. Question is, does Miller know who it was that she bagged?" asks Duke dejectedly.

"You kidding?" asks Willy. "The whole air wing knows! And by the time they do the post op, the whole ship will know."

Hearing this, Duke visibly winces.

**Corporal Andrea Parker and I were having dinner** together in Wardroom #1 when my JAG attorney, LCDR Janet Fisher, set her meal tray on the table.

"Just got the word. The venue for your court martial has been changed. You're going to be tried in Naples," states Fisher.

"Will I still be under house arrest or incarcerated during the trial?"

"Thanks to all those medals you wear, you are released on your recognizance. You're free to move about as you wish. But I wouldn't be late for any of your appearances."

"In that case, you won't need me dogging you," says Parker. "I'll confirm what your attorney says and then catch the next COD, and return to my unit."

As Parker rises to leave, I also rose, sticking out my hand for Parker to shake, telling her, "I hope we run into each other again, some day."

"You know what, Major? I hope so, as well."

Inside the Captain's Cabin, Sergei is working at the conference table that doubles as the dining table, going over some paperwork when CDR Cue enters.

"Oh, Curly. Come in and have a seat. Just working out the details for our next port of call. The Carrier will be anchored offshore from Naples." To his Aide, Sergei says," Tell the cook that CDR Cue will be joining me for dinner. Steak and lobster, appropriated from the Chief's Mess."

"Yes, sir."

As Cue takes a seat opposite the Captain, Sergei continues, "They tell me your son nearly got the best of you. Obviously a chip off the ol' block. Don't feel bad, he got the best of me during a Topgun exercise. He's good."

"Appears to be. But Cap'n, the way I've been playing catch up with the personnel files, until a few days ago, I didn't even know he was in the Navy."

Inside the hospital ward, wearing only his pants, CDR Cue is still prone on the examining table, hooked to the circular patches glued to his chest, as the Flight Surgeon, LCDR Wilde, is studying his electrocardiogram. Noticing the doctor shaking his head as he examines the EKG, Cue pulls himself into a sitting position, asking, "What is it, Doc?"

"Sorry, Commander, But I'm going to have to ground you."

"That bad, huh?," asks Cue, stunned.

"Commander, you've had more than one heart attack. Fortunately, they were mild, but they were real. Now, the decision isn't up to me, but I'll recommend you continue as CAG until a replacement is found, but without flight status."

"What good is a CAG if he can't fly?"

Inside the Captain's Cabin, Captain Andrew Sergei Bonime and Commander James C. Cue are seated across one another at the large conference table.

"Look, Curly. You know your options as well as I do."

"Yeah, my carrier days are over."

"You should be court martialed for intimidating an Oceana doctor to cover for your heart attack and return you to flight status. In any event, I'll see that JAG deals with him."

"Sir, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I see your point. Court martial him and they'd have to court martial you. And since both doctors and officers like you are hard to come by, what would be the point. But neither of you can get off scot free. There needs to be some punishment."

"I agree to any punishment, long as I can stay in the Navy."

"I don't see how that's possible. Wait a minute. There is one open position that would allow you to stay in the Navy and possibly still get in a little flight time."

"And what would that be?" "An instructor at Topgun. Not a flight instructor, but a ground instructor. We put you into a two-seat trainer along with a Topgun flight instructor or top student, you'd get in plenty of flight time. I'll work it out with the admiral."

"That sounds like an option. Thanks," responds Cue smiling.

Inside the main wardroom, Frank, Willy, Duke and Blueberry are seated at one of the wardroom's circular tables enjoying breakfast when Mary Miller slips into one of the empty chairs, next to Duke.

"Hello, Ace," greets Mary smiling. "That last exercise reflected one of your better pursuits. Let's hope it's not a one-shot performance. And you don't have to go out of your way to avoid me. The past is the past. No regrets."

Duke, appearing extremely uncomfortable, looks at Mary and quietly nods.

LCDR Melbi Stevens, food tray in hand, slipping into the vacant chair, says "Hi, Dad. I see that you've met my good friend, Mary Ann.

"Not officially," replies Frank.

"Then, let me introduce you, Lieutenant Commander Miller, meet my father, Frank Stevens. He works in Hollywood and is writing a book about us."

To Mary, Frank says, "Hope you will grant me an interview.

"Well, I don't know. Who's going to play me in the movie? Why don't you have your people call my people and we'll pencil something in," says Mary in a droll manner.

Melbi slaps Mary's shoulder as Frank cracks up, and Mary, smiling, says to Frank, "Oh, that's right, I don't have any people. Of, course I'll give you an interview whenever you want. We’ll do lunch.”

After laughing, Frank smiles and says to the group, "Given any thought to how you want to spend your first night, during our stopover in Naples."

In a Naples Hotel, dressed in civvies, Frank, Willy, and Blueberry wait in line to register along with other officers from the carrier battle group.

"This hotel is very accommodating for the American Fleet. We usually get a room with two single beds, then order in two more rollaways, so as to accommodate four," says Blueberry.

"Thanks, but I think I can afford a room of my own, if one is available," replies Frank.

After signing in at the reception counter, Duke turns and sees Cue, leaning against a pillar, clearly waiting for Duke. He walks over and joins his father.

"I'd buy you a farewell drink, except I don't have much use for alcohol," says Duke.

"That because of the incident at your high school graduation?"

"How did you know about that?" asks Duke, astonished.

"I was there."

In the high school auditorium, dressed in civvies, a proud James Cue is seated in the shadows at the back of the auditorium as the high school Principal announces the name of the valedictorian, "And now, our valedictorian, Louis Osgard."

Duke walks to the podium to deliver his speech.

"If you were there, why didn't I see you?"

"I was way in the back."

"I remember that night! After my speech, I went out with some of the guys and got wasted."

"Yeah, I stuck around to see that you made it home safely; left the next morning. Even your mother didn't know I'd been there. …Sort of lost track of you after that."

"It was my first drink. Never cared much for alcohol ever since."

Cue gets to the point. "They, uh, they're sending me out to TopGun tonight. So, I've a plane to catch. …It's going to be a very different kind of life."

Standing on Duke's left, Cue raises his right arm and rests it on his son's shoulder. A somewhat surprised Duke turns his head, taking in the unfamiliar sight of his father's arm on his shoulder. Their eyes meet and hold. Slowly, Duke reaches up with his left hand and removes his father's arm. Then he holds out his right hand in front of Cue, like an arm wrestler, or brothers on the street. A smile crosses his face. Cue returns the smile and plants the removed hand firmly in his son's outstretched palm. The handclasp evolves into an unprecedented embrace, wherein furtive tears are showing in the eyes of each.

**Chapter Ten**

In the Mediterranean Operating Area**,** a combat air patrol is launching from the flight deck of the super carrier. An E-2C Hawkeye is launched. On the two catapults located forward of the island, two fully armed Hornets get a green light while an S-3 Viking, with a refueling pack, moves into place. On the number two cat, the Cat Officer notes the pilot's salute and the green light on the bow and then sweeps his arm down, pointing into the wind. The catapult track is filled with steam as the Hornet is hurtled into the air.

In the Hornet #2 Ready Room, Squadron commander Robert Deans is briefing Duke and Blueberry, "God only knows why, but you have been selected for a special mission. It's extremely dangerous. If you wish to back out do so now, before the new CAG briefs you."

"Anything for a little excitement," adds Duke, with Blueberry nodding agreement.

"Believe me; your adrenalin will be pumping on this one."

At this point, the ready room door opens and CDR Colin “Buddy” Brown enters with LCDR Mary Ann Miller and LCDR Melbi Stevens.

"Here's CAG to fill you in," offers Deans, as Melbi and Mary Ann take two seats next to Duke and Blueberry.

CDR “Buddy” Brown makes a keyboard entry and aerial photos of a Syrian missile site appear on the 52 foot HD TV monitor.

CDR Brown narrates, "Photos from one of our drones over Masyaf, Syria, indicate that two advanced ballistic missiles, capable of hitting any part of Israel, are being fueled. That usually means an immediate launch," the new CAG continues. “The two missiles preparing for launch are surrounded by the Russian built S-300 and the Pantsir-S1 air defense systems, as see on the screen.”

"Two Hornets will go in and take out the site. For this mission, Killer will also be flying a Super Hornet with Mello as her WSO."

“The missiles are launched from the ground, off the back of the 22-wheeler, 40-ton semi-trailers built specifically to transport and launch the deadly, long-range missiles. You'll each be armed with four laser guided Mark-83 bombs, with heat seekers on the wingtips."

"What about the Sparrows?" asks Duke.

“Carrying four Mark-83s, you’ll have a weight problem as it is. Since there’s not likely to be many aerial threats, the skipper feels the lighter Sidewinders will produce less drag on your wingtips.”

"What do we know about their air defense?" asks Mary.

Brown makes another couple keyboard strokes and shown on the HD screen are the deadly air defense rockets embedded among civilian homes located throughout the town.

"You'll be up against the deadly, Russian built Pantsir-S1 and S-300 air defense systems. They’ll be extremely hard to destroy without causing extensive collateral damage,” warns Brown.

On the screen, are the two missiles preparing for launch. While in the open, they are surrounded by the Russian built S-300 and the Pantsir-S1 air defense systems.

"Since you're sending two aircraft to the target, I assume we'll be using Israeli tactics to light the targets," says Duke.

"Absolutely. The trailing aircraft will light the target for the lead aircraft."

Interjecting, Deans reports, "Captain Bonime has brought the carrier as close to the Syrian border as possible, so that you won't have to refuel. If there are no questions, I suggest you launch A-SAP."

The fliers rise and make their way to the exit.

As Duke and Blueberry open the hatch leading to the flight deck, Duke is confronted by the flight surgeon, LCDR Wilde, "Lieutenant! You're overdue for your physical."

"Sorry Commander, I'm a little busy now."

"I want to see you as soon as you return."

"My word, Commander."

"Good enough."

Duke and Blue run for their Super Hornet, which is at ground idle and positioned on the number one cat. Out on the number three cat, Mary and Melbi’s Super Hornet is preparing to launch.

Mary moves the throttles against the stop, salutes the catapult officer, then grabs hold of the bars on each side of the windscreen, allowing the computer to launch the aircraft without the pilot attempting to override the system. Her Hornet smokes the deck as it is hurtled off the forward deck and becomes airborne.

Duke does essentially the same thing.

Approaching the target, the two aircraft are in a right echelon with Mary’s aircraft with the number 100 painted on the nose, in the lead. Suddenly, David's threat receivers start beeping their alarm. Despite the daylight hour, due to the overcast, tracer rounds are visible on the horizon. With two separate, thunderous claps, the Super Hornets penetrate the firepower coming at them from the ground. They just get through it when suddenly, the tone of the threat receivers changes pitch.

Duke keys his UHF transmitter, "Mustang 100, Pantsirs are radiating!"

Mary replies, “Mustang 207. Remember, we light the targets for each other. Since I'm in the lead, you'll light the first target and then we'll circle and switch places for the second attack."

“Roger that.”

Duke flips a switch, adjusts the laser, then keys his radio transmitter, "Mustang 100, first target is lit."

Mary's aircraft jumps slightly as, from the underbelly, two laser guided Mark-83 bombs are released in quick succession. As Miller's Super Hornet passes overhead, her laser guided bombs slam into the first missile site and explode.

"Scratch one missile. …Now for the second," transmits Mary.

Both Super Hornets are in a tight circle, but changing places. Now it's Duke in the lead and Mary's turn to light the second missile site. The two Hornets pull out of the turn and line up on the second target.

"Lighting second target. Now!"

Duke switches the master arm selector to his two laser-guided Mark-83s and depresses the bomb pickle on his control stick. The aircraft jumps slightly as the two Mark-83s kick away. Secondary explosions indicate a direct hit! Suddenly the threat alarms sound.

"Threat receivers indicate Pantsir missile launches. Looks like we've been found out. Starting countermeasures," reports Blueberry.

"Initiating countermeasures," adds Duke.

Duke keys the ECM (Electronic Countermeasures) button on his control stick.

SAM missiles are lifting off from several sites. Little streams of tin foil and IR flares are dispensed from one of Duke’s F/A-18F ECM pods. The chaff merely floats to the ground. But tiny chutes allow the ejected flares to ignite in a bright red glow and hang in the air.

A SA-22 Greyhound missile seeks out Duke's Super Hornet but instead detonates on one of the IR flares, in a spectacular explosion. Two more SA-22 Greyhounds are launched. As Duke's aircraft climbs to altitude, chaff and flares are again dispensed from the underbelly pod. Both Greyhounds lock onto Duke's Super Hornet, but one detonates on the chaff dispersals, and the other on one of the IR flares. Both contacts produce tremendous explosions.

Mary's Super Hornet joins on Duke's as both aircraft dispense IR flares and chaff as they attempt to gain height. Another SA-22 missile seeks out and detonates on one of the infrared flares.

Refraction from the sun's rays are skipping off the billowing carpet and adds to the cathedral-like atmosphere. Suddenly, the two Super Hornets emerge from the "carpet" and climb, side by side, into the clear sky. The two warriors level off at 35,000 feet, well above any threats from below.

"Clean sweep, Duke! Mighty fine job."

"Good teamwork. But the job's only half finished," is Duke’s reply. .

"You spotted that camouflaged building."

"Roger. Big enough to hold several more missiles."

"We can't very well take it out without any bombs," suggests Mary.

"But we can take out the Pantsir control center so that whoever comes back can take out that storage facility, and do so without getting blown out of the sky," assures Duke.

"And we can do that with sidewinders and guns."

"Concur!!"

The two aircraft break into a 180 degree turn. Completing the 180 Blueberry keys the intercom, "I spotted the Pantsir control center, near the middle of the village; its tracers were radiating a distinct signature."

Duke passes the information on to Mary. "We're going to have to launch a coordinated effort," says Mary.

"I'm handling this myself. You jam their frequency and maintain a CAP over the target in case the Russians or Syrian Air Force decide to stick their noses in," insists Duke.

"You're giving me orders?"

"Course not. It's just that Blue Boy has got their position nailed and feels he might be able to jam their radar frequency."

"That is an advantage. Since the Control Center won't be emitting a heat signature, you'll have to be damn close to the target before you release your Sidewinders. Good luck."

"Roger."

Duke breaks in a split "S" and drops toward the cloud layer. As he disappears beneath the carpet, Mary takes up a combat air patrol over the target area. Duke's WSO is guiding him to the target, "A pinch to your left. That's it. You're good to fire."

With his nose on the Pantsir control center, Duke squeezes the control stick trigger that will launch the two wingtip sidewinders. Nothing happens. Duke squeezes the control stick trigger a second time. Still nothing. Duke's aircraft breaks off and begins climbing as the afterburners kick in.

"What happened?" asks Blueberry.

"The sidewinders failed to launch."

"That tears it. Instead of the pursuer we're now the pursuee!!" says Blueberry.

Suddenly, Duke becomes the target of intense triple-A ground fire. As the Super Hornet continues its ascent, the fuselage takes a series of triple-A hits. Feeling the artillery impacts, and with Threat Receivers beeping, Duke attempts to pop flares and chaff by punching the ECM button located on the control stick. Nothing happens. He pushes the ECM button once again. Still nothing. He keys his frequency hopping channel. Mary answers. "Took some hits. Sidewinder and ECM gear inoperative. Threat receivers indicate a possible SA-22 launch," says Duke.

As if to punctuate his words, another series of triple-A shells tear into the cockpit, barely missing Duke but doing serious damage to the aircraft's instrument panel. Suddenly the Threat Receivers are silent.

"A reminder, the SA-22 has a 32,000 ceiling," says Blueberry.

"Come on, baby. Climb!! Don't let me down now! Just get me to 32,000."

Mary's Super Hornet is circling over the target area when her WSO pipes up, "We're only at 22,000, within range of the SA-22. Hadn't we better climb? …Damn! There goes another launch."

Mary keys her computer-controlled, frequency hopping channel. "Duke! Your status. I show a launch."

Climbing into the overcast, Duke and Blueberry are practically on their backs.

"ECM still inoperative. Should be through the overcast in a few seconds."

As if on cue, Duke's Hornet shoots upward, through the "carpet" layer and continues climbing with precious fuel pouring through the afterburners, "Twenty four thousand and climbing. Engine rough. Temp rising. Missile on my six."

"Duke. You still need an additional 8,000 plus," asserts Mary.

Suddenly, an SA-22 Greyhound missile pops through the overcast, locked onto Duke's superheated tailpipes.

"Missile!! I see it. Duke! You're not going to make it," declares Mary.

"Killing burner. Putting my nose to the ground," reports Duke.

"Negative! Hold what you have," advises Mary.

Suddenly Mary's Super Hornet does a split "S" and enters the danger zone. The nose of her aircraft appears headed directly for Duke's Super Hornet. But this illusion doesn't account for the fact that Duke's aircraft is still climbing. Passing beneath Duke's white hot tailpipe, Mary's ECM lays down a series of IR flares, which ignite seconds after being dispensed. Duke's twin engines are running erratically as Duke finally reaches a safe altitude and levels off.

Passing up a nearby flare, the SA-22 is not fooled. It finds itself free of the pattern laid down by Mary's flare dispenser and now locks in on Mary's Super Hornet. Mary's aircraft fights for a safe altitude. But the SA-22 missile climbs faster and, in only a handful of seconds, climbs inside the Super Hornet's tailpipe and explodes. Mary's fighter dies in a ball of flames.

"Mary! No, Mary! …Oh, God, no! You shouldn't have done it! It should have been me!" cries Duke.

Blueberry's calm voice snaps Duke back to the reality of their circumstances, "One of our compressors is out of balance and we're low on fuel. In Vegas terms, I put our chances of making it back to the boat at zip!!"

"Got to at least make it to the coast."

Smoke is spewing from the crippled fighter. Red warning lights are flashing and a computer-generated voice is repeating the manufacturer's programmed cautions.

"Shutting down the starboard engine," reports Duke.

In the rear cockpit, sparks begin spewing from equipment, "Hate to tell you this, but we're now officially in Delta Sierra (Deep Shit)," responds Blueberry.

Aboard the carrier, in the CATC Center, Air Ops Boss, CDR Danny Deever, keys a button and is connected to the Captain's cabin.

Sergei, answers the phone on the first ring, "Captain!"

"Deever, Sir. We lost Mustang 100, no chutes sighted, and Mustang 207 is reporting the loss of one engine, numerous electrical malfunctions, and is low on fuel. CAG is launching the Alert-5 to provide escort, and has ordered the guard helo in as close to the coast as possible. The Viking has also moved into position."

"Good. If 207 can make it to the beach before bailing out, the helo will be there to pick them up. What's the armament on the Alert-5?," asks Sergei.

"Usual, sir. Sidewinders on the wingtips and sparrows underneath on the rails…and, of course guns." says Deever.

"And the Viking?" asks Sergei.

"Launching now, sir."

"Thanks, Deever. Keep me posted."

Smoke is no longer spewing from the crippled fighter. Blueberry states "Radar's picking up an incoming bogey. Straight ahead. Looks to be a thousand feet above us.”

"Could be our escort."

"Better be. With our sidewinders inoperative, all we've got is guns. And I'm not sure we've got those!”

The UHF radio crackles, "Mustang Flight 207, this is your Alert-5 escort to home plate. What kind of a mess have you got yourself into this time?” asks Willy.

"Willy, we lost Killer and Mello," laments Duke.

"I know."

**Chapter Eleven**

The super carrier is preparing for recovery ops. The Ops Boss, CDR Danny Deever, keying a button, is connected to the Captain's cabin.

Again, answering on the first ring, Sergei answers, "Captain!"

"Sir, the Alert-5 is now flying escort and Mustang 207 is preparing to take on fuel from the Viking. The only issue is whether or not he's able to trap, what with all the electrical anomalies."

"Thanks, Deever. Continue keeping me informed."

"Yes, sir."

With the Alert-5 Super Hornet flying 207's wing, Duke's Super Hornet, with its fuel intake probe extended, is maneuvering into position, slightly below the Viking.

"Mustang 207, this is your Mobile gas station. How many gallons shall I put you down for?" asks the Viking boom operator.

"I don't want to trap with any more weight than necessary. Why don't we go with three hundred gallons?”

"Three hundred it is."

Through the windscreen, Duke watches the approaching refueling basket which contains a series of small lights lining the periphery, making it easier to distinguish, daytime or nighttime. He checks the throttles making contact at last. After the aerial refueling is completed, the refueling hose is disconnected and pulled back into the Viking.

Aboard the carrier, ABBCS John Patrick Giannini, the Crash and Salvage Leading Chief Petty Officer (LCPO) and his First Assistant are climbing into their fire-fighting gear.

"We hear 207 is showing a lot of white breakers and we don't know what effect this will have on the pilot's ability to trap. He'll probably ditch and let one of the helos do its job. But if he doesn't, we've got to be ready for anything," says Giannini.

"You can count on me, Giannini."

The Alert-5 is flying underneath Mustang Flight 207, "Lot of Triple-A hits. No apparent leaks, result of self-sealing tanks, no doubt. Structurally, everything looks sound," says Willy.

"Good a time as ever to test the gear," says Duke. "Blue, reset the breakers for the landing gear."

"Roger, resetting. Set," responds Blueberry.

As the gear comes down, Duke reports, "Main gear down and locked. Nose gear down but not locked."

"Try recycling it," suggests Willy.

In the rear cockpit, once again sparks are bouncing off some of the electronic gear. Then a couple breakers pop open, showing the telltale white streak. The sparking stops.

"Breakers popped again. We've got major electrical problems," maintains Blue-berry.

"That's okay, we'll leave the gear down and take our chances," replies Duke.

With the deck ready for recovery ops, CAG CDR Colin “Buddy” Brown and the controller continue monitoring Mustang Flight 207, "With the gear down, he's flying dirty. He'll burn extra fuel," says Brown.

"Took on 300 gallons from the Viking," announces the Controller.

"Oh, good. That should get him here," says Brown.

Duke's Hornet passes over the coastline and closes on the carrier.

CDR Brown enters the tower to touch base with the Air Boss, who announces, "In case 207 fouls the deck, we're bringing LT Wigglesworth aboard first."

Through the Hornet's windscreen, Duke spots the super carrier about 30 miles in the distance, "There's the boat, Blue. About 26 nautical miles, straight ahead. Think you can hold this crate together until we're on the deck?"

"Can do, Skipper. Can do," responds Blueberry. The two Super Hornets are in an echelon with Duke in the lead.

"Leaving you now, Duke. They want me to come aboard first," says Willy.

"Roger. Tell Frank that-- No, I'd better tell him myself."

"Understood."

Then the burners light up and the Alert-5 aircraft moves ahead, leaving 207 in its wake.

Duke's radio crackles, "Mustang Flight 207. Marshall. You are now within ten miles of the carrier. Contact Primary." .

"Roger, Marshall. Contacting Pri-Fly."

The Alert-5 aircraft touches down, catches the number two wire, and is pulled to a stop -- well short of the bow. Personnel are gathering high up on Vultures Row to watch the emergency landing on the deck, below. Officers are gathered to watch the television which shows the flight deck in the main wardroom.

Duke is now lining up with the meatball, under the control of Primary Flight Con-trol and the Landing Signal Officer, "Tower.....Mustang Flight 207…Rino…Ball…Fuel state 4.9.:

"Roger. Looking good.....Hold what you have," reports the LSO.

On the portside of the flight deck, is the LSO platform, where the LSO and his assistant are there as a backup to the Fresnel Optical landing System, commonly referred to as the "lens," or "meatball."

In the Captain's Cabin Sergei is commiserating with Frank Stevens as they are watching the two flat screen HD TV sets showing the flight deck and approach. Frank says, "the outpouring of sympathy over the loss of my daughter has been overwhelming."

"Pilot coming in now will be able to tell you what happened," says Sergei, indica-ting the screen.

"Why all the concern over this particular landing?" inquires Frank.

"His nose gear is down but not locked," says Sergei.

"How dangerous is that?" asks Frank.

"It's bad only if he misses the wires and becomes a bolter. In which case he may be unable to get a clean lift off and go around for another attempt," says Sergei.

"In which case he ends up in the drink."

"And chances of survival decrease dramatically."

Duke's Super Hornet is finally touching down. The tail hook catches the number two wire. The arresting cable unspools under previously set tensions, as it is being stretched to the limit, the nose gear remaining down and locked despite the indicator. The Hornet is brought to a stop, well short of the angled deck's bow. The tail hook is raised and the aircraft makes a sharp, right turn and heads back to a temporary parking area behind the number two catapult shield.

Sitting aboard the P-25 fire fighting vehicle, ABBCS John Patrick Giannini removes his head gear and salutes Duke with a thumbs-up as the Super Hornet makes its final left turn to its temporary parking place.

Osgard and Blueberry are climbing out of their flight gear and changing into their tan CNT uniforms. Duke is conflicted, "I don't know how to explain to Melbi’s father what happened without making Mary look bad."

"You mean was it a mutual decision to do what they did, or did Mary act on her own, without regard for her WSO?" asks Blueberry sympathetically. "Knowing Mary as I do, in my opinion, they both felt they had a good chance of pulling it off.

They were tripped up by a SA-22 which refused to play by the rules."

As Blueberry and Osgard enter the Officer's Ward Room, everyone present jumps to their feet and applauds. The abundant, good-natured backslapping and handshaking takes Duke by surprise. He's in a sort of daze, while Blueberry seems to handle the adoration much better. One of those handshakes is from the Flight Surgeon, Dr. Wilde. As Osgard attempts to release his grip, LCDR Wilde continues grasping Duke's hand, "My office, first thing in the morning! Understood??"

"Affirmative. First thing in the morning.

Inside Duke's stateroom, Duke and Frank are sitting at one of the stateroom's desks.

"Fathers are not supposed to outlive their children," laments Frank tearfully.

"I'm truly sorry. It should have been me."

"There's a Yiddish expression: everything's *bashert*. It means, well, it means a lot of things, but mainly, ‘It was meant to be.’ In other words, the world doesn't all rest on your shoulders," consoles Frank.

"I get it. But I will always think, "Did I do enough?' But then, that's

**Chapter Twelve**

In the medical ward, Duke is getting an electrocardiogram. Dr. Wilde is studying the printout, a frown on his face. He tears off the strip of paper with the printed results. Then he listens with the stethoscope to several areas on Duke's back and chest. Finally, LCDR Wilde shakes his head, "Heart conditions must run in the family."

"What is it, Doc?," asks Duke, alarmed.

"Atrial fibrillation."

"What? What kind of fibrillation?"

"Atrial. A-Fib. It's an irregular heartbeat that can increase your risk of stroke, heart failure and other heart-related complications."

“Treatment?”

“We thin your blood to prevent clots in the upper heart chamber that can lead to stroke. I'm putting you on Warfarin. You'll be fine."

"Now, tell me this will not affect my flight status!"

"Sorry."

Inside Duke's stateroom, he is finishing packing his duffel bag. Blueberry turns to him, "Listen, before you go, uh, I've got something for you but you've got to come with me to the hangar deck."

Blue leads Duke onward until they reach the escalator that takes them down to the hanger deck. Duke enters the hangar deck and looks up in surprise as he hears applause and cheers and sees the festive banners of good luck and best wishes, all in his honor. Most of the off-duty offices and some crew members are in attendance to bid their goodbyes. No alcohol of course, but there are some creative juices derived from beets, raspberries, cranberries, and pineapple juices that help wash down the many cakes, pies and jumbo shrimp cooked up by the chiefs of the two wardrooms and the Chiefs Mess.

Among those next in line to shake Osgard's hand and wish him well are: Captain Andrew Sergei Bonime and Senior Chief Giannini. Instead of just shaking hands, “Sergei” steps up and gives Osgard a hug and talks to him not like a superior officer, but more like an uncle, "Duke, I know it may feel like your life is over, but you're still a young fellow and capable of anything you set your mind to. So set your goals high."

"I will, Captain. Thanks."

Gathered in the chamber that contains the main hatch leading to the flight deck are Frank Stevens, Joe Blueberry and Willy Wigglesworth, bidding their personal respects. A Petty Officer hands Osgard his cranial helmet, necessary headwear when on the flight deck or flying in the COD.

"Hope they give me another pilot with your talent. Don't expect they'll find one," says Blueberry.

"We were a great team, Blue. Loved every minute of it.”

"Remember, Duke, everything's *bashert*, " says Frank.

Willy “Sticks” Wigglesworth is the last person to wish Duke well, before boarding the COD, "Call me if you ever need anything," says Willy, shaking hands with Duke, street style.

"You're the only number on my speed dial."

With cranial helmet firmly on his head, Duke heads towards the open rear ramp of the Carry on Delivery aircraft. From Primary Flight Control, the COD turbo prop aircraft, below is being hooked up to the #4 catapult. The Carry Onboard aircraft is catapulted off the deck of the carrier and disappears into the scud layer.

**Chapter Thirteen**

**“Jonathan, that’s the damnedest story I’ve ever heard,” comments Raoul Donavan, working on the finger food and champagne being served by Jason in the aft lounge of my yacht. “I happen to know Duke’s no longer in prison. How did that come about?”**

**“I have to thank JAG officer, CDR Janet Fisher, for that,” I said. “She went to court, got Captain McGraw of the Clark County Sheriff’s office to testify on his behalf and got him an early release.**

**In the Lovelock Correctional Center, several convicts in orange jumpsuits approach and enter the weight room. Duke Osgard, one of the convicts, settles on a bench and, under the watchful eye of his Apache spotter, known only as “Chief,” begins a series of bench presses. Finally, after four reps, Duke stops and breathes.**

**"C'mon, two more. You can do it. It's only at two-twenty," says Chief.**

**At this point, a Corrections Officer sticks his head in the door, "Osgard! You in here?"**

**"Yeah!"**

**"They want you up front! …Assistant warden's office!"**

**In the prison’s visitor parking lot, CDR Janet Fisher is seated inside a dark colored SUV. She is attired in her naval uniform but now sporting three full golden stripes on her shoulder boards. The commander is anxiously watching the prison’s front entrance as a desert wind blows dust across the lot.**

**Suddenly the gate opens and Duke Osgard walks out. Janet emerges from her SUV. Duke spots her and they rush toward each other, passionately embracing.**

**THE CASPIAN SEA CROSS-UP**

**PART THREE**

**Chapter One**

**Hi, it’s Jonathan again**. I’m aboard my yacht in the San Francisco Marina with CIA Special Agent Raoul Donavan enjoying our usual finger food and champagne being served by my British cook and butler and reminiscing about the Merry Band’s background and how they got started doing what they do.

It was Donavan who brought up The Caspian Sea Cross-up, one of our first and more successful capers. “Afterall, it’s the operation where we first met,” Raoul added, “I want to hear every detail.”

Well, the story begins in Iran. Nigel Fleming, looking to be about 35 years old and physically fit, is exiting Tehran's midtown Espinas Resort Hotel when two uniformed police officers step alongside and grab his arms, escorting him away.

“We were called in by Gerard Baker of the Wall Street Journal. Seems Fleming was a reporter for the Journal.

In New York, Harry Fletcher and I entered the Wall Street Journal building, took the elevator and approached the office of Mr. Baker. To the receptopnist, I said, "I'm Jonathan Moore." Indicating Harry, "My partner is Harry Fletcher. We have an appoint-ment with Gerard Baker."

"Yes, Mr. Moore. Mr. Baker is expecting you. I'll let him know you're here," stated the receptionist.

The door opens to the large, posh office and the distinguished, baldheaded man seated behind the desk, Gerard Baker, jumps to his feet and warmly greets the two men being escorted by the receptionist, who immediately excuses herself and leaves.

Gerard, oozing charisma as he shakes my hand and announces, "Jonathan, although we've spoken on the phone, it's good to finally meet you." Turning to Harry, "And you must be Harry Fletcher. I've heard a lot about you." Smiling and shaking hands, "From what I've heard, you're a very resourceful young man."

Gerard then indicates the two stuffed chairs in front of his desk, suggesting "Please have a seat, gentlemen," while he returns to the high-back executive chair behind the desk.

Once seated, O said to Baker, "On the phone you mentioned something about one of your journalists being arrested in Tehran and currently being held in the notorious Evin Prison."

"According to my partner, you suggested that we might be of assistance in get-ting him out," adds Fletcher.

"According to what I've learned about you two, if anyone can, it's you," pro-nounces Baker.

"Let's just say, I know all about your afterhours exploits as Robin Templar. Look, I'm a fan and as such would never coerce you or your team into helping us. All I'm going to do is give you an incentive and leave the final decision to you," offers Baker.

"An incentive?" I asked.

Gerard has the full attention of both Harry and me. "Our journalist is being held for $5.5 million in ransom; although the Iranians don't call it ransom. We're ready to pay, but it seems there's a law against it. If we pay, we would be subject to arrest and likely fined a lot more than a mere $5.5 million."

Harry and I exchange looks then turn back to Gerard, with Fletcher saying, "Please continue, Mr. Baker."

"The money's yours. All you have to do is get Nigel Fleming out of Evin Prison and return him safely and unharmed to his Notting Hill home in London."

"This money you say is ours. Are we talking the whole $5.5 million?” questioned Harry.

Gerard Baker smiled broadly and slowly nodded in the affirmative.

Since the Hilton Times Square Hotel is located on the upper half of a Manhattan skyscraper, the lobby is situated on the 21st floor. Harry and I finally approached the front desk. At the desk, we were checking with the Hilton clerk, an attractive woman who is probably just out of college.

"Mr. Gerard Baker, at the Wall Street Journal, told us he had reserved two suites for us, paid for, of course, by the Journal," declares Harry.

"And your names?" asks the clerk.

"Jonathan Moore and Harry Fletcher," said Harry.

The clerk goes to work on her computer then, finally, announces, "Yes, two adjoining suites, paid for by News Corp," as she proceeds to produce two keycards. "Note here says anything you need from the gift shops or restaurants, just charge to your rooms."

"That include the bar?" inquires Harry.

"Of course, Mr. Fletcher," replies the clerk smiling.

Schlepping my own luggage, I entered the living room area of my suite and then moved to the bedroom, where I placed my suitcase on the king-size bed. Using the remote, I then turned on the bedroom's 40-inch flat screen HD TV and tuned to the Fox News Channel. Suddenly, there's a knock at the door. I quickly moved to the living room where I opened the door and welcomed Fletcher into the suite, asking "Your suite as nice as this?"

"Exact duplicate," reports Harry as he checks his watch. "That CIA agent Baker mentioned, should be here in 45 minutes. Just time enough to check out the bar."

Only two couples were in the bar when Fletcher and I entered and seated our-selves on adjacent bar stools. Fletcher addresses the Hilton barkeep.

"Jack Daniels Manhattan - up," orders Fletcher.

"Snifter of Hennessy Cognac," I stated. .

As the barkeep nods and moves to put together the orders, I turned to Fletcher, "Unless this CIA agent is extremely helpful, I'm afraid this is a mission impossible; even for us."

"If we're caught, our future will be most unpleasant," Fletcher suggested, nod-ding.

At this point, the barkeep places the adult beverages in front of us and we take a sip and nod approval.

Entering my suite and closing the door behind us, Harry and I contined our dis-cussion with Harry commenting, "Look, with a name like Raoul Donavan, this guy's got to be good. "Donavan?" .... He's probably related to "Wild Bill" Donavan, the founder of the agency and of OSS fame."

"Gerard Baker certainly spoke highly of him."

"There, you see? Nothing to worry about, right?"

Suddenly, there is a knock at the door. Harry and I exchanged looks. Then I moved towards the door. Opening it, a disheveled, overweight man in his mid-to-late 40s, with a moustache, full head of equally disheveled hair and wearing a corduroy jacket and pair of dark slacks, both in need of pressing, is standing there. Slung over his shoulder, in its carrying case, is his laptop computer. The man looks at me and says, “Mr. Moore, I presume. I'm Agent Donavan. I believe you and your partner Harry Fletcher, were expecting me."

Admitting to being somewhat disappointed by what I saw, I motioned for Agent Donavan to enter.

After a short conversation, with introductions exchanged, lights in the suite are dimmed and Raoul Donavan is using his laptop for a PowerPoint presentation. Seated around the suite's small desk, Harry and I were fascinated by the images Raoul is projecting onto the nearby white wall.

Photos of Evin Prison in Tehran are being projected, as Donavan explains what we are seeing, "This is Evin Prison, located in northwestern Tehran at the foot of the Alborz Mountains. Since it's a prison offense to take photos of the prison, we're lucky to have these, such as they are. Approximately 15,000 inmates currently reside at Evin, where they are divided into three separate sections: One section for common criminals, one for political prisoners and one for prisoners being held for ransom or other means of profit."

"It's like three prisons within one, each with its own deputy chief commandant. The most brutal conditions are in the section holding the political prisoners. Here beatings and torture are routine and women prisoners are systematically raped by the guards. Fortunately, our journalist friend is in the section reserved for those being held for ransom."

"Why do you say fortunately?" inquires Harry.

"Those prisoners being held for ransom, or other means of profit, receive the best treatment, such as it is. For instance, they have access to an infirmary whereas the general population does not; and their food is reasonably edible. But as far as we're concerned, the biggest benefit is that they are allowed access to an outside courtyard where they can exercise or just sit around in the sun. And they are not beaten or tortured, for fear of bad publicity once the ransom has been paid and the hostages released."

The PowerPoint photo is holding on the prison's exercise yard, awaiting Raoul Donavan's pressing the switch to continue. Harry and I exchange looks, and then focus our attention on Donavan, who just might not be the disheveled government lackey he pretends to be. Donavan asks, "Mr. Templar, I mean Mr. Fletcher. As a licensed helicopter pilot, does this photograph give you any ideas?" All while the PowerPoint photo is holding on the shot of the prison courtyard.

The restaurant and bar are also on the 21st floor where the lobby is located. Seated in a prized booth, Harry and I are both enjoying a grilled (prime) New York Strip steak with spinach and steak fries. Naturally, we’re washing this down with a premium California Cabernet Sauvignon.

"Frankly, this guy, Donavan, frightens the hell out of me," asserts Harry.

"That's because you've probably never run up against his sort before."

"And you have?"

"Many times. They were always second guessing my interrogation methods during the Gulf War."

"Well, I don't like it. He seems to have a pretty good handle on my past."

“You needn't waste time trying to figure out what Donavan knows and does not know. We can assume he knows everything," I responded. .

"What do you think of his statement that he would be seeing us at the Universal Imports office in three or four days?"

“Look, my friend, this is no time to go paranoid. Donavan has to get us our visas and educate us on the ins-and-outs of traveling in Iran."

Fletcher begins to relax and takes another sip of his wine, "I'm not going paranoid. It's just that I wish I knew how he knows so much?”

Universal Imports occupies the entire 19th floor of a San Francisco Financial District office building. The elevator door opens and the frumpy Raoul Donavan steps into the lobby. He is carrying his own luggage and has his laptop slung over his left shoulder. Donavan approaches the attractive receptionist, Marianne Valton.

"I'm Raoul Donavan, here to see Jonathan Moore and Harry Fletcher."

"Of course, they are expecting you," announces Miss Valton, who gets up from behind her desk and indicates for Raoul to follow. They enter the large double doors and walk past several offices, until they come to a door marked: Harry Fletcher, CEO.

Marianne gently knocks and then enters, escorting Donavan into Harry's posh office with its window view of the Bay Bridge.

Fletcher rises from his desk and greets Raoul warmly as Miss Valton gracefully excuses herself. "Mr. Donavan. Good to see you again," Harry utters.

Placing his luggage on the floor but keeping the laptop and its case slung over his shoulder, Donavan replies, "Same here, Mr. Fletcher," shaking hands.

Marianne has continued down the hallway to a door marked: Jonathan Moore, CFO. Knocking gently, she opens the door, pokes her head in, and informs me, "Mr. Donavan is in Harry's office."

"Thank you," says Moore, as Marianne closes the door.

Fletcher is sitting in his high-backed executive chair while Donavan is seated in the stuffed chair in front of the desk, the laptop now resting in his lap. Indicating the laptop, Harry comments, "I suppose you have another PowerPoint presentation for us? The conference room is ideal for just such use."

"Then the conference room it is," remarks Donavan.

At this point, there is a knock at the door and I stepped into the office and greeted Donavan, smiling, "Mr. Donavan, good to see you again. Have a good flight?"

"Only so-so. I seem to be putting on weight just as the airlines are reducing leg space and I swear they're making the seats smaller."

"You flew coach?" I asked.

"What else? I'm a government worker."

The three of us have moved to the conference room of Universal Imports. The laptop is setup for the PowerPoint presentation but is not turned on. Instead, Fletcher and I are seated across the table from each other, getting an overview from Donavan on the life of an American, traveling in Iran.

"You need a reservation and photo ID to board a train. Canadians, Brits and Americans have to show their passport. So, if the hotel is holding yours, be sure to make a color copy of the personal data page," explains Donavan.

"Is a photocopy acceptable?" queries Fletcher.

"It is. Now. I need to know if you two are it. Or, are there any other team members who will be entering Iran with you."

Again, Harry and I find ourselves exchanging looks, as I suggested, "Well, there is one team member who could be useful."

"And who might that be?"

"Louis Osgard."

"Ah, yes. Duke Osgard. Former naval aviator, trained to fly anything but a helicopter. Did some prison time in Nevada. Excellent choice. He could go to Iran as your bodyguard. It's perfect."

"What's perfect?" I asked.

Indicating his surroundings, Donavan remarks, "Look, you have a legitimate import-export company. What you need is an appointment with Iran's Minister of Industries and Business, Mohammed Reza Nematzadeh."

Nodding approvingly, I added, "An appointment could be arranged through our Office of Foreign Assets Control."

Fletcher is also nodding, "The OFAC, it's perfect! We have all the required permits."

"Then it's settled. You'll enter Iran for the purpose of establishing trade. Now that's settled, let's plan your escape routes," reports Donavan, as he dims the lights and fires up the PowerPoint presentation, the images being projected onto the white wall. The first image is a map of Iran that shows the major cities, together with the railroad lines. Using his light pointer, Donavan first highlights the city of Tehran, "You can board a train in Tehran and with a change in Esfahan go all the way to the Persian Gulf."

The highlighter follows the railroad's path due south to the city of Esfahan and from there further south to the city of Shiraz. From Shiraz one spur goes west and then south to the Gulf city of Bushehr. The other spur goes southeast to the Gulf city of Bandar-e Abbas, on the Strait of Hormuz. "Since the area around Bandar-e Abbas is heavily militarized, I suggest taking the train to Bushehr, where the flight distance to the naval base at Bahrain is much shorter than that from Bandar-e Abbas."

"If we're being chased, wouldn't they be waiting for us at both Bandar-e Abbas and Bushehr?" I asked. "Instead of riding into a trap, we could get off the train at Borazjin, which looks to be some 20 miles from Bushehr. There, we could steal a plane and with enough gas still reach Bahrain."

"Excellent idea. We'll call this Plan "A." responds Donavan.

"You mean there's a Plan "B?" asks Fletcher.

"By way of the Caspian Sea, into Azerbaijan, and then on to Russia," I surmised.

"Very good, Mr. Moore," comments Donavan, impressed. "Now, there's one other little wrinkle we need to think about."

"And what might that be?" asks Fletcher.

"Although restrictions are easing somewhat, Canadians, Brits and Americans are required to have a government escort, at all times."

"Well, that tears it!!" retorts Fletcher angrily.

"I agree. How in hell do you pull off what we're trying to do with a government escort?" I commented.

"I cannot tell you now, but I think there might be a way."

At this point, Fletcher, Donavan and I reenter Fletcher's office and take our usual seats.

"I'll need a hotel for the night. Any suggestions?" asks Donavan.

"Nonsense. You'll stay with me, on the boat," I insisted.

"That twin mast, 90-foot yacht you keep in the Marina??"

"It's the only boat I own."

"It would be a great pleasure to spend the night aboard. Yes, indeed," answers Donavan, beaming.

At sundown, aboard the yacht, Jason Burrell is serving a gourmet dinner to Raoul and me.

"I assume Harry Fletcher is on his way home to Carmel Highlands," remarked Donavan.

"Should be picking up his helicopter at the Monterey Airport, just about now," replies Moore, checking his watch.

**Chapter Two**

At Monterey Regional Airport’s visitor airctaft tie-down area, an electric golf type cart is transporting Harry Fletcher to his helicopter, "Have a good flight, Mr. Fletcher?"

"So-so, Max. Airline travel just isn't what it once was."

"Ain't that the truth."

As the cart approaches Fletcher's helicopter, the driver asks, "How long does it take you to get home?"

"Ground-to-ground, it's usually a 15 or 20 minute flight."

The cart stops on the right side of the chopper. While the driver places Harry's two bags in the rear compartment, Fletcher climbs into the pilot's seat and lowers the headphones over his ears. After flipping a few switches, the blades begin winding up-to-speed.

Aboard Sweet Charity, the sun has dropped below the horizon as Raoul Dona-van and I continue our conversation while enjoying our gourmet meal accompanied with fine wines, poured by the ever efficient Jason Burrell.

"Not knowing how long we will be gone, or if we're ever coming back, Harry and his wife will have many issues to deal with," I surmised to Raoul.

"And you have no such issues?" inquires Donavan.

"I have no immediate family," I answered, slowly shaking my head.

"Fletcher's family issues aside, I'd like to see you, Harry and Osgard on a commercial flight to Tehran no more than twelve days from now."

"Any significance to that specific date?"

"None whatsoever. Just factoring in the days necessary to get the visas and make all the arrangements. Speaking of visas, while I have yours and Fletcher's, I'll need Osgard's passport in order to get his Iranian visa. We're using the Swiss Embassy to facilitate issuance."

Donavan, studying my expression, added, "Or, might I assume that Duke Osgard is yet to be informed that he's making the trip?" Reading my expression correctly, he asks, "When do you intend informing him?"

"Fletcher is going to call him this evening," I responded.

"Good. If Duke indicates a go, I'll book tomorrow's flight to New York through Jacksonville, and personally pick up his passport. The three of us will meet at the Hilton Times Square Hotel, 5 pm. Eleven days from today. You'll fly out to Iran the following morning."

At Fletcher’s Carmel Highlands Estate, Nicole Fletcher, Harry's beautiful and sexy school teacher wife, probably in her early 30s, is cooking dinner as her husband is preparing to make a phone call from the kitchen's landline.

"What're you cooking?" Harry asks.

"Dover Sole, Aux Delices style. You can choose the wine."

"How does a Montrachet sound?"

"Perfect. You know how long you'll be gone?"

Fletcher dials a number on the kitchen phone, commenting, "If everything works out, only three or four weeks."

"And, if it doesn't?"

At Duke’s Jacksonville Bar and Grill, both the dining area and lounge are packed. As usual, the owner Duke Osgard is acting as host, greeting everyone accordingly. Suddenly, his iPhone starts ringing. Duke pulls the Smartphone from his jacket and notes the caller ID which reads Robin Templar. Osgard answers, "How can I help you?"

"Go to a random pay phone and call me at this number, within the hour," states Fletcher.

"That's a tall order. There's not as many pay phones today, as there used to be; might take the full hour just to find one."

"Bus terminals still have pay phones. Be a good idea to include Janet in the conversation," reports Fletcher, then hanging up the phone he turns to Nicole, "I'll get the wine from the cellar."

Nicole and Harry are enjoying the Dover Sole. The wine Harry is pouring iinto the crystal wine glasses is a Domaine Leflaive Montrachet Grand Cru.

"Now, I'm starting to worry," declares Nicole.

"About what, my dear?"

"You're pouring a $5,000 bottle of wine. I can't help thinking you wouldn't be doing so if you were confident you would be returning from this mission you refuse to tell me anything about," exclaims Nicole upset.

Suddenly, the landline rings. Getting to his feet, Harry goes to the phone and answers, "Hello."

Inside the bus station, Duke Osgard and his wife, the attractive Janet Fisher, are at the bank of public phones. Osgard, speaking into the phone, asks, "Why the cloak-and-dagger? What's going on?"

"Don't want to involve you, should you turn me down," asserts Fletcher.

"Go ahead and lay it on me," states Osgard.

"Before I do so, I need to know how you and the Navy JAG wife of yours are getting along."

"She resigned her commission as a naval commander and is now practicing law here in Jacksonville."

"That's great. Since I know you would never undertake a mission such as I'm about to propose without your wife's approval."

At the Hilton Times Square Hotel, Harry, Duke and I are listening as Raoul Donavan educates the three of us on what we can expect once inside Iran. Donavan hands each of us our respective passports, commenting only that, "Your visas are for 30 days. Don't get caught overstaying." To me, "As I explained to you, although it's" slowly changing at some of the finer hotels, generally your credit cards are not good in Iran. So it's essential you carry plenty of cash."

Harry and I pull up our shirts and proudly slap our sophisticated money belts, with Fletcher pronouncing, "We're covered, except for Duke."

"Makes sense. As your bodyguard, you two would be expected to cover his expenses. Now, once again I'd like to go over your language skills. See where we might be vulnerable," suggests Donavan as he turns and confronts each team member individually.

To Osgard, "What about you?"

"Fluent Spanish and Russian."

"Can you write Russian?"

"Affirmative," answers Duke.

Next Donavan turns and confronts Fletcher, who answers, "Besides English, I read and write German, two French dialects, Hebrew and Afrikaans."

"Where you're going, I suggest you forget you ever knew Hebrew," comments Donavan.

Finally, Raoul confronted me. I said, "I speak French and Arabic, don't write either. But my big asset is that I read and speak *Dari*, a language closely related to Farsi."

Impressed, Donavan asks, "That mean you understand anything being spoken in Farsi?"

"Almost everything."

Indicating that the language skills interrogation is over, Raoul passes out our plane tickets, telling us, "You change planes in Paris and again in Zurich. They're roundtrip tickets although the return portion is not expected to be used."

"Earlier, you mentioned something about our having a government guide whenever we leave the hotel?" I inquired.

"That's right, and whose basic, daily salary you may be required to reimburse the government."

"That certainly changes the situation," announces Duke.

"Not necessarily. We have a man working for the Ministry of Industries and Business who sometimes performs such services. For security reasons, I don't think it prudent to give you his name, but he wants to come in out of the cold and, if possible, we would like you to bring him home along with the journalist, Nigel Fleming."

"But how will we know him?" asks Fletcher.

"He will utter a phrase, a code word you will memorize. In English, he will say: 'I personally believe that capitalism produces more wealth than any other economic system. A wealth that even the poor benefit from.'"

"What are the chances this CIA mole will be the one assigned to guide us?" asks Osgard.

"Fifty-fifty," answers Donavan.

At Tehran’s Imam Khomeini Airport the Swissair 747 touches down on the runway and rolls out. Three anxious passengers, Fletcher, Osgard and I enter the ter-minal where we were guided to one of two immigration lines where we correctly stand in the slower moving pasport line marked for foreigners.

Finally it's our turn. I collected the passports from Duke and Harry and handed them over to the uniformed immigration officer, explaining in English, "The three of us are traveling together. Mr. Fletcher and I are here for a meeting with the Minister of Industries and Business." Indicating Duke, "Mr. Osgard is our bodyguard."

With a uniformed guard standing by, the immigration officer checks each passport for a valid visa and then slides one after the other through his scanner. It takes a moment for the data to pop up on the computer screen. Studying the data on the screen, the officer stamps the passports and, retains all three. He then gets off his stool and motions for us to follow. We are the only ones in line signaled out. We then are led to an office, where the immigration officer orders, "You'll wait here."

With that it's assumed the officer then returns to the stool behind his bulletproof enclosure, retaining our passports.

"Did you notice we were the only ones singled out?" mentions Fletcher.

"I wouldn't worry about it, you'll note we're not under guard," I suggested.

"Without our passports, it wouldn't make much sense to try for a break," adds Osgard.

At this point a plain clothes immigration agent enters the office and sits behind the desk. In his hand are our passports, "Welcome to Tehran. You've been assigned a guide during your stay and he will meet you at the luggage carousel. All I need from you is where you'll be staying. Then we will get your fingerprints and you'll be on your way."

"We're staying at the Espinas," I stated.

"Good hotel," replieed the immigration agent, as he returns our stamped pass-ports. "Now, shall we get the fingerprinting process out of the way?"

As the three of us descend the escalator to the baggage area, unescorted, Fletcher comments on their good fortune, "That went much smoother than I expected."

Agreeing, Osgard comments, "We weren't even searched."

"It's not over yet. We're still not out of here,” insists Fletcher.

At the bottom of the escalator, a Tehran airport employee is standing guard with a basket of red roses, which she hands out to everyone. To us she says in Farsi, French, English, and Russian, "Welcome to Iran."

We collect our bags from the carousel and look around for our guide. Suddenly appearing in front of the team is an Iranian who appears to be in his early 50s, announcing, "I am Sirjan Sanjabi, your guide."

Without wasting time for further introductions, Sirjan motions for us to follow him, briefly commenting, "We'll exit through the Green 'nothing to declare' Line."

Exiting the IKIA terminal, schlepping our own luggage, we walk to the street, whereby Sirjan hails a cab.

The cab driver pulls to the curb and Sirjan helps the driver place the luggage into the trunk, telling the driver in English, "Hotel Espinas."

"Very good, sir," answers the cab driver in English.

"And let's take the direct, not the scenic route," Sirjan orders the driver.

"As you wish," says the driver dejectedly.

Sirjan settles into the front passenger seat, while the rest of us climb into the back. The cab pulls away from the curb and begins the rather long journey due north to the hotel.

Fiinally, the taxi pulls up and stops in front of the Espinas Hotel, in Central Tehran, near Valiasr Square. The cab driver gets out and opens the trunk as the hotel's bellboy rushes out to take care of the luggage. I paid off the driver and we followed the bellboy into the 5-star hotel.

Inside the lobby, the ever efficient Sirjan Sanjabi leads us to the check-in desk and addresses the male Espinas clerk, who also speaks English. "This is the Moore - Fletcher - Osgard party. They have reservations. I'm their government guide." With that Sirjan flashes his identification, and the clerk hastens the check-in procedure, asking only for our passports. To the team, Sirjan tells them, "You'll have to surrender your passports, but you'll need to keep a color photocopy of the identification data page with you at all times."

"I'll be happy to make you copies," offers the Espinas clerk.

"Thank you, but we have copies," I replied.

"I see you came prepared. Hotel Espinas is one of the few places in all of Iran that accepts foreign credit cards, if you wish to use one," suggests Sirjan.

"No, we'll pay cash," I responded.

"That's 540,000 rials per night," states the clerk.

"how much is that in Euros?" asks Fletcher.

The clerk taps some keys on his computer keyboard and comes up with the answer, "One hundred sixty Euros per night, per room."

I counted out three thousand Euros and handed it to the clerk. "Credit this to our account. Restaurant charges will be billed to our rooms."

"Very good, sir," replies the clerk who then hands over the three keycards.

Sirjan and I were alone in my hotel room. Although not a suite, the room is large and looks clean and comfortable.

"I don't suppose the room comes with a minibar," I commented. Laughing out loud, Sirjan comments, "That's a good one, Mr. Moore. You know it could be serious trouble, even for westerners, if caught in Iran with alcohol. I know to some it just doesn't make sense."

"I'll tell you what doesn't make sense. That's the dress code for women. This hijab or whatever they make the women wear is what doesn't make sense. Iranian women are so beautiful. Seems a shame to purposely hide that beauty behind all that clothing, head covering, and veils."

Suddenly, there's a knock at the door. Sirjan opens the door and Fletcher and Osgard enter.

"Hi, fellas. How're your rooms, considering they're not suites?" I asked. "Rather nice, actually," responds, Fletcher.

Osgard nods agreement.

"Good. Now Sirjan has some final instructions for us before he returns to his day job," I stated. .

"Long as you stay in the hotel, you won't need an escort. I prefer calling myself a guild. But once you leave you must have an approved government escort. If you wish to leave for whatever reason, you call me and I'll be right over, day or night."

Handing each team member his card, Sirjan explains, "My cell number is on this card. Cellular phone service in most of Iran is excellent. If you don't have a cell phone, you can pick up a low-end, prepaid cell for approximately 50 Euros here in the hotel’s gift shop, which cellular comes with two hours of talk time and is good for 90 days. Once you purchase a cell, I'll, of course, need the phone number. I'll leave you for now." With that, Sirjan waves goodbye and exits the room.

After Sirjan's departure, we all just exchanged looks. Finally Osgard pipes up, "I wonder if he's the guide Donavan was telling us about."

"He give the coded phrase?" Fletcher asks.

"Could just be sizing us up before exposing himself," I commented.

"Or, it could be we've been set up from the beginning," asserts Fletcher.

Then something occurred to me. "If you'll excuse me, there's something I want to check out with the desk clerk. I'll be back shortly." With that I exited the room as Osgard and Fletcher exchanged their usual looks.

In the lobby, I approached the check-in desk and the Espinas clerk who previously checked us in, the one to whom Sirjan previously flashed his identification. Recognizing me, the clerk says, "Mr. Moore, I believe. How can I help you?"

"We're trying to get hold of our guide, but without success. I happened to notice that he showed you his identification and was wondering if you could tell me what agency he is with."

"But, of course, Mr. Sanjabi is with the Security Police, PAVA."

We were having an early dinner in the Persian Restaurant, one of two restau-rants in the hotel. The main subject of conversation, of course, was our guide, Sirjan Sanjabi.

"The clerk actually said Sirjan was a Security Police officer and as such part of the Council for Intelligence Coordination, a powerful agency you don't want to mess with," asserts Fletcher.

"Yes, in so many words," I replied. .

"That doesn't sound good. What're we gonna do?" asks Osgard.

"I think we should phone him. Let him know we need to set up a meeting with the Ministry of Industries and Business and ask his help in making the appointment," declares Fletcher.

After dinner, in my hotel room, I was on the room’s landline phone as Fletcher and Osgard sit nearby, listening to the one side of the conversation. "We thought that since, as our guide, you will have to be present that you make the appointment with Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh at the Ministry.”

On the other end of the phone conversation, speaking from his upscale bachelor apartment, is Sirjan, speaking on his cell phone, "I suppose I could do that. Do you have any preference as to time?"

"Sooner the better. We're all anxious to return to our homes," I affirmed.

"Return to America. I see."

"Pleasant as our journey has been, Harry and I have a business to run. We need to return to San Francisco soon as possible," I said.

"I'll phone for an appointment first thing in the morning," states Sirjan.

"We'll wait to hear from you."

As I hung up, Fletcher offeres a comment. "Question is why Sirjan was assigned to us."

"Was he assigned, or did he maneuver for the assignment?" asks Fletcher.

"If he maneuvered for it, then he's our man. The one we're supposed to take with us when we break that journalist out of prison," adds Osgard.

"Maneuvered or assigned. How're we going to tell which?" asks Fletcher.

"Next time we see him, I'll ask," was my simple retort.

**Chapter Three**

Inside Tehran’s nortorious Evin Prison, the commandant of the special prisoners sec-tion, Major Montazeri, is seated behind his desk addressing a seated prisoner facing him. Montazeri, approximately 45 years of age, displays a cool, methodical temper-ament, speaking to the prisoner, "Look, Nigel, here's the situation. The Dow Corpo-ration has yet to pay your fine, modest as it is. What I need to know from you is why. Can you think of a reason?"

The prisoner, Nigel Fleming, mid 30s, appears to be in reasonably good health, despite his incarceration, answering, "No, Major. I cannot."

"Being in the special prisoners unit, so far you've had it pretty good. But if the fine is not paid within a few days, all of that will change. You'll be transferred to the political prisoners section, where life is very, very different. One might even call it brutal. I hate it when on of my prisoners ends up there."

"Yes, I believe you do. You're not a bad soul. Since you've treated me fairly, I'm going to tell you why I think Dow is refusing to pay."

"And why is that?"

"It's illegal. Yes, family members might defy their governments and pay such fines, if they can afford it, and likely get away with it. But the fines to major corpora-tions, like Dow, could be half a billion or more. It cannot be rationalized."

"I see," responds Montazeri calmly.

"Your government would have been more successful if they had approached my family members, asking for $750,000 or some such more reasonable amount."

"Sad. Very sad. The charge against you is espionage. You could receive a life sentence. No one lasts long in the political prisoner section -- whippings, beatings almost daily. You sleep on the floor, rotten food, hot shower once a week. Torture a common event." Shaking his head, he continues, "Sad, very sad. Glad I'm not in charge of that section."

Duke and Fletcher were having the buffet breakfast in the Espinas Hotel's popular second restaurant, overlooking the main road. The two were just starting to chow down when I joined them.

Greeting them, I said, "Sirjan will be here in an hour."

"Can I asume that he successfully made an appointment for us with Minister Nematzadeh?" asks Fletcher.

"You can."

"I'm impressed. When's the appointment?" asks Osgard.

"Immediately following the Dhuhr, the midday prayer. He consented to come by early when I told him that we had a lot of questions about Tehran and Islam."

That night we were gathered in my room when there was a knock at the door. Osgard opens the door and Sirjan enters. Addressing me, he comments, "You said to come early, that you had some questions?"

"In preparation for our meeting with Minister Nematzadeh, we wanted to learn as much as we could about Iran's economy."

Everyone grabs a seat as Sirjan begins, "Iran today is transitioning to be a market economy. Currently its economy is a mixture of central planning, state owner-ship of oil and other large enterprises, including village agriculture."

"I notice there seems to be a lot of privately owned business," offers Fletcher.

"As I said, the country is slowly moving from government ownership to free enterprise and the private sector. That is except for oil and gas, which accounts for the majority of government revenue."

"What's your opinion of capitalism?" inquires Fletcher.

Before answering, Sirjan, hesitating, gives everyone a look, and then pro-nounces, "I personally believe that capitalism produces more wealth than any other economic system, a wealth that even the poor benefit from." Looking at us Sirjan is not surprised to see all three of us grinning. He returns the grin.

Sirjan Sanjabi is driving his government vehicle at a good clip, passing through one of Tehran's scenic districts. Inside the vehicle, I was seated in the passenger seat, alongside Sirjan, with Fletcher and Osgard in the rear.

"You gave us quite a scare. Didn't know who you were, and still don't know who you actually work for," I declareed.

"I work for the Security Police. But I'm given various assignments with many agencies. Currently, that assignment is with the Minister of Industries and Business, Mohammed Reza Nematzadeh, whom you shall meet following the midday prayer."

Sirjan has parked his vehicle in a lot outside the Ministry of Industries and Business building, allowing Fletcher and I to enter the building. Inside the vehicle, Osgard has moved from the back seat to the front, where he is now seated beside Sirjan.

"What I don't understand is, if you want to flee Iran, why don't you just hop a flight to London? Why get involved in our little caper?" inquires Duke.

"Because your caper, as you put it, is not so little. When you break that journalist out of prison, a manhunt will immediately be put into effect the likes of which Iran has seldom seen, and, of course, I'll be a prime suspect."

"How is that?" asks Duke taken aback.

"Prisoners at Evin are allowed carefully screened visitation privileges once a month. But being a Security Police officer, I'm allowed to see our man, Nigel Fleming, pretty much as I wish. It won't take long for Major Montazeri to figure out how Nigel just happened to be in the exercise yard at the precise time of the attempted escape."

"I'm not sure I like the term attempted. And who is this Major Montazeri?"

"He's the military policeman that will be tracking us down."

"Once again I have to wonder why you are involved?"

"My parents now live in Los Angeles. Seems like a good place to start over. But mainly because Dow Corporation is paying me one million Euros if the escape is successful."

"Now, I understand," adds Osgard, nodding.

At this point, Jonathan and Harry exit the Ministry building and then proceed to wait patiently on the sidewalk next to the street.

"There they are, on the sidewalk in front of the building," points out Osgard.

Sirjan fires up the engine and heads car to the pickup area.

Once again the four of us are gathered in my hotel room.

"So, the meeting went well and thus we have now established a legitimate reason for our stay in Iran," comments Duke.

"Long as you don't overstay your thirty day visa," reports Sirjan.

"I don't intend staying here much longer. Soon as Jonathan puts a plan in play we'll get on with the job we came here to do," retorts Harry testily.

"I do have a plan I'd like to go over with you, but first we have to find a reliable source for getting our hands on a helicopter, then getting the word to Nigel Fleming," I announced.

"If you're going to steal a chopper, the best place to do so would be Mehrabad Airport," offers Sirjan.

"Then I suggest we do a recce," says Harry.

"A recce?" asks Sirjan.

"He means a reconnaissance of the airport," I explained.

"When?" asks Sirjan.

"Now's as good a time as any," Harry states.

Sirjan is once again driving his government vehicle through one of Tehran's scenic districts, traveling at a good clip. Again, I was in the front passenger seat with Harry and Duke in the rear.

"Mehrabad was once the primary airport of Tehran on both international and domestic passenger traffic but has since been replaced by Imam Khomeini International for most of its international traffic. However, in terms of passenger traffic and aircraft movements, Mehrabad is still by far the busiest airport in Tehran. And it is where you'll find your chopper," explains Sirjan.

"There's still the little matter of having Nigel in the exercise yard at a precise time on a precise day," reminds Harry.

"Leave that to me," insists Sirjan.

Sirjan pulls up in front of the security gate post guarding entrance to the runways, tarmac, towers, hangers, aircraft, and a military post on the grounds of the airport. From the driver's side of the vehicle, Sirjan reaches out the window with his left hand and shows the security guard his identification. From his shack, the guard leans out his window and studies the identification carefully. Leaning back, he asks, “Your desti-nation, Mr. Sanjabi?"

"Military barracks,"

"Very good," says the security guard, as the steel retaining bar rises allowing Sirjan's vehicle to enter the airport's inner grounds. On the airport's inner grounds, Sirjan's vehicle is heading in the direction of the military barracks.

"I didn't know there was a military base on the airport grounds. That could greatly complicate things," suggests Fletcher.

"On the contrary, could be just the break we need," I stated.

"How so?" asks Fletcher.

"I'll let Sirjan explain."

A moment later Sirjan declares, "Look over there. Four government helicopters lined up in a row."

Once parked at Hotel Espinas, as we exit the government vehicle, Sirjan pops the trunk from which he retrieves a standard sized briefcase.

Inside my hotel room, we patiently watch, while Sirjan, using a sophisticated scanner, is sweeping the room for listening devices. Finally he nods the okay and repacks the scanner, explaining, "I didn't think there would be any devices planted without my knowing about it but then, from now on, we have to be extremely careful."

Everyone picks a favorite place to settle, either the couch or one of the stuffed chairs. Harry is the first to speak, "Jonathan, you mentioned that the military barracks could be a plus. Other than the fact that apparently at least four helicopters are assigned to the barracks, how's this a plus?"

Addressing Sirjan, I anounced, "We'll need two high-ranking officer's military uniforms. Air Force would be preferable; perhaps one a major and the other a colonel.

Nodding slowly, Sirjan says, "That can be arranged. Of course, I'll need the measurements."

Later, we were carrying on our conversations from a secluded booth in the hotel's Persian Restaurant.

"You speak English surprisingly well. How do you account for that?" I asked Sirjan.

"My elementary and middle school years, as you Americans would call them, were spent in England. Then later I attended the University of California at Los Angeles."

"UCLA. Yes, that would explain it," I affirmed.

"So, do you have a date in mind?" asks Sirjan.

"Longer we hang around here, the more attention we draw to ourselves. Provided we can get everything ready in time, I'd like to do it day after tomorrow," pronounced Fletcher in a lowered voice.

At this point the waiter delivers the servings, mostly lamb dishes of various preparations, sans alcohol, of course.

We were again sprawled out on the couch and stuffed chairs in my hotel room.

"I don't suppose you could get us a couple of military IDs to go along with those uniforms," I inquired.

"Security Police can reproduce anything, but I'd have to do it tonight, when no one would be looking over my shoulder."

"Then do your thing and be back here in time for lunch, tomorrow," I urged. "As you wish. I'll need some photos."

Sirjan pulls out his iPhone and motions for the team members to stand against the plain white wall so that he can get a clean headshot.

"Only Osgard and I will need the uniforms and identification," states Fletcher.

With Fletcher and Osgard against the wall, Sirjan gets his headshots and then sticks his iPhone back in his pocket, saying, "now for the measurements."

I handed Sirjan a slip of paper, telling him, "I wrote them down for you."

Sirjan nods his goodbyes and exits the room, closing the door behind him. After the door has closed, everyone purposely remains silent while Fletcher gets up and moves to the door where he listens carefully. Finally, he quickly opens the door and peers up and down the hallway, which is empty.

Closing the door, Fletcher says "He's gone."

As Fletcher returns to this stuffed chair, he opines, shaking his head, "I wish I could shake this feeling I have that our Sirjan is not exactly who he purports to be. Why would someone in his position involve themselves in such a scheme?"

"I may be able to answer that, at least partially," Osgard pipes up. "While you were meeting with Minister Nematzadeh, Sirjan and I had a long conversation. He told me why he was doing it.

"What he told you could have been carefully planned. So let's cut to the chase. Do you, Duke Osgard, feel Sirjan is legit?" I asked, impatiently.

Thinking about it, Osgard finally nods his head and replies, "Yes, I do."

"If he's not, it won't take long for us to find out."

The next day, we were again gathered in my Espinas Hotel room, going over last minute details. I was explaining the plan, "The plan is for Sirjan to take a taxi to the prison tomorrow morning while you two take his government car to Mehrabad Airport. That is, of course, after dropping me off at the train depot, along with our luggage."

"We cannot be seen leaving here in a military uniform, so we'll have to find a gas station restroom in which to change," asserts Fletcher to Osgard.

Suddenly, there is a knock at the door. I opened the door and Sirjan entered carrying two military uniforms complete with rank and insignias. I relieved Sirjan of the uniforms while he reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out the fake identi-fication card and papers, telling him, “Sirjan, you're just in time for lunch.”

"We will have a change of clothes in the chopper for Nigel. Do you happen to know his measurements?" asks Fletcher.

"He's approximately my size," answers Sirjan.

"We have a replacement British passport for him. It comes complete with visas and is stamped with recent entry points from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Azrbaijan and Russia. Visas and stamps are fake, of course, but the passport is real. We'll turn it over to him once he's clear of the prison," reports Fletcher.

"Very good. So what's planned for the rest of the day?" asks Sirjan.

"I think we should test these new ID's," states Osgard.

**Chapter Four**

Sirjan is driving his government vehicle on a scenic side street in Tehran, with me seated beside him and Fletcher and Osgard in the rear.

"There's a gas station up ahead. You can change into your uniforms in the men's room," Sirjan announces. He then pulls into the gas station and stops next to the men's room so Fletcher and Osgard can exit from the rear and, carrying their uniforms on hangars, head for the men's room.

Waiting patiently for Fletcher and Osgard to return, Sirjan and I are going over final details of tomorrow's mission.

"Mind if I see those IDs?" I asked.

"Course not," replies Sirjan as he pulls the two military IDs from his jacket and hands them over.

Studying them, I said, "Hope they are able to pronounce their new names."

"Except for the photos, height and weight, those are legitimate IDs for an actual major and colonel currently serving in Bandar-e Abbas."

I handed the IDs back to Sirjan, commenting, "The only loose end is what time do you want the chopper over the exercise area?"

"I'll let you know the precise time later today, but normally I meet with Mr. Fleming around 10:30 in the morning and we take a walk in the outdoor exercise area."

"In the exercise yard, are you alone?"

"Usually, but not always."

At this point, Fletcher and Osgard emerge from the men's room wearing their uniforms with all the insignias and ribbons. They're carrying their civilian clothes on the laundry hangars. Sirjan gets out of the vehicle in order to inspect the uniforms. Nod-ding satisfaction, Sirjan hands the officers their respective identifications. To Osgard, he says "Major Birjand," and to Fletcher, he says "Colonel Sabzevar. Memorize your names and dates of birth."

Sirjan drives up in front of the Mehrabad Airport security gate post, and from his side of the vehicle, reaches out the window with his left hand showing the guard his identification. It's the same security guard as before. From his shack, the guard leans out his window and recognizing Sirjan, inquires "Mr. Sanjabi? Same destination?"

"That's right, military barracks."

"Very good," answers the guard.

"I'm sorry but I didn't get your name, the last time," says Sanjabi.

"Arash, sir."

"Arash. These two officers in the back will be coming and going often during the next few days."

Osgard and Fletcher hand Sirjan their military IDs and Sirjan passes them onto Arash, who studies the identification cards carefully then takes a good look at the military passengers in the back. He then hands the ID cards back to Sirjan and calls out to the passengers in the rear, announcing, "Major Birjand and Colonel Sabzevr. Please consider me at your service."

The steel retaining bar rises and Sirjan's vehicle is allowed to enter the airport's inner grounds where it heads in the direction of the military barracks and the row of choppers. Approaching the row of choppers, there are now only three helos, with one of the four missing. Pointing that out, Harry says, "One of the 4-seater helos I intended on using is missing. Let’s hope the second one I intended on using isn’t also missing when we need it.”

Once parked in the lot of the Hotel Espinas, as Sirjan and team exit the vehicle, Fletcher and Osgard are back into their civilian clothes. Sirjan pops the trunk from which he retrieves his briefcase together with what looks like a radio.

Inside Jonathan's hotel room, while the team patiently watches, Sirjan is again sweeping the room for listening devices. Nodding the okay, he repacks the scanner into the briefcase and turns his attention to the radio and Fletcher, "As you requested, this radio is capable of being tuned to the air traffic control frequencies at Mehrabad Airport, including ground control, takeoff, the Tehran Center, along with approach control, and landing frequencies."

"All pilots must speak English when transmitting over a radio frequency, there are certain procedures that are indigenous, which Duke and I are going to attempt to familiarize ourselves," explains Fletcher.

The only outstanding item on the checklist is the overhead time and the train reservations," I declared.

"I'll phone you with the overhead time and I'll make the train reservation soon as I leave here. Don't forget, you'll have to show your passport or other acceptable form of identification in order to board," Sirjan tells Jonathan.

"Understood," I replied.

"Meanwhile, the automobile is yours. I'll take a taxi."

Luggage in hand and wearing the clothes we arrived in, we are at the checkout counter. Using the Euro for currency, I paid the small balance in cash. The Espinas clerk puts the cash away, makes some entries on his computer and then hands over the three pasports.

Sirjan's government vehcile, with me behind the wheel and Fletcher and Osgard in the back, pulls into the gas station and stops next to the men's room. I remain behind the wheel while Fletcher and Osgard exit from the rear, each carrying a tote bag, and head for the men's room.

Soon the government vehicle is traveling southbound on Valiasr Avenue. Inside the vehicle, I was going over our escape plans with my two uniformed passengers. “Our reservations are for Bandar-e Abbas, on the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf and indeed we will purchase tickets for that destination. That's Plan 'A.' But reservations have also been made for rail travel from Esfahan to Tehran and on to Khvoy, near both the Armenian and Turkish borders. This is Plan 'B.' However, with Plan 'B' we don't go all the way to Khvoy. Instead we get off at Rasht, a resort on the Caspian Sea."

Next, I was pulling into the the impressive train station where I stopped in the temporary parking structure. I got out as Fletcher and Osgard begin unloading the luggage, with Osgard, saying, "I'll get a cart."

With that, the 'major' takes off while the 'colonel' and I had a final word. “Jonathan, you'll have charge of the luggage. If we have to catch a later train, you'll wait for us in Esfahan. If we're not on your train or fail to catch up with you in Esfahan, it means the worst and you're on your own," asserts Fletcher.

"Understood," I replied.

Osgard arrived with the luggage cart and without any goodbyes he and Fletcher step into the vehicle, with Fletcher in the back and Osgard behind the wheel. They pull away from the curb as I loaded the luggage onto the cart and started off for the station's interior.

At Mehrabad Airport, once again, the government vehicle pulls up in front of the airport's security gate post. From the driver's seat of the vehicle, Osgard reaches out the window with his left hand showing the security guard, Arash, the military identification of both him and Fletcher. From his shack, the guard leans out his window and acknowledges recognition of the two officers, "Major Birjand and Colonel Sabzevar."

Arash hands the two ID cards back to Osgard as the steel retaining bar rises and once again the government vehicle is allowed to enter the airport's inner grounds. The vehicle heads in the direction of the military barracks and the row of choppers. Approaching the row of choppers, they find that the missing 4-seater helo has returned. Osgard parks in the military visitor lot and he and Fletcher exit the car, lock it, and calmly head for the row of military choppers. They are both carryiing small tote bags.

"We'll take the one with the most fuel, just in case," declares Fletcher as they walk with confidence up to the first two 4-seat helos. Osgard quickly checks the gas gauge of one while Fletcher checks the gauge of the other.

"Half tank," calls out Osgard.

"Nearly full," reports Fletcher.

Without a word, Osgard walks over and climbs into the left seat of the nearly full fuel chopper while Fletcher climbs into the pilot's seat. Both put on their headphones. As Fletcher flips a number of switches in preparation for starting the engine, Osgard whips out his street map of Tehran. As the blades begin to wind up to speed, Fletcher and Osgard take a look around to see if anyone notices that one of the military's choppers is about to go missing. No one is approaching.

Meanwhile, Fletcher is on the intercom communication system, "So far, so good. Give me the ground control frequency."

Osgard twists the knob to the correct frequency, "Set."

Fletcher presses the radio transmitter located on the stick, transmitting, "Mehra-bad ground control. This is Colonel Sabzevar in Military 437-N, on a special mission, requesting permission to taxi to the helo ramp."

Ground Control: "Military 437-N. Permission granted. Contact tower when ready to launch."

Fletcher transmits, "Contact tower when ready." Then Harry double clicks the carrier transmit button, the universal code for understood and will comply.

The chopper is in position, blades spinning, ready for takeoff. Inside the cockpit, Fletcher addresses Osgard over the chopper's internal intercom system (ICS), "Get me the tower frequency."

Duke twists the frequency knob until he comes up with the correct setting, commenting, “Set.”

"Mehrabad tower. This is Colonel Sabzevar in Military 437-N, on helo pad ready for liftoff," announces Fletcher transmitting on VHF.

“Military 437-N. Request your destination."

"Military 437-N. Tower. Destination is Evin Prison, dropping off one commandant and picking up another."

No response. Then, finally, from the Tower: "Military 437-N. You are cleared for liftoff."

The helo lifts off.

The commandant of Evin’s special prisoners section, Major Montazeri, is seated behind his desk addressing a seated Sirjan Sanjabi, "I'm curious, what's Security Police's interest in Nigel Fleming?"

"We want to find out who he was working with, who his handlers are," answers Sirjan.

"In my opinion, he was working with no one; merely a journalist doing his job."

"We have to know for sure," insists Sirjan.

"Well, this time of morning, he's usually in the yard. I'll get you an escort," says Montazeri checking his watch.

"No need. I know the way."

"Very well," replies Montazeri acquiescing.

Montazeri reaches into a desk drawer and comes up with a numbered Visitor's Badge, which he hands over to Sirjan.

Followed by an armed Evin guard, Nigel Fleming and Sirjan Sanjabi exit the prison building and enter the outdoor exercise yard, which is the size and dimensions of a basketball court. With the three story building making up one wall, the remaining walls are eight feet high with rolled razor wire on top. The armed guard remains by the door as Sirjan and Nigel walk side by side towards the far end of the yard.

"When we hear the helicopter appraoching, the first thing we do is disarm the guard. As a precaution, the chopper will not actually land due to the risk of the blades hitting the wall. What you have to do is grab and hang onto one of the skids while I grab the other. It won't be easy," explains Sirjan.

"I get the picture."

"Now, I suggest we head back towards the guard and get in position to jump him soon as we hear the chopper."

**Chapter Five**

The 4-seat chopper is flying low over the buildings of Tehran. Inside the exercise yard, Sirjan and Nigel can now hear the approaching chop-chop sound of the helo's blades. With that they exchange looks and then go into action.

As they amble towards the guard, using his left hand, Sirjan cups his ear and points to the sky as if to ask the guard what that unusual sound was. The armed guard listens and stares at the sky and that's when Nigel and Sirjan strike, knocking the guard unconscious and disarming him.

Sirjan reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a small, two inch wide roll of Scotch mailing tape on a red plastic roller and begins peeling off the tape to bind the guard's hands and feet, before taping his mouth shut. Meanwhile, Nigel takes the guard's weapons and tosses them over the wall.

Finally, the helicopter is now hovering overhead. It slowly descends into the courtyard but then with the skids about seven feet from the ground the descent is halted and the chopper merely hovers. Each skid contains two small wheels, one at the front and one at the rear of the skid. Wasting no time, and avoiding the small wheels, Nigel reaches up and wraps his arms around one skid while Sirjan wraps his arms around the other. The chopper begins to lift, taking Sirjan and Nigel with it.

The helicopter is rising higher and higher into the sky with the two men hanging onto the skids. Reaching altitude the chopper heads south at full speed. The two dangling men struggle to climb up on the skids so as to gain access to the rear door of the chopper. Finally reaching the doors to the rear passenger compartment, Nigel and Sirjan are startled when the doors suddenly open and Duke Osgard appears, lending a hand to help both men, one after the other, into the chopper.

Inside the chopper, Osgard has returned to his left seat in the front while Nigel and Sirjan are in the back. Osgard calls back to Nigel, "Mr. Fleming. Somewhere back there is a tote bag with your new clothes. Suggest you get changed A-SAP. In one of the pants pockets you'll find your replacement passport."

In the back of the helo, Nigel has almost completed his clothes change. Up front, using the internal communication system, Fletcher and Osgard are preparing to contact Mehrabad approach control.

"Give me the frequency for approach," asks Fletcher.

Osgard dials up the proper frequency, "Set."

Transmitting on VHF, Fletcher says, "Mehrabad approach. This is Military 437-N making an approach from the north. Permission to land on the helicopter pad?"

Approach Control: "Military 437-N. Permission to approach granted. Contact Tower for final instructions."

"Contact Tower for final instructions. Military 437-N. Out."

Major Montazeri is on his cell phone when his civilian assistant, Sirus Moosavi, enters and patiently waits for the major's call to end.

"There are reports that a military helicopter was seen hovering around the prison, less than ten minutes ago. I want to be kept informed as to what that was all about," insists Montazeri.

Clicking off his cell, the Major comments to his assistant, "Isn't anyone cncerned that an unscheduled helicopter successfully approached the prison and apparently hovered for as long as a minute? Outrageous!!"

"Latest report from the guard house is that the helicopter was hovering near the eastern wall," replies Sirus.

"The exercise yard. Fleming and Sanjabi. Check it out!!"

With that Sirus Moosavi is out the door.

Major Montazeri's assistant, Sirus Moosavi, bursts through the door to the exercise yard and finds the guard bound and gagged with Scotch mailing tape. He grabs his cell and dials the Major.

"Yes," answers Major Montazeri.

An overly excited Sirus Moosavi exclaims, "Major. The guard watching Fleming is in the yard, tied up and gagged with some kind of tape."

"Fleming and Sanjabi. Any sign of them?"

"None."

"There's a small military unit at Mehrabad that includes four or five helos. I'll give them a call. Meanwhile I want you to round up a Republican Guard unit to track down my escaped prisoner and those who helped him."

At Mehrabad, the chopper is descending onto the helicopter landing pad. Upon touching down, using the four small wheels attached to the skids, the chopper taxis to the military's helicopter row. The chopper comes to rest in its previous slot and the engine is shut down. Before the blades have wound to a stop, the four persons inside are climbing out of the craft and calmly walking towards the military visitor parking area.

On the airport's inner grounds, the government vehicle with Sirjan behind the wheel and Fletcher, Osgard, and Fleming as passengers, heads in the direction of the security post and possible escape from the airport.

"That was a brilliant operation. I was beginning to think I would never get out," declares Nigel.

"You're not out yet. None of us are. Major Montazeri will do his best to hunt us down. And don't underestimate him. He's a methodical tracker. If anyone can find and track us, he will," discloses Sirjan.

Back at Evin Prision, Major Montazeri is on his cell phone, "I want to know if you've had any helicopter landings in the past few minutes. If so, where's the pilot and passengers?"

The Mehrabad Airport administrator is on the other end of the Major's phone call, "If you'll hold on, Major, I'll check with the tower."

After checking with the tower, the administrator is back on the line, "Major? Helicopter meeting your description was cleared to land no more than five minutes ago."

"Notify your security posts not to let anyone leave the restricted area. Hold everyone until my assistant, Sirus Moosavi, gets there to identify the escapee," declares the Major.

Sirjan's government vehicle approaches the exit side of the security post, slowing down in preparation to stop if motioned to do so by the security guard. Recognizing Sirjan and the two officers, Major Birjand and Colonel Sabzevar, Arash, the guard, motions them through. The government vehicle turns right onto the thoroughfare that leads away from the airport.

No sooner has the government vehicle entered the thoroughfare than the phone in the guard shack rings. Arash answers tha landline phone, "Security. Post three. Yes, sir. Shut down the airport's restricted area. Let no one in or out without your authorization. Understood.” Arash hangs up the phone then pulls his weapon from its holster and checks the clip.

At his Evin Prison office, Major Montazeri is on his cell phone, "Yes, Colonel. I understand. However, if it meets with your approval, I'd like to set up my base of oper-ation at your Republican Guard headquarters. I'll need your sophisticated communi-cations and a lot of other assets that I don't have here at the prison."

Colonel Moquiseh, in his large, posh office, is on the other end of the line, "I suggest you make the move immediately."

"Yes, sir," replies Montazeri.

"And Major, I want these people caught, and soon! I don't have to tell you that you career is finished unless you're successful."

"I understand, sir. Might I inquire as to how many Republican Guard members will be assigned to me?"

"As many as you need, Major."

"Thank you, sir. Right now we have to cover trains, planes and automobiles."

"I'll send units to cover all three."

It’s still dayight as a military vehicle is southbound on the thoroughfare. Inside, a noncommissioned officer is driving with Major Montazeri in the rear. Major's cell phone rings, which he answers, "Yes, Sirus. What've you got?"

Sirus Moosavi is standing beside Arash, the security guard at the security gate post at Mehrabad Airport, "Looks like Fleming managed to get out of the airport before the lockdown. He was seen with Sirjan and two military officers, a Major Birjand and a Colonel Sabzevar."

"Colonel Sabzevar? I know him. He's commander of a base in Bandar-e Abbas. I'll put a call into him; see what he has to say. Meanwhile, release the lockdown then find out all you can about Sirjan's movements for the past few days. I think he's the key to recapturing Nigel Fleming."

The government vehicle, driven by Sirjan, with its three passengers, approaches the iconic Tehran train station on Valiaser Ave.

Inside the huge domed interior of the station are two tracks, currently with pas-senger trains on both. On one track, passengers are boarding from the right and on the second track from the left. One of the two trains is departing the station, quickly picking up speed. I was on that train heading for Bandar-e Abbas. I was seated in an isle seat, facing three empty seats, whioh seats are presently filled with luggage. That’s when I spotted the four individuals approaching. I looked up and smiled at Fletcher, Osgard, Sirjan and Nigel Fleming.

A military truck pulls up next to the Tehran train station and six uniformed soldiers carrying rifles climb out of the rear and rush into the station.

Nigel, Sirjan, and the team are reclining in the two rows of seats facing one another.

"Right now, Major Montazeri is blocking off all possible escape routes. He'll have men meeting this train at Esfahan, Shiraz and Bander-e Abbas," declares Sirjan.

"Looks like we go to Plan 'B,'" suggests Osgard.

"We'll have to leave the train before it gets to Esfahan," I pointed out. .

"How? Jump?" asks Fletcher.

"Looks that way," I insisted.

"Fortunately, the train slows at the edge of the city," offers Sirjan.

"How slow?" asks Fletcher.

"Between 35 an 40 miles per hour," reveals Sirjan.

"Be lucky if all five of us don't end up with broken legs, or worse," suggests Fletcher.

"The good thing is that they won't be watching the north bound trains," I added.

With Fletcher and Osgard still wearing the uniforms of high ranking officers, the team is sort of by themselves, with no other passengers seated near them.

"It'll be dark when we reach Esfahan," reports Sirjan.

"Good, that'll help," I replied.

"You mean help kill us when we make the jump," adds Fletcher facetiously.

A woman wearing a chador moves up the aisle, passing us, causing Duke to comment, "It's a shame these beautiful women have to go throug life wearing those damn burqas."

"That woman wasn't wearing a burqa. She had on a chador, which is not quite as restrictive as a burqa," explains Sirjan.

"I don't care what you call it. It's criminal to make women hide their beauty like that."

"Then you might be interested to know that the whole Islamic Cultural Revolution really started heating up when Shah Reza Pahlavi banned the chador," disclosed Sirjan.

"Sirjan's right. Under the Shah, Iran was a secular country. Your faith could be Christian, Hindu, Shinto, Buddhism, atheist and even Jewish and for the most part you'd be treated decently. The fundamentalist Muslims, of course, hated this and started the revolution with the goal of removing Shah Pahlavi from office," adds Nigel.

"Removing the Shah from office really meant killing him, his family and top military leaders," states Sirjan.

At Tehran’s Repub;ican Guard Headquarters, Major Montazeri is greeted by Colonel Monqiseh. "Now, Major, let me show you your office.” The door opens and Colonel Moqiseh leads Major Montazeri into his temporary Republican Guard office. The office is well equipped to handle the job at hand.

"Let me know what you need and I'll see to it," declares Moqiseh.

The large office is being transformed. Chalk boards, pull down maps and screens for PowerPoint presentations are being installed. An eight place conference table has been moved into the center of the office, with as many phones, each with individual lines. Seated at the table and working the phones are the Republican Guard officers directly responsible for capturing the fugitives, Capt Seyed Kazemi, Capt Shahram Azam, 1st LT Ehsan Khan, 2nd LT Aghdam, and 2nd LT Ahmadi.

The seat and phone at the table's head is reserved for Major Montazeri and the spot to his right is for his civilian assistant, Sirus Moosavi. The seat at the other end of the table is reserved for Colonel Moqiseh, should he wish to sit in. Presently, Major Montazeri and Sirus are standing a few feet from the table, discussing the movements of Sirjan Sanjabi over the past few days.

Speaking to the Major, Sirus announces, "Past few days, Sirjan Sanjabi has been playing guide to three Americans from a San Francisco based export/import company called Universal Imports. They had an appointment with the Minister of Industries and Business, Mohammed Reza Nematzadeh. According to Security Police, the Americans were staying at the Hotel Espinas, the one near Valiasr Square."

"Fine work, Sirus. I'll let you go so that you can contact the hotel and get all the information you can," urges Montazeri, as he gives Sirus an encouraging pat on the back. Sirus takes his seat at the table and picks up the landline phone.

**Chapter Six**

On the train to Bandar-e Abbas, Sirjan is giving us a rundown on what's likely happen-ing regarding our pursuit and capture, "About now, Major Montazeri has set up his headquarters in the Tehran Headquarters of the Republican Guard and is tracking down my movements over the past few days, which means that soon he will have your names, as well."

"That go for our phony Major Birjand and Colonel Sabzevar, as well?” askes Osgard.

Chuckling to himself, Sirjan tells us, "but now, the major has had those names for some time. But it'll take additional time to actually check with the real major and colonel to see if they were actually in Tehran at the time of the breakout. I happen to have read where Major Birjand and Colonel Sabzevar are currently vacationing at a non-disclosed resort on the Caspian Sea."

"So that's why you chose their identities for us to impersonate," states Fletcher.

"And that's why their identities will continue working, for now." asserts Sirjan.

"I fail to see the advantage," remarkes Fletcher.

"I think Sirjan is referring to the fact that uniformed military officers do not need reservations for train travel and their military IDs are sufficient for boarding. You'll switch back to your passport identities once we're northbound from Tehran," I suggested.

"I see. And in the meantime, if Harry and I run into trouble, you three are free to watch our backs and possibly free us from harm," asserts Osgard.

"And vice versa," adds Nigel.

At the Republican Guard Office, standing a few feet from the large conference table, Republican Guard Captain Seyed Kazemi is conferring with Major Montazeri, "The base commander at Bandar-e Abbas says Major Birjand and Colonel Sabzevar are supposedly on leave at a Caspian Sea resort near the city of Rasht. He'll get back to me with their cellular numbers within the hour."

"Good work, keep me informed," states Montazeri.

As Captain Kazemi returns to his seat at the big table, Sirus Moosavi approaches the Major. "Hotel Espinas reports that the Americans checked out this morning and their passports returned." Sirus hands the Major a folded sheet of paper, saying, "Here are their names and passport numbers. Two of the three rooms are still vacant. I told the hotel to keep them unoccupied until after I've had a chance to examine them."

"Take a fingerprint man. Concentrate on freshly used glasses, toilet flush handles, empty fruit drink containers, and doorknobs," orders Montazeri.

Together with our luggage, Sirjan has us jammed into the small passageway be-tween two train passenger cars.

"Train's slowing down. Get ready to jump. Toss your luggage first then tuck your chin firmly against your chest, cover your head with your hands and with knees half bent, roll upon hitting the ground," declares Sirjan.

"And remember, like the Israelis, we will leave no wounded behind," I asserted.

"Alright, this is as slow as it gets. Go!! Go!! Go!!," demands Sirjan.

Fletcher went first, following his luggage out the opening between the cars. The rest of us followed in close proximity. It was the perfect place to jump, a small hillside next to the tracks. Instead of landing flat footed on level ground, we rolled off the hillside and came to rest uninjured. We quickly scrambled to recover our luggage.

Our presence somewhat protected, we gathered and looked to the 50s some-thing year-old Sirjan for guidance. "We're about a mile from the train station. We'll arrive there in plenty of time to catch the northbound train back to Tehran. Meanwhile, you can bet the Republican Guard will make a thorough search of the southbound train we just departed," comments Sirjan.

We then proceeded, walking in the direction of the train from which we had just escaped.

Standing in his usual spot, Major Montazeri clicks off his cell phone just as 1st Lieutenant Ehsan Khan approaches.

"What is it, LT Khan?" asks Montazeri.

"Sir, the vehicle assigned to Sirjan Sanjabi by the Security Police was just found at the Rahaban Square train station. I've got a station agent checking reservations."

"Good work, Lieutentant. First good lead we've had so far."

Following the railroad tracks, we pass a sign marked in both Farsi and English: Esfahan City Limits.

"By now the Major has discovered my vehicle at the Tehran train station and will soon discover ourreservations for Bandar-e Abbas," comments Sirjan.

"Aren't you giving Montazeri a lot of credit? You sure he deserves it?" Fletcher askes.

"He was once head of the Security Police, and my boss. That was until he spoke out over how women were treated under the Islamic Cultural Revolution. They demoted him and reassigned him to Evin Prison," reports Sirjan.

"About our reservations, won't they discover our reservation on the northbound train to the Caspian Sea?" asks Osgard.

"Not likely, since those reservations were made at Esfahan, not Tehran they won't be looking for them, at least for awhile," I offered.

"Jonathan is right of course," states Sirjan.

In the bathroom of Jonathan's Hotel Espinas hotel room, the fingerprint man, Javan Ganji, is dusting the flush lever to the toilet when Sirus Moosavi walks in.

"What about it, Javan. Got anything?" asks Sirus.

"No, Mr. Moosavi. No prints, even where there should be. Nothing in the waste-paper baskets, either."

Sirus pulls out his cell phone, commenting, "Better let the Major know we're dealing with professionals."

Still carrying our own luggage, we are walking alongside the tracks. The train station looms ahead.

"We're way east of the city. Too bad you can't take a day to tour the Old City. It's very beautiful. Due to its hand-painted tiling and magnificent public squares, it is considered one of the most beautiful cities in the world," comments Sirjan.

"Noted for its expensive Esfahan carpets," I added.

"It also has a healthy steel business, which operates outside the city," says Sirjan.

"What's the altitude? I seem to be having trouble getting my breath?" Nigel asks.

"We're at the foothills of the Zagros mountain range, about the same altitude as Denver, in America," remarks Sirjan.

"That would explain it."

"If it's any comfort, in less than 40 minutes we'll be on the train, headed back to Tehran."

Standing by the huge wall map of Iran, in his Republican Guard office, the Major is calling for everyone's attention, "Attention. May I have your attention? No one is going home this evening. Hot food will be brought in and Colonel Moqiseh has arranged for some cots to be set up in the hallway for those of you who will need to get a little sleep, when not following a lead."

The Major uses his pointer stick to indicate relative locations, "Here's what we know so far. The escapee, Nigel Fleming, the three Americans, and the Security Police officer, Sirjan Sanjabi, are on the train to Bandar-e Abbas, where they plan to make their escape to the United Arab Emirates. Or, perhaps that's what they want us to think. Instead, they might get off before Bandar-e Abbas, say at Shiraz, then make their way to Bushehr on the Persian Gulf, and try for Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, or Kuwait. Now, where do we stand?"

Captain Shahran Azam gets to his feet.

"Captain Azam?" what do you have? asks Montazeri.

"We have men prepared to board the train at Shiraz. And all major bus stations and relative airports are covered, as well as rental car agencies. Don't see how they can get far."

It’s nighttime on the Esfahan to Tehran train. The passenger car is sparsely filled. Nigel, Sirjan and the rest of us are huddled together. Osgard and Fletcher are still wearing their military uniforms.

"Oh, oh. As you Americans put it, we may be in the proverbial deep excrement," exclaims Sirjan, checking his iPhone.

"How so?" I asked.

Studying his iPhone screen, "Our northbound train has been cancelled. Another train taking its place leaves two hours later, from another track."

"I see where you're coming from. What are we going to do without drawing attention to ourselves, for two hours?" I commented.

"Of our entire plan, this is where we will be at our most vulnerable," declares Sirjan. "Once we change to the northbound train and are clear of the station, you'll get rid of your uniforms and destroy your military IDs, reverting to your real passports for identification. Since we'll be departing the train early at the Caspian Sea resort of Rasht, once again we'll have to schlep our own luggage. We can't check it."

"We still haven't answered the question of what we're going to do with ourselves for two hours," states Fletcher.

"I might have an idea," I offered. .

The Major is in his chair at the head of the large conference table, eyes closed and chin resting on his chest when standing beside him, Captain Shahran Azam taps his shoulder. The Major perks up with a start, gets to his feet and faces CAPT. Azam, "What is it, Captain?"

"Train to Bandar-e Abbas just left Shiraz where our people searched it thoroughly and found nothing."

"And what do you make of that?" asks Montazeri.

The captain motions for the Major to follow him to the big map where, picking up the pointer, Azam places it on Kerman, a city approximately 230 km northeast, "Either they jumped from the train before Shiraz, or they were never on it. Could be that at Esfahan, they switched trains and took the one to Kerman. You can reach Bandar-e Abbas from Kerman." For emphasis, Captain Azam maneuvers the pointer along the train track until it ends up pointing to the city of Bandar-e Abbas.

"Very good, Captain. But what if instead of switching southbound trains, at Esfahan, they boarded a northbound train?" asks Montazeri.

While most of the Republican Guard officers are taking advantage of the hallway cots, only a couple are still actively working the phones. One such officer, 2nd LT Aghdam, hangs up his phone and calls out to the Major, "Major? As you suggested, I checked reservations for all northbound trains departing either Esfahan or Shiraz and got a hit for both. The train from Esfahan is due to arrive at the Tehran station within the hour."

At his Tehran home, sleeping alone, the Colonel awakens at the sound of the ringing. He rolls over to pick up the handset of the landline phone, answering impatiently, "Hello?"

It’s Major Montazeri on the other end. "Colonel, it's Major Montazeri."

"Yes, Major. Have you apprehended our fugitives? Are they finally locked up?"

"Not yet, sir. We had them on the train to Bandar-e Abbas, but we now have reason to believe they may be returning to Tehran. My team has them scheduled to arrive within the hour."

"Are you sure? Why would they return to Tehran? Makes no sense."

"Perhaps they've decided to make their escape through Armenia or Azerbaijan."

"Impossible. Those borders are sealed tight, and besides, they'd be arrested the moment they entered either Armenia or Azerbaijan."

"Colonel, that may very well be, but right now I need you to authorize dispatching enough troops to completely lockdown the Tehran train station."

"What about the troops already assigned to the station?"

"You'll recall, you withdrew them at sundown yesterday, sir."

"And rightly so. The presence of so many troops in a public place is unsettling. That's why I'm going to turn down your request for a lockdown. You yourself said these Americans were professionals. Pros wouldn't attempt an impossible escape route. I believe they're tricking you into believing they plan to escape across the northern border while their true intent is to bribe a fisherman to take them across the Strait of Hormuz to the Emirates or the Persian Gulf to Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. And that, Major, is where you should be concentrating your efforts, not on any northern escape route. That understood?"

"Yes, sir."

As the train enters the city limits of Tehran, Nigel, Sirjan and the rest of us were still huddled together. Sirjan was addressing me. "When contemplating what we were going to do with ourselves for two hours, while waiting for our train, you said you might have an idea. Now might be a good time to fill us in."

"It's a bit complicated and requires a great deal of deception. We'll have to play our parts flawlessly," I stated.

"Then you better give us our scripts," urges Osgard.

"Give your luggage claim checks to either Fletcher or Osgard," I told Nigel and Sirjan. To Sirjan, I said, "We're going to need a bus schedule for the Tehran Train Station to Khvoy and the border with Turkey. As most fugitives know, sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight."

**Chapter Seven**

Scattered among those disembarking from the train are Nigel, Sirjan, Osgard, Fletcher and, of course, me. We found ourselves walking along one of the two domed station's concourses leading to the station's large waiting room. The area is huge with three floors of office space dividing the lobby from the train's arrival and departure concourses. On the second floor, next to the staircase and elevators, is the train station's security center which consists of three rooms, only one of which is visible to passing foot traffic, and a holding cell, also not visible to passersby. Two armed, uniformed officers are on duty. All offices are there to deal with station affairs, including a postal office, restaurant and fast food area on the ground floor and various personnel offices on the 2nd and 3rd floors.

Sirjan and I head for the elevator while Nigel, Osgard and Fletcher, the latter two still posing as a major and colonel respectively, head for the luggage carousel. Fletcher, Osgard and Nigel approach the empty and quiet carousel and wait patiently.

"Babysitting luggage for two hours is not exactly what I signed up for," Osgard complains.

"Suck it up! Jonathan's plan is a good one and I, for one, think it just might work," discloses Fletcher.

"It better work. Rather than spend any time in Evin we're going to wish we were shot and killed rather than be captured," Nigal asserts.

On the train station's 2nd floor walkway, the elevator door opens and Sirjan and I step out and move towards the station's security office. The door to the security office opens and Sirjan and I enter where we were confronted by one of the security guards asking, "Can I help you?"

Flashing his Security Police badge, Sirjan explains. We're here to arrest an es-capee from Evin Prison who may be attempting to catch the train to Ardabit and then cross the border into Azerbaijan."

The security guard, who is now joined by the other armed security guard states. "Day shift reported they had some Republican Guard soldiers looking for the same persons around noon yesterday."

"That would be correct," answers Sirjan.

I then asked a question in Darii, the language related to Farsi, "You said persons, more than one?"

"According to the log, there may have been as many as four or five," replies the guard.

"Any descriptions?" asks Sirjan.

"Only that two of them may be wearing the uniforms of air force officers," says the other guard.

"Good, that might be helpful," responds Sirjan.

Afraid his English accent might give me away, I again spoke in fluent Dari, "I hope you won't mind our staying here with you until our backup shows up. They'll look for us here first," I explained. .

"Delighted to have you," comments the first guard.

"You speak excellent Dari. Where did you learn it?" asked the second guard.

"My parent’s first language is Arabic," I replied answering in Dari.

In the train station lobby, with the luggage in front of them, Nigel, Osgard and Fletcher are seated together.

Addressing Nigel, Fletcher suggests, "It might be best if you find a seat some-what away from us. They won't be looking for a lone individual with fresh, expensive clothes and luggage. I'll give you a signal when to make your report to Jonathan and Sirjan."

With that, Nigel grabs two bags of the expensive luggage and moves to an isolated seat forty feet away.

Off to one side of the large conference table, Major Montazeri is privately con-ferring with his assistant, Sirus Moosavi, and 2nd LT Aghdam, "Spoke with Colonel Moqiseh who didn't agree with our assessment that Nigel Fleming and the people who broke him out are making their escape through northern Iran. The Colonel is convinced they will cross the Persian Gulf to Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, or cross the Strait of Hormuz to the United Arab Emirates."

"And the Tehran train station?" asked LT Aghdam.

"He all but ordered me to stand down."

"Understood. Without your approval I intend to take some volunteers with me to the train station for a look around," states Aghdam.

"I'd like to go with you, as a volunteer, of course," adds Sirus.

"Of course. Why don't you check and see how many others wish to volunteer."

"Yes, sir."

Taking the thoroughfare towards the train station, are four heavily armed men, three in uniform and one dressed in civvies. Besides Sirus Moosavi and 2nd LT Aghdam, the other volunteers are 2nd LT Armadi and 1st LT Khan. The latter, as senior officer is driving. LT Aghdam is beside him in the passenger seat.

"Although I'm the senior officer, I prefer that you remain in command," Khan tells Aghdam.

"Sir, as you wish."

In the waiting area, Fletcher checks his watch then signals Nigel who picks up his luggage and walks over to Fletcher and Osgard, where he sets the luggage down and then continues walking towards the elevators.

At the interior security office of the train station, the two security guards are typ-ing reports and updating the log book. In the front office Sirjan and I are seated reading magazines, when Nigel Fleming bursts through the door and calls out excitedly, "Time to go, bus to the border will be here in five minutes."

In the interior office, clearly hearing Nigel's words, the security guards jump to their feet and rush to the front office where Sirjan is admonishing Nigel for his outburst, "You stupid fool."

Soon as the security guards blunder in they are relieved of their weapons by two men who know exactly what they're doing, Sirjan and me. Addressing the guards, Sirjan, feigning regret, says, "Sorry you had to hear that."

With the train to the Armenian border still in the great domed station, the escapees have split up. Sirjan, Nigel and Jonathan are comfortably seated near the front of the sparsely occupied car. Duke and Harry are seated together near the rear of the train's passenger car.

Sirus Moosavi and the three lieutenants enter the security office only to find it empty. Sirus calls out, "Anybody here?"

A scuffle is heard from one of the rear offices so the arrivals go to investigate. In the holding cell of the security office, the two security officers are found bound and gag-ged, tied next to the bars so they remain apart. As Sirus removes the gag from the mouth of the first security oficer, Aghdam demands, "Which concourse is the train to the

Armenian-Turkish border on?"

"Concourse 'B.' But they're not on the train."

The security guard now has everybody's undivided attention, when LT Aghdam asks, "What do you mean they're not on the train?"

"They're on the bus, bound for the same destination but with many more stops."

LT Aghdam turns to Sirus, "Do you have that picture of Nigel Fleming?"

Sirus pulls the photo from his jacket pocket and shows it to the security guard "Is this one of the men?"

The guard looks at the picture and then nods his head.

"When does the bus leave?" asks Aghdam.

"It left five minutes ago," says the guard.

"And the train leaves when?"

"It's leaving now."

"You have your command back, Lieutenant Khan. Track down that bus and, at the first stop, make sure Fleming is aboard and if so, report its next stop to the Major. Don't try to stop or board it on your own, the Major will want to minimize casualties."

With that, Aghdam, armed with a 9mm Glock strapped to his hip, dashes out of the office.

On concourse “B,” as the train begins pulling out of the station, 2nd LT Aghdam is running down the concourse where he suddenly veers off towards the compartment between two passenger cars and easily jumps aboard.

Inside the passenger car where the team is, Fletcher tells Osgard, "It's time to get rid of these uniforms." With that, they pick up their luggage and head for the passenger car's lavatory.

Nigel, Sirjan and I are rejoicing over our narrow escape from Tehran when, suddenly 2nd LT Aghdam appears in the aisle alongside us, his weapon drawn. With his free hand, from his pocket, he pulls out several plastic 10-inch zip ties, telling the men,"Now, to make life easier for me, you're going to secure your hands and feet with these zip ties."

Just then, Aghdam is attacked from behind by Fletcher and Osgard, both now dressed as civilians. Fletcher grabs the gun while Osgard pulls a cell phone from the lieutenant's pocket and tosses it to me. I could only ask, "Now, what're we going to do with him?"

Meanwhile, with Fletcher jamming the 9mm Glock into his ribs, the lieutenant remains silent as Sirjan attempts to calm the rest of the passengers by flashing his badge and announcing, "Security Police! Please be calm." Indicating Aghdam, "This man is a deserter and under arrest. Don't interfere or you'll find yourself under arrest, as well."

Sirjan and Fletcher have taken Aghdam to the train compartment where two pas-senger cars are joined, and are holding him there. The outside, normally closed during travel, is wide open.

"Train is slowing and the tracks look to be on a rolling hill. This might be a good place in that it's unlikely he will suffer any injuries, except to his pride," Sirjan tells Fletcher.

"Then off he goes," says Fletcher and with that, Aghdam is tossed from the train in the middle of nowhere.

On the slope next to the tracks, Aghdam hits the slope and rolls before finally coming to a stop. Slowly picking himself up, and finding no injuries, he looks around only to find himself totally isolated, and without his cell phone.

Fletcher and Sirjan return to join Osgard, Nigel and me in the passenger car.

"According to the train schedule, we're due to arrive in Qazvin in twenty minutes. Our plan is to take two separate taxis to the Qazvin bus terminal where we catch a bus to Rasht and the Caspian Sea. The question is, do we abandon the train before the Qazvin station or ride it in?" I asked.

"I say we ride it in. In my opinion, their maximum effort will be to capture us at Khvoy or the Armenian border," suggests Fletcher.

"I agree with Harry. This jumping from moving trains is eventually going to result in some serious injuries," adds Osgard.

Captain Seyed Kazemi and Shahram Azam are taking a coffee break with Major Montazeri when the major's cell phone rings. "Major Montazeri."

As the Republican Guard van speeds through the countryside LT Khan, in the passenger seat, on his cell. “Major, it’s LT Khan. Train station security guards report our escapees are on board a bus to Khvoy and the Armenian border. But that's not all. LT Aghdam is aboard a train headed for the same designation."

"Aghdam have any reason to believe the escapees are aboard the train?" asks Montazeri.

"None, sir. He's just covering all the bases. He'll call you if he finds anything."

"Good. I'll make some calls and have a contingent of troops meet you at the Qazvin bus depot."

The Republican Guard van is still following the passenger. LT Khan is studying the map, "According to this map, we're about twenty minutes from Qazvin."

"Do we follow the bus in or should we pass it and get there ahead of it?" asks Sirus, who is driving.

"Let's get there first," says Khan.

Just then the van pulls ahead of the passenger bus and, shortly thereafter, is driving within the city of Qazvin.

"We're about five minutes from the bus depot, and well ahead of the bus," pronounces Khan.

"There's the depot ahead,” Sirus points out.

We should be two or three minutes ahead of the bus. Be on the lookout for any signs of our backup," adds Khan.

It’s dawn when the train rolls into the Qazvin Train Station. Luggage in hand, Nigel, Sirjan and I hop into one taxi while Osgard and Fletcher take another. Both taxis then pull away from the curb and head in the direction of downtown Qazvin.

The two taxis pull up in front of the Qazvin bus depot and, luggage in hand, Nigel, Sirjan and I jump out, while Osgard and Fletcher jump out of the other cab; allof us entering the bus depot. At the ticket counter, the escapees check their luggage, show their IDs, and with tickets in hand head for the terminal where their bus is in the final boarding stage.

The Republican Guard van pulls up and parks on the street outside the bus depot and the occupants, Khan, Ahmadi and Sirus, climb out and head for the terminal.

Just then a bus whose destination reader indicates it is headed for the city of Rasht, on the Caspian Sea, is just pulling out as the occupants of the Republican Guard van enter the terminal and get into position for the arrival of the bus from Tehran.

Inside the passenger bus from Qazvin to Rasht, the escapees are happy to be that much closer to making good their escape. Seated together, Fletcher turns to me and asks, "That soldier we tossed overboard. Remember what happened to his cell phone?"

"Of course."

"Mind filling me in?"

"Before we left the train I turned it on and then carefully hid it."

"Jonathan, my dear friend. You indeed deserve your reputation," comments Harry chuckling. "When they don't get an answer to their calls, they'll ping the cell num-ber. And wrongly assuming we're aboard the train, will act accordingly. That just might give us the time we need to make good our escape."

Four armed Republican Guard soldiers have arrived and are greeting LT Khan and, once receiving Khan's brief orders, pull their weapons and spread out as the bus from Tehran pulls into the terminal

With captains Seyed Jazemi and Shahram Azam standing by, the Major is on his cell phone with LT Khan, "You say there's no sign of the escapees aboard the bus?"

As the bus in question departs the Qazvin terminal, LT Khan is on his cell, telling the Major, "That's right, sir."

"Did they get off somewhere?"

"Driver says no one left the bus since it departed Tehran."

"Then the logical conclusion is that they're on the train. LT Aghdam is supposedly on that train. Have you heard from him?"

"My calls to his cell phone keep going to his message service."

"You should've let me know this earlier. I'll have the cellular service ping his number and then at least we'll find out where his phone is. Meanwhile, you chase down that train. There may be a reason why Aghdam wasn't able to call us."

**Chapter Eight**

As the Qazvin to Rasht bus heads north, towards the Caspian Sea, Sirjan joins Fletcher and me, sitting down in the vacant seat across the aisle. Everyone seems fairly sat-isfied with themselves until I pointed out a reality, "If the Major's as good as you say, even though he may think we're aboard the train, he'll be checking all other sources of escape, including cars for hire."

You're right, Mr. Moore. He'll check all bus and train passenger lists and eventually be back on our trail," says Sirjan in agreement.

Two Republican Guard vans are racing to catch the train which is just ahead of them. Sirus is driving with LT Khan in the passenger seat and 2nd LT Ahmadi in the back when Khan's cell phone rings. Khan answers on the first ring, "LT Khan."

It's the Major who is on the other end of Khan's cell call, "Results of the ping on Aghdam's cell phone indicate its location is consistent with the movement of the train you're chasing."

"We're set to board it at its next stop, which is Zanjan."

"Good. Meanwhile I've requested that the Security Police text me Sirjan Sanjabi's cell number. Soon as I receive it, I'll have the cellular service ping it, as well."

The Major clicks off his cell phone and turns his attention to the big map. Finally, he turns to Captains Seyed Kaemi and Shahram Azam, both of whom have now joined him.

"We need to check passenger lists for planes, trains, automobiles and buses departing Qazvin."

At this point Colonel Moqiseh enters the huge room, taking charge, "What do we have, Major?"

"I think we're on the verge of having the necessary intelligence and means to make arrests."

"How soon?"

"Very soon."

"Good work, Major. I think my people can handle it from here. You can return to your post at Evin Prison. Make sure no one else from your section manages to escape."

The Major is stunned. Nevertheless, there is only one reaction he can voice, "Yes, sir."

The bus from Qazvin pulls into the Rasht City bus terminal. The door opens and passengers begin disembarking, including Nigel, Sirjan, Osgard, Fletcher and me. With luggage in hand, we approach the taxi stand. Instead of taking the first taxi in line, we choose the last. As we climb into the back seat, the taxi driver places the luggage in the vehicle's trunk then gets in behind the wheel, with Sirjan seated beside him.

"Where to?" asks the driver.

"Ramsar," answers Sirjan.

"That's an hour and 45 minute drive!" declares the driver.

Fletcher passes a handful of euros to Sirjan, who counts out a few bills and hands them to the taxi driver.

"I believe this is more than your standard fare," asserts Sirjan.

The taxi driver counts the bills and nods his acceptance. The cab then exits the bus depot and disappears down the street.

Back in his old office at Evin Prison, Major Montazeri is busy resuming his old duties when his cell phone rings. He answers on the first ring, "Major Montazeri.

Calling from the Major's former Republican Guard office, Colonel Moqiseh is on the other end of the call, "There's been some complications. I'd like you to come back and work the case."

"For how long?"

The Colonel, recognizing he is being tweaked, chooses to ignore the jab and move on, "Until they either make good their escape or are apprehended, which is looking less and less likely."

"Security Police should have phoned in with Sirjan Sanjabi's cell number by now,” the Major says. “Have the cellular service ping it and see if we get a hit. I'll be there soon as I can."

In the Caspian Sea Resort Town of Ramsar, the taxi from Rasht pulls up to the depot's taxi area and stops. Sirjan pulls out a 3 x 5 memo book and hands it to the driver, asking him, "Write your address."

Then Sirjan takes some of the euro notes previously handed to him by Fletcher and tears the bills in half, handing one-half to the driver, "That's a thousand euros. If we're not disturbed for ten days, my half of the money will be mailed to you. Is that understood?"

The driver records his address in the memo book, "Perfectly."

After the taxi from Rasht drives away, luggage in hand, the fugitives climb into a second cab.

Inside the Ramsar Taxi, Sirjan addresses the taxi driver, "The Forest Resort. Swing by the airport on the way."

At the Republican Guard Office, Captain Shahram Azam hangs up his phone and reports to the Major, "The ping on Sirjan's cell phone resulted in one of our men finding it right here in Tehran, in a trash barrel at the Hotel Espinas."

"Well, we knew they were professionals."

At this point CAPT Kazemi hangs up his landline phone and gives a shout out to the Major, "Sir? Got a hit on some bus reservations from Qazvin to the city of Rasht, near the Caspian Sea."

"Get the information to LT Khan," orders Montazeri.

Approaching Ramsar Airport, the taxi driver explains, "While there's a weekly, commercial flight to Tehran, the airport is mainly used for private, business, sport and charter flights. Was there anything in particular you wanted to see?"

"Charter flights," responds Sirjan.

The taxi turns into the airport and heads for the charter services area. Approaching in the distance, parked on the tarmac, is a modern looking Dornier Sea Star 12-passenger seaplane with retractable landing gear. The Sea Star is clearly visible from inside the taxi, prompting Fletcher to comment to Osgard, "See what I see?"

"A Dornier Sea Star with two Pratt & Whitney PT-6 tandem turbo engines on top of the overhead wing, with a retractable landing gear and a range of over eleven hundred miles."

"We could stop, but I think it better if we just get a phone number for now."

Approaching the Ramsar park from Chaboksar Road, the taxi driver explains the park area to his passengers, "The only access road to the resort and chalets is from the backside of the mountain, which is a four hour drive. Therefore this cable car complex was built to transport guests to the top. The cable ride takes approximately 12 min-utes."

The taxi pulls up and parks within a short distance of the cable car facilities. As the driver gets out of his taxi and begins retrieving the luggage from the trunk, he continues explaining the virtues of the Forest Resort, "The Park was built around the cable car. At first, it was basically a parking lot for the resort guests. But then it grew, grass was planted and manmade ponds and playgrounds were added. Oh, and don't forget to try the restaurant, it's first rate and the tea excellent.”

At Major Montazen’s Republican Guard Office, suddenly the door flies open and we are greeted by the presence of Colonel Moqiseh, who blurts out, "I understand our team will be in Rasht within two hours. What's the plan once they arrive?"

"Sir, first, they'll interview all the taxi drivers on duty at the time of the bus's arrival. They most certainly had to have taken a cab to their next destination. We need to know what that destination was."

The Major is on his cell phone, calling LT Khan, "What've you got, lieutenant?"

"We're interviewing the Rasht taxi drivers now. There's one driver whom I believe knows more than he's telling us," reports Khan.

"How's that?" asks Montazeri.

"He's nervous, sweaty. The usual giveaways. Sir, with your permission I'd like to give him a choice, of telling us all he knows or being sent to Evin Prison."

"I agree with your thinking, but that kind of authorization can only come from the Colonel. I'll get back to you."

After a few minutes, LT Khan's cell phone rings. He answers, "LT Khan."

"Montazeri. The Colonel said, and I quote, 'Use any method short of killing the man to get the information.'"

"Understood, sir."

"I'll make arrangements with the local police for you to use one of their interrogation rooms."

**Chapter Nine**

At the Forest Resort, the cable car is ascending the heavily forested mountain, which has a number of chalets situated near the top of the mountain. The escapees, exiting the cable car, have entered a large chalet and are now gathered in the colorful living room of the chalet.

Discussing the final phase of their escape from Iran, I was voicing a suggestion. "Plan 'B' called for our stealing an aircraft somewhere between Rasht and Amol and flying it to the Russian resort town of Makhachkala, on the Caspian Sea. But I propose chartering this Sea Star flying boat for a roundtrip to Baku, Azerbaijan, supposedly returning in two days."

"But Iran has treaties with Azerbaijan. We're no better off there than here in Iran," argues Nigel.

"We convince the charter service that we're hotel executives with the Accor Group intent on purchasing one or more Baku hotels for the Ibis chain. Upon arrival on the Azerbaijan peninsula, we offer to put the pilot and co-pilot up for the two nights at a five star hotel such as the Four Seasons, Marriott, or Hilton, in which lounges alcohol is commonly served to all but women," I asserted.

Enlightened, Osgard fills in the rest, "But at Baki, we steal the plane, fly it to Russia, and land at our originally intended destination, the resort of Makhachkala, on the Caspian Sea."

"I like it. If we work it right, it'll be two days before our charter pilots discover their plane is missing," affirms Fletcher.

Pulling out his cell phone, Sirjan says, "Good. If that's settled, I'll book the charter."

Sirjan then clicks off his replacement cell phone and announces, "We're booked. We leave for Baku 9:30 in the morning. Since we'll be returning to the same location as our departure, there won't be a lot of paperwork.”

This meets with applause from the escapees.

At a nearby Forest Resort restaurant, we were enjoying a specially prepared, grilled kebab dinner consisting of chicken, steak and fresh Caspian Sea catch, washed down with tea, of course.

"For the first time, I'm starting to believe that you people may actually pull this off," comments Nigel.

I stated that "My only concern at this point is what happens after we're in Russa."

"What's the concern? We land in Makhachkala, check into the Hotel Lux, find a tourist group to hook up with and exit the country as part of the tour. After all, our passports are in order, thanks to a clever CIA agent named Raoul Donavan," insists Osgard.

Back at the chalet, the escapees are packing their bags when Sirjan enters the living room and announces, "I checked us out, we're set to go."

The Forest Resort cable is descending from the mountain top. Reaching the bottom, exiting the cable car, and schlepping their own luggage, the fugitives make their way to the nearby taxi stand.

It’s now nighttime as, from inside the interrogation room of the Rasht Police Station, the taxi driver who drove the fugitives from Rasht to Ramsar, is seated in a chair while being interrogated by LT Khan, LT Ahmasi and Sirus Moosavi. Khan thrusts the torn-in-half 1,000 euro bills in the taxi driver's face and shouts, "Where did you get these bills?"

"Where did you take your passengers?" asks Sirus.

"What passengers?" asks the driver.

"The passengers who gave you these Euros!!" exclaims Khan.

"What Euros?"

"The torn euro bills we found in your pocket?" declares Ahmasi.

Major Montazeri and the two captains are seated at the conference table, catnapping, when Colonel Moqiseh enters and barks, "So, where do we stand?"

Everyone snaps awake. The Major rises to answer. LT Khan is interrogating the taxi driver. He thinks he'll have answers by morning."

"He thinks? Is that all we can expect? What methods is he using?"

"The usual -- sleep deprivation, bright lights, loud noises, and intimidation."

"Good work, Major. Keep it up. I'll be at home. Call me when you get any word."

In the Rasht police station interrogation room, the bright lights are blinding and the music loud. The taxi driver begins to nod off and is slapped by LT Ahmadi, who announces, "No sleep for now. There will be plenty of time for sleep once you reach Evin Prison.

At this point, the Republican Guard members from the second van, who earlier joined Khan's team and helped conduct interviews of Rasht taxi drivers, enter. They pull the taxi driver to his feet and handcuff him.

"What's this?" asks the taxi driver panicking.

"Your escort to Evin Prison," states LT Khan.

"Alright! Alright! I drove them to Ramsar and let them off at the bus depot," says the driver, confessing.

Major Montazeni answers his cell phone, "Montazeri." From the interrogation room of the Rasht Police Station, LT Khan is on the other end of the call, "Our escapees are in Ramsar."

"We don't have any assets in Ramsar. You'll have to go there yourselves, char-ter a plane. I'll put through the authorization. Get there quickly as possible. Once there, you know what to do." demands Montazeri.

"Yes, sir."

A taxi from the cable car park pulls up in front of the Ramsar Airport charter service building and we climb out and, carrying our own luggage, enter the building.

In the charter section of the airport, the co-pilot is assisting Nigel, Sirjan, Osgard, Fletcher and me in boarding the seaplane. The pilot is starting the Pratt & Whitney tandem, turbo, inline engines sitting atop the overhead wing.

At Major Montazeri’s Republican Guard Office, a cell phone rings, which the Major manages to grab on the the first ring, "What've you got, Lieutenant?"

At the Ramsar bus depot the Ramsar taxi driver is standing beside LT Khan, falling all over himself to cooperate.

"I've got the taxi driver who transported our fugitives to the Forest Resort cable car," says Khan.

"I know the resort well. Go ahead," replies Montazeri.

"Before dropping them off at the cable car, his passengers requested they do a drive by of the airport. They seemed particularly interested in a charter service that had a modern looking seaplane parked on the tarmac. We're about to leave for the airport. but the airport needs to be shut down. Obviously I don't have that authority."

"Neither do I. That will have to come from the colonel. I will notify him immedi-

ately."

The Major bursts into the Colonel's office exclaiming, "Colonel, we need to shut down all departing flights from the Ramsar Airport, immediately!"

"And why is that, Major?" asks the Colonel.

"My people have sufficient cause to believe our fugitives are attempting to make good their escape from Iran, as we speak."

"Is there a possibility your team can apprehend these escapees without shutting down the airport?"

"A possibility, but it would be a cinch if the airport were shut down."

"Shutting down the airport could draw public scrutiny and I'm not sure our ransom program can withstand the pressure of the world press nosing around. Better we re-lease our own version to the effect that: 'the journalist was held by mistake and as soon as that was determined to be the case, he was released.' In the meantime, let's hope your people are successful in apprehending them, without the necessity for closing the airport to outgoing traffic or recalling any recently departed flights," declares the Colonel.

"Sir, I'm afraid I don't understand the refusal to recall recently departed flights?"

"Simple. These men could be desperate. It might put the flight crew in danger and we can't have that!"

"Understand, sir. Forgive the intrusion."

Two Republican Guard vans are racing towards the Ramsar Airport. Sirus Moosavi is driving one of the vans. Beside him, LT Khan is on his cell phone, "We've been calling the charter service that owns the Sea Star, but all we're getting is the answering machine. That could be because the owners are the two charter pilots and are busy with a charter. We're headed there now. Question is, if we get there too late, do we have permission to recall the flight?"

"Permission denied. We're in contact with the tower. The Sea Star is asking permission to take off. ATC is attempting to stall them but won't be able to do so much longer without alerting them that something is wrong," answers the Major

Captain Shahram Azam is on his landline, talking to the Ramsar tower.

"Just get there in time," orders Montazeri.

LT Khan snaps off his cell phone and turns to the driver, "Step on it. We' re running out of time."

At Ramsar Airport, the Sea Star is sitting on the runway, ready to take off. Inside the cockpit, the pilot and co-pilot are becoming concerned over the tower's delay in granting permission for takeoff. The co-pilot is on the radio, "Tower! I fail to see what's holding us up, burning unnecessary fuel. Allow us to take off or explain why."

The tower controller finally acquiesces, "Cleared for takeoff."

The Republican Guard vans roar to a screeching stop in front of the charter service building and everyone piles out, armed to the teeth. The Republican Guard team storms onto the tarmac, weapons drawn.

The Sea Star pilot is advancing the two throttles and the seaplane begins picking up speed. The aircraft reaches rotation and lifts off, its retractable landing gear coming up and folding into its hidden compartments. The seaplane continues climbing into the sky.

Inside Nigel Fleming's flat in a two story apartment complex in Notting Hill, a fashionable section of London, Nigel is speaking into his landline phone, "Plan 'C' worked beautifully. We landed in Baku, Azerbaijan and Fletcher checked the pilots into the Four Seasons and we checked into the Marriott. But instead of spending the night, we headed back to the airport and with Duke at the controls, managed to take off in the Seaplane and make a successful night landing at the Russian resort of Makhachkala, where we checked into the Hotel Lux."

The distinguished baldheaded man on the other end of Nigel Fleming's call is Gerard Baker, editor-in-chief of the Wall Street Journal, commenting, "Great to have you back."

"Great to be back," answers Nigel.

"Your first assignment is to write an account of your time in the notorious Evin Prison and your miraculous escape; being careful to avoid revealing the identity of those who assisted, who do not wish the notoriety."

"I'll get right on it."

In the San Francisco Marina, on the fantail's deck lounge of my yacht, Sweet Charity, Duke Osgard, Harry Fletcher, Sirjan Sanjabi and a most unusual CIA agent, Raoul Donavan, have joined me sipping Dom Perignon champagne and enjoying hors d'oeuvres being served by Jason Burrell.

Sirjan is describing to Donavan the final phase of Plan 'C,' "After checking into the Hotel Lux, on the Caspian Sea resort of Makhachkala, we blended into a group of Irish tourists who, when told our story, decided to take us under their wing and help us make good the final phase of our escape."

"Fact we bought all the drinks was what finally won them over," adds Duke.

After Donavan checks his watch, he gets to his feet, announcing, "I better go, if I want to catch my flight."

Also rising, Sirjan says, "And I have to get back to Los Angeles. Thanks to the Wall Street Journal, I'm closing on the purchase of a home for my parents."

Gesturing to Jason, I said, "Jason will take you both to the airport."

"We're grateful you took the time to drop by," says Fletcher.

After the usual exchange of handshakes, Donavan says, "Thanks for the invite. Looking forward to doing it again.”

I then turned to Donavan, telling him, "Great job on those passports. Russians never gave them a second look."

As Sirjan and Raoul follow Jason towards the yacht's exit ramp and the pier, I turned to Fletcher and commented, "Me thinks Robin and his Merry Band may have two new recruits, should they be needed on a future caper."

Watching Sirjan and Raoul leave the boat, Fletcher nods agreement.

**THE GREAT DIAMOND HEIST CROSS-UP**

**Part Four**

**Chapter One**

**Raoul Donavan and I are still sitting in the aft lounge of my yacht, relaxing and enjoying our finger food and champagne.**

**“Jonathan, as I’ve said many times before, I just love hearing those amazing adventures of your Merry Men.”**

**“You mean Robin Templar’s Merry Men…and one Woman.”**

**“I stand corrected. That said, the caper I’d really like to hear is the one about that famous Diamond heist mystery that you cleared up for the Anthrep police.”**

**Startled, I asked, “How did you hear about that?”**

**“You forget, I’m with the CIA. Police kept your names out of it but it didn’t take a whole lot of deduction to figure out that it was the Merry Men and one Woman who solved the case."**

**“Alright, but this might take awhile. Perhaps we should have Jason prepare dinner.”**

**“Splendid idea.”**

**I gave Jason the sign to begin preparing dinner, and then turned back to Raoul. “The story begins in Cape Town, South Africa at the renowned Diamond Works. It’s mostly about the heist of the Antwerp Diamond Center vault which took place several years ago, with a hundred million in diamonds being stolen and never recovered."**

**I then began telling Raoul the story. I started by describing the Diamond Works, a gray, 14-story, fortress-like, steel and glass structure on the Coen Steytler Roundabout, next to the Cape Town financial district and is a local tourist attraction where tourists sip champagne while browsing through cases filled with sparkling diamonds, I related. “The 15-minute tour is accompanied by an English translation of what the tourists are viewing. Our objective was for Chardonnay Rogers to pose as a diamond expert in order to get into the office of Frederick Van Gent, head of the Diamond Works. What we didn't count on was her getting locked inside the vault.”**

**“Chardonnay was inside the vault, sorting through the cases of cut and uncut diamonds. The vault door was wide open as she randomly selected diamonds and viewed them with her small 25X jeweler's glass.”**

**Meanwhile, inside Van Gent's office, Frederick Van Gent, a very fit man in his mid-50s, is seated behind his desk in the large office, going over some paperwork when there is a knock at the office door.**

**"Come in."**

**The door opens and the attractive, young receptionist / secretary and all-around trouble-shooter, Mitzi Morgan enters.**

**"Good morning, Mr. Van Gent.**

**"Morning, Miss Morgan. Did you get the information I requested?"**

**"Yes, Mr. Van Gent. I did."**

**Mitzi, settling into one of the cushy chairs facing the desk, opens her purse and extracts a manila file folder and a 3 x 5 memo pad, which she consults.**

**"So, about Paul's new girlfriend, this Chardonnay Rogers?"**

**Mitzi, referring to her notes, says "Chardonnay Rogers does not exist. According to her fingerprints, which by the way were extremely difficult to obtain. She is actually; get this, an American detective by the name of Andrea Parker."**

**"You sure?**

**"Positive. She's a detective-sergeant with the San Diego Police Department, no less. According to them, she's on a six-week leave."**

**"That's hard to believe. Paul checked her out, claimed to have seen her passport. Faking a passport that actually works is not easy what with all the scrutiny these days –"**

**"Clearly not an amateur."**

**"Obviously, someone sent her."**

**"Someone with resources."**

**"Where is she now?" asks Frederick.**

**"In the vault. Paul has her sorting diamonds for our next shipment, pulling any stones that have a laser-etched inscription."**

**"i think you know what has to be done, Mitzi," declares Frederick.**

**Unfortunately, I said to Raoul, Van Gent was able to discover Chard's true identity, something we did not count on. While she was continuing to sort diamonds using her jeweler's glass, suddenly, the vault door was slammed shut, with her inside. Quickly realizing what happened, Chard rushed to the vault door, attempted to open it but to no avail. She was trapped.**

**Inside Van Gent's office, Frederick is pouring himself a brandy as Mitzi enters, telling him, "Done."**

**Frederick pours another and handing the glass to Mitzi asks, "How long will it take?"**

**Checking her watch, Mitzi says "It's now 2:55 p.m. Friday, so she'll be dead by noon on Sunday."**

**"Pity. She was really quite lovely."**

**"Monday morning we'll open the vault and discover the tragic accident."**

**"She carries a cell phone. Are you sure she can't get a signal from inside the vault?"**

**"Positive."**

**"Good. When Paul returns tell him I want to see him."**

**Inside the vault, Chardonnay powers up her cell phone but the display shows the words No Signal.**

**Entering Van Gent's office, Paul Venter, mid 30s, with rugged good looks and sophisticated charm that could easily melt most women's hearts, calls out, "Hi, Mitzi!."**

**"Paul? Mr. Van Gent says he wants to see you the moment you come in."**

**"Any idea what he wants?"**

**"Not a clue. How did your getaway to Victoria Falls go?"**

**Chapter Two**

**“It was two weeks earlier when I phoned Harry Fletcher – er, Templar, and gave him an update on that Antwerp Diamond Center heist,” I said to Donavan.**

**Inside the Fletcher estate, a large home with a large garage and adjacent helicopter hangar, located on a Carmel Highlands cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, Harry Fletcher is cooking his usual gourmet breakfast when the phone rings, answers, "Fletcher."**

**"Jonathan here,” I said. “Have you seen this morning's paper?"**

**"Not yet. Why?"**

**"Remember that heist of the Antwerp Diamond Center vault that took place a while back?, asks Jonathan while he is being served a gourmet breakfast by Nigel.**

**"Supposedly a hundred million in diamonds stolen. Of course, I remember."**

**"Yes, and they never recovered any of them. Well, they just released the number one perp from prison. Do you find that interesting?"**

**"I do. That was Leonardo Bartiromo. He got a 10-year sentence but they're releasing him after only five."**

**"What does that tell you?"**

**"I think it tells me, I'd better meet you for lunch."**

**As Fletcher hangs up the phone, his buxom, beautiful young wife, Nicole, enters the kitchen, wearing one of her provocative, lounge around the house outfits, causing him to start to apologize, "Sweetheart, I'm sorry, but -- "**

**Holding up a hand to interrupt him, Nicole declares, "Darling, stop, don't even go there. I heard the phone ring. I know what it means."**

**"It’s just business," says Fletcher.**

**"You were wonderful this morning and you make your wife very happy. But every time that phone rings, I worry about what that Robin Templar is going to do to my Harry. …Just come back to me."**

**They share a hug and loving kiss. Breaking away Fletcher, taking a closer look at his wife's body, asks, grinning, "What kind of outfit is that for a school teacher to be wearing?"**

**Harry Fletcher exits the front door and heads for his helicopter hangar. He boards the helicopter, flying it to the Monterey Regional Airport, where he lands the chopper in the long term, visiting aircraft area. After the chopper is tied down, Fletcher enters the airport, getting in line, with his boarding pass, for the SkyWest flight to San Francisco. After the SkyWest aircraft settles onto the runway at SFO, Fletcher exits the airport and looks around. Spotting Jason, he follows him to the limousine where he climbs into the back. Jason, getting behind the wheel, takes off, heading for the City by the Bay.**

**Sitting in the aft lounge area of my 90-foot, twin mast yacht, Jason is serving champagne, accompanied by sandwiches and hors d'oeuvres to me and my partner, Harry Fletcher.**

**"As I see it," I said, "the only reason they would let a mastermind criminal of Bartiromo’s magnitude out early is to follow him and see if he leads them to the unrecovered diamonds."**

**“So, despite insurance company denials, there *are* unrecovered diamonds."**

**My KLM flight landed at Amsterdam's Schiphol International Airport and I climbed into my rental car and headed for Antwerp. I used my iPhone to call to call the Antwerp Diamond Center Police Department.**

**At the same time, Chief Insurance Investigator Denice Oliver, having parked her Mercedes S550 in a reserved zone, was walking toward the entrance of the police building. The 40-something, auburn-haired, svelte, well-dressed woman, entering the building, answer my call, "Oliver."**

**"Hello, Ms. Oliver,” I said.. “Jonathan Moore. I should be there within the next 30 minutes."**

**"Very good, Mr. Moore. Looking forward to meeting with you."**

**Inside the Antwerp Diamond Center Police conference room, plain-clothes chief investigators Agim De Bruycher and Patrick Peys join Denice Oliver around the conference table. Oliver, with a low-key manner that exudes the kind of assurance that is necessary in the heady, polyglot world of international jewel markets, is briefing the investigators on the forthcoming meeting with Mr. Moore.**

**Bruycher asks, "So, Ms. Oliver, as the chief insurance investigator, did you check him out?"**

**Pulling out a manila folder of computer print-outs, and thumbing through a few pages, Oliver begins citing from her notes, "Jonathan Moore, early 60s, is the chief financial officer for Universal Imports, a San Francisco-based multi-national company. Retired from the Marine Corps as a Lt. Colonel who in his final years of service was the aide de camp to a two-star general. Before that, his primary duty was planning covert operations.."**

**"Anything on his assets? Is he wealthy?, asks Bruycher.**

**“Close to a million in prime stocks and a 90-foot, refurbished, twin-mast yacht moored at the San Francisco Marina, named "Sweet Charity."**

**"So, what does he want?," asks Peys.**

**"Claims he has the resources necessary to recover most, if not all of the missing diamonds."**

**"He probably already has the diamonds and this meeting is for the purpose of negotiating his finder's fee without revealing that he's in possession or knows where the stones are," says Peys.**

**"You know better than that. If that were the case, he would already be on our radar."**

**"And should we recover the diamonds first, then even though he may have led us to them, when it comes to any finder's fee, he's shit out of luck, as the Americans say," suggests Bruycher.**

**A uniformed police secretary enters and announces, "Mr. Jonathan Moore to see you, Miss Oliver."**

**"Good. Escort him in."**

**Chapter Three**

**As usual I was relaxing in one of my favorite places, the fantail lounge of my yacht, bringing my partner Harry Fletcher up to speed. "Good news is that the insurance companies agreed to a 30 percent recovery fee."**

**"That's great! And the bad news?”**

**"Did I say there was bad news?"**

**"There's always bad news in our racket."**

**"It's only bad in that we cover our own expenses."**

**"I think we can afford it," comments Fletcher smiling.**

**"The insurance companies involved are sending a joint letter agreeing to the terms. Should arrive in a day or so."**

**On the 19th floor of our office building, in San Francisco's financial district, the elevator door opened and the building's mailroom employee handed a small mail bag to our attractive receptionist, Ms. Marianne Valton.**

**Ms. Valton then knocked, and entered my Universal Imports office, handing me the envelope.**

**"Thank you, Ms. Valton," I said. After she left, I opened the envelope from the insurance companies and read the letter of agreement. I took the agreement directly to Fletcher’s office. Entering, wearing a broad smile I opined, “Time we put together our team.”**

**Back aboard my yacht, using one of my *burner* phones, I was putting in a call to our computer expert. Although not officially a team member, the lanky, gorgeous, high cheekboned, 20-something lady of Russian heritage, Rayana Kakhimova, has been very helpful in previous capers. Previously, she had managed the IT services for the Cosmodrome spaceport at Baikonur.**

**Finally reaching her, I was very relieved when she confirmed that she was aboard.**

**The following day, on the 19th floor of our office building, the elevator door to Universal Imports opens and Chardonnay Rogers stepped into the lobby, announcing herself to Ms. Valton, "Chardonnay Rogers to see Mr. Jonathan Moore."**

**"Hello, Ms. Rogers," said Marianne, checking the roster, then motioning to the double doors, "Through there, then take a left until you come to a set of double doors marked Conference Room."**

**Chardonnay finally entered the conference room where I was gathered with Rayana, and, referred to by his alias, Robin Templar. The conference room was loaded with computers and several HD flat screens.**

**Taking her seat next to Rayana, Chardonnay greets the Russian warmly. “Rayana, it's been too long. You taught me all I know about computers."**

**"Oh, I doubt that," replies Rayana.**

**"No, it's true. Pity it was all in Russian, which I can't understand."**

**This got a laugh from both Templar and me. Smiling, her next words were, "Hello again, Robin, Jonathan."**

**"You're looking good, as always," remarked Templar smiling.**

**"Welcome back," I said. So, the reason we're here --"**

**That was my cue to go to works with the presentation. Using PowerPoint, projecting onto a large screen, I began recapping the highlights of the Great Antwerp Diamond Centre heist. The perceived mastermind behind the heist was Leonardo Bartiloni, age 63." I had his picture on the screen.**

**Pointing to the respective pictures on the screen, I continued, mentioning that, "According to court records, Bartiromo's known cohorts included: Pietro Tavano, known as 'Speedy,' Elio d'Onorio, called 'The Genius,' whose specialty is alarm systems, and a third man whose name we don't know. Sadly, we only know the group called him, 'The King of Keys.' He could duplicate keys on the run. He is yet to be caught." Indicating another photo on the screen, I said, "And this elegant-looking man is Fernando Finotto, known as 'The Monster.' Hugely capable lock picker, safe cracker, electrician and all-around mechanic. …Obviously another Douglas Shinaman.”**

**"Wouldn't have gotten very far without him," commented Templar.**

**Consulting my notes, I continued, "Now the following is according to Court Records. The vault housing the diamonds is situated two floors below the Diamond Centre and protected by multiple security mechanisms, including a lock with 100 million possible combinations, infrared heat detectors, a seismic sensor, Doppler radar, and a magnetic field. Two years prior to the robbery, Leonardo Bartiromo rented a sparsely furnished office which included a safe deposit box in the vault, beneath the building. It also included a tenant ID card that gave him 24-hour access to the building. There he posed as an Italian diamond merchant."**

**I then continued my presentation. "On a clear, frozen Sunday evening in Belgium, Bartiromo's cohorts entered the Diamond Centre vault and went to work on the 190 safe deposit boxes. Bartiromo himself stayed on the street, in the getaway car. Using only the light from their flashlights, the four-member crew broke into the boxes, extracting leather satchels filled with diamonds and gold. Although in the time allotted, the team was only able to penetrate 109 of the 190 reinforced boxes, the robbery was considered a huge success; no alarms; no police; no problems. And the heist wouldn't be discovered until guards checked the vault on Monday."**

**"Bartiromo always insisted that it was a diamond merchant who hired him to steal the game," said Templar.**

**Interrupting, I urged, "If we're ever to find these missing diamonds, we'll need that merchant's identity."**

**"That means interviewing Leonardo," said Templar.**

**"How do you propose to do that?" I asked. .**

**"You're the planner. I'll let you figure that out."**

**"Well, the editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, Steve Linde, is an old friend. I suppose I could get Chardonnay credentialed to do an interview with Leonardo for the *Post*.**

**"Great, if he'll go for it," says Chardonnay.**

**"He's already given an interview to *Wired* Magazine. I don't see why he wouldn't do another. In any event, most of what he's going to say is a matter of court records."**

**Templar turned to me and commented, "But he's yet to give up the name of his alleged Jewish diamond merchant. What makes you think Chardonnay can obtain the name?"**

**"Because she's Chardonnay. That's why,” I replied, meaning every word.**

**Turning to the Russian beauty, I announced, "Bartiromo supposedly lives in or near Turin, Italy. Get on your ipad and find an address."**

**Rayana opens her iPad and goes to work.**

**Chapter Four**

**In front of a modest villa just outside Turin, Italy, Chardonnay pulls her rental Mustang to the curb and parks. Dressed in a chic pants suit, she walks to the front door and presses a button. The door is promptly opened by Martina Bartiromo, an extremely attractive 52-year old woman.**

**"Hello, my name is Chardonnay Rogers, from the *Jerusalem Post*."**

"Yes, Miss Rogers," says Martina, smiling. "My husband is expecting you. Please come in," opening the screen door for Chard to enter.

Appearing young and fit for his 63 years, Leonardo Bartiromo's five years in the slammer don't seem to have hurt him all that much. As he shakes her hand, Chard is slightly taken aback by his charm. Although he has spent a lifetime as a professional thief, he has the engaging manners of a Northern Italian aristocrat, seemingly comfortable in his skin. His English is near perfect, with only a slight Italian accent.

Inviting Chard to sit, he asks, "You are from the *Jerusalem Post*? Are you Jewish?"

Hesitating, as she sits on the couch, Chard answers, "Does it make a difference?"

"No, not at all. I only ask because Rogers doesn't exactly sound like a Jewish name. Or have you changed it?"

Given Chard's darker skin tone, black hair and beauty of indeterminate Asian leanings, it's an understandable question.

"You're right. I'm not Jewish. I was born in Canada and raised as a WASP."

"A what? A wasp? I am sorry -- ?"

"White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant."

"Ah, I see. Would you care for some coffee? Perhaps a glass of grappa?

"No, thank you, I'm good. For what’s it’s worth, The *Jerusalem Post* actually is owned by a Canadian company."

"You don't say. I assume the owners are probably gentiles, as well."

"That I can't speak to. All I know is that the *Post* wants your version of the heist."

"Long as you understand that I'm not giving up any names that are not already a matter of public record."

Nodding, Chard says, "Let's get started."

Bartiromo explains, "Every day, billions of dollars in diamonds are transported along the diamond district's main street. During the day they travel from office to office in briefcases, coat pockets and the like. But at night, all those gems are locked up in safes and underground vaults. It's one of the densest concentrations of wealth in the world. And that's why I was there. For a thief it was *Il paradiso*. Paradise!," Bartiromo, laughing a little at the memory.

"I presented myself as a gem importer based in Torino and rented a small office in one of the Diamond Center's buildings. My purpose was to make friends with the merchants, buy a few diamonds from them, and then, of course, rob their office safes at night. I never once even considered taking on the Center's main vault. But then things changed. One day one of the Jewish dealer's I had met earlier came up to me and asked me to take a walk with him so we could talk. After we turned off Hoveniersstraat onto a side street, he said he would like to hire me for a big robbery."

"Just like that? He came out with it? Weren't you suspicious?" asked Chardonnay.

"I'm always suspicious. But he mentioned some names and said some things; I felt I could go forward with him. So, for an initial payment of 100,000 euros, I would find the answer to a simple question. Could the vault in the Antwerp Diamond Center be robbed? I was pretty sure the answer was no."

"Was he a tenant in the building?"

"He rented a safe deposit box to secure his own stash. He considered it a very safe place to keep valuables. Although photography was strictly forbidden, with a miniature camera designed to look like a pen, I began scoping out the Center's security features, which were considerable."

"I photographed the police surveillance booth on the Schupstraat, a street leading into the center of the district. The officers were testing the retractable steel cylinders that prevent vehicular access to the district. There are numerous video cameras throughout the three main blocks of the district, seemingly covering every inch of street and sky.

Access to the 14-story fortress in blocked to visitors by metal turnstiles and visitors are questioned by guards. Flashing my tenant ID card, I was allowed entry to the building.

Entering the elevator, I pressed a button for the vault antechamber, two floors down. A 3-ton steel vault door dominating the far wall has a combination wheel with numbers from 0 to 99. To enter, four numbers have to be dialed and there were 100 million possible combinations. And forget about power tools. The door was rated to withstand 12 hours of non-stop drilling. And, of course, the first vibrations of a drill bit would set off the embedded seismic alarm, in any event."

"Is that all?" asks Chardonnay jokingly.

"Not even close. The door was monitored by a pair of metal plates, one on the door itself and one on the wall just to the right. When they were armed, the plates formed a magnetic field. If the door was opened, the field would break, triggering an alarm."

"Let me guess. To disarm, a code had to be typed into a nearby keypad," Chardonnay offers.

Smiling, Bartiromo says, "And the lock itself required a huge key, some 30 centimeters long, and it was almost impossible to duplicate!"

"During business hours, the door was actually left open, leaving only the steel grate to prevent access. I pressed a button on the grate and the video guard, recognizing me from the monitor, remotely unlocked the steel grate, allowing me to step inside. As I entered it, a security camera transmitted my movements to the security room, and the images were recorded on videotape. The safe deposit boxes were made of steel and copper and required a key and combination to open. Each box had 17,576 possible combinations. I opened and closed my box and then walked out."

**Chapter Five**

Chardonnay and Rayana are gathered with Robin Templar in his suite at Turin, Italy’s Grand Hotel Sitea where Chard was giving her report. "So, Leonardo told the Jewish dealer that the heist was impossible. And he gave him the photographs to prove it. Then the Jewish dealer disappeared."

"Five months later,” Chard continued, “the Jewish dealer called back. He wanted to meet at an address just outside Antwerp. When Leonardo arrived at the apparently abandoned warehouse, the dealer was waiting for him. The dealer unlocked the battered front door, telling him he wanted to introduce him to some people. Inside, the Jewish dealer pulled back a corner of some black plastic tarps covering a massive structure and they ducked underneath. Leonardo said the structure was actually an exact replica of the Diamond Center's vault. Inside the fake vault, there were three Italians to whom the Jewish dealer introduced Leonardo."

The man referred to as King of Keys told Leonardo that he needed a clear video of the key. Although Leonardo told him that would not be easy; the King of Keys said that was not his problem.

"How did he manage to do that?" Rayana asks Chardonnay.

"That's the most interesting part,” explains Chardonnay. “Between the Genius and the Monster, they managed to install a miniature video camera just above the vault guard's head. With each spin, the combination came to rest on a number, recorded by the miniature camera, thereby recording the combination and sending the video signal to a storage room beside the vault. Among the supplies stored there is an ordinary looking red fire extinguisher strapped to the wall, which received the video signal. Although the fire extinguisher was fully functional, a watertight compartment inside it housed electronics that recorded the video signal. Then, after the guard finished dialing the combination, he inserted the vault's long key. However, that same miniature camera managed to catch a sharp image of the key."

Continuing her report, Chard says, "Two days before the heist, an armored truck delivered numerous small boxes to the diamond district. De Beers is the world's largest diamond mining company, operating mines in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, among other countries. Each month, the rough, unpolished gems are flown to London, where they are divided and placed in 120 boxes, one for each official De Beers distributor, many of which are headquartered in Antwerp."

"So, how did he dismantle the combined heat/motion sensor?" asks Templar.

Smiling, Chard answers, "Hair spray. Women's hair spray. The day before the heist, Leonardo, while alone in the vault, took out a can of hair spray from his jacket pocket and, covered the combined heat/motion sensor with a thin coat of the transparent, oily mist. The oily film insulates the sensor from changes in temperature, effectively shutting it down."

"It's a short window. Five minutes at the most," comments Templar.

"Maybe a study of the robbery itself will give us a clue as to who could be behind it," suggests Chard.

"Alright, let's go over it step by step," states Templar. .

"From court records and what Bartiromo told me, this is what we know. Bartiromo drove his rented automobile onto Pelikaanstraat, a road that skirts the District. He let out the Monster, the Genius, the King of Keys, and Speedy, carrying large duffel bags. Bartiromo stayed with the vehicle."

"Apparently, from what Leonardo said, the King of Keys quickly picked the lock and they all disappeared into the rundown office building. The Genius led the group out the rear of the building into a private garden abutting the back of the Diamond Center as, supposedly, it is one of the few places in the Diamond District that isn't under video surveillance. The Genius had brought with him a ladder, which he set in place, pulling out a homemade polyester shield from his duffel bag, climbing up to a small terrace on the second floor. Once there, moving in slow motion, the Genius used the polyester shield to block his body heat from reaching the sensor of the heat-sensing infrared detector monitoring the terrace.”

“Placing the homemade shield in front of the detector, preventing it from sensing anything, he then motioned for the rest of the group to join him with the rest of the team, scrambling up the ladder, the Genius disabled the alarm sensor on one of the balcony's windows. Everyone was wearing surgical gloves. With the sensor disarmed, the four thieves, carrying their duffel bags, climbed through the window."

"Coming through the window, the group dropped to a stairwell and then descended towards the vault antechamber," Chard continues. "Outside the antechamber, pulling black plastic bags from their duffel bags, in the darkness, the thieves covered the security camera and then flipped on the lights. Facing the vault door, the Genius pulled a custom-made slab of rigid aluminum out of his bag, and with the help of the others affixed heavy-duty double-sided tape to one side."

Continuing with her lengthy report, Chard, says, "It was ingenious the way they disarmed the magnetic field. The plates remained side by side and active and the magnetic field never wavered. Then the Genius stuck the double-sided tape on the two plates that regulate the magnetic field on the right side of the vault and unscrewed their bolts. The magnetic plates were then loosened but the sticky aluminum held them together, allowing the Genius to pivot them out of the way and tape them to the antechamber wall."

"Before entering the vault, the King of Keys, remembering what he had seen in the videos, that the guard usually visited a utility room just before opening the vault, they all searched the room. The Genius spotted the original key hanging on the wall, which he gave to the King of Keys. They thought there was no point in letting the safe manufacturers know that their precious key could be copied. And the police wouldn't know that a duplicate was ever made," comments Chard. "So the King of Keys slotted the original key into the vault's keyhole, and then waited while the Genius dialed the combination. After dialing the combination recorded by the video, they turned off the lights so as not to trigger the light detector in the vault when the vault door opened. The bolts that secure the door retracted and the giant, heavy, vault door swung open."

"During all this time, Bartiromo told me he had been waiting in his car, monitoring the street traffic on the police scanner, when he finally heard on his phone from Speedy who told him they were in.

Inside, after the King of Keys picked the lock on the metal grate, the Monster propped the grate open with the two cans of paint he brought. Now, the Monster had to disable the remaining systems, and do it in the dark before the hair spray on the infrared sensor became ineffective in stopping the Monster's body heat registering. The Monster walked eleven steps into the middle of the vault, reached for the ceiling and pushed back a panel. Every second he is there would raise the ambient temperature so he had practiced in the warehouse mockup to move quickly but keep his heart rate low."

"An automatic electric pulse was constantly being shot into the vault and back out along the wires the Monster had to strip. If any of the sensors were tripped, the circuit would break. When a pulse shot into the vault, an answer was expected. If an answer was not received, the alarm was activated," says Chard.

"The court records say, when the police later discovered the stripped wires, they guessed that the thieves considered cutting them, only to lose their nerve. But no, the Monster knew exactly what he was doing," comments Templar.

"Once the copper wires were exposed, he likely clipped a new, precut piece of wire between the inbound and outbound wires. That bridge then rerouted the incoming electric pulse over to the outbound wire before the signal reached the sensors, states Rayana.

"So, what happened further down the line would be of no consequence whatever," says Templar.

Chardonnay, continuing with her report, "Next, they blinded the heat/motion detector with a styrofoam box and covered the light detector with tape. Using their flashlights, they went to work. From his duffel bag, the King of Keys retrieved a homemade, hand-cranked drill which he fitted with a thin shaft of metal. Jamming the shaft into one of the locks, he began cranking. The thieves knew the vault had a hidden sensor set to the pitch of a power drill, but were unable to find it. Since even a single hand-cranked drill made a great deal of noise, let alone two or more, the team stuck with one."

"Opening the boxes, they yanked the contents out, dropping them into their duffel bags. Within the vault boxes," says Chard, "the actual diamonds are mostly kept in leather satchels and the unopened satchels were thrown into the duffel bags. Besides the visible gold bars, there were millions in currencies: Israeli, Swiss, American, European, British -- all pouring from the breached boxes. But the thieves figured the satch-els of diamonds were the mother lode."

Chard continues, "Bartiromo, still sitting in his vehicle, received a call from Speedy, who told him, the team was ready to come out, having stacked the four duffel bags together with a black trash bag near the street entrance. Bartiromo told them to come on. It's predawn by this time. The four men raced out of the building and jammed the duffel bags and trash bag into the car. Bartiromo, wanting to know what was in the trash bag, was told by the Genius that it was nothing they wanted to leave behind. The Monster said he should find a lonely spot and burn it. After the thieves jumped into the vehicle, Bartiromo pulled away from the curb and headed in the opposite direction."

"Gathered together in Bartiromo's Antwerp apartment, huddled around the four duffel bags, the thieves eagerly began unzipping the bags and the Monster opened one of the leather satchels. The satchel was filled with worthless washers as was the next one. A wave of stunned anxiety swept the room as the thieves continued opening the bags and rifling through the satchels, about one out of five containing diamonds. The rest held nothing of value. The thieves were enraged and nearly apoplectic. Leonardo confirmed what was now evident. They were set up,” says Chard.

Templar, pacing the floor, continues "They were set up alright. But the Jewish dealer was only the front. We need to find the real brains."

"Leonardo insists that in the weeks leading up to the heist, he had seen many of those same leather satchels in the offices of various dealers, and they were always filled with inventory. That's why he expected the total take to be over $100 million,“ reveals Chard.

"Instead of the paltry $20 million they actually got," remarks Templar.

"That means there is possibly up to $80 million for us to recover," affirms Rayana gleefully. "Our share could be as much as $24 million.

"We have to persuade Bartiromo to reveal the identity of the Jewish dealer and then we need to have the dealer reveal who he was fronting for. I've got some ideas on that," says Chard.

**Chapter Six**

Chardonnay pulls up to the curb in front of the Bartiromo home, parks her rental Mustang, climbs out, and followed by Rayana and Templar head for the house. Chard, pressing the bell, the door is opened by Martina Bartiromo greeting Chard with delight, "Buon giorno, Miss Chardonnay."

"Buona mattina, Maria. I want you to meet my associates." Indicating each one, she tells her, "This is Robin Templar and this is Rayana Kakhimova. We'd like to speak with Leonardo."

"Of course. Please come in."

Chard, Rayana and Templar join Leonardo in the living room.

Chard tells Leonardo, "Mr. Templar has a proposition I think you should hear."

Templar, taking over, says "I have been commissioned to recover the missing diamonds from the Diamond Centre robbery, if there are any."

"They exist alright. Somebody has them," insists Bartiromo.

"But you don't know who?" asks Templar.

"Whoever they are, they're dangerous."

"Why do you say that?" asks Templar.

"Because they were able to recruit men like the Genius, the Monster, and the King of Keys."

"You don't think they were recruited by the Jewish dealer?"

The Jewish dealer was just a, how do you say, a stooge; willing to take the fall for money. That's the way clever people do business."

"But he was never arrested," comments Chard.

"Because I never gave up his name."

"You gave up the names of the others?" asks Templar.

"Why not? By their hanging around my apartment, the police already knew who they were. It was actually my nosy neighbors who reported them."

Chard asks, "Do you think the police have any idea who the Jewish dealer actually is?"

"They know nothing," discloses Bartiromo .

"Does the dealer know who's behind it all?" asks Rayana.

"Of course he knows. But believe me, he won't talk. It would mean his life."

"Leonardo," says Templar, "I'm going to make you an offer you cannot refuse."

In the Antwerp Diamond Center police conference room, Templar, Chardonnay and Rayana are seated across the conference table from Detectives Patrick Peys and Agim De Bruycher. Templar tells the two detectives, "We're here to notify you that we're actively working to recover the missing diamonds for a fee negotiated with the insurance carriers."

"We're aware of the deal you made with the insurance companies. How can we help?” asks Peys.

"We'd like to know exactly how you managed to apprehend the perps?"

"The perps? Oh yes, you mean the robbers. The end for the *perps,* as you call them, began when a landowner off the E-19 motorway complained to the police that some local teenagers had a party on his land and left a mess. He insisted the police investigate, adding that there was videotape thrown all over the place. At first, the police ignored him. But when the owner added that there were also some white envelopes printed with the words Diamond Center, Antwerp, then Patrick and I were called in. Turns out, the trash was evidence your *perps* needed to get rid of," says Bruycher. "We were in a thicket in the area, wearing crime scene gloves, gathering evidence and putting it into clear plastic bags, when we found an interesting pile of torn paper, which turned out to be a receipt made out to Leonardo Bartiromo for a low light surveillance system.. And this was enough to get a search warrant for Bartiromo's Antwerp apartment."

Bruycher continues, "We then found a half eaten salami sandwich that had been discarded next to an antipasto Italiano salami wrapping that tied him to the robbery. During the search of Bartiromo's apartment we found a time-stamped receipt from a local deli for the antipasto Italiano salami sandwich."

Peys chimes in, "Bartiromo got 10 years, the Genius, the Monster, and Speedy each got five years. The King of Keys has never been caught. Bartiromo was released early due to good behavior."

Chard offers, "So you could follow him, hoping he will lead you to the $80 million in missing diamonds."

Inside an Antwerp café on Hovenierstraat the Jewish dealer finishes his espresso, lays some change on the table, climbs to his feet and leaves the restaurant. He turns off Hoveniersstraat onto a side street when he is distracted by a statuesque Kazakhastani beauty, who says, "Excuse me, could you tell me how to get to the railroad station?"

Before the dealer can answer, Rayana deftly thrusts a needle into the side of his neck, injecting its preloaded dosage into the artery, causing him to quickly go limp. A dark colored van driven by Templar pulls to the curb. Chardonnay jumps out, grabs the Jewish dealer and tosses him into the back of the van. Rayana climbs in as Templar engages the drive gear and speeds away.

Outside Antwerp, in the bathroom of an abandoned farmhouse, using an excessive amount of duct tape, Chardonnay finishing securing the Jewish dealer to a kitchen chair after which she and Templar lift the chair into the bathtub in which the water is well above the dealer's ankles. Chardonnay stuffs a washcloth in the dealer's mouth then firmly secures it with an additional strip of the two-inch-wide, gray duct tape.

Next, she takes the nearby lamp cord and quickly pulls apart the two wires until there is at least a three and a half foot gap. Using the wire cutters from her fanny pack, she then strips both ends for the first five or six inches then ties each end around one of the dealer's lower legs, just above the water line, with bare wire exposed to the skin. Over by the wall socket, poised in a threatening manner, Rayana holds the plug end of the electrical cord next to an electrical outlet. With Templar looking on, Chardonnay explains the rules to a secured and frightened Jewish dealer.

"Here's how this works, Izzy. When I give my associates the signal, she plugs the cord into the wall socket. But only for a second. Then I open the tape on your mouth and remove the washcloth. You then have six seconds to give me the name of the person behind the heist. If you fail to talk, I then replace the washcloth and put the tape back on and we repeat the process. If your answers don't match, we keep repeating the process until they do. It’s that simple. Some people have been known to survive this up to 15, maybe 20 rounds; after that, not so much. So, it's up to you. You're in charge, as it were. Now, nod if that's clear."

The Jewish dealer gives a reluctant nod.

"Alright! Everyone ready? Izzy? Okay, on my count...one...two...," says Chard.

Just as Chardonnay is about to nod to Rayana, the dealer's muffled voice is heard attempting to scream through the duct tape so Chard reluctantly removes the duct tape and washcloth, sounding disappointed, "You have a name? Already?"

"Frederick Van Gent. Frederick Van Gent?" cries the dealer nodding and weeping profusely.

"And where do we find this Frederick Van Gent?" asks Chard.

"Cape Town, South Africa. He's a big diamond merchant."

As Chard, Templar and Rayana walk towards their vehicle, Templar asks her, "Tell me, would you have actually given Rayana the nod?"

"Tell me, would you have let me?

Inside Templar’s Antwerp Diamond District Hotel suite, Chardonnay, Rayana and Templar are gathered together. Rayana is working on her iPad and Templar on his iPhone. Chardonnay is refilling everyone's glasses with Champagne.

Once again I was relaxing aboard my yacht when one of my *burn* phones chimed. It was Templar. “Jonathan, we need you over here A-SAP.”

“For what purpose,” I inquired.

“To keep the detectives, De Bruycher and Peys busy. Have them follow you around so the rest of us can slip off to Cape Town and recover the diamonds without them getting in our way."

"I understand. I'll be sure and make an insufferable nuisance of myself."

"These investigators are no dummies. They're actually damn good. In any event, you'll take over my suite here at the Hyllit."

"And if they ask about you?"

"Tell them I didn't think there were any unrecovered diamonds to be found and went back to Miami."

"Hmmm. If they're good as you say, it won't take much time for them to see through that lie."

"We don't need much time. Just enough. Bon voyage," states Templar, ending the call.

Clicking off his cell, Templar turns to Rayana, asking her, “Have you worked out an itinerary where we arrive on different flights at different times? After all, we don't want to make it too easy for them."

Rayana recites the itinerary. "We depart Schiphol on a flight to London. I will remain on the flight which goes on to Cape Town. You and Chardonnay will spend the night in London at Hotel 41, and then catch a non-stop flight following evening at 8:10 pm, which arrives in Cape Town at 9:40 am. An 11-hour and 30 minute flight."

"Long flight. Better be first class."

"Naturally. All tickets are first class."

Arriving at London’s Hotel 41, Chard and Templar approach the Hotel's check in clerk. Templar says, "Checking in. Two suites. Chardonnay Rogers and Robin Templar.” Turning to Chardonnay, he says "The hotel has two world-class bars. Care to try one of them?"

Seated at the bar, sipping wine, and admiring the South African themed decor, Chard asks, "Where are we staying in Cape Town?"

"I told Rayana to book us in different five-star hotels, but in the same general area. She found exactly what I was looking for in the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront vicinity. I want to establish you as a wealthy American who came to Cape Town, liked what she saw and decided to stay awhile. So, you're staying at the Waterfront Marina Residential Apartments. You'll like it. Luxury two bedrooms, large living room, kitchen, three 50-inch flat screen TVs and DVD players, balcony and air conditioning. Did I mention that it comes with a free cooked-to-order breakfast?"

"Well, that settles it. You know the real reason I'm a part of this caper is for the great food and wine?"

"I know. Me too."

**Chapter Seven**

At the Cape Town International Airport, a British Airways flight settles onto the runway and rolls out. Chard and Templar deplane, gather their baggage and exit the airport, engaging a taxi to take them into the city. Sitting in the back seat of the cab, Templar is pointing out the sights, "That's Groote Schuur Hospital where on December 3, 1967, Dr. Christian Barnard performed the first heart transplant."

"How do you know all this stuff? I mean, it wasn't your heart, was it?"

"How old do you think I am? Actually, I was born and grew up here. My father was an American diplomat and my mother taught French, Spanish and German, at the University of Cape Town. I was a somewhat nefarious youth until enlisting in the Marine Corps."

As the taxi enters the spectacular Victoria & Alfred waterfront, Templar points out the Dock House Boutique Hotel, saying "Rayana is staying there."

The taxi continues wending its way through the Marina until it comes to The One & Only Hotel, where it pulls up to the hotel's front entrance and Templar says to Chard, "This is where I'm staying. There's a Reuben's restaurant in the hotel. We all meet there for lunch at 1 p.m."

Templar climbs out, hands some bills to the taxi driver, saying, "The lady has reservations at the Waterfront Marina Residential Apartments. Please take good care of her."

"Yes, sir," says the taxi driver, impressed with the cash amount. To himself, he smiles, "I'll do everything but tuck her in."

The bellboy extracts Templar's luggage from the trunk and carries it into the hotel, with Templar following.

Inside Reuben's Restaurant at The One & Only, Chardonnay, Rayana and Templar are seated at a discreet table in the brasserie which specializes in local cuisine. While enjoying luncheon fare and an excellent wine from the Bouchard Finlayson vine-yards, Rayana reports on what she has been able to find out, often referencing files on her iPad.

"The Van Gent organization is one of the top players in the international diamond market," says Rayana. "Frederick Van Gent, with all of his fame is a....how do you say....a very careful man. Does not travel much. Hard to get to. But he is not without weakness. This, I think is the weakness.”

On her ipad, she shows the team a picture.

“This is Paul Venter, Van Gent's right-hand man, and his weakness."

"His job is like that of a 'fixer'?” asks Templar.

As the Team peers at the laptop images, Chardonnay seems unusually fascinated.

"Yes! This is Paul Venter. He does, well, many things for Van Gent," says Rayana.

"And why is he the weakness?" asks Chardonnay.

"He gets out a lot and he loves 'the good life.' Once a month he does a weekend by himself at a five-star hotel in wine country -- the Delaire Graff Lodge and Spa, near Stellenbosch."

"I know it well. Great place. Inside the hotel there are actually two Michelin two-star restaurants," says Templar.

"Sounds like my kind of guy," comments Chardonnay quietly.

Templar, noticing that Chard is nearly glassy-eyed as she stares at the iPad picture of Venter, asks her, "So, what do you think?"

"Reminds me of someone I knew once. The resemblance is....uncanny."

"Could it be the same man, then?" asks Rayana.

Chard, pulling her eyes from the image, says, "Oh, no....He died."

"I'm sorry," says Rayana.

"It's okay. It was a long time ago," replies Chard.

"We're a little pressed for time, so, when is this Paul Venter next scheduled for a visit to Stellenbosch?" asks Templar.

"This weekend," reports Rayana.

"Perfect!" To Chard, Templar declares, "We need to get you a wardrobe befitting a princess."

At the Delaire Graff Lodge & Spa, in the Western Cape Wine Country, wearing a designer bikini and looking devastatingly attractive, Chard lies on a lounge chair next to the pool; soaking in the sun while reading the *London Daily Mail.*

Directly across the pool in a similar lounge chair and wearing swim trunks is Paul Venter. A tuxedoed sommelier named Courtney is setting up a bucket of ice on a stand, next to Paul's lounge chair. Packed in the ice is a bottle carrying the iconic label of Dom Perignon. Courtney hands Paul a freshly poured glass. Paul holds up his flute glass filled with champagne, salutes the gorgeous stranger across the pool, then takes a sip.

On the other side of the pool, Chard raises her right arm slightly and wiggles her fingers in a hello manner at the handsome man offering the salute, before returning her attention back to the newspaper.

Inside the two-star restaurant of Delaire Graff Lodge, it is evening. Chardonnay, in a stunning designer outfit, is seated alone at one of the hotel's prominent tables. In an ice bucket next to her table is a bottle of Dom Perignon. Courtney tops off her flute glass as Chard looks over the menu. Paul Venter is escorted to his table by the Maitre d'; which table happens to be near that of Chardonnay.

After being seated, Paul asks a favor of the Maitre d', indicating the sommelier, who is hovering around Chardonnay, "Please ask Courtney to come and take my wine order."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Venter."

The Maitre d' approaches Chardonnay's table and whispers to Courtney, indicating Paul Venter's table.

Courtney respectfully addresses Chardonnay, "Excuse me, Miss Rogers, but an important guest has asked for my services. If you're ready, I will send the head waiter to take your order."

"Thank you, Courtney."

Chard smiles as she watches Courtney approach Venter's table.

Inside the popular brasserie at the One & Only Hotel, Rayana and Templar have finished dinner and are enjoying their after-dinner drinks. "One of us should be there, keeping an eye on her. After all, who is this Paul Venter, anyway?" asks Rayana.

"Of that, we're not sure. But knowing Chardonnay, I'd say he's probably got more to fear from her than the other way around. She'll be fine," replies Templar.

"Let us hope so."

**Chapter Eight**

At Delaire Graff, on a pathway to the lodges, a golf-type cart transports Chard and Paul to Chardonnay's Superior Suite. The cart driver stops in front of the suite and both Paul and Chardonnay disembark. Chard, opening the door, enters the suite, followed by Paul.

Inside, Paul looks around, impressed, commenting, "This is actually bigger than my suite. If you don't mind my asking, how much does it set you back?"

"I believe it's in the neighborhood of $2,500 per night. But I really don't keep track of these things."

Indicating the refrigerator, Chard suggests, "You'll find some Montrachet and champagne in the fridge. Why don't you pick one you like while I get some glasses?"

The fridge is loaded with wines of iconic labels, including Le Montrachet and champagnes: Taittinger, Laurent Perrier, Louis Roederer, and Dom Perignon.

"What do you do for a living?" asks Paul.

"I used to deal in fine art," answers Chard.

"You mean like rare paintings?" responds Paul sounding impressed.

"Paintings, antiquities. Occasionally, even jewelry. But I'm retired. For now, I just want to spend my money living the good life. How about you? What do you do?"

"Diamonds. I buy and sell them. But there is so much more to life than money, wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose that depends on your point of view."

Paul closes the door of the fridge without withdrawing any of the bottles and approaches Chard. Facing her, he places his hands on her shoulders. Looking into her eyes, he slowly moves his lips towards hers. He is startled when, in order to prevent the kiss, at the last minute she turns her head.

Grasping Chard's shoulders tightly, Paul shakes her in anger, "What the hell's going on here?? Just who the hell are you? What's your game?!"

With her hands free, Chard grabs Paul's upper right arm with her left while grabbing his belt with her right. In a whirl of motion, Paul suddenly finds himself flat on his back, on the floor with Chardonnay standing over him.

"Just who do you think I am?"

Standing above him, Chardonnay is looking down at the amazed Paul Venter, lying on the floor -- flat on his back.

"Sorry, Paul. You were coming on a little strong. After all, we've only just met. You'll have to give me some time," says Chard as she reaches for his hand and helps him to his feet.

"Sorry. Guess I'm not used to women of your class," asserts Paul sincerely.

"I forgive you. But if this relationship is going to survive, you're going to have to treat me like a lady. Sorry if you felt I was leading you on. I didn't mean to give that impression. It was just that I found you interesting and wanted to know you better."

Looking each other in the eyes, Paul Venter nods his understanding.

With Paul behind the wheel of his rare, 35-plus year-old, long-wheelbase, S-Class customized Mercedes convertible, he and Chardonnay motor their way through the Western Cape's spectacular wine country. A road sign indicates they are five kilometers outside Stellenbosch, in the Banhoek Valley. In the distance is the white Cape Dutch architecture of the Zorgvliet Estates winery.

"I want to take you for some wine tasting later, but first if you don’t mind I need to make a delivery. It won't take long," announces Paul.

The old Mercedes rumbles over a hill as the highway winds through the vine-yards.

The Mercedes passes through the gate to Stellenbosch Children's Foundation and takes a short, winding drive up the hill. In a shaded dell, an administration building and three classroom buildings are clustered.

Chardonnay is a little bewildered as a couple dozen young black African children come running to greet Paul, who gets out, pops the trunk and unloads three boxes of text books. Calvin, the young black administrator, comes out of the building, shakes Paul's hand, thanks him and takes over the delivery as the kids swarm around Paul.

"Can you stay a while, Mr. Paul? Join us for some football, perhaps?" asks Calvin.

"Sorry, I can't stay today, but next time we can play a little football and I can go over your economics papers," replies Paul to the kids. "It'll be soon."

The kids obviously love him. Chard sits in the convertible, observing her date with amazement and pleasure.

Paul climbs back into the convertible and fires up the engine, asking Chard, "Alright, so, are you ready to taste some phenomenal wines?"

Paul drives out of the gate and then driving along, notices Chard staring at him with a slight smile.

"What is it?:

"Nothing. You just surprised me with that school."

"I started the Foundation about five years ago."

"Why do you do it?"

"Makes me feel good. Not many people know about it. Not even my boss. I doubt he'd understand."

"Well, I think it's great."

Paul smiles at her.

Back at Delaire Graff’s Michelin two-star restaurant, Paul and Chardonnay are dining at the same table; Chard's table as it so happens. The sommelier, Courtney, is pouring the champagne that started it all, Dom Perignon."

"Tell me, my dear. Do you know anything about diamonds?"

"A little. Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to keep you around. Would you consider coming to work for my boss, Frederick Van Gent?"

"*The* Frederick Van Gent?"

"The very same."

**Chapter Nine**

At the Table Mountain Aerial Cableway, the tram is ascending to the top of one of the Seven Wonders of the modern World Inside are Chard, Rayana, and Templar. As we ascend, the Merry Band is all agog with the spectacular 360-degree view of Table Mountain and its surroundings.

"The food up here is not quite Michelin rated but I think you'll agree, the view makes up for it," maintains Templar.

"I did check menu, and they have some decent beer and wine," adds Rayana.

"Well, then it could hardly be a total loss," assures Templar.

As the tram touches the top of Table Mountain, the Team arrives at the Table Mountain Restaurant. Inside, Chardonnay, Rayana and Templar are enjoying Western Cape cuisine including succulent gourmet hamburgers.

"So, what did you tell him when he asked if you knew anything about diamonds?" asks Rayana.

“That I once worked as a gemologist, although I’m not licensed as such.”

"Where do Van Gent's diamonds come from and where do they go? That's the focus. Sooner we know that the better. Meanwhile, on our end, Rayana will continue doing her thing," states Templar.

"I'm not sure I can pull this off," says Chard.

"You've got to. Could end up being our best chance,” Templar points out. But then Templar reads something in Chard’s eyes that he has not seen before. “Okay, lay it on me. What's the problem?"

"I really like this guy."

"Well, he is good-looking," comments Rayana.

Then Chardonnay breaks down and confesses. "Rayana, Paul Venter looks exactly like my first love. Spittin' image. It feels just like....well, like being with him. What's really weird.....he moves like him, even smells like him." Uncanny.

Inside Chardonnay's posh Marina Residential apartment, the phone is ringing. The door to the apartment opens and Chardonnay enters, returning her card key to her purse. She rushes over and picks up the phone's handset, saying "Hello."

Calling from his office in the Van Gent building, "It's Paul. You should've given me your iPhone number. It took some doing to track you down."

"I'm glad you made the effort."

"Suppose I pick you up in two and-a-half hours and drive you down to Cape Point, where I hope to show you some terrific scenery and the Cape of Good Hope."

"Delightful. I'll meet you out front in exactly two and-a-half hours."

Chardonnay is waiting where she said she would be when Paul's old Mercedes pulls up to the curb, she climbs into the car and they drive off.

Driving the Atlantic Coastal Highway, south of Cape Town, Paul's Mercedes is traveling southbound along the roadway carved from the mountainside bordering the Atlantic Ocean. Chardonnay and Paul are enjoying each other's company as they drive. "And another thing about diamonds, they repel water. If you spray a diamond with water and it beads up, then it's probably real," explains Paul.

"I've heard that. Didn't know whether it was true. I've also heard that they accept hydrocarbons, such as wax or grease."

"Even I didn't know that, but it makes perfect sense. You must come to work for the Van Gent Diamond Works."

"We'll see," remarks Chard smiling

"Chardonnay. I refuse to take no for an answer."

About 60 km south of Cape Town, Paul and Chard come to rest on the carved out, concrete tourist attraction overlooking the Cape of Good Hope, where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans meet. Paul and Chardonnay join a young, black couple at the popular tourist spot. The two couples take each other's pictures with the ocean and rugged coastline in the background.

Inside the Flying Dutchman Funicular at Cape Point, Paul and Chard are ascending a hilltop towards the Two Oceans Restaurant, overlooking the Cape Point coastline.

Finally, Paul and Chardonnay are seated at a prime window seat overlooking the ocean and coastline below, the most stunning view of South Africa. As they sip a local Stellenbosch white wine, Paul has a clay fish with calamari and Chard a Sicilian prawn linguine dish, both specialties of the menu.

Paul explains, "Some years back, the company purchased a diamond mine along the lower Orange River. From the mine we ship out both uncut and polished diamonds to our vaults at the Antwerp diamond district. From there, they are shipped to the world's diamond merchants in Tel Aviv, New York, London, et cetera. But only when De Beers gives the nod, and at the prices they set?"

"You do have some knowledge of diamonds," comments Paul, impressed. "Although we're not officially a signatory to the De Beers agreement, we find it best to play by their rules. It's all about controlling the number of diamonds that are on the market at any one time."

"Thus controlling the price. If all available diamonds were to hit the market at the same time, they'd be as valuable as rock salt."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far, but you get the idea," responds Paul grinning.

"I seem to recall the Antwerp Diamond Center was robbed a few years back."

'We were among those hit. Fortunately insurance covered our losses."

**Chapter Ten**

The team (Chardonnay, Rayana and Templar) is gathered in Templar's luxury suite at the One & Only. The hors d'oeuvres and champagne lie untouched on the sideboard. Chard has everyone's attention as she gives her report.

"We need to find out all we can about this diamond mine on the lower Orange River," affirms Chard to Rayana. "I'm meeting Frederick Van Gent tomorrow morning."

"Give me your iPhone," interjects Templar abruptly.

As she does so, Templar replaces her sophisticated iPhone with an ordinary cell phone, telling her, "This is a prepaid, *burner* phone. Use it from now on. To the group, he commands "No iPhones for anyone. From now on we use burner phones," passing out prepaid cell phones to the team.

With Chardonnay in the back seat, the taxi wends its way along the De Waal Expressway around the picturesque mountain road overlooking the tall monuments to power and wealth, among them the Van Gent building. The taxi swings off the expressway at an interchange and heads toward the monuments. At the Diamond District in Cape Town's Financial District, the taxi pulls up in front of the towering Van Gent building. Chard climbs out, pays the driver and enters the building.

Inside the building, before one can reach the elevators, everyone has to pass between the information and security desks; the latter with two armed guards keeping an eye on the building's array of video monitors. Approaching the young man at the information desk and checking his nameplate, Chard says, "Excuse me.....Mr. Naude, I have an appointment with Mr. Paul Venter. I wonder if you can tell me how to find his office."

"His office is on the top floor, next to that of Frederick Van Gent."

"Tell me, do all the offices in the building belong to the Van Gent Company?" asks Chard.

"Oh, no, Ma'am. They only lease the top three floors."

"Three floors...out of what?

"Thirty."

"But the Van Gent name is on the building."

"They pay extra for that. It's like a sponsorship, a sports arena being named after a big company."

"I get it. Sponsorship."

Like most tall buildings the Van Gent building has different sets of elevators, one set covers the first 16 floors, and the second set floors 17 through 30, bypassing the first 16. Chardonnay lights the button of an elevator that will take her to the top floor.

On the 30th floor, the elevator door opens and Chardonnay steps into a lobby reminiscent of the Universal Imports Office in San Francisco, only the sign on the wall reads: VAN GENT DIAMONDS. Sitting behind her desk is the attractive young receptionist-secretary, Mitzi Morgan. Mitzi smiles at Chard, who is slipping on her chic, designer gloves.

"May I help you?" asks Mitzi.

"I have an appointment with Paul Venter."

"You would be Ms. Rogers?"

Chardonnay passes a long row of desks where the secretaries sit. Things are quiet, although it's not yet lunchtime. Most of the desks are empty and look as though they haven't been used in some time. She comes to an office marked: PAUL VENTER, ASSISTANT TO MR. VAN GENT. As she approaches, Paul's office, his door opens and he pops out with a broad smile on his face.

"Ms Rogers. So glad you accepted my offer. Please come in." Paul, holds the office door open and gestures for Chard to enter.

Chard enters the modest office befitting an executive assistant to the president. Paul closes the door and they both take a step closer to each other, apparently of equal minds. At first their lips touch softly....then with much more passion. One thing is obvious. Chardonnay is no longer just doing her job. Breaking their embrace, Paul gets down to business.

"You're going to meet the man himself, Frederick Van Gent. He's agreed to hire you part time to sort and grade our diamonds."

"But I thought you needed a secretary? I'm no gemologist. You need someone board-certified, do you not?

"That's alright. I'll teach you everything you need to know. Then we'll get you certified," says Paul smiling. "And by the way, don't tell Van Gent how well off you are or that you really don't need the job. He'll think you're here to steal his diamonds."

This manages to bring a smile to Chard's uneasy expression.

Paul and Chardonnay enter Van Gent’s office where Chard is warmly greeted by the boss. "You must be the Chardonnay Rogers that Paul has been telling me about," says Frederick smiling.

Chard nods, returning the smile.

"So you're going to help us sort some diamonds. It's a tedious job and we're thankful to have you aboard."

"I could use the extra money."

Paul shows a smile of satisfaction.

**Chapter Eleven**

**Meanwhile, in Anthrop I, one Jonathan Moore**, was seated on purpose at a highly visible sidewalk table at the popular cafe, sipping his espresso. Across and half a block up the street, Patrick Peys is behind the wheel and Agim De Bruycher in the passenger seat of a parked, nondescript car used primarily for surveillance. While I didn’t know it at the time, De Bruycher has his 20-power binoculars focused on me.

"He's been there 20 minutes, had two espressos, and no one has approached him," says De Bruycher.

"Maybe it's time we had a chat."

I finished my espresso and was about to leave when detectives Peys and De Bruycher settled into my table's, occupying the two empty chairs.

"Hello, Mr. Moore," says Peys.

"What a coincidence running into you," says De Bruycher.

"Yes, isn't it?" I said, smiling.

"Tell me, Mr. Moore, what's happened to your partners in the recovery, Simon Templar, Chardonnay Rogers and the Russian known as Rayana?"

"If you mean Robin Templar? He's returned to his home in Miami, convinced that there are no diamonds to be recovered."

"So, you're working alone?"

"Yes, I'm not as pessimistic as Mr. Templar."

"Any leads?"

"Making some progress."

Back at the Van Gent Building, Chardonnay exits the building, her burner cell phone to her ear and some text books in her other arm. She gets into a taxi parked at the curb and waits patiently for an answer on the other end of her call.

On the terrace of Cape Town’s five-star Mount Nelson Hotel, built in 1899, seated at a table overlooking the hotel's beautiful garden, Templar is having afternoon tea, which is served with delicate finger sandwiches, freshly baked scones and preserves. Nearby is a buffet table laden with sweet confections such as delectable cakes and milk tarts.

Templar answers his cell phone, "Hello?"

Chard inquires, "Where are you? Took long enough to answer."

"Having afternoon tea at the Nellie."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The Mount Nelson Hotel. Sorry but, in keeping with decor, I had my cell in the vibration mode. Didn't feel it at first."

"Thought you'd like to know that Frederick Van Gent only leases the top three floors of the building that bears his name. He pays a premium to stick his name on it."

"Hmmm. I'll pass it along to Rayana. Are you hired?"

"Start tomorrow."

"Doing what?"

"Sorting and classifying their diamonds prior to shipping."

"Really? You're not a gemologist."

"Paul's going to train me. Help me get my certification."

"Van Gent is planning on using you and not just as a diamond sorter. The question is, how and why. Just be careful, going into that lion's den," Templar thoughtfully insists.

"Don't worry. I'll be okay. I've gotten really close to Paul Venter. If something was coming down, I'm sure he'd protect me."

"Chard, I don't know how else to say this, but you're scaring the livin' bejeezus out of me."

"Robin, I've got it under control."

"No, you don't! The man works for the Godfather!"

"He's only an assistant. A glorified secretary; he wouldn't be included in a criminal scheme."

"And you know this for a fact?"

"He cares about other things. He's got his foundation. You should see how he interacts with those kids, and, you don't understand. I'll be fine."

With that, Chard takes the burner phone from her ear and snaps it off, termina-ting the conversation. She directs the taxi driver where to go and the taxi takes off down the street.

On the Terrace of the Mount Nelson, Templar's freshly baked scone is suddenly not so attractive as Chard has upset him more that he showed her. Noticing his cell phone is vibrating, he answers, "Hello? Jonathan? How's the weather in Antwerp?"

**From my Antwerp hotel suite** and with my cell to my ear and sipping from a flute glass filled with champagne, I gave Templar my report. "Kind of chilly, based on my chat with Patrick Peys and Agim De Bruycher. You were right. These are bright cops. I figure we've got 24, maybe 36 hours, before they figure out where you are. I did a dance for them, I don't think they bought it."

"Figure another day to fly down here and that will give us 36 to 48 hours to prepare for them."

"Sorry I can't hold them here longer."

"It's okay. You've given us a good head start. I just need time to figure out why they hired Chardonnay to sort and grade their diamonds."

"How's that?" asks Jonathan puzzled.

"Nothing," mutters Templar, clicking off his cell phone and stuffing it back in his pocket, he goes to work on his scone.

**Chapter Twelve**

Chard opens the door to her Marina Residential Apartment and, text books in hand, enters the luxurious apartment just as her burner cell phone rings. Tossing the three diamond industry text books on the couch, she answers, "Hello?"

Inside her 760-square-foot Victoria & Alfred Waterfront suite, sipping champagne, Rayana speaks into her cell, "It’s Rayana. …How did your meeting with Van Gent go? I was worried."

Chard answers, "Seems nice enough."

"You know he'll be running a background check."

"It'll take them some time. Today I wore gloves. But I'm going to be sorting diamonds and you can't do that wearing gloves. So, eventually they'll catch up with me."

"One thing that bothers both Robin and me. Why pick you to sort their diamonds?"

"I'm not sure. I think Paul just wants an excuse to keep me from leaving town. Says he'll train me and get me board certified."

"So, you think he's got a....how the British say....a fancy for you?"

"Oh, I know he does."

"What about you?"

"It's still early," replies Chard thoughtfully.

At Reuben’s Restaurant at the One & Only, seated at their favorite table, Rayana, Chardonnay and Templar are having dinner.

"Anyway, Paul gave me three text books to study, all about the diamond industry, and also some blank GIA grading reports to look over," reports Chard.

"Wait. You say they gave you some blank GIA grading reports?" asks Templar.

"That's right."

Slamming his free hand to his forehead, Templar says, "You know there's an international database of all board-certified graders whether they're from GIA or any of the other groups. Now if you go and sign Chardonnay Rogers to a grading report, what do you reckon that will set off, eh?"

"A whole lot of alarms," responds Chard suddenly getting the picture.

"And if those diamonds are confiscated and treated thereafter like conflict....or blood diamonds?"

"But they wouldn't ask me to forge someone else's signature."

"That's true. They don't know you well enough. Besides, attached to the report is the very gemologist's photo ID."

"They check the names against the database. Do they also check the signatures or mostly rely on the photo ID?"

"Doesn't matter. Either way it's a risk we can't afford."

Turning to Rayana, Templar tells her, "As a precaution, check the database on the off chance that there's a board-certified gemologist out there by the name of Chardonnay Rogers."

Rayana and Templar are walking through Cape Town's Gardens, an iconic botanical landscape to the south of city center and home to the five-star Mount Nelson Hotel.

"So, there is a Charlotte Rogers that is board certified?" asks Templar.

"Yes, but interesting part is that she signs her name as 'C. Rogers' or 'Char. Rogers.'"

"That is interesting. What were you able to find out about Van Gent's Orange River diamond mine?" asks Shinaman.

"Appears the mine played out two years ago. Today it doesn't produce enough to pay rent on the office space."

In the walk-in vault, two floors below Paul Van Gent's offices, Venter shows Chardonnay what he's looking for in a diamond sorter. He leads her through trays and trays of rough, cut, and polished diamonds.

"Many of these diamonds will go out on our next De Beers shipment to Antwerp. But Van Gent wants to hold back any diamonds with laser inscriptions."

"Yes, the Blue Nile text you loaned me said the inscriptions are normally found on the stone's girdle, whatever that is."

Paul pulls out his 25x jeweler's glass and putting the piece to his eye picks up one after another of the polished diamonds, looking for an inscription. Finally, he finds one. Passing the jeweler's glass to Chard he points to the section of the diamond where she will find the inscription number, saying, "Here. Take a look."

Accepting the jeweler's glass and putting it to her eye, Chard takes a look, saying "I see," then handing the glass back to Paul who refuses it with a wave of the hand.

"It's yours. Just make sure no laser inscription diamonds are included in the shipment."

Rayana and Templar are among nine other tour members visiting the Robben Island prison, now a museum, where Nelson Mandela spent 18 years of his 27 year sentence. The Robben Island tour guide is leading the tour group inside to Mandela's cell. The 7-sq. ft., 0.6-meter-wide cell is so small that barely two people could fit inside, leaving the tourists to line up for a peek. Templar's burner cell rings. He drops out of the line and steps off by himself before answering, "Hello?"

Chardonnay is on the other end of the call, "Robin, De Beers handles Van Gent's shipments to their vaults at the Antwerp Diamond Center. Now listen to this: Van Gent's only instruction to me: make sure no laser inscription diamonds are included in the shipment."

"That is interesting," replies Templar.

"Did you know the Van Gent Company owns a twin-engine turboprop?"

"Yes. Rayana found out this morning. It's a Hawker Beechcraft with a range of about 2,000 miles. Holds 11 passengers and can fly as high as 35,000 feet. Why do you ask?"

"I'm being invited to spend the next few days with Paul at Victoria Falls."

"And he's borrowing the company aircraft?" asks Templar agitated.

"I've always wanted to see the Falls."

Templar is aghast, "You can't go!"

"What?" asks Chard, annoyed.

"Hear me out! Paul Venter is a licensed pilot. Frederick Van Gent is not."

"So what? You're so wrong about Paul."

"Come on, Chard! You know better! You're a cop!"

"I'm also a woman and I know him better!"

"The old Chardonnay, the clear-headed one, would realize that your judgment is no longer sound."

On the verge of an emotional breakdown, Chard shouts out a primeval roar, "Aaaah!!."

She then takes a moment, reins herself in and speaks calmly, "Okay, Robin. So help me, I will prove you wrong," and hangs up the phone.

At Robben Island, after having peeked into Mandela's cell, Rayana joins Templar just after Chardonnay has terminated their call, "Well, at least these side trips make us look like tourists."

Seeing that Templar is upset about something, Rayana asks, "Say, what's got you so upset?"

Templar, utterly aghast, says, "That damn woman is going to get herself killed."

**Chapter Thirteen**

The Hawker Beechcraft King Air 350 flying at its optimum altitude of 28,000 feet. Inside the plane, the large passenger compartment. Paul Venter is piloting the aircraft, with Chard sitting in the co-pilot's seat.

"Instead of flying straight to the Falls, we'll stop and refuel in Bulawayo. We carry enough fuel to make it to the Falls but wouldn't have the required reserve."

"What's the range of a bird like this," asks Chard.

"About 1,800 nautical miles or 3,000 kilometers. That's roughly 2,000 miles to you, give or take."

"Nautical miles, miles, kilometers. It's all too confusing for me. Can we have lunch in Bulawayo?"

"Thought maybe we'd pack a picnic basket, rent a car and drive down to the Matopo National Park and have lunch at World's View, the grave site of Cecil Rhodes."

"Fabulous."

Templar and Rayana are again at Reuben’s, lunching at their usual, discreet table.

"I managed to hack into De Beers shipping orders for the past six months and the next four weeks. Van Gent has been shipping around 1.5 million dollars a month in diamonds, to their vaults in Antwerp."

"And from a mine that's no longer producing. …Shame. Shame.”

"The next shipment goes out Tuesday morning. They're shipping the insured, unrecovered, stolen diamonds back to themselves as having been newly mined. But short of robbing the shipment, how do we prove it and get our recovery fee?" asks Rayana.

"We may not have to. Instead, let's put in a call to Patrick Peys and Agim De Bruycher."

"That is the other thing I was going to tell you. Peys and Bruycher have reservations on a flight for Cape Town, leaving first thing in the morning."

In Zimbabwe, at the Matopo Hills Park, Paul, carrying a basket, and Chardonnay are climbing up the hill toward the grave site of Cecil John Rhodes. The iron slab covering Rhodes' remains simply reads: HERE LIE THE REMAINS OF CECIL JOHN RHODES. The barren, golden landscape is strewn with many boulders, some the size of a small house. A huge plaque reminds visitors that this is Malindidzimu (the hill of the spirits), a burial ground for those killed in the first Matabele war.

Using a much smaller set of boulders as chairs and table, Paul and Chard finally settle down to their late lunch of cold chicken and Western Cape white wine. Chard is taken with the beauty of the place and sighs as she takes it in.

"I'm glad you brought me here."

"I'm glad you agreed to come. Tonight we'll stay at the Safari Club Hotel."

"I thought we were staying at the Victoria Falls Hotel," says Chard surprised. "We're staying there tomorrow night. We'll be getting into Victoria Falls too late for high tea which, beside the view and proximity to the Falls, is the only reason for staying there. So, I thought we'd spend tonight at the Club."

"You know best," agrees Chard smiling.

At Victoria Falls, a monumental statue of Stanley Livingston stands next to the Falls as Paul and Chardonnay pass by in their rented Land Rover. The Land Rover is on the game reserve's two-lane blacktop heading westward alongside the Zimbabwe River. Paul is driving. Chard is in the passenger seat.

"The Safari Club has only 20 rooms. And it's in a game reserve. You'll see all kinds of animals, maybe even an elephant or two."

Approaching the Safari Club, the Land Rover pulls in front of one of the Falls' newer hotels and the bellboy and parking lot attendant are immediately on the scene, doing their jobs. Chardonnay and Paul approach the Safari desk clerk.

"Two suites. Reservations in the name of Chardonnay Rogers and Paul Venter.."

Checking his computer, the Safari clerk, confirms, "Ah, yes. Two suites on the same floor.”

Chardonnay interjects, "Instead of the same floor, why don't we make it the same room?"

While pleased with Chard's suggestion, Paul is nevertheless cautious, asking "Are you sure?"

Chard answers with a slight nod.

Later, seated at a patio table at the Safari Club Restaurant, so as to get a better view of the nearby animals, Paul and Chard are enjoying a delightful dinner, with some Western Cape wine, of course. Many animals take water from the nearby manmade pond, including a mother and two baby elephants. Although cautious, the animals seem to know that they are protected and will not be harmed. Paul spots a special animal and points it out to Chard.

"Look! There's a sable antelope."

"It's beautiful."

"They're an interesting animal. They run in herds. But when one of them is hurt, wounded by a hunter or mauled by a lion, the lead bulls turn on it and drive it from the herd."

"Shameful. But why?"

"Just like in our society, beauty is rewarded. The maimed and ugly are outcasts."

"That's a terrible attitude."

"It's a fact of life."

Later that night, in the Safari Club suite, lying in the luxurious king-size bed, Paul sensing that Chard is disturbed, asks "What on your mind?"

"It's what you said this afternoon."

"Said? About what?"

"The sable antelope."

"What about it?"

"I don't believe in casting out the maimed or wounded. What if you were wounded? Do you think I would cast you aside?"

"It's the smart thing to do. But not to worry. If I were ever in that position I would take the decision away from you by killing myself."

"Surely you're joking?"

In an attempt to relieve the tension, Paul, laughing, agrees with Chard that he was joking all along, "Of course, my love. I'm surprised you took me seriously."

Smiling, Chardonnay wraps her arms around Paul and pulls him towards her with serious intent."

After checking into the Victoria Falls Hotel, Paul and Chard go out to view the spectacular falls; the bridge over the Zambezi; the grand ole dam, and the narrow gorge of rushing water below the falls.

Afterwards, just like high tea at the Nellie, Paul and Chard are having tea with finger food, scones and the like.

"Tomorrow, we'll refuel in Kimberley, have lunch at the Kimberley Club after which I'll show you the hole," says Paul sipping tea.

"The hole?"

"Where De Beers got started."

At the Kimberley Club Boutique Hotel, the exclusive gentlemen's club, founded as the social diamond in the rough setting of a dusty, chaotic mining town is now a four-star boutique hotel offering 21 rooms and three dining areas. Inside the dining room of the club Paul and Chardonnay are having a late lunch: traditional turtle soup and pork belly roast, mutton cutlets and aspic of foie gras. The waiter tops off Chard's wine glass with a Cape classic.

Paul places his hand over his glass when the waiter tries to top off his glass, and shakes his head, explaining, "Flight status. I'm piloting a plane." To Chardonnay, he says, "In the beginning, in order to dine here and enjoy the club's facilities, you had to hold a mining interest in what is now referred to as the Big Hole."

"Which interests Cecil Rhodes took over in forming the De Beers company?"

"More or less."

Deciding to get personal, thinking of her job, Chard says, "You know, one thing about Van Gent puzzles me."

"What's that?"

"Well, I've heard that the Van Gent Mine on the Orange River played out six years ago. So where is the company getting the diamonds it's been shipping to Antwerp, Tel Aviv, London, and New York?"

"That rumor about the mine playing out is old news. Where did you hear about it?"

"That rumor, as you call it, surfaced when I mentioned I was going to work for the Van Gent Company."

"Who, specifically, told you?"

"Some fellow residents in my apartment complex. Are you telling me it's not true?"

"Partially true. That's how rumors get started."

"So, what happened?"

"Started with the 'use it or lose it' provision in the last Mineral Bill. If you don't produce, you relinquish your property?"

"They'd confiscate the mine?" asks Chard shocked.

Paul, nodding, comments, "The bill was designed to punish the big companies like De Beers, Petra, Trans Hex and Diamondcorp. In 2009, De Beers had shut down 60% of its operations. Unfortunately, other companies, like Van Gent, were caught up as well."

"What was supposed to be the bill's purpose?"

"To attract foreign investment and black-owned mining companies, in particular."

"That still doesn't explain how the rumor got started."

"You mean the rumor about the mine playing out?"

"What else have we been talking about?"

"The mine hadn't exactly played out, but the pipes were getting so deep that the gems were getting costly to dig out. That's when Van Gent got the idea to use the mine as collateral for the secret purchase of a coastal mine in Namibia."

"Ah, by listing the Namibia diamonds as coming from the Orange River mine, Van Gent was able to hold on to his Orange River claim."

"While using the money to convert the Orange River mine from an alluvial to a kimberlite style operation. But was clever of you to figure it out. So, you're not just a pretty face," says Paul smiling.

Chardonnay smiles and sips some of the Cape wine in her glass.

**Chapter Fourteen**

In Templar’s One & Only Hotel suite, Rayana and Templar are again taking a meeting to discuss strategy. "I am very worried. I am next to myself," says Rayana.

"Oh, you mean, beside yourself."

"Yes! That is the expression in English -- I am beside myself with worry."

"You're far from alone, m'dear.

A knock at the door sends Rayana ducking out of sight while Templar answers. Opening the door, Templar is taken aback to discover Chardonnay standing in front of him. He quickly pulls her into the room, checks the hallway, and then closes the door.

"You took a big chance coming here. By now they've got to have someone shad-owing you,” states Templar.

"They do. She's probably still following the taxi she thinks I got into," replies Chardonnay.

"She?"

"Mitzi....The receptionist for the Van Gent Company." Rayana emerges from the suite's bedroom and gives Chardonnay a warm welcome.

Chard turns to Templar, "I took a chance on this meeting because of some concerns I have that we may be going about this all wrong."

"I'm listening," adds Templar.

"We need Jonathan to go back to the insurance people and negotiate a new deal."

"For what purpose?"

"To increase our percentage of the unrecovered diamonds from 35% to at least 50%," says Chard.

"Why," asks Rayana.

"Because I believe, that from the beginning, the stolen gems have always been commingled with the company's legitimate diamonds."

"You're worried that the stolen gems won't be distinguishable from the legitimate ones?" asks Templar.

"Exactly! How do we know the difference? Maybe we should just hijack the whole damn De Beers shipment and keep it all. Now that would fund our favorite charities for a very long time," exclaims Rayana.

"Problem is Chard is correct. We could end up with zip, especially if Peys and De Bruycher have their way," affirms Templar.

"I know how we can positively claim recovery on a portion of the unrecovered gems and that's why I suggest Jonathan renegotiate our deal. Fifty percent of something is better than 100% or nothing. Rayana, I want you to get on your iPad and dig up all you can on Van Gent's purchase of a coastal mine in Namibia."

Rayana nods. Understanding what has to be done, Templar patiently, if reluctantly gives Chard her marching orders.

"It would be helpful if we had a location on the bulk of unrecovered diamonds. If not in the vault, then where are they?" asks Templar.

Back in the Van Gent walk in vault, using her jewelers glass, Chardonnay is busy sorting diamonds when, suddenly, the vault door is slammed shut. Light still on, Chard rushes to the vault door and attempts to open it, without success. After examining the lock from the inside, with a grim expression Chard pulls out her cell phone and attempts to dial. The No Signal message is displayed. Dismayed, she returns to her work, but now she is removing the diamonds from the pouches designated for shipment and replacing them with the diamonds she had set aside.

At Reuben’s Restaurant, Templar is seated at his usual table, enjoying an adult beverage, when Rayana joins him for a late lunch. He asks, "How's it coming?"

"Slowly. This Van Gent is slippery. I am having to hack through many layers, many false fronts."

Templar gets on his burner phone and hits a number on the autodial. The phone continues to ring and finally the call goes to voice mail. He clicks off without leaving a message, a grim expression on his face.

"Went to voice mail," he explains.

"But you didn't leave a message."

"If she's in trouble, there's always a chance her cell phone is compromised."

Inside the vault, Chardonnay finally finds what she is looking for; hidden behind a panel, a locked safe within the vault. She tries to open it but can't.

In the lobby of the Van Gent Building, Paul Venter and Mitzi Morgan pass the security and information desk as they exit the building.

"They'll discover the body sometime Monday, when De Beers comes by to pick up the diamonds for Tuesday's shipment to Antwerp," reports Mitzi.

"If she's a detective, placed upon us by who knows who, somebody is likely to make a noise," suggests Paul.

"That noise, as you call it, will fall solely on Van Gent, as we planned."

"Nevertheless, you'd better be there when they open the vault to make sure she doesn't leave anything incriminating."

**Chapter Fifteen**

**In the Antwerp Diamond Center Police conference room**, I was seated opposite Ms. Oliver at the table.

"My dear, Mr. Moore, I've checked with the insurance companies I represent and I'm sorry but the answer is no. And frankly, I agree with them," states Oliver. "My father, who had this job before me, always said, If you make a bad deal you hug it all the harder."

*"*Well. You can't blame one for trying," I said.

At the Van Gent Building, Templar is addressing Young Naude at the information desk, "A Chardonnay Rogers reported for work with the Van Gent Company, yesterday morning. She hasn't been seen since. I wonder if you have a record of her logging in or out."

"Sorry, sir. The building doesn't keep records of comings or goings."

"Well.....thank you, anyway."

Templar is walking towards the entrance when his burn cellular rings. Continuing his walk, he answers, "Yes?"

It was me on the other end. I gave Robin the bad news, "Sorry, Robin. The insurance company refuses to renegotiate terms."

"Can't worry about that now. Chard is missing."

"That is bad news. Far worse than the fact Peys and De Bruycher are headed your way."

Templar slows his pace almost to a stop before exiting the building.

"We know about that. Rayana has confirmation of their flight."

"Should have known she'd be on top of it," was my only comment.

"It's time for you to get back to San Francisco. Hold things down from there," said Templar.

All I could do was offer a weak, “I’m on my way.”

Rayana is still with Templar in his One & Only suite. The mood is grim and for possibly the first time, no adult beverages are being served.

"By now they probably have her prints and know who she is. If she's not already dead, they're probably holding her in one of those top floor offices. I say we go up and look for her," Rayana insists.

Suddenly there is a knock at the door. Templar rises and moves to answer as Rayana ducks out of sight into the bedroom. Cautiously, Templar opens the door. Standing before him with a wide grin on her face and a leather satchel in her hand is none other than Chardonnay Rogers.

"Sorry if I caused you any concern, but I couldn't sneak out of the building until they reduced the number of guards in the lobby.

Templar responds, registering both relief and anger, "You could have phoned!"

"Too busy dodging security."

Rayana emerges from the bedroom and a joyful hug is exchanged. The mood has suddenly done a one-eighty.

"What've you got there?" asks Templar indicating the satchel.

Chard moves to the bar, opens the leather satchel and lets the large-carat, cut and polished, diamonds flow onto the countertop.

"These are the diamonds that were supposed to be shipped by De Beers. They're clean, no etched serial numbers."

"Afraid I don't understand," says Templar.

"The diamonds De Beers will pick up on Monday all have etched serial numbers that can be traced back to the Antwerp Diamond heist. Imagine what great good our favorite charities can do with this; after deducting our rightful fee, of course. Anyone hungry besides me?"

Inside Reuben's Restaurant, seated at the usual table, Chard, Rayana and Templar are now able to enjoy some adult beverages with their gourmet meals.

"One thing I don't understand is, how did you manage to get out of the vault?" asks Rayana.

"It was Harry Houdini, as I recall, who famously said, safes are built to keep people from getting in, not getting out. Easy when you know how."

Laughing jovially, Templar says, "Our sometime teammate, Douglas Shinaman, taught you well.

**Chapter Sixteen**

At the Cape Town International Airport, the British Airways Jetliner settles on the runway and rolls out.

Inside the lobby, as Patrick Peys and Agim De Bruycher enter the airport waiting area they are surprised to be greeted by Robin Templar, himself. After the traditional handshakes, the three continue towards the baggage area.

"Look, Templar, Fletcher, whatever your name is, I'm not surprised to find you here," says De Bruycher. "By here I mean Cape Town. But I confess, I am rather surprised to find you here, at the airport."

"Look, you two," announces Templar. 'I'm about to make you superstars among your peers. All I ask is just don't screw it up, for both our sakes."

The two cops share a glance.

"Once we gather your bags, I'll arrange for you to interview both Rayana Kakhimova and detective-sergeant Andrea Parker, who you know as Chardonnay Rogers."

In Templar’s One & Only suite, as guests, Patrick Peys and Agim De Bruycher are being introduced to a life style far beyond their reach as more government employees. Both are enjoying the finest champagne and hors d'oeuvres.

There is a knock at the door.

To the two detectives, Templar states, "That would be Cape Town Chief of Police Wayne le Roux. I invited him to join us, since you two have little, if any, legal authority in South Africa."

Chardonnay answers the door, saying "Hello, Chief Le Roux. You're right on time." In uniform, Cape Town police Chief Wayne Le Roux enters and joins the group.

An armored car pulls to the curb in front of the Van Gent building and two armed guards climb out while the driver remains behind the wheel. At the entrance to the building, the two armed guards are joined by Chief Le Roux, Patrick Peys, Agim De Bruycher, Chardonnay Rogers, Robin Templar, and two Cape Town Police officers. Together, the group enters the building.

Ascending to the top floor, everyone is jammed into a single elevator. Chardonnay addresses her team, who are behind her as she faces the door, "You guys gotta back off. It was Van Gent locked me in the vault. Paul had nothing to do with it."

Behind Chardonnay, Templar cannot help a roll of the eyes at Chard's evident naivete.

At the information desk, Young Naude is on the phone, "Thought you'd like to know, there's a pack of people who look like they know what they're doing heading for your floor. Besides the De Beers guards, there is the Chief of Police and two uniformed officers."

At the reception desk on the top floor, it's Mitzi who is on the receiving end of Young Naude's cell, answering, "Thanks, Naude. I owe you."

Mitzi immediately hangs up and hastily dials another number.

On the De Waal Expressway, Paul's Mercedes is headed towards the financial district when his cell rings.

Answering it, he hears Mitzi's voice at the other end of the call, "I don't know what to make of it, but a number of police officers are accompanying the De Beers guards for this morning's pickup."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

"The plane ready to go, just in case?"

"It's ready."

"Diamonds aboard?"

"Yes, and 300,000 in U.S. dollars."

The elevator door opens at the top floor reception area and everyone enters Chief Le Roux steps forward and addresses Mitzi, "These men are here to pick up your De Beers shipment," indicating the guards. "Would you or Mr. Van Gent mind opening the vault for them?"

"Mr. Van Gent isn't here," discloses Mitzi as she suddenly spots Chardonnay at the back of the group and becomes visibly shaken.

With an impatient gesture the chief of police addresses Mitzi, "Then...?"

Rising from behind her reception desk, Mitzi directs them, "The vault is two floors below."

Everyone heads back to the elevator.

In the vault room, Mitzi works the tumblers to the walk-in vault. In no time she has the massive vault door open allowing the two De Beers guards to enter. The guards find the locked and marked package in its usual place and take possession. Carrying the marked package, they head for the secured elevator. With the De Beers guards leaving, Mitzi starts to close and lock the vault when le Roux stops her. The Chief then nods to Chardonnay (wearing a fanny pack). Detective-sergeant Andrea Parker enters the vault.

Chardonnay, inside the walk-in bank-type vault, pulls apart the panel which reveals the hidden safe and then goes to work. She briefly examines the tumbler lock. Allowing herself a smile, she pulls a stethoscope from her fanny pack and puts it to use. With the business end of the stethoscope pressed to the steel next to the combination lock, Chardonnay's skillful fingers manipulate the tumblers. Finally, Chardonnay jerks the stethoscope's tentacles from her ears and maneuvers the safe's lever. The safe's door swings open.

"Too easy," mutters Chard disappointed.

Chard exits the vault so that the two uniformed police officers can take possession of the small safe's contents. What they come up with are leather satchels full of cut and polished diamonds. Chard grabs the 25x jeweler's glass from a shelf in the vault, pulls one of the diamonds from the satchel in Chief le Roux's hand and takes a look. Satisfied, she pulls out another diamond and takes a look;, then another and another. Finally, she looks at Peys and De Bruycher., telling them, "They're etched with serial numbers."

Templar, allowing himself a smile, comments to the detectives, "If any of those numbers match up with the Diamond Center heist, they're part of the recovery. Sorry to cut you boys out of getting the reward for yourselves. But you do get the glory."

De Bruycher, not looking all that unhappy, responds "Glad you won. As police officers, we probably wouldn't have been allowed to accept the reward, in any event."

The elevator door opens and Paul Venter enters the vault room. Both Chardonnay and Mitzi urgently step forward to greet him. For the first time, Chard sees Miss Morgan as a competitor.

Before anyone can say anything, Chief Le Roux's voice booms out to Venter, "And you would be?"

"Paul Venter. I'm an assistant to Frederick Van Gent."

Motioning Paul over, the Chief points out the previously hidden small safe, asking, "What can you tell us about this safe full of diamonds we found in the vault?"

Paul, exchanging a quick look with Mitzi then glancing at the safe, says "I can tell you nothing. I've never seen it before."

De Bruycher's iPhone rings. Answering it, he repeats his name, "De Bruycher. Got it. Thank you."

Clicking off his phone, De Bruycher turns to Chief Le Roux, saying, "The insurance company's chief investigator is emailing a list of the serial numbers etched on some of the unrecovered diamonds. We'll soon know if our suspicions are correct."

Again the secured elevator door opens and Frederick Van Gent enters the vault room.

"What's going on here?" he asks.

"Mr. Van Gent. Good of you to join us. Would you do me a favor and step over here?" demands Chief Le Roux.

Van Gent does as told. The police chief points to the small safe within the vault.

"Do you know anything about this safe or its contents?"

Van Gent looks inside the vault then turns back to Le Roux, saying, "Never saw it before."

Indicating Patrick Peys and Agim De Bruycher, the Chief tells Van Gent, "Then you won't mind if these investigators take charge and inventory the contents while you accompany me to my office, at least until we sort out this whole mess."

"If you insist."

"I insist." Turning to Paul, Chief Le Roux says, "I would appreciate it if you would accompany me, as well."

"Absolutely, Chief. May I take my own car and meet you at police headquarters?"

Chardonnay pipes up, "Sir? I'll accompany him; make sure he doesn't lose his way."

Templar, appearing pained at Chard’s insistence on joining Paul nevertheless tries to hide it.

"I suppose that will be all right," says Le Roux.

"Do you see any reason why Miss Morgan cannot return to her receptionist desk? After all, we have a business to run," declares Van Gent.

"She can go," replies Le Roux.

With that, Mitzi wastes no time heading for the open door of the secured elevator. The door closes before the others have a chance of reaching the lift. Everyone but Peys and De Bruycher (who have their work cut out for them) wait patiently for the elevator to return.

Templar's phone rings. Checking the collar ID, he answers, "Yes, Rayana?"

Inside Rayana's room at the Dock House Boutique Hotel, while at her high-speed laptop surrounded by binders, manila folders and reports, an excited Rayana practically shouts: "Robin, listen, I have breakthrough!"

**Chapter Seventeen**

In the lobby of the Van Gent Building, Paul and Chard walk toward the exit as Chard says, "We'll catch a cab."

Meanwhile, on the vault floor, Templar is on the phone with Rayana, who says, "The Van Gent Company is not owned by Frederick Van Gent! The real owner is Paul Venter!"

Templar suddenly realizes Chard's immediate danger. He turns frantically to the elevator doors and presses the down button.

Outside the Van Gent building, as Paul and Chard step out onto the sidewalk, Paul's old Mercedes convertible (top down) suddenly whips around the corner, pulling up in front of Chard and Paul.

Behind the wheel, Mitzi shouts out, "Paul! Get in!"

Paul jumps, hurtling over the passenger door and landing in the passenger seat. But Chard, although surprised, is equally agile. She quickly leaps and lands in the rear seat just as the Mercedes roars away from the curb.

"Paul! What the hell....?" cries Chard.

Frederick Van Gent is under no restraints as he and Chief Le Roux exit one of the lobby elevators.

"Appreciate your cooperation and I'm sure we'll have the whole thing cleared up within the hour," says Chief Le Roux.

Paul’s Mercedes, with Mitzi behind the wheel, Paul in the passenger seat and a confused Chard in the rear, is racing along the De Waal Expressway in the fast lane at high speed. They take the off ramp at a sign indicating the direction to the airport.

Chard is flabbergasted, "Paul!! This isn't the road to the police station!"

Mitzi, to Paul, demands "Time for plan 'B.'"

"Stop this car, now!," insists Chardonnay, automatically reaching for her police-issue Glock-19 semi automatic. But it's not there!!

Mitzi reacts, reaching into her purse and withdrawing a small .32 caliber semi automatic.   
 Gun in hand, Mitzi quickly turns toward Chardonnay.

Paul reacting instantly, shouts, "No!" and grabs for Mitzi's gun, trying to wrest it from her. "Don't hurt her!"

In the struggle, Mitzi loses control of both the gun and the wheel. Suddenly, the Mercedes goes flying off the expressway at a high rate of speed and crashes into a ravine, bursting into flames. Upon impact, Chard, the only one not wearing a seat belt, is thrown clear of the convertible. Dazed and bloodied, Chard gets up, sees the flames and realizes her lover is still in the burning Mercedes. She climbs to her feet and rushes to help.

Reaching the Mercedes, Chard opens the passenger door, unbuckles the seatbelt and drags Paul from the burning vehicle, resulting in severe burns to her bands and arms. It's too late for Mitzi; she was killed instantly. Chard, with the flickering light of the flames, kneels in the ravine beside the prone and severely burned Paul Venter.

"I'm sorry, Chard. You deserve better.”

"Paul, hang in there. You'll survive this. I give you my word. Just stay with me."

Suffering in agony and continuing in a broken voice, Paul responds, Listen. There's a hidden safe in the plane. I want you to have the contents."

"The contents will be for both of us, Paul," cries Chard emotionally.

"No, it's over for me. I am a sable antelope at heart."

"What? It's not over. I'll take care of you."

"I .....couldn't allow you.... to do that."

With that, the wounded antelope puts the .25 caliber semi automatic he took from Mitzi Morgan to his temple and pulls the trigger, spattering the both of them with his brains and blood.

"No! Paul, no! Why did you....?" shrieks Chardonnay.

Chardonnay is beside herself with grief and weeps like a rainstorm as the car and everything around her goes up in flames and smoke.

**Chapter Eighteen**

At Chief le Roux’s police headquarters in Cape Town, the Chief's phone rings. He answers, "Chief Le Roux."

The call is coming from the vault room at the Van Gent Building. Using the 25x jeweler's glass, it's Peys who reads off the etched numbers of the diamonds to the two uniformed policemen, while De Bruycher is on his phone to Chief Le Roux, telling him, "The numbers match."

"Thanks," says Chief Le Roux.

The Chief hangs up the phone and his big frame merely does a half turn, looking Frederick Van Gent in the eye. Van Gent's eyes drop. Knowing he's cooked, he cannot return the chief's look.

Back in San Francisco’s 19th Floor Universal Imports office building, the elevator door opens and the DHL courier enters carrying a medium size box. He addresses the receptionist, Ms. Valton, "Registered package from South Africa for Mr. Jonathan Moore."

Placing the package on the counter, the courier offers the ubiquitous electronic device for Ms. Valton's signature.

I was in my office when there was a knock on my door**.** I called out, "Come in."

Marianne Valtan enters carrying the package, saying "Package from Mr. Fletcher."

"Great. Let's open it and see what he sent," I said.

Taking a box cutter from a desk drawer, I opened the box. First I took a look at the paperwork inside. The routine forms list the contents as zirconium diamonds with the customs prepaid. There were a lot of customs stamps listing the contents as cubic zirconium imitation diamonds. Value listed as US eight hundred thousand dollars, with the duty prepaid.

"Why would Mr. Fletcher send us phony diamonds?" asks Ms. Valton.

"I don't think he would,” I said.

Opening the package further Jonathan discovers a number of leather satchels. Opening one of the satchels, he discovers what looks like cut and polished diamonds.

"Get me a glass of water," I said to Ms. Valtan.

Next, I took the shallow bowl on my desk and dump out the cookies and candy, replacing them with the contents of the satchel just as Ms. Valton return from the wet bar with the glass of water.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"See if my hunch is right."

I poured some of the water onto the diamonds. Being repelled, the water beads. I couldn’t help but let my satisfied smile get even wider.

"If the other satchels are the same, we likely have from $8 to $10 million here."

Ms. Valton's eyes widen and she remarks, smiling, "I have a feeling this is going to be our best caper ever."

I couldn’t agree more.

**THE BORDEAUX CROSS-UP**

**PART FIVE**

**Chapter One**

Château Lafite Rothschild, one of Bordeaux's first growth wineries is eerily quiet on this moon bright chilly night in October. The residence chateau is on the right and the winery facilities on the left. In the distance, seven people are walking toward one of the entrances to the chai, all of whom are dressed in black, ninja-type uniforms. Each is carrying large, black backpacks.

Two of the ninjas disarm the primitive alarm system, while another pair works on and picks the century-old lock to the giant oak door. Then the ninjas enter the chai. Once inside the huge facility, the ninjas pull flashlights from their pockets and shine them across the stacked oak barrels. Getting their bearings, they quickly make their way towards a second iron gate.

One of the ninjas begins working on the lock and has the gate open in a matter of seconds. The seven enter a vaulted cellar which houses the château's wine library, or memory cellar, with bottles of Lafite wines known to date back to 1797. A light switch is flipped on and a bare bulb casts a dim light to reveal the vaulted ceiling and stone walls covered with dark mold and exposing the treasures lying on their sides in the sand-filled bins.

The seven intruders take off the cloth head gear masking their faces and stare at the rare old bottles with great reverence. The bins start with a single bottle in a bin marked 1778 and continue up through the 1800s and 1900s; all the way to 2012. But the ninjas are only concentrating on the bins marked from 1920 through 1968. Two of the seven intruders, Dennis and Jack, in their early thirties, appear to be in charge, with the other five, Ben, Marilyn, Beverly, Philip and Colette, seemingly looking to them for guidance. All the ninjas wear white cloth gloves so as to leave no fingerprints.

"I can't believe I let you guys talk me into doing this," mutters Philip, shaking and sweating.

"Alright, people. Let's go to work. Remember, don't touch any bottle older than 1920. The vibration could kill the wine. Now you know what to do, so let's do it!" pronounces Dennis.

Marilyn and Beverly move to the bins. With cloth wipes they clean the dust and cobwebs from the spot where the label usually goes and paint the vintage year on each bottle in white, as they hand them off to the others, who carefully place them into large tarp blankets with pockets of a size designed to hold the various bottles.

Five months earlier, on Marina Blvd., next to the San Francisco’s Golden Gate National Recreation Area Yacht Harbor, near the Golden Gate Bridge, two San Francisco police vehicles have a 4-door sedan boxed in on the side of the boulevard. The sedan contains two Caucasian men, a driver and his female passenger. Officer Lucas and the second officer are searching the car while they have the driver and his attractive female passenger handcuffed and face down on the ground. One officer is examining the interior while the other is looking through the trunk.

An unmarked police vehicle pulls up from the rear, stopping behind one of the black and whites. Plain-clothed San Francisco Police Department Inspector David Morgan, early 30s, steps out. The two uniformed officers all but snap to attention as David approaches them, asking, "What do we have here, officers?"

"Well, Inspector, we got a tip from a reliable source that this vehicle was transporting methamphetamine. We caught the passenger trying to ditch approximately five grams of cocaine and some marijuana cigarettes. Driver claims she's only a hitchhiker he picked up in Sausalito," reports Officer Lucas.

"Cocaine gives you probable cause for the search?"

"Yes, sir," replies the second officer.

"And what did you come up with?"

"Looks like we're going to have to wait for the sniffer dogs," says the second officer again.

Suddenly, David gets a text tone on his iPhone. He checks the screen, which reads, "Davey -- Need to see you immediately. Very urgent. When can you get up here?" David types a brief response, presses send, and puts his phone in his jacket pocket.

"You know what to do. Tell the Captain I'll turn my paperwork in later. My brother needs me up in Napa."

"No problem," says Officer Lucas

In Yountville, David pulls his unmarked vehicle into the parking lot of the Domaine Chandon winery and heads towards the administration offices. As Morgan enters the lobby, he passes Domaine Chandon's winemaker.

"David. I'm so sorry to hear the news about your uncle Frank," states the winemaker.

"What news?" inquires David.

"Oh, I thought you knew."

"Knew what?"

"Sorry, I assumed your brother had already informed you. I should let him tell you."

"No, just tell me. What?"

"Apparently, your uncle Frank was found dead at his winery in Bordeaux."

Approaching the door of the office marked *Director of Sales Communications*, *Tore Morgan*, David bursts in without knocking.

Tore Morgan, mid 30s, is on the phone, but when his brother enters, obviously upset, he excuses himself, "Look, I'll call you back in an hour." He hangs up the phone and stands to shake hands with his younger brother.

"Just heard the news," declares David.

"Have a seat, Davey. I'll fill you in on what I know."

David plants himself in the chair and awaits his big brother.

"Two days ago, Uncle Frank's body was discovered at his winery, a bullet to his right temporal lobe and the gun in his right hand. They suspect suicide," explains Tore.

"Two days ago?! Why're we only learning about this now?”   
 "The email came from Malcolm. You remember Uncle Mal?"

"Of course. I spent a summer over there once when I was in college. Mal and Frank were as close as brothers can be."

"For sure, and Mal's been Frank's winemaker since Frank bought the place, back in the 70s."

"I know. So, why the ten days?"

"Instead of sending the email to my iPhone, Uncle Mal sent it to the Chandon website. I was out of the country and only received it when I returned from London, yesterday."

"You were in London at the time of the death?"

"London, Italy, or maybe Spain. I'd have to check my itinerary. Come on, let's take a walk."

Inside the fermentation room of the winery, David and Tore are walking through the huge room and its giant, jacketed stainless steel fermenting tanks lined up side by side. Ahead of them, a perky young female Chandon guide is conducting a private tour of the winery for about 14 tourists; who, for the most part, are impatiently waiting for the wine tasting portion of the tour.

"Here at Chandon, we like to keep the temperatures between 70 and 86 degrees. We run heated or cooled glycol through those dimpled jackets you see on the sides of the tanks," the guide tells the tourists.

"I just don't believe Uncle Frank committed suicide!" declares David.

"Well, you are the detective. But maybe not for much longer."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm told that in his will, Uncle Frank left the winery to you."

"What?! me? What the hell am I supposed to do with it?" asks David taken aback.

"You're expected to run it."

The tour group, with David and Tore following, reaches the barrel room of the winery and enters a huge room with casks of still chardonnay wines stacked on top of each other, running its length.

"I'm not sure, of course, but the only reason I can think of for you inheriting, instead of me, is that you're the only one of Mom's children not in the wine business."

"All the more reason for me not to inherit."

Adjacent to the harbor, onside one of Marina Del Rey’s waterfront luxury apartment complexes, an attractive young couple is lounging in bed. Under the sheets, pleasantly drained, post-sex, Dennis, early 30s, and Beverly, late 20s, were part of the group of ninjas from the wine library scene at Château Lafite.

"You know, Dennis, I love you but, you really are incorrigible." reflects Beverly.

"What? I beg your pardon?” asks Dennis.

"No, really. You're doing me, at least one other woman I'm aware of, probably several others among all those actresses, bimbos and, of course, there's your wife. I can't imagine how you get away with it? Or for that matter, why you bother to spend so much time with me."

"Beverly, darling, I'm really not in the mood for one of those talks. I spend time with you because we're so compatible. You always get work on my movies; we share many of the same interests. And we rarely argue."

Dennis's iPhone rings, checking the display, he sees the callers name is Merv Davidson. Answering the call, "Merv. How are you? I assume you love the script as much as I do and that you want me to direct?"

Beverly, sensing this could take a while, takes the opportunity to get up and go

Into the shower.

The call is coming from a luxury home in Bel Air, where reclining on a comfortable lounge chair by his swimming pool overlooking the Los Angeles Basin, film producer Merv Davidson, a well-preserved specimen in his late 60s, has his iPhone in one hand and a glass of red Bordeaux in the other. On a lounge chair next to him is his gorgeous 40-something wife, Zelina, sporting a fashionable, designer swimsuit. Speaking into the phone, laughing jovially, Merv says, "Dennis, the script is great."

"Terrific!" responds Dennis excitedly.

"But I can't do anything with it. Not now."

"What? Why not?" asks Dennis, shocked.

"My last two pictures were bombs and I can't afford another. I'd be broke."

"But, Mervin -- " objects Dennis, crestfallen.

"Going another way, sport. But I have to thank you. Al that info you gave me on the French wine business has convinced me."

"Convinced you of what?"

"That it's the safest investment in the world. So, I'm partnering with a Frenchman in the purchase of a Bordeaux winery, not far from Lafite. I'm told I'll have the eighth largest collection of rare old wines in the world. A wine library they call it."

"If you're buying a winery just for the rare wines, you're making a big mistake."

"Dennis, you've been like a son to me, but I'm too old to lose money. How can I pass on this? There is no risk!"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you! There's tremendous risk! First, those wines are uninsured. Sure they will only get more valuable by the minute. But that only gives world-class thieves more incentive to rip you off. They can get in there and walk off with your whole damn cellar."

"Nobody can do that!"

"Wanna bet?"

"What are you talking about?"

“What's the most valuable wine library in Bordeaux?"

“If I could prove to you that wine libraries are vulnerable, that they can be opened up easily as a can of beer and the contents removed, you'd want to know about that, wouldn't you? I mean, before you put your money into something similar?"

"Well, yeah, I guess I would."

"And if I really got in there and proved it to you, and saved you from a disastrous mistake, you'd be grateful, right?"

"I suppose. Yeah. I guess," responds Merv cautiously.

"Grateful enough to put together financing for my movie?" inquires Dennis.

"There would have to be a timeline," states Merv thoughtfully.

"Six months from today," announces Dennis.

Pondering a moment, Merv then burst out with a long, hearty laugh, "Dennis, my dear boy, you got balls. Okay, maybe I'm just a crazy old man, but, what the hell. You pull off a heist like that, you've got a deal. But nobody can get hurt! And you've got to put the wine back afterwards!"

"Understood!"

Inside Bordeaux, France’s, Police Nationale headquarters, which also houses the Police Judiciaire at 87 Rue Abbé de Pepée, Bordeaux, in the office of Capitaine Adrian Legrand, Legrand keys his intercom, saying, "Faites venir l'Inspecteur Picard dans mon bureau des que possible."

The beautiful, light auburn-haired detective, Lieutenant Brigitte Picard, late 20s to early 30s, is making her way down the hallway towards the Capitaine's office. Capitaine Legrand is signing some papers when Lieutenant Picard enters, then closes the door behind her and standing at attention.

"You wanted to see me, Capitaine?"

"Have a seat. I want to go over your report on the Frank Sloan case."

Brigitte sits, pulls out her ipad, and taps on a few icons. Studying the screen, she begins a verbal update, "Malcolm Sloan does the lab work for about 30 wineries in the Pauillac and Margaux area. Between that and being the winemaker for Château La Gironde-Sloan, he makes a very good living. The body was discovered by Malcolm Sloan around 11 pm. The police of Pauillac did a test on the victim's hands and found no nitrites, diphenylamine, ethyl centralite or nitrodiphenylamine. But they botched the investigation because they failed to conduct a sodium rhodizonate test on the brother's hands."

"So it's unlikely that the victim fired the fatal shot?" asks Legrand.

"That would be my opinion." answers Brigitte.

"Both Frank and Malcolm had keys and were qualified chemists in oenology, trained at the University of California at Davis," comments Brigitte.

"The lab, even though it's on Frank's property, has always belonged to Malcolm, not Frank?"

"That's what I understand."

"So who is this new owner of La Gironde-Sloan?"

David Morgan, in a sharp business suit and wheeling two large suitcases, exits the Bordeaux airport and is met by his uncle, Malcolm Sloan, a distinguished, vital-looking Scottish gentleman of 62. David drops the bags on the sidewalk and the two men shake hands warmly.

"Good to see you again, Davey," says Malcolm.

"Likewise, Uncle Mal, although I wish it were under better circumstances."

"Aye, to be sure. What's it been, fifteen years? We've all changed a bit, haven't we?"

Then Malcolm grabs one of the bags and David the other and the two head for the nearby parking lot. Malcolm drives a fully restored 1969 Mercedes 280 SL with a Tunis beige metallic paint job. Malcolm turns onto the highway and heads for the city of Bordeaux.

While Malcolm is driving a somewhat entranced David through the outskirts of Bordeaux, David reveals, '"On the plane coming over, I found myself wondering what the hell got into me, taking a leave from the department and all. I'm still not quite sure what I'm doing here."

Malcolm smiles. The Scottish Highlands ring clearly in his English speech and in his candor with those close to him, but over thirty years in France have smoothed his edges into a charming patina of Gallic sophistication.

"Well. You're here to prove yourself, lad."

"Is that according to my mother?"

"Aye. As you know, she's always been a bit of a pistol," remarks Malcolm chuckling. "She told me once she believed the only reason you joined the police was out of some frustration that your father was taken from you at such an early age, and by a driver under the influence, no less."

"She's entitled to her opinion, I suppose. And, Lord knows, she will expound it like it was gospel."

"None's been able to stop her so far."

"But suddenly, I have to prove myself?"

"The truth is, Davey, Nancy was disappointed that you chose law enforcement over the family business. She sees your inheritance as a test."  
 "I always hated pop quizzes. So, what do I have to do to pass?"

"If you produce a successful harvest your first year, the rewards will be enor-mous for you."

David, chewing on this for a moment, answers, "Not if I sell it first."

Malcolm pulls the Mercedes over to the side of a tree-lined road, stops, takes the car out of gear and puts on the parking brake. Turning to face David, he says earnestly, "David, I am thinking that you, as the heir, need to actually read your uncle's will."

"I have read it. Well, okay, I've skimmed it. I might have missed some of the boilerplate.  
 "Well, hidden in that, boilerplate, as you call it, you'll find a certain codicil..."

Malcolm has David's complete and apprehensive attention, "An amendment, if you will, saying that as long as Nancy still owns her percent of the winery, she has first right of refusal on any inherited stock you might wish to sell, at a designated price."

David visibly astonished, then smiles wryly and shakes his head, "My dear mother."

"Feeling a bit gob-smacked, are you, Lad? It's nothing personal, you know. Your Uncle Frank, he loved you very much. But he was no fool. He wasn't about to turn his lifework over to someone who couldn't, or wouldn't make a go of it."

David is starting to feel the weight of the expectations. Malcolm laughs as he puts the Mercedes back in gear, pulls onto the road and accelerates. He slaps David's shoulder encouragingly. telling him, "Gaun yersel! You got this!"

As Malcolm is driving past the harbor area, where most of the wine negociants are located, he is coming to the downtown area and it is now early evening.

"So, the will leaves you the winery. But the Château, the maison, the house, that Frank left to me. But seeing as we're all family, I’ll be giving you Frank's suite of rooms. It includes an office, just been remodeled; best rooms in the Chateau. And you can stay as long as you want.”

"Thank you, that's incredibly generous," says David.

"You hungry? Let me buy you dinner, Davey," as he drives his Mercedes into a parking slot in front of Le St. James Restaurant. "You'll see how the Bordelaise eat, since you're now aspiring to become one of them, as it were. My lady friend owns this restaurant."

As the two walk from the car toward the entry, with every step, Malcolm seems to exude more savoir faire. For a Highland lad, he has learned to fit quite smoothly into the deceptively laid-back yet drop-dead sophisticated region of Aquitaine.

"Now, you may not like the cuisine here. But, if so, you'd be the first," says Mal-colm as the two enter the restaurant.

Once inside, David and Malcolm approach the female maitre d' of the restaurant, greeting her, "Est-ce-qu'il vous reste par hasard une bonne table, sans réservation?"

She responds, "Nous gardons toujours une table réservée pour vous, Monsieur Malcolm, surtout le vendredi soir," leading the way to the dining room where she ushers David and Malcolm to their table.

No sooner have David and Malcolm been seated than Malcolm is approached by the glad-handing Laurent Chevillot, early 60s, an overweight, blustering personality. Chevillot plants himself in the chair between David and his Uncle.

"Monsieur Sloan, so good to see you again," states Chevillot.

:Monsieur Laurent Chevillot. Like to introduce you to the new owner of Château La Gironde-Sloan, my nephew, David Morgan." Explaining to David, "Monsieur Chevillot is our neighbor. His winery, Château La Chevillot is adjacent to our property."

David shaking hands with Monsieur Chevillot, states, "A pleasure, monsieur. I assume you knew my Uncle Frank well?"

"Very well, indeed. We were frequent dinner guests of one another. In fact, he was my guest just two evenings before he....well, according to the police, he was murdered!"

"You sound like you don't believe it was murder?"

"No. Frank did not have an enemy in the world."

"Then you believe it was suicide?"

Chevillot suddenly loses his jocular mood and become serious, "Yes, I do. First, he was depressed, you know, because of the sudden death of his wife, your aunt, Monique. Secondly, for the first time in his life, all his affairs were in order, including his last will and testament."

David nods thoughtfully, as Chevillot gets to his feet.

"Good to meet you, Monsieur Morgan. I expect we will be seeing a lot of each other," comments Chevillot as he heads for the exit.

David gives Malcolm a quizzical look as Malcolm shrugs with his eyebrows.

"Did Uncle Frank seem depressed to you?" queries David.

"Frank and I were brothers, grew up together, worked together, would do anything for each other. But, at the heart, he was a very private man. And even though we've been thirty years in the south of France, we were still Scots, y'know. So, for all I know, he might well have been daft suicidal."

"But do you believe he was?"

"Nae...no' for a minute."

At this point, the maitre d' leads Lt. Brigitte Picard to a table near that of David and Malcolm.

Malcolm, spotting Lt. Picard, comments, "Hmm. Justice, it seems, never sleeps."

"Pardon?" asks David.

Indicating Brigitte, "That's the police inspector investigating Frank's murder."

David, studying the striking woman seated at the adjacent table, sipping a glass of white Bordeaux, asserts "Hmm. That is a coincidence. Does she speak English?"

"Why don't you go find out?"

"Excuse me."

David rises from his seat and stands before Brigitte, who is dining alone, saying, "Pardon me, madame."

Lieutenant Picard looks up and smiles.

"My name is David Morgan, new owner of Château La Gironde-Sloan. I understand you're the inspector in charge of investigating my uncle's murder."

"I am in fact with the Police Judiciaire. Please, sit down, Inspector Morgan. I mean former Inspector Morgan, on leave from the San Francisco Police Department."

"Very impressive," says David, seating himself.

"You would have done the same, I am sure."

"So, do you know as much about my uncle's death as you do about me?"  
 "You know well, I cannot discuss an open investigation."

"I thought a little professional courtesy might be in order."

"But, Monsieur Morgan, you are no longer police. You are a vigneron."

David laughs softly, "Okay, you got me there."

As David rises from his chair, he notes that Brigitte wears no ring, and tells her, "I apologize for disturbing your meal, mademoiselle."

David steps back toward Malcolm's table but Brigitte stops him with, "I'll tell you what, monsieur. Since you are family to the victim, tomorrow I'm going to be in Pauillac around noon. If my superior agrees, I'll meet you to talk about the case. Say, at the château around noon?"

"I will count the hours," responds David smiling.

David rejoins Malcolm at their table.

"She is rather a bonny lass. But," wagging a warning finger at David, "she is a police lieutenant."

"I know a few things about cops, Uncle Mal."

At this point something across the room catches David's eye and he asks, "Does that include chefs?"

The restaurant owner and chef, Jacqueline Bujold, 40-something, comes out from her kitchen to enthusiastic applause from the diners. Even in her chef's whites, she glows with a warm, sensuous beauty. Malcolm smiles broadly and with pride, "That is my lady friend."

"How did you meet this lady friend of yours," asks David, impressed.

"My daughter introduced us. Ever since my wife died, Audrey has been presenting me to all kinds of women. She doesn't want to see me live alone."

"Audrey? My little cousin? How is she?"

"Not so little anymore."

Jacqueline makes her way to the table of David and Malcolm and seats herself at a chair between the two. Morgan understands why his uncle wanted to show her off. Bujold is a class act.

"Jacqueline Bujold, let me present my nephew, David Morgan."

The two shake hands lightly, but warmly.

At the adjacent table, Lieutenant Brigitte Picard signs and hands the credit card receipt to the waiter, then heads for the lobby. She stops at the podium where the maitre d' inquires: "Est-ce que la table convenait? Avez vous établi le contact visuel?"

"Brigitte hands the maitre d' twenty euros, replying, "Parfait! And yes, contact was made."

On Highway D-2, Malcolm's Mercedes, with David in the passenger seat, exits the city of Pauillac, in the Haut Médoc, and continues northbound.

"I'm going to have to buy a car. Perhaps you can help me find a used one," suggests David.

"No need for that. You can drive this one. I normally drive one of the camions, that's a lorry, a truck to you. I only drove the Mercedes out of respect for the winery's new owner. You can buy a new car after we get the crop in."

Surrounded by vineyards, the Mercedes approaches a sign announcing in French and English that you turn left in 500 feet to visit Château La Gironde-Sloan. The Mercedes makes the turn onto Highway D-205. Adjacent to the highway, the Chateau looms ahead with the huge chai nearby and other buildings beyond.

"My brother retained my services as winemaker. The decision whether or not to continue that relationship is also yours."

"What're you talking about? Of course you're the winemaker. Nothing changes. And thanks for the loan of the Mercedes and for putting me up. I won't forget your generosity."

"Nor I yours, David. You're certainly different from your brother..." Thinking he may have said too much, Malcolm backs off. But then continuing, he adds. "At least from what I recall and what I've heard lately."

The Mercedes pulls in and parks in a slot designated as private at the Châateau.

David and Malcolm, with the suitcases, enter the châateau and, seeing the light on in the kitchen, head for the source. Entering the large kitchen, they find Audrey Sloan, a gorgeous blonde in her late 20s, and the 50-something head housekeeper and cook Odette Ginestet, with her husband, the château's cellarmaster, Pierre Ginestet, having a late snack. David is greeted warmly by all three, especially the spirited Audrey, who jumps to her feet and rushes up to David.

:"David! I heard you were coming and since, it's been so long, I wanted to welcome you properly," as she throws her arms around his neck giving him a big kiss on the lips.

David pulls her arms from around his neck and, studying her face, says "Don't tell me. You're my cousin Audrey?"

"Herself."

Interjecting, Malcolm announces, "I told you, she's not that little anymore. David, say hello to the chateau's most important people The two who keep the place running. Our cook and head housekeeper, Odettte and her husband, Pierre, our cellarmaster."

As David shakes hands, he tries a halting take with some of his poorly remembered French, "Bonsoir, Madame, il fait bon de vous...racontrer... or no, it's rencontrer, no?"

"Monsieur Morgan, I not only read and write English, but I speak it too," states Odette.

"Oh, thank God. And you do it flawlessly. Please forgive an American's ill manners."

Smiling, Odette tells him, "Je vous pardonne, Monsieur Morgan. In France, we always welcome any attempt to speak our language."

"You're more than kind," remarks David.

Malcolm, turning to Audrey, suggests, "Perhaps you will show your cousin to his quarters."

David carries both of his large bags as Audrey leads him up the wide staircase to the second floor.

"Your suite is in the east wing of the second floor. The third floor has been closed since Uncle Frank bought the chateau."

Audrey opens the door and she and David enter Uncle Frank's former suite. With the remodel, it looks like something out of the Ritz-Carlton. Sufficiently impressed, David drops his bags and looks around with jaw agape, asserting, "I think this will do just fine."

"I'm happy that you like it. My room is just across the hall. I know you're tired from your trip, so I'll see you in the morning,” says Audrey, as she withdraws from the suite, closing the door behind her.

David is in bed, sound asleep when the door to his suite opens and a shadowy figure enters. The figure, which appears to be nude, moves silently toward the bed. The covers of the giant bed are lifted and the mysterious, nude figure slips beneath the sheets. Sensing the movement, David wakes with a start, asking sleepily, "What's this all about?"

Audrey peeks out from under the sheets, whispering, "Shut up and enjoy."

As the sun rises over the vineyards, David awakens to find himself alone in the bed. Birds outside are chirping and the rising sun is pouring in through the sheer-draped windows. David rises, grabs a light robe, walks to the French doors, throws them open and steps onto the balcony. He is enthralled by the spectacular view of trees and vineyards extending endless into the distance. The birdsong and the golden light give David cause to breathe and reflect upon this, his tentatively enchanting inheritance.

In the kitchen of the château, Odette is cooking sausages for Malcolm and Audrey, who are seated at the large kitchen table, when David, now fully dressed, enters.

"Good morning, everyone," announces David.

"Morning, David. Have some breakfast, after which Audrey can show you the chai and explain how we make our wine."

David and Audrey exchange looks. Audrey smiles at him but gets no response. He moves to the nearby sideboard, an overwhelming display of plenty: baskets of croissants, tubs of butter, coffee, milk, orange juice, cold potato salad, scrambled eggs, melon slices, bacon and a basket of bread.

In Château La Gironde-Sloan’s barrel room, wine glasses in hand, David and Audrey stand next to one of the 600 plus barrels stacked three-high the length of the chai. Audrey removes the bung and lowers the glass pipette into the barrel. When the stem is filled, Audrey places her thumb over the top and raises the "thief" from the bung hole. Then, over David's glass, she releases her thumb and the red wine falls into the glass. She then fills her own glass.

"Tell me. Why such a large breakfast? We only ate a small portion of what was served."

"The breakfast is for the entire household staff."

"How many household staff is there?" asks David as he begins to go through the motions of wine tasting. He swirls the wine in the glass, checks the viscosity by viewing the legs, or wine falling from the side of the glass. He swirls again, and then holds the glass to his nose. Finally, he takes a sip, letting the cool liquid roll over his tongue.

"Total of five," answers Audrey. "Odette was working in the fields and running the harvester when Uncle Frank sent her to Paris, to the Cordon Bleu cooking school. She is great. It's too bad we have to let her go."

"What do you mean? Why let her go?"

"My father inherited only the château, not the fields or the winery facilities. Without the income from the winery, we will have to reduce costs."

"Too bad. Maybe we can work something out. That is, as long as I'm still a guest of the chateau."

With a final swirl, David drinks the remainder of the wine in his glass. Audrey takes a mouthful from her glass, expertly rolling it over her tongue, then spitting it into a sawdust-filled bucket sitting on the floor next to the cask. She then also dumps the remainder of the wine in her glass into the bucket.

David and Audrey are walking through one of the cabernet sauvignon vineyards.

“The four grapes we grow in the Haut Médoc, are cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, and petit verdot. The merlot usually harvests first and the petit verdot two weeks after the cabernets, depending on the weather," reports Audrey.

"You mentioned that Odette used to drive the harvester. Does that mean that we own a grape picking machine?"

"Frank bought one seven years ago."

"Before that, my father resisted buying a machine because all the harvesters he tested were just giant vacuum cleaners, sucking in everything, including rotten grapes, weeds and stones.:

:"What changed his mind?"

"Americans finally made one that worked."

"Yes, I'm familiar with the shaker-vibration model. They use it in California."   
 "We still need a few pickers to pick what the harvester misses. And, of course, the biggest competitor for pickers are the Rothschilds, who still do not use the har-vester."

David and Audrey are about to enter the chateau when Lt. Picard's vehicle pulls into the parking area and stops next to Audrey's rental. Brigitte gets out and approaches.

"I wonder what she wants," comments Audrey.

Instead of answering, David checks his watch then calls to the inspector, "Right on time, Lieutenant."

Inside Malcolm Sloan's laboratory, David and Audrey watch as Brigitte lays out on the counter a series of police photographs. Some photographs show Frank's body on the floor, gun in his right hand. Others show some test tubes filled with red liquid; two wine glasses, each one-third filled with what looks like red wine.

Picard addresses her narrative directly to David, much to Audrey's barely concealed annoyance, "The gun in Mr. Sloan's hand was stolen a month before the shooting."  
 "Stolen from whom?" asks David.

"Jacqueline Bujold, owner of the restaurant where we all dined last night." "And you believe Frank stole a gun from his brother's girlfriend in order to commit suicide?" inquires David.

"We believe only that it is possible," states Brigitte.

"I assume only Frank's fingerprints were found on the weapon," suggests David.

"That's correct, but I discovered a clear, partial print on one of the bullet casings that we cannot match to Frank, Malcolm or the gun's owner."

"Malcolm? Don't tell me you consider him a suspect?" asks David, surprised.

Brigitte, giving David a bemused look, remarks, "Oh, come now. Inspector? Would you not?"

Controlling his anger, David declares, "I assume you ran tests on the wine found in the two glasses."

"Of course. It was a cabernet aged in inferior oak barrels."

"How do you know that?"

"Microscopic oak particles were found suspended in the wine. That suggests new barrels, but either the barrels weren't properly charred or they were of an inferior quality. It also suggests a small winery producing vin ordinaire."

"Now we're getting somewhere. Did you test Frank's hands for nitrites?" asks David smiling.

"Pauillac police found no nitrites on either of Frank's hands. But they made a mistake when they failed to run the same test on the hands of Malcolm."

David is steamed but remains contained. Audrey stretches her shoulders like a lioness about to pounce.

As the sun's shadows are growing long, David and Audrey enter the chateau kitchen where Odette and her small staff are cooking the evening's meal.

"Odette? Qu'y a-t-il au menu ce soir?" asks Audrey.

The cellarmaster's wife answers without stopping what she is doing, "Quail and pheasant stew with jumbo sea scallops. Thin asparagus, with my own special sauce. Chipotle sweet potatoes. Fresh sand dabs and trout, flown in from California, courtesy of a friend. And for the main course, honey-orange marinated duck breast, with thin strips of Kobe filet mignon. And for dessert, a cabernet pear tart and a chocolate caramel pecan cake, with an assortment of petits fours."

Explaining to David, Audrey says, "We dine Saturday nights in the main dining room, sometimes with guests. Sometimes other winemakers and owners join us."

At a nearby cabinet, Odette's husband, Pierre, dressed unpretentiously in the blue jacket and beret of the farm worker, prepares the awesome wines to be served during the evening meal. The wines neatly stacked behind each other include: six bottles each of Laurent Perrier Champagne, Meursault, Le Montrachet, Chambertin, Château Latour, and three bottles of Château d'Yquem. Nearby a tub of ice to chill the champagne and the white wines.

"I better go get changed," states David.

"So should I," adds Audrey.

David is putting on his dress shirt, when the unlocked door to his bedroom opens and in slides Audrey.

"Is there something I can help you with?" asks David.

"There is. Help me out of my clothes," answers Audrey.

David is again reluctant, but just look at her. How does he say no? "I suppose we could skip dinner?"

As her clothes fall to the floor, she turns and throws her arms around David's neck, "Terrific idea!" she pronounces.

Its morning as David enters the kitchen to find Audrey, Malcolm, Odette and some of the staff having breakfast. Nodding and smiling at everyone, he picks up a plate, helps himself to the traditional breakfast and seats himself between Odette and Audrey. Addressing the cook, he asks "Where's Pierre this morning?"

"Oh, Monsieur Morgan. Last night he couldn't waste all that wonderful wine that the guests did not drink. He will wake up probably in time for dinner," responds Odette.

Turning to Malcolm, David asks "Just what kinds of wines are served at these dinners?  
 "We generally serve current releases together with rare wines from the wine library," explains Malcolm.

"Yes, the wine library." To Malcolm, "Very generous of you," says David.

"My dear nephew. Forgive me, but again I commend you to Frank's last will and testament. The cellar is part of the château and belongs to me. But the contents, that is, the wine, it belongs to you. It is I who should be thanking you for last night," comments Malcolm.

David suddenly looks sheepish as he feels Audrey rubbing his leg and even Audrey can't suppress a smile, so he quickly addresses another subject, "I got this in the mail today and I'm trying to understand it. The header shows what appears to be an acronym: "SAFER." It's in French!"

Audrey reaches out for the letter; which David hands over.

Reading the letter, "Ah, yes, "SAFER," La Société d"Aménagement Foncier et d'Etablissement Rural." Looking up, Audrey continues, "It's the agricultural commission. They want you to go to Paris and appeal to them for enough time to apply for a carte de séjours."

"Go all the way to Paris? Is that necessary?" asks David.

"Only if you want to own a winery in France," declares Malcolm.

On the Air France flight, David and Audrey are seated together in first class.

"It's great that your appointment with SAFER coincides with when I had to return to Paris. Now you can see my restaurant," suggests Audrey.

"I'm looking forward to that. But I must tell you I'm getting uncomfortable with the hanky panky," asserts David.

"Hanky panky?" asks Audrey coquettishly.

"Look, you're family. And I'm having a tough time looking your father in the eye."

"Speaking of my father, what did that lieutenant woman tell you? Does she think my father murdered Uncle Frank?"

"Malcolm isn't the only person of interest. They ran a background check on our cellarmaster."

"Pierre?" responds Audrey, shocked.

"Yes, and they found an arrest record for a Pierre Ginestet, in Italy, for using grapes not allowed in the Sangiovese blend, in producing his Chianti. He did six months, after which he ended up working for Uncle Frank."

"Pierre? I never imagined. And those two wine glasses they found in the lab?"

"Audrey, no one knows anything yet. It's too early."

It’s near sundown at Orly Airport as David and Audrey exit the airport building. A new Mercedes S550 pulls up and a young man, Jean Poitier, jumps out and begins loading the luggage.

"Jean, voici mon cousin, David Morgan. David, meet Jean Poitier," Audrey says.

Jean and David shake hands, warmly.

Passing through many a Paris Landmark, Jean is driving with David and Audrey in the back seat. Suddenly, Audrey calls out to Jean, "Jean! Gare-toi ici?"

Parked in the middle of the Tournelle Bridge, Audrey steps out of the Mercedes, followed by David. Audrey turns to Jean, "Pourriez vous porter les bagages dan mon appartement? Je veux montrer a David ma vue préférée de la ville."

"Tres bien," replies Jean.

Audrey leads David to the edge of the bridge, overlooking the Seine, Notre Dame Cathedral, and the Ile de la Cité, "This is my favorite Paris scene and my favorite time of day to view it."

A tourist boat full of people eating and drinking and generally having a good time floats by on the Seine.

"Beautiful! But the first sight of Paris I want to see is this restaurant of yours." comments David.

"Then look over your left shoulder."

David turns and is visibly impressed as he spots the distinguished looking, six story building on the corner of quai de la Tournelle, at the southern end of the pont de la Tournelle. A prime location overlooking the river.

"Restaurant La Grande Gironde is on the top floor," says Audrey.

The restaurant is mostly windows, large windows, giving diners a magnificent view of the city.

"Very distinctive building that you and your father own."

"Sadly, it is mortgaged heavily."

"In reading Uncle Frank's will, I saw the provision forgiving the mortgage upon his death. That must have given the two of you some breathing room?"

"Some."

"You have the ground floor leased out to boutique shop owners and, of course, I can see that the top floor is the restaurant. What's on the other four floors?"

"The second to the fourth floors houses what you would call high-end apart-ments. I keep the fifth floor for myself."

"The entire floor?"

Audrey and David are sitting at a table at the northwestern most corner of the Restaurant La Grande Gironde, next to its panoramic view windows which offer the finest view of any restaurant in the heart of the city, overlooking the Seine and a rear view of Notre Dame.

"Uncle Frank made the down payment on the building and his second mortgage is now forgiven. My father invested the money to take over the lease of the previous restaurant operator. We're both still paying the first mortgage."

"Which I understand is substantial."

"You're investigating me?" retorts Audrey angrily. "Vous avez été s’enquéirir de moi! Mais au juste, qu'esperez-vous decouvrir -- Inspector Morgan?"

"Calm down! I'm just trying to stay ahead of Lt. Picard, who should not be underestimated. She's a worthy opponent."

"Ou, peut-étre une amante potentielle. I've seen how she looks at you and you at her."

David is relieved as the waiter delivers the main course, duck, and gives Audrey occasion to pause her rant.

After dinner, David and Audrey are in the building's private elevator when Audrey tells him, "This is my restaurant's biggest asset and where most of the purchase price went." At this point, the elevator doors open and the two are in a vast wine cellar, capable of properly storing 500,000 bottles in multiple racks reaching from floor to ceiling.

Walking through the cellar, David asks, "What's the oldest wine you have here?"

"We have four bottles of 1929 Bordeaux and maybe 500 bottles of similar Bordeaux produced in the 1930s and 40s. We don't have a lot of old vintages. They're just too expensive."

"How expensive?"

"Well. Two of our pre-war Bordeaux wines are on our wine list each for 20,000 euros. Today, the bottles that are worth real money are found only in the private cellars of Bordeaux's First Growth estates."

"Mouton Rothschild, Lafite Rothschild, Margaux, Latour and Haut Brion."

"Very good. The old vintages stored in the private cellars of those estates are worth millions. Often far more than the wineries themselves," says Audrey as she stops and pulls a bottle from one of the racks. "I like almost any well-made wine. But this is my favorite."

Audrey places the bottle next to several wine glasses, including two flute champagne glasses, on a nearby, upended oak barrel, which is a bottle of Dom Pérignon Rose.

"A Dom Pérignon Rosé?"

Audrey, placing the bottle in a rapid wine chiller, comments, "Yes. A wine named for the well-known 17th century Dominican monk."

"Oh, yes. 'I am tasting the stars.' Isn't that what he said when he discovered what he'd made?"

"Well, we're not sure Dom Pérignon actually said that. But, if he didn't, he should have."

Audrey and David are once again in the building's private elevator when she inserts one of her special elevator keys into the proper slot on the eight-button control panel. As the elevator begins its ascent, she turns to David: Your biggest enemy is the weather. Like last year, we harvested early, thanks to Uncle Frank's intuition and my father's constant monitoring of sugar content. The Rothschilds also harvested early. Then the rains came. We managed to produce a full-bodied wine nonetheless. So did the Rothschilds. None of our other neighbors did. Their production was, well, not to say watery but, less than full-bodied."

"And, 'less than full-bodied,' for a Second Growth Bordeaux winery would be ---?"

"Pretty much a disaster."

David and Audrey step from the private elevator into the vestibule then into a very upscale Parisian apartment where they are greeted by Jean, "Mademoiselle Sloan. Je me suis permis de mettre les bagages de Monsieur Morgan dans la chambre d'amis principale."

"Merci, Jean. Pourriez vous nous apporter du champagne? Peut-être un Louis Roederer Cristal. Et rapportez un verre pour vous."

"Tout de suite, mademoiselle," replies Jean as he retreats to fetch the champ-agne.

Audrey drags David to one of the apartment windows with its spectacular view, telling him, "Jean is one of the people I rely on. He is, how do you put it? My right-hand man."

"And I suppose he would do anything for you?"

"I suppose."

"I made reservations for tonight at the Ritz."

"I'll have Jean cancel your reservation. You won't be charged. Tonight, you are staying here."

"You cannot be serious."

"Relax, dear cousin. You will sleep in the main guest room. The door has a lock."

David is asleep in the king-sized bed in the main guest room as the door is being unlocked with a key. The door opens and the shadowy figure of a young woman enters and slowly approaches the bed, disposing of her nightgown on the way. She lifts the covers on the bed and slips beneath the sheets.

"I see that you're not a person of your word," says David.

"You found me out," whispers Audrey.

Beneath the sheets, her hand reaches down.... "Oh, my god. you were waiting for me."

"Shut up and enjoy," David tells her.

David and Audrey are being driven around Paris in the Mercedes S550 by Jean, visiting the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs Elyeeses, the Eiffel Tower, the Palace and gardens of Versailles the garden of the Orangerie, the Temple of Love and Hameau de la Reine in the Trianon.

After visiting some of iconic tourist spots in Paris, Jean parks the Mercedes at the front of the Gironde building. David and Audrey step out from the back seat and start walking toward the building's entrance. At this point, David sees Laurent Chevillot entering the building and tries to hail his Pauillac neighbor, but without seeing, Monsieur Chevillot enters the building and disappears.

In Audrey's 5th floor apartment, David and Audrey are sitting at a table at the corner window and sipping Dom Pérignon Rosé, watching the sun go down over the city.

"Tomorrow I meet with the Ministry of Agriculture," states David.

"Take my counsel and fight to keep the winery. Become a citizen, whatever it takes."

Jean enters the apartment pushing a cart with two meals and two bottles of wine. He begins serving the meal, "Le plat du jour: Boeuf Wellington accompagne de foie gras et d'une sauce aux truffes. Quant au vin, un Lafite 1990 et avec le dessert, un Chateau d'Yquem 1989."

"Tell me, Jean, how are things going upstairs?"

"Crowded, as usual, Monsieur Morgan," comments Jean as he pours the wine.

"The diners will be disappointed, mademoiselle, if you don't make an appearance."

"Pas ce soir, Jean."

"I understand," replies Jean, who then retreats.

"I saw Laurent Chevillot enter the building," remarks David.

"Indeed you did. His apartment takes up the entire fourth floor, just below us. He has a girlfriend living there and visits on weekends."

"Sounds cozy. What's she like?"

"She's good looking, a pleasant sort but, well, he's very rich and she's young enough to be his granddaughter. You do the math."

It’s after sundown, inside his Paris apartment, when Chevillot embraces his 20-something girlfriend, Charlotte, who is seductively dressed in practically nothing. Breaking the embrace, he removes a packet from his jacket pocket and hands it to his lover. Charlotte opens it with glee, anticipating its contents. Inside is a jeweled necklace, with a diamond studded pendant worth the average Frenchman's annual salary. Practically screaming with joy, Charlotte allows Chevillot to pin the necklace around her lovely neck.

"Oh, my dear Laurent. You are so good to me. I don't deserve it."

"And you, my dear Charlotte, are the love of my life."

During their embrace, the flimsy garment Charlotte is wearing gets pulled out shape, fully exposing one of her lovely breasts.

In Audrey’s apartment, sipping an expensive wine, David and Audrey are seated at the small table next to a window overlooking Paris and the rear of Norte Dame.

"When Monsieur Chevillot is in Bordeaux, the restaurant caters her meals at a twenty percent discount. The bill is charged to Monsieur Chevillot," states Audrey.

"You're a remarkably accomplished business woman," comments David.

"The entire Sloan family have always had a good business sense."

"Your father fully extended himself, didn't he, when he bought out the restaurant lease for the sixth floor?"

"What's that supposed to mean?!!"

"That, clearly, your father greatly benefited from Uncle Frank's forgiveness of the building's second mortgage."

Audrey explodes and springs uncontrollably from her seat, saying angrily, "of course he benefited. We both did. But that doesn't mean we killed him!"

"I didn't say you did! But if it's a pattern that jumps out at me, what do you think Lt. Picard will make of it?"

"I wasn't even aware of the forgiveness provision until the will was read, after his death!"

"That doesn't mean your father wasn't aware!"

"Sortez d'ici! Je ne veux plus jamais vous revoir! Sortez!" exclaims Audrey as she picks up a knife from the table for emphasis.

As this point, David cautiously rises to his feet and backs his way towards the door. Audrey follows, waving the knife at him.

"Calm down! I'm only trying to stay one step ahead of the police," declares David, alarmed.

Now hysterical, Audrey is shouting: "Je vais vous dire ce qui s'est passe! Quelau'un a tue Oncle Frank.... mais ce n'était pas moi et ce n'était pas mon père. Mon père almait et admirait son frère. Et je n'accepte pas que vous insinuiez le contraire! Maintenant sortez d'ici! …Get out!!”

Backing towards the door, David reaches him and opens the apartment door leading to the elevator vestibule, asking wistfully, "Have my luggage sent to the Ritz." With that, he steps through and closes the apartment door behind him.

Inside the apartment, Audrey crosses her wrists, leaning them against the closed door. Then she touches her forehead to her crossed wrists and begins crying softly.

Carrying his own bag, David Morgan exits the Bordeaux airport where he is confronted by Lt. Brigitte Picard. She falls in step with him as he continues towards the parking lot.

"How did you know I'd be arriving today?" asks David, surprised.

"Monsieur Morgan, we are not called Police Nationale for nothing," replies Brigitte, smiling wryly.

"Of course. Please overlook my American naivete."

"Tell me. Have you met your kissing cousin's personal assistant?"

David stops walking, forcing Brigitte to also stop. Facing each other, David looks the police lieutenant in the eye, telling her, "Before you start a scandal, where none exists, Audrey is not my cousin. She was adopted by my Uncle Frank and Aunt Monique when she was a year old."

"Whatever you say," answers Brigitte coyly.

"It's the truth. You asked if I'd ever met Jean Poitier. What about him?"

"Apparently, he was in Bordeaux the night your uncle was murdered."

David carefully maintains his poker face, but this does give him a moment's pause.

As David and Brigitte reach the Mercedes 280 SL, David unlocks the door and tosses his bag into the passenger seat.

"Great car. Nice of your Uncle Malcolm to let you use it until after the harvest, when hopefully you will be able to afford one of your own."

"Now how did you know --?" asks David amazed. "Oh, never mind."

"Until next time, then," says Brigitte.

With that, David gives her a nod, flips on the ignition and drives away.

In California, sundown over the Pacific is spectacular from the large home with its four-car garage and adjacent helicopter hanger. The estate is located on an isolated bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean at the western end of Highlands Drive, just north of Carmel Highlands. Inside the home, in his office, Harry Fletcher, a trim 30-something, who often goes by the name Robin Templar, but never at home, answers the phone, "Fletcher."

Calling from Cedars Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles, a woman named Christine Graham is on the phone. "Ms. Graham. What a pleasant surprise. What can I do for you?"

Speaking from a hospital bed in a room inside Cedars Sinai, Ms. Graham an-nounces "I'm about to offer you the opportunity of a lifetime."

"Christine, that is quite a mouthful. But coming from you, I'm all ears. What's on your mind?”

"I was scheduled to depart for France with 24 wine students for a 21-day tour of the wine country."

"Was?"

"Instead, I'm here at Cedars Sinai with a case of pneumonia."

"Oh no. I'm sorry to hear that. Anything I can do?" asks Fletcher obviously con-cerned.

:Yes, Harry, there is. I need someone to replace me."

"Who could possibly do that?"

"I was thinking you."

"Wow. Look, I confess to having expensive tastes, but you're a celebrity food and wine critic. Me? Nobody knows me from the proverbial Adam."

That's not important. I know of no one better suited to lead this tour."

"I must admit, it's very enticing," replies Fletcher thoughtfully.

"Then you'll do it?" asks Christine.

"Twenty-one days, you say? Twenty-one days in the French wine country?"

"Gourmet meals. The finest wines in the world. And it doesn't cost you a cent."

"Sounds rough. But then, I suppose someone has to do it."

At Bordeaux’s National Police Headquarters, Brigitte is patiently waiting as David's Mercedes finally pulls to the curb at 87, Rue Abbé de Pepée. Tossing her designer bag in the rear, Brigitte steps into the classic Mercedes.

"On the phone, you said we were going to Cognac. I just realized it's a three-hour round trip. Hardly a day trip. Especially if one wants to relax and take in the sights," comments David.

"I made reservations at the Hotel Mercure. We'll make it a two-day trip," answers Brigitte.

David catches an unmistakable glint in Brigitte's eyes, as he asserts, "Anything to cooperate with justice."

As the Mercedes drives off and heads north on A10, Brigitte asks, "What did the Société d'Amenagement Foncier et d'Etablissement Rural have to say about your ownership of the winery?"

"With your sources, you should be telling me."

"I heard there were, how do you say? Family issues?"

"I won't ask how you know this. But yes, my dear mother, who is a 15 percent owner in the winery, and who somehow still manages to hold a French passport, has petitioned SAFER to prohibit me from selling my stock. At least until after the harvest; at which time a second codicil kicks in. If I fail to produce a profitable crop this year, then my mother has the right to purchase my shares at 50 percent of market value. I have little doubt of what she'll do with the stock."

"Turn it over to your brother?"

David does a little take, looking at her quizzically, saying "You are good."

The Mercedes, continuing north through the countryside, is approaching the city of Saintes. Road signs show exits for Saintes, on the left, and Cognac on the right.

"That's Saintes up ahead. Take N-141 east," states Brigitte.

The Mercedes makes the turn and heads east, toward the city of Cognac.

"So, who's your favorite suspect for my uncle's murder?"

"I'm sorry, but kissing cousin's father is still at the top of the list. He's the only one who gained financially, and he has no alibi."

The look on David's face indicates he is getting a little tired of the constant jabs about Audrey. Brigitte reads his expression and acquiesces, "Alright. So she's not your cousin. Technically."

"You checked."

Her eyes drop, giving away the fact that David's suspicion is correct, "Of course I did. We were talking about the usual suspects. Are you interested, or do you want to waste time discussing your non-cousin's family history?"

"You're wrong about Malcolm. You yourself pointed out that his fingerprints don't match the partial found on the bullet casing. And Jacqueline Bujold insists that Malcolm could not possibly be the one who stole her gun. He had no reason. She would have lent it to him, had he asked. What about that guy Poitier? You said he was in Bordeaux the night of the murder?"

"Jean Poitier. If he did it, he planned and timed it perfectly. He was in Bordeaux to attend the Saint Emilion Fête des Fleurs, the spring Jurade, celebrating the flowering of the vines. That evening, he was at three Chateaux: Ausone, Pêtrus and Magdelaine, buying wine for the restaurant. Unfortunately, his prints are not in our database."

"I still find myself thinking of those two half-filled wine glasses found at the scene."

"Don't see the connection, but if you want someone with a motive and opportunity, take a look at your brother."

"Tore? Ridiculous!"

"Passport control shows he landed in Paris two days before the murder."

"That means nothing. He works for Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessy and travels to France often. Although I admit it's strange he didn't mention to me that France was on his itinerary."

Road signs show the ancient city of Cognac, with its medieval turrets and 19th century boulevards, is only a few kilometers ahead. David's vintage Mercedes crosses the Charente River and enters the city.

At the Hotel Mercure, David and Brigitte enter the lobby and approach the registration counter, where they are greeted with a warm smile by the hotel manager, who notices that Brigitte wears no wedding ring, "Monsieur....Mademoiselle?"

"Brigitte Picard. J'ai rêservê deux chambres," as she hands the manager her credit card and he goes to work on the computer keyboard then again looks up and flashes his smile.

"Qui, Mademoiselle Picard. Vos chambres sont au premier êtage."

The manager hands David and Brigitte their separate key cards.

That afternoon finds David and Brigitte touring the Old Town. They take in the old buildings, gargoyles, cobbled streets, the Saint-Lêger church, among other attractions. In her chic designer outfit, Brigitte attracts considerable attention from the club patrons. David, too, takes notice of her with fresh eyes.

Later, in a Cognac night club, Brigitte and David dance, first in a hot, fast paced number, then a slower, more romantic beat which ends with the two in a kiss that starts off warm but then turns passionate. After the kiss that breaks the ice between them, they continue dancing away the night.

Finally returning to the hotel, David and Brigitte are walking down the second-floor corridor toward their rooms. Brigitte pulls her key card from her purse. Reaching her room, she inserts the card in the lock, and draws it back quickly, getting a green light.

"See you in the morning," says David, and with that starts to continue on to the next room. To his surprise, Brigitte grabs him, spinning him around to face her.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To my room?"

"Oh, David. That room is just in case the department makes a fuss over us spending the night in the same hotel," states Brigitte, amused at his naiveté.

"Deja vu," mutters David to himself.

The door to Brigitte's hotel room opens and they practically fall inside, kissing passionately. Naturally, clothing begins falling to the floor as fast as buttons, zippers and belts can be unfastened.

As dawn looms, David and Brigitte are in bed, awaking all aglow. David stares at her radiance and marvels, "Guess I'm just a really lucky guy."

"Oh, you better believe it. Your problem is you don't know how lucky."

"Really?"

"My goal in life has always been to become a capitaine in the National Police be-fore age thirty. Now I find myself both envying and despising you."  
 "Despising?"

"The chance that has been simply given you has been a lifelong, secret fantasy for me. But you. You don't seem to value the gift that you have been given. You would prefer being a policeman to running a winery. A very great winery at that."

"So, if you inherited a winery or had the means to purchase one, you would give up your future in law enforcement?" ask David, taken aback.

"To run a winery? Are you joking? I'd give up my career it up in a heartbeat."

"A heartbeat, you say?" says David reflectively.

"Yes. That is the expression in English, is it not?"

David nods in agreement but is suddenly sobered. He doesn't quite know what to make of this stunning, smiling creature in whose bed he has awakened.

The nude Brigitte rises from the bed; grabs and tosses David's pants toward him as she heads for the bathroom, telling him, "Get dressed. I've arranged for a private tour of the Hennessy cellars, including a tasting and lunch."

"How did you arrange that?"

From the bathroom door, Brigitte calls out, "I just pointed out that your brother was the director of sales communication for Domaine Chandon."

“Good move,” David confirms.

The Hennessy Cellarmaster is hosting David and Brigitte, "We are in the cellar of the founder, or le chai de fondateur, named after Richard Hennessy. It is also known as the Paradis Cellar. Here our oldest wines are aged, most of which are blended into our Paradis or Richard Hennessy Cognacs."

"Is it true that no blend less than one hundred years old is used in the Paradis or Richard Hennessy bottling?" Brigitte asks.

"With few exceptions, that is true."

As Edith Piaf's La Vie en Rose plays softly in the background at the nearby outdoor bar, David and Brigitte enjoy a luxurious picnic under an umbrella at a table set up on Hennessy's beautifully manicured lawn.

"I'm curious why all the warehouses seem to have a sort of black fungus growing on the roofs," comments David.

"That is a fungus and it's produced by evaporating cognac or the 'angels share' as distillers poetically call it. It's caused by a combination of summer heat and, how do you call that, not air tight barrels?" remarks Brigitte.

"I think my brother calls it, 'Porosity of the oak wood barrels.'"

"Ah, yes. But fungus or not, it is still lovely out here, no?"

As Brigitte sips her wine and looks out with pleasure on the classic view of the river, David finds himself watching her with pleasure as her lips touch the wine glass and she casually brushes back her golden-highlighted auburn hair from the elegant curve of her neck. Finally, he snaps out of it, asking "Ready to try the Paradis?"

She smiles and nods. David pours the precious cognac into crystal snifters. The couple swirl and sniff, then sip it as they lock eyes sharing instant ecstasy. Paradise, indeed.

In Reims, Harry Fletcher's wine tour bus is approaching and then slowly passing the Place du Cardinal Lucon with its statue of Joan of Arc, in armor, on her horse, brandishing her sword before the 13th century Gothic Cathedral.

The bus pulls up in front of the Taittinger Cellars and Harry Fletcher and his 24-member tour group step out and enter the winery. Of the 24 students, we should be focused on nine. They are: Jack and Colette Hamilton, Benton and Marilyn Lane, Philip Shen, Dennis Stevens, Beverly Amphlett, Michael and Diana Landis. The group is greeted by the cute, busty young Taittinger guide.

Inside the fermentation room of Taittinger, while Jack and Dennis are overtly flirting with the guide, Colette slips up next to Philip, who is busy photographing everything in sight.

"Ben and Marilyn say that when it comes to wine, you have the best palate of anyone here. Almost psychic in blind tastings," gushes Colette.

"Comes from not smoking, having a good memory and mostly, drinking a lot of wine," replies Philip, enjoying the compliment. Chuckling, he adds, "Your husband has a pretty good palate himself."

"Yes. In a way. If they extended the sensory evaluation award to sniffing, swirling across the tongue, and remembering certain parts of the female anatomy, Jack would be sommelier of the year," responds Colette, with sadness in her eyes.

Marilyn comes out of the winery's main entrance, walking towards the bus. En-tering, except for Beverly, who appears to be upset, she finds the bus empty. Marilyn, sitting next to her, remarks, "After all that champagne, I think I need a nap. So what's your excuse for leaving the festivities?”

"Nothing, really. It's just that sometimes Dennis can be so inconsiderate. I'm thinking of leaving the tour and going home," laments Beverly.

"Oh, you saw him with the guide?"

"It's not just the guide; it's every woman with a shapely figure.

"Frankly I was wondering why you stay with him."

An embarrassed Beverly shrugs and drops her eyes.

"Oh, my god. You're in love with that womanizer," states Marilyn.

Beverly's eyes tear up.

"Don't tell me....you're pregnant." exclaims Marilyn in sudden realization.

Beverly collapses altogether; crying her heart out. Marilyn rushes to comfort her, "Someday, someone's going to make sure that he finally gets what's coming to him."

Instead of comforting her, this comment sends Beverly into another crying spell.

In a single day, the tour includes visits to to the following landmarks and wineries: Krug, Roederer, Veuve Clicquot, Dom Ruinart, Laurent Perrier, Mumm's, and the Abbey at Hautvillers where the monk Dom Perignon is buried.

Visiting Moet et Chandon in Epernay at sundown, the group is inside the spectacular Orangerie, with its seven Palladian-arched windows overlooking a long, reflecting pool. Harry and the students are enjoying a catered dinner in the elegant guest dining room. Moet champagnes are generously poured by the traditionally dressed staff, including Dom Perignon.

Seated in a group are: Jack and Colette Hamilton, Philip Shen, Ben and Marilyn Lane, Michael and Diana Landis, Dennis, Beverly and the tour guide Harry Fletcher.

Smiling at his beautiful wife as he rises, Michael says, "Honey, would you excuse me?" as he heads toward the restroom.

As Michael passes her, Marilyn glances over at Debra who, taking a packet the size of a sugar substitute, tears it open and pours the contents into her husband's wine glass and stirs it with a spoon. Marilyn is naturally puzzled and somewhat alarmed. She turns to Ben for advice. But as Ben is busy talking to Philip, she says nothing.

Back at Château La Gironde-Sloan, in the lab, David is consulting with Malcolm, who is working with test tubes of red wine and some sophisticated equipment, "How's it look?"

Malcolm tells him, "The merlot is late this year, which means it will probably be harvested alongside the cabernet sauvignon. In about two weeks."

Exiting the laboratory, David bumps into Laurent Chevillot, who comments, "Glad to find you, young man. They told me you were in the lab." Chevillot joins David as they both start walking toward the château, adding, "Saturday, I'm having some guests for dinner, local growers. Just wanted to invite you and Malcolm to join me? I promise some good wines."

"That's very kind of you Monsieur Chevillot. I'll ask Malcolm, but you can certainly count on me," responds David.

It’s Saturday night at Château La Chevillot and Malcolm, David and Laurent Chevillot are seated at the huge dining table, having finished the meal, along with Chevillot's other guests: four owners or top executives of leading, nearby Haut Médoc wineries and their wives. Chevillot makes sure the guests do not lack wine in their glasses. Some of the wines he is pouring are produced by his distinguished guests.

"I understand that during WWII the Germans occupied many of the châteaux. I'm curious as to what shape they left the cellars?" asks David.

The four distinguished guests exchange glances to see who will answer. The first guest responds, "They were trashed! But knowing what was coming, some of the owners hid all their most valuable wines in caves dug especially for the purpose, which were carefully hidden."

The second guest comments, "Best kept secret of the war."

"If they hadn't done that, all the great pre-war vintages in our cellars, including the library cellars, would no longer exist," reports the third guest.

"Interesting. By the way, how much is the wine in these libraries worth?" David asks.

Chevillot and the four guests exchange shrugs.

"I'd estimate that if auctioned, the libraries of the first growth wineries, including Yquem together would be worth at least 100 million euros; the Rothschild cellar probably being worth the most," reports the fourth guest.

"I wonder if I could impose on you to give me a barrel sample of your previous harvest. I'd like to compare it with our own vintage," asks David of Chevillot.

"Of course! You are welcome to sample my wines any time. I welcome the comparison," responds Chevillot.

Shortly thereafter, in the barrel room, dipping the "thief" into the oak barrel, the ceremonially dressed cellarmaster fills the glasses of David and Malcolm. They take a sip, swirl it around their tongues, then swallow. They look at each other in surprise.

"This appears to be as good as, if not better than our own vintage," exclaims Malcolm.

"Congratulations. Having harvested during the rain, how did you manage to make such a good wine?" asks David.

"I couldn't afford not to," states Chevillot, smiling.

In the medieval city of Riquewhr, the Fletcher tour bus enters the city’s parking lot and the group exits the bus and tours the city, visiting the wineries of Dopff & Irion and Hugel.

Inside the fermentation room of Hugel, Beverly pulls Dennis aside and discreetly shows him a strip displaying the results of her home pregnancy test which shows a positive result.

"Is that what I think it is?" asks Dennis.

"It's the results of my HPT test." reports Beverly.

"And I suppose that word positive indicates that you're pregnant?"

"It would appear so."

Dennis appears nonplussed by the news.

In the city of Beaune, the tour bus parks in the lot next to the Hospice de Beaune. The tour group exits to visit the Hospice. Later, they visit various Beaune and Burgundy locations, including Clos de Vougeot, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Domaine Leroy and Maison Louis Jadot.

At Maison Joseph Drouhin, three hundred meters up the hill from the cellars, Fletcher and his 24 wine students gather in a hospitality area, sampling Joseph Drouhin wines in a most picturesque setting.

"I know you're not going to leave your wife, and I would never ask. On the other hand, I've decided against an abortion," reports Beverly.

"You're not serious? An unmarried teacher in a Catholic school? It could cost you your job," exclaims Dennis.

"That's a chance I'm willing to take."

Diana and Michael are seated in the partially enclosed gazebo. Michael doesn't look well; he and Diana seem to be arguing. Finally, Michael gets to his feet and, leaving his wife behind, walks out onto the patio.

On the patio, Michael runs into Fletcher, who is chatting with Ben and Marilyn. The tour leader takes one look at Michael and becomes alarmed, "Michael? Are you alright?" asks Harry.

"I'm fine, Mr. Fletcher. I think I've had a little much of that outstanding wine, that's all," answers Michael, who turns around and walks back into the gazebo.

Fletcher watches as Michael joins his wife and gives her a big hug.

"There's something wrong with that relationship. At Moét & Chandon, I saw Diana mix a powder into Michael's champagne. I don't trust her. If he's sick, she knows why," declares Marilyn.

At Bordeaux’s National Police Headquarters, in the office of Capitaine Adrian Legrand, David and Malcolm are enlightening the Capitaine. "Chevillot invited Frank to dinner two days before he was murdered. Chevillot must have bragged about his cur-rent vintage and poured Frank a sample, as he did with us." reports David.

"Frank would instantly have known that a wine harvested during the rains could not possibly be bigger and fuller than that of his own. I think his suspicion got him killed. David suspected this all along. That's why he asked Chevillot for the barrel tasting," suggests Malcolm.

"Now that you've given us a possible suspect and motive, we are attempting to match Chevillot's prints to the partial found on the casing. Too bad you didn't get a sample of the wine," asserts Legrand.

At that point, Lieutenant Picard enters, "Sorry, Capitaine, but we could not find any prints for Laurent Chevillot in any of our databases."

"I see. Now a sample of that wine becomes more important than ever. It could have given us probable cause to obtain Chevillot's prints," urges Legrand.

On the road to Lyon, the tour bus is heading south, through hills covered with vineyards. Up front, in the seats directly behind the driver, generally reserved for the tour guides, Diana is being questioned by Harry Fletcher.

"I'm concerned about your husband. He doesn't appear to be in good health. In addition to looking out for his well being, I, as the tour guide, am responsible for making sure any illness he might have doesn't affect the rest of the tour members. You follow what I'm saying?" asks Harry.

"Perfectly," answers Diana stoically.

"Now, you have been observed mixing a powder of some sort into your hus-band's wine. What about it?"

Diana is attempting to maintain her stoic expression even as tears begin flowing from her eyes.

"Diana, you might as well tell me all about it," declares Harry.

Suddenly, there seems to be a disturbance from the rear of the bus. The bus is being followed by a convertible with two hormone-crazed teenage French youths who are flirting with some of the younger women in the back of the bus who, of course, are shamelessly egging them on, blowing kisses, etc. Jack and Colette Hamilton are seated several rows ahead of the teasing young women. Finally, Jack turns to his beautiful and voluptuous trophy wife. "Look, sweetheart, why don't you go back there and show the amateurs how it's done."

Colette frowns at her husband but then reluctantly joins the three flirtations women on the rear, bench seat, taking center spot in front of the rear window. Giving the youths in the convertible a good view, she unbuttons her blouse. The boys in the convertible can't believe their eyes. Blouse unbuttoned, Colette pulls up her bra, and exposes her ample breasts. She then presses them against the window. The driver of the convertible, jaw all agape, loses control, veers off and ends up in a ditch alongside the highway.

It’s nighttime at Château La Chevillot and there are no lights as David and Brigitte, having discreetly parked their vehicle, approach Château La Chevillot on foot.

"I've confirmed that Monsieur Chevillot is in Paris. But that doesn't mean there are not employees guarding the chateau. We must be careful," warns Brigitte.

An alarm slowly starts to go off in David's sub consciousness as he asks," Do you have a warrant for this search?"

"Not really. All you have to do is testify that Chevillot gave you permission in front of several witnesses."

Carefully heading for the barrel room, they enter and David leads Brigitte to the oak barrel from which the previous tasting samples were extracted. David removes the bung and plunges a glass pipette into the barrel. When the stem is filled, he removes it and releases the wine into the vials held by Brigitte, who carefully replaces the cork on the open-end and labels each vial with the time, date, barrel number, and location where the samples were taken.

Brigitte drives while David holds the precious vials.

"French wines are probably the safest in the world. Sadly, even we can't com-pletely eliminate fraud. The most common fraud is adding oak chips, which is now legal in vin ordinaire, but illegal in anything above a table wine. If these samples show what I think they will, Monsieur Chevillot will be doing some serious jail time," announces Brigitte.

As David enters his bedroom at Château La Gironde-Sloan, his cell phone rings.

It’s his brother Tore, calling from his Domaine Chandon office.

"How does your yield look?" asks Tore.

"Little above normal. But the sugar content is low," answers David.

"Why is that?"

"The weather is near freezing at night."

"Clarets don't make very good ice wines. So, what do you intend to do?"

"Wait until it warms and the sugar is right."

"Wait too long and get a lot of rain, you could use the entire crop."

"Don't you think I know that?!"

"Mother might think waiting is a foolish gamble. Better a vin ordinaire than no vin at all."

"Mother might think a lot of things. Thank you for the input!!" states David annoyed, and then clicks off his smart phone.

At the Paul Bocuse Restaurant, the wine tour bus is parked at the famous restaurant located in Collonges au Mont d'Or, just south of Lyon. On the second floor, the wine students are divided into three standard rectangular tables seating four each, and two circular tables designed to comfortably seat six.

Fletcher is at one of the foursome tables with Dennis and Beverly, speaking to them quietly, confidentially, "Diana has a situation. Could you do me a favor and very quietly try to look into whether she might have any reason to kill her husband? I've asked her to tell you what she told me. Here she comes now."

Diana approaches the Fletcher table, settles into the vacant seat, glancing around furtively, then looks Harry in the eye, saying, "If my husband sees me with you for more than a minute or two, he might become suspicious."

"You agreed to allow me to confide what you told me to Dennis and Beverly. I want you to tell them directly," asserts Harry.

"The powder I'm giving Michael in his drinks is to prolong his life, not to end it."

Dennis and Beverly exchange looks.

In the Châreau’s kitchen, Odette Ginestet is serving breakfast to David, when a grim-faced Malcolm Sloan enters, saying, "Brace yourself. Our grape harvester has been sabotaged. It's useless."

"How long to get it repaired?" asks David, alarmed.

"Three to four weeks at a minimum."

"Can we purchase a new one?"

Odette seems particularly disturbed by the news.

"Yes, but with a five to six week delivery," states Malcolm.

"What about a used harvester, or a rental?"

"Plenty will be available, after the harvest. Whoever did it knew exactly what he was doing."

The tour bus pulls up in front of the Lyon Sofitel Hotel, located at 20 Quai Gailleton, on the banks for the Rhone River. Harry Fletcher, sitting behind the bus driver, grabs the mike and clicks on the bus's audio system, "Just a reminder, tomorrow morning we're flying to Bordeaux. I know many of you have looked forward to this leg of the tour most of all. In the meantime, you are free tonight here in Lyon. Enjoy, and we'll see you in the hotel lobby, packed and ready in the morning."

At a pleasant spot along the walkway next to the Rhone River, Dennis conducts an impromptu meeting of his closest cronies; which include: Jack, Colette, Ben, Mari-lyn, Beverly, and Philip.

"Okay, so we're robbing the wine library of the world's greatest and most famous winery, Lafite Rothschild." Angrily, Philip continues, "I wanna know what's really behind this. Frankly, I think it's a scheme to fund your latest film."

From his expression, it's easy to see that Philip has exposed the filmmaker for who he is. Dennis lays his cards on the table, "Philip is correct. It has everything to do with funding of my latest film project. It all started with a bet I made." Dennis then explains the bet to his six cronies after which he says, "And that's the whole story. Sorry I wasn't forthright with you before."

The expressions on the faces of the cronies reveal nothing. Finally, Philip says, "I'm still uneasy about it. You're sure there is no way this could bit us in the proverbial you know where?"

"If it does, I promise to step forward and accept full responsibility, keeping your names out of it," replies Dennis, in attempt to provide reassurance.

There are a few slight nods, and then Jack asks, "You're sure you can find that secret cave, again?"

"Absolutely. When I was there on a commercial shoot five years ago, I made friends with the old cellarmaster and he showed me the camouflaged cave. He said even the current owners don't know where it is. But that cellarmaster is dead now. I may be the only one left who knows how to find it."

"Would we get parts in your movie?" inquires Colette.

"I think that could be arranged."

"You have to admit, it would be one hell of a sweet caper," comments Ben to the group.

"And it would teach these wineries that their 17th century security systems need serious updating," declares Jack.

Only expressions of Marilyn and Beverly show skepticism.

In the barrel Room, David approaches Pierre Ginestet, who is busy topping bar-rels, telling him, "We're in deep trouble, Pierre. Our harvester is out of commission and we can't get a replacement until it's too late. We're going to need pickers, lots of pick-ers. Where can we get them?"

Pierre stops what he's doing and gives David his full attention, responding, "It's true that Pauillac has pickers, but unfortunately they are, what's the word?, committed to the Rothschilds, who have resisted the use of the harvester. These pickers would only be available after the Rothschild crops are in."

"Would offering more money help?"

"No, Monsieur David. This is Bordeaux. They are loyal to the Rothschilds."

"We must be able to get pickers from someplace."

"Gypsies, Spanish, Basque. I can try, but we won't have enough to replace the harvester."

That evening, in his bedroom, David is standing looking out the large open window at the surrounding fields, hoping for inspiration when his cell phone rings, which he clicks on.

In Domaine Chandon’s Etoile Restaurant, Tore Morgan is on his cell phone. Naturally, he is with a super-model quality blonde babe. David is on the other end of the call.

"Heard you lost your harvester?"

"How the hell did you find out?"

"Bad news travels fast in the wine community."

"Could it be that you had advance notice?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I'm curious as to who else among my inner circle wishes me harm. If you had anything to do with this, I'll hold you to account."

"You know something, Inspector Morgan? I don't doubt that at all."

Suddenly, there is the dreadful sound of rain and thunder. David springs from his room into the hallway. Running down the hallway, he quickly descends the staircase. Rushing to the main door of the Château, as he passes the kitchen, he happens to glance inside. He stops, turns back and enters where he sees Malcolm calmly reading a newspaper while enjoying a cup of strong coffee.

"Are you aware that it's raining?" David asks.

"That I am, lad," Malcolm answers

"Won't that screw up the sugar content?"

"Nothing a few warm, sunny days won't cure. Fortunately, it's not a heavy rain and shouldn't harm the grapes."

Calming down, David pours himself some coffee from the French Press pot and sits at the large table.

"The grapes are ripe. To bring the sugar content up to optimum, I'm only concerned about sunlight and temperature. We need dry weather, and sunlight on the vines."

The wine tour bus pulls into the Lyon International Airport and parks. Fletcher and his 24 wine students exit the bus and head for the airport entrance.

At altitude, the small, commercial airliner is heading west from Lyon, toward Bordeaux. Inside the cabin which has two seats on each side of the aisle, Ben and Marilyn are seated together. Keeping her voice down so that others cannot hear, Marilyn turns to her husband, "Beverly has confided to me that she's pregnant."

"Really? I hope she's not waiting around for Stevens to divorce his wife and marry her." comments Ben.

"How do you know he won't?"

"Because I know Dennis. There is no way he'll ever leave his wife."

At Bordeaux, Harry Fletcher and his students exit the Airport Terminal and head for the waiting, substitute bus. Although it's no longer raining, the sky is cloudy and from the shivers coming from the tour group, it appears the temperature is unusually cold.

At Police headquarters, Capt. Legrand and Lt. Picard are updating David, with Legrand disclosing, "The wine samples from Château La Chevillot were a match for the samples found in Malcolm's laboratory. We now have probable cause to arrest Laurent Chevillot."

"The lack of a search warrant won't be a problem?" asks David.

"For sure the judge will reject the case, but not before we get Monsieur Chevillot's prints," affirms Brigitte.

David, smiling approvingly, suggests, "And see if his prints match the partial found on the bullet from the gun that murdered Frank! But, wait, there's still one problem. If the judge throws out the case for lack of a search warrant, won't he also throw out the fingerprints?"

"Why would he do that?" asks Legrand.

"In America, we call it "fruit of the poisonous tree."

Legrand shares a bemused look with Brigitte, who shrugs with her eyebrows.

"We have no such law. It's a wonder you Americans ever get a conviction with the way your laws protect the criminals more than the victims," remarks Legrand.

"We think of it more as protecting the individual from the power of the state. It would be a sad day for America if that kind of due process were ever lost," pronounces David.

"In any case, Mr. Morgan, I would not want to be in Laurent Chevillot's shoes."

In his lab, Malcolm is busy testing vials of grape juice as David laments the weather, "Perhaps we should just gather as many pickers as possible, and begin the harvest first thing in the morning. Since no one else is picking, we should have little trouble getting at least temporary pickers. As my brother says, 'a vin ordinaire is better than no vin at all.'"

"Tore would love for you to do that. Proof to Nancy that you failed. It would be handing him the winery, at fifty percent of its value."

The substitute tour bus pulls up in front of the Hotel Pullman Aquitania, formally called the Sofitel Aquitania. Dennis is the first to exit the bus carrying his HDV camera. He records Harry Fletcher and the students departing the bus and heading for the hotel entrance.

Later, unpacking inside their Sofitel Hotel room, Dennis and Beverly are trying to work out a solution to their current problem.

"Dennis, you know I love you but that's not enough. You simply don't have what it takes to be a good father, absentee or otherwise. So, after we get home, we'll go our separate ways; no more contact."

"So, our child won't know me? Or anything about me? That's unbelievable," declares Dennis angrily.

"I don't see you as a father. And don't worry; I won't be seeking child support."

"That's noble of you, but hardly practical, or in the best interests of our child. Eventually, the kid's going to ask questions. Your decision to exclude me will backfire when you're finally forced to explain that you were the one who cut the ties."

David and Brigitte are having dinner at Restaurant St. James. Ironically, seated nearby are Fletcher's wine tour students. At a common table are Dennis, Beverly, Jack, Colette, Ben, Marilyn, and Philip. The restaurant is full and since David Morgan and Harry Fletcher are not seated close, they do not notice one another.

"Chevillot has a reservation on a flight from Paris, arriving here noon tomorrow. I'll be there to arrest him on behalf of the Fraud Brigade," states Brigitte.

At their common table, Dennis tells the group, "Now you may see bottles dating to the 18th century. We don't touch anything older than 1920. Any movement of an older vintage risks killing the wine."

"Agreed," says Jack.

"The bottles we do move will be carefully marked as to vintage and handled with the greatest of care," asserts Dennis.

"Carefully is definitely the operative word," reinforces Philip.

"What are we going to call this band of thieves?" asks Ben.

"What do you mean?" inquires Dennis.

"Shouldn't we have a name to sort of set us apart?" queries Ben.

"Why not the Bacchus Seven?" suggests Beverly.

This gets nods of approval from all present.

"So be it. From now on we're the Bacchus Seven," affirms Dennis.

After dinner, Fletcher, Dennis and Beverly have moved to the restaurant’s lounge. Fetcher orders from the bartender, "We'll have a bottle of Moĕt Imperial cham-pagne. And flute glasses for four."

"For three. I'm going to mineral water for now," replies Beverly.

The beverage order submitted, Harry Fletcher turns his attention to Dennis and Beverly, telling them, "Diana should be joining us any minute. What have you found out?"

"Beverly and I called in a lot of favors to get this information. I hope it's what you were looking for," offers Dennis.

"Just want to know whether or not she's trying to kill her husband," insists Fletcher.

"She's not," affirms Dennis.

"Michael Landis has incurable leukemia. The powder his wife puts in his drinks is a medicine to prolong his life," reports Beverly.

"When the leukemia was diagnosed, he was told that with the right medication, he had maybe five years; without it, two at the most. He chose, for whatever reason, to get it over with and refused the medication. Near as I can tell, he didn't want to place a long-term burden on his wife, whom he clearly loves very much," adds Dennis.

Finishing their dinner, David hands the waitress his American Express card wherein the waitress then scurries away to get a printout of the charges.

"Since you insist on paying the check, I'll buy you a drink in the bar," asserts Brigitte.

"No, let me. It's not fair. You're just a cop. I'm a rich vigneron," insists David.

"Pardonnez moi?" asks Brigitte laughing.

"I'm sorry, I meant no insult."

Still laughing, Brigitte adds, "No that's fine. Calling me just a cop is not an insult. It's true. But you are not a rich vigneron. Not yet!"

"Okay, you got me. Go ahead, buy me that drink. If the rains continue, I may need it more than you."

At this point Diana Landis enters the bar lounge and intuitively seats herself beside Fletcher, in front of the flute champagne glass into which the bartender is pouring the champagne.

"Thank you for joining us. Yes, your story checks out. What I don't understand is the purpose of this deception?" asks Fletcher.

"It gives me more time with him. Also, it gives me the chance to make his final days a dream come true, at least for him," states Diana.

"How so?" asks Fletcher

"He's always wanted to travel. Never thought he could afford it. When we started dating, I was afraid to confide my background and so we were married last spring with him thinking I was a struggling college student from a middle-class background."

"And you're not?" asks Fletcher.

"Well, I was but -- "

"While she was in college, Diana inherited about 9 million dollars US," says Dennis to Fletcher. Continuing, while looking Diana in the eye, but talking to Fletcher, Dennis says, "After all the trust funds have kicked in, Diana will be worth three times that amount."

"Michael is having the time of his life. From here we go to Jerusalem. He is not expected to leave Israel, replies Diana, eyes tearing.

At this time, David and Brigitte enter the lounge and head for the bar where Fletcher, Dennis, Beverly and Diana are seated. As it happens two stools are available next to Harry Fletcher. Concerned about Diana, Fletcher's back is turned away from David as he and Brigitte settle on the two vacant stools. Sensing movement behind him, Harry turns around and comes face-to-face with his friend and sometime accom-plice. The expression on both faces is one of complete surprise. David, not knowing what "mission" Robin/Harry might be on, is naturally cautious as to his public reaction.

"Your face looks familiar. Have we met?" asks David.

"Aren't you Inspector Morgan of the San Francisco Police Department?"

"Formerly of the Department. I recently inherited a winery, here in Bordeaux. I am the new owner of Château La Gironde-Sloan.

Something clicks in Fletcher's mind and he digs in his suit pocket for a brochure of the wine tour; momentarily studying the brochure, Harry smiles and then looks at David, "Thought so. We're scheduled to visit La Gironde-Sloan three days from now. Let me introduce myself. I'm Harry Fletcher. I took over Christine Graham's wine tour when she suddenly contracted pneumonia."

"Good to, uh, meet you, Rob -- uh, Harry."

"Looking forward to seeing you in a few days."

"Likewise."

Brigitte looks a little askance at David as she picked up the playacting aspects of the conversation she just witnessed; but remains silent, for now.

The new day at Château La Gironde-Sloan is sunny but cold, so David is bun-dled in a heavy coat when he enters Malcolm's lab, asking, "What the hell is going on with the weather? Sun's out but it's still cold. Whatever happened to global warming?"

"All we need are two more days of dry, and reasonably warm weather," reports Malcolm, indicating the ever present test tubes.

"We better pray that it doesn't freeze."

The dapper Chevillot exits the Bordeaux airport and is confronted by Brigitte and two gendarmes.

"Monsieur Chevillot? Je vous arrěte pour fabrication et trafic de vin denature," announces Brigitte.

"I suppose you have some sort of proof for such an outrageous allegation," asserts Chevillot.

Brigitte is sad that she has to arrest Chevillot, saying "Afraid we do, Monsieur Chevillot."

Chevillot voluntarily places his hands behind him so that Brigitte can cuff him, telling her, "I see. Don't suppose you could understand what it's like for a man to outlive his pecker and then find a young woman so beautiful and charming as to cure that aberration, and cause an otherwise rational man to risk his reputation in order to hold on to her."

"I'm sorry, monsieur, but not if it involves betraying the French wine industry."

In Jack’s Sofitel Hotel room, the Bacchus Seven are in conference.

"Jack has some white marking pens. Labels for most of these bottles have disintegrated long ago. So going by the date marked on each bin, carefully mark every bottle with that date," directs Dennis.

Dennis opens up the large bags on his bed from which he extracts black, ninja type outfits and large baby-blanket-sized canvas sheets with pockets built in, com-menting, "If we should happen to run into a guard, these outfits will scare them more than pointing a gun; which reminds me. No weapons; none whatsoever. Understood?"

This statement gets nods from everyone present.

Next Dennis pulls out a packed containing cloth, funeral style white gloves, telling them, "We'll wear these gloves and, before leaving, we'll brush the ground, removing any footprints. Understood? One more thing, the entrances to the camouflaged cave must be left in the same condition we find it. Any questions?"

"I'm still not sure why we are doing this?" says Philip, again.

In her Paris apartment, Audrey has her cell phone to her ear as she sits at her dining table overlooking the Seine River. "Papa? Tout va bien. Je m'inquiete pour toi. Il parait que le temps dans le Médoc n'a pas l'air terrible."

"I just tasted the cabernet. If we can get one more day of sunshine with a temperature above 50 degrees Fahrenheit, we should be all right. At the moment, the sugar content is a little low."

"Et le merlot et le cabernet franc?"

"David is in the field gathering samples for testing."

"You're in the lab?"

"Been here all day. Likely to be here all night. Some 30 wineries have sent samples for testing."

"I heard about the harvester."

"That's the bad news, but there is good news."

"And what is the good news, Papa?"

"The police matched one of Chevillot's fingerprints to the partial found on a bullet from the gun that killed Frank."

"Oh, Papa. That is good news. But are mere prints on a bullet enough to convict him?"

"David thinks so. He thinks Frank suspected Chevillot of having added oak chips to last year's vintage and confronted him here, in my lab."

As I see it, Laurent confronted Frank, pulling the stolen gun from his pocket and saying, "Sorry, Frank. But I want those vials, your notes, and your solemn word that you'll forget all about this unfortunate incident."

I believe Frank might have said, "You can have the vials and notes, but you are jeopardizing the reputation of our industry." Then he likely made a sudden lunge for the gun. They struggled for control of the weapon when, suddenly, there was a loud shot as the revolver went off and Frank collapsed to the floor.

I further believe that a stunned and remorseful Chevillot then likely asked Frank to forgive him that he didn’t mean for any of this to happen. But then he quickly realized the enormity of his deed and went into survival mode. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiping prints from the gun then placed it in Frank's hand.

Malcolm in Bordeaux is on the phone to Audrey in Paris. Malcolm tells Audrey. "David figures that while the shooting may have been an accident, Chevillot staged it to look like a suicide by wiping the gun, which Laurent previously stole from Jacqueline Bujold, and placed it in Frank's hand. Trouble was, he didn't wipe the bullets."

"Our nightmare is finally over. Although I'll never forgive David for putting us through it," insists Audrey.

At Lafite, with their ninja cloth gear masking their faces now removed, the Bac-chus Severn carry out one of the most inventive heists in history.

At Bordeaux’s National Police Headquarters, Lieutenant Picard steps into Capitaine Legrand's office and closing the door, asks, "Vous m'avez demande, Monsieur?"

"Eric de Rothschild reported that someone broke into the Lafite wine library last night."

In Malcolm’s lab, David and Malcolm are conferring with one another. Malcolm, tells him, "As I predicted, the sugar content of the merlot and cabernet franc grapes, which normally harvest a couple weeks earlier than the sauvignon, are the same. All we need is dry weather and sunshine for another day or two, then either we get that damn harvester fixed or get ourselves some pickers."

"Sun is shining now," comments David.

"It is, isn't it," remarks Malcolm, smiling.

Suddenly there's a knock at the door, which David opens and is greeted by Lt. Brigitte Picard of the Police Judiciaire.

David's delight at seeing her is quickly crushed when he sees her somber expression, asking, "What is it? What's wrong? You look like you've been ordered to arrest your grandmother!"

"Last night, Château Lafite was robbed of millions of euros of wine from their library cellar. Other vintners with large library cellars are concerned, to say the least."

"How many bottles were stolen?"

"Perhaps as many as five or six hundred. And, of course, they took the most valuable wines."

"How is that possible?" asks David incredulously.

"That's what I need to find out!!" exclaims Brigitte.

As the tour bus arrives in the medieval city of St. Emilion, Harry Fletcher turns on the PA system and addresses the students, "We'll have lunch at the Hôtel de Plaisance, here in St. Emilion. Then we'll have some tastings at Chateaux Pétrus, Ausone, and Cheval Blanc. After that, we'll cross the river to the Haut Médoc where we'll tour Château La Gironde-Sloan and have a catered dinner in their barrel room.

In Gironde-Sloan’s kitchen, Odette is serving lunch to David when Malcolm enters, all smiles, and announces, "Attention, mes amis. We harvest in the morning."

"And the sugar content?" asks David.

"By sundown, it will be perfect."

In the barrel room of the heated chai, the caterers have set up the tables in a "T" shape. At the center, at the top of the "T," are seated David Morgan, with Harry Fletcher on his right and Colette on his left. Everyone is enjoying the catered meal, especially the wines.

"They were harvesting today in Pomerol," comments Harry to David.

"We plan to start first thing in the morning, if we can get pickers," replies David.

"Don't you have a mechanical harvester?"

"It's in the shop. Won't be ready for another week. Unfortunately, we can't wait that long."

"These are excellent wines, Mister Morgan. It is very generous of you to serve such rare vintages. Are they from your library cellar?" asks Colette, indicating her wine glass.

"I'm glad you appreciate them. Sadly, we have no library cellar. These are from my private cellar," states David.

"What I don't understand is why Bordeaux library cellars, like Lafite, don’t have any white wines?" comments Colette.

"Some do. Haut Brion, for instance. But here in the Haut Médoc, we only pro-duce red wines, which can last far longer than the whites. In many cases a hundred years, or more, depending on the vintage," explains David.

Suddenly Malcolm enters the barrel room and rushes up to David, exclaiming, "David! It's hailing!"

"What do you mean, hailing?" asks David.

"I mean hail the size of golf balls!"

David is bemused, but Fletcher understands, asking, "Is it actually raining, as well?"

"Not yet. Right now all we're getting is the hailstorm," says Malcolm.

"You've got to pick immediately! Hail that size will knock most of your grapes to the ground and bruise what's left on the clusters. And if your grapes are ready for picking and it rains, the entire crop could be lost," asserts Harry.

"Mr. Fletcher is right. I just called Pierre and he's on his way with maybe 45 pickers," bemoans Malcolm.

"Not nearly enough, is it?" asks David.

"Can you use another 25? Including myself?" inquires Harry.

"T'would be like a lifeboat," exclaims Malcolm.

Harry's knife on a wine glass rings the room to attention, "Attention, students. We've had our dinner. Now it's time to chop the wood!" announces Harry.

In the cabernet sauvignon vineyards, the hail has stopped. Vehicle headlights now light the fields: David, Malcolm and Harry survey the damage. The vineyard is devastated, very little left on the vines. Grapes mingled among the hailstones litter the ground.

"We've got to hurry. The hailstones are not melting," insists Malcolm.

Armed with clippers, baskets and bottes (baskets carried on the back) Harry and his wine students are ready to work.

"Do the cabernet first. We'll divide into two groups, pickers and porters," directs Malcolm.

When a basket is filled, it is dumped into the botte of a single porter, and when full, the porter moves it to the cart pulled behind the tractor.

"We'll need six strong porters. The rest of us are pickers," pronounces Malcolm.'

The porters with full bottes climb the ladder and dump the grapes and stalks over their shoulder into the cart.

Seated in first class on an Air France flight, Audrey Sloan is listening to the announcement from the pilot: "Dan quelque minutes, nous allons atterrir a Bordeaux. Veuillez redresser vos sieges et range vos tablettes sous l'accoudoir droit. In a few minutes we will be landing in Bordeaux. Please put your seats up and stow your trays under your right arm rest."

In the fermentation room, David and Malcolm are working the grapes through the de-stemmer which then pumps them through hoses into giant stainless-steel vats. To the delight of David and Malcolm, Pierre enters with 45 pickers.

"Pierre!! Dieu merci! Allez chercher l'equipment des cueilleurs et emmenez-les dans les champs!" exclaims Malcolm.

It’s very dark outside as Odette and her small staff set up a tables at the end of the rows in the cabernet sauvignon vineyard currently being picked, and serve sandwiches, hot coffee and a variety of juices. Vin ordinaire is also offered, but Harry and his wine students prefer the coffee. In the field, Pierre's 45-member pickers are greeted with a hearty welcome and cheers from Fletcher and the wine students.

The huge fermentation room holds 14 vats, each 14 feet high.

Malcolm tells David, "I've sent Pierre out to determine the extent of the damage. If some of our fields are still intact, and it doesn't rain, then we're far from defeated."

Audrey's rental car from the Bordeaux Airport, exits Pauillac, and proceeds northbound toward Château La Gironde-Sloan.

The picking is moving along. Baskets of grapes are dumped into the bottes, and carried to the cart. Having finished his survey of the fields, Pierre Ginestet enters the fermentation room and announces, "If it doesn't rain any more, we'll only lose about 20 percent of the merlot and cabernet franc, and maybe 40 percent of the sauvignon. If it rains, the grapes, with their ripeness, will rot on the vines before our very eyes."

From behind them, they hear a voice. Audrey declares, "We cannot let that happen, can we?"

Malcolm and Pierre turn and welcome Audrey with enthusiasm. Only David is reserved in his response.

Malcolm and Pierre are mesmerized as Audrey works on David, flirting with him, "Now, cousin Davey. As you Americans say, why don't we let bygones be bygones? I'm grateful you got Papa cleared. Perhaps you'll let me show you how grateful."

"My darling, here's another American saying, 'That ship has sailed,'" replies David.

Audrey approaches David, placing her hands behind his neck, telling him, "You're such a prude."

Letting go of his neck, she steps back, accepting her fate; melodramatically imitating Humphrey Bogart from *Casablanca*, "At least we had Paris."

Malcolm, turning to his daughter, declares, "My dear, we can use all the pickers we can get."

"That's why I'm here. I'll change my clothes," answers Audrey as she leaves David and Malcolm, letting them get back to work.

Inspector Picard’s official vehicle exits the city of Pauillac, heading north. Even-tually she reaches Château La Gironde-Sloan and pulls into the parking lot. Stepping out, she heads for the fermentation room where she finds David and Malcolm still work-ing the de-stemmer.

"Salut, Lieutenant. Vous ne devriez pas être au lit a cette heure-la?" says Mal-colm.

Brigitte begins helping with the de-stemmer, replying, "Not on a night like this. Every mechanical harvester in Aquitaine is burning fuel. And every picker available is being paid overtime. I came to see how you were handling it."

"How bad is the damage to the surrounding areas?” asks Malcolm.

"Little damage at all to the Medoc, except for Pauillac. Lafite and Mouton escap-ed damage. The hardest hit were you, La Chevillot, Bellegrave, Pontet-Canet, and perhaps a few neighbors. Now, if you'll show me where I can change my clothes I'd like to help."

Working only by truck and tractor headlights, Audrey and Brigitte pick side by side, across the row from one another.

"You're in love with David. Don't lie to me. I can tell," declares Audrey.

"Et alors! Ce ne sont pas vos affaires," replies Brigitte.

"It is very much my business. Since he is family, I have a right to know and approve of who becomes a director of the Château."

"What has that to do with me? I see," says Brigitte in sudden realization. "You're afraid I want to marry him to be the director of his winery stock, as a French citizen."

"Oh, no Brigitte. I approve of you. I was only worried that while you were thinking it over, he may find someone else. In my opinion, that would be a tragedy."

"Then we can only hope that he sees things your way."

"He will. Or I'll make his life a living hell!"

In the fermentation room, Pierre is on a ladder atop one of the vats, calling out, "I can now predict that fermentation is guaranteed to begin in a day or so. We might have a decent harvest yet. Not nearly the volume we expected. But the makings of a great, full-bodied wine, just the same."

Michael Landis, who has been picking alongside Debra and Fletcher, notices David approaching Fletcher and calls out, "Oh, Mister Morgan. This is definitely the highlight of our tour. We've all seen enough vinification and barrel rooms. For the first time we're actually experiencing the terror and the struggle against nature. I envy you. To produce something this wonderful from the soil; you must be so proud.

"Yes, but right now I am far more terrified than exhilarated.”

As Michael breaks off, David approaches his old accomplice, Harry Fletcher, AKA Robin Templar, and takes him aside, remarking, "I accidentally learned from the lovely Colette that your group may recently have visited Lafite's wine library."

"That's right."

"I understand that Christine Graham makes this tour often. I'm curious how many of your students have been to Bordeaux before?"

"I'll ask around. But I know for a fact Stevens has been here before?"

"How so?"

"Five years ago, he made some TV commercials for the top Bordeaux wineries."

"Including Lafite?"

"I believe so. Why do you ask?"

"The timing of your arrival and an unusual robbery at Lafite. Well, I'm just trying to connect some dots."

David approaches Audrey and Brigitte, who are still picking together, telling them, "I see you're all getting along?"

"Like family," responds Audrey, smiling.

"You don't say." To Brigitte, "By the way, at some decent hour, I suggest you call the marketing director of Lafite and ask him if they remember the Hollywood director, Dennis Stevens, who filmed some TV commercials here five years ago. And if so, was he ever shown the secret, camouflaged cave where their precious wines were hidden from the Germans during WWII?"

Brigitte smiles wryly as she nods, seeing David's intent, "First thing in the morn-ing."

The sun is up, revealing a heavily overcast day, as pickers in the field, including Fletcher and his students, are now working on a merlot field.

Dennis and Beverly are busy picking when the filmmaker suddenly stops and looks Beverly in the eye. He blurts out, "Eventually, my wife will find out who she married and have the good sense to dump me and move on with her life."

"Would you care?" asks Beverly.

"You're not going to believe this, but -- " says Dennis, thoughtfully.

"You're still in love with her?" asks Beverly, in sudden realization.

Dennis lowers his eyes.

"But, could you be faithful to her?"

Dennis raises his eyes and looks Beverly in the eye, replying, "I think so."

"Whatever makes you believe that?" asks Beverly, incredulously.

"Because I just realized something."

"What?"

"Being faithful might make me feel better about myself."

"If you mean what you say, it says a great deal about your future."

"How's that?" asks Dennis taken aback.

"It means I think you might just turn out to be a reasonably decent father figure after all. She gives him a peck on the cheek. He returns the kiss in the same spirit. Then they get back to picking.

David is working the de-stemmer as the tractor pulls up with a cart full of grapes. Malcolm jumps down from the driver's seat and approaches his nephew, indicating the latest cart, "David! This is merlot. It goes into a separate vat. When you're finished with the cabernet, have Pierre switch the hoses."

David gestures his understanding with a wave.

Pickers and porters continue to work until suddenly a clap of thunder draws their attention to the sky. Diana and Michael glance up at the blackened sky, then at each other.

"Darling, you should rest now," urges Diana.

"No, my dear, if there is an afterlife, this is a memory I plan to carry with me while I wait for you."

"But do we have to be in such a hurry to enter that afterlife?"

"No, I suppose not," responds Michael, grinning.

They put down their buckets and embrace.

David is still working the de-stemmer as Brigitte enters the fermentation room, gets off her cell phone and approaches, commenting, "Word is that rain is headed our way."

David looks up at the 14 huge stainless steel, jacketed vats. The hose from the de-stemmer goes directly to the tenth vat.

"Six and a-half vats of cabernet and nearly four vats of merlot; hope that's enough because with grapes this ripe, rain means the end of the harvest. The remain-ing clusters will rot on the vines.

In the merlot vineyard, Malcolm approaches Harry Fletcher, announcing, "That's enough of the merlot. Rain is coming. We've got to get in some cabernet franc, which is the next field over."

How much time until the rain hits?"

"No idea. Any moisture on the grapes will make for a watery wine. But my big-gest fear is rot. In the grapes present condition, this could start to occur within an hour or so after the rain."

**Chapter Ten**

David is still working the de-stemmer as Malcolm steps up next to him, "That's it, Lad. The rain has hit. All we'll get now is a watery wine and rot, and this is not the noble rot of wine lore."

In the Château’s dining room, a scrumptious buffet, together with an assortment of beverages, including some super expensive wines, is laid out on the large dining table. Fletcher and his exhausted wine students begin filing in from the vineyards to partake of the well-deserved fruition of their extraordinary efforts. Joining Fletcher's students are David, Malcolm, Audrey, Brigitte and Pierre Ginestet. Pierre's wife, Odette, and her staff are constantly replenishing the buffet. David pulls Malcolm aside.

"Six and-a-half vats of cabernet, four vats of merlot and half a vat of cabernet franc. Ten and a half vats out of fourteen filled. And I understand the petit verdot should be ready to harvest in another two or three weeks. I owe you and Pierre big time. Now, I know that you've always wanted to own your own winery."

"Aye, 'tis no secret."

"I'm told on good authority, that having failed to get a crop harvested this fall, and lacking anyone to run the place, Château Chevillot will be on the market."

"Indeed, I've heard the very same chatter. 'Tis pity I can't afford it."

"Well, provided you agree to maintain your lab and act as my consulting winemaker, in exchange for the maison, if you can call anything this large a house, I might be persuaded to finance La Chevillot for you. You can rename it La Chevillot-Sloan, if you like.

"Davey, m'lad, where are you going to get that kind of money?"

"Now that we have a successful crop, I'll put up my stock in La Gironde-Sloan as collateral. What do you say?" asks David, sticking out his hand for Malcolm to shake.

"I say hell yes!" responds Malcolm, as he accepts the outstretched hand and pumps it warmly.

Then David hunts for Brigitte Picard. Spotting her, he approaches. "Lafite confirms that five years ago, Stevens filmed their wine library, but cannot confirm that he was shown the hidden cave. Apparently no one at Lafite knows exactly where the well hidden cave is actual located, it all happened so long ago."

"That's a probable cause far as I'm concerned," Brigitte announces.

Dennis is at the buffet table, going for seconds when, suddenly, he finds Brigitte Picard at his side, flashing her badge.

"What's this about?" asks Dennis.

"It's about your knowledge of the camouflaged caves at Lafite?"

"Excuse me?"

"Please, put your plate down and step into the kitchen with me."

In the Château’s large kitchen David and Brigitte are in the process of breaking and getting a confession out of Stevens.

"We know you did it and we know how you did it," insists Brigitte.

"What we don't know is why you did it," asserts David.

"Why don't you enlighten us?" asks Brigitte.

"Can you give me a hint? What're you talking about?" asks Dennis.

"Lafite's wine library," says Brigitte.

"Oh, that. It was a wager," Dennis readily admits.

Brigitte and David exchange looks.

"A wager?" says David, in disbelief.

"That, you'll have to explain," advises Brigitte.

"I was all but set to direct a feature film based on my own script when the pro-ducer and investor decided to invest in a Bordeaux winery, instead. He intimated that the rare wines in the wine library would more than cover his investment. I pointed out the rare wines he was talking about were not insured and that because of their value they were vulnerable to being ripped off."

Brigitte regards Stevens with an arched eyebrow.

"You probably won't believe this but --" adds Dennis.

"Mr. Stevens, you're probably right. I doubt I'll believe you," states David.

Dennis swallows hard.

Indicating Brigitte, David declares, "But you better hope she believes you."

Dennis takes a deep breath before continuing, "You want to know about the wager?"

Both Brigitte and David smile at the filmmaker, awaiting his explanation.

Suddenly, David's cell rings. He checks the display, but before connecting the cell, he exits the kitchen.

In David's absence, Brigitte listens to Stevens' explanation.

Outside the kitchen, David puts the cellular phone to his ear, "Hello?"

It is nighttime in California, where the cell call was initiated by David’s brother. "How goes the struggle, little brother?"

"As if you didn't know."

"Well, I did warn that a vin ordinaire is better than no vin at all."

"Then you'll be surprised to learn that, despite the weather, we managed to harvest enough high quality grapes to make for a successful year."

"Sorry to hear that."

"I know who your informant is; can't blame her for banking her future on you rather than me. She was merely playing the odds. And she's one hell of a cook."

"I agree. I was the one who suggested Uncle Frank send her to the Cordon Bleu cooking school. For what it's worth, her husband knew nothing about her crippling the harvester. She did it out of loyalty to me. I suppose you'll fire her."

"A cook like Odette? Not a chance. In the future at least I'll have a loyal and repentant employee; something I could not be sure of with a new hire. By the way, I'm billing you for the harvester repairs, plus a little extra for the inconvenience."

"I'll see that you get a check. Doubt I would be as forgiving if the shoe were on the other foot."

"Just tell Mom that she backed the wrong sibling."

"You're wrong about her. She was rooting for you all along. And, as a matter of fact, try as I did to reverse the outcome, I'm not all that disappointed in the results. You came through nicely; surprised everybody. Take care, little brother."

In the kitchen, Dennis is studying Brigitte's expression, asking, "You're not buying it, are you?"

At this point, David reenters the kitchen, saying, "Tell us about the cave."

"Ironic, isn't it. The wines never left the property," declares Dennis grinning.

"Against my better judgment, I'm going to let you go," asserts Brigitte.

"With one proviso," adds David.

Dennis waits for what might be coming.

"Phone Lafite and tell them where they can find their rare wines. In their own hidden cave. Of course, you might have to explain how to find the cave; nobody there seems to know," states Brigitte.

"Doubt you'll believe me, Lieutenant, but that was my intention all along," confirms Dennis.

"I know that. But we have to be clear on a couple of things," insists Brigitte.

Without saying a word, Dennis waits for the hammer to drop.

"First, Lafite may want to prosecute for breaking and entry. The Lieutenant cannot help you there. Secondly, Lafite will not want publicity about a robbery. That understood?" asks David.

"Perfectly."

"Now get out of here, and go call Lafite," demands Brigitte.

Stevens nearly trips on himself as he hurriedly heads for the door and makes his exit. As the kitchen door closes behind him, David and Brigitte break into hysterical laughter.

"Ninja costumes? Only in the movies!!" declares David, between tears of laughter.

In the dining room, many conversations are ongoing. David approaches Audrey, asking, "May I speak with you?"

"What about?" asks Audrey.

"Your future.”

Jack and Colette are having a somewhat intense discussion. Colette tells Jack, "When we get back to Los Angeles, I'm filing for divorce."

"Why would you want to do a crazy thing like that?" asks Jack taken aback.

"I'm tired of being the trophy wife. I want to find someone who will love and respect me for whom I am. Not just because I have what misogynists like you consider to be a decent face, slim body and ample tits," declares Colette.

“Misogynists? Where did you ever come up with a word like that?"

"I'm not as illiterate as you think. For instance, I'm very familiar with the phrases, community property and financial settlement. Try ordering me to bare my breasts when I own and operate half of your dealerships."

The look on Jack's face can only be compared to that of a dead man walking.

A pre-occupied Audrey exits the Château and walks toward her rental car. She opens the door and climbs in settling comfortable behind the wheel. Suddenly, Brigitte appears at the driver's window, asking "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"Have to get back to Paris."

"Without saying goodbye?"

"David made me realize that there really is a right person out there, but that if I'm ever going to find him, I'm going to have to be far more discreet in my approach."

"He's a thoughtful and kind person, isn't he?"

"Generous too."

Brigitte's eyebrow raises.

"He offered to pay down the mortgage on Restaurant La Grande Gironde," comments Audrey.

"I'm glad. And I truly hope you and I will eventually become close," asserts Brigitte.

"You and me; becoming close? Of that, I have no doubt," confirms Audrey, smiling.

After exchanging warm smiles Audrey fires up the engine and heads off down the road.

Brigitte watches as Malcolm, Pierre, Odette, David, Harry and his 24 students exit the château and gather in the parking lot, where they are about to board their tour bus.

David and Harry have a brief moment to themselves.

"Doesn't look like we'll be seeing you in San Francisco anytime soon. Shall we take your name off the list of Robin's Merry Band of honorable thieves?" asks Harry.

"No, leave it there. Just don't call during harvest," answers David smiling.

"Agreed."

The two shake hands, warmly.

The students are now boarding the bus. Among the last to board are: Philip Shen, Marilyn and Ben Lane, Beverly Amphlett, Colette and Jack Hamilton, Michael and Diana Landis, Harry Fletcher and finally, with his ever present digital, HD video camera recording the event, filmmaker Dennis Stevens.

The door closes and the bus quickly departs while those left behind wave.

Finally, David and Brigitte come together and begin walking back to the Château, followed by Malcolm, Pierre and Odette. David takes Brigitte's hand and clasps it gently, telling her, "I think I'm finally getting the hang of this wine business,"

"Does that mean that you're thinking of staying, rather than returning to the San Francisco Police Department?"

Only if I can find a woman willing to give up an exciting, prestigious career for the hard life of running a winery."

"I should think you'd be able to find that woman in a... in a heartbeat."

"A heartbeat, you say."

:"Oui, Cheri. A heartbeat."

At that, Brigitte slips her arm around that of the former SFPD inspector and with him responding in kind as they continue toward the Château.

**THE GREAT ART HEIST CROSS-UP**

**PART SIX**

**Chapter One**

**Hi, it’s Jonathan again**. I’m aboard my yacht in the San Francisco Marina with CIA Special Agent Raoul Donavan enjoying our usual finger food and champagne being served by my British Butler and reminiscing about the many successful capers carried out by Robin Templar and his merry band.

Agent Donavan startled me by quipping, “I know of at least one caper your Robin Templar was unable to solve.”

Taken aback, I responded with, “And which caper might that be?

“The art heist at the Isabella Stewart Garden Museum in Boston,” Donavan re-plied.

He had me. That investigation could certainly be listed as Templar’s biggest failure. I struggled for an answer. “How did you know about our involvement in attempting to recover the stolen paintings?

“I read the FBI file,” was Donavan’s reply. “I know about the theft, I’d just like to hear about Templar’s participation in the attempted recovery. I just *know* it will prove interesting. So, as the late radio commentator Paul Harvey used to say, let’s hear the rest of the story.”

And so you shall, was my answer.

Inside the Museum, room after room is full of priceless paintings hanging on the walls, mostly classical masters. It's a quiet day. Inside the Dutch Room, the only occupants are the masterpieces on the walls – that is until a young woman enters. Fair-skinned, very attractive, with long black hair, wearing a beige raincoat, black leggings and mini-skirt, 23-year-old Margaret Lupino, carrying only a large handbag, calmly floats through the room. While pretending to admire the paintings, she is subtly checking out the security cameras.

Taking note of the cameras' movement, Margaret maneuvers herself into a blind spot which turns out to be a rather large area in one corner of the room. Reaching into her handbag, with the deftness of a table-top magician, she pulls out a high-end digital camera and begins photographing a number of the nearby paintings; something that, according to the posted sign, is strictly forbidden. Margaret snaps digital photos of the paintings from the following masters:

Rembrandt's "Storm on the Sea of Galilee (1633)"

Vermeer's "The Concert (1658-60)"

Rembrandt's "Self Portrait (1629)"

Rembrandt's "A Lady and Gentleman in Black (1633)"

Govaert Flinck's "Landscape with Obelisk (1638)"

Manet's "Chez Tortoni (1878-80)"

Finished, Margaret slides the camera into her handbag and exits.

Back in her loft in Miami’s South Beach, she is concentrating intensely as she paints what appears to be a copy of Rembrandt’s “The Storm on the Sea of Galilee.”

Her apartment is typical of that belonging to a professional painter. Next to the brick-and-tile, pizza-style oven is a shelf filled with bottles of varnishes and India inks, together with a glass jar containing several delicate and ridiculously expensive red sable brushes. Several neatly stacked paintings lean against the wall. The one partially visible looks to be "A Lady and Gentlemen in Black," by Rembrandt. There is a wig stand, whereon resting is a familiar long black wig.

Now a sandy blonde, Margaret is sitting at an easel by the window where she is concentrating intensely as she paints what appears to be a copy of Rembrandt's "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee" -- which she was photographing in the museum. Then she flicks on a PowerPoint application which projects that very photo onto the canvas.

Suddenly, the oven alarm sounds and Margaret puts down her brush and moves to the brick-and-tile oven. Moving the temperature dial to zero, she opens the oven door and carefully removes the painting; which also appears to be the same as that currently on the easel -- "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee."

A knock at the door causes Margaret to go stark still. Making not a sound she studies the door intently while listening to the sound of a key being applied to the loft's door lock. Margaret relaxes as the lock is turned and the door opens. She sets the freshly baked painting on the table. The young woman who enters, Gayle Lupino, is slightly older than Margaret and almost as good-looking.

Gayle is carrying a basket filled with 24 3-ounce glass jars filled with various colored paints and a large cardboard tube about seven inches in diameter and five feet in length. She sets the basket of jars on the table but holds on to the tube.

"Hey, Sis, that the canvases?" indicating the tube.

Instead of answering, Gayle opens the cardboard tube by pulling the round cap from one end and extracts what looks to be several canvases used by artists upon which to paint their pictures.

Margaret accepts the rolled up canvases and, pulling back a corner, studies each carefully, one-by-one, saying, "They look and feel right."

"They are right," responds Gayle. "Before I removed the paint, they were once water colors or little-known paintings of the Seventeenth Century."

"Any trouble extracting the original paint?" asks Margaret.

"The water colors were easy. Some of the others were a little more difficult. Bottom line is they will all test correctly for the appropriate period."

"Did you pay a lot for the originals?"

"Some were more expensive than others, but nowhere near what the fakes will bring," remarked Gayle.

At this point Gayle spots the painting 'The Storm on the Sea of Galilee,' fresh out of the oven. Walking over, she studies it carefully, appearing impressed, announces, "Cracking looks perfect. I'll put it through the tests."

Gayle and Margaret are enjoying lunch at Otentic, a popular sidewalk bistro on South Beach. Margaret tells Gayle, "I'm only making three copies each. Don't want to flood the market."

Gayle laughs. "Duh! And take a chance of a buyer running into another copy of 'the priceless painting' he just paid a fortune for?" Growing thoughtful, Gayle announces, "No, actually, we are now ready to tackle the tough part."

Margaret, only half joking, asserts, "Whoa! Are you saying that what I just did was easy?"

"Of course not! They're brilliant. Best fakes I've ever seen, by far. But we're only half-way there."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. This is the part where we have to sell them," says Margaret.

"And, as we've discussed..."

Sounding resigned, Margaret answers, "If Galbraith is to sell them as stolen masterpieces, then...."

"The originals will have to actually be stolen."

I'll be honest! That's the part that's got me quaking a little. Okay, maybe a lot. I mean, I'm an artist, okay? Anyway, you said you've got somebody lined up for that part."

"Uh, yeah."

"Who you got? Somebody good, right?"

"Well, uh...," mutters Gayle who looks away a moment before turning a steady gaze at Margaret.

Margaret, with dawning realization, declares, "No!! No, no. No, you, uh...just don't go there. It's not what I do. Forget about it. Not gonna do it. Not gonna happen."

At Boston’s Scoozi Restaurant, sitting at the bar having Italian sandwiches and beer are Margaret in dark sunglasses and the long black wig, and a very butch-looking, ex-correctional officer and security guard who appears to be someone not to be messed with, named Bonnie Wellman.

"So, how did you find me? And how did you know I'd be willing to provide what you're looking for?" questions Wellman.

"You know I can't reveal that. I was told that up until a year ago you were a security guard at the Gardner Museum," reports Margaret.

"That's right."

"And presently, money is tight?

Wellman, anxiously, replies, "Ah, yes, the money."

Margaret pulls a thick white envelope from her purse and, handing it to Wellman, informs her, "Half now and the other half shipped to you via FedEx in one year. Provided you haven't spoken with the police in the meantime."

Nodding affirmatively, Wellman states, "That was the deal."

At this point, Bonnie, reaching into her own purse, extracts an envelope of her own, handing it to Margaret. Opening the envelope, Margaret pulls out and studies the three pages of detailed diagrams of a security room and security system; together with written instructions. While Margaret studies the diagrams, Bonnie flips through the stack of hundred-dollar bills in the envelope. Putting their respective, exchanged envelopes into their purses, the two women nod affirmatively to each other. Then Margaret pulls out her wallet to pay the tab. As she removes two $20 bills, Bonnie glances at the wallet. Visible to Wellman in the plastic window just for an instant is Margaret's Florida driver's license. The wallet closes and is returned to a jumble of papers in Margaret's messy purse. Margaret hands the bills to the bartender.

In a suite inside Boston’s Hotel Commonwealth, Margaret and Gayle, sitting in front of a well-lighted mirror in their lingerie, are helping each other with their disguises. Their hair is pulled up and bundled on top of their heads. Dark, customized wigs are then applied, followed by thick mustaches and sideburns. Nearby are the official Boston Police Department caps to conceal their hair.

Margaret, fussing nervously, asks, "You got the phony police plates on the car and put something over the rental sticker, right?"

"Of course. Besides, it's after midnight; we can park on the street right in front of the museum. Chances of being picked up by a surveillance camera are practically nil."

"Practically nil may not be good enough," asserts Margaret.

"Relax. The police plates will come back to an unmarked Boston PD unit. And the beauty is the plates aren't stolen, just cardboard copies, like what they use in Hollywood movies."

With the facial transformations complete, the next task is to hide the ample breasts of both women. Off come the bras, replaced by a clack cloth wrapped tightly around the breasts and secured by velcro in the back.

"Does it have to be so tight?" asks Margaret

"Darling little sister, we have to look like men. Okay?" insists Gayle.

Finally, it’s after midnight. …Showtime.

The door to the suite opens slightly and a uniformed Boston police officer peeks out and checks the hallway, which is empty. The door closes. Seconds later, the door reopens and two male police officers emerge and start down the hallway toward the elevators. Affixed to the sleeves of one of the uniformed officers are the stripes of a sergeant (Gayle). The second male officer appears to be a corporal. Both officers are properly armed.

A dark-colored rental car with fake plates pulls to the curb on the east side of Boston’s Palace Road, near Evans Way, and parks. The sign on the building indicates the car is parked in front of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Gayle is behind the wheel as she and Margaret, in their police disguises, go over their check list. They check the tote bag for the proper tools and then slip on their police issue gloves. They exit the vehicle and step onto the sidewalk, the museum looms above them like a castle. With Margaret carrying the tote bag they move toward the side entrance where Gayle presses the white buzzer next to the large wooden door.

In the Security Room, the 1st security guard, a twenty something college student, sits in front of a console filled with video monitors, one of which shows the two police officers outside. The young guard presses the intercom button, politely asking, "What is it you want?"

Lowering her voice an octave, Gayle answers, "Boston Police. We're here about a disturbance in the courtyard. You need to open up."

The inexperienced young guard notes the police patches on the men's shoulders and the insignias dotting their lapels. They look like cops. Again he presses the intercom, announcing, "Orders are not to let anyone in."

"Didn't you hear me? This is the Boston P.D. Now open up or be charged with obstructing a police investigation!" insists Gayle.

Duly intimidated, the young guard buzzes the officers inside. The two police officers finally arrive at the watch desk. Gayle, who has perfected the lower octave voice, does all the talking, asking, "Are any other guards in the building?"

"Just one."

"Get him down here."

The guard picks up his cell phone and presses one of the auto dial buttons, calling the 2nd guard, who, also very young and green, is doing his rounds when his cell phone rings. He answers, "Yes."

"Will you please come to the watch desk?"

Somewhat puzzled, the 2nd guard clicking off his cell phone, heads towards the watch desk.

At the watch desk, Gayle needs to move the guard from behind the watch desk, where he could trigger an alarm in a heartbeat. She says to him. "You look familiar. I think we have a default warrant out on you. Step over here and show us some identification."

The guard reluctantly moves out of the booth and complies, opening his wallet and showing his driver's license. In doing so, he has moved away from the panic button, the only direct connection to the outside world. Nervously, he says, "If it's about the Christmas party, I can explain."

The 2nd security guard appears in the doorway. Margaret immediately thrusts him against the wall, spread-eagles his arms and legs and summarily slaps the cuffs on him. Incredulous and confused, the asks, "You're arresting me?"

Simultaneously, Gayle clicks shut the handcuffs over the 1st Security Guard's wrists. At this point, Margaret draws her gun, to the amazement of both guards.

"This is a robbery. Don't give us any problems and you won't get hurt," states Gayle.

The 1st security guard is stunned and laughing nervously, maintains, "Dude, you must be kidding."

"Don't test me, asshole," snaps Gayle.

"Okay, don't worry. They don't pay me enough to go in harm’s way," replies the 1st guard.

"That goes for me, as well," says the 2nd guard panicking.

"Good... Now we head for the basement."

Gayle and Margaret steer the two guards down a series of stairs into the basement. Once in the basement, Gayle extracts their wallets and studies their ID's, Margaret pulls a roll of duct tape from the tote bag and wraps strip after strip around the eyes and mouths of the guards, finally handcuffing them to a solid and secure pipe.

As a final warning, Gayle declares, "So, Timothy Flaherty of 391 Fourth Street, South Boston and Edward McGuinness of 210 Bolton St. Don't tell the police anything and in about a year you will get a reward. Do as you're told, no harm will come to you. If you understand and accept, nod your head."

Both guards nod immediately. Now the thieves have free rein of the Museum.

Still dressed as Boston P.D., Gayle and Margaret enter the Museum's Dutch Room and quickly go to work. Like clockwork, they take down the six framed paintings known as: *The Concert*, by Johannes Vermeer*; A Lady and Gentlemen in Black*, by Rembrandt, *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, by Rembrandt; *Self Portrait*, by Rembrandt; *Landscape with Obelisk*, by Govaert Flinck; and *Chez Tortoni*, by Manet. They carefully remove the masterpieces from their frames and then re-hang the empty frames; placing the removed paintings in a stack on the floor. Gayle picks up the six masterpiece paintings and, without rolling them up, follows Margaret to a room on the same floor known as the Short Gallery.

The room is little more than a narrow hallway. Across from the entrance is a small oil sketch of the museum founder, Ms. Gardner, painted by Anders Zorn. The thieves, enter the gallery, Margaret, pointing out the Gardner portrait, announces, "That's the founder, Isabella Stewart Gardner. From now on, it will be the missing paintings she will be watching over."

After taking a moment to study the painting which shows Gardner joyfully pushing open a set of glass doors, a fireworks display rocketing off behind her in the evening sky, the two thieves quickly go to work hiding the six masterpieces behind other pictures. They take down the three largest paintings in the gallery and begin removing the backs from the frames. Margaret, pointing to the huge 'The Storm on the Sea of Galilee' canvas, says, "Save the biggest frame for this. It's five by four."

In the basement, the guards have removed enough of the duct tape so as to talk to each other. With most of the tape off their faces, the two guards would be free except for the three-inch pipe securing their handcuffs. The 2nd guard, afraid, asks, "Do you think they'll kill us? I mean, Dude, we can identify them."

"Distinct possibility. We've got to get outta here!"

Checking out the pipe they are handcuffed to, the 2nd guard reports, "This pipe looks ancient. Probably hasn't been used in decades.

"You're right. Let's see if we can twist our way out of these cuffs."

With that the guards clamp both their fists around the pipe and prepare to twist it free from its connections and the 2nd guard asks hesitantly, "Which way do we twist?"

"I don't know. Counter clockwise, I think."

With renewed vigor, the two guards begin attempting to unscrew the pipe.

In the Short Gallery, while Gayle is re-hanging two of the three paintings the sisters have just removed, Margaret, working on the floor, is placing the remaining two (of the six) paintings behind the framed painting removed from the wall just moments before.

After separating the paintings with thin tissue paper taken from the tote bag (for their protection), Margaret skillfully replaces the paintings separate backboard and snaps the locking devices into place. She then hands the framed painting, with its two concealed masterpieces hidden within, to her sister who carefully places it back on display. Replacing their tools in the tote bag, the sisters are ready to leave.

Gayle pulls back the glove on her left hand and, checking the time on the male style watch on her wrist, says, "2:50 a.m. ... not bad."

"We better check on the guards before leaving. See that they're all right," reminds Margaret.

Good idea, I'll do that while you gather all the security camera and motion detector tapes and discs. Meet you at the watch desk.

The sisters exit the Short Gallery and head in different directions, Margaret carrying the large tote bag.

Gayle arrives in the basement to find the guards straining themselves to unscrew the pipe to which they are handcuffed. Lowering her voice, she asks "Having any success unscrewing that pipe?" Seeing the guards negative expressions, she continues, "Just wanted to make sure you were all right. Another four hours the next shift will arrive and it won't be long after that until you're free. I suggest you make the best of it by simply relaxing and making yourself as comfortable as possible."

The guards exchange suspicious looks. As Gayle heads back up the stairs, the guards go back to their task of attempting to unscrew the pipe. The 2nd guard says, "They could still set fire to the building and we'd like be the only casualties." With that thought, the guards attack their objective to free themselves with renewed vigor.

Gayle arrives in the Security Room as Margaret is pulling all the re-recordable DVDs from their machines and stuffing them into the tote bag and asks, "How's it going?"

Margaret replies, "Just have to get the motion detector DVDs, together with the tapes of the side door monitor."

"You sure there are no backups?"

"Sure? No. But, I think I got'em all. Guards okay?"

"They'll be just fine."

"Can identify us to a 'T'."

"Of course. Now let's get the hell outta here."

With Gayle behind the wheel, the dark-colored rental pulls into the Commonwealth Hotel parking lot and parks out of sight of any surveillance cameras. Still dressed as police officers, the sisters climb out of the automobile and surreptitiously remove the phony, prop license plates, placing them in the large tote bag, before heading to their suite.

Back in their hotel suite, in front of the large, well-lighted mirror, the sisters remove their disguises. Off come the dark wigs, sideburns and prosthetic noses. Next, their breasts are unwrapped and placed into more comfortable bras.

"In the morning, I'll turn in the rental at the airport and take a flight to Shreveport, then a bus to my home in New Orleans. Later, you'll take the hotel shuttle to the airport and catch your flight to Jacksonville, from where you'll catch a bus to Miami," reports Gayle.

After the transition is complete with the police uniforms and makeup kits safely locked into a separate set of luggage, Gayle adds, "We'll keep in touch via text messages, but be careful what you say."

"In three months, we'll meet at your flat in Miami. By then we should be ready to meet with Professor Galbraith."

Margaret, smiling, affirms," I'll count the hours.

**Chapter Two**

**Sitting at a table in the fantail lounge of my yacht,** Jason Burrell was serving me my usual gourmet breakfast. I was reading the San Francisco *Chronicle* when an article caught my attention. I immediately picked up my iPhone and put in a call to my partner, Harry Fletcher.

Harry has a large home with a four-car garage and adjacent helicopter hangar sitting on an isolated bluff overlooking the Pacific at the western end of Highlands Dr., just north of Carmel Highlands.

In the kitchen, Harry answered on the third ring.

“Fletcher.”

“It’s Jonathan. ...Have you seen this morning’s *Chronicle*?”

“Not yet. Why?”

"There's an article on the Gardner Museum heist that happened a while back. Seems they've run out of leads and are offering a 10-million-dollar reward for recovery of the pieces."

"As I recall, the stolen paintings were estimated to be worth $500 million."

"Sounds like a job for Robin Templar and his Merry Band."

"I'll meet you at the office around noon"

Fletcher hangs up the phone just as his stunningly beautiful wife, Nicole, wearing only her cotton panties, enters and pours herself a glass of orange juice. He proceeds to plate and serve their breakfast at the kitchen table as they both sit and begin to eat.

"I hope whoever was on the phone isn't going to take you away again," remarks Nicole.

"You can tell by just looking at my face, can't you?"

"I know you. You're busted," replies Nicole smiling.

Smiling sheepishly as he nods, "I do have to go into the City, and...."

"....and you 'may not be back for some time. I've heard this before...."

Rising and stepping over to him, Nicole sits on his lap and puts her arms around his neck, "This have anything to do with Robin Templar?"

"I've told you before that Robin Templar no longer exists."

"But that's not really true, is it?"

"Well, he does exist, but it's not like before. He's gone legit, alright?"

"Meaning he no longer robs armored cars but now risks his life and limb recovering stolen goods?" asks Nicole."

"Well, you know, it's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it."

"Dirty job, hell. It's fun and you love it."

Fletcher, looking into her eyes and smiling, says "You’re what would be fun right now."

Nicole smiles and their lips meet in a sweet kiss.

Then he grabs her up off his lap as he rises and throws her over his shoulder. Nicole shrieks in mock horror and laughs as Fletcher carries his mostly naked wife out through the door to the next room.

Later, Fletcher exits the front door and heads for the adjacent helicopter hangar where he slides open the door to the hangar revealing his Hughes MD Model 500 helicopter.

At the Monterey Regional Airport, Fletcher's helicopter lands in the long-term vis- iting aircraft area. As the engine shuts down and the Tie-Down Crew approaches, Templar walks to the boarding area, and gets in line prepared to present his computer printed boarding pass. Finally, the Flight Announcer can be heard, "The SkyWest flight to San Francisco is now boarding."

At the San Francisco International Airport, a SkyWest aircraft settles onto the runway and rolls out. Templar debarks, exits the building and looks around. Spotting Jason Burrell, Fletcher follows Jason to the black limousine where he climbs into the back. Jason gets behind the wheel and takes off, heading for the City.

In San Francisco’s Financial District, the black limo pulls up in front of a high-rise. Fletcher exits the limo and enters the building. Reaching the elevators in the lobby, he presses the button for the 19th floor. As the elevator door opens, Fletcher steps into the lobby of a busy company identified by the sign on the back wall: Universal Imports, which takes up the entire floor with the huge lobby compiling about 18 percent of the floor space and individual offices the remaining 82 percent. The elegant but efficient receptionist Ms. Marianne Valtan greets Harry, revealing a trace of a French accent, "Mr. Fletcher.... Mr. Moore is expecting you."

"Thank you, Ms. Valtan."

At this point, Fletcher opens one of the tall double doors and disappears into the corporation's inner sanctum. He moves down the hallway past an office with the door marked *Harry Fletcher, Chief Operating Officer* and on to the next office with the sign, *Jonathan Moore, Chief Financial Officer*. Harry knocks and without waiting for a response enters.

I rose from behind my desk and shook my partner’s hand**.** I then suggested lunch at the Acquerello Restaurant, near Nob Hill

“Sounds perfect.”

Acquerello is a non-descript, seemingly residential building virtually hides on Sacramento Street behind a simple, identifying awning and a plaque proclaiming the restaurant's 1989 founding date. Inside, in a warmly lighted space that, with its high-beamed ceiling, looks at once like the nave of a chapel but feels like an elegantly cozy nook, Harry and I were escorted to a table.

Fletcher ordered the duck breast and I the salmon steak. I also ordered a bottle of Louis Jadot Montrachet Grand Cru. Fletcher, wearing a grin of gastronomic ecstasy, declares, "You know, I miss the Marine Corps, but, uh, let's face it," gesturing at the table and ambience.

"Civilization has its rewards," I finished his sentence.

"The trick is to get the best of both worlds."

"Speaking of which, if ever there were a caper that required the expertise of Robin Templar and his Merry Band, this is it. Think of the charities we could fund with ten million U.S. dollars, less our expenses and modest commission, of course."

Fletcher responds thoughtfully, "So, I suppose we need to contact the officer-in-charge at the Boston Police Department. Let him know we're interested in earning the recovery fee."

“That would be a good start,” I said.

In a glass-walled office, at Boston Police Headquarters, the earnest police lieutenant William "Bill" Cassidy, a fit and trim 43 in his three-piece suit, confers with the retiring Gardner Museum Director, Anne Hawley, who, at 73 is still defiantly red haired and beautiful.

"What do we know about these men we're supposed to meet with?" asks Hawley.

Opening the file folder on his desk, Cassidy reads, "Harry Fletcher -- honorable discharge from the Marines, rank of Captain. The details of his service record are oddly redacted. Has an MBA from the Wharton School of Business and is the CEO of an apparently successful import-export business based in San Francisco. Other than that, not much. Low-profile kind of guy. …Now, Jonathan Moore, Fletcher's business partner, is even harder to figure. Twenty years in the Marines ended by court-martial but with honorable discharge and full pension as a major. Didn't know they could do that. Anyway, primary duty in the Corps: Special Ops, planning covert missions."

"Black ops?" asks Hawley.

Cassidy nods.

"Impressive," adds Hawley.

"I think it's worth a dinner."

Hawley nods agreement.

Inside Boston’s Capital Grille Steakhouse, Cassidy, Hawley, Fletcher and I are seated at a booth, enjoying their superb aged beef dinner and world-class wines.

"The 10 million dollars is for recovery of all six of the paintings; prorated for individual recovery. I'll see to it that you get a list of the paintings and the recovery fee for each," states Hawley.

"And where's the money coming from? Insurance or the museum?" asked Fletcher."

"The Museum," responds Hawley.

“For the *perps* to spend as much time as they did in the museum and get away clean, they had to have detailed knowledge of the security system, such as it was," I suggested. .

"So, either they worked at the museum or someone gave the information," Fletcher added.

"I can provide you with a list of past and present employees, for all the good it'll do you. They're not likely to volunteer any information and we certainly cannot force it out of them," reports Hawley.

"We don't intend to. If the information was sold to the thieves, it was likely done out of a need for cash. Once in need of cash, always in need of cash," announces Fletcher. "So we'll run ads in the local media offering a substantial reward, under anonymity, to the person who provides such information and consents to an interview. No police involved."

Acquiescing, Cassidy says, "Might work."

I looked both Hawley and Cassidy in the eye and said, "Now, what we want to hear is exactly what happened the night of the robbery."

“But, of course,” was Cassidy’s reply.

In Miami’s South Beach, Gayle and Margaret are relaxing at a sidewalk table at the popular Otentic bistro. The handsome waiter steps up and asks, "May I take your order?"

Gayle requests, "Two glasses of your best Chardonnay, please."

"And we're expecting one other person," says Margaret.

The waiter smiles, then moves away to accommodate the order.

"I know it's best that I not know where, but....are my paintings safe?" asks Margaret.

"They're here in Miami, stored in six different locations. I'll give those up, one at a time, as Professor Galbraith sells them and we receive our share of the money."

"So, you don't trust the man either."

"Of course not. Why would I? I mean.... Sure, he's the best at what he does, selling masterpieces to obscenely wealthy art lovers who are willing to receive stolen goods. But he's a crook."

Gayle looks up as Margaret's face cues her, and, interrupting, with a determined smile, "And here he is now."

Margaret and Gayle are joined by Neil Galbraith, early sixties, a dapper art connoisseur. Gayle, motioning for him to sit, asks, "Care for a cocktail before ordering?"

"Don't mind if I do," responds Galbraith.

The young bistro waiter brings the sisters' Chardonnays.

Galbraith speaks to the waiter, "I understand you have Hennessy Paradis by the glass?"

"I believe that's correct, sir."

"I'll have a glass."

"Very good choice, sir."

Galbraith, adding, "But, bring that to me after lunch. Meanwhile, I'll have (pointing to the sisters' drinks).... What's that you're drinking?"

"Chardonnay," says Gayle.

"You like it?"

"Yes, it's nice."

"Bring me what they're having."

"Very good, sir."

As the waiter moves away to fill the order, Gayle and Margaret exchange a look. Then Gayle looks Galbraith in the eye.

"Trust you'll be picking up the tab," comments Gayle.

Back on my yacht, Jason Burrell is serving breakfast to Harry and me. We’re washing it all down with Dom Perignon Mimosas. Harry is determining which of his merry band would be right for this type mission.

"I don't see Shinaman on this one, and we won't pull 'Duke' Osgard's chain either. But, because of their police connections, we can definitely use Chardonnay and David Morgan," Fletcher suggests.

"Already put in the call.” I said. “They'll be here in the morning."

At South Beach’s Otentic Bistro, Margaret, Gayle and Professor Galbraith are finishing their lunch. Galbraith now sips his Cognac.

"I've run all the standard tests on the paintings. Believe me, they will test as authentic right down to the canvas, paint and brush strokes," reports Gayle.

"Good. Not that my buyers will risk having them authenticated, but most of them are connoisseurs themselves and could probably tell the difference on their own. And the originals?"

"In a safe place," Gayle tells him.

With a subtle glint in his eye, Galbraith states, "Good, good. It wouldn't do to have them suddenly turn up; at least not in our lifetime."

At the San Francisco International Airport, the tall and slinky Chardonnay Rogers, late 20s to early 30s (whose real name is Detective Sergeant Andrea Parker of the San Diego PD), exits the terminal with her luggage, stops at the curbside and looks around for her ride. With her features, a drop-dead gorgeous blend of Mediterranean and Asian, she would stand out in any crowd. She soon is greeted by Jason Burrell, who takes her luggage and leads her to the nearby limousine.

Once aboard my yacht, Fletcher warmly renews his friendship with Inspector David Morgan, early 30s, of the San Francisco Police Department, as handsome as he is fit. The animated conversation is interrupted as Jason Burrell escorts Chardonnay aboard. Naturally, there are warm hugs all around. Everyone gathers around the circular dining table, set up by Jason. .

"So, I'm thinking I'll go undercover as a shadowy, art-hungry billionaire looking to buy authentic black market art," reports Fletcher.

"That's it? That's your plan?" asks Morgan.

"Yeah. What's wrong with it?"

"The day after that heist, both the Boston Globe and the New York Times wrote that the whole thing was probably contracted in advance by a black-market collector, outside the country."

"So??" I interjected.

"Well, the idea that billionaires go around snapping up looted paintings is mostly a myth. It's not worth the risk."

"Well, it's all we've got," responds Fletcher.

"Templar, I mean Fletcher's right. We've got to start somewhere," comments Chardonnay.

"Hopefully, we'll stir up the art world and get a line on someone who knows something," insists Fletcher.

Addressing Morgan, Chardonnay declares, "Obviously, it's unusual, but don't you think there are some art loving billionaires out there who would do almost anything to land a coveted painting?"

Morgan, considering it, retorts, "It's an art-lover's fantasy, I suppose. The idea of finding a stolen Rembrandt in some Pierce Brosnan version of a Thomas-Crown-style hiding place, and --"

Interrupting, Fletcher says "And having secret and exclusive possession of such an ageless treasure. For your eyes only. I suppose it could be a wet dream for some collectors.”

More likely for many collectors,” I added.

In her South Beach loft, Margaret is alone reading an old Agatha Christie book, when there is a knock on the door. Putting down the book, she rises from her stuffed chair and moves to the door, asking "Who is it?"

"Neil Galbraith."

Margaret opens the door, asking, "Professor, what're you doing here?"

"I came for the location of the first set of paintings and the padlock key," says Galbraith, entering and beginning to snoop around the loft, obviously looking for paintings.

"You can give it up; you're not going to find any paintings here," announces Margaret, who gets a post-it note pad and writes an address and the combination to a lock.

While Margaret is thus turned away for a moment, Galbraith palms and pockets a couple of small 3-ounce jars of paint off a shelf. She turns and hands the post-it note to Galbraith, explaining, "Here's the location of the first three unsigned paintings, together with the combination to the padlock."

The professor accepts the note.

"You'll get the location for the next set of paintings from my sister, once our share of the proceeds is safely deposited into our Cayman Islands bank account. By the way, we have six different bank accounts."

Galbraith, taken aback, comments, "Good God, you are careful."

"No more than you."

"What do you mean?"

"My guess is you wouldn't risk selling original stolen paintings. Long prison sentence for that. But selling fakes? In some countries they don't even prosecute. It's hardly even a crime," states Margaret.

"You're a damn good painter, and one smart lady. But, you're forgetting one thing. While copying a masterpiece isn’t a crime, forging the artist's signatures is a prison offence – should I be caught at it. Goodbye Miss Lupino," replies Galbraith smiling.

Margaret returns the smile as the professor closes the door behind him.

The picturesque village of Sausalito perches on the Bay, just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. Inside the Trident Restaurant, David Morgan is having a seafood dinner with Andrea Parker (Chardonnay Rogers when working with the Merry Band). From the Janis Joplin Booth they are sitting in, the view of San Francisco and the surrounding bay is spectacular.

"So where do you think the Gardner paints are? And will we ever find them?" asks Chardonnay.

"They'll turn up. I think in a year or two they'll be ransomed for, say, ten to fifteen percent of their value," responds Morgan.

"So you don't think they'll ever be sold to some Thomas-Crown-type billionaires who'll hide them in their secret enclaves?"

"No, I don't," says Morgan smiling. "But as you say, it's a start. By the way, based on the luggage in the trunk of my car, being a detective and all, I might conclude that you're not checked into a hotel."

"Being a detective myself, I would concur that your observation is likely correct."

"It might be presumptuous of me, but my humble, but clean, apartment is only a matter of blocks from here. If you'd care to spend the night...?"

"Why not?"

**Chapter Three**

On the 19th floor headquarters of Universal Imports, in the conference room, David Morgan and Chardonnay look very relaxed, but they are all business as they confer with Harry Fletcher and me.

"As you know, we've put out media ads offering a reward for information on the Gardner Heist and the Museum's security system. Well, we got a bite. So, Chard, you'll leave for Boston first thing in the morning.”

"Okay. I suppose it could be real."

"Or it could be someone looking for a quick buck. It's up to you to find out which."

"Understood."

"Meanwhile I'll be flying to Miami to re-establish my residency in Gable Estates, where I'm known to my landlady as the mysterious Robin Templar, a shady man of wealth," reports Fletcher..

"Well, Florida sounds nice," announces Morgan.

"Yes, but you are not going there," states Fletcher.

"Aw."

"You're going to Philadelphia," declares Fletcher.

Satisfied that my partner had everything under control, I climbed to my feet, smiled and excusing myself, quipped, “Keep me posted.”

At the Philadelphia International airport, Morgan rents a car and drives to the local FBI office.

Inside the FBI Field Office, special evidence boxes marked "Gardner Museum Heist" are trundled into the office on a cart by a secretary as Inspector David Morgan waits patiently, seated in front of the desk which bears the nameplate: Special Agent-in-Charge, Theodore Post. Following the boxes is the man himself. Agent Ted Post, mid 50s, affable and obviously fighting to control his weight. A desk jockey if ever there was one.

Post announces, "Sorry to keep you waiting, Inspector.

"No problem Special Agent Post.”

Interrupting, Post says, "Please just call me Ted. I'll put you in an interview room where you can take as long as you like to read through the files, even come back tomorrow. You can take notes but no photographs or the like."

"Fair enough, Ted," says Morgan smiling.

Ted returns the smile.

At the Miami International Airport Fletcher’s Delta 757 approaches and settles onto the runway. In the terminal, he rents an incredibly expensive sports car and heads for Miami’s Gable Estates.

Gable Estates is a stunningly beautiful community that is dominated by fifteen-million-dollar-plus waterfront mansions. He has the wind in his hair as he drives his rental red Ferrari convertible (top down) on Leucadendra Drive, the waterfront street flanked by mansions on each side. He then pulls into one of the grand estates, 485 Leucadendra Drive. Although only two stories, this is a palace, with guest houses in the back that probably cost at least $1 million to build. Fletcher parks the Ferrari in front of a guest house, climbs out, grabs his luggage from the trunk, and moves to the door. Using his key, he enters. Dropping his luggage, Fletcher moves to the landline phone and getting a tone, he dials a number.

In the main room of the mansion, a phone rings and is answered by an elegant lady in her early 70s, "Hello."

"Mrs. Rothschild? This is Robin Templar. Just wanted to let you know that I'll be staying in my guest house for at least two weeks, maybe longer."

"Glad to have you around, Mr. Templar."

"Mrs. Rothschild? Could I have twenty minutes of your time?"

"Of course, Robin. Any time. Any time. *Now*, if you'd like."

"I'd like."

In the den of the mansion, Greta the butler, is serving finger food and pouring tea for Mrs. Rothschild and her guest.

"Thank you, Greta. That'll be all," says Mrs. Rothschild.

As the Greta retreats, Mrs. Rothschild turns to Fletcher, "Now, Mr. Templar, what is it that's on your mind?"

"I want it to become known that I'm the primary resident and inferred owner of your entire estate."

A bit taken aback, Mrs. Rothschild asks, "How do you propose to do that? A mere title search will prove that I'm the sole owner."

"I don't need to actually own the property. That's only the impression I wish to create. I could be leasing it, should anyone check. A section 'B' sixth page press release will explain the lease, as taking place while you are on an extended trip to France. But you don't go. You stay on here but keep a low profile."

Excited, Mrs. Rothschild exclaims, "This sounds like another of those shocking adventures you occasionally tell me about."

"Could be."

"Will I be in any danger?"

"Not likely."

"Oh," disappointed, "I always wanted to be part of one of your capers."

At Boston International, a United *heavy* flight settles onto the runway of Logan Field and rolls out. At the Avis counter, Chardonnay rents a full-size car. She drives her rental vehicle into the Commonwealth Hotel parking lot, grabs her luggage from the trunk and heads for the lobby. At the check-in counter she announces herself, "Andrea Parker. I reserved a suite."

The hotel desk clerk, checking his computer, turns to Chardonnay with a smile, "Yes, Detective Parker. We have a suite for you on the ninth floor."

Inside her suite, Chardonnay is enjoying a gourmet room service dinner. Fenway Park, just a couple blocks away, looms large in her picture window. Her burner phone rings, Chard answers, "Hello?".

Of course it was me on the other end of the call**.** "I've got your schedule. Tomorrow at 10 am, you're meeting at the Gardner Museum with Anne Hawley, the former director. Then at 1:30 you're doing lunch at Scoozi with our informant, a Bonnie Wellman.

"What? Scusi?

"Yeah, Scoozi. It's a restaurant, just down the block from your hotel. I'll text you the particulars."

"And after that?"

"4 o'clock, you're at Boston police headquarters. Lieutenant Detective Cassidy has set you up an interview with the guard who let the fake cops enter the museum."

"Thanks. Check with you .later." With that I clicked off my cell phone.

In the Gardner Museum, Chardonnay and Anne Hawley enter the Dutch Room, on one of the upper floors. Chard is taken aback to notice that the frames of the stolen masterpieces are hanging in their original spots, sans the canvases of course.

Anne Hawley, noticing Chard's surprised look, explains, "We decided to leave the empty frames in their original positions until the paintings are returned."

"I see, a little eerie."

"I suppose. But actually, it was the thieves who re-hung them."

"What? Why would they do that? asks Chardonnay astonished.

"I don't know, but the museum decided to leave them that way. I think it may give the supporters some hope that one day they will be returned."

Chard is nonplussed, "Is my information correct that none of the paintings were cut out of their frames, but instead were painstakingly removed?"

"That's correct."

Studying the floor, Chard continues, "So they likely laid the canvases in a stack, I guess on the floor, then rolled them up and placed them in a cardboard tube for transportation."

"That would be a good guess, but for the fact that most of these old paintings are too stiff for that. Like Rembrandt's Storm: during its restoration, the back of the painting had been sealed with wax and varnished many times over the years. The painting was about as flexible as an aluminum can."

"So, then they couldn't have gotten it into a tube? That leaves them carrying a stack of large, stiff canvases?" asks Chard.

"They might have taken the time to strip off the wax; but they'd still have the stiffening of many a varnishing. No, any rolling up would undoubtedly trash the canvas. Ruin the painting."

"The care they took in removing the paintings, what does that tell you?"

Hawley, shrugging, responds, "Professionals. Highly competent, knowledge-able."

"And what kind of person would normally acquire that knowledge?" asks Chard.

"I don't know. Art lovers?"

"Exactly. Probably with formal training. They would never put a great master-piece in jeopardy."

"Hope you're right," responds Hawley dubiously.

Inside the Scoozi Restaurant, located at Kenmore Square near Boston University, Bonnie Wellman, in her security guard uniform, looking as butch as ever, is seated at the bar having a sandwich and a beer. On a barstool next to her, Chardonnay has a sub sandwich and an eight-ounce glass of a Super Tuscan.

"We met here in this restaurant. We sat at this very bar."

"What did she look like?"

"What about the reward?

"We'll get there. First I need to know that you're on the level."

"How do I know *you're* on the level?" How do I know this isn't some kind of bullshit sting operation?"

"If I wanted to sting you, I'd have arrested you by now."

"Hey!"

"Oh, calm down. If you want the money, you can start by telling me what she looked like."

Wellman settling down, replies, "She was a hot little package, early 20s, about five-five, or five-six, and, uh, good looking."

"Hair color?"

"Black. Although it could have been a wig."

"Eyebrows were of a slightly lighter shade."

"Eyes?"

"She had two."

"Please, no smart-ass crap. I obviously meant the color."

"She wore sunglasses. That's all I know. Now, about the money?”

Chard reluctantly reaches into her purse and pulls out an envelope of hundred-dollar bills. Bonnie reaches for it but Chard pulls back, asking, "How did her people come to approach you?"

"I've thought about that. Obviously it was someone who knew I had worked at the Gardner and was desperate for money. But I have no idea who."

Chardonnay hands over the money and prepares to leave, leaving behind her unfinished sandwich and glass of wine. As she rolls her muscular bulk off the bar stool, Wellman hesitates as she remembers something, "There is one more thing."

Chard turns back.

"When she opened her wallet to pay the bill, I noticed she had a Florida driver's license," continues Wellman.

Chard asks, her eyes getting big, "Did you get a glimpse of the name?"

"Not really. It was just a blur. I think the first name started with 'MA.'"

"'MA'?! What about the city?" asks Chard excitedly? "That's the last line under the name. Now think."

Wellman, shaking her head, responds, "Sorry. As I said, it was a blur."

"Did the blur seem like a long name or a short one?"

Thinking carefully, Wellman finally says, "Short one. Could have been Miami. And her purse was a mess."

"Looked like all women's purses. A lot of receipts, tissues. A flyer for some kind of 'Peace' thing."

Chard, now truly excited, asks "Peace?"

"Yeah. I recall, I think the word 'Peace' was on the header of a flyer in her purse."

"Bonnie, if you were a man, I'd kiss you."

Bonnie hesitates, gives the attractive Chard a look, reflects a moment, chuckling a little, remarks, "Honey, personally, I wouldn't be that fussy. But, no thanks. All I need right now is the money. Good luck."

Wellman turns and exits as Chard smiles subtly to herself.

In the Philadelphia FBI field office, seated at a rectangle table David Morgan is studying the files on the Gardner Museum heist and copying portions of the file on to his yellow legal pad, to be joined by a number of such yellow pads beside him on the table.

Special Agent Ted Post enters, announcing, "How's it going, Inspector?"

Looking up, Morgan tells him, "Please, call me David. I'm not here in any official capacity."

"I know. You're part of the hotshot team that's after the five or is it ten million recovery fee. When you've had enough for the day, I'd like to take you to dinner, on the FBI's tab, of course."

David and Ted are at Fiorino’s Italian Restaurant, a small neighborhood eatery at om Indian Queen Lane, noted for serving authentic Italian, seated at one of the ten or so tables David Morgan and Ted Post are enjoying a lovely Barolo with their main entree, David manages to work in the many questions he has after having read a portion of the FBI file on the Gardner heist.

"It appears that you have conducted a very thorough investigation," says Morgan.

"Actually, we are still investigating, interviewing the usual suspects, so to speak."

"And that list is clearly a who's who of art thieves and underworld crime figures. But what, I'm wondering, is the real motivation, for pulling off such a heist?"

Puzzled, Post comments, "Well, it's always about the money, isn't it?"

"Yes, but art carries so much emotional baggage. The very concept of its high value is, after all, based on feelings, emotions, art lovers' dreams. Desire for power, for revenge? A series of intangibles."

"I see where you're going. But to even guess at psychology, you need to have someone in mind. Unfortunately, we aren't there yet. Now, the FBI has assembled a list of players in the art world who have been at least suspected of black-market activity. If you're willing to sign a non-disclosure agreement I could possibly provide you a copy of that list."

"I'd need to share it with rest of my team."

"I think we can accommodate that request." Leaning in close, Post advises, "But let me flag something for you. Between you and me, the FBI is losing interest in the case. That's why the museum allowed your team aboard and why there were no objections from the Boston Police."

"I don't understand."

"You're a cop, David. Think about it. Busting art thieves isn't sexy. Agents would rather be chasing more macho criminals, like murderers, bank robbers. Japanese police barely consider art theft a crime," informs Post, throwing up his hand and smiling wanly. "Cops, that's just the way we are."

**Chapter Four**

Inside the Miami-Dade Public Library, with an open laptop computer and a number of books relating to the paintings of the masters on the table before him, Harry Fletcher (Robin Templar) is tutoring himself on the world of art and art history. Harry's cell phone rings, to the annoyance of those seated nearby. Climbing to his feet, he moves to the stacks where he can take the call without disturbing the others, answering, "Hello?"

It was me making the call**.** Jason Burrell was driving me to the office in the company limo, passing several of the city’s landmarks on the way.

“Harry? …Jonathan. …Morgan was able to get the FBI’s list of shady art brokers. I’ll email it to you.

"Great," Fletcher replied.

"But listen to this. The dealers are all over the country, but one of them lives in Miami. A Professor Neil Galbraith. He teaches art at the University of Miami."

"Okay, I guess I could check him out, since I'm already here.”

“Chardonnay met with the informer, Bonnie Wellman. I’ll email you what she learned. See what you can make of it.” I then clicked off the *voice* to my cell and began texting.

Inside the public library, Fletcher goes back to the table and checks his laptop, reading his email text: "...attractive young woman in early 20s....Florida driver's license....First name begins with MA....City may be Miami....Possible keyword of 'Peace.'" Fletcher is visibly excited.

At Boston Police Headquarters, Lt. Detective Cassidy and Chardonnay are interviewing the first Security Guard who previously admitted to having let in the fake cops.

"How tall were they?" asked Chardonnay.

"One was slightly taller than the other. I'd say they ranged from about five six to five eight," reports the 1st security guard.

"That's something new," comments Cassidy.

"What about their weight? Heavy? Medium? Thin?" asks Chardonnay.

:"Both?" asks Cassidy.

"Yes, sir."

"What did they bring with them into the museum?"

"They had a tote bag; the kind that artists sometimes use to carry their portfolio. Only it was really large."

"You didn't see a cardboard cylinder of any type," queries Chard.

"No, Ma'am. Unless they had it in the bag. We didn't even see the tote bag until after we were cuffed."

"How do you suppose they were able to wander throughout the museum without setting off any alarms?" asks Cassidy.

"As I've said before, they forced me to shut off the alarm system, then before leaving they must have taken all the camera and motion detector discs."

"Any way you could have fooled them and just pretended to shut down the alarm system?" asks Chard.

"Probably, if I hadn't been scared shitless."

Chard gives a slight nod to Cassidy indicating as far as she's concerned, the interview is over. The lieutenant detective addresses the guard.

Cassidy announces, "Thank you for coming in. Your cooperation will be noted. Now if you'll remain here, I'll have an officer escort you from the building."

With that Cassidy and Chard climb to their feet and exit the interview room. As Detective Cassidy escorts Chard towards the building's entrance, he asks for her thoughts, “So, what do you think? Was the interview helpful?"

"Very. Did it ever occur to you that the two fake cops could have been women?"

Cassidy's face shows that he obviously hadn't entertained the possibility.

Inside the public library, Fletcher is still intently focused on his laptop. Googling "Peace Miami," he scrolls, grimacing, through the selections that come up: "Prince of Peace Moravian Church," "Peace Love Hair Salon," "Peace Education Foundation." None of these seem to go anywhere. Then he searches for "Peace Art Miami" and up pops "Peace Mural by Huong," an art gallery in South Beach. And it's the only one that includes all the search criteria. His eyes narrow as if sensing this is something he may be able to move on.

At Miami Beach’s Peace Mural Gallery, Fletcher parks the red Ferrari in front of the gallery, exits the car and, dressed in his finest tropical-billionaire-casual costume, sunglasses and all, he enters. Posing as his alter-ego, Robin Templar, removes his sunglasses as he enters the 2,000-square-foot gallery. The gallery is filled with the paintings of the renowned Huong, a Vietnamese female artist established in Florida since 1985.

Fletcher joins the dozens of people who wander through the gallery, and also the 11,000-square-foot adjacent studio. He peruses the abundant artwork while surreptitiously checking out the people who are milling about, especially the staff, who wear name tags. Fletcher approaches the female staff to get close enough to read their tags, which are many and varied, but none have first names beginning with "MA."

Having made the complete circuit of the place, Fletcher is verging on discouragement when his cell phone rings. He answers, "Robin Templar."

"Are you at the gallery? How's it going?" I asked.

"Not the right names, old Boy. I'm beginning to think maybe we're in the wrong place, because -- whoa...."

“An attractive young salesperson just walked by. Her name tag reads: "Margaret."

"Call you later," Fletcher said to me. And the cell went dead.

Fletcher makes a beeline toward Margaret and positions himself in front of her, pointedly staring at the artwork on the walls.

"Welcome to the Peace mural. Are you looking for anything in particular?" asks Margaret.

Fletcher, pretending to be surprised at her attention, states, "Oh! Well, I am a big fan of the Vietnam peace activist, Huong."

"Well, you certainly came to the right place, Mr. uh..."

"Templar...Robin Templar. He hands his card to Margaret who accepts it and looks it over. The card reads: Robin Templar, 485 Leucadendra Drive, Gable Estates, Miami. At the bottom of the card is a phone number and email address.

"Leucadendra Drive. Don't they call that billionaire row?" asks Margaret, putting the card in her pocket.

"Really?"

"It's something I heard. So, you're interested in Huong?" comments Margaret smiling.

"Yes, indeed."

"Any particular one of her works?"

"Well, I already have many of her earlier works. Got them from a gallery in the Wynwood district. Thought I'd stop by and see what you had to offer. I'm interested in quality. Price is not a big deal."

"I'm certain we can show you some good things. If I may ask, what business are you in, Mr. Templar?"

"You might say I'm retired; presently in the business of purchasing and enjoying fine art."

"And you consider Huong to be a fine artist?"

"I like her story; a former journalist, a mother, a Vietnam War refugee, who fled Vietnam at 25, and a peace activist. All the great masters have a story."

"Why don't you come this way and I'll show you some of her more recent work."

Inside the adjacent, 11,000 square foot artist studio of the Peace Mural Galley, Margaret is leading Fletcher through the exhibits, telling him, "We have a lot of aspiring artists renting space here to show their works. Most are students from the university."

"University?" asks Fletcher.

"University of Miami. They have a terrific art program headed up by Professor Neil Galbraith, a very renowned art appraiser."

At this point, as the pair enters the space rented by Margaret to show her paintings, Margaret says, "This is my work."

Fletcher, seeing that the paintings on the wall are nothing short of masterful, exclaims, "Oh," giving the paintings slack-jawed attention as he is most impressed by Margaret's works.

Margaret leads Fletcher back into the main Gallery.

Fletcher tells her, "Do you understand how good you are? Your work is head and shoulders above anything else in this place. It's the equivalent of the Masters."

Margaret, becoming suspicious, cautiously replies "Thank you."

"Now, I've got to go, but I'll be back, probably tomorrow, and when I do, I want to buy one or more of your paintings. In the meantime, can you do me a favor?"

"What would you like, Mr. Templar," Margaret asks cautiously.

"If you run into anyone with one of the old masters for sale, at a bargain price, you have my card."

"If you would like, I have an early Huong in the vault, that is, if you'd care to take a look," replies, Margaret, a bit alarmed, but smiling.

Noticing the slight change in her tone, Fletcher responds hesitantly, "Lead the way."

Once inside the vault room, Margaret explains, "This is where we keep our more valuable paintings." She sorts through several canvases until she finally finds what she's looking for. Pulling out the framed Huong canvas, she hands it to Fletcher, who takes a look. While he is studying the Huong painting, Margaret slips out of the vault. Once out of the vault, she slams the vault door shut and rotates the combination, assuring that whoever is inside will stay there.

At Boston’s Calital Grille Steakhouse, Chardonnay and Lt. Detective Bill Cassidy are having drinks at the bar. Looking around, Chard comments on the decor, "Very nice place."

"Said to be one of the best steakhouses in New England."

The Capital Grille waiter comes up, saying "Lieutenant Cassidy, your table is ready."

Chard and Cassidy are given a window seat. Cassidy tells her, "I've set up an interview with the second guard for the first thing in the morning."

"Great."

"Ah, so, Detective Parker. What is your assessment so far?"

"Of what? The case or you?"

Laughing, Cassidy comments, "You Californians get right to the point."

"Life's too short for anything else. You married?"

"No, I'm a widower."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you, but it's okay. It's been a long time. You?"

"Single. Enjoying it."

They regard each other with cool smiles and size each other up. Finally, Cassidy breaks the silence, "Well, so much for us. What's your take on this case?"

"I'm afraid I don't have a take and that's what bothers me. None of it makes sense. I feel like it's staring me in the face but I'm looking right through it."

The Peace Mural Gallery is now closed. Professor Galbraith approaches the door and knocks. The door opens and Margaret lets him in.

"What's the problem? Over the phone you sounded like your world was about to come crashing down on you," asks Galbraith.

"I'm not sure there is a problem," answers Margaret. Explaining the situation to the professor, she says, "This man, calling himself Templar, tried to convince me was a billionaire looking to purchase rare art works at bargain prices."

"So?"

"I was stupid enough to show him my paintings."

"And?"

"He assumed unusually interested. I got the feeling he might be some kind of cop. So, I called you."

"What do you expect me to do about it?"

"Use some of those sources you're always bragging about to have him checked out," suggests Margaret as she pulls out Templar's card and hands it to Galbraith.

Galbraith, reading the card, asks, "Where is he now?"

"Locked in the vault."

Stunned by this revelation, Galbraith explodes, "Are you nuts?!! This is your mess. Why should I get involved?"

"Because I gave him your name as the dealer."

"He didn't have to be held prisoner for me to have him checked out."

Acquiescing, Margaret says, "I may have overreacted."

Galbraith, incredulous, retorts, "May have!!! Let me make some phone calls."

The vault's interior light is on as Robin Templar assesses his situation. Climbing to his feet, he checks his iPhone, which shows no signal.

Professor Galbraith, clicking off his iPhone, turns to Margaret, "Okay, my sources, as you call them are checking out your Mr. Templar. Should have an answer within a couple hours.

At their window table, at the Capital Grille, the conversation between Chard and Bill Cassidy is about to become more personal.

"I'm ex-military. Navy to be precise," says Cassidy.

"I'm aware of your background, Commander."

"Then perhaps you have heard of the red light-green light code when applied to personal relationships between the sexes?"

"I have," responds Chard cautiously.

"As they say, the evening is young. I'd just like to know if I have a green light or a red light."

Chard, looking into his eyes for a few moments and liking what she sees, comments with a smile, "A red light. Not that I have anything against good sex, but I think it would be best to keep our relationship on a professional one."

Cassidy nods his understanding.

At the Peace Mural Gallery Margaret and the professor enter the vault room.

"Did you confiscate his cell?" asks Galbraith.

"No need. Can't get a signal inside the vault."

"At least with a vault this big, he has had plenty of air.

**Chapter Five**

At the Gallery, Galbraith's cell phone rings. Margaret is watching him anxiously as he answers, "Galbraith. You sure? All Right. Thanks."

Turning to Margaret, he tells her, "Apparently, Mr. Templar is who he says he is. Have you thought about how you're to apologize to him?"

Margaret's expression indicates that she has not.

"Well, however you do it, include me out. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way. You might want to lock the door behind me."

Margaret follows him to the door. When he has left, she heads for the vault room.

Margaret opens the vault to find Templar/Fletcher relaxing on a stool, a broad smile on his face.

"I'm sure there's a good explanation," states Fletcher cheerfully.

"It's a beauty. If you're really interested in purchasing an old master, for the right price, of course, well…."

Fletcher exits the vault and stands next to Margaret, announcing, "I'm all ears."

At the Miami International Airport David Morgan is presenting his driver's license and filling out the rental agreement.

Driving the rental car, David pulls up in front of 1 Hotel South Beach and stops, letting the valet parking team take over. Inside the lobby, David addresses the check-in clerk, "Since I'm likely to be here two weeks or more, I reserved one of the apartment suites."

The check-in clerk checks her computer and, turning to David, confirms, "Yes, sir, Mr. Morgan. An apartment with a beachfront view."

In Morgan’s South Beach apartment suite, Harry is bringing David up to speed. "She unintentionally let slip that it's a man named Galbraith who sells her paintings. I assume stolen or otherwise. Supposedly, he's a professor at the University of Miami. I'll have Jonathan check him out. Meantime, it would be helpful if we know where she lived."

"Leave that to me.

Inside her Hotel Commonwealth suite, Chardonnay pulls out her iPhone, checks the caller ID and then answers, "Jonathan?"

I was calling Chard from the fantail lounge of my yacht, Sweet Charity.

"You're going to need to go to New Orleans, I said into my iPhone."

:"Great, I'm always up for some Jambalaya. But what's in New Orleans? Did that Margaret Lupino not pan out?" asks Chardonnay.

"That's still working, but I did a background check and discovered she has a sister, one Gayle Lupino, who is a sometime art dealer. Lives in New Orleans."

"Email me what you have on her."

Across the street from the Peace Gallery, David is sitting behind the wheel of his rental, and watching the front door of the gallery. Finally Margaret comes out, heading for the parking lot. David puts the 30-power binoculars to his eyes and, based on the photos spread on the front passenger seat, checks out her face to be sure. He continues watching as Margaret climbs into her car and pulls out of the lot, heading south. David fires up his car and tails Margaret's car.

He is not far behind as Margaret's car pulls into the parking lot of Otentic Bistro. She enters the French bistro and is escorted to a table. It's happy hour and the place is jammed.

David enters, spots Margaret with a rare table of her own, and makes his move, asking her, "Place is a little jammed, mind if I join you?"

Margaret is reticent but finally nods her acquiescence.

After a United flight settles onto the runway at NOLA International, Chard catches

a cab to the French Quarter. A valet carrying her luggage, Chardonnay approaches the front desk of the Hotel Monteleone and addresses the check-in clerk, "I have a reservation, for a suite."

"Your name?"

"Chardonnay Rogers."

The clerk goes to work on his keyboard, "Yes, Ms. Rogers. A second floor suite. Also, there's a package for you."

Chard enters the large, superbly decorated, suite with its separate bedroom and two baths, crossing over to a couch, she sits. Opening the small package handed her by the clerk, she looks at the contents and smiles. It is a book entitled *"Provenance (How a Con Man and a Forger Rewrote the History of Modern Art,"* by Laney Salisbury & Aly Sujo. She puts the book down and searches for a phone book. Finding one, she sits back down on the couch and begins her search. Finally she finds the page she's looking for. The list of Lupinos is short: there are only two, a G. Lupino and a G. L. Lupino; the latter with a French Quarter address. Chard takes a guess.

From across the street, Chardonnay walks past the Charles Street address provided her by the phone book and notices movement in the second story loft. She enters the store across from the loft. The souvenir shop is rather quiet during the day. Business picks up in the evening. Chard approaches the shop's proprietor and flashes her San Diego Police Sergeant's badge, saying "I'm not here in an official capacity, but I have a fugitive under surveillance and wonder if you'd be kind enough to allow me to sit by your window until he makes an appearance." Struck by Chard's beauty, the Proprietor acquiesces, commenting, "Lady, you can do whatever you like. The store is yours."

In the Souvenir shop, Chardonnay is planted on a stool looking out the window at the building across the street. Finally, the person she was waiting for comes out and begins walking towards the 500 block of Chartres Street. Making a goodbye gesture to the Proprietor, Chardonnay slips out the door. From the opposite side of the street, Chard begins shadowing Gayle Lupino through the Quarter, with a book sticking of her purse, the book's title visible.

Chard watches as Gayle enters an art supplies store. The sign on the store indicates that this is Creason's Fine Art. Making sure the title of her book, *Provenance*, is prominently displayed, sticking out of her purse, Chard follows her into the store.

Gayle is greeted warmly by the proprietor, Greg Creason, a crusty, but friendly old curmudgeon, "Gayle, my dear, what can I get for you? More paint-stripping chemicals?" Lamenting. You really should tell those art students of yours that with the stripping costs, the difference between reusing their canvas and buying a new one isn't all that great. For that matter, why eliminate the old painting at all? Just paint over it."

"No chemicals this time, Greg. I hear you have a large watercolor from the Dutch Golden Age. If its origin can be authenticated and the price is right I might be interested in taking a look."

"It's by an unknown amateur. Only value is its age. Tate archivists are establishing its provenance as we speak. Should have the results in a week or so."

"The price?"

"Should go for twenty to thirty thousand."

"Wow! That's a lot of money."

"Not when you consider that it was supposedly painted over 350 years ago.."

"That's the operative word, isn't it?"

"What's that?"

"Supposedly."

Gayle turns to exit the store when she accidentally bumps into Chardonnay.

"Excuse me, but I couldn't help overhearing Mr. Creason use the word 'prove-nance,'" asserts Chardonnay.

"Yes?"

Chard pulls the book entitled *Provenance* from her purse and shows it to Gayle, saying, "I was just reading about the process archivists go through to authenticate a painting. I find it fascinating. It's really become my passion lately but it's so difficult to get good information on it. For instance, while not as concise as fingerprints, I'm told that brush strokes are similarly used to identify the works of the masters."

"True. Brush strokes are almost as individually unique as finger prints."

"I also heard Mr. Creason refer to your students. Are you by chance a professor of art? Reason I ask is that I'm enrolled in a semester of Art Restoration at Tulane. Course is only offered once every four years and I'm afraid I'm in way over my head."

Impressed, Gayle affirms, "That's a tough course."

"You know about it?"

"Yes."

"My hotel, the Monteleone, is only a few blocks from here. I wonder if you'd let me buy you a drink."

“In the Carousel Bar & Lounge?"

"Of course."

Gayle and Chardonnay are seated at the Hotel Monteleleone’s famous revolving bar, enjoying a round of drinks.

"I want to stay in the Quarter but Tulane is so far away. I'll probably have to get an apartment nearer the university," remarks Chard.

"Not necessarily. All you have to do is walk up to the corner of Royal and Canal and catch the St. Charles Avenue streetcar. It will drop you off right in front of the university."

"But I still need to find a place to stay. This place is severely cutting into my budget."

"I don't doubt it. It's one of the best hotels in Louisiana. Say, I have a thought, why don't you stay with me? I live nearby and have an extra bedroom. It would be nice to have some company. And the rent will be most reasonable."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely. And I'll teach you more about art restoration that you'll ever learn at Tulane."

"I'm....I'm overwhelmed."

David and Margaret have been visiting a number of nightclubs and dancing spots on Miami's South Beach.

Eventually, after a night of clubbing and dancing, David and Margaret are relaxing in the lounge of David's hotel, 1 Hotel South Beach. Finally in an environment conducive to conversation, they are seated at a table enjoying finger food and champagne.

"This is where you are staying?"

"In one of the fourth floor, ocean view apartments."

"How long are you here?"

"That's up in the air. Could be for several weeks."

"Great hotel..."

"I like it."

"What do you do to afford all this?"

"I work for Universal Imports, a San Francisco based company. I'm a purchaser."

"And what do you purchase?"

"Almost anything of value that can be sold for a profit. What about you? What do you do for a living?"

"Graduate student at the University of Miami working part time at a local art gallery."

"Art. That's something I wish I knew more about."

David, pouring the last of the champagne into Margaret's flute glass, which isn't much, says, "I can drive you home now....or in the morning. The choice is yours."

Margaret looks David in the eye and decides, telling him, "Much as I would like to spend the remaining of the night with you, I think it's best that you take me to my car."

David and Margaret are in his rental heading in the direction of the Otentic Bistro. The expression on Margaret's face indicates she may be having second thoughts about insisting David return her to her car and she states, "you mentioned art is something you'd like to know more about. Perhaps I can teach you."

"Bet you could teach me a lot."

"You're shameful! No! I'm serious. Why don't you let me try?"

David pulls into the now closed restaurant parking lot of the bistro and stops next to the only car still in the lot. Indicating the lone car, he says, "I assume this is your vehicle."

"Vehicle? That's a strange way to describe my humble, but dependable transportation?"

"What? Vehicle? Likely my military background."

"What were you? Shore patrol?"

"NCIS. Naval Criminal Intelligence."

"I suppose that could explain it," comments Margaret, leaning over and giving David a meaningful kiss, then quickly departing his *vehicle.*

Margaret moves to her car, climbs in, fires up the engine, and pulls out of the lot.

David follows her car discretely. After seeing her car pull into the underground parking of her flat, he pulls up and stops across the street, taking note of the address he records it in his 3 x 5 inch notebook.

The following morning, at the Peace Mural Gallery, Margaret spots David as soon as he enters and rushes up to him planting a kiss on his lips, asking, "How did you find me?"

"Wasn't easy."

"Well, I'm glad you made the effort.”

Inside the Templar guest house at Gable Estates, the landline phone rings. Fletcher answers, "Templar."

Inside Galbraith's office at the University of Miami, Galbraith is behind his desk, on his landline, "Mr. Templar?"

"Yes."

"This is Professor Neil Galbraith of the University of Miami art department. Understand you're looking for rare paintings by the masters, at a good price."

"Yes. That's right."

"When not working my day job, I moonlight as a broker specializing in fine art. If you're agreeable, I'd like to come by and show you a catalogue of what's currently on the market."

"Of course. What time?"

"How's 8 pm?"

"Eight p.m. it is. Do you have the address?"

"485 Leucadendra Drive, Gable Estates?"

"That's correct."

In a quiet corner of the 1 Hotel lounge, David and Margaret are enjoying happy hour beverages.

"I never took much interest in art as an investment, what with all the fake paintings one hears about. It just seems like a sleazy business."

"Well, yes, there've certainly been some high profile fraud cases, but it's hardly an epidemic."

"I understand that it's not even illegal to copy a masterpiece."

"That's right. Most art students attempt it at least once as an exercise. It's only illegal if the painter tries to copy the artist's signature or pass it off as an original."

"What if the copyist paints the original artist's signature at the bottom of the painting only for identification, and the signature is so different as to never be confused with the original?"

"That would be a grey area. Tomorrow is my day off from the Gallery. If you're free, I have an idea on how to spend the day."

"I'm listening."

"In the morning. while it's cool, I'll show you Miami from the view of its waterways. We take a tour of the harbor and some of the nicer nearby residential areas in a high-speed RIB Zodiac. Then, in the afternoon, we'll tour the Bass Art Museum."

"I've heard of it."

"Good. The Bass is filled with wonderful art pieces."

"A mix of mostly contemporary works, right?"

Margaret, delighted, declared, "I'm impressed. You've been googling the local art scene."

"I confess."

"Fabulous! That will be your art appreciation course for tomorrow."

"Sounds perfect," affirms David.

**Chapter Six**

At the Gable Estates mansion, Fletcher is behind the wet bar opening a Mouton Rothschild Claret when Greta, the attractive female butler escorts Professor Neil Galbraith, carrying a briefcase, into the den, announcing, "Professor Neil Galbraith to see you, Mr. Templar."

Fletcher dismisses Greta with a wave of the hand.

"Welcome, Professor. Care for a glass of Mouton?"

"Thank you. I most certainly would."

Fletcher/Templar pours a second glass and hands it to Galbraith. They both swirl the wine in their glasses, then inhale the aroma. Then the first sip, savored as the wine runs slowly over their tongues before swallowing.

"Nothing like a first growth claret to start the evening, I always say," states Galbraith.

"Although Mouton wasn't one of the original first growths."

"Quite right. Unlike the 1855 classification, Mouton wasn't added until 1973."

Fletcher, gesturing towards the nearby couch, remarks, "You certainly know your wines. I trust your knowledge extends to the world of the master painters."

The two men settle side-by-side on the couch. After they set their wine glasses on the coffee table, the Professor opens his briefcase and pulls out a catalogue.

Opening the catalogue, Galbraith tells Templar, "This is a list of some of the more valuable canvases currently on the market."

Some of the pieces featured in the catalogue are highly recognizable.

"I don't see the name of the seller."

"You won't. That's to prevent the seller and purchaser from cutting out the dealer, or runner, such as me."

"What about provenance?"

"It will be provided."

"Look, Galbraith. Let me be perfectly frank. I have a special, highly secure art viewing room in the basement. What I'm looking for is another masterpiece to add to my collection, provided the price is right."

"And that price would be?"

"About a third of its market value."

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Templar."

"Then, perhaps you're not the person I should be dealing with."

Fletcher climbs to his feet and is about to dismiss Galbraith when the professor decides to take another tack.

"Please sit down, Mr. Templar. Suppose I could find such a painting, and the canvas is eventually discovered, what protection can I expect?"

"The statute of limitations on what I'm looking for runs out in five years. Furthermore, if you're not in possession during such eventual discovery, then you won't need protection."

The two men climb to their feet.

"I think we can do business. I'll be in touch. Meanwhile let me give you my cell number."

With a smile on his face, Fletcher escorts the professor towards the door.

After having had an excellent dinner aboard my yacht, I was in the Master cabin about to go to bed when I heard the friendly chimes of my cell. “Hello?” It was Chardonnay calling from her suite at the Monteleone in New Orleans. She sounded depressed.

“Jonathan, I've made contact with Gayle Lupino and she's asked me to move in with her."

"That's wonderful!"

"Ehh."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"She feels to me like a nice kid... thinks I'm enrolled in an art restoration class at Tulane."

"And you don't like deceiving her?"

"Sounds goofy, but I find myself fighting an urge to blurt out the truth."

"David called, saying pretty much the same about her sister. Apparently he doesn't like his assignment any better than you."

"I mean....I am not going to blow out the mission, but this is tough.

"Listen,” I said, “Templar says he may be close to solving the case but needs another few days. I know what you and David are going through. The question is, can you give Robin the time he needs?"

"Did you put this question to David?"

"Yes, I did."

Conjecturing, "And his answer was yes, otherwise we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"David elected to continue doing his job. Then I will continue doing mine."

In Morgan’s South Beach 1 Hotel apartment, a nude Margaret rolls over on the king-sized bed and attempts to awaken David, "David. Wake up. We've a busy day ahead of us. We better grab some breakfast before the waterway tour."

Morgan, waking up says, "I forgot to tell you. I phoned Ocean Force Adventures last night and changed your reservation to a charter tour, just the two of us, with a gourmet lunch at one of the stilt homes at Stiltsville. The whole thing on my nickel, of course. We leave at eleven, not eight, as you had scheduled."

"Well, in that case, I see no hurry for breakfast," reports Margaret seductively.

She reaches down and begins kissing David's hairy chest and then works her way further south. The look in his eyes and smile on his face says he is beginning to really care for this exquisite young woman.

"Works for me."

Checking out of the Hotel Monteleone, Chardonnay is being helped by the same clerk that checked her in.

"I would appreciate it if you would provide me with a bellboy to schlep my luggage over to Chartres Street; for a nice gratuity, of course.

"Of course, Miss Rogers. Consider it done."

The Monteleone bellboy is wheeling Chard’s luggage along Charles Street when finally they arrive at Gayle’s apartment building. Leaving the transport on the sidewalk, the bellboy schleps the luggage up the steps to the second floor of the two floor building with two apartments on each floor. Chard stops at apartment #3 and knocks on the door which is soon opened by a delighted Gayle.

"Chardonnay. Come in. Come in. Your room is ready."

Chard accepts the luggage from the bellboy and tips him $30.

Carrying her own luggage, Chard enters the 900-plus-square foot, two-bedroom, single-bath apartment. The living room has been converted into a studio, but not that of the typical artist.

"I apologize for the living room. I use it to recreate old paint formulas for my restoration work."

Indicating the jars and chemicals and large pans, Chard remarks, "Wow! And this, I assume, is for your paint striping process?"

"I scrub paint from a lot of old canvases so that they can be used again."

There are two easels in the room, neither containing a painting at the moment.

Then, indicating the easels, Chard quips, "And these are for the paintings you are restoring?"

"That's right. … Let me show you your room."

Chard follows Gayle towards one of the apartment's two bedrooms.

As David rolls out of the king-sized bed to get dressed, Margaret flashes some skin in the adjacent bathroom, putting up her hair. David calls out, "What're you doing?"

"Putting up my hair for the boat ride."

David gazes at her appreciatively.

Margaret, behind the wheel of her own *vehicle*, pulls into the South Beach Marina and parks. Both she and David exit the older model car and head for the docks where a number of RIB Zodiac boats are tied to the dock. As David and Margaret approach they are greeted by a smiling Captain Brandon, who says, "You must be my 11 o'clock."

"Indeed we are....Morgan....special charter."

With that, David and Margaret follow Captain Brandon down the dock, toward one of the twin engine Zodiacs.

With Morgan and Margaret the only passengers in the Zodiac, which normally takes up to eight people, Captain Brandon throttles up the two powerful outboard engines and the Zodiac skips like a stone over the waves of Biscayne Bay. The RIB slows as they approach beautiful Star Island and its celebrity homes, all worth millions. Clicking on his microphone, Captain Brandon points out several unique dwellings and who currently resides in them. David hardly listens as he is lost in watching admiringly the exuberant Margaret, who snaps photos with her digital camera and its 50 to 250 adjustable lens. Then the Zodiac picks up speed and really takes off.

The Zodiac slows as Brandon clicks on his microphone and points out the various attractions.

Captain Brandon announces, "Fisher Island is about as luxurious a place as we have in Miami, or anywhere else for that matter. Pretty much the ultimate. Highest per capita income in the United States. You can glimpse some of that in the yachts at the docks of the many waterfront mansions."

Then the Zodiac picks up speed and heads toward Stiltsville. The Zodiac slows over sparkling turquoise water that is mere inches deep. Something shimmers ahead. A heat mirage? Houses in crayon colors, yellow, green, red and blue, hover weightless above the bay. No, these homes aren't levitating at all; they are supported by pilings and suspended a few feet above the sea. Welcome to Stiltsville. Accessible only by boat, these, seven wooden homes are a few miles from downtown Miami but light years from the city's stress and hum.

"Stiltsville dates to the 1930s. 'Crawfish' Eddie Walker built the first shack above the water. Over the years, larger homes were constructed and the area took on an aura of mystery,” reports Captain Brandon.

"This is amazing," states Morgan.

"Today, a visitor can lean back on the veranda and watch the currents carry bonefish across the flats. Take a dip off the back porch. Snorkel pristine coral reefs or, at the end of an afternoon with the day's catch on the grill, watch the lights of Miami blink on while the setting sun paints the sky in hues of orange."

"Not too shabby," agrees Morgan.

Margaret smiles at David, having the time of her life.

Later, on the veranda of a Stiltsville house, while the Captain relaxes in the Zodiac, a cook and waiter are serving Margaret and David. The entree is a flatfish which Margaret immediately identifies, surprised, "Catalina sand dabs. These had to have been flown in from California."

The waiter pours the golden-colored wine into the crystal glasses. Margaret sees the bottle's label and becomes even more amazed, exclaiming, "Le Montrachet! This is like hundreds of dollars a bottle." Turning to David, she asks, "What's going on here?"

"Just wanted you to have a moment that perhaps you might treasure."

"Treasure! It's the best thing that's ever happened in my life. I love it," she exclaims, reaching up to give David a kiss that he won't soon forget.

"One thing I ask."

"Name it."

"You cook dinner for me, at your apartment."

Unsure if this is a good idea, Margaret hesitates in answering, but finally, acknowledges, "But, of course. Tomorrow night be soon enough? I'll need time to prepare."

"Tomorrow night will be fine," Morgan assures her, smiling.

This time both lean into each other; their kiss is passionate and genuine.

At Templar’s Gable Estates Guest House, Robin Templar's burner cell phone tings and Fletcher answers, "Templar."

Inside Galbraith's office at the University of Miami, Galbraith, behind his desk, is on his phone, "Mr. Templar, I think I have exactly the painting you are looking for and, yes, the price is right."

:"And which painting might that be?"

"Can't discuss it over the phone, but I can swing by this evening and give you the details, in private.:

"Sounds good. Seven?"

“Fine.”

Margaret drives her car into the parking lot of Miami’s Bass Art Museum and parks. As she and David approach the main entrance, she tells him, "I picked this place because it gives a good overview of the current Miami arts and culture scene."

"Has a little bit of everything?"

"Almost."

"Great! Let's go take a look," declares Morgan, as they head into the museum.

Margaret and David are wandering through the museum's myriad of cross-cultural exhibits, including contemporary local artists and works from Latin America, the Caribbean and West Africa. One traveling exhibit they look at is by Pascale Marthine Tayou, a Cameroonian now based in Belgium, whose room-sized collage freely mixes African masks, Easter eggs and stacks of Arabic pots with Renaissance Madonnas and a 15th Century Italian altar piece showing Mary being crowned the queen of heaven.

Margaret, admiringly, remarks, "This place is never what I expect. In life I don't like surprises. But in art, it has to be surprising. Otherwise, it's boring."

"You know who Billy Wilder was?"

"Great movie director? *Some Like It Hot*."

"He would have agreed with you. He only believed in one commandment for the artist: Thou shalt not bore!"

"A man after my own heart."

Taking Margaret's hand and kissing it, David tells her, "You know, *you're* like a great work of art."

"How so?"

"Because you're so surprising."

Margaret laughs as she wraps an arm around David's waist and they continue walking.

They go outside to the Bass Courtyard Cafe where they sit down and order some drinks: Margaret has a cappuccino and David a double espresso. While they sip, David remarks, "Wonder how many of the artworks we've seen today are fakes?"

"Based on statistics, I doubt any."

"Isn't it true that Interpol ranks art crime as one of the most profitable criminal activities, second only to drug smuggling and weapons dealing?

"I suppose so. The current wave of thefts began in 1974, when the IRA stole $32 million worth of paintings by Goya, Rubens, Vermeer. The gangs figured that stolen art was much easier to move than drugs or cash, arms or diamonds. Dogs can be trained to sniff drugs, but not to tell if a painting is a fake."

"I read where 40 percent of all artwork put up for sale in any given year are forgeries and the art world can only talk about the bad forgeries, the ones that have been detected. The good ones are still hanging on museum walls."

Margaret, giving David a playful punch on the shoulder, says laughing, "You're really bad."

Inside Gayle's apartment, while Gayle is cooking lunch on her top-line range, while Chard is mixing a tossed salad, Gayle explains the empty easel in the middle of the living room, "I average two restorations a month. Next one is supposed to arrive tomorrow. I charge $10,000 per restoration, more if there are canvas tears. And even more if a section of paint is missing."

"That's a lot of money," comments Chard, looking around the apartment. "Yet you seem to live relatively modestly.

Indicating a number of paintings stacked against the wall, Gayle states, "I buy old paintings, the older the better."

Guessing, Chard asks, "Then you strip the paint?"

Gayle, nodding, affirms, "Producing a pristine but rare canvas."

"There's a market for old, blank canvases?"

"Orders pour in from all over."

"And how do the buyers know they're getting the real McCoy?"

"I do a series of digital photographs of the entire process, including photographic evidence of the original painting's provenance."

"How do you know that the buyers aren't using the canvases for illegal purposes?"

"As long as there's no law against what I'm doing, I'm not really concerned."

Chard appears calm and collected but her eyes are getting bigger as she feels a growing epiphany.

**Chapter Seven**

In my office at Universal Imports in San Francisco Financial District, I heard the chimes from my burner phone and answered. "Jonathan."

It was Chard, walking in a New Orleans park. "They're forgers."

"What?"

"They're not thieves, they're forgers," revealed Chard. "I've been spending a lot of time with this Gayle, and..... Look at the way the thieves re-hung the empty frames. It's like a secret message: almost like a promise of return -- or, it may say, they are still here, you just can't see them. Jonathan, I don't think the paintings ever left the museum."

"I didn't see that coming," I admitted.

In the posh den of the main Gable Estates mansion, Fletcher is behind the wet bar, opening a bottle of Dom Perignon, when the attractive Greta escorts Professor Galbraith into the room, announcing, "Professor Galbraith to see you, Mr. Templar."

"Good to see you, Professor. Care for a glass of champagne? Of course you would." Noting the label on the bottle, the professor puts down his briefcase, smiling broadly, and steps forward to accept the flute glass filled with the venerable monk's version of *stars*, commenting, "Delighted, Mr. Templar." Taking a sip, pronounces, "Your taste in wines is impeccable."

Fletcher, taking a sip of his own, gets down to business, asking, "Now, what's this painting you wish to sell?"

"Rembrandt's 'Storm on the Sea of Galilee,' painted in 1633."

"Damn. I'm impressed. But isn't that one of the paintings stolen in the Gardner heist?"

"The very same."

"And how much do you want for it?"

"It's worth as much as $100 million. But because of its problematic credentials, I'm letting it go for $1 million."

"Fair enough."

Placing his champagne glass on the coffee table, the professor reaches into his briefcase, pulling out two copies of a three-page agreement, and hands one copy to Templar, stating, "For both our protection, I have a sales agreement that says I'm selling and you're purchasing a copy of 'Storm on the Sea of Galilee,' by Rembrandt van Rijn, painted from a photograph."

"Clever. What about delivery?"

"This is Saturday. We'll meet at your bank 12 noon Monday, at which time I'll provide you with the routing and account number for your money transfer. You'll receive delivery as soon as the money hits my account."

"Sounds fair to me."

"Now, shall we sign the agreement?

Each reaches for their pens, signs, exchanges agreements, and signs again.

Outside the Templar guesthouse in Gable Estates, Fletcher knocks, opens the door, then enters, calling out, "Mrs. Rothschild?"

"Coming."

The grand old lady enters the living room and is greeted by Fletcher/Templar, "You can have your house back, at least temporarily."

"I'm really quite comfortable right here. Why don't you just stay there until this, this caper of yours is concluded? Are you sure there's not a role I can play in this drama?"

"Far too dangerous for you to be anywhere near the line-of-fire."

"Line-of-fire! I love it. So exciting."

Fletcher's burner phone rings. "Hello."

It was me on the phone, giving Harry a previously scheduled update.

Using my burner phone, I disclosed what I had learned from Chardonnay, "Harry, and Chard’s reports that the sisters are indeed involved in some kind of forgery. Margaret does the painting and Gayle supplies the correct canvases and paint. We're just not sure how exactly it ties in to the Gardner Heist."

Then Fletcher said, "I may have that answer shortly. In the meantime, send me a cashier's check drawn on the Universal Imports account, in the amount of $1 million, made out to cash. I want it to be negotiable like a bearer bond. I'll need it Monday morning so have Jason take it to the airport and ship it counter-to-counter. I'll have David pick it up."

"You got it."

In the Guest House, Fletcher terminates the call and then dials a new number.

David is crossing the lobby of his South Beach hotel, heading towards the elevators, when his burner phone rings. He answers, "David."

In the Templar guest house Fletcher, speaking into the phone, tells David, "Come by the Leucadendra Mansion about 9 pm.

“Will do.”

Seated at a prime table at Marcello's New Orleans Restaurant & Wine Bar, Gayle and Chardonnay are enjoying a terrific meal together with excellent wine, of course.

"I wish you would consider working for me," Gayle suggests to Chard. "I would teach you everything you'd need to know and the money – well, it could be sizable."

"That's generous of you. What is it I would be doing?”

"Mainly stripping paint off old canvases and prepping them for reuse."

"I'm amazed that there's a big market for old canvases."

"Not high volume. But the few that play..... Well, they pay a fortune. And they only deal with reliable sources."

"My preparing the canvases would free you to find and purchase old paintings and work on various paint formulas?"

"Now you know everything."

Margaret and David, visiting some Miami landmarks, are walking through the National WWII Museum on Magazine Street.

Margaret asks David, "Does it affect the way you view art if you can't tell the difference between the real and fake?"

Pondering her question, David shrugs.

Soon, they find themselves at Miami's Lock & Load Gun Range, where they are at the counter selecting their weapons and ear protection.

Morgan asks Margaret, "You come here often?"

"At least twice a month. Don't tell me an ex-military man like yourself is afraid of guns?"

"Let's just say I have a tremendous respect for them."

They select their weapons: Margaret a Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum revolver and David a 9-mm Glock-19.

Inside the gun range, the paper target (the life-size figure of a head and bust) is about 40 yards down range from Margaret and David's cubicle.

Margaret, advising David, says "Don't be afraid. Just squeeze off your shots in quick succession. And allow for the law of gravity. A bullet tends to lose altitude the further it travels."

David nods his understanding and the two put on their hearing protection and, under the watchful eye of the range supervisor, Margaret quickly cocks and expertly fires off six shots. Pressing the return button, the paper target is quickly returned to the cubicle where we see that Margaret has two misses and four hits, albeit the shots are somewhat scattered.

Now it's David's turn so the range supervisor loads another target and sends it back to the wall, 45 yards away. Then, although the magazine holds many more shells, David squeezes off six shots in rapid succession. David no more than lays his weapon on the counter than the target is well on its way to the cubicle. Arriving there, the target shows a pattern of six holes within a 2-1/2 inch grouping directly over the heart.

Studying the grouping the range supervisor, astonished, tells David, "Don't get a big head but, from that distance, that's the best grouping I've ever seen."

Margaret stares in disbelief at the target and then at David.

That evening, at the Gable Estates Mansion, David rings the doorbell. The door opens and David enters and is escorted to the den where Fletcher is waiting.

Fletcher, bringing David up to speed, explains "So, I believe the Rembrandt Galbraith is selling me is a copy, and that it was painted by the talented Margaret Lupino using a canvas and paints furnished by her sister."

"Figured as much. I also think Margaret likely painted more than one copy. So, how do you see the exchange going down?"

"Badly, unless we force his move."

"How?"

"I've led Galbraith to believe I have a viewing room in the basement filled with stolen masterpieces. I think if we set it up right --"

Interrupting, Morgan asserts, "The temptation will be too great for him to pass up.”

At the University of Miami, with the faculty offices empty at night, Professor Galbraith takes the opportunity to forge Rembrandt's signature to his 'masterpiece.' He takes the copy of "Storm on the Sea of Galilee" from a stack of various paintings he keeps in his office.

Next, the professor takes a booklet from his desk, a booklet issued only to documentation experts showing known examples of the signatures of a wide list of celebrities, including the art masters, Beatles, Rolling Stones and a number of actors and actresses.

He turns to the known signature of Rembrandt. Using the booklet as a guide, with a sable brush and special jar of paint, looking similar to the one he stole from Margaret's studio, Galbraith carefully traces Rembrandt's signature onto the painting.

Seated alone at South Beach’s Otentic Bistro, Professor Galbraith is enjoying a delicious meal when his cell phone rings. Picking it up he is surprised to find Templar on the other end. “There's a change in plans," Templar says.

"And how is that?

"Instead of meeting at my bank tomorrow, you'll bring the painting here to my home where I'll give you a cashier's check in the amount of $1 million."

"Made out to cash."

"Absolutely. Just like a bearer bond."

"Works for me. What time do we meet?"

"Whatever's convenient for you. I'll be available anytime after noon."

At Margaret's South Beach loft, in a delightful setting and presentation, Margaret has cooked a gourmet dinner for David, who, conveying his admiration, declares, "You're not only a great artist, a great lover, but a great cook, as well."

Beaming, Margaret responds, "As a lover, you're not so bad yourself."

"Sadly, we won't be able to put it to the test tonight. I have to meet with a colleague. Sorry, it's business. In fact, I need to be going," replies David, checking his watch.

Crushed, Margaret asks, "When will I see you?"

Rising from the table, David responds, "All I can say is – soon as possible."

They kiss goodbye.

Morgan enters the university’s well-lit building. There is a fair amount of traffic in the hallways as night classes are common. He walks down one of the hallways until he comes to Galbraith's door where he calmly takes from his jacket pocket an electronic lock-pick and within seconds opens the door and enters.

Flashlight in hand, David searches Professor Galbraith's office. In a desk drawer, he finds what he's looking for, a book of the known signatures of artists and celebrities usually sold only to authenticators. Opening the book, he thumbs through the pages, finally coming to rest on a page containing the copy of a known signature of Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn.

Then, in another drawer, the San Francisco PD inspector finds a carton of .45 caliber cartridges. Using his iPhone, David photographs both the Rembrandt signature and box of cartridges.

**Chapter Eight**

In the bathroom of Gayle’s NOLA apartment, behind a clear plastic shower curtain, Chardonnay is standing in the tub/shower. In the living room, her large purse rests on the hallway table atop a folded newspaper.

Gayle enters the living room from the kitchen, a glass of wine in hand. Wanting to read the newspaper, she grabs it with her other hand, attempting to slide it out from under the purse. She accidentally knocks the purse to the floor and some of its contents spill out. Stunned, Gayle discovers the purse contents include a Glock-19 together with a badge and I.D. indicating that the person she has let into her apartment and confidence is a detective-sergeant with the San Diego Police Department named Andr-ea Parker.

Taking the Glock-19 from the purse, an angry and betrayed Gayle chambers a cartridge, flips off the safety and heads for the bathroom. With the Glock in one hand and Chard's police ID in the other, Gayle, struggling to control herself, steps into the bathroom. Chard pokes her head around the shower curtain to find Gayle pointing the handgun at her face.

"Detective-Sergeant Andrea Parker! Explain yourself!" demands Gayle.

"You make a habit of going through other people's purses?" asks Chard.

"Oh, now you're taking the moral high ground? That's rich. You lying bitch! How could you? I trusted you!"

Chard, taking a deep breath, remaining calm, asks "Could you hand me that towel..."

As Gayle glances off to the side and reaches to pick the towel up from its rack, Detective Parker snatches the Glock pistol from her hand with a lightning move that she was obviously trained for. Gayle, stunned and distressed, begins to cry as she holds her towel, staring at Chard.

"Towel, please," says Chard. Finally getting the towel and wrapping it around her body, she emerges from the tub/shower, declaring, "I think we could both use a cup of tea. And don't worry. I have a feeling this will all work out."

Tearfully, Gayle responds, "I need to call my sister."

"Not now. You can call her later."

It’s sundown as David's rental car enters Miami's International Airport. He exits the car, enters the building and steps up to the Delta ticket counter. He asks the ticket agent, "San Francisco to Miami counter-to-counter envelope for David Morgan."

"Let me check," says the agent, who leaves the counter and goes to a back room.

In her New Orleans apartment, Gayle surreptitiously goes into the bathroom, locks the door and from her purse takes her cell phone and calls her sister.

Inside her South Beach apartment, Margaret answers her cell. “Hello?”

Keeping her voice down, so as not to be heard, Gayle responds, "We may have a problem."

"May have??"

"I'm not sure. I took in a roommate who, as it turns out, is part of a team out to recover the paintings stolen from the Gardner. They're after the reward. I thought you should know in case a member of the team should attempt to ingratiate him or herself to you, as this person did to me."

Margaret, stunned, responds, "I think he may already have done it."

Back at the Gable Estates Mansion, Greta leads David into the den. "Got your package," David says to Templar. Reaching into his jacket pocket and withdrawing an envelope, he hands it over to Fletcher.

“Ah, the check. Good, it got here in time.”

"You really think the professor is going to knock off this supposed basement viewing room of yours?"

"The way I set it up, a guy like Galbraith cannot possibly pass up the opportunity."

"So he figures on killing you and that attractive maid, taking the million dollar cashier's check and the supposed paintings and living the good life?"

"Something like that."

"Any idea when this is to take place?"

"I purposely left it open so as to allow him the confidence of making his move unexpectedly. Take your car and park it behind the guest house. Not knowing you're here is the game changer."

David is moving his car when his cell phone rings, with an angry and tearful Margaret on the phone, screaming, "You bastard! How could you?"

"Calm down. How could I what?"

"I know what you're after," shouts Margaret. "Are you also a cop?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," affirms David calmly. "But I'm not here in any official capacity."

"I don't understand," says Margaret, quieting down somewhat.

"You and your sister have committed no real crime. We're not after you. I'll explain when I see you. Just don't contact anybody about this. That means anybody. Understood?"

Hesitating, Margaret, says, "I don't know."

Inside the mansion, Greta, is escorting Professor Galbraith into the den where, as usual, he is greeted with a glass of champagne. Fletcher/Templar purposely ignores the fact that Galbraith is wearing a set of designer gloves, having expected as much. The professor is carrying a large, thin package wrapped in a leather pouch with a zipper along one side.

'That the painting?"

"You mentioned a cashier's check. Made out to cash?"

Indicating the pouch, Fletcher asks, "Can I see the merchandise?"

Galbraith, unzipping the pouch, eases a portion of the painting out of it. Templar studies the artist's signature at the bottom of the painting and comments, "Signature looks legitimate."

Then, Templar pulls an envelope from inside his sport coat pocket and hands it to the professor. Galbraith opens the envelope, extracts the check and, examining it, says "One million. Paid to cash."

Satisfied, the professor sticks the check in his pocket and hands the pouch over to Templar, who begins extracting the painting. He does not seem surprised when Galbraith makes his move, pulling a gun.

"She's actually my butler."

"I don't care if she's your masseuse. Get her in here!"

Fletcher, thoughtfully, quips, "Masseuse....Interesting thought." He calls out, "Greta? Would you please come here for a minute?"

Holding his classic 1911 model 1A .45 Colt semi-automatic on Templar, Galbraith frisks him for weapons but finds none.

Greta enters and is visibly upset on seeing the gun pointed at her.

"We're going to take a trip to that viewing room in the basement and have a look around," commands Galbraith.

"Viewing room?" asks Templar.

"Don't play dumb, it'll only cause pain."

"Fair enough."

Leading the way towards the basement, Templar chances asking the professor the obvious question, "You really expect to get away with this? What with all the neighborhood security cameras?"

Galbraith, scoffing, retorts, "They will be recording a stolen vehicle and my face will be well hidden. Keep moving!"

At the bottom of the stairs, Galbraith receives the surprise of his life when David sticks a Glock-19 in his back, and calmly orders, "Drop the gun, professor."

Galbraith instinctively fires, hitting Fletcher in the left shoulder with the powerful .45 caliber slug. Then the professor attempts to flee back up the stairs. David, with his Glock pointing at Galbraith's back, is about to squeeze off a round when he hears Fletcher's command, "David! Don't!"

David holds up.

Fletcher, continuing, insists, "Not here! I don't want to give Mrs. Rothschild any grief, although I'm not sure she wouldn't love it. I'll be all right. Wait 'till he gets off the property. I don't want him traced back here. Understood?"

"Understood."

As David heads up the stairs behind Galbraith, Glock in hand, Greta rushes to Templar's side and presses her hand over the wound to stop the flow of blood. Then she replaces her hand with that of Templar's right, telling him, "Press hard and keep the back of that shoulder pressed to the floor. I need to go for the first aid kit."

Fletcher nods his understanding.

Once on the grounds outside the mansion, with a head start, Professor Galbraith, ignoring his stolen vehicle, rushes down to the waterfront channel leading to Biscayne Bay.

There are three boats moored at the waterfront channel, a 30-foot yacht, a small speedboat, and still smaller twin engine RIB Zodiac, similar to the one in which Margaret and David toured the Miami waterfront two days earlier. Galbraith chooses the speedboat in which to make his getaway. He casts off the rope that secures the two engine inboard to the dock, jumps aboard and fires up the engines. Then, engaging the gears, and ignoring the speed laws, the professor heads down the narrow channel towards Biscayne Bay.

David rushes out of the mansion in time to see Galbraith heading down the waterway towards the Atlantic. Watching the speedboat picking up speed, making its escape, he runs towards the dock and is forced to use the RIB Zodiac in order to give chase. He throws off the mooring line, jumps into the Zodiac, fires up the powerful twin engines, and takes off after Galbraith.

In the basement of the mansion, emergency-room-grade first aid kit in hand, Greta pours a white powder on Templar's wound and prepares to wrap it with a sterile strip of gauze. Cell phone in hand, Fletcher punches in a preset number.

Inside Gayle's New Orleans apartment, Chardonnay's cell phone rings and she answers, "Yes. I understand." Hanging up, she turns to Gayle, "Get packed. We're catching the next flight to Miami."

Still in the basement of the main mansion, wrapping the wound, Greta reassures Templar, smiling, "Good news, Mr. Templar, the bullet went clean through the tissue, so we didn't need to go digging for it. Doubt we'll even have to report it as a gunshot wound."

**Chapter Nine**

Galbraith's speedboat heads north, past Vizcaya Park towards the Rickenbacker Causeway and Key Biscayne. Looking behind him, seeing the Zodiac gaining on the speedboat, he flips the small safety lever on the .45 to the ON position. As soon as it comes into range, he is prepared to fire the remaining rounds in the seven round clip towards the Zodiac.

Gaining on the speedboat, David double checks the magazine of his Glock and prepares to fire once within range. As the two craft approach the 913 Causeway to Key Biscayne, the distance between the two crafts is visibly closing. Judging that he is probably within range, Galbraith opens up with his M1911 semi-automatic, firing three shots at the Zodiac.

Hearing the reports, David ducks down and then checks the rubber craft for bullet holes. The RIB's integrity appears to be intact. On the speedboat, the professor turns back towards the Zodiac and takes careful aim at David. But David refuses to back off. Galbraith fires off another three shots.

As the professor returns his attention forward to steer the speedboat, his expression becomes one of horror. The stolen speedboat slams into one of the causeway pilings and explodes in a ball of flames.

David cuts back the two throttles and steers the Zodiac towards the remains of the speedboat. Pulling alongside the sinking remains of the speedboat, David spots the professor's body floating on the water. He maneuvers the Zodiac alongside, stops, and struggles to pull the dead body aboard. Once aboard, David goes through the pockets of his jacket until he finds the wet cashiers' check. Unfolding the check, he glances at it and sees that the water has not caused the ink to run. Opening his wallet, he places the wet check inside. Hearing the far off sirens, he looks up to see a Harbor Patrol boat approaching.

In the den of the mansion, Templar (his left arm in a sling), together with David Morgan, are explaining to Mrs. Rothschild what happened to her speedboat.

Fletcher, attempting to console her, "I'm so sorry about the loss of your speed-boat. Afraid things just got out of hand."

"Think nothing of it, my dear. I was going to trade it in on a faster model, anyway. Besides, it is fully insured." Turning to David, Mrs. Rothschild asks, "Tell me, young man, did the police give you a hard time?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Rothschild. They asked how I happened to become involved and after flashing my badge, I explained that I was visiting you when I noticed someone stealing one of your boats. My instincts, by training, were to give chase. Try to recover the boat."

"Perfect. I predict a great future for you."

"Thank you. Coming from you, that means a lot," replies David to Mrs. Rothschild. To Fletcher, he says, "That reminds me, I have something for you," and opening his wallet, he withdraws the now dry cashiers' check and hands it over.

At that point, Greta leads Margaret, Chardonnay and Gayle into the den.

The painting known as "Storm on the Sea of Galilee" is leaning against the wall. Addressing the sisters, Templar points to the artist's signature and asks, "Either of you paint that signature?"

Gayle, shaking her head, says, "No."

Margaret states, "My paintings had no artist signature."

"Figured as much," responds Fletcher.

David, flipping through a series of photos on his iPhone, finally comes to the one he is looking for and indicating the photo, comments, "Perhaps this will explain it."

The sisters gather around to take a look. The photo is a page from the book of known celebrity and historical signatures. Centered is the signature of Rembrandt van Rijn.

"I think that's all we need to know," remarks Chardonnay.

"Not quite," replies Fletcher. Turning to Margaret, he asks, "Assuming you created your paintings from photographs, where the hell are the original paintings?"

Gayle pipes up, "They never left the museum."

Chard looks at Fletcher and smiles at the confirmation of her instincts.

The sisters, afraid they are about to be arrested, begin to repent.

"I'm so ashamed," laments Margaret. "I'll never do anything like this again."

"Nor will I," insists Gayle.

"Well, now. Don't give up what the two of you do so well, on my account. Uh, hang on." To Chard and David, he says, "We've got to talk."

Inside my office at Universal Imports, I was listening on the speaker to Fletcher, who is explaining the situation, "So that's how it is and, Jonathan, you know how you say that now and then the only way to do the right thing, sometimes, is to do -- "

Interrupting, I responded, "The wrong thing?"

"Yes! Well -- "

Chard, interjecting, says "Jonathan, these are not the kind of people I feel good about busting."

Morgan confirmed their feelings, "I totally agree. They deserve better."

"So then, from everything you say, they are more like the kind of people I occasionally hire," I interjected.

"My very thought!" adds Fletcher.

"Absolutely!" exclaims Chardonnay.

"You never know what these women could do for us, on some future caper," de-

clares Morgan.

The Merry Band goes back to the Lupino sisters in the mansion's den. Fletcher tells them, "So, since it's unanimous, we'll leave it at that. Just don't tell us where, in the museum, the paintings are hidden. We don't want to know." Answering together, the sisters, ask somewhat incredulously, "You don't?"

Smiling warmly, Fletcher continues, "But don't be surprised if you hear from us down the road."

The sisters regard him quizzically.

Morgan then tells Margaret, "And you'll definitely hear from me, if you're still interested." Hearing that, Margaret's eyes are full of relief and affection for David.

Fletcher/Templar steps over to the wall upon which the copy of "Storm on the Sea of Galilee" is leaning and picks up the large seascape, handing it to Mrs. Rothschild.

"This is for you, my dear. Just don't try to pass it off as the original."

Studying the painting, Mrs. Rothschild comments, "Even though I am not, or course, a believer, when I see Rembrandt's image of the apostles waking Jesus from a deep sleep, asking him to save them from the terrible thunderstorm, it always gives me a feeling of profound peace. I know exactly where I'll hang it."

"Where's that, Mrs. Rothschild," asks Margaret.

"Right here in the den, child, where it will always remind me of Robin and his Merry Band of brigands."

This gets a hearty laugh from all but Margaret and Gayle, who look on puzzled.

Jason Burrell and I were enjoying our usual champagne brunch aboard my yacht, Sweet Charity, when a thought occurred to me. “I better give Lt. Detective Cassidy a call and give him the sad news,” I said to Jason.

I dialed a number and put the cell to my ear.

Inside his Boston Police headquarters office, Lt. Detective William Cassidy's cell phone rings, he answers, "Lieutenant Cassidy."

"Jonathan Moore. Look, Lieutenant. 'Afraid my team has hit a cul-de-sac, so to speak. Our leads did not pan out and, unfortunately, we have no idea precisely where the stolen paintings are located."

"I'm not surprised. Frankly, the Boston PD and FBI have long since withdrawn manpower. Looks like the case many never be solved."

In the Dutch Room of the Gardner Museum, empty frames where the stolen mas-terpieces previously hung are still in their places on the wall of the second floor gallery; awaiting their eventual return.

**THE FINAL CROSS-UP**

**PART SEVEN**

**Chapter One**

**Hi, it’s Jonathan again**. I’m still aboard my yacht in the San Francisco Marina with CIA Special Agent Raoul Donavan enjoying our usual finger food and champagne being served by my British Butler and reminiscing about the many successful capers that have been carried out in the past by Robin Templar and his merry band.

“I undersand your Harry Fletcher once studied to be a Jesuit prist. I wonder what made him go from the studying the gospel to what can only be called a hard boiled mer-cenary?”

“He got tired of turning the other cheek.”

Agent Donavan nodded his understanding then went on to say that since I had just told him about Templar's biggest failure, the still unsolved theft at Boston’s Gardner museum, how about discussing another of the Merry Band’s more successful capers.

While The Final Cross-up caper could be listed as successful. It was the saddest of both our careers, but particularly Fletcher’s. Harry Fletcher had retired from his former nom de bataille as Robin Templar and was enjoying a peaceful life with his beloved wife, Nicole. The Merry Band had also disbanded.

Our story begins in Jackson Hole, Wyoming at the Earl Lee estate. Dacia Lee, a pretty, vivacious, 30-something woman, appearing unhappy and distraught, is taking a single-action, 1873 Colt .45 Peacemaker out of its purple velvet-lined display case. Grasping the vintage handgun in both hands, she lifts it up, holding it close to her face.

"Darlin', don't be doing that," exclaims her husband, Earl Lee, a husky six-footer in his late 60s. He reaches for the gun and tries to wrest it from her.

"Please, I can't go on. Just let me do it," pleads Dacia desperately.

"Dacia," shouts Earl, struggling with her for the pistol. Both have their hands around the weapon, which suddenly goes off with a huge blast and the room is filled with the smoke of black gunpowder. The .45 caliber bullet ends up harmlessly in a nearby wall. The blast causes Dacia to release her hold, allowing Earl to possess the single action Colt. She falls onto the bed, exhausted, curling up in a fetal position. Earl sits on the bed, looking at her, with a worried look on his face, "This was a close call, Dacia."

Just then, the bedroom door is thrown open and an attractive couple, Nicole and Harry Fletcher, enter, obviously having heard the gunshot.

"Dad!" cries Nicole

"She tried it again," says Earl, dejectedly.

"Good thing you were here," states Harry as he focuses on the deadly Colt .45 in Earl's hand.

"I'll call Doctor Prince," says Nicole.

"Doctor Prince?" asks Harry inquisitively.

"Dacia's psychiatrist," Nicole tells her husband.

A short time later, an SUV pulls out of the long, sweeping driveway onto the highway from the large ranch-style home that sits on a hill, overlooking the city of Jackson. The SUV is northbound on scenic Highway 33, the Grand Tetons seen in the background. Earl Lee is behind the wheel with Harry Fletcher beside him and Harry's wife, Nicole, behind her father. Harry is as fit and trim as when he left the Marine Corps a decade ago. Nicole, late 20s, a classic, curvaceous, blue-eyed blonde, is just drop-dead gorgeous.

"Nicole, I keep telling you, it's not the money. In any event, I'm finally going to have my will drawn up," insists her father. "And, except for a trust fund to take care of you and a modest but a nice trust fund for Dacia, I'm thinking of leaving the whole package to the Ashton Stevens Preservation Foundation."

"A worthy cause," Nicole tells Harry.

"Glad you think so, my dear, since it was your idea. Anyway, I have an appointment with the estate attorney in about a month to get it done, soon as he returns from Hawaii."

"And what actually is 'the whole package'?" Harry ventures to ask. .

"That would be the Targhee ranch, resort and preserve," explains Nicole to Harry. “More than ten thousand acres of pristine wilderness."

"What about the ski resort?" asks Harry.

"What about it?" asks Earl Lee.

"It's a world-class ski facility. What are your plans for that?" queries Harry.

"Land on the mountain is owned by the Bannock Indians, their chief was named Targhee. Dad only has a 99-year lease."

"Still, it's a cash cow, so to speak," comments Earl Lee proudly. "Excluding the ranch and preserve, it's probably worth somewhere north of five hundred million."

"You're an amazing guy, Earl," states Harry. "And that would figure. How else could you have the most amazing woman in the world for a daughter?" adds Harry as he looks back at Nicole and the two share a look of love and commitment.

Finally reaching the Targhee Ranch & Preserve, Earl Lee, Nicole and Harry Fletcher, with the Grand Tetons looming in the background, are wandering through the preserve's spectacular locations. As they walk along the forest trail, Harry questions Earl, "How long has this Dacia situation been going on?"

"Got married a year ago. At first, everything was fine," says Earl hesitating and shrugging a bit. "Then, last couple of months," shaking his head sadly, "I mean, I love her very much, but, you know, when you're my age, there can be a downside to having a much younger wife. I think she may have met a younger man who might've swept her off her feet, so to speak. Because of our age difference, I felt I couldn't blame her and acted as if I was unaware. I don't know, maybe that was a mistake. Anyway, she clearly became conflicted and has since made several attempts to end her life."

"Dad, I'm so sorry."

"I mean there's a lot of ways I could look at this, but I choose to see her as a decent woman fighting her own demons," asserts Earl.

"You've always been a very positive person," affirms Nicole.

"I think we'll get through this okay."

"I hope so, Dad."

Later, as Harry and Nicole are alone, walking arm-in-arm along a scenic trail," Nicole tells him, "I'm so sad for what Dad is going through, but I'm glad we came up here together." Snuggling up to Harry as they walk, she continues, "Now that you're not going to be Robin Templar anymore, just my Harry, I am really looking forward to our spending more time together."

Nodding with a contented smile, Harry replies affectionately, "Me, too, Sweetie. It's been far too long."

What worried me most is when you told me that you loved me enough that if anything happened to you, you were killed or sent to prison for a long period, that you wanted me to get on with my life? Remember?” asks Nicole. As Harry nods, she continues, "It was the best and the worst day of my life."

"Worst day?" asks Harry puzzled.

"Best, because I realized how much you did love me, that my happiness meant everything to you, as does your happiness mean everything to me. Worst, because I don't think I could go on without you."

"You don't know what you're saying. In life, we have to play the hand we're dealt."

"Long as that hand means I no longer have to worry every time you meet up with your merry band of brigands," admits Nicole, smiling.

"You can now consider that hand to have been dealt," confirms Harry returning the smile.

Two weeks later the 737 from San Francisco touches down at the Monterey Regional Airport and Harry Fletcher deplanes. He stops at the flower stand and picks up a bouquet of red roses, smiling with evident pleasure as he inscribes a card. Then, the electric airport cart picks him up and escorts him out to the guest aircraft parking area. The cart drops Harry off at his private helicopter, a Hughes Model 500D, popular among businessmen with wheels instead of skids. Harry climbs into the pilot seat and the blades begin to rotate. Once airborne, Harry's helicopter heads southward, overflying the city of Carmel-by-the-Sea.

As the helicopter reaches the Carmel Highlands, Harry can see the Fletcher estate. The large home with its four-car garage and adjacent helicopter hanger is situated on an isolated bluff overlooking the Pacific at the western end of Highlands Drive. The name on the mailbox, simply reads "Fletcher."

The helicopter settles down next to the hangar and then, using its wheels, powers itself inside.

Inside the Fletcher Mansion, Nicole Fletcher, after taking a shower in the bathroom, steps out of the shower stark naked. Hearing the noise of the chopper rotating blades, she grabs a large towel and wraps it around her body. Entering the master bedroom, she moves to a skillfully reproduced painting on the wall -- *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, by Rembrandt. She swings the painting away from the wall revealing a hidden wall safe. Nicole works the safe's combination and when the tumblers click for the final time, she opens the safe and withdraws her pearl necklace and diamond broach. She closes the safe door, flips the combination, and turns toward her bed. Her eyes suddenly widen as there is the sound of a silenced pop. As the towel falls to the floor, blood gushes out of a wound on her lower torso. A dagger plunges downward in several rapid strokes, spraying fountains of blood everywhere.

After shutting down the chopper’s engine, Harry exits the hanger, briefcase in hand, and heads towards the min house. He opens the front door and enters the foyer leading to the living room, carrying his briefcase and the bouquet of roses, happy to be home and calling out, "Nicole? Honey?"

Receiving no response, Harry leaves his briefcase and bouquet on a nearby end table and heads for the master bedroom. Stepping inside the bedroom, Harry first notices the painting covering the safe has been swung out from the wall and senses something wrong. With two more steps, he sees, behind the bed, a vision of horror. The nude body of Nicole lies on her back on the rug, her bath towel beside her, and several gaping, obviously very mortal wounds, still oozing blood. In the middle of her torso, something sticks out, the handle of a dagger.

Falling to his knees over her, holding her head and, for a moment or two, irrationally tries to revive her, "Nicole! Nicole! Come back! How could this happen?"

But clearly, she is dead. Any one of the multiple gashes was enough to have killed her. His eyes turn to the dagger handle and, without thinking, grabs and pulls it out. Then he realizes it is an engraved Templar dagger, his Medieval Templar dagger from the now empty display case in the bedroom. Yet more horrified, he drops the dagger and tries to catch his breath and collect himself. He looks up at the wall safe and notes that the safe's door is closed. Harry rises to his feet and, hands trembling, pulls out two cell phones from his suit jacket. He fumbles with them, finally steadying himself enough to choose the iPhone, and accesses a number.

In the sheriff office in Salinas, Sheriff Bernal picks up the handset of his phone, answering, "Sheriff Bernal." Listening, his face registering sad surprise, he nevertheless continues, "I'll send some men and a forensic team from Monterey. Yeah, right away."

Inside the master bedroom of the Fletcher mansion, Harry again notes that the Rembrandt painting covering the hidden safe remains swung open. The safe is exposed but locked. He also notes the valuable pearl necklace and broach lying next to Nicole. Then he walks away from the bed to the table and chairs across the large bedroom. There he sits and consciously tries to breathe deeply and slowly to overcome the panic that is pounding through his head and chest. Finally, choosing his second cell phone, Fletcher presses the auto dial, and puts it to his ear.

I, Jonathan Moore, was performing maintenance on my 90-foot, twin mast yacht *Sweet Charity*, docked at the San Francisco Marina, when my IPhone made its distinct tone. Noting that the call was probably coming from a burn phone peaked my interest and I answered on the third ring. “Yes?” From the master bedroom of the Fletcher mansion, Harry responded, "Jonathan?"

"I see you're using your burner phone. Anything wrong?" I asked?

"Everything."

As I listened on my phone, walking from the bow to the fantail lounge, I was increasingly stunned and disturbed by what I was hearing. Finally reaching the lounge, I virtually collapsed in a chair.

In his Carmel Highlands bedroom, Harry struggles to keep himself focused, "We were just starting our lives again. No more Robin Templar. No more capers. We just wanted to live. She was the love of my life, Jonathan!." Tears pour from Harry's eyes, but he fights the urge to break down.

"I know."

"She's what made it all worthwhile." As Harry barely steels himself enough to keep his wits, I was suddenly struck with several thoughts all at once and I began to make notes on a pad, "Have you called anyone else?"

"Only the sheriff. They're on their way."

"Anything missing?"

"No, I don't think so. They left her jewelry on the floor next to her. The safe appears unopened. It was not a robbery." Then, starting to lose it, Harry exclaims, "They butchered my wife!"

"We might need the team to get to the bottom of this."

"The 'Merry Band'? They're all scattered."

"We'll just have to get them back."

"What good would that do?"

"Harry, listen to me. You have to get a grip before the cops get there. This sounds like, some kind of rage killing and -- ."

"And I'm the husband. Oh, my god! I'm the husband," laments Harry, with sudden realization.

"Yes! It's how cops think. Let me start making some calls."

We both terminate the call, simultaneously. Then I pressed an autodial button on my i{hone, making the first call to bring certain members of the Merry Band back together.

Located in a Jacksonville, Florida, business District, the noise level is high inside Duke's Bar & Grill, as the proprietor, Louis "Duke" Osgard wends his way through the lunch crowd, glad-handing his customers. His cell phone rings. He answers, "Duke speaking!"

"Jonathan here. ... Harry's got some trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Duke asked.

"The kind that may require a great defense attorney," I said.

"You're thinking of my wife, Janet?" asks Duke as he puts a finger in his other ear to help drown out the noise coming from the crowd and the four 52-inch flat screen TV sets featuring replays of notable sports games.

"I am. Is she qualified in California?"

"I'm sure she is. As a JAG officer she was once stationed in San Diego. To become active, she'll probably have to pay some BAR fees, but that's no problem."

"See that she's active."

Inside the San Diego Police Department, Detective-Sergeant Andrea Parker, a stunning beauty with a blend of Mediterranean and Asian features, in her early 30s, better known as Chardonnay Rogers during her career with the Merry Band, answers her cell phone, "Detective-Sergeant Parker."

Speaking into my iPhone, I identified myself, "Jonathan here. Andrea, what does your schedule look like? Robin has a.... situation."

"A 'situation'?"

"Yes," I replied, pointedly.

"For Robin Templar, you tell me the schedule and I'm there!" responds Chardonnay, decidedly.

Back in Carmel Highlands, as the forensic team works the location, Harry is being interviewed by Sergeant Garcia, who seems as shrewd as he is fat.

"Harry, so far, we've found two large-caliber weapons on the property, neither of which appears to be the smoking gun, as it were. Of course, they'll have to be checked out by forensics to make sure," states Sergeant Garcia.

A forensic analyst approaching asks, "Okay, Sergeant?"

"Sorry, Harry. Need to get a swab of your hands."

"Of course, you do," replies Harry as he sticks his hands out and the forensic analyst does his thing. At this point, a sheriff's deputy enters the bedroom carrying what might be a pistol in a ziplock bag.

Handing the bag to Garcia, the deputy says, "Found this in a linen closet."

Examining the weapon through the plastic bag, Harry gets wide-eyed as he peers at it.

"Appears to be an Army Model 1911 .45 caliber semi-automatic," comments Garcia as he unzips and puts his nose to the bag. Taking a sniff, he adds, "Recently fired."

"I've never seen that weapon before. It's not mine!" insists Harry.

Sergeant Garcia smiles and nods as he hands the bag back to the forensic analyst, telling him, "Log it."

Harry, doing his best to stay cool, clearly is annoyed and worried.

**Chapter Two**

In Bordeaux, France, in the 3rd floor master bedroom of the winery known as Chateau La Gironde-Sloan, former San Francisco Police Inspector David Morgan, mid to late 30s is awakened from sleep by the ringing of the landline phone.

David reaches out and fumbles for the handset of the phone on the nightstand. "David Morgan. Who? Jonathan? What's going on?"

David, climbing out of the canopied bed as he listens with growing intensity, asks the obvious. "Fletcher? What kind of trouble? Oh, my god!"

Mrs. Brigitte Morgan, early to mod 30s, formerly Lieutenant Brigitte Picard of the Police Nationale, half-opens her eyes, and speaking with a French accent, says "David, tell them you'll call back and come to bed. It’s the middle of the night. You know I can't sleep without you."

"Give me a minute, Honey," replies David as he continues to listen on the phone while pulling on his robe and, taking the telephone handset with him, steps out of the bedroom into the privacy of the hallway.

David finds a bench in the hallway and sits, "Has he been arrested? Yeah, that's true. Husband's the first guy they focus on." Summarizing for himself, he continues, "So, in their bedroom, no robbery, no alibi. Yeah, as frame jobs go, sounds pretty convincing. But who'd want to do it? Okay, so it's not a short list."

David looks up to see Brigitte standing in the door of their bedroom wearing a barely-there, slinky negligee and a look of expectation. Obviously, she's been listening to David's end of the conversation.

"I'll bring my wife. She's a damn good investigator in her own right. I know. I'll be in touch," states David as he clicks off the phone, stands up and puts his arms around his wife.

"My dear, have you not noticed? I am no longer Lieutenant Picard of the Police Nationale?"

"I know that, and I'm no longer Inspector David Morgan of the San Francisco Police Department. But this guy is special, and it looks like he may need our help."

"You mean your help."

"I mean our help."

In the master bedroom of Fletcher’s mansion, Sergeant Garcia, looking Harry in the eye, announces, "Look, Harry. I've got enough to arrest you right now. But I'm not going to. Not until we check the .45's registration and make sure it's the murder weapon. Just don't leave the county."

Harry nods. But he's clearly not happy.

In the Den of Earl Lee’s Jackson Hole mansion, key in hand, Earl’s young trophy wife, Dacia, furtively approaches the gun display and unlocks the panel's glass-framed doors. She removes one of the nine weapons from the showcase, the .45 Colt Peacemaker.

Dacia then checks the chambers to make sure the Peacemaker is loaded and then relocks the case. While sitting at her desk, the .45 on the desktop beside her, Dacia types away on her laptop. After printing a copy, she looks it over, apparently satisfied.

In the living room of the mansion, the doorbell rings and Earl Lee enters the living room and walks to the front door. Answering the door he greets Doctor Prince, Dacia's psychiatrist. He has dark hair, a goatee and moustache and wears horn-rimmed, slightly tinted glasses.

"Doctor Prince. Please come in."

"I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop by to see my patient."

"Of course. Of course. She's probably upstairs." Gesturing toward the living room, "Have a seat. I'll tell her you're here."

In the bedroom, after a slight knock at the door, Earl enters, telling Dacia, "Dacia, my dear. Your therapist is here and would like to see you."

Dacia rises and walks toward Earl, carrying the Colt at her side. They come together as if to embrace but, at the last moment, Dacia raises the .45, points it upward, toward her husband's throat and before he can react, pulls the trigger. The sound of the blast is enormous and the room is filled with black powder smoke.

Dr. Prince bursts into the room and watches as Earl Lee slowly falls to the carpeted floor and begins bleeding out, crying out, "Dacia! What have you done?"

"We struggled for the gun and it went off," exclaims Dacia frantically.

In the prosecutor’s office of the Monterey County Courthouse, Sheriff Bernal, from Salinas, and Sergeant Garcia, from Monterey, are meeting with Deputy District Attorney Charles "Chuck" Cheek, also from Monterey. Tthe aggressive young deputy DA is seated behind his desk listening intently.

"Ballistics has determined that the Army .45 found in Fletcher's linen closet is indeed the murder weapon and registered to him, at his address. Purchased from a San Francisco pawn shop, three weeks ago."

"And there was gunpowder residue on his hands," states Sergeant Garcia.

"Then, why isn't he in custody?" asks Cheek.

"Said he had been working out at a San Francisco shooting range about two hours before the murder. I checked it out with the gun club and, yes, he had been there."

"So, the residue test is moot, at least, that's what his lawyer will argue. I know I would. What else you got?"

"Background check doesn't show much other than his Marine Corps record, most of which, incidentally, has been heavily redacted."

"Hmmm," mutters Cheek.

"But we ran across some possible issues," interjects Sheriff Bernal.

"Like what?" asks Cheek.

"He's a principal in what looks like a successful, multinational company called Universal Imports, out of San Francisco. It's financially opaque, being private, closely held."

"So? How does that impact -- ?" asks Cheek.

"Well, his partner is another former Marine, a Major Jonathan Moore. And his records are also mostly closed. He was apparently forced to retire, but his mission in the Corps?? Planning covert operations," says Sheriff Bernal pointedly.

"So, you're saying our guy could be....a little slippery?" asks Cheek.

"No.... a lot slippery," responds Sheriff Bernal, as he nods to Garcia who hands Cheek the file.

"What we really know about the man who calls himself Harry Fletcher is, well, a little thin," comments Sergeant Garcia as he accepts and lays open the file on his desk.

In the bedroom of the Lee Mansion, the Teton County Coroner is removing Earl Lee's body as Jackson police Chief Eliason, is interviewing Dacia's psychiatrist, the visibly shaken Dr. Prince. The distraught Dacia sits nearby.

"I had just entered the room and found Dacia attempting to kill herself again with, uh, that old revolver. Her husband was trying to stop her," states Dr. Prince.

"So, he was still alive when you came in?" asks Chief Eliason.

"Oh, yes, sir. I saw the whole thing. As he tried to take the gun away, she struggled with him and in an instant, somehow, it went off. This is all so sad."

"We found what appears to be a suicide note on her laptop."

"Doesn't surprise me....classic behavior."

Chief Eliason nods as he takes notes.

Later, in the living room, a half-dozen state and local government vehicles are parked in front of the Jackson estate. Chief Eliason is winding up his interview of Dacia Lee and her psychiatrist, Dr. Prince.

"Looks to be an accident. But still, there's likely to be an inquest and possibly a grand jury," reports Chief Eliason.

"Thank you, Chief. Now, I think my patient needs me.:

"But, of course," responds Eliason, Taking the bagged and tagged Colt Peacemaker with him, the Chief and his entourage make their departure.

Once the door is closed and the police gone, Dacia and the psychiatrist turn to face each other falling into each other's arms.

"Darling, we pulled it off," proclaims Dacia passionately.

"You were magnificent."

""You weren't so bad yourself. You're very convincing as a psychiatrist."

"What can I say? I'm good with crazy."

In the Monterey County Courthouse, the Salinas County prosecutor Charles Cheek finishes reading the file and thoughtfully looks at Sheriff Bernal and Sergeant Garcia as he searches in his mind for something he can hang on Harry, commenting, "Alright, so, Fletcher has a sideline, recovering stolen goods for some big bucks. Plainly, he doesn't do this by himself."

"No, supposedly he is able to hire his own little force of operatives, like a mini black-ops crew, and deploy them all over the world," suggests Sheriff Bernal.

"Then let's talk to his crew," insists Cheek.

"Haven't found a one of them. We have some names but they're all aliases."

"This Fletcher, a guy that shady.... I think a jury would read him as dirty."

"Don't be so sure. He's also one of the biggest supporters of local charities. You'd be hard put to find anyone in the county that would say one bad thing about him."

"Well, that's too bad."

"Look, I agree, all this covert activity stinks, but he has done some good things."

"Like what?"

"Like breaking a Wall Street Journal reporter out of an Iranian prison."

"He aided and abetted a prison break?" asks Cheek incredulously>

"In Iran, for god’s sake. Fletcher and his crew went over there, pulled the reporter out of the notorious Evin prison and brought him home, right under the Ayatollah's nose. And everyone involved lived to tell about it!"

"Wow," exclaimed Cheek, obviously impressed. Then, thinking hard, he continues, "That kind of seals it for me..... A guy who can pull that off....," as his expression grows dark and grim, "is capable of doing anything."

At the Fletcher home in Carmel Highlands, two black and white Sheriff's units enter the seaside estate and park strategically, blocking both exits.

In the den, Harry Fletcher is sitting in his favorite stuffed chair sipping a cocktail, as Sergeant Garcia and two deputies enter without knocking.

"Sergeant Garcia? Why the unusual entry?" asks Harry, concerned.

One of the deputies approaches and slaps a pair of handcuffs on Harry before he can even react.

"Harry Fletcher, you're under arrest for the murder of Nicole Lee Fletcher," announces Sergeant Garcia.

As the cops hustle the cuffed Harry toward the front door, Sergeant Garcia begins mirandizing him, "Harry, you know you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you."

Aboard my yacht, Sweet Charity, Jason Burrell, the cabin steward, limo driver, cook, and all around good guy, serves cocktails, champagne, and hors d'oeuvres to members of the Merry Band: Chardonnay, Duke Osgard and his wife Janet; together with David Morgan and his wife Brigitte. I was sitting across from the group working on a flute of the premium champagne and commenting, "Now that we all have heard the update, let's agree on a plan."

"Yes, marching orders, please. Bur first, I need a refill," says Brigitte.

Jason, a bottle of champagne in each hand, moves to top-off the glasses of the Merry Band members.

As the sun sinks below the horizon over the Pacific Ocean, inside the kitchen of the Fletcher mansion, Harry has his salmon filet on the grill when his phone rings. Harry turns down the heat, checks the landline display, then answers, putting it on speaker, responding, "Thanks for bailing me out."

It was me, of course, on the phone. "Sent Jason to deliver the cashier's check personally."

"I think they were a little surprised that we came up with a million dollars so quickly."

"An excessive amount, in my opinion."

"Now the real trick will be to keep me out. And the scariest part is....I know what that means."

"We need to find the murderer."

"Which that Deputy DA is convinced he already has."

"We need to make a list."

"Of anyone who might have a motive to harm me."

"Exactly."

"I've racked my brain about nothing else. It's a discouraging process."

"And all from memory. Robin Templar, of course, never kept any records, that rogue   
 "Let's make separate lists, starting with that armored car heist we pulled off in Vegas."

On one of the few streets located in the Carmel Highlands, David Morgan and Duke Osgard ring the doorbell of a mansion and wait patiently for someone to answer. Finally the middle-aged lady of the house, answers . “Yes?”

"Excuse me, Ma'am, sorry to bother you but we're friends of one of your neighbors, the Fletchers," says David.

"Oh, my god, the Fletchers! Everybody on the block is talking about it. That horrible murder!" she exclaims sympathetically.

"What we wanted to ask is, if you noticed anything the day of the murder?" Duke asks.

"Any strange vehicles in the area?"

"Vehicles?"

"Cars, vans, pickups. Anything unusual?"

"Sorry. I don't recall seeing anything out of the ordinary. They seemed like such a lovely couple. Of course, I didn't really know them. Are you with the police?"

"No, Ma'am, just friends of the victim."

In San Francisco’s Mission District, dressed smartly but showing a strategic amount of skin, Chardonnay and Brigitte walk along the sidewalk in the 2400 block of San Francisco's Mission Street. The women come to a Pawn Shop with a sign reading: Best Collateral Pawn. With Brigitte leading the way, the two women enter the shop. While their appearance is drop-dead *hot*, their manner is all business. They are greeted by the young pawn clerk, who can’t help ogling Brigitte’s cleavage.

**Chapter Three**

Inside the Best Collateral Pawn Shop, Brigitte addresses the young clerk. “We’re here to see Mr. Drifka,” Brigitte says.

“He’s in the back, I’ll go get him.”

Brigitte and Chardonnay wait patiently as the clerk tears himself away long enough to fetch the proprietor.

The clerk returns shortly, “Mr. Drifka will be out in a minute.

Chardonnay, looking over the impressive array of rifles on the back shelf, including the popular AR-15, remarks, "Nice collection of rifles. See you have an AR-15."

"Won't be here long. They sell fast."

Finally, Drifka emerges and approaches the two women, "I'm Ervin Drifka. I understand you want to see me."

"We were hoping you could help us," says Chardonnay as she flashes her police badge. It's from San Diego but Drifka is too distracted to notice. His focus is on Brigitte's cleavage.

"I'll help in any way I can," says Drifka.

"Three weeks ago, you sold an Army Model 1911 .45 automatic."

"I remember."

"Do you remember the person you sold it to?" asks Brigitte.

"All such sales are a matter of record. I could look it up."

"I was wondering if you could identify the purchaser from a photo," asks Brigitte.

"I don't know. Over the course of three weeks, I deal with a lot of customers."

Brigitte pulls three pictures of Harry from her purse and hands them to Drifka, asking, "Is this the person who purchased the .45?"

The manager examines the face in the pictures, "Hard to say. Maybe -- maybe not."

"Think! Try to remember," urges Brigitte.

"Could be," responds Drifka. "What's in it for me?"

Obviously, the cleavage thing isn't working. Chardonnay turns to the clerk. "While we're waiting for Mr. Drifka to regain his memory, mind showing me that AR-15?"

"Sure," replies the clerk, grabbing the rifle and handing it to Detective-Sergeant Andrea Parker, who handles the weapon like she knows what it's all about. Chard works the mechanism several times and announces, "Doesn't feel right. When's the last time this weapon was cleaned?"

"You kidding? Nobody around here knows how to field strip an AR-15," states the clerk. .

In a flash, Chardonnay goes to work. After making sure the chamber is cleared, she pushes the takedown pin out; then she pivots the upper receiver away from the lower receiver and pulls the charging handle partially rearward -- pulling out the bolt carrier group. She then lifts up and pulls out the charging handle from the handle channel. Both Drifka and the clerk stare as though mesmerized. Next, Chardonnay pushes the pivot pin out and pushes the buffer retainer down. Then she pulls the buffer and spring out of the receiver extension. Quickly, she slips the buffer out of the action spring then examines the spring, pronouncing, "When the mechanism gets sluggish, it's usually the spring. This one appears to be okay.”

Continuing, she pulls out the firing pin and pushes the bolt into the bolt carrier, turning the cam-pin 90 degrees. This allows her to pull the cam-pin out. Next she pulls the bolt out of the bolt carrier. Now she removes the extractor pin -- completing the field strip. With numerous parts scattered across the display's countertop, Drifka suddenly regains his memory, "Now that I think of it, this is NOT the man to whom I sold the Model 1911 automatic."

"Which really isn't an automatic, but a semi-automatic," chimes in the clerk. .

"Are you sure?" asks Brigitte, pointing to pictures. “It's important we get this right, one way or the other."

"That ain't the guy," replies Drifka emphatically, indicating the pictures.

"Could you give us a description of the man who made the purchase?" asks Chardonnay.

"No. I'm sorry. All I can tell you is -- this wasn't the guy."

"Thank you, Mr. Drifka. If you'll give her a couple minutes, my partner, Brigitte, will reassemble your rifle."

"She can take as long as she likes," states Drifka, smiling.

Chard and Brigitte return the smile.

On another Carmel Highlands street, and on foot, David Morgan and Duke Osgard are at the front door of another mansion as they speak with the young maid, who had responded to the door chime. "It's funny you should ask about cars. I remember thinking about it later. It was 12 o'clock and I brought the garbage cans down to the street. It was pickup day. I stood there in the street when a dark, four-door sedan practically ran me down. I kept thinking, why was he driving so fast?"

"Remember the make or license number?" asks Duke.

"No, but there was one thing -- a rental sticker on the windshield."

Duke and David exchange looks.

"How do you know it was a rental sticker?" asks David.

"I used to work for a rental car agency, cleaning the cars. Believe me, this is a far better job," comments the maid, smiling.

"Could you tell which agency the rental belonged to?" asks Duke.

"No. They all put their stickers in the same spot on the windshield. Hard to tell them apart."

Down the road, at the Fletcher Estate, Harry is in his den, glass of red wine in hand, staring out one of the windows overlooking the Pacific watching another spectacular sunset.

Suddenly the iPhone on the lamp table beside him rings. Checking the display, he answers, "Hi, Jonathan."

Yeah, once again it was me making the call**.**  As usual, I was relaxing in the fantail lounge of my yacht. “How’s it coming along?” I ventured.

"I don't know. The worst part is they may be right."

"What are you talking about?"

"Had I spent more time being Harry Fletcher and less being Robin Templar....Nicole would still be alive."

"Harry, don't go there."

"No, I as much as killed her, Jonathan."

"Harry, no."

"I mean, she was everything to me but I....I created this."

"Snap out of it, Soldier," I retorted. Then, speaking like a Marine I added: "Would'a, should'a, could'a? Is that where you're gonna go?! You know where that leads....It's a recipe for insanity. Now listen....More than anyone I've met, you've always played the hand you were dealt and did it with honesty and courage. No one could ask for more. Now is not the time to do any less. You did not do this, Harry! Now get it together."

Pausing, taking a deep breath, Harry finally replies, "Yes, sir."

Taking a deep breath of my own, I went on with point of y phone call. “I've put together a list of some folks who might have a motive for revenge."

"I have a similar list."

"Good. I'll email you my list and you email me yours. Maybe something will stand out."

It’s sundown at the Monterey Regional Airport. David Morgan and Duke Osgard are going from counter-to-counter of the car rental agencies.

"Once we get the list of all rentals of dark, 4-door sedans on the day of the murder off to Jonathan, hopefully, a name will jump out," reports David.

“Unless he’s using an alias,” Duke interjects.

“We can’t worry about that now”

“It amazes me how you’re able to get these young rental agency women to vol-unteer the information.”

“It’s the smile.”

The two approach the next rental agency.

In the prosecutor’s Office at the Jackson Court House, Jackson police chief Eliason is seated across the desk from the Teton County prosecutor, Ronald LeMieux, who comments, "We checked the serial numbers on that Colt Peacemaker but couldn't come up with a registration."

"That's likely because the weapon was manufactured before 1898 and is considered an antique and doesn't have to be registered. And no background check is required for its purchase," explains Chief Eliason.

"I see. You sure it's an authentic antique and not a reproduction?"

"It's authentic, all right. Shoots only black powder cartridges. Have you set the inquest date?"

"Tuesday of next week. But it's only a formality. I expect a full acquittal."

"Four days. Interesting that she ends up with all that money."

The Prosecutor shoots the Chief an inquisitive look. But the Chief continues, "Earl's son died two years ago in Afghanistan and his daughter was recently murdered in California."

"Murdered? That is interesting. But the daughter was married. Why wouldn't the daughter's husband be entitled to her share?"

"He's the prime suspect," replies Chief Eliason.

LeMieux is taken aback.

As the sun is about to disappear on the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge, once again members of the Merry Band are gatheredin the fantail lounge of my yacht. I was seated opposite Chardonnay, Brigitte, Duke Osgard and David Morgan and the mood is decidedly less than celebratory.

"I am not a big fan of coincidences," remarks Chardonnay.

"This 'accident,' killing Nicole's father, it doesn't, how do you say, 'pass the smell test,'" comments Brigitte, shaking her head.

"That's why we'll be looking into it. Now, where do we stand with males who rented a dark, 4-door sedan at the Monterey Airport?' I asked.

David, handed a sheaf of printouts to me. “We have eight names,” he said.

I then offered an opinion, “If our perp was able to obtain fake credentials for Harry, it's unlikely he'd use his real name to rent a car."

"What we may get from the list however, is the home address of those renting dark, 4-door sedans, on the day of the murder," adds Duke, “Perhaps an address will stand out.”

"What if the perp, as you call him, rented from an agency not located at the airport," asks Brigitte.

"We considered that and concluded it was likely the killer was from out of town with no ties to the community. He would fly in, complete his mission, and get out of Dodge quickly as possible," states David.

"Dodge?" asks Brigitte.

"Take a powder," explains David.

"Powder?" queries Brigitte.

"Yeah, like take a French leave," states David.

"Pardonnez moi?”

"Like get out of town fast," explains David further.

"You Americans. You don't even speak English," comments Brigitte laughing.

Bringing the meeting to a close I announced, "Janet is busy preparing Harry's defense. The rest of us will all help Chardonnay run background checks on the eight names. Make sure to track down each person and make sure they are who they say they are," announces Moore.

"When we get to one we cannot track, that'll be our perp," states Chardonnay.

From his Jackson police chief’s office, Chief Eliason places a phone call.

In the Monterey Courthouse prosecutor’s office, the phone rings and prosecutor Charles “Chuck” Cheek answers on the first ring, "Prosecutor's office. Cheek speaking."

"This is Chief Eliason, Jackson, Wyoming, Police Department."

"What can I do for you, Chief?"

"I'm interested in the Nicole Fletcher case, in which I understand you are the lead prosecutor."

"May I ask, what is your interest?"

In San Francisco’s Mark Hopkins Hotel, the bar at the Top-of-the- Mark, arguably offering the finest 360 degree view of the city, is jammed.

At a table overlooking San Francisco's East Bay, Chardonnay, David and Brigitte, with Duke Osgard and his former JAG attorney wife, Janet Fisher, have gotten together. The only one missing is Jonathan.

Members of the Merry Band have regrouped in their customary manner -- sipping great wines and munching on exquisite hors d’oeuvres and Beluga caviar; all charged to Universal Imports, of course.

"I have to admit, I do love seeing her again," remarks David, starring out at the City.

"Her? Who is *her*”? asks Brigitte, with mocked jealousy.

"The City, darling. Of course, the city," comments David laughing.

"She does have her own magic," adds Brigitte. "But a different magic from Paris. I’ve always wondered what it really was that brought you all together to work with this....Robin Templar? It can't just be all the great wine and champagne, can it?" asks Brigitte.

"Actually, it is," insists Chardonnay, getting a chuckle from all present.

"I admit I like the camaraderie. Our team members are the best and we work so well together. I also like the charities we are able to help. And then there's Robin....Harry, of course; although I didn't know his real name, until recently. He's a truly remarkable man," states Chardonnay.

"You like him?" asks Brigitte.

"Yes, I like him...but never permitted myself to love him. After all he is…or was…a happily married man. Anyway, he was very charismatic, you know, and....okay, yes, I do love the rush," answers Chard in a poor attempt to clarify.

"A kind of excitation, different from the work of the police, yes?" asks Brigitte.

"I like doing some justice in ways the badge won't always let me."

"Ah, Oui, je sais. Je sais," Brigitte nods knowingly.

"And, of course, it was a chance to work with Jonathan Moore, another remarkable man," comments Chard.

"David says it's not about the money," says Brigitte.

"He's right. In addition to expenses and the gourmet food and wine we could not otherwise afford, I agree with Chardonnay that it's a good feeling to be able to support the charities we do,” explains Duke.

"You were a fighter pilot?" asks Brigitte.

"A *Navy* fighter pilot. The best," proclaims Janet.

Duke smiles and squeezes Janet's hand, acknowledging her loving accolade.

"When I got A-fib and they took me out of the sky, it wasn't just the flying I missed, it was the fight…the rush…the sense of accomplishing a worthwhile mission. And yeah, the danger... It just felt right. I admit it. I was and remain...an adrenalin junkie," explains Duke.

"I've been meaning to ask, from the Monterey airport, you'd selected some rental drivers' licenses, right?" interjects Chardonnay.

"Yes," says Duke.

"Have we seen if any of them are from Wyoming?" asks Chardonnay.

This gets an inquisitive look from all present.

In the Monterey County Courthouse prosecutor’s office, Janet Fisher Osgard is seated across the desk from Deputy District Attorney Charles Cheek, whose manner is particularly cagey, even for him. "Good of you to come. I don't rightly know whether the information I'm about to give you comes under the rules of discovery, but I'm going to share it with you, nevertheless. If you don't know yet, you'll find out anyway."

"What information?"

"I received a call from the Jackson, Wyoming, Chief of Police, who had concerns over the death of Nicole's father, at the hands of his wife."

Cheek watches Janet's a reaction carefully, as though expecting some sort of previous knowledge. But Janet is a stone, "Concerns?"

"The prosecutor has determined the shooting to have been an accident."

"But the Chief isn't convinced," asks Janet.

"The inquest is tomorrow. Thought you'd like to know."

Janet, smiling at Cheek, replies, "Mr. Cheek. I could kiss you."

An embarrassed Chuck Cheek doesn't know how to react and reaches for an appropriate answer, "Well, now, that won't be necessary.”   
 "I was being metaphorical," Janet responds, still smiling.

"Glad I could be of help," comments Cheek returning the smile.

**Chapter Four**

On the beach near Monterey, in their Pebble Beach Suite, David Morgan and wife Brigitte together with Duke Osgard and Janet, are sharing a 2-bedroom cottage at the luxurious beachfront hotel location known as: Fairway One at the Lodge. The day coming to an end, naturally they are enjoying hors d'oeuvres and adult beverages.

David speaking on his iPhone, "Of the males who rented a dark, 4-door sedan on the day in question, two have Wyoming driver's licenses. Names are: Ronald McDaniel, from Casper, and Clayton Prince, from Wilson."

Aboard Sweet Charity, relaxing in the deck lounge area, I was on the other end of David’s call. “Neither of those names rings any bells," I said.

"What about the addresses, the cities? Casper? Wilson?" asks David.

"Casper's a fairly large city. Never heard of Wilson."

One other rental of interest caught our attention, but only because of the time frame. Renter was a M. B. Masterson, of San Jose, California. Interestingly, he only had the sedan out for ninety minutes. Between 11 am and 12:30," reports David.

"Hmmm... Let's check out this.....Masterson, you say."

As David clicks off his iPhone, Duke checks his watch, and speaking to wife Janet says, "Darling, what time were our dinner reservations?"

"In about an hour."

"I hope Harry appreciates how much premium champagne we're willing to chug down on his tab, in order to save him," comments David.

"Yes, it's quite a sacrifice," responds Brigitte drolly.

"Someone has to do it," says Janet.

"I am certain he will be very appreciative," states Brigitte.

"Only if we succeed," replies Janet.

The Bench Restaurant overlooks the 18th hole of the famous Pebble Beach golf course in the hotel formerly known as the Del Monte Lodge, now simply called the Lodge. David, Brigitte, Duke and Janet are enjoying their drinks, having just placed their orders.

"Jonathan wants us to check out this Masterson fella," remarks David to Duke.

"I'm leaving for Jackson in the morning," reports Janet.

"You have to go? It's that important?" asks Duke.

"It's important. …If the death of Nicole's father was not an accident, then that could explain everything, states Janet.

"Someone might have had a real motive for killing Nicole," adds David.

The inquest into the death of Earl Lee has drawn a crowd to the small Jackson Court-house, including some press, friends and relatives, the perverse and the curious. Seated in the next to last row is Janet Osgard. The only witness to the shooting is being sworn in, "Do you swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth?"

"I do," answers Dr. Prince, right hand raised. Lowering his hand, Dr. Prince takes the stand.

With Judge Cockrill looking on, the prosecutor, Ronald LeMieux rises from his table and approaches the witness, "Please state your name."

"Dr. Clayton Prince."

"And where do you reside?"

"3601 Old Pass Road, Wilson, Wyoming."

Janet's eyes blink, registering hearing that Dr. Prince's address, Wilson, Wyoming.

"You're Dacia Lee's psychotherapist?" asks LeMieux.

"Yes."

"Now, Dr. Prince, tell us what you saw before and after Earl Lee was fatally shot."

"Dacia had a gun and was trying to shoot herself. Earl was attempting to take it away from her."

""By, Earl, you mean Earl Lee, the victim?"

"That's correct. In any event both parties had their hands wrapped around the weapon, struggling for control."

“By weapon, you mean the Colt Peacemaker, which was between them at chest height.”

“That’s correct. Just as it looked like Earl was finally wrestling the gun away from his wife, the wife make a final effort to jerk it out of his hands. The gun discharged, the bullet striking the husband in the throat, just under the chin. He was likely dead before he hit the floor.”

“That’s a conclusion only the medical examiner can make,” states the Judge.

LeMieux apologizes for Dr. Prince’s conclusion, “Sorry, your Honor,”

LeMieux then picks up the Colt from the evidence bench and shows it to Dr. Prince, asking,

"Is this the weapon Mrs. Lee shot her husband with?"

"Looks like it."

Aboard Sweet Charity**,** David, Brigitte, and Duke Osgard, along with yours truly, are gathered in the fantail lounge.

Osgard on his iPhone, is listening to Janet’s report. "Wilson, Wyoming, is an up-scale suburb of Jackson." Janet is calling from inside her suite at the Rusty Parrot Lodge in an upscale section of Jackson, "It's the home of Doctor Clayton Prince, psychiatrist to the wife who shot Nicole's father. The inquest is ruling it an accident. But the local police chief thinks the judge made a terrible mistake."

"And that she is getting away with the perfect crime?"

"Not if we can prove otherwise."  
 "How? She's been found innocent. That would be double jeopardy," suggests Duke.

"Not so, my dear. Double jeopardy does not attach to inquest decisions," pro-claims Janet.

Duke smiles.

I'll call you from Monterey," says Janet, continuing.

"Why from Monterey? We're all in San Francisco."

"Harry's preliminary hearing is day after tomorrow.," explains Janet.

""I'll try and make it. But first David and I have to check out this Masterson character."

Duke, driving a rental sedan, pulls up in front of the San Jose State University and parks. Duke asks, "You sure this is the address?"  
 "That's what it says," as David checks his iPad.

Getting out of the rental, they head for the administrative office. Once inside, standing opposite the counter from each other, Duke and David confer with the attractive administrator -- Fran Roberts, late 40s, whose severe manner and dour wardrobe undercut her otherwise abundant sexual attributes. .

"Masterson is an adjunct professor of computer science," reports Fran Roberts.

"We'd like to talk to him," states David.

"Professor Masterson has no classes during the Summer Session."

"You're saying that he's not currently on campus," asks Duke.

"That is correct."

"Could we have his home address? It's rather important," asks David.

"I'm sorry, but we're not allowed to give out that information."

"How disappointing," comments Duke.

"However, as I recall, he lives somewhere near Cupertino. Perhaps he's in the telephone book," suggests Fran Roberts, melting a little.

"Fat chance in this era of cell phones. But thank you anyway," says Duke.

As Duke and David pull away from the University in the rental, Duke opines, "Maybe we should get Janet to issue a subpoena, citing the University address.”

Inside the Monterey courtroom, the day of the preliminary hearing, Harry Fletcher is seated beside Janet Osgard, at the defense table. Chuck Cheek occupies the prosecutor's table. Bailiff, preliminary judge and court stenographer are ready. Sergeant Garcia has just been sworn in.

The sergeant takes the stand. Duke, Jonathan, and Chardonnay are among the spectators. The Prosecutor approaches the witness, "Would you provide your name

and occupation for the record."

"Sergeant Lucas Garcia, Monterey County Sheriff's Department."

"And how long have you been with the department, Sergeant?"

"Twelve years this coming November," Sergeant Garcia answers proudly.

"And have you worked many homicides during your law enforcement career?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Many."

"Off the top of your head, would you estimate the number?  
 "Including homicides where I merely assisted, I would estimate the number to be 45 to 50."

"Tell the court exactly what you did upon arriving at the Fletcher estate, on the day of the murder."

"First thing I did was secure the premises. Only people in or out were the coroner's people and the forensic team. The victim appeared to have been shot, so, I had my deputies search the premises for a possible murder weapon. Then I interviewed the victim's husband, Harry Fletcher."

"Did you find such a weapon?"

"Yes, sir. My deputies found an Army Model 1911, .45 semi-automatic. A sniff test indicated that it had been recently fired."

Cheek holds up a pistol in a plastic evidence bag, asking "Is this the weapon?"

"Appears to be." Garcia exams the weapon closer. “Yes, it has my mark.”

"Let the record show we have entered it into evidence as Exhibit A. Did you perform a ballistic test?"

"Absolutely."

"And the results?"

"It was found to be the murder weapon."

"And Sergeant, where was the murder weapon found?"

"Hidden away in a linen closet at the Fletcher home."

"Did you acquire any registration information for this weapon?"

"Yes, it is registered to the defendant at his home address. It was purchased from a San Francisco pawn shop four weeks ago."

"And did you perform a gun residue test on the defendant?"

"Yes."

"With what results?"

"Mr. Fletcher was found to have gunshot residue on his hands and clothing, indicating that he had recently fired a weapon."

"And Sergeant, did the victim show any other wounds besides the gunshot?"

"Yes. The victim sustained some fifteen stab wounds, mostly in the upper torso and face area."

"And did you recover a weapon on the promises consistent with those wounds?"

"Yes, sir. The dagger, which has been entered as People's Exhibit B, is a medieval antique."

"And could you determine the provenance of this dagger?"

""Yes, it's a relic of the Knights Templar, dating from thirteenth-century France. The defendant has identified it as his personal property."

"Were there any fingerprints on the dagger?"

"No. It was likely wiped clean."

"Objection!" asserts Janet.

"Sustained!" pronounces the Judge.

Satisfied, the prosecutor heads back to his table, stating, "Your witness, counselor."

Janet climbs to her feet but does not approach the witness. "Sergeant Garcia, did you arrest Mr. Fletcher on the basis of the gunshot residue test?" Janet asked.

"No,

“And why was that?”

The test was inconclusive."

"Inconclusive?? He had residue on his hands, did he not?"

'Because he had just previously been to a shooting range -- The SFO Gun Club in San Bruno. Which I verified."

"So, although the test did not exonerate Mr. Fletcher, neither did it indicate guilt, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"No further questions, subject to recall later."

"You may step down," the preliminary judge tells Garcia.

"The people call Dr. Francisco Costa, the County Coroner," announces Cheek.

"Do you expect your examination to be a lengthy one?" asks the Judge.

"I do, your Honor," states Cheek.

"Since I have a matter that requires my participation in another court, we will adjourn until after lunch. We’ll reconvene at 2 pm.”

Inside Cannery Row’s unique Monterey Plaza Hotel, Duke and Chardonnay are seated at a window table having lunch at the popular Schooners Coastal Kitchen & Bar.

"Kinda surprised David and Brigitte aren't here for the hearing," comments Duke.

"They're still in Wyoming. Too bad Janet couldn't join us for lunch," states Chard. . "She said something about quizzing Harry about the timeline and prepping to cross examine the coroner," replies Duke.

"What does she think of our chances?" asks Chardonnay.

Shrugging, Duke insists, "When she's defending a client, you can't get anything out of her."

Once again everyone is back in the courtroom as the preliminary hearing continues. The prosecutor is questioning Dr. Francisco Costa, the county coroner. “Dr. Costa, once you took control of the body, what was the first thing you did?"

"Took a liver temperature and then wrote down the ambient temperature and took note of whether the air conditioner was on."

"Was the air conditioner on?"

"Yes."

"Based on liver and ambient temperature, and all of your other findings, do you have a time of death?"

"Between 10:30 am and 12 noon on the day in question."

"And the cause of death?"

"A gunshot wound to the chest by a .45 caliber weapon."

"I'm confused, Dr. Costa. If the gunshot killed her, why the many subsequent knife wounds? In your opinion, what does that indicate?"

"It indicates that the murder was likely a crime of passion perpetrated by someone close to the victim."

"In your experience, hasn't it been found that in the vast majority of such crimes of passion, it's the spouse or lover that's eventually proven to be the guilty party?"

"That's my experience."

"Objection. Opinion. Not a fact." exclaims Janet, jumping to her feet.

"Your Honor, I'm sure the coroner has handled many similar crimes and, as he stated, is basing his opinion on vast experience," asserts Cheek.

"Overruled," states the Judge.

Cheek, returning to the prosecutor's table, tells Janet, "Your witness, counselor."

Janet Osgard rises from defendant's table and approaches the witness, asking, "Dr. Costa, how many homicides have you worked in your career?"

"Hmm. Probably about twelve hundred."

"And in each of those, you made an estimate of the time of death?"

"Yes, that's part of the job description."

"And you said the time of death was between 10:30 am and noon."

"Yes."

"Is there any practical possibility that the time of death was later than 12 noon?"

"There is always a possibility. Absent direct temporal evidence -- such as, say, surveillance video, we have to estimate a range of time."

"If you had to give the widest possible practical range, what, in your professional opinion, would be the very latest this time of death could have occurred?"

"I suppose it could be pushed to 1:00 pm. Given special circumstances, perhaps 1:30 pm at the outside."

"Thank you, Dr. Costa."

Cheek jumps to his feet, saying, "Redirect, your Honor."

The judge nods his acquiescence.

"Of your twelve hundred estimates of time of death, how many of those findings were impeached?"

"To my knowledge, none."

"Thank you, Dr. Costa. No further questions.

"The prosecution rests, your Honor," says Cheek.

"Does the defense intend to present a defense?" asks the Judge of Janet.

"Of course, Your Honor. …I call Dian Fox."

Dian Fox, a pert 25-year-old, rises from among the spectators and comes forward to be sworn in. Cheek is suddenly concerned and thus once again on his feet. "Objection. This witness is not known to the People, Your Honor. She's not on the list."

"Permission to approach?" asks Janet.

The Judge waves at the two to step forward and she and Cheek crowd the Judge's bench.

"Bur your Honor, I only became aware of this witness's availability within the last ninety minutes."

"So? For that we should rewrite the rules of discovery?"

"Your Honor, this is a witness with limited availability, critical to the defense case. This is a hearing, not a trial. We are asking for some latitude."

"Alright, I'll allow it."

"Your Honor -- ," exclaims Cheek appalled.

"If you need time to prepare a cross, I'll give you a continuance. In the meantime, the docket is too full to miss a chance to keep this moving to a conclusion. Proceed, Ms. Osgard," pronounces the Judge, cutting off Cheek.

"Thank you, Your Honor," replies Janet.

The Oath Taker approaches Dian, "Raise your right hand. Do you swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth?"

"I do," answers Dian Fox, then lowering her hand she takes the stand.

Janet approaching, says, "Please tell the court your name and occupation."

"Dian Fox. I am a flight attendant with United Airlines."

"Tell me, Miss Fox, do you recognize the defendant?"

"Yes, I do."

"So, you've seen him before?"

"Yes."

"Under what circumstances did you see the defendant?"

"He was a passenger on one of my San Francisco-Monterey flights. He was flying first-class."

"What was your passenger wearing? Like, did he have a jacket?"

"Yes, he did."

"Can you describe the jacket?"

"It was brown suede with a fringe."

At this point, Janet returns to the defense table to retrieve some paperwork. Returning to the witness stand, she hands a sheet of paper to Miss Fox, asking "Please tell the court what this is?"

"It's a passenger list," replies Dian Fox, glancing at the sheet.

"Is it the passenger list for the San Francisco-Monterey flight in question? The one where the defendant was a passenger?"

The flight attendant examines the sheet more closely, then answers, "Why yes, it is."

"And the date of the list is correct."

Re-examining the sheet, Dian Fox, responds, "Yes, it is."

"Please tell the court what time that flight arrived in Monterey."

"The flight left San Francisco at 3:00 pm and arrived in Monterey at 3:55 pm.

Cheek looks suddenly sullen. Turning to his second chair colleague, he whispers, "Why didn't you know this?"

Jonathan, Duke and Chardonnay smile broadly. Harry looks mostly relieved.

"Thank you, Miss Fox," says Janet. Turning to the Judge, "Your Honor, this is a certified copy of the passenger list for the date of the murder. Together with the Internet code representing the defendant's ticket, I would like it entered as defense exhibit next in order.”

"Mr. Cheek?" inquires the Judge.

"May I see that, Your Honor?" requests Cheek.

The Judge waves to the Bailiff to have him show the exhibit document to the Deputy DA. Cheek gives the document the once-over. As he suspected, against his fondest hope, the document appears genuine, "No objection."

"So be it," pronounces the Judge.

"Your witness, Counselor," states Janet.

A disconcerted Cheek, grudgingly gets himself together, "Your Honor, given the undeniably exculpatory nature of the evidence here presented, for the furtherance of justice, the People would like to withdraw all charges."

"So ordered. This hearing is over," pronounces the Judge, hammering his gavel. "Mr. Fletcher, you are free to go.:

The Merry Band gathers around Harry and they all share a group hug.

"I'll have Garcia's badge for this screw-up," complains Cheek to his 2nd chair.

**Chapter Five**

As the sun is going down over the Pacific, at Pebble Beach’s Fairway One at the Lodge,

Chardonnay is now sharing the 2-bedroom cottage suite with Duke and Janet, Chard is sitting in the living room, talking on the phone with David and Brigitte. “Yeah, everybody is on cloud nine. Janet was brilliant."

From their Rusty Parrot suite, David and Brigitte bring Chard up to speed on what happening on their end.

“Brigitte and I are shadowing Mrs. Lee and her....psychiatrist."

"How's that looking?"

"Darker than we ever imagined."

"What do you mean?" asks Chard.

"Only that their relationship goes well beyond that of psychiatrist and patient."

"Wow....Hmmm. Do me a favor. Can you sneak a picture of this psychiatrist and email me a copy?" asks Chard.

"Will do."

**Duke and Chardonnay are back aboard Sweet Charity**, gathered – where else but in the lounge area where I was getting a report. "So, this computer professor lives somewhere near Cupertino?" I asked.

"That's what I was told," Duke says.

"Doesn't that ring a bell," I asked? .

"Should it? I'm no longer a Californian. Okay, Cupertino is the headquarters of Apple."

"Perhaps this Masterson might be spending his summers working for Apple? Wouldn't that be a natural?" I suggested. .

"Kind of a long shot," replies Duke.

Duke and Chard share a look, then she adds, "Better than waiting for a subpoena."

"We'll check it out in the morning," states Duke.

At the Cupertino Apple headquarters, Chardonnay and Duke are attempting to con their way past the Apple receptionist, a woman of Asian descent.

"Hi, we're here to see Matthew B. Masterson," states Duke.

The receptionist, searching on her computer screen, asks "He expecting you?"

"Yes."

"Who should I say is calling?"

"Dr. Palmer."

"He's not answering," reports the receptionist finally, who then moves to one of the administration's speaker systems and presses a button, "Can you page 'Bat' Masterson? Have him report to reception."

Chardonnay and Duke share a look of realization. She pulls Osgard aside, away from the receptionist, whispering, “*Bat* Masterson? Whose real name is?"

"Matthew Bartholomew, ace black hat hacker to the Mob. A name we know all too well," confirms Duke.

"Technical genius. But a moron when it comes to choosing associates."

"Most of them ended up in prison. I'm surprised he's still on the outside." To the receptionist, Duke asks, "Is there a room where we can have a moment alone with Mr. Masterson?"

"Yes. You can use the visitors' conference room," the receptionist answers, pointing out the room.

Matt "Bat" Masterson finally enters the lobby where he is greeted by Duke Osgard with a big smile, "Hello, Bartholomew."

Bat looks Osgard over carefully, then realizing something is up, snaps his fingers and, finally registering recognition, states, "I remember. Patrick Palmer. Right? Arrested for that armored car heist in Las Vegas."

"That's right, except that the name Palmer was a battle tag. My real name is Louis Osgard. My friends call me Duke."

"My friends call me Bat.”

Duke, indicating the conference room, suggests, "Could we have a moment with you in private?"

Hesitating, Bat says, "At this point? …What the hell?"

The three step into the conference room. Bat turns and faces Duke and Chard, who remarks, "I should have put it together. Bartholomew William Barclay 'Bat' Masterson.... Old West lawman, journalist, friend of Wyatt Earp. Changing your name from Matt Bartholomew to Matt Masterson was a no-brainer."

"Who's she?" asks Bat indicating Chard.

"Your worst nightmare, if you don't tell us the truth," insists Duke.

"Whadda you want to know?"

In Wyoming, near a house on Old Pass Road, a rental van is staked out across the street with David and Brigitte waiting inside for Dacia's psychiatrist to appear. Brigitte is holding a Nikon digital camera with a 300MM lens. Suddenly, the psychiatrist appears. He exits the ranch-style house and heads for his car, parked in the driveway. Brigitte fires away with her long lens Nikon.

Aboard Sweet Charity, Duke and Chardonnay are once again bringing me up to speed regarding this Masterson character. .

"Bartholomew is not the perp. Had his name changed legally," reports Chard.

"He was in Monterey repairing the computer system at the Naval Postgraduate School," adds Duke.

"And you verified that's why he was there?" asks Moore.

"Of course," adds Chard.

Suddenly, Chard's iPhone buzzes, and the screen indicates it's an email from David, with photo attachment.

"Brigitte and David are sending a photo of Doctor Prince," announces Chardonnay.

"Good," I said in anticipation.

Chard, studying the photo, a puzzled expression on her face, comments, "He looks eerily familiar, but I can't quite place him."

"Let me see," I said, taking the iPhone from Chard and carefully studying the image. Finally I said, “It's the beard."

"It's a popular look. Seems like every other middle-aged guy has it." retorts Chard.

"Also makes a pretty good disguise," I added, as I handed the iPhone to Duke, who takes a quick glance then pulls his own iPhone from his pocket, and dials.

At Apple headquarters, inside Masterson's office, Bat answers his landline phone, "Masterson.”

Duke, replies, "Bat? This is Louis Osgard."

"Ah, Duke. What can I do for you?"

"I have a favor to ask,"

"Name it. Anything for you and Chard."

"I have a photo of a man with a moustache, goatee beard and glasses. I'd like to see what he looks like without the facial hair and glasses."

"Is that it? That's all you want?"

"Yeah. That something you can do?"

"Duck soup. Can't do it today, though. I'll be on the road. But you can have it tomorrow morning."

"That'll be fine."

"Email me the photo. Just a second, I'll give you my email address."

Duke writes down the address. "Got it. Thank’s Bat."

Inside their Rusty Parrot Lodge's suite, Brigitte and David are getting ready for bed.

"You and Jonathan never used the battle tags -- les noms de guerre or les noms de bataille? Was there a reason for that?" asks Brigitte.

"We never participated in any of the capers. Me by choice and Jonathan by necessity."

"Necessity?"

"Jonathan was the planner and organizer. Back when the Merry Band was up and running, he was the only one who knew all the team members' true identities. They didn't even know each other's real names or their home towns. That way, if one of them was apprehended, that person could not expose other team members. Not even Harry knew team members' true identities."

"Sounds like a military intelligence unit."

"Exactly. He was reproducing privately the Force Recon units he ran when he was in the Marines. Jonathan was the only one who could expose the entire team, therefore he could never go in harm's way."

"Brilliant. So, Andrea Parker became Chardonnay Rogers. Louis Osgard, Patrick Palmer. Harry Fletcher was Robin Templar."

"Others were brought in as needed. Of course, when the team went legit there was no longer any need for the battle tags and the real names came out. But some team members still use them, out of habit, I suppose."

“So what role did you play?”

“I first met Jonathan Moore when I was still a San Francisco PD inspector and investigated a shooting aboard his yacht in which he was the shooter. The shooting was ruled justified homicide and we became friends. Taking advantage of the friendship, he would often call be for favors.”

“Favors?” said Brigitte.

“Usually information only a police officer can provide. I was rewarded by receiving information that led to numerous arrests for which I received the credit.”

Brigitte, starting to curl up and go to sleep, in an increasingly slurred speech, comments, "You are all such a remarkable bunch. I can see why you would team with Jonathan. C'est le camaraderie. Chardonnay though, she's mysterieux. I think she's got a thing, you know... a thing for Harry.”

"For Harry?" asks David chuckling.

"Certainement. She just doesn't know it yet. But she has great taste."

"How do you know these things?" inquires David, amused.

"I'm a woman, silly," replies Brigitte, who now falls fast asleep.

In the deck lounge of Sweet Charity, Jason Burrell is serving brunch to Duke, Janet, Chardonnay and me.

Chard's iPhone buzzes, announcing an incoming email, the screen indicating that it's from Bat, with photo attachment. Chard says, "It's the photo...from Bat."

Quickly bringing up the photo of the psychiatrist, without his goatee and glasses, Chard, gasping in shock, exclaims "Oh, my god!!" Suddenly turning an improbable shade of pale and looking positively grim, Chard hands the iPhone with its photo to me. I studied the photo, "Looks familiar....but....do I know this guy?"

"That is Frederick Van Gent," states Chardonnay.

"He's supposed to be in a South African prison," were my only words.

"When did he ever do what he's supposed to?" asks Chard.

"Just who is this Frederick Van Gent," asks Janet.

"South African mine owner, businessman, scam artist, thief -- and cold blooded killer," responds Chard adamantly.

"And a guy that Robin Templar and his Merry Band took down," I added.

"We took him down hard. Took his diamonds. Put him in prison," comments Chard.

I explained, "You remember a few years back the great robbery at the Antwerp Diamond Center?"

Both nod. "Record-setting robbery, as I recall," Duke says.

"Most of the robbers were caught but almost none of the diamonds were recovered. Years passed. The police had given up trying to learn the identity of the mastermind. Case got cold. Then Robin and I made a deal with the insurance company and, long story short, the Merry Band, most notably through the courage of Chardonnay here, identified Van Gent as the mastermind and tracked him down in Cape Town, South Africa. It was Harry who had him arrested," I explained. Adding, "I'm only surprised he hasn't come after me, as well."

Inside the iconic bar at the Top of the Mark, enjoying their drinks, Janet and Chardonnay are seated together at a table overlooking San Francisco's East Bay.

"Jonathan told me a little about your previous run-in with Van Gent, in South Africa," informs Janet.

"It was not pleasant. He tried to kill me. Almost succeeded. Did Jonathan tell you about Paul?"

"I think he mentioned him."

"Yes, well, Paul Venter was an amazing, brilliant man. I just happened to fall in love with him," reports Chard, shaking her head ruefully as she remembers. "Paul, in the end, by some accounts, turned out to be one of the bad guys in that caper. I have a different perspective on that, but..." Chard shrugs.

"That must have been devastating."

"Yes. You could say that. Paul was the love of my life."

"Where's he now?"

"Oh, he's dead."

"I'm sorry. Jonathan didn't mention that."

"He died while saving my life."

"Whether it was Van Gent or Paul Venter who was actually behind it all doesn't matter. When we took down Van Gent, I thought that was the end of it. But here he is." "I had no idea. You really do have some unfinished business with this guy." responds Janet, shaking her head sadly.

Chard nods.

**Chapter Six**

**I, Jonathan,** was one of those gathered in the conference room at Universal Imports 19th floor San Francisco office. Besides me, those gathered around the table were Harry Fletcher, Chardonnay, together with Duke and Janet.

From their Rusty Parrot Lodge suite in Jackson, Brigitte and David are heard on the speaker phone. Brigitte is presently delivering her report.

"I have been able to tap my old contacts at the Interpol Headquarters in Lyon and it is clear that Frederick Van Gent did not get out of prison by any legal means."

"Escaped, of course?" asks Harry.

"About two years ago. He broke out of the C-Max, maximum security prison in Pretoria, killing two guards in the process. Somehow he managed to cross into Botswana and then the Namibian wilderness and was never heard from again."

"Until now, in Wilson, Wyoming of all places." states David.

"This guy has major survival skills," was my initial comment.

"In wilderness like that? You bet. Sounds almost like somebody we might have trained," remarks Harry.

"Actually, you may have trained him. He was in the Royal Netherlands Marines. Did a tour in Afghanistan," reports Brigitte.

"I remember those guys. Dutch Marines. 'The Black Devils' they called them-selves. I never thought of them as 'Black,” was my second comment.

"But Devils they were. A tough unit. Good as anyone," insists Harry.

"Anyway, people, this is great news -- escaped diamond thief and murderer, impersonating a doctor, committing perjury in a homicide inquest. It's beautiful. We know where he lives. It's not like we don't have enough to get him picked up," pronounces David.

"Make it happen, David," I urged. .

"Yes, sir. Once we have him in custody, we can take our time hanging the murder charge on him," says David.

"There's a United flight from SFO at 5:30 pm. I'll be on it," reports Harry.

"See you tonight, Harry," says Brigitte.

The phones in the conference room click off.

"Forgot to ask if they had anything on Dacia," comments Harry.

"My very thought," I added.

"The whole Dacia-Prince thing sounds incredibly coincidental," interjects Janet.

“As far as homicides go, I’m trained not to believe in coincidence,” Chard spits out.

Back in Wilson, David and Brigitte sit in their rented sedan parked across the street from "Dr. Prince's" residence. Two Teton County Sheriff's squad cars are parked on the street in front of the house. Deputies are going in and out of the front door. Finally Deputy Coles approaches David as he sits behind the wheel, saying to Brigitte, "Looks like we're too late." Coles then beckons to David, so he and Brigitte get out of the car and join Coles and the other deputies in searching the house, which is easy to do, since the place has been stripped bare but for a king-sized mattress on the floor in the bedroom.

"If anyone actually lived here, they're clearly not coming back," remarks David.

At the Earl Lee Estate, a Jackson Police detective's unit and Brigitte's rental car are parked in the driveway of the large ranch-style home on a hill, overlooking the city of Jackson.

Brigitte and Detective Carter ring the bell at the front door. In a few seconds the door is opened by a beautiful young Chinese woman, Mrs. Ming, with her two-year-old child beside her, clutching at her dress. "Yes?"

"Hello, Ma'am, I'm Detective Carter of the Jackson Police. We're looking for the owner of the house."

"I am she," responds Mrs. Ming.

Brigitte and the Detective glance at each other with slightly dropped jaws, as Det. Carter says, "Actually, I'm looking for Mrs. Lee."

"Oh, yes, the poor distraught widow. That was so sad. I'm sorry, I can see that you are confused. I am Mrs. Ming. We just moved in last night. My husband isn't here right now, but would you like to come in and have some tea?"

Brigitte, shaking herself out of her shock, answers, "Yes. Yes, please, we would love that...," as she and Det. Carter enter the house.

"So, you just moved in, did you?" asks Brigitte.

We find David’s rental car eastbound on Highway 22, heading back towards Jackson. David is speaking into his iPhone, which is locked into one of those hands free devices.

“Have I got a surprise for you,” David says into the i{hone.

In her rental, still parked at the Lee mansion, Brigitte responds.

“And I for you. You show me yours, I'll show you mine. I bet mine's bigger."

Hesitating quizzically and laughing, David says, “You go first.” Listening, in less than 30-seconds David is heard yelling, "Whaat?!"

Sitting on bar stools In the Jedediah Whisky Bar, located inside the Jackson Hole Airport, Harry, Chardonnay, David and Brigitte sit enjoying Cowboy Coffees (coffee and whisky combos).

Laboring to digest the news, Harry states, "...as if my head weren't already spinning: Van Gent has disappeared. Dacia is also nowhere to be found and has apparently sold the mansion with the furnishings and the Targhee Ranch and Resort -- that's basically the entire estate for --"

" -- for one hundred million into a foreign bank account. According to the helpful Mrs. Ming,” interjects Brigitte.

"Insane. It's worth five times that," insists Harry.

"Not if you're on the lam," adds Chard.

"Yeah. Fast is now clearly their priority. And they've obviously planned this out meticulously and over a long time. With a buyer already in place," states Harry.

The street around the Jackson police department is quiet, but inside, there are a number of people meeting with Det. Carter, who, checking his notes, comments, "So you folks understand, we have shared only a limited amount of information with the family that seems to have bought the estate, but, uh, Mr., uh, Mr. Ming has volunteered to come talk with us."

Harry, Chard, David and Brigitte are gathered around Det. Carter's desk, whose easy, small-western-town manner belies a good investigator's mind. Det. Carter leads Harry, Chard, David and Brigitte into the observation room, which features a large glass window affording a view into the as-yet empty interview room next door, announcing "Apparently, Mr. Ming is a Chinese businessman based out of Indonesia. I don't much know yet what's really going on, but....I think it's best if you all just stayed out of sight for now."

"Agreed. We'll just watch and wait," states Harry.

"And, of course, Mr. Ming thinks that we are just investigating a neighbor's complaint about one of Mrs. Lee's dogs getting out," clarifies Det. Carter.

"I didn't know she had dogs," asserts Harry.

"She doesn't. I just came up with that to put Mrs. Ming at ease," Brigitte chimes in.

"Ah, of course. Break out the popcorn and let the games begin," adds Harry.

As the Merry Band watches from the observation room, Mr. Daoshing Ming, an Oxford-accented, 40-something Chinese gentleman in an impeccable, gray, Italian suit, is seated at the interview table with Det. Carter.

"Since we are obviously new in the area, when my wife told me that the neighbors had a complaint, I just wanted to come down and make sure we got off on the right foot," asserts Mr. Ming.

"That's very good of you, Mr. Ming," affirms Det. Carter.

"What seems to be the problem, Detective?"

"Well, we came out responding to a call about Mrs. Lee's dogs, so naturally -- "

"Sir, we know nothing about any dogs."

"Oh, we wouldn't expect you to. I was just going to say, we're actually just looking to speak with Mrs. Lee and were surprised when your wife told us she didn't live there anymore."

"Well, I can certainly help you with that."

"You know where she is?"

"I know where she will be tomorrow. Meeting with me at the main office of the Targhee Ranch and Resort."

Inside the observation room, Harry and Chardonnay share an "a-ha" look with David and Brigitte.

Back in the interview room, Mr. Ming, continuing, "We'll take care of final transfer logistics. Keys, gate pass, codes, you understand. Because of the price, I made the deal very quickly."

"As I gather, you got quite a bargain."

"Mrs. Lee was anxious to remove herself from the scene of her traumatic and tragic loss. And serendipitously, I am the beneficiary. Life can be strange that way,

no?"

"Indeed."

"Nevertheless, these are some large and complex properties. Everything needs to be wrapped up, just so. As they say, the devil's in the details."

Det. Carter, smiling and nodding, adds, "Well now, ain't that the truth."

In the Observation Room, Harry and Chardonnay share an second "a-ha" look with David and Brigitte.

Harry's phone rings. It was me putting in the call from the Universal Imports office. I could hear Harry putting the call on speaker. "We're kind of in the middle of it here, Jonathan. What is it that’s on your mind?” Then noting the calling number, “And what are you doing at the office this late?”

**Chapter Seven**

In my office at Universal Imports, I was on one of the office landlines; which number Harry obviously recognized.

“I’m still here because it's bright and early in Cape Town. Turns out that your gorgeous young stepmother-in-law, Dacia Lee, maiden name, Dacia Morariu, is from a family of Romanian gypsies.”

"I suspected Dacia was a Romanian name. But she has no Romanian accent. If anything, I thought she sounded vaguely British. When did the family come to the U.S.?" asks Harry.

"They didn't. Yes, they emigrated from Romania, but to....guess where?"

"On, no. You're kidding."

"Oh, yes! South Africa!"

"How deep it gets."

"Four years ago, she was working as a bartender in Cape Town; in the diamond district, of course. Did occasional modeling. Then she disappears and eventually turned up about two years ago, entering the U.S. on a South African passport."

"Right about when Van Gent escapes from prison," interjects Chardonnay.

"Pretty easy to fill in the blanks," adds Chardonnay.

"Oh, these people are good," asserts Brigitte.

"As con jobs go, I've never seen a better one," states Chardonnay.

"Worthy of a politician," says David.

Shaking his head, almost in admiration, Harry explains, "They had a perfect plan, really. It was brilliant. By planting Dacia as Earl's trophy wife, then killing both Earl and Nicole, while framing me, he gets very rich very fast...and by the same stroke, destroys the man who destroyed him. Neat, huh?"

"But he still has to get away," I added.

"That's the whole point: right now, he thinks he has. Probably plans to slip out immediately to some country that doesn't extradite," suggests Harry.

At this point, the Merry Band, watching through the observation window, sees Mr. Ming shake Det. Carter's hand as he takes his leave.

"You're sure Van Gent doesn't know he's been made?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. I'm sure he thinks we haven't even connected him. He's that arrogant," asserts Chardonnay.

"And he thinks he's rich," adds Harry.

"Let's keep him thinking all of that," I interjected.

"We can't let him see Harry....or me, for that matter," reminds Chard.

Det. Carter steps into the observation room, announcing, "I have made an arrangement to meet with Mr. Ming tomorrow at the Targhee Ranch and Resort where Mrs. Lee expects to meet the widow at 2:00 pm. So, I'd suggest we coordinate our efforts."

"My very intention, Detective," says Harry, his visage turning dark.

Approaching the Targhee Resort, a white Cadillac Escalade SUV rolls along the highway that goes up into the high range of the Grand Tetons and the Targhee Resort. The Cadillac has dark-tinted windows.

Van Gent is driving. Dacia is in the passenger seat, excitedly making notes on an Ipad. Van Gent is a little edgy.

"We're in good time. Ming will just about be there when we arrive," comments Dacia.

"That's good. We won't waste any time then. Helicopter is standing by."

"Then we'll just hop over the mountain to the Jackson Hole Airport, where the Lee corporate jet is waiting, and we will have breakfast in Cuba! Out of harm's way. Pretty slick, eh?" suggests Dacia excitedly.

"After what these insects have put me through.....I cannot wait."

The Cadillac rolls through the entrance to Targhee Ranch and Resort.

In the administration area of the Jackson Police Department Lucy, a young, civilian secretary, is busy emailing out reminders about the upcoming Police Department fundraiser. Det. Carter enters and hands the secretary an APB Form, asking, "Lucy, could you scan and email this to the Teton County Sheriff soon as you get a chance?"

"No problem, Sir. Let me just finish sending this last flyer and I'll get it right out."

"Thank you."

Carter enters his office and shuts the door. Lucy scans the last flyer about the Police Department fundraiser and emails it off to the Targhee Resort office. Then she scans the APB form as well, which is a standard police APB form on Frederick Van Gent, ADA Dr. Clayton Prince, describing him as an escaped murderer and showing a picture not only of his current appearance with beard and glasses, but also of the digitally cleaned-up look Bat Masterson created.

Just as Lucy is about to send the APB form, the phone rings and she reflexively reaches out and picks up the handset, answering, "Hello, Jackson Police Department, how may I help you?" Concentrating on the call, Lucy absentmindedly clicks the send button of the computer's email page. Continuing, she says, "I'll send a unit to check it out." At this point, Lucy focuses on the email screen on her computer, muttering to herself, "Damn!!"

Charlotte, the secretary occupying an adjacent desk, asks "Damn what?!!"

"I mistakenly sent an APB to the Targhee Resort. It was supposed to go to the Sheriff's Department."

Four white panel vans, looking like local vendor delivery trucks, are parked at the mouth of each of the two access roads to the compound. Plain clothes deputies man each of the vans.

Wearing sunglasses, with hats designed to obscure their faces and dressed in mountain hiking gear, Harry and Chardonnay are sitting in one of the vans; Chard behind the wheel. Harry checks his Sig Sauer 9mm and slides in a clip while Chard does the same with her police-issue Glock-19. Chard notices with raised eyebrow that Harry's Knights Templar dagger -- the very one Van Gent had left stuck in Nicole's chest is secured in a sheath strapped to Harry's belt on the opposite side of the holster for the Sig Sauer. Chard's gaze lingers for a moment on the anxious Harry. Worried about him, she remarks, "Should anything go wrong, we're not exactly armed to the teeth."

"You know my philosophy -- "

"Play the hand you're dealt -- I know."

"Besides....what could go wrong?"

Focusing on the Templar dagger, Chard, in an accusatory tone, pronounces, "You're hoping something will go wrong. Why else would you go to the trouble of bringing the Knights Templar dagger that figured in your wife's death??”

In a clearing in the woods next to the Targhee Resort office complex, sits the Lee company helicopter.

An SUV enters the space and parks on the opposite side of the clearing, from which point the occupants have good command of the helipad area and all approaches to it. Inside the SUV, David and Brigitte are wearing mountain vacationers' gear with Glock-19's at the ready.

Det. Carter walks up to Harry and Chard's van. Chard, in the driver's seat, rolls the window down.

Carter, leaning on the window, alerts them, "Ming and Lee are both about a half hour away. Morgan and that French lady are guarding the helicopter, as you requested; although, as I've said, I doubt they'll see any action. But anyway, I've got two men in the office as well and I've got two more covering the surrounding grounds."

"Well, hopefully, nobody will see any action," states Harry.

"That's what I'm planning on, Mr. Fletcher."

"Sounds like you've got it well in hand, Detective," assures Chardonnay.

"I believe so. We run a simple operation in these parts, but, I think we have enough muscle on hand to control one little woman. Should be fairly smooth, especially since they don't know that we know," comments Det. Carter, who then turns and walks away toward the reception office.

Chard, seeming uncharacteristically anxious, asks Harry, "Do we need to get slapped upside the head or something?"

Harry, looking grim as his fingers caress the Templar dagger in the sheath on his belt, says "Can't blame me, can you?"

"No, and I don't blame me, either."

"We're not murderers. We're just hoping for a chance -- "

Interjecting, Chard asserts, "Yeah, a chance to get some of ours back. I've got the same feeling."

Harry nods and then realizing it sounds hollow, suggests, "Sounds crazy, doesn't it; you wanting to avenge the death of Cape Town boyfriend, Paul Venter, I believe was his name, and me, the murder of my wife.”

"No. Crazy it doesn't. Wrong is what it does sound like."

Harry, now more sad than grim, shares a look with Chard and then, agreeing, "You're right. Putting a round into Van Gent's head, as attractive as that idea might feel, it wouldn't bring back what we've lost."

"Looks like we're just going to have to settle for justice."

"Whatever that turns out to be."

At Targhee’s main office, a black Mercedes S-550 pulls up to the reception area and parks. Out steps Mr. Ming and his associate Mr. Mao, a younger Chinese man, carrying a briefcase.

Harry and Chardonnay watch as Det. Carter emerges from the reception building, giving Messrs. Ming and Mao a welcoming handshake. The three men enter the building.

"And so it begins," remarks Harry.

Carter, Ming and Mao enter the reception area of the resort office and go through a door into the conference room.

**Chapter Eight**

The white Cadillac Escalade with opaque dark-tinted windows approaches and enters the resort property.

As Van Gent drives up the long, winding drive, Dacia gets an email alert on her Ipad. She brings up the email message, commenting, "A flyer for the Policeman's Ball....that's funny....and, what's this?" The APB, mistakenly addressed to Dacia's Targhee Resort email, fills the screen, showing Frederick Van Gent, AKA Dr. Clayton Prince, escaped murderer. A picture shows not only his current appearance with beard and glasses, but also the digitally cleaned-up look Bat Masterson created.

"Holy shit!" exclaims Dacia.

The Cadillac arrives at the main office of the Targhee Resort and parks in front of the office building, as Dacia tells Van Gent, "Look at this!"

Van Gent looks at the laptop screen. He's been made. He grows pale -- but only for a couple of moments. Then he takes a deep breath and becomes very calm. Cool as a snake, his eyes dart around the complex. A sweep of the area shows the vendor vans, all with tinted dark windows, parked at strategic points, guarding the two exits.

"Oh, yes. They've brought all the king's men. Those vans are not for flower delivery," reports Van Gent, who, while evaluating the situation, hesitates. Dacia is holding her breath. Van Gent, finally looking at her, urges, "We're both going in there.....to take this meeting....like nothing happened."

"But it's a trap," insists Dacia.

"Only for me. You, they've got nothing on. You know nothing. Get it?"

'What are you going to do?"

"They expect me to run. That's what they're ready for. So, I'll give them something they're not ready for," reports Van Gent as he makes sure he is armed with his Glock 9mm in a shoulder holster and his SOG Seal Knife 2000. Dacia, on the passenger side, is the first to get out of the parked car, then Van Gent, from the driver's side.

Harry's eyes pop on seeing Van Gent, saying, "Jackpot."

"It's him. He's walking right into it."

"Should we....uh?"

"Uh, no. No. They've got this. We don't want to expose ourselves yet," says Chard hesitating.

"You're right. Let Carter play his hand. Cleaner that way."

Inside the reception area of the Targhee Resort main office, the only person there is the Targhee Operations Manager, Barney Kendrick, a tanned, fit-looking, 40-something, former ski instructor. Dacia, affecting a breezy, casual and even ditzy manner, enters the reception area, followed closely by Van Gent.

Barney greets Dacia with a nervously warm, double-handed handshake, "Hello, Mrs. Lee, good to see you; been a while since we've had you up here. I'm so sorry about your husband."

"Thank you, Barney. I'm just carrying on, you know. Life goes on. That's how I look at it. This is Dr. Prince, my psychotherapist -- helping me through all this. So, is Mr. Ming here yet?"

"Yes, Ma'am, in the conference room; if you'd care to step this way," says Barney, holding the door open, which Dacia goes through first. As Dacia steps through the door, entering the conference room, she sees Det. Carter and two Teton County Sheriff's deputies pointing drawn guns in her general direction. But to the cops' utter shock and surprise, behind Dacia, Van Gent has the astonished Barney's arm pulled up behind his back with a Glock 9mm stuck in the back of his neck, announcing, “Drop your weapons! Now! All of them! And the cell phones, as well."

Appearing shocked, Dacia exclaims, "Clayton! What are you doing?"

Outside the main office of the resort, the Cadillac is still sitting in its parked location. Two horses, ridden by teenage girls in western gear, amble by. A tourist family, man, woman and two kids, slowly drive by with their luggage on the rooftop. Inside the van, Harry notes that the Cadillac hasn't moved, nor has anything else.

Chard, also taking note, begins to check emails on her iPad. Harry waits.

Finally, the door of the main office opens. Harry's eyes, focused on the resort entrance, watches a sheriff's deputy come lumbering through the door, with a police issue Glock 9mm holstered to his gun belt and carrying a standard issue shotgun, prompting him to say, "Whoa, what's this? Oh." As the deputy walks to a white vendor van, labeled on the side panel as Gordon's Fine Florals, gets and drives away, Harry finally exhales.

The flower van driven by the "deputy" who just left the office shows up at the edge of the helipad parking area and stops in the middle of the road. David and Brigitte scan the clearing.

"What's this?" asks Brigitte.

"Police?" asks David

The driver of the Flower vendor van, behind nearly opaque tinted glass, dressed as a deputy is, of course, Van Gent in disguise. Van Gent scans the clearing and recognizes the strategic positioning of the SUVs, muttering to himself, "Okay, so they've covered their bases."

David and Brigitte, sitting inside a vendor van watch as Van Gent turns his van around. David keying the transmitter on his communications unit, says, "Harry, I've got a Deputy out here in a van."

Inside Harry and Chard's van, Harry answers David's call, "Yeah, I saw him come out of the building."

At this point, Chard finding something shocking on her iPad, exclaims "Harry! I've been monitoring Dacia's email. Look at this!"

"Hold it, David," glancing over as Chard sticks the laptop in his face. The screen shows the data mistakenly sent to Dacia: Frederick Van Gent, AKA Dr. Clayton Prince, escaped murderer.

"Okay, we're blown," admits Harry.

Harry and Chardonnay come busting through the front door of the Targhee reception area with handguns at the ready. The room is empty. Harry moves quickly, scanning the side rooms. Nothing. Chard moves into the adjacent cafe-restaurant, scanning the cafe. She follows a banging sound to the walk-in refrigerator. Opening the door, she finds a cold and very sheepish-looking Det. Carter, along with two deputies, one of them freezing in his underwear, as well as Barney Kendrick, Mr. Ming, Mr. Mao and Mrs. Dacia Lee. "Oh, thank God you're here! That horrible man! I can't believe he did this to me!," cries Dacia.

Harry, without Chard, bursts out of the building’s front door, running to his van, simultaneously keying his communications device, "David, that deputy you saw -- "

Interrupting, David reports. "Took one look at us then turned around. Probably a good couple miles ahead of you by now."

Harry jumps into his van, fires up the engine, and roars away from the administration building heading for the helipad area. As Harry's van roars into sight of the helipad, David and Brigitte get out of their SUV and wait. Harry pulls his van up to the helicopter, jumps out of the van and climbs into the pilot's seat. He does an accelerated pre-flight regimen: Finding the keys in the pilot's log book, Harry checks the switches and warning lights and fires up the engine.

Chardonnay arrives in the clearing on a serious-looking Harley-Davidson motorcycle, wearing her Glock-19 on her hip. She pulls up next to the SUV just in time to watch Harry lift off.

"Where'd you get the bike?" asks Brigitte.

"Barney, the resort manager. He wasn't using it."

"They went that-a-way," says David indicating the exit road.

"Thanks, Cowboy," states Chard, who takes off in a cloud of dust.

"I love it. This is so....Americaine, non?" comments Brigitte.

Flying the helicopter over the Grand Teton Range, Harry is searching the highway below, seeing many multi-colored cars roll down the mountain highway, until a white van comes into view.

Harry swings the chopper low, nearly grazing treetops, trying to get a clear view of the white van as it races along the edge of the mountain. Along the sheer side of the mountain, Harry flies at eye level next to the roadway that clings to the mountainside. Finally getting a break in the tree line, he gets a clear look at the van: it's a young couple with two kids in the back. Harry pulls the chopper up just in time to avoid hitting the mountain.

Chard is speeding along the mountain road on the Harley, whipping past several cars, looking for the wayward vendor van.

Two black & white sheriff's units come blasting out of the resort, moving down the mountain with flashing lights and sirens.

Flying along in the chopper, from high above the road, Harry spots a likely van, moving quickly on the highway. Inside the Floral van, Van Gent, wearing his deputy disguise, drives intently, honking at a vacationer's SUV in front of him. Finally, desperate to pass, Van Gent pulls onto the oncoming lane and passes despite the oncoming traffic. He straddles the line, just missing a head-on collision.

Harry is still watching a likely van moving erratically, making dangerous passes. He descends low enough to spot the side of the van: It's a meat delivery truck. Wrong again so he takes the chopper back up high and regroups.

On the mountain road, Chard continues pressing onward, wending her way through vacationers' traffic.

Inside his van, Van Gent keeps checking his rearview mirrors as he drives aggressively.

Searching the road below, Harry spots another van moving erratically, making dangerous passes. He descends low enough to spot the side of the van and the sign which reads: Gordon's Fine Florals. That's Van Gent.

On the road, Van Gent looks to his right and sees Harry flying mere feet off the ground, alongside the van. The killer has made eye-contact with his nemesis. Harry glares back at him. With the passenger-side window down, Van Gent points a shotgun at the chopper and fires. Realizing buckshot has blasted a hole in the door of the chopper Harry pulls up to evade further attacks.

Now that he has marked the proper van, Harry flies above it with a clear view of the roadway ahead.

Van Gent continues to speed along. Harry, still flying directly above him, sees the roadway has taken Van Gent to a tunnel. Soon the van disappears from Harry's view into the Tunnel. Harry takes the chopper higher and flies around to where the tunnel ends, and there he hovers. Inside the tunnel, Van Gent drives to a spot just before the exit end where screeching the van to a halt, lets it slide sideways so that it blocks nearly the entire tunnel. Exiting the van, Van Gent waves his arms and flashes the Sheriff's badge of his disguise, stops the traffic behind him.

Hovering above the road, Harry waits but no white van appears, only a silver BMW SUV, causing him to wonder.

Chardonnay, on the Harley, enters the now jammed tunnel and upon reaching the end, finds the Floral van blocking most of the exit and a young man and woman with three children standing around looking stunned and bewildered. Chard approaches them.

Inside the chopper, Harry's cell phone rings. He answers to a spotty connection, "Chard?"

"Harry!" says Chard on her cell as, behind her, the family whose car was taken sits by the roadway, looking dejected. “Van Gent switched cars on us. You're now looking for a silver BMW SUV. He left about a minute ago." While the phone connection is starting to deteriorate, Chard says, "He also took some clothes from these people." At this point, the phone connection becomes nothing but static.

Harry takes the chopper higher and continues scanning the roadway below. And then, bingo, there it is: a silver BMW SUV, which begins following. Van Gent is driving expertly, fast as the BMW will carry him on the winding road. The BMW whips around curves, accelerates in the straightaway and does power slides into the curves. Van Gent checks the skies around him, nothing. The rearview mirror shows no one behind.

Then, as Van Gent comes around a blind curve, he suddenly has to brake desperately. Harry has put the helicopter down on the ground in a wide space in the road, nearly blocking the entire roadway. Soon as Van Gent brings the BMW to a halt, out of the driver's window, he opens up with his pump action 12 gauge shotgun. Van Gent pumps six 12-gauge shells into the helicopter, destroying the chopper's canopy and causing the cockpit interior to catch on fire. Van Gent rolls the BMW forward to get a better look but the cockpit is empty.

Having escaped from the chopper, Harry is now protected by a boulder on the side of the road. He fires back with his Sig Sauer 9mm, blowing out the SUV's windshield and tires and causing Van Gent to duck and roll under the dashboard. This defensive maneuver costs Van Gent the control of the SUV, which, stuck in drive gear on flattened tires, now rolls off the roadway.

Tumbling over and over sown the ravine, the BMW finally comes to rest on its side, at the bottom.

Harry scrambles down the hillside, into the ravine, after the fallen SUV. At the bottom, Harry finds the broken and battered SUV mostly intact, but empty -- no trace of Van Gent. Then Harry notices some drops of blood and follows the trail of broken branches and blood. Van Gent, slightly wounded and breathing hard, is making a run for it, going deeper into the woods. Continuing along the trail, Harry slides down a hill. There is no trace of Van Gent so Harry can only watch and listen, following his Marine-Corps-trained instincts.

Up on the Teton Mountain Road, at the blind curve, Chard is sitting on the Harley, having arrived at the site of the roadway wreckage. She is on her iPhone, "Yeah, it's like they slid off the road down into the Mill Creek Ravine."

Yeah, it was me, Jonathan on the other end of Chard’s call. I was in the conference room at Universal Imports sitting before a bank of computers looking at a screen showing a map of the Grand Tetons. "If they make it to the creek, there is a campground about two clicks downstream."

"So should I look for them at the camp?"

"That would be my guess,” I said.

"You're guess is good enough for me," confirms Chard.

**Chapter Nine**

At Mill Creek Camp, Van Gent emerges from the woods into a good-sized clearing -- a low-key camping area for backpackers. Several pup tents are scattered amid the trees. Van Gent keeps moving cautiously as he adjusts the hastily made tourniquet on his calf. Aware that he is leaving a trail of blood droplets, Van Gent comes upon three canoes positioned for launch along the creek shore. Van Gent boards a canoe and shoves off, leaving his blood on the ground.

Mill Creek is misnamed; it's actually a small river. Using the double paddle oar, with shotgun and plenty of shells tucked away in his clothing, Van Gent makes his way downstream.

Harry arrives at the Mill Creek clearing and studies the ground, looking for the telltale blood droplets. Finally, at the canoe launch, Harry spots what he's looking for. Without hesitation, he boards one of the other canoes and begins paddling downstream. Paddling fast as he can, Harry nevertheless keeps a cautious eye on the shoreline.

Spotting a good landing area, Van Gent lands the canoe ashore and carefully hides it from view. Shotgun in hand, together with his handgun, Van Gent starts climbing up the boulder-strewn shoreline of the creek positioning himself atop a boulder. He looks down on the creek below.

In the distance, Harry Fletcher is paddling into view. Still wearing the sheriff deputy's uniform with the unused handgun in his hand, Van Gent jams a fresh clip into the semiautomatic and draws a bead on the approaching canoe.

Without her motorcycle, Chardonnay is running as fast as she can alongside the small river, on a trail too rugged for the motorcycle. Glancing towards the river, Chard notes with satisfaction that she is not far behind Harry's canoe.

As Harry rows within range, Van Gent opens fire. High-powered .45 caliber bullets slam into, and penetrate the canoe, barely missing Harry. Figuring it's time to jump ship, Harry abandons the canoe and swimming under water, heads for the shore.

Van Gent slams a fresh clip into the semiautomatic prepares to again open up on the vulnerable Harry as he exits the water.

Sixty-five to seventy yards in the distance, Chard spots Van Gent on the rock ready to fire more lead in Harry’s direction. She stops running and, pulling her Glock-19 from her hip takes aim at the murderer of her Cape Town lover and friend's wife. At first, Chard's weapon is pointed directly at Van Gent. Then to allow for the gravitational effect on the bullet at that distance, the aim is changed to approximately ten fingers above the target’s head.

Near the sandy beach, never more vulnerable, Harry stands up in the water and slowly walks to shore. With a bead on Harry, Van Gent is about to open fire when, suddenly, a mostly spent bullet rips into his shoulder -- followed by the sound of the loud report; a remarkable shot for a handgun, given the distance. Without having fired, Van Gent's handgun falls from his paralyzed arm. The arm, with the mostly spent bullet still in it, is bleeding noticeably.

Instinctively, Harry jerks his head towards the sound of the report. But there is no sign of Van Gent. Upstream, from Van Gent's boulder, standing on a large rock of her own, Chardonnay tosses a salute to Harry. They share an intense, acknowledging look, then Harry scrambles up the rocks from whence Van Gent fired, but the South African has faded into the trees, leaving only a few drops of telltale red blood behind.

Watching from her perch, with a look of satisfaction, Chard pretends to blow smoke from the barrel of her gun – then, holstering her weapon with a smug observation, which she voices, "Not a bad shot, if I say so myself."

Working his way downstream on the trail, well-worn by deer, bear, cougar and occasional hunter, Harry follows the blood drops. Several ponderous moments pass as Harry moves through the trees. Just when he seems to have lost the trail, another droplet appears on the ground.

Harry moves on until he finds himself at the base of a huge tree, where a pool of red has gathered. The woods have suddenly gone quiet. Even the birds are still. All Harry can hear is his own heartbeat. Something is very wrong. At the moment he flashes on the realization that he has been lured, he looks up, just in time to see Van Gent perched in the tree directly over him, firing his shotgun. Harry steps aside in time to sustain only a flesh wound in the shoulder, but Van Gent falls on him from the tree, wielding a military type knife.

Harry pulls his own knife from its sheath and, in a move trained into him by years in Special Forces, slips the attack in classic martial–arts fashion. He pivots to slam Van Gent into the trunk of the great evergreen and by the same stroke, with all his weight, plunges his Templar Dagger through Van Gent's trachea until it sticks deep into the tree.

Van Gent's face looks more surprised than terrified, as he find himself impaled through the neck and nailed to the tree, by the very dagger he had used to kill Fletcher’s wife. Harry, spent, bloodied and exhausted, catches his breath. He pants as he stares at Van Gent's popped eyes and grotesquely hung up carcass, scarcely believing he is really dead.

To the sound of rustling leaves, Harry turns to find Chardonnay, tears in her eyes, rushing to hug him, "Thank God! Thank God! Thank God!," she keeps repeating. Harry melts into her weeping embrace, responding in kind as she puts her head on his shoulder and with closed eyes, holds him tight for several long moments. Finally, they take a half step back and look at each other, as if with new eyes. Seeming to like what they see, they turn and walk away together, down toward the clearing of the flat campground, the mountain peaks above them. Harry is leaning on Chard all the way.

As they enter the camp, Chard supporting Harry's weight, four campers emerge from their tents. Seeing Harry is seriously injured due to being hit by buckshot in the shoulder, and his thigh bloodied as well, the campers fashion a stretcher from a cot and carry him to the parking lot.

Harry and Chardonnay are met by a sheriff's SUV, out of which emerge two deputies as well as David and Brigitte who immediately go to hug Chardonnay and clasp Harry's hand as he lies on the improvised stretcher.

Everyone looks up to see the medevac helicopter touchdown nearby. Two paramedics step out, clutching a gurney. The paramedics load Harry onto the gurney. Harry reaches out and grabs onto Chardonnay's arm, requesting, "Stay with me." Chard's eyes well up again. as she tells him, "A regiment of Dutch Marines couldn't keep me away." At this, Harry smiles broadly.

The paramedics load Harry's gurney and Chard steps aboard with it. Brigitte nudges David, indicating Harry and Chard and gives her husband a knowing look. David, still somewhat bemused, nods. The medevac chopper lifts off as the campers wave.

Inside the Jackson Police Department, Dacia Lee is speaking with Det. Carter, "I first reached out to that man about three, four months ago, when I began to have emotional problems and I felt I needed a psychotherapist.."

"So you had never met him before."

"No. Absolutely not."

"So you had no way of knowing that this man who called himself Dr. Clayton Prince was actually Frederick Van gent, a diamond thief and murderer, having escaped from a South Africa prison?

"That's right. As you say, no way of knowing."

In the adjacent observation room, Dacia's interview is being monitored. Listening in are Janet, Duke, David, Brigitte, Harry (his arm in a sling), and Chardonnay.

As the Dacia interview continues, Harry opines, "Does anybody here have the stomach to sit through this?" The Merry Band looks around and realizes the answer is no. Continuing, "I mean this is where Detective Carter tells her that we know she's Van Gent's wife, married in South Africa years ago."

"Then she'll probably ask for a lawyer," comments David.

"She'll need one when she finds out that getting cleared of murder in a coroners' inquest doesn't protect her from double jeopardy," states Janet.

"I know a picturesque setting where they serve obscenely expensive, premium wines," reports Chard.

"That include champagne?" asks Brigitte.

Chard smiles.

"I'll drink to that," adds Harry.

Somberly nodding agreement, everyone rises and files out the door, Harry and Chardonnay bringing up the rear. On the way out, in the hallway, Harry's hand manages to touch Chardonnay's as they walk. Slowly their fingers entwine.

"By the way, just where is this picturesque brasserie?" asks Harry.

"Why, it's docked at the San Francisco Marina, where else?"

Judging by the smiles and happy faces, Chard's suggestion has the unanimous approval of all present.

As the Merry Band exits the Resort’s administration building, Chard and Harry are still holding hands.

**THE IRANIAN CAPER CROSS-UP**

**PART EIGHT**

**Chapter One**

**Jonathan here. Surely, by this time you know where I am and with whom**. That’s right, I’m aboard Sweet Charity with my friend, CIA Special Agent Raoul Donavan. As usual, Jason Burrell is serving finger food and pouring Dom Perignon champagne.

This next story I’m about to disclose – you should remember well since you were an integral part of the caper; although even you do not know the full story.”

“Well then, enlighten me.”

“Very well, as you may recall several years ago, you contacted both Harry and me, asking us to make another trip to Tehran. When asked if you meant the CIA wanted us to make another trip, you answered, 'Not exactly....The CIA is aware I'm making you this offer but they're not the agency behind the request.'"

"And just who is making the request?" I asked.

"That's classified," stated Donavan.

"Tell us and you'd have to kill us sort of thing?" I inquired, smiling.

"Something like that," replied Donavan, not smiling.

"We'd have to be crazy to return to Iran. We'd be arrested on the spot and promptly shot. We were lucky to get out alive during our last visit," I insisted.

"And a highly successful visit it was," confirmed Donavan.

"So tell us why we would ever agree to go back?" I asked.

"Your outlandish fee, of course, most of which you always donate to your favorite charities," Donavan explained.

"And how much are we talking about?" I asked.

"I was to offer you $10 million plus expenses if successful and $5 million and expenses, if not."

"And?"

"And settle for $20 million and expenses if successful and $10 million and expenses, if not."

"$20 million sounds reasonable...so, without making a commitment, what is it you want us to do?" I inquired.

"Photograph the blueprints and all other data for Iran's nuclear program, including the exact locations and other statistics on their underground facilities."

With a stunned look I said, “Is that all?” I tried to make it sound like a walk in the park. I doubt I succeeded.

At LAX Harry and I approached the Delta Airlines counter where we were greeted by an attractive Delta employee.

"I'm Jonathan Moore. You're supposed to have tickets to Toronto for Harry Fletcher and me."

The Delta employee, checking her computer, smiled and turned to me, "Yes, Mr. Moore; two first class tickets for Toronto."

In the first class section of the Delta 737 aircraft, seated together in the two front row seats on the left-hand side of the plane, and keeping our voices low, Fletcher and I were going over the plan.

"You get hold of Duke?

"Hopefully, he'll meet us in Toronto," I replied.

"Hopefully?"

"His wife, Janet, was giving him some flack about going on another caper."

Inside Duke's Bar & Grill in Jacksonville, Florida, seated at a table having lunch, Janet Fisher Osgard and Louis "Duke" Osgard are having a bit of a dust-up.

"Duke, I'm telling you. If you go on this caper, don't expect me to be here when you get back...*if* you get back."

In the first class cabin, Harry and I were exchanging thoughts on the prospective mission, when I commented, "As for money, Donavan has no idea of the expenses we can rack up -- 5-star hotels, gourmet meals and Dom Perignon champagne. I'd like to see his expression when he gets the bill."

"Leaving more money for our charities,” Fletcher replied, chuckling.

In Toronto, inside one of the Canadian city's newest 5-star hotels, Harry and I were gathered in my luxury suite that will double as a meeting place. The suite includes a wet bar, refrigerator, and microwave. I was mixing drinks at the bar when there was a knock at the door. Fletcher, checking his watch, remarks, "Too early for Raoul. Must be Duke."

Harry opens the door, to greet Duke, announcing, "Osgard! ... Right on time. Come in!"

"I see you worked things out with Janet," I commented, from behind the bar.

"Well, sort of," says Duke sheepishly, as he enters the suite and shakes hands with Fletcher.

Cocktails in hand, I moved from behind the bar to shake hands with Duke and hand him the drink, "Gentleman Jack, of course. Still your favorite cocktail?"

Accepting the drink and taking a sip, Duke replied, "Absolutely...especially when it's served neat. So what's this about raiding a highly secure military building in Tehran to photograph military secrets?"

"Our old friend Raoul Donavan will be here soon to explain it all," I said.

"That old computer geek should know that it's much easier to hack such documents than to physically photograph them."

"Except that these documents are not on any computer system," I pointed out. "Iran military realizes that if they were to put this sensitive material on a computer that the material would be hacked in a heartbeat," I further explained.

"Good headwork," replies Duke, nodding agreement.

Suddenly there is another knock at the door. Harry, checking his watch again, reports, "That has to be Donavan," as he moves towards the door.

Fletcher opens the door and welcomes Raoul Donavan into the suite. Carrying a small bag and his computer, Donavan enters. Taking a look around the suite, he nods his head in approval. “On the expense account, I presume.”

"Say hello to Duke Osgard....who needs to be brought up to speed,." I told Donavan.

"But, of course," replied Donavan. Turning to Duke, "What is it you would like to know?"

"To start with, what the hell are we doing in Canada?"

"As of now, you're citizens of Canada." Reaching into his corduroy jacket's inner pocket, Donavan pulls out three passports, passing them out. To Duke, he says, "You are now Peter M. Mitchell, Canadian citizen. And Jonathan, your battle tag is Sydney J. Porter."

Glancing at the passport photo, Duke asks, "Where did you get the photo?"

"From your Jacksonville liquor license."

Turning to Harry, Donavan pronounces, "I know you prefer the nom de guerre Robin Templar, but on this mission your battle tag is Donald E. Parker."

Accepting the passport, Fletcher comments, "As in Westlake. I get it!"

"Knew you would."

"Raoul, you've got a perverse sense of humor," says Harry.

"Thanks to cooperation with the Canadian government, long as you're on this mission, your fingerprints will reflect your battle tags as Canadian citizens. Travel restrictions within Iran are strict for Americans and Canadians, but less so for Canadians," explains Donavan.

There's a fourth passport, which he returns to the jacket pocket. Then he pulls out a map and unfolds it on a nearby table, advising, "Gather around, this is the game plan."

Just then, there is another knock at the door.

"That would be Sirjan Sanjabi," says Donavan.

"Sirjan?...The Iranian gentleman who helped us free that journalist being held in Evin Prison?" questions Fletcher. .

"The same. Why don't you let him in, Parker?"

Startled, Harry says, "Parker....that's me," as he turns and heads for the door.

Opening the door, Harry is greeted by Sirjan Sanjabi, "Hello, Harry. Good to see you again," as the two shake hands warmly.

"Come in. Good to have you aboard. ...You are aboard, aren't you?"

"Why don't we see what Mr. Donavan has to say," states Sirjan, as he enters the suite and shakes hands with everyone. They are all glad to see him.

Raoul pulls out the fourth passport from his jacket and hands it to Sirjan who, in exchange, pulls out his own passport and hands it over.

Checking the passport, Sirjan affirms, "Ervin Shirazi. Good Persian name."

"Sirjan will join you....mainly to keep you out of trouble," asserts Donavan, as he reaches into his carryon bag and pulls out four money belts. "As you know, Iran is basically a cash society. Each of the belts contains EU currency and rials worth $50,000 U.S."

The four accept the money belts.

"Now gather around. We've got a lot to go over, including your plan "B" escape plan should something go wrong with the original," states Donavan.

Everyone gathers around the table containing the map.

**Chapter Two**

Our four team members are flying on a Swiss Air Boeing 757 headed to Moscow, having joined a 12-member Canadian group touring Russia. After landing in Moscow, we were put on a tour bus headed west towards St. Petersburg. Seated together near the rear are Duke and Fletcher. Sirjan and I are seated across the aisle.

"I don't understand. Why the pretense of touring St. Petersburg? Why not wait in Moscow until the tour returns and then catch the flight to Nairobi, which I understand stops at Tehran and Al Aqabah," asks Duke.

"We're supposed to get the usual tourist photos with our iPhones and these two high-tech digital cameras Donavan gave us," replies Fletcher.

"I see.....So when you get your sprained back and we have to layover in Tehran for three days, we can prove we're really tourists."

"That's if things get dicey."

"Don't things always get dicey?"

"Once your sprained back is healed by a doctor who is also a Mossad informant, we get on the next flight to Nairobi, supposedly to rejoin the tour. But the flight has a stopover at Al Aqabah, Jordan -- where we get off and make our way to Eilat, Israel," comments Duke.

"And from there we fly to Natbaq...Ben Gurion Airport to you, where we're met by IDF Intelligence," answers Fletcher.

Having reached St. Petersburg, Sirjan and Duke are snapping pictures with their iPhones while Fletcher and I are using the high-tech digital cameras provided us by Donavan. Touring the city, the four of us are prominently posed at each of the city's tourist attractions.

Finally, the Airbus, carrying the marking of Air France Airlines, is headed towards Tehran. Inside the first class cabin, Sirjan and Harry are seated on the left side of the cabin while Duke and I are seated on the right.

"You sure the Tehran airport doesn't have facial recognition?" asks Duke.

"Not according to Donavan."

"Hope he's right."

At this point, Harry excuses himself and rises to his feet, explaining, "Restroom break," as he heads for the two forward first class restrooms.

I noticed Harry making his way towards the restrooms and nudged Duke who immediately comprehends what's going down, and comments, "Looks like Operation Reveal is under way."

"Now it's up to us to play our part," I confirmed.

Fletcher exits one of the forward restrooms, takes a few steps and falls into the arms of the flight attendant exiting the galley.

"What is it? How can I help?" asks the flight attendant.

"Slipped disc. Need medical attention," murmurs Harry.

"We'll be landing in Tehran soon. You can get treatment there."

The Air France aircraft settles onto the runway at Khomeini International Airport in Tehran and rolls out. Fletcher, on a stretcher, is being rolled into the terminal, accompanied by me, Duke and Sirjan. They are immediately confronted by an immigration official who checks the Canadian passports. Then, speaking in English inquires:

"What have we here?"

"We're part of a tour group headed for Nairobi. Our friend has slipped disc and needs immediate medical attention," states Duke.

Returning the passports, "You'll have to go through immigration line 'A.'"

As Fletcher's stretcher is wheeled up to immigration line "A," the flight attendant explains to the official, "This is Mr. Parker. He's suffered a slipped disc and unable to continue his tour flight to Nairobi. He needs medical care." Indicating the team, "These gentlemen are his friends and are willing to leave the tour in order to care for him."

"We will all rejoin the tour soon as our friend is better," reassures Duke.

"If you'll excuse me, I have to rejoin my flight," says the flight attendant as she turns and walks away.

"I'll need your passports. Also your cell phones and cameras," demands the official.

The team hands everything over, as requested.

"You'll wait in room 'A' until called for."

"But our friend needs medical attention," insists Duke.

"If allowed to stay over, he will receive treatment," pronounces the official.

Suddenly a passenger in line from an incoming flight speaks out, "I'm a doctor with an established practice here in Tehran, perhaps I can be of service," as he steps forward and presents his credentials, giving his name as Dr. Dana Rahbar.

The official examines the credentials and acquiesces, "Alright, Dr. Rahbar. You may examine the passenger."

Dr. Rahbar moves to the stretcher bound patient and begins a cursory exam. He asks Fletcher to roll onto his side, and then he starts poking sensitive areas on Harry's back. When he pokes the lumbar 5 vertebrae, on cue Harry lets out a cry. The cursory exam complete, the Doctor turns back to the official, pronouncing, "It's the L-5 vertebrae....slipped disc. This man needs hospitalization."

"Very well," replies the official acquiescing.

Interjecting, Dr. Rahbar suggests, "On the other hand, if the injured passenger were to check into a nearby hotel, I could treat him there and have him on his way in two or three days."

"Excellent idea, Doctor. I suggest he check into the Novotel Tehran Imam Khomeini International Airport Hotel, only blocks from here," says the official.

"Good choice. But won't he need his passport?" asks Dr. Rahbar.

"I'll call the hotel. However, if your stay exceeds three days, you'll need a visa, which you can get here at the airport."

Interrupting, I insisted, "he'll need 24 hour care. Getting food, going to the bathroom."

"We're his friends from the tour and are willing to take care of him and make sure he is able to be with us when we rejoin the tour in two or three days," adds Duke.

The Novotel Tehran Imam Khomeini International Hotel has the look of a 5-star hotel. Inside the Fletcher suite, shoes are removed as Harry is rolled in on the stretcher by the team while Dr. Rahbar looks on. Once safely in the room, with the door locked, Harry gets to his feet, puts his forefinger to his lips, making a "T," points to Sirjan, and then quietly shakes hands with Dr. Rahbar. Everyone keeps their voices low as Sirjan sweeps the room with a "bug" finding device.

"Nice work, Doctor," commends Harry.

"Normally you would have a tour guide or someone assigned to escort you wherever you go, just as Sirjan was assigned during your last visit. But it looks like you're free to come and go as you please."

"We're clear. No bugs," announces Sirjan in a normal voice. Continuing, "They could still assign someone to keep an eye on us, without our knowledge."

"True, but I doubt it," assures Dr. Rahbar.

"We'll need our cameras and iPhones. When will they be returned?" asks Jonathan.

"Right now they're going through all your photos and when they're convinced you are truly tourists, everything will be returned. I would say first thing in the morning. Now, if you'll excuse me, that's when you will next see me," reports Dr. Rahbar, as he exits the suite.

After the doctor's departure, the team members exchange looks. But it was I who put their thoughts into words, "I wonder just how far we should go in trusting him?... After all, he's only a Mossad informant, not an agent."

"Speaking of agents, aren't we supposed to meet our Mossad contact, a real Mossad agent?" asks Harry.

"But, as Raoul pointed out, one with hardly any training. Rushed into service and given an assignment at age 16, I caution against relying upon her too much. In any event, contact is scheduled for 1:00 am. In the meantime, I suggest we all return to our own rooms and get some rest. We'll meet here in Fletcher's suite at 12:30 am. Agreed? asks Sirjan.

"Agreed," they all respond.

In the Immigration Office at Khomeini Airport, LT Aghdam looks on as the two immigration officers display the digital photos recorded on the iPhones and two high-tech cameras belonging to Fletcher, Osgard, Sirjan, and me. On the large HD flat screen are the photos taken at the Toronto Airport, Moscow, and St. Petersburg by team members, many photos featuring themselves.

"It would seem that they be tourists, alright.," states LT Aghdam. After looking at several other photos, he comments further, "I cannot help thinking that they look vaguely familiar. Might as well go ahead and return their passports, iPhones and cameras. Meanwhile, I'm going to keep an eye on them."

Inside the Tehran Novotel Hotel, the three of us are gathered in Harry's suite attempting to convince Harry that he should stay put and not join the others in their rendezvous with Debra Mordecai; cover name: Farah Jaberi.

"I've made arrangements to meet the undercover Mossad agent at the train station, in downtown Tehran at 1:00 am," reports Sirjan.

Checking his watch, Fletcher announces, "It's almost 12:45... we better get started."

"You're not going anywhere!" I insisted.

"What do you mean I'm not going anywhere?! Of course I am!!" states Harry, taken aback.

"No, you're not. If we're caught wandering around Tehran in the middle of the night, we might be able to come up with an excuse," retorts Sirjan.

"You could not,” adds Duke.

Thinking it over, Harry finally nods, "You're right, it would be stupid."

At the Tehran Railroad Station, Duke, Sirjan and I are walking through the main terminal, when Sirjan nods towards an attractive woman sitting on a bench, just ahead, keeping his voice low, "That's her, the one wearing the blue dress and black hijab."

As we approach, Sirjan shoots the young lady, Debra Mordechai, a nod and smile, but continues walking with Duke and I towards a more secluded portion of the terminal. The woman in the blue dress gets up and cautiously follows at a safe distance. Duke, Sirjan and I find a secluded bench and settle down, waiting for the woman in the blue dress to catch up. Finally, she does, sitting down on the bench beside Sirjan.

Making the introduction, Sirjan says, "This is Farah Jaberi. Better you not know her real name at this time. If you can get her in the building on the night in question, she will open the safe for you."

This early in the morning the lighted streets of Tehran are deserted. Anyone wandering around is likely to cause curiosity. Duke, Sirjan and I exit the rail station and, sans luggage, surreptitiously climb into a taxi. Through the rear view mirror, the taxi driver eyes his passengers with suspicion.

"Khomeini Novotel," says Sirjan.

"No luggage?" asks the taxi driver in Farsi.

Responding in Farsi, Sirjan says "It was sent ahead to the hotel."

Apparently satisfied, the driver pulls out and heads down the deserted street.

Back inside Fletcher's suite in the Tehran Novotel Hotel, Duke, Sirjan and I are filling Harry in on our meeting with the lady in blue.

"I'll say this....she's a looker, even in that hijab -- she's a beauty," asserts Duke.

"Never mind that, what intel did she give you about the building's security?" questions Harry.

"Night entry requires a keycard in which only six people have access. But the cards are reprogrammed three times a week," I answered.

"If we're ever going to get in, we'll need to get our hands on one of those cards within the three day period," confirms Sirjan.

"If that isn't bad enough, you also need a right hand thumb print," adds Duke.

Harry is absorbing everything he's been told.

"You'll never guess who has one of the keycards.....None other than our old nemesis Colonel Moqiseh," I offered.

"You mean the very same charmer who, together with Major Montazeri, coordinated the Revolutionary Guard's efforts to track us down after we freed that journalist from Evin Prison?" questions Harry.

"The very same," I stated.

Harry, mulling that bit of information over in his mind, asks, "Our lady in blue happen to have a home address for the Colonel?"

"No. That information is closely guarded," I responded.

"Given some time, I might be able to find out," comments Sirjan.

"We don't have time. Get on it right away. And rent us some transportation." Then, to Duke and me "Meanwhile in the morning you two do a thorough recce of the building's exterior; times for the changing of the guards; location of the keycard receptacle, etc. You know the drill. Meanwhile, I'll need a wheelchair. And we need to set up a code for identifying who's knocking on my room door. Wouldn't do to answer while on my feet unless I know who's doing the knocking," explains Harry.

An isolated secure five story military building in Tehran is surrounded by heavily armed uniformed guards. On a side street near the military building, Duke and I, seemingly eating our lunch in an automobile, are actually casing the building, aided by our Nikon 16x50 Aculon binoculars.

Inside his suite in the Tehran Novotel Hotel, Harry is startled by an unfamiliar knock at the door. Seated in his wheelchair, shoes removed, Harry opens the door and is greeted by LT Aghdam, a pouch slung over his shoulder.

"You must be Donald Parker. I'm Lieutenant Aghdam....returning your cameras and iPhones."

"Please come in," greets Harry cheerfully.

The lieutenant accepts the invitation and removes his shoes. Once inside, he drops the pouch from his shoulder and pulls out one of the high-tech cameras, handing it over to Harry, confiding, "I only wish I could afford such a camera."

"I wasn't aware it was so special," comments Harry innocently.

"Good to see you at least up and about, be it in a wheel chair. ....Your back must be improving."

"It is, thanks to Dr. Rahbar. My friends and I should be able to rejoin our tour group in a day or two."

:"Speaking of your friends, do you know where they are?"

"I assume in their rooms, resting."

"But, of course. I'm pleased with your progress. By the way, have we ever met before?"

"Not unless it was in Canada and we happened to bump into each other inside a bar or on a train."

"You have never before been in Iran?"

"Heavens, no. In fact, this is my first trip outside North America."

"I see.... I only wished to return your property. I'll see myself out."

Harry's eyes never leave him as he makes his exit.

Inside the popular Restaurant Galaxy in the Tehran Novotel Hotel, their shoes removed, a wheelchair bound Fletcher, together with Duke, Sirjan and I are comparing notes while having dinner.

"I found the home of Colonel Moqiseh. There is only one armed guard and from what I was able to find out -- the Colonel is always home by 8:00 pm," reports Sirjan.

"Great work, Sirjan." To Duke and me he asks, "So what can you tell us about our military building?"

"There are six fully armed guards on duty at all times. Change of the guard occurs at 7:00 am, 1:00 pm, 7:00 pm, and 1:00 am," I reported.

"One guard is posted on three sides of the building and three guards cover the building's entrance," adds Duke.

"The keycard device is located to the right of the entrance. The keycard must be coordinated with the card holder's thumb scan," I continued.

"Biggest problem is the thumbprint," asserts Duke.

"Shouldn't be a problem," suggests Harry.

"NO." … With sudden realization, Duke declares, “You don't mean?!"

"I do mean. Just be thankful the device doesn't require an eye scan," affirms Harry.

It's sunrise and from the Minaret prayer tower, in Tehran, a loud, albeit sweet voice of the Muezzin announces Aran to the faithful: "Allaho Akbar, Allo Akbar....Ash-hadu at-la ilaha ill Allah -- Ash-hadu al-la ilaha ill Allah.

Inside Fletcher's suite in the Tehran Novotel Hotel, using the special knock code, one by one the team gathers together. The last to arrive is Dr. Rahbar.

Addressing the Doctor, I asked, "Did you bring the serum I requested?"

Dr. Rahbar, reaching into his black bag and coming up with a small bottle of serum and three hypodermic needles, announces "Right here!"

"Good. How long will it knock him out?" I asked.

"Eight CC's should put him out for at least 12 hours. And I wouldn't give him more than ten CC's. Stuff's pretty powerful. Bottle contains enough for three persons," explains Dr. Rahbar, as he hands me the bottle and syringes, which I put into my fanny pack. .

"Thanks," I said, as I watched the Doctor carefully and then ushered him to the door and bid him goodbye. "In case things go wrong, the less you know about the operation the better off you are."

Rahbar steps into the hallway and I closed the door. Waiting a few seconds, I then jerked the door open. But Dr. Rahbar is gone.

"Now, what do we know about this untrained Mossad agent and where do we pick her up?" Harry inquires.

"She speaks flawless Farsi. But then if you can speak Hebrew, you can speak almost anything. We're to pick her up at her apartment. ...I have the address," elaborates Sirjan.

Fletcher nods approval.

"Goes by the name of Farah Jaberi. According to Raoul, for security reasons, we're not to ask or know her real -- Jewish name," adds Duke.

Nodding approvingly, Fletcher states, "We've got to figure out a way to get our two digital cameras inside the building."

Sirjan pipes up, "Oh, that's easy. I'll purchase an official, military type briefcase and have it marked TOP SECRET. Then I'll get a pair of handcuffs and we'll cuff it to you left wrist. Were you in uniform, they wouldn't dare open it."

"Hope you're right," says Harry.

Chiming in, I suggested, "We could also stick a Glock, semi-automatic in there, as well."

"Can you get your hands on a handgun?" Harry asks Sirjan who answers, "I can try."

"Well, then, let's make sure we've got everything we need," urges Harry.

"What about some breakfast?" asks Duke.

"We'll do lunch -- after which we'll all get some rest. It's going to be a long night," pronounces Harry.

**Chapter Three**

The rental car is moving through the almost empty city streets of Tehran at night, with Sirjan driving, Fletcher in the passenger seat and Duke and I in the rear.

"How much further, Sirjan?" asks Harry.

"Three kilometers....about two miles."

"One question. What time was the guard change at the Colonel's home?" queries Harry.

"Midnight. ....Next change is 6:00 am," replies Sirjan.

"Does the exchange guard arrive in a military vehicle or his personal car?" I asked.

"Sometimes one....sometimes the other," offers Sirjan noncommittally.

"Sort of gives us a 50-50 chance," suggests Duke.

"I think we can handle it," affirms Harry.

Outside Colonel Moqiseh's Tehran house, the Colonel's guard, a high-ranking noncom, is in his tiny shack, located at the front of the darkened house wherein things appear quiet and normal. The Colonel's guard is reading a book when suddenly an arm surrounds his neck in a chokehold. Finally, the guard goes limp. Duke and I go to work tying and gagging the high ranking non-commissioned guard. We leave him lying helplessly on the floor of the shack with Sirjan guarding him. Fletcher grabs the guard's keys and then he, Duke and I approach the door of the Colonel's home.

Duke goes to work on the door's locks, trying one key after another until he finally finds the correct one and we have access.

"Having access to the premises is not going to do us any good unless we find and dismantle the alarm system.....and in record time," I stated.

"Then, let's do it," urges Harry.

While Harry stands guard, In the foyer of the Colonel's house, wearing fanny packs filled with much needed tools, Duke and I go to work on the alarm's keypad. We quickly pull the keypad from the wall and pulling a sophisticated device from my fanny pack, I attached two clips to the wires behind the keypad. Then we all waited for the alarm to sound; breathing a sigh of relief when it does not.

Working quietly in the lower level of the Colonel's house, we searched for and quickly located the surveillance system, dismantling it as well. Finally, we make our way upstairs, towards the Colonel's bedroom

Inside the Colonel's bedroom, from my fanny pack, I extracted the syringe and bottle of serum, carefully preparing the syringe for injection. At the same time, Fletcher is going through the Colonel's closets, looking for the right uniform. Finally, I was ready for the injection. I grabbed one of the Colonel's arms and the Colonel quickly awakens. But Duke is there to hold him down while the serum is injected.

The keycard is found on the nightstand, next to the bed. So far, so good! Then Harry pulls a wire cutter from his fanny pack and prepares to cut off the Colonel's right hand thumb. Only Duke cringes as the cut is made. From my fanny pack, I pulled out the bandages and medication to stop the bleeding and secure the wound.

As Duke, Harry and I exit Colonel Moqiseh's house, Harry is dressed in the Revolutionary Guard uniform of a full colonel. As they pass the guard shack they are joined by Sirjan, now wearing the guard's uniform. Inside the guard shack, the Colonel's guard is alive but tied up and secured to the extent that he is unable to move. His mouth is covered with duct tape and he is wearing only his underwear.

With Sirjan behind the wheel, the rental vehicle pulls up in front of a Tehran apartment complex. As he starts to get out of the vehicle, Duke calls out, "Wait a min-ute!! You go in there wearing that uniform and you'll frighten her to death. ....Better let

me go get her.   
 Hesitating, Sirjan sinks back into his seat, "You're right. ....Apartment 5A."

Inside the apartment complex, Duke knocks on the door of apartment 5A. In less than five seconds the door is opened by the beautiful and shoeless Mossad agent.

"Oh, it's you," exclaims Debra Mordecai. "I was expecting Sirjan."

"He thought it best I come and get you," says Duke.

"I'm glad," comments Debra smiling.

Farah Jaberi is riding in the backseat of the rental vehicle, between Jonathan and Duke. As they navigate the streets of Tehran Harry, in the front passenger seat, turns to face Farah, "Miss Jaberi. We need to know which side of the building the vault holding the information we're after is on."

"The north side."

Harry, turning back to Sirjan, tells him, "That will be your post."

Duke explains to Farah, "If things should go wrong, we may have to shoot out a window and toss out the cameras for Sirjan to retrieve."

The rental pulls up in front of the military building and parks in the area reserved for senior officers. The team exits the vehicle and approaches the ranking noncom in charge of the guard. Seeing the uniformed colonel approaching, the guard-in-charge jumps to attention and salutes; which salute Fletcher returns. Sirjan, in a uniform that outranks the guard-in-charge, does the talking.

In Farsi, Sirjan explains, "Colonel Sanjabi is from Military Headquarters and needs immediate access to the building."

"Does the colonel have an access card?" asks the guard also in Farsi.

"But, of course."

"Very well. But I will have to search you for cameras and firearms."

"By all means, do your job."

Sirjan turns to the "Colonel" and in Farsi announces: "Sir, with your permission, we will now be searched."

Although Harry has no idea of what Sirjan just said, he nods his approval.

The guard-in-charge then does a quick but professional pat down of me, Duke and Farah Jaberi, leaving the "Colonel" for last. As the guard-in-charge attempts to take the briefcase from the "Colonel," he notices that it is handcuffed to the "Colonel's" left wrist. Then, seeing the TOP SECRET printed in Farsi across the flap and, as predicted, he backs off, telling the group, "You're free to proceed."

Sirjan heads for the main door -- motioning for the team to follow. With the team crowding around the keycard device, Harry pulls the keycard from his wallet and inserts it in the device. Then Jonathan pulls the saran wrapped thumb from his mouth, unwraps it, and carefully places it on the thumbprint identifier, located on the device. The red light on the device turns green and all but Sirjan enter the building.

Sirjan remains outside, as if making an inspection of the troops. Dressed in his uniform, he wanders towards the north end of the building and is seen chatting with the soldier-on-duty positioned there.

On the first floor of the building, with Farah Jaberi looking on, the team goes to work. They quickly track down the control unit for the security system. In the tiny room maintaining the security system, Duke and I proceed to dismantle the various units.

With a smile on my face, I aproached Harry and announced, "Alarm system is dismantled." Then, turning to Farah, I direct her, "Lead us to the vault."

The door of the vault room opens and Harry, Duke, Farah and I enter. Wasting no time, Farah moves to the vault, lets the fingerprint device recognize her thumbprint and then begins dialing the combination lock.

I pulled a handcuff key from my fanny pack and unlocked the cuffs, freeing the briefcase from Harry's wrist. Harry opens the case and extracts the two high-tech digital cameras, handing one to Duke.

Finally, Farah gets the vault door open and begins hauling out boxes of blue-prints, diagrams, and other paperwork. The clock on the wall shows the time to be 1:45 am. With me positioning the paperwork for Harry and Duke to photograph, everyone goes to work.

The clock in the vault room shows the time to be: 2:30 am. Farah is busy returning the boxes to the walk-in vault. As she replaces the boxes from memory, she has occasion to look the scene over, think about it, and then make slight adjustments.

As I placed the material in camera range, both Harry and Duke continued digitally recording the material from inside the vault. Soon, the clock shows the time to be: 3:15 am.

Finally there are no other documents for me to place in front of the cameras. The clock now shows the time to be: 4:00 am. Duke hands his camera over to Harry who puts it -- together with his own -- back into the briefcase marked TOP SECRET. I then pulled out the handcuffs and snapped them on both the briefcase and Harry's left wrist.

As Harry, Duke, Farah and I reach the ground floor, the team splits -- each doing their job. Duke and I reassembled the security system in the alarm system control room. Farah and Harry make sure the keypad for the alarm system appeared normal when they are joined by Duke and me.

"Time to get out of Dodge!" urges Duke.

"Agreed!" confirms Harry.

Outside the secure military building, patiently watching the soldier-on-duty guarding the north side of the building, and chain smoking Turkish cigarettes, Sirjan checks his watch and then moves towards the entrance of the highly secure building. Team members exit the building only to be greeted by the guard-in-charge and Sirjan; both of whom stand at attention and salute the "Colonel."

"Sir, if you'll follow me," directs Sirjan to Harry in Farsi.

Harry has no idea what Sirjan has said but as the Iranian turns and walks off in the direction of the parking lot, the team members follow. In the parking lot, I removed the handcuffs.

The rental vehicle pulls up in front of the apartment complex. Sirjan, in his uniform, is behind the wheel, with Harry in the passenger seat, holding the briefcase with its valuable contents.

Harry turns to Farah Jaberi, seated between Duke and me in the rear, telling her, "Farah, your mission in Tehran is officially over. When this caper blows up, you're likely to be a prime suspect; I strongly suggest you join us on our flight to Nairobi. Pack what you need and destroy the rest. Then meet us at the Novotel in one hour."

Farah climbs out of the automobile and heads for the entrance to her apartment as the rental drives off. She enters her apartment and begins packing a small suitcase. Glancing at the clock on the wall, she notes the time to be 6:00 am.

It’s dawn when the rental car pulls up and brazenly parks near the front of Colonel Moqiseh’s Tehran House. Duke and the uniformed Sirjan and Harry climb out and head for the guard shack. Inside the guard shack, still tied up, duct tape covering his mouth, the Colonel's guard still lies on the floor dressed only in his underwear. While Sirjan stays in the shack, Harry and Duke pick up the Colonel's guard and carry him out of the shack. Harry and Duke carry the guard to the main house which they enter. Once inside, they dump the tied up and secured Colonel's guard, as Harry rids himself of his high ranking uniform.

Duke and Harry, the latter now dressed in his normal attire, exit the Colonel's house and head for the rental. A vehicle pulls up and parks a short distance from the guard shack, and a uniformed sergeant, armed with an automatic rifle, climbs out and approaches the guard shack. There is a brief change of guard ceremony as the new arrival officially replaces Sirjan. Sirjan then heads towards the rental automobile.

Inside his suite in the Tehran Novotel Hotel, Harry reaches into the briefcase previously handcuffed to his wrist and extracts the two high-tech digital cameras. He then removes the thumb drives and hands them to Duke and me. "I believe the two of you know what to do with these thumb drives."

Wincing before reluctantly nodding his understanding, Duke says, "Just hope I don't come down with a case of diarrhea."

Then, handing his firearm to Sirjan, Harry tells him, "We no longer need this....get rid of it."

Suddenly, there is a knock at the door. Everyone exchanges looks as the knock does not conform to the code previously established.

"Go ahead and open it. It's probably Farah," says Harry.

Brightened by the thought, Duke goes to the door and opens it.

"Duke....how good to see you," says the charming Debra in greeting. Carrying her small suitcase, she automatically removes her shoes and enters the suite planting a kiss on Duke's cheek.

Only I frowned at the sight of the kiss. I had a bad feeling.

At his Tehran house, Colonel Moqiseh is slowly becoming awake. Finally he sits up in bed, shaking off what might otherwise be considered a bad hangover. It's then that he notices the missing thumb from his right hand, which is expertly bandaged. From his expression, it's obvious the memory is coming back. He glances at his nightstand where his cell phone is usually kept and notices it's missing. He jumps to his feet and pulls on his trousers. Checking his wallet he is not surprised to find his keycard missing. He dashes downstairs, opens the front door and shouts, "Guard!!"

A short time later, Major Montazeri has arrived, having been called by the Colonel. The Major has joined Colonel Moqiseh in his bedroom, who is preparing to play back a video on the bedroom's large HD TV screen, commenting, "The intruders managed to make the regular security footage useless but were not aware of my bedroom camera that automatically begins recording whenever more than one person is detected on or about my bed."

"Mostly female, I presume," says Major Montazeri.

The image on screen is of an attractive woman standing next to the bed -- undressing before the Colonel, who appears to be naked beneath the sheet.

"See for yourself," states COL Moqiseh.

The attractive woman has just bared her breasts when Moquiseh fast forwards the on-screen images. Watching the sexually explicit images flash buy, the image of Duke and me suddenly appears on the HD screen. Moqiseh slows the images to normal speed. Sure enough, it's yours truly, Jonathan Moore, and Duke Osgard administrating the dosage from the syringe.

At the Novotel, Sirjan enters Fletcher’s suite and announces, "I've checked us out of the hotel, we're good to go."

"Ever get the feeling that things are going too smoothly?" I asked.

"All the time, my friend, all the time," responds Harry.

"I'll feel better once we're on the plane --- " adds Duke, with some trepidation.

"---and in the air," chimes in Debra.

**Chapter Four**

Carrying our own luggage, we came out of the hotel and climbed into a seven passenger van with the markings of a local taxi company.

Arriving at the airline terminal of the Khomeini International Airport, we exit the van and enter the terminal. Pushing the cart loaded with the team's luggage, Sirjan arrives at the baggage check in counter. He's about to hand over the tickets when, happening to glance at a TV monitor behind the counter, he sees the clear images of Duke Osgard and Jonathan Moore, taken from the Colonel's bedroom camera.

Sirjan slips the tickets back into his jacket and slowly pulls the cart away from the counter. Pushing the luggage cart, he approaches the rest of us. Quietly, we engage in conversation and then turn around and head for the terminal exit. Once outside, we stop to plan our next move.

"They'll be watching the train and bus stations as well," Sirjan tells the group.

"I think this calls for plan "B."....We take a taxi," I suggested. .

"They're probably running a facial recognition scan on Jonathan and Duke, as we speak," reports Sirjan.

"Think they have any old images to compare us with?" asks Duke.

Schlepping their bags, the team approaches the taxi stand.

"We'll take the cab to the nearest town to the north then catch a southbound train passing through Tehran," announces Harry.

"I approve. If they do match our images to the past, they'll think we're repeating ourselves, heading for the Caspian Sea," I ventured.

"Where we'll steal a plane and fly to Russia," Duke says.

"Except, we'll steal a plane near the Persian Gulf and fly to Iraq," adds Harry.

Arriving at the taxi stand, Harry chooses the second cab in line which is a seven passenger van and the team climbs in. Sirjan takes the passenger seat next to the driver, whose name turns out to be Farshin, while Harry and I are in the seats just behind the driver. Duke and Farah have the three seats in the rear to themselves.

Farshin, in Farsi, asks, "Where to?"

"Karaj," answers Sirjan.

"Karaj is a great distance. I’lll have to charge you a round trip fare. In advance," explains Farshin in Farsi.

"And how much might that be?" asks Sirjan in Farsi.

While Farshin is calculating the amount in his head, Sirjan decides to speak English. He extracts a fist full of cash from his money belt and hands it to the driver, asking "This enough?"

"It will be sufficient," responds Farshin, also in English, who then fires up the engine and peels away from the curb.

"Easy, we're in no hurry," says Harry.

"You can call me Farshin. And you are?"

Enrouted to the city of Karaj, the taxi driver attempts to make conversation with his five, tight lipped passengers. He checks his rearview mirror and inquires jovially, "Might I assume that at least one or more of you are from the good ol' USA?"

"Why do you ask?" I asked cautiously.

"It's a place where many Iranians wish to migrate."

"Is that your wish as well?" I asked.

"Not me. I'm too old to start over. Besides my wife has a good job and I own my own taxi. We have a nice house and eat well. What more in life could one wish for?"

"But??" I inquired.

"But many of my countrymen long for the old days, when society was more secular and women weren't told what to wear in public."

Harry and I exchanged looks.

At the Military Command Center in Tehran, the facial recognition software finally stops on a match. Everyone turns to look at the monitor screen which shows side-by-side pictures of Duke Osgard with the word *match* spelled out in Farsi and English. Major Montazeri is conferring with Captains, Seyed Kazemi and Shahram Azam, "The photo on the right was taken at the Ramsar Airport, several years ago, where he was among a party that chartered a sea plane, eventually flying it to Russia."

"I remember the incident," states CAPT Kazemi.

"So do I. I recommend we put our men on all northbound trains and give the order to shoot on sight," urges CAPT Azam.

"I concur. They may be attempting to pull off a similar escape," offers CAPT Kazemi.

"I'm not so sure," comments Major Montazeri.

"How is that, sir?" asks CAPT Azam.

"They fooled us before, they may be trying to fool us again," suggests Major Montazeri

"How so?" asks CAPT Kazemi.

"During our last encounter they feigned heading south, towards the Persian Gulf then secretly doubled back, eventually making their escape via the Caspian Sea," explains Montazeri.

"Sir? Afraid I don't understand."

Indicating the monitor, the Major asserts, “If anyone resembling this likeness is found to have been heading north towards the Caspian Sea then we concentrate our resources to blocking their southbound escape."

Standing a few feet away and having overheard the exchange, LT Aghdam smiles and nods approvingly. Once Major Montazeri returns to his position at the table, LT Aghdam approaches him, asking, "Sir?"

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"The men you're looking for are part of a tour group out of Canada. I have their names and photos..... at least the names and photos on their passports," offers LT Aghdam.

"By the grace of Allah, why didn't you come forward with this information earlier???"

"It took time to get copies of their passports emailed to me."

"You have such copies?"

LT Aghdam places the photocopies in the Major's hand. The Major looks them over, astounded, pronouncing, "Good work, Lieutenant."

The Major then jumps to his feet and announces, "Gentlemen, we're looking for men carrying passports with the following names. Photographs of the subjects and copies of their passports will be available in mere minutes. The names are Donald E. Parker, Peter M. Mitchell -- "

The Major is conferring with LT Ehsan Khan, handing over a series of photos, "I want these photos published in tomorrow's edition of every newspaper in the country."

As the 7-person van pulls up in front of the Karaj train station, Farshin an-nounces, "Here we are. The Karaj train station. I wish you a safe journey, regardless of your destination," says Farshin sincerely. He gets out of the van to help his pas-sengers with their luggage.

All the team members except for Farah are at the ticket counter, with Sirjan speaking to the clerk, "Four tickets on the northbound train to Ramsar."

Just as the southbound train is about to pull out, the four step out onto the platform where they're met by Farah.

"There's the southbound train ready to pull out.....Come, we'll just have time to catch it," urges Sirjan, pointing it out.

Carrying their own luggage, the five rush to get aboard and enter the first class compartment where the five are basically seated together. Farah is still wearing her hijab scarf, when the conductor approaches asking the passengers to show their tickets.

Sirjan hands the conductor the four tickets to Ramsar, and explains, in Farsi, "We must've gotten on the wrong train.... we seem to be traveling south."

"You are on the wrong train. You'll have to get off in Tehran and catch the correct, southbound train," says the conductor in Farsi.

"I'm the tour guide and official escort for these tourists. It really doesn't matter where we go -- long as they don't get bored," states Sirjan in English.

"So?" asks the conductor in English.

"So how far south will these tickets take us?" asks Sirjan in English.

"Probably as far as Esfahan," answers the conductor after mulling it over.

Sirjan pulls out a twenty euro bill and hands it over, "I trust you can make the necessary arrangements?"

Slipping the bill into his pocket, the conductor takes possession of the tickets and smiles, "But, of course, Sir." Then, he turns his attention to Farah, "Your ticket, please."

Farah pulls out a handful of Iranian rials and states, in Farsi, "I'll purchase my ticket now."

"How far are you going?" asks the conductor.

"Shiraz," says Debra.

The conductor accepts the currency and announces, in Farsi, "Very well....You'll probably have some change coming, which I'll see that you get."

At the Military Command Center, Captain Kazemi hangs up the phone and jumps up to approach Major Montazeri with the news, "Railroad clerk from Karj just reported that four persons fitting our descriptions bought tickets on the northbound train to Ramsar,"

"Ramsar! That's on the Caspian Sea, isn't it?" asks the Major.

"I believe so...... Yes," replies CAPT Kazemi.

"I cannot believe these people are stupid enough to repeat old patterns.... And these are anything but stupid people," remarks the Major thoughtfully.

"Perhaps it is they, who think we're stupid," comments CAPT Kazemi.

"Somehow I doubt that's the case. In any event, get troops aboard that train."

Major Montazeri is standing in front of a large map of Iran and the surrounding area, hung on the wall. With his pointer, he traces the path of the train tracks all the way to Ramsar. Then he retraces the tracks back to Tehran and then south to Esfahan and then further south to Shiraz. Putting down the pointer, he pauses briefly to ponder. Then he turns to Captain Kazemi and quietly calls out:

"Kazemi.....Make sure we have armed soldiers aboard every southbound train leaving Shiraz."

"Yes, Sir."

Finally, the Major calls out, "Lieutenant Aghdam!!"

"Yes, Sir!"

"A word please."

"Right away, Sir," answers the Lieutenant who then gets to his feet and rushes to the side of Montazeri.

"Two years ago, you had an extensive conversation with at least one of these men, correct?" asks Major Montazeri.

"Yes, Sir."

"I want you operating on your own. Requisition as many soldiers as you need. Your orders are to prevent these men from escaping, even if you have to kill them. Use whatever firepower you deem necessary."

"Understood, Sir. With your permission I'd like to charter a plane and fly to Esfahan --"

"My dear Aghdam!! You don't need permission; you're now an acting lieutenant colonel. Get on with your job!!" exclaims the Major interrupting.

On the train, in the first class compartment, I was reflecting on why the Colonel woke so early. I confided to the team, “Looks like our Dr. Rahbar might have purposely allowed us to give the Colonel less of a dosage than was required. Obviously working both sides.”

Harry nods.

"Surely, we're not going to brazenly ride this train into the Esfahan station?" asks Duke.

"No, we're going to jump off about two miles from the station, that is except for Farah -- who will depart the train, at the station," affirms Harry.

The conductor returns with Farah's change. The Mossad agent decides to take advantage.

"Oh, conductor?" asks Debra in English.

"Yes?"

"During our brief stopover in Esfahan, I would like to pick up some magazines and snacks. Would you please awaken me when we're eight or nine kilometers from the station?" To emphasize her request, she hands the conductor a handful of Iranian currency.

"Eight or nine kilometers, you say," responds the conductor.

A little later, Farah is feigning sleep when the conductor approaches and gently touches her shoulder, who pretends to awaken.

"You wanted me to remind you when we were eight or nine kilometers from Esfahan."

"Thank you," says Debra with a smile.

As the conductor makes his way forward, Harry, Osgard, Sirjan and I grab our suitcases and make our way to the rear. About one and a half miles from Esfahan Station, the train begins slowing down before entering the city and eventually the station. Then, suitcases are tossed from the train followed by the four of us. After having rolled over several times, we climb to their feet, dust ourselves off, check for injuries, and then retrieve our luggage.

Colonel Moqiseh enters the Command Center and everyone jumps to attention.

"As you were," states COL Moqiseh.

"Colonel, I've temporarily promoted Lieutenant Aghdam to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and ordered him to find and stop these men -- at any cost. I want you to notify all command leaders of the promotion and to give him their fullest cooperation and assistance," advises the Major.

"Very well, Major. It will be done," replies the Colonel.

At Iran’s Esfahan airport, the executive jet touches down on the runway and rolls out. Wearing civilian clothes, Lieutenant (now LT Colonel) Aghdam exits the plane, enters the terminal and steps up to the rental car agency. After renting a car, Aghdam heads for the train station.

As the train rolls into Esfahan Station and comes to a stop, accompanied by eight armed soldiers, LT Aghdam surrounds the train as passengers disembark. Each part-ing passenger is herded through a single line where Aghdam can get a good look.

As Farah disembarks and passes through to the terminal building with the rest, Aghdam gives her only a cursory glance. The soldiers prevent anyone buy Aghdam from boarding.

Aghdam walks through every compartment looking the remaining passengers over carefully. He passes the empty seats where those he is looking for were seated only a short time ago. Finally he exits the train and motions for the soldiers to let the awaiting passengers board. As they do so, Aghdam looks them over carefully.

**Chapter Five**

Led by Sirjan and walking, Duke, Fletcher and I are making our way towards Esfahan when, suddenly, a blue automobile pulls up alongside. "Come on, get in!!" shouts Debra, as she pops open the trunk into which the escapees toss in their luggage and then slam it shut. They then pile into the blue sedan as it takes off down the street.

Harry, seated in the front passenger seat, is the first to speak, "I won't ask where you got the automobile."

"It was the only one I could find with the key in the ignition," states Debra.

A look at the steering column confirms that the automobile has not been hotwired.

"But you have to give me some credit. Guess who I stole it from?"

"Is it important?"

"Perhaps not, but it's a little ironic when you think about it."

How so?"

"Check the rental contract in the glove compartment."

Harry pulls out the rental contract and takes a quick look, eyes widening, "Holy Mother of Jesus!! She stole the car from Lieutenant Aghdam!!"

"You know it was incredibly stupid to steal Aghdam's rental.....Not exactly what one would expect from a Mossad agent."

"You're right. It was stupid. But I've been living this lie since I was sixteen years old," Debra responds angrily, ripping off the hijab scarf, but not discarding it.

"For once, I want to be myself.... to return to my family in Israel.... to live my own life." Continuing angrily, "of course, I targeted Aghdam's rental. I was sending him and his superiors a message. ....A message that their days of exporting terrorism around the world are about to come to an end. And you can stop calling me Farah Jaberi!! My real name is Debra Mordechai.”

Harry waits for Debra to calm down before adding his two cents, "I only wish you would have waited until we were safely in Israel before sending your message."

This gets a smile of relief from the Mossad agent, who admits, "Now that I think of it.... You're absolutely right.....I messed up. So, what are we going to do?"

"First thing is to find an automobile the same year and model as this and then exchange license plates."

"After that?"

"Run for our lives!!" declares Harry.

Inside the Military Command Center, Captain Seyed Kazemi answers the phone and indicates that the call is for the Major.

Accepting the call, the Major answers, "Major Montazeri. What is it?"

In the train station parking lot, standing where his blue rental was previously parked, Aghdam is on his cell phone, "They're here in Esfahan."

"How do you know?" asks Major Montazeri

"My rental car has been stolen," replies LT Aghdam.

"And??"

"Someone is sending me a message."

"And what does that message tell you?"

"That they think they're the smartest ones in the room, so to speak."

"And are they??"

Major Montazeri hangs up the phone and then calls everyone to attention, "Listen up. We're now looking for a blue sedan heading southbound from Esfahan.....The make, model and license plate of the vehicle is as follows: A blue Ford, model -- "

Under cover of darkness, in a small town parking lot, Duke and Debra (again wearing her hijab) are removing the license plate of an automobile the same year and make as Aghdam's blue rental. As one plate is removed, it is replaced by another.

"Even with the replacement plates, how far do you think we can make it in this automobile?" asks Debra.

"Hopefully to the plan "B" airport where we steal a plane and fly it to Iraq," states Harry.

"Any of you know how to fly?" inquires Debra.

"Duke can fly anything with a fixed wing and Harry owns and flies his own helicopter," I asserted.

"I'm impressed," says Debra. "For now, all we have to do is get to Shiraz."

On a lonely nighttime highway, a military truck pulls up behind the blue sedan and, using binoculars, the passenger attempts to obtain a plate number from the light cast by the truck's headlights.

Debra, still behind the wheel, warns the others, "Don't turn around, but we've got a military truck following us."

The truck passenger is reciting the sedan's plate number to the truck driver, "Two digit code on the right of the plate indicates that it's a local, Yazd Province registration."

"Obviously not the sedan we're looking for," says the truck driver.

The military truck then passes the sedan and charges onward, into the night.

The occupants are suspicious and fearful of every headlight. Sighs of relief are heard when a headlight approaches from either the front or rear and it turns out to be just another civilian.

It’s nighttime and the military truck is parked outside a truck stop restaurant. While the passenger soldier is eating, the truck driver is on his cell phone to LT Aghdam.

Still at the Esfahan Airport, in his civilian clothes, Lieutenant (now LT Colonel) Aghdam is renting another automobile.

Speaking on his cell phone, in a very aggravated tone, Aghdam says "Let me get this straight. You spotted a vehicle matching the description of my stolen rental, except the plates didn't match. But you didn't force it over?"

"That's correct, Sir. Didn't see a reason."

"These are clever people, license plates can be exchanged. Now you get out there and find that blue sedan!!" demands Aghdam angrily. As he clicks off his cell, he turns his attention back to the woman wearing a hijab behind the car rental counter.

Sirjan is now driving while Debra is asleep in the back seat, next to Duke. Harry and I are still in the front passenger seat.

"We've got to get rid of this car. Find a crowded 24-hour parking lot, near the bus station, where you can abandon it," says Harry.

"But first, drop us off at the safe house Raoul secured for us in the event of plan "B," I said.

"Safe house?" asks Debra.

"With our passports compromised, we cannot check into a hotel. So arrange-ments were made to stay with a family who takes in tourists. With a guide, no passports are required," I explained.

Cots have been set up in the command center so as to allow those on duty to occasionally catch some much needed sleep. Major Montazeri is on the phone with Lieutenant Aghdam,

In Shiraz, Aghdam is standing next to the open driver's side door of his latest rental and looking at the blue sedan parked in the lot. He is on his cell, “Major? They're here! In Shiraz.”

"And, Lieutenant Colonel, what do you intend to do about it?"

"From our past cross-up with them we know that one or more of them is a skilled pilot. It's my belief that they intend to steal a plane to make good their escape."

"I repeat, what do you intend to do about it?"

It’s now daytime and in the guest house, near the Shiraz Airport and Sirjan is finishing sweeping the room with his bug detector. Finally he pronounces, "Clean."

"We have to risk a cell phone call. Give IDF Intelligence a status report and our ballpark schedule," I stated.

Inside the Israeli Defense Forces Headquarters in Tel Aviv, a phone rings and is picked up by Intelligence Officer Major Joseph Barak, answering, "Intelligence, Barak speaking."

He listens for a few seconds then jumps to his feet, calling out, "Listen up, gentle-men. I have Debra, code name Farah Jaberi, on the phone." Then he sits back down, putting the phone's handset to his ear.

Debra is saying, "That's right, Sir. One's a fixed wing pilot and the other a helicopter pilot. Everything goes right, we should be landing in al Basra, Iraq, day after tomorrow. Understood? Thank you, Sir."

Quickly clicking off the cell and handing it to Jonathan who removes the SIM card and smashes it with heel of his foot, Debra tells the team, "The IDF says that if we can land at al Basrah, the U.S. Navy will have Seal Team members waiting to escort us to the Ayn al-Asad Airbase where, from there - we will be flown to Israel."

I said to Sirjan, “Find us a car whose absence won't be missed for several days."

"Right away," responds Sirjan, as he heads out the door.

A white van is heading south from Shiraz, in the dead of night. Sirjan is behind the wheel. I am in the passenger seat. In the two seats behind the Sirjan, Harry is stretched out and asleep. Taking up space in the rear three seats, Duke and Debra are snuggled together, with Duke half asleep.

This airport we're heading for. I've never heard of it. You sure it even exists?" asks Debra.

"It better -- or else we've had it," pronounces Harry.

"If Donavan says it exists -- then it does," I confirmed.

"It's not a commercial or military airport. That's probably why you haven't heard of it," explains Harry.

I explained, "It's a repair facility for executive type aircraft; very low profile.”

In the rear, Debra plants a kiss on Duke's lips.

At this point, Sirjan announces, "Truck lights approaching from the rear. We're going the speed limit so whoever is gaining on us is breaking the law,"

This, together with the flood of lights hitting the rear window, has everyone's attention. Then the lights indicate that whoever is gaining on them, intends to pass, which the truck does. The occupants of the van watch anxiously as the truck passes. There are no military markings on the 18-wheeler.

At the Military Command Center, the cots are filled with sleeping soldiers. Only a few senior officers are still at their posts. Major Montazeri is on the phone with Lieutenant Colonel Aghdam, "Where are you?"

Standing next to the open driver's side door of his white Ford rental, Aghdam, answers, "I'm at the guest house where our escapees spent time showering and resting."

"Great job. .... How did you find where they were staying?"

"With their passports compromised, I didn't bother checking the hotels but in-stead concentrated on guest houses. ... Just got lucky. I'm heading south; should be able to catch up with them before they reach the Gulf.

"How do you know they're driving south?"

"I don't. It's what I would do if I were in their shoes. They have to know we're watching airports, bus and train stations."

"Good enough for me. .... So how can I help?"

"Assign three or four armed soldiers at every airport between Shiraz and Bushehr that might have aircraft with enough fuel to reach Bahrain."

"You think Bahrain is their final destination?"

"I do. It makes sense."

"And where will you be?"

"At one of the largest airports on the Gulf, Bushehr. You have my word, they will not escape."

The white van appears to be obeying the speed laws. Debra has replaced Sirjan behind the wheel while I still occupying the passenger seat. Debra, turning to me and said, "I guess the plan is to make whomever is on our trail think we're going to steal a plane from Bushehr."

"That's the plan."

"How do you know someone is really on our trail?"

"I don't. But it would be foolish to assume otherwise."

Debra nods agreement.

An executive jet lands on the well-lit runway and rolls out at Bushehr International Airport, on the Persian Gulf. LT COL Aghdam, still wearing civilian clothes, exits the plane, enters the terminal and approaches the counter of an automobile rental agency.

Inside the control tower, with a full view of the airport, he once again is in communication with Major Montazeri. "Bushehr Airport is secure. Anyone attempting to steal an aircraft will be arrested or shot on sight."

At the military command center in Tehran, with the cots removed and everyone back to work, the Major is on his landline phone, "Are you sure you've now got all possible escape routes covered?"

"Not yet....but I'm working to do so."

"How so?"

"There's an executive jet repair facility nearby that I still need to check out. Not many people know about it, that's why I saved it until last."

"So what makes it so interesting?"

"Most of its executive jets, sitting on the tarmac, are likely carrying enough onboard fuel to travel long distances."

"Then don't let me hold you up!!"

Everyone but Sirjan, who is driving, is attempting a catnap. Suddenly Sirjan announces, "Debra?! … We should be approaching the cutoff to our airport."

"I've been watching for it," I stated.

"If we're going to steal a plane and take off tonight, I'm going to have to get some real sleep..... these catnaps are not doing it," comments Duke.

"Duke's right. We could all do with a good rest," suggests Harry.

It was then that I spotted the turnoff leading to the repair facilities for executive type aircraft, "Here we are.....just ahead."

The van makes a right turn onto the road leading to the secluded airport, about a mile away. A small township exists just outside the airport and in that small township there just happens to be a guesthouse. The van parks next to the guesthouse and everyone piles out and enters the dwelling.

Inside the living room, the new arrivals remove their shoes and are greeted warmly by Tina, the host. Sirjan introduces himself as the tour guide and then intro-duces the others, using their battle tag names.

"We're not going to be staying long, lots of sightseeing to get done," says Sirjan.

"I understand," comments Tina.

Inside Debra's guesthouse room, someone is knocking on the door. Wearing only a bra, panties and slip, Debra opens the door.

"You wanted to see me?" asks Duke.

"Yes, come in. I thought we should talk. I've never met anyone like you, except in my dreams, of course."

"We both should be getting much needed rest," states Duke.

Debra sits on her bed and indicates for Duke to sit beside her. Instead, he plants himself in the nearby stuffed chair.

"What's the matter? Don't you like me?" asks Debra.

"What's not to like? Why are you acting like this?"

"Acting like what?"

"Like a married woman reaching out because her sexual desires are not being satisfied by her husband. ... A virgin who has yet to really experience the joy of sex."

"That's just it. I am a virgin," responds Debra, tears streaming down her cheeks

In another guesthouse room, the alarm on my watch sounded. Checking the watch I noted the time to be 8:55 pm. I climbed out of bed and gave a shout out to Harry, who is immediately fully awake. I then traveled down the hallway and knocked on Debra’s door. Finally, the door is opened by Duke, wearing only pajamas.

"I'm sorry, I thought this was Debra's room," I said.

"It is," responds Duke sheepishly.

Before Duke had a chance to close the door, I took note that in the bed Debra was attempting to cover her naked breasts. I sensed that this was not going to end well.

The team is now gathered in the room assigned to Harry and me. Keeping his voice low, Sirjan is telling everyone, "I managed to get my hands on one of the uniforms the plant engineers wear. It should allow me access to the aircraft parked on the tarmac.

"That's good. All you have to do is spot us an aircraft with the capacity to carry four passengers plus the pilot, and enough fuel to get us to Iraq," states Harry.

"Understood."

LT Colonel Aghdam's latest rental is rushing northward from Bushehr on the two-lane blacktop. Riding with him are three heavily armed Revolutionary Guard soldiers. The vehicle is entering the city limits where the executive jet repair facility is located. The black sedan pulls up to the guard shack and from a slight distance, Aghdam, flashes his identification and engages in a short conversation with the shack guard. A moment later, the black sedan enters the grounds of the jet aircraft facility

Inside the cockpit of a Gulfstream G550, dressed in his stolen engineer's uniform, Sirjan watches as Aghdam's black sedan pulls up on the tarmac and the four fully armed Revolutionary Guards jump out and take up tactical positions. Sirjan continues checking the G550's fuel supply. The plane's fuel tanks are almost full. Sirjan then climbs out of the pilot's seat and boldly makes his exit from the aircraft. As he exits he is immediately confronted by a Revolutionary Guard Corporal, who demands in Farsi, "Freeze and raise your hands, or I will shoot."

Sirjan does as told and the Corporal frisks him for weapons, finding none, asking him, in Farsi, "What are you doing here, at this late hour?"

Answering in Farsi, Sirjan replies, "This Gulfstream is scheduled to be worked on first thing in the morning. As an engineer, I was making a list of the repairs to be made."

"Very well," says the Corporal.

**Chapter Six**

Above the Hinnon Canyon, Jerusalem’s Montefiore Quarter was rebuilt with golden Jerusalem stone. It is now a series of expensive townhouses, a favorite of Israel's wealthy community.

In his IDF uniform, Major Barak climbs up the steps and knocks on the door of the unit belonging to the Mordechai family. Finally Ehud Mordecai opens the door, "Major Barak? I'm honored by your visit. Won't you come in?"

Barak steps into the lavish townhouse. Once inside, he is led to the kitchen where Mrs. Mordechai is preparing lunch. Ehud gestures that the two of them should sit at the large kitchen table. A cheerful Mrs. Mordechai pours both her husband and the Major a fresh cup of coffee, asking "So what do we owe this auspicious visit, Major?"

"Your daughter is coming home," declares Barak.

Mrs. Mordechai nearly collapses but manages to contain her composure, but with tears streaming down her cheeks, "Debra coming home. I've waited so long for this day."

Her husband eases his wife into an empty chair, as she utters, "I was beginning to give up the thought of ever seeing her again."

Barak turns to Ehud, "I thought you deserved a heads-up, that's why I'm here. She's not out of the woods yet, but I have it on good authority she's being extracted by an American team that is experienced and highly competent in this sort of thing."

Everyone is gathering inside the guesthouse room shared by Jonathan and me.

"I'm concerned. What could be keeping Sirjan," asks Duke.

"Not to worry, Sirjan can take care of himself," I remarked to Duke, reassuringly.

There is the coded knock at the door and then Sirjan enters, announcing, "I've found your aircraft, a G550."

"You mean, our aircraft," says Harry.

"No, I mean your aircraft! I will not be going with you."

"How so?" I asked?

"Armed Revolutionary Guard soldiers are guarding the tarmac. Only way to get that Gulfstream off the ground is to create a diversion."

"Explain," Duke requested.

"I create a diversion by firing up the engines of an aircraft at the opposite end of the tarmac from the Gulfstream. Meanwhile you climb over the fence, board the G550, and as the saying goes, get the hell out of Dodge."

"And you?" asks Harry.

"If I cannot make my escape or talk myself out of the situation then, perhaps you'll consider rescuing my pour soul from Evin Prison."

"You know anything about starting a jet engine?" asks Duke.

"No. But you're going to teach me."

Aghdam parks his black rental on the street in front of the guesthouse. Carrying a fully automatic assault rifle, he steps out of the vehicle, walks up to the front door and knocks.

Tina opens the door, staring at the assault rifle. Aghdam flashes his military ID and then shows Tina the photos of Fletcher and Osgard.

"You're on a list that makes your home available to tourists. Have you seen either of these men?"

Tina slowly nods her head, as Aghdam asks "Are they in?"

In response, Tina slowly shakes her head no.

The cots in the military command center are full and only a few senior officers, including Major Montazeri are still at their posts. Montazeri's land line rings and he picks up, "What is it, Colonel?”

Standing next to his rental parked in front of the guesthouse in the township next to the aircraft repair facility, Aghdam is giving the major rapid-fire instructions, "They're here, Major, and I've only got four guards. I want you to have a Mirage F-1 fighter fully fueled and armed, ready to launch at a moment's notice. These are clever adversaries. We cannot take any chances."

"It will be done, Colonel," responds Montazeri.

Aghdam clicks off his cell phone, steps into his black sedan and fires up the engine.

It’s the dead of night and Debra is behind the wheel, as the white van is driving along the 12-foot high, chain-link fence that surrounds the jet repair facility, its runway and tarmac. She is not driving on a roadway, but on open terrain.

"Sirjan said to watch for a ladder he placed alongside the fence," Harry announces.

Spotting the stashed ladder, Debra parks the van. Jonathan and Harry are maneuvering the 15 foot ladder up against the 12 foot fence and urging everyone to climb up and jump over. Debra is first to climb the ladder and jump off onto the dirt ground on the other side, rolling over parachutist style upon landing. Duke, Harry and I follow.

Inside the aircraft repair facility, Sirjan, settling into the pilot's seat of the Learjet, is beginning the procedure for starting the engines.

The black sedan stops at the guard shack of the repair facility as Aghdam asks the guard, "Anyone been in or out of here recently?"

"Only you, Sir," states the guard.

Then suddenly, from the far end of the tarmac, comes the sound of twin engines being wound up to speed. Sirjan then sets the throttle at ground idle and climbs out of the pilot's seat and heads for the exit. Outside, he runs a few yards and then scrambles into another jet aircraft, tied down nearby.

At the sound of the jet engines, Aghdam, in the black sedan, peels out headed in the direction of the sound. As Aghdam breaks to a stop on the tarmac near the Learjet, the four Revolutionary Guard soldiers have already surrounded the Lear with its engines at ground idle. Weapon in hand, Aghdam jumps out of his rental and rushes to the air-craft where, without hesitation, he opens the plane's door and steps inside. Aghdam quickly moves to the cockpit wherein he settles into the pilot's seat and begins shutting down the jet's twin engines. As Aghdam exits the Lear, from the far end of the tarmac there is the sound of another set of jet engines being wound up to speed. He is imme-diately on his cell phone.

Major Montazeri picks up on the first ring of his phone.

"This is Aghdam, launch the Mirage F-1 fighter. Looks like our escapees are about to launch."

"Any way you can stop them?" asks the Major.

"Not likely but we'll try."

"TAB-6, Bushehr will probably request a heading for its Mirage. What do I tell them?"

"Tell them to take a look at their radar. Our target will be the only aircraft departing this area!! Likely destination is Bahrain."

"I'll order the launch immediately."

With its lights off, the G550 Gulfstream is taxiing towards the takeoff runway.

Aghdam and his Revolutionary Guards pile into the black sedan as Aghdam fires up the engine and gives chase.

Reaching the takeoff runway, the landing lights come on as the Gulfstream swings onto the long runway and goes to full throttle.

Just then the black sedan arrives and also turns onto the runway, assault weapons sticking out of every window but the driver's. Behind the wheel of the sedan, Aghdam has the pedal-to-the-metal as he gives the chase. From the sedan's open windows three of the Revolutionary Guard soldiers stick their upper torsos out, take aim at the fleeing jet, and open fire.

Inside the cockpit of the G550, Duke Osgard has the Gulfstream's two throttles pushed as far forward as possible. From the sound of the pings hitting the fuselage, it's obvious the fire from the assault weapons is doing some damage. He turns to Harry in the co-pilot's seat, "Once we're airborne, do a damage check. God forbid they hit a fuel tank, oil or hydraulic line."

"Or, punched a hole in the fuselage."

"Yeah, that would restrict our altitude somewhat. Better check the oxygen masks, make sure they're working."

Finally, the G550 manages to outrun the pursuing the gunfire and become airborne.

Reaching altitude, Harry returns to the co-pilot's seat and gives his report to Duke, "No signs of cabin pressure loss. At least none of the firepower appears to have breached the cabin."

"What about fuel tanks and oil lines?" Are we streaming fuel?"

"Not that I can tell. But to make sure, all you need do is monitor your gauges."

"I know. And if the yoke suddenly goes heavy, then we have a perforated hydraulic line."

At the Tehran Command Center, once again Major Montazeri is on his phone, "The Mirage has orders to shoot on sight."

Stopped at the end of the runway at the jet repair facility, Lt. Col Aghdam is on the other end of the call. "Sorry I let you down, Major.”   
 "Don't worry, a fully armed Mirage up against an unarmed Gulfstream? I think we can safely say our mission is over."

"It would appear so," says Aghdam cautiously.

"Lieutenant? Your job is officially over. Return to your regular duties."

"Yes, Sir," answers Aghdam dejectedly.

Debra and I were seated together in the luxurious Gulfstream cabin.

"Before we get too relaxed, we have to consider that this aircraft was in for repairs. The question is -- "

"--What is the basis for those needed repairs?" interrupts Debra. "I'm more worried about the fighters now being scrambled from Bushehr Air Force base to shoot us down."

“That’s a good point.” I jumped up and headed for the cockpit.

Inside the cockpit, Harry asks "You have any idea of how to get to Al Basrah?"

"Vaguely," responds Duke.

It's at this point, I entered. "The thought ever occur to either of you that Bushehr Air Force Base may be scrambling fighters to shoot us down?"

"What put that thought into your mind?" asks Duke.

"Debra."

Duke immediately puts the G550 into a dive until it levels off at wave-top height.

Catching his breath, my only comment was, "Good move."

"We’re being painted, Duke informs us, “I just didn't know by whom. .... At this altitude, we'll get lost in the ground clutter and they'll have a tougher time tracking us.

Duke places his right hand on the throttles to make sure they're against the stop - at full throttle.

I returned to the passenger cabin and settled back in the seat next to Debra.

"This maneuver will buy us little time, eventually they will catch up with us and it will be over," laments Debra sadly.

"Don't you think Duke can get us home safely?" I asked?

"Logically, nobody could get us out of our present situation. It will all be over in a matter of minutes." responds Debra depressed.

"I wouldn't be so sure," was my reply.

Inside the cockpit of the F-1 Mirage, which is at altitude, the pilot is pursuing the blip on the radar screen when suddenly it disappears.

The pilot clicks on his UHF transmitter, "TAB-6....Mirage flight 1. Patch me through to Tehran. Major Montazeri.

Inside the Military Command Center in Tehran, Major Montazeri is speaking on his phone, "Go ahead Flight 1."

"Sir, I've lost radar contact with the Gulfstream. I'll refuel at Abadan and set up a perimeter around the Al Basrah air space," states the Mirage pilot.

"You can get there ahead of him?" asks Montazeri.

"Already ahead......I'm throttling down from 2,338 kilometers."

"Why that's s --"

"---Twice the speed of sound. Yes, Major."

"How do you know the Gulfstream is headed for Al Basrah?" asks the Major.

"Seems logical, based on their previous course. "

The Major gives the matter some thought. Then finally asks, "How can I help?"

"Order another F-1 Mirage from Bushehr. Have him refuel at Abadan and join with me in setting a perimeter preventing the Gulfstream from entering Iraqi airspace."

It’s still nighttime in the G550’s cockpit as Duke looks at Harry. "Those fighters won't waste time trying to find us at wave-top height. Instead they'll set up a patrol monitoring any unidentified aircraft attempting to cross into Iraq and land at Al Basrah," explains Duke.

"So what do we do?"

"We have two choices. One, veer to the left and enter through Kuwait. The second? Veer to the right and enter through Iran."

"That's a no brainer."

The G550 breaks left.

It’s dawn at Al Basrah International Airport, as the Lockheed C-130 Hercules with U.S. Marine Corps markings touches down and rolls out, taxiing back towards the tarmac. Besides the crew, and several armed Marines, the Hercules is carrying three fully armed Navy Seal Team members – all in full combat gear - who are chatting among themselves.

"Lieutenant, I don't understand. If intelligence knows what type aircraft our subjects are arriving on, wouldn't it be a good idea to clue us in?" asks the Corporal.

"Relax, Corporal, we should have that information momentarily," says the Lieutenant.

"Hope you're right, Lieutenant. I don't see ourselves confronting every passenger on an inbound flight from Iran," comments the Sergeant.

The C-130 Hercules breaks to a stop on the tarmac and the ramp is lowered.

Once again the Corporal has a question, "So what do we do now, Lieutenant?”

The Lieutenant calmly pulls out his cell phone and lays it in his lap, responding, "Wait for the call."

**Chapter Seven**

Inside the office building, of the jet repair facility, using a small flashlight as his light source, Sirjan is going through the file cabinets. Finally he finds the file he's looking for, pulls it out and begins reading.

In the D.C. office of Raoul Donavan, the CIA Special Agent is seated at his desk when his phone rings. Picking it up on the first ring, he answers, "Agent Donavan. … Sirjan, been waiting for your call. What do you have?

Inside the office building of the jet repair facility, Sirjan is on his cell phone but studying the contents of the folder.

"You've got to get hold of Duke before he lands. He'll likely be monitoring the guard frequency. Tell him the G550 was in for repair because the nose gear does not always show down and locked upon landing; needs to be recycled several times before getting a *down and locked*. He could be in for a rough time. Better to be prepared for it. Alright, here's the tail number and other information on the Gulfstream that you'll need to pass on to Israeli Intelligence."

Relaxing in the interior cabin of the C-130, the troops and three Seal Team members are on stand-down when suddenly a cell phone rings. The Lieutenant clicks it on and puts it to his ear, "Speak." After listening for a moment or two, then: "Got it."

The Lieutenant clicks off his cell and addresses the troops and three fellow Seal Team-7 members, "We've now got the aircraft type and tail number of our target. Let's get in place."

The Marine troops, followed by the three Seal Team members, depart the aircraft through the rear ramp.

In the G550, Harry tells Duke, “We've been in Kuwaiti air space for nearly 15 minutes. Surprised we're apparently getting away without being detected."

"We're not undetected. It's the G550. On radar we appear to be one of the many G550s purchased by the Kuwaiti military.”

"Any idea where we are?"

"I'm not familiar with Kuwaiti landmarks, but Jonathan probably is. Better trade places with him."

Harry is pulling himself out of the co-pilot seat when the radio cranks with a message on the guard frequency, "Gulfstream G550 departing Iran near Bushehr, do not respond, but be advised your aircraft was downed due to nose landing gear not always locking when lowered. You might try recycling it a few times.” The message repeats itself several times while Harry and Duke exchange looks, then Harry exits the cockpit.

The Mirage pilot is in a right echelon with his wingman. He clicks on his UHF transmitter, "Let's spread out. Find and bring down this enemy of Iran."

The two fighters peel off and begin forming a barrier, covering the normal approach to Al Basrah airport from the Gulf.

In the cockpit of the G550, I slipped into the co-pilot's seat and buckled myself in.

"I have the radio heading for Al Basrah, but am a little curious as to just where we are at the present. Any familiar landmarks down there?" asks Duke.

"Let me take a look," I said as I studied the terrain below.

"I recognize that waterway below. That's Bubiyah Island to the east of us and Warba Island to the north. We're nearing the Iraqi border."

“I’m going to have to request clearance for landing at Al Basrah,” Duke is saying, “and that could get dicey. You speak some Arabic, which could come in handy."

"How so?"

"I want you to ask for landing instructions. Do so in English, but with an Arab accent. Doing so might avoid a lot of questions."

"Can do. But what about the nose gear?"

"Harry told you?"

I nodded.

We'll recycle the gear two or three times and take our chances," reports Duke.

"Recycling helps?" I asked?

"Sometimes."

The Mirage fighter pilot clicks on his UHF transmitter, "Lead, to Mirage TAB-6 Two..... Should have made contact by now. Probably making their approach from Kuwait...... Let's regroup and head for Al Basrah. We'll stop them there."

In the cockpit of the G550, Duke turns to me and pronounces, "Time to make the call to Basrah approach control."

"You got it."

On the tarmac at Al Basrah International the Lieutenant has his binoculars focused on the sky above the airport watching two jet fighters circling the airport at 12,000 feet. He is communicating to the Sergeant and Corporal what he sees," Looks like two Mirage fighters circling above. They can only be there for one reason. He takes the binoculars from his eyes and turns to the Sergeant."They intend to shoot down the G550 as it makes its approach."

"What can we do to prevent it?"

"Not a lot, I'm afraid. I'm leaving you in charge. I must get to the control tower."

Back In the cockpit of the G550 the voice of Basrah approach control is heard on the radio, "Iranian G550, you are cleared to land on runway 340, contact ground control at 118 MHz. Good day."

The unarmed Lieutenant, followed by armed Airport Security, rushes into the tower and confronts the Basrah Controller, exclaiming, "Warn that Gulfstream on approach to take immediate countermeasures. He's about to be blasted out of the sky by two Mirages."

The Controller immediately begins broadcasting, "Iranian G550.....take evasive action, you are about to be fired upon by three Mirage fighters. Repeating --"

"Iranian G550 take evasive action, you are about to be fired upon by two Mirage fighters.

Duke checks the ECM scope then pushes the throttles to the stop and calmly states, "We're being painted."

Suddenly the Gulfstream rolls on its side, peeling away from the approach pathway. A downward missile zooms by the space where the Gulfstream last was, and hits the ground exploding in a large flame. Then, just as suddenly the G550 reverses the roll and is back onto the glide path. Duke pulls the G550 upright and retards the throttles, correcting its position just in time to attempt a landing but he is approaching much too fast.

"We're coming in hot. Use your feet and press hard on the top of the pedals....that's the brakes," Duke tells Jonathan.

"What if the nose gear collapses?"

"Then it really won't matter how fast we come in."

Instead of settling gently onto the runway, the Gulfstream slams down onto the concrete and then begins its rollout, smoke coming from the braking tires. Duke keeps the nose up long as he can but then in a moment of truth, the gear slowly settles onto the runway.....and holds. The Gulfstream comes to a successful stop and taxis to the tarmac.

Whisked into the interior cabin of the airborne C-130, where the mood is jovial, Harry and I describe to the seal team members events from our point of view. Duke and Debra are sort of by themselves, insofar as you can be by yourself, with fully armed troops seated nearby.

"A foreign fighter can boldly fire missiles at commercial airliners, and get away with it?" I asked the Lieutenant.

"Can if you're an Iranian fighter. We're still on a war footing, I'm afraid," replies the Lieutenant.

"Happen often?"

"Three or four incidents a year, Major."

"How did you know I was once a major?"

"We got a complete briefing on all of you. Even lst Lieutenant Louis "Duke" Osgard, a former U.S. Navy fighter pilot." Then, smiling at Harry, "And then, of course, there's Marine officer, Harry Fletcher. I personally found his brief to be by far the most interesting.”

"Airport manager will notify the jet repair facility where they can pick up their stolen Gulfstream," states Duke.

Debra is giving Duke the "my hero" treatment, "You must tell me more about yourself. Are you married?"

The question obviously sets Duke back a bit. As if it will acquit him of his adulterous behavior, he answers immediately, "Yes."

"And your wife?"

"Hopefully running the business back home and awaiting my return."  
 "Hopefully?"

"We had a bit of a dust-up over my taking on this mission. But she'll get over it....hopefully."

Wasting no time in changing the subject, "And you? What will you do once back in Israel....stay with Mossad?"

"Heavens no. I was only recruited because my sister is with Mossad and I studied Farsi and learned to speak it without an accent. My father is quite a renowned diamond cutter and is contemplating retirement. I intend to learn the business and take his place when he finally gives it up. Tell me about your wife? Is she a professional woman?”

Obviously Duke isn't comfortable with this line of questioning, but sees no way out. "She's an attorney.....former JAG Commander."

"She pretty?"

"Very."

At this point, the Seal Team Corporal enters the cabin from the cockpit and announces, "Listen up. For anyone interested, we're about to land at Ayn al-Asad Air Force Base, located in the Anbar province of western Iraq."

The Corporal's announcement that the troops are home safely from another mission gets a round of applause.

"What happens to us, now?" Harry asks the Lieutenant.

"A C-21Learjet is awaiting our arrival. It will transport your group to Israel in style and comfort. It seems that a certain U.S. governmental agency has ordered the plane stocked with the best Cognac and Champagne money can buy."

At the Ayn Al-Asad Air Force Base, a Learjet C-21 executive jet lifts off. Besides me, inside the cabin, are seated Harry, Duke and Debra. Aside from the uniformed female IAF corporal, Erin, we have the eight passenger cabin to themselves. Erin ap-proaches.

"May I get you gentlemen some refreshments?"

"What do you have?" asks Harry.

Erin begins calling out the names: "Hennessy Paradis Cognac, Louis Roederer and Dom Perignon Champagne, Gentleman Jack Tennessee Whiskey, Chivas Regal Royal Salute Scotch Whisky, Chateau de Puligny-Montrachet, Chateaux Latour and Lafite Rothschild, and for dessert, your choice of Chateau d'Yquem or a Trocken-beerenauslese..... What you don't drink here, you can take home with you, courtesy of a Mr. Raoul Donavan."

"And for the entree?" asks Jonathan.

"Choice between Alaskan wild Sockeye Salmon or a premium, well-marbled, dry-aged filet mignon. I cook everything myself," states Erin.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," I commented, smiling.

"Imagine that. Donavan participating in the padding of our experience accounts," remarks Harry.

"That reminds me, I don't know about you, but I feel rather patriotic. What if we were to charge only expenses for our services. After all, it was a good cause and none of us really has any use for the money except to give it to charity," I suggested.

"If Duke goes along, then I'll go along," Harry agrees.

**Chapter Eight**

At IDF Headquarters, Tel Aviv, Major Joseph Barak’s landline phone rings. He picks up the handset and puts it to his ear. “Major Barak.”

It’s Ehud Mordechai on the other end.

“Ehud. What can I do for you?”

The Mordechai family is gathered in their Montefiore kitchen.

"Major. Have you heard anymore about Debra?"

Mrs. Mordechai watches her husband carefully for any sign.

"She's on her way home. In about 20 minutes I'm having a detail sent over to escort you to the airport," says Barak.

Ehud is weeping as he hangs up the phone, but his expression shows he is clearly weeping with joy. His wife reads his expression and tears of joy pour from her eyes, as well.

At Jerusalem’s small international airport few know about, located on the out-skirts of the city, which houses an Israeli Air Force (IAF) fighter and transportation squadron, a Learjet C-21 taxis to within a few yards of a gate and the cabin door is opened. A reception, including Major Barak and Mr. and Mrs. Mordechai greet the Corporal, two pilots, and four passengers disembarking the plane. Debra, followed by Duke, is the last to come down the stairway. Debra rushes into the arms of her parents where emotions of joy run high.

Harry, Duke and I are approached by the uniformed Major Barak, who introduces himself, "Gentlemen, I am Major Barak. You have what you were expected to deliver?"

Affirmative nods from Harry and Duke.

"Then, gentlemen, I salute you," as he comes to attention and fires off a smart military salute. An equally smart salute is returned by the three of us.

"Now's the time to turn it over," adds Barak.

"Now, Sir, that presents somewhat of a problem," states Duke.

"How so?"

"Due to security and the chance of being frisked, the thumb drives were hidden in sort of a Steve McQueen "Papillon" fashion," says Harry.

"I see," says Barak slowly. “I think we can find you acceptable facilities to make the extraction. In any event, tonight I want all of you to join my wife and me for a Friday night Shabbat dinner."

In a large second story flat located in the heart of Jaffa’s artist colony, there is a large open patio behind which is located the second floor dwelling with magnificent views of both the Colony and Mediterranean.

Inside the flat, in the Barak dining room, seated around the candlelit table are Barak, Ehud and daughter Debra, together Harry, Duke and me. There are two empty chairs at the eight place table. Ehud is thanking Duke, Harry and me for bringing their daughter home.

"I only have two children, both daughters, both working in intelligence. I wish they didn't, but that's their chosen field. I can't thank you enough for bringing my baby safely home."

Barak interjects, “Debra is the child from Ehud's second wife. His eldest daughter, Rachel, is from his first wife. The first wife, Leah, was murdered by a notorious Palestinian killer, who has fled to Tunisia.

Duke reaches for and picks up the wine bottle, carefully refilling everyone's empty glass. Then, lifting his own glass and looking at Ehud, "A toast to those who one day will go to Tunisia and revenge your wife's murder."

Everyone takes a healthy sip of wine. Then, Mordecai's attractive second wife, Hannah and Mrs. Barak come out of the kitchen carrying the specially prepared fish meal. They place the dishes on the table and then sit in the two vacant chairs. Everyone digs in. The Shabbat meal has begun.

The top is down as the late model convertible, with Debra behind the wheel and Duke in the passenger seat, heads north along the Mediterranean.

"Where are you taking us?" asks Duke.

"My sister, Rachel, has a beach shack near Caesarea. Since she's out of the country, I thought we'd go there, for a swim and then have lunch at my friend's restaurant at the ruins."

"Ruins?"

"The ruins of the place Herod the Great built to honor Caesar. It has quite a history, which we'll get into once we're there."

The Caesarea beach shack turns out to be a 4,000 square foot high-end dwelling twice the size of Barak's Jaffa flat. Docked at the pier is a twin mast 60 foot yacht belonging to Ehad. Duke and Debra, nude, are seated together poolside, their feet dangling in the water.

"I understand you're scheduled to return to the States on Wednesday," comments Debra.

"That's affirmative."

"Couldn't you stay over a week or so, give me time to show you our tiny country and explain why the world cannot afford to see Israel driven into the Mediterranean, as many of our neighbors would wish," Debra asks, seductively.

“Afraid not. Besides I'm not into politics. Israel's problems are no concern of mine."

Debra is visibly upset over Duke's answer but recovers enough to suggest, "It's lunchtime. My childhood friend, whom I haven't seen in years, and who now owns an art gallery and restaurant at the ruins, will be expecting us. We don't want to disappoint her."

At the Caesarea Ruins, there is a two story brick building with a restaurant on the top floor and an art gallery on the lower floor, both of which rest next to the cool waters of the Mediterranean. Several establishments, mostly novelty stores catering to tourists dot the edge of the ruins. The ruins themselves consist of tunnels and crumbling walls of what was once a fortress.

Inside the restaurant, Duke and Debra are seated at a window table with a magnificent view of both the ruins and Mediterranean.

"Stick around an extra week and I'll make it worth your while," asserts Debra suggestively.

"How so?" asks Duke, intrigued.

"You know how; don't be silly."

"That's what I was afraid of. Didn't you at least have a boyfriend in all that time you were in Iran?"

"It would not have been smart."  
 "I suppose not."

An overweight woman wearing a tent-like dress and make-up that seems to have been applied with a trowel joins them. Miriam Segal plants herself next to Debra, saying, "So this is the young man you were telling me about over the phone."

"It is," responds Debra.

Miriam looks Duke over carefully, telling him, "I had not expected you to be so handsome. But I don't want her spending any time with you."

"I beg your pardon?" says Duke taken aback.

"For years Debra has been off serving her country instead of studying for the career she is destined to pursue."

"You mean diamond cutting?"

"I mean high-end cutting, like her father does."

"And you're afraid I will be a distraction from those studies."

"Your young Adonis is not only handsome, but smart too," says Miriam to Debra. "Come, let's order lunch.... on the house, of course," as she turns and lifts her hand in a call for a waiter.

The late model convertible is once again heading north, as Duke asks, "Where are we headed now?"

"If you're not staying over then I've only got three more days to show you our tiny country. We'll start with Acre, or Akko, in Hebrew. It's an important, ancient location, sitting in a natural harbor at the northern end of Haifa Bay and includes Khan al-Umdan, the City Walls and the Citadel of Acre."

Debra tells Duke some of the other top tourist spots of Northern Israel that she will show him: "Nazareth and Mary's Well and the Basilica of the Annunciation; Church on the supposed site of Joseph's workshop; Tiberius, from the hill overlooking the city; and the Sea of Galilee, from the waterfront walkway."

That evening, at the Mordechai Montefiore townhouse, Duke and Debra are seated together. The table is set for four, but there are no candles. As Ehud pours the wine, Duke asks: "What, no candles? Isn't this the third meal of Shabbet?"

"While we honor tradition but tend to be more secular than some of our friends. And our meals are not always kosher."

At this point, Mrs. Mordechai comes out of the kitchen carrying a huge silver salver loaded with food, placing the salver in the center of the table, announcing, "Veal Piccata. Bétèavôn."

" Bétèavôn means bon appetit. Enjoy your meal," Debra tells Duke.

Later, on the large deck of the Montefiore complex, overlooking the Walled City, across the canyon, Debra is explaining to Duke the significance of the windmill, located in the southwest corner.

"The windmill is a landmark, designed as a flour mill, it was built in 1857. Today it serves as a small museum dedicated to the achievements of Moses Montefiore, for whom the complex is named."

Duke indicates the Walled City across the canyon, commenting, "And that's the walled city where both the Second Temple, Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque are located."

"We will visit the site tomorrow. Now, let me walk you to your hotel."

They head for the stone steps that will take them up to the street level. Once on street level, they turn right on King David Street and walk towards the King David Hotel, only a few blocks away.

Inside the iconic King David Hotel, in Duke's suite, Duke and Debra are lying in bed together.

"Tell me, what's the life of a diamond cutter like. How many diamonds a day does one cut?" asks Duke.

"A top cutter like my father may cut one diamond a week."

"Only one diamond a week?! I would have thought that he would cut several a day."

"Some do, but not high-end cutters who deal with extremely valuable stones. They spend a day studying the diamond and then another four days thinking about it.....cutting it over and over in their minds. Finally on the sixth day they make the actual cut."

"What does your father do with himself during the thinking period?"

"Play golf."

Inside Jerusalem’s the Walled City, Duke and Debra are walking along the Western Wall.

"Some refer to this as the Wailing Wall, we prefer calling it what it is, the Western Wall of the Second Temple which was destroyed by Titus and the Romans in the year 70 C.E. The Roman siege killed 1.1 million people, the majority of which were Jewish. Now we will go on top, to the Temple Mount, where we will visit the al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock Mosques."

Atop the Temple Mount, Debra and Duke are standing in front of the entrance to the Dome of the Rock Mosque. Debra explains, "As a Gentile, you can go in and look around, but I cannot join you."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm Jewish."

That evening, in the dining room of the Montefiore townhouse, the place setting at the dining table is set for four. Ehud fills Harry's and my wine glasses, saying, "Thank you for accepting my invitation for dinner. The purpose of my invite is to discuss my daughter Debra and Mr. Osgard."

"What are your concerns?" I asked.

"According to Major Barak, your young man is happily married to a terrific woman. This cannot end well for my daughter."

Without saying anything, Harry and I waited for Ehud to explain.

"She's a very mixed up young woman, taken away to perform a mission for which she was much too young and which robbed her of her youth. Right now, she is recapturing that missed youth, at the expense of your friend, I'm afraid. You understand my concern?"

"My friend, you need say no more," I said.

Harry nods agreement.

Mrs. Mordechai enters the dining area carrying the large silver salver, loaded with what looks to be a mouth watering dish. As she lays the salver in the middle of the table, she announces, "Chicken Cacciatore."

"You've probably guessed by now, my wife is Italian," comments Ehud.

Inside Duke’s suite at the King David Hotel, Duke and Debra are in bed.

"So what's your decision?" asks Debra.

"My decision?"

"Are you returning to your wife tomorrow or staying here, with me."

"I'm leaning towards staying," says Duke smiling.

A joyful Debra rolls her nude body on top of his and gives Duke a hint of what's in store for him should he stay.

Among the swaying palms and tropical flowers surrounding the pool of the King's Garden Restaurant, Harry and I are waiting for Duke to join us for lunch.

"Here he comes now," said Harry.

"So, what's up, guys?" asks Duke, taking a seat.

"Just got word that Sirjan is safe; he's at the U.S. Embassy in Armenia.

"That's terrific," affirms Duke, greatly relieved.

"I assume you will be returning to the States with us, this evening?" I asked.

"I've decided to extend my stay by at least a few weeks," says Duke.

"That would be a huge mistake," insists Harry.

"How so?"

I explained, "Kid, you're making a fool out of yourself. I'm old enough to be your father, so let me speak to you as a father. You're risking your marriage over a child trying to grow up .....a street smart kid learning social skills she's never needed before. A year or two she'll be a fine, attractive lady."

"But by then you will have lost someone who is already a fine, attractive, mature lady," Harry stated.

"Smart too," I added.

"And devoted to your well being," says Harry, who climbs to his feet and throws his napkin on the table, pronouncing, disgustedly, "I've lost my appetite!!"

I got up and followed, leaving Duke alone with his thoughts.

Sitting at the table, Duke reflects on meeting drop-dead gorgeous LCDR Janet Fisher who had entered his restaurant in Jacksonville, Florida, Duke's Bar & Grill. During lunch together, they recalled having met on the aircraft carrier where Duke was an aviator and she was the JAG officer defending Major Jonathan Moore. Duke finally gets up and heads for the exit of King's Garden Restaurant.

**Chapter Nine**

Inside the shop of a Ramat Gan diamond dealer, an armed guard is standing by the door as Duke approaches the clerk.

"Does Ehud Mordechai happen to be in?" asks Duke.

"As a matter of fact, he is," answers a clerk.

"I'd like to see him"

"I'll get him for you."

The clerk disappears behind a door. After a moment, Ehud appears, following the clerk.

"Duke? What brings you to my shop?"

"I want to purchase a high quality uncut diamond."

"Uncut?"

"Uncut."

"And what price range did you have in mind?" asks Ehud.

"Half a million U.S." responds Duke.

"I don't have an uncut that size." Brightening, "But I have a flawless uncut for say, 275,000 U.S. Properly cut the stones could be worth two million."

"And improperly cut, it could be worthless?"

Ehud smiles and nods in the affirmative.

That evening, at Ben Gurion International Airport, the female voice announcer is calling for the boarding of passengers for the El Al flight to Paris. Harry and I are together by the gate, obviously hoping that Duke will decide to join us on the flight home.

"Can't wait any longer. We have to board," Harry said.

"Deep down, I thought he would show," I added, dejectedly.

We handed over our boarding passes and entered the cabin of the wide body aircraft.

Once inside the cabin, we took a left turn towards the first class section. As we slipped into our sleeper seats, we happened to glance across the aisle and spot Duke's broad grin.

In the dining room of the Montefiore townhouse, Mrs. Mordechai, Ehud and Debra are savoring a pasta dish when Ehud addresses his daughter. "Duke asked me to give you this."

With that, he pulls out the wrapped package and hands it to his daughter. Excitedly, Debra begins unwrapping the package and soon uncovers the large, uncut diamond.

"It comes with a letter," Ehud tells her as he hands over the letter.

Obviously Debra is startled by the gift. She reads the letter aloud, "The diamond is yours. When you've studied enough to cut it properly, send me one of the smaller stones so that I can have a pinkie ring made to remind me of the success you've made of your life.....post Mossad. Warmest regards, Duke."

Tears are streaming from Debra's eyes. She carefully refolds the letter and looks up at her parents.

"What a lovely man. I shall never forget him," says Debra smiling.

Aboard the El Al Paris flight, Duke and I are engaged in conversation.

"Have you spoken with Janet?" I asked of Duke. .

"She's meeting me at the airport," was Duke’s answer.

I could not help but smile.

Then he added, "By the way, so long as Sirjan gets his fee, I'm all for forgoing my share on this caper. Reimbursement of expenses will be sufficient. After all, we are patriots, not mercenaries."

From the U.N. General Assembly Building, file TV footage shows Benjamin Netanyahu delivering his 27 September 2018 speech before the seventy-third session of the General Assembly and displaying before the world the location of Iran's hidden, yet functional, secret nuclear sites.

**OPERATION: VENGEFUL CROSS-UP**

**PART NINE**

**Chapter One**

**Hi. Looks like you found me** – aboard my yacht relaxing with my friend, Raoul Dona-van as usual. I had just finished relating the full story behind the operation Robin Templar’s Merry Band likes to call *the Iranian Caper Cross-up*. Naturally, Raoul had some questions.

“You mentioned the Mordechai family often, an Israeli family with which I’m somewhat familiar,” said Raoul. “Although I’m aware of Debra and her incredible feat, I’m far more familiar with her older half-sister, Rachel, who has led several high profile Mossad operations.”

“Know her well. In fact Harry and I were with her on one such high-profile opera-tion – and a pip of a mission it was. We were lucky to get out alive.”

“This I’ve gotta hear.”

“And that you shall,” I began. …”The story started long ago, aboard the early morning bus wending its way through the Negev from Be’en Sheva to the nuclear facility in Dimona. Affectionately known as the Mother Bus, the passengers are predominately women, most with children who are placed in the childcare facility at the nuclear plant.”

One such woman is Leah Mordechai, with her 10-month old baby, Baby Rachel. Leah is in a conversation with the fellow woman passenger seated beside her, named Ruth.

"What a cute child. What's her name?" asks Ruth of Leah.

"Rachel."

"Rachel will grow up to be a very beautiful woman."

"Thank you."

"Haven't seen you on the bus before. This your first trip to the reactor?" asks Ruth.

"It is. I was only recently hired.”

The bus driver slows the bus, preparing to stop as he looks ahead at the three men, standing in the middle of the road, waving automatic weapons.

Three Arab men, one with a noticeable scar on his left cheek, motion for the bus to stop, which it does.

Waving his firearm, the man with the scar motions for the driver to open the door. The driver complies and the three Arabs scramble aboard; one of them packing a RF radio transceiver in his fanny pack.

Suddenly, the emergency doors of the bus are thrown open as passengers make a break, scattering into the desert. While the man with the scar points his gun at those still onboard, the other two Arabs open fire on the fleeing passengers. Of the forty who attempted escape, ten are killed or seriously wounded. Passengers remaining inside the bus include nine women, six babies or small children and two men.

Leah cannot control herself. She finds herself staring at the scar on the third Arab's cheek. As this does not please the man known as Scar, he turns on her.

"What're you staring at?" Scar asks in broken Hebrew.

"Nothing. Just wondering when this ordeal might be over," says Leah, also in Hebrew. .

Scar puts the barrel of his weapon to Leah's head, "For you, it's over now."

Scar pulls the trigger of the weapon pointed at Leah's head and blood is splattered against the bus's window. Blood splatter also covers Baby Rachel's face and clothes. Scar then turns and fires on the driver, killing him instantly. Ruth tries to remain calm, but fails in her attempt.

Suddenly, a voice from the radio in the fanny pack is heard, "Israeli Special Forces heading our way. Be at your position in 10 or 15!"

Waving his weapon wildly, Scar shouts out: "Abu Jihad sent us! And until all Israelis are pushed into the sea he will keep coming back."

One of the Arabs declares, "Tell that to your Special Forces."

As the Arabs prepare to exit the bus, a military jeep arrives from behind driven by a third Arab.

The second Arab announces, "The jeep we hijacked has arrived. Time to go."

Exiting the bus, Scar grabs the hand of Ruth, dragging her from the bus with him. Once outside the bus, whether feigning or for real, Ruth collapses. Scar drags her for a couple yards but then releases her and jumps into the jeep, which speeds off.

Ruth climbs to her feet and re-enters the bus. The first thing she sees is Baby Rachel clinging to her dead mother's neck, her face and clothing covered with blood splatter. She's not crying, only trying to awaken her mother. As Ruth moves closer, Baby Rachel turns and looks at her; her eyes pleading for an answer.

At Shayetet-13 headquarters, Rachel, now 30-something-years-old, once again is pleading for an answer, as reflected in her eyes. Seated across the desk from the IDF uniformed Rachel Mordechai is the head of Shayetet-13, the IDF's version of the U.S. Navy Seals. Rachel's uniform sports the insignia of an IDF captain. Both she and Lt. Col. Gur Schreibman wear the coveted paratrooper wings on their uniforms.

"Rachel, don't look at me like that!!" declares Gur.

"Then grant me my leave of absence," states Rachel.

"So you have located Abu Jihad and the man known as Scar?”

"Yes!"

"And you want to avenge your mother's death, which happened 32 years ago! Why now? Why didn't you do this years ago?”

"I wasn't ready."

"Ready?"

"Ready to be an assassin," pronounces Rachel.

"You've killed before," Gur tells her.

"In the line of duty. I've never purposely assassinated anyone."

"And you're ready to do so now?"

Receiving no answer, Gur stands up and walks over and looks out the window. After a few seconds, he turns and looks at Rachel.

"Rachel, Israel cannot afford to be seen as murdering citizens of other countries, no matter how much they deserve it, especially at this time."

Saying nothing, Rachel's eyes remain focused on the commander, officially known only as "G." Enough is enough. Gur comes to the realization that Rachel's will is beyond all understanding and he acquiesces., "All right, what is it you want me to do?"

"I only ask that you not stop me from going after them."

"In Tunisia? You know I cannot officially sanction such an operation."

"Just don't try and stop me."

After several moments, "You cannot use any Israelis in your operation."

"Understood."

"Then who are you going to get to help you, or are you going to conduct the raid all by yourself?”

"I'm going to try and get Issa Said to help me."

"You mean that Arab interpreter?"

"The same."

Gur nods approvingly, "Good choice."

In a popular, Arab owned Jaffa restaurant on the Mediterranean, its customers including Arab, Jew, and journalists from every country, but especially America, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, Rachel Mordechai is seated with Issa Said (pronounced si-eed). Their table overlooks the Mediterranean.

"But madam, what you are asking is impossible. It cannot be done. You'll only get yourself killed in the attempt. An operation like this is for the Mossad and many, many operatives," states Issa.

"I've been promised cooperation from the Mossad in Tunisia," responds Rachel.

"Worthless unless they are willing to expose themselves. And believe me they are not."

The Arabic waiter arrives to present the menus and wine list. The handsome, physically fit and youthful Issa glances at the wine list and then orders in Arabic. When finished the waiter nods his approval and then moves away to fill the order.

"I ordered a Domaine du Castel Grand Cabernet. One of Israel's finest. As you well know, Israel isn't known for its white wines," explains Issa.

"Drinking red wines with sea dishes is something I've gotten used to."

Issa smiles then gets back to the subject at hand, asking, "Out of curiosity, how many did you intend to use in carrying out this operation?"

"Three...besides you and me."

Issa reevaluates the woman seated across from him, "Precisely the number I would have suggested. Who do you have in mind?"

"I only have one of the three in mind. A former U.S. marine officer who is now a successful U.S. importer-exporter, operating out of San Francisco. He's known to put his former skills to work for the right causes."

Nodding approval, Issa inquires, "Importer-exporter! Where do you know him from?"

"Met him aboard a U.S. aircraft carrier when I was an intelligence officer, part of the military exchange program between the U.S. and Israel. Marine Corps Major Jonathan Moore was under arrest for frightening an Iraqi solder into giving up information that saved hundreds of American soldier's lives. I found that to be most interesting."

"Was he convicted?"

"His JAG attorney not only got him off, but with an increase on rank from Major to Lt. Colonel – although he still prefers to refer to himself as a former major.

"And the remaining two? What kind of men do you need?"

"I'll need a computer hacker extraordinaire and someone who can get our people out of a highly secure facility, should team members be arrested or captured by the enemy. Any suggestions?"

"Possibly."

In the Warden's office of Shikma Prison in Ashkelon, the guard escorts Rachel Mordechai and Issa Said into the Warden's office where they are warmly greeted and offered a seat.

"For security reasons I'm only known as Warden. The man you know as Gur phoned and asked me to hear you out. So what can I do for you?"

"I'm interested in two of your prisoners. Marwan Jerrar and Adnan Fares," Issa says.

"Model prisoners except for the fact Marwan has escaped twice and Adnan keeps breaking into our computer room to hack into God knows what highly secure facility. So what is your interest?"

"I'd like to get them temporarily released into my custody."

Flabbergasted, the Warden states, "You're not serious?”

Matter of factly, Issa replies, "Sir, I'm afraid she is.” .  
 The Warden, seeming to notice Issa for the first time, asks "Mr. Said. May I ask just who might you be?"

"I work for Miss Mordechai."

"in what capacity?"

"It's a long story, Warden. Perhaps I should explain."

"Please do," says the Warden.

Issa starts out, speaking in Hebrew, "Besides being notorious Palestinians, the reason we need Marwan Jerrar and Adnan Fares is for their skills. Miss Mordechai is on an unofficial, unsanctioned, mission to avenge the 1988 death of her mother at the hands of the mass murderer Abu Jihad and his henchman known as Scar."

The Warden seems stunned by what he has just heard. Finally, he finds his voice, "If the man known as "G" asks me to release Marwan and Adnan into your custody, I will comply. But I caution you. These are not trustworthy people. They will cross you given the chance. You will need someone capable of riding herd."

Rachel and Issa exchange looks.

In the prison’s cafeteria, heavily armed guards escort small groups of prisoners into the cafeteria where they are then lined up at the buffet to fill their tin plates. Next to each other in the line are Marwan Jerrar and Adnan Fares.

"Where do we stand on that information I asked for," says Marwan to Adnan.

I'll have it for you soon as I can get into the computer room. Should be sometime this afternoon. But the price has gone up."

"You don't say."

"Next time you break out of here, I go with you."

**Chapter Two**

**At San Francisco’s Marina**, “Sweet Charity” is moored out on the very end of the pier. Given the width of the pier, approximately 40 feet of the 90 foot, twin mast yacht is thus on each side of the pier, allowing boats moored inside to be able to get to the sea. Enjoying adult beverages and hors d'oeuvres served by my English butler, Jason Burrell, I’m huddled in the aft lounge with my partner, ex-marine officer Harry Fletcher.

Fletcher, in his late 30s to early 40s, who usually goes by the name Robin Templar when on a covert mission, is listening intently as I explained the mission proposed by Rachel Mordechai.

"I agreed to be a part of her team a week ago. Didn't tell you 'cause I didn't expect you to be involved," explains Jonathan.

"But now you do?" asks Harry.

"Now I do."

"What's changed? You know that as the planner, with full details of the caper, you never go in harm's way, where you could be captured and induced through drugs or whatever to talk -- thus compromising the operation."

"Nothing's changed. I'm still the planner only instead of leading the operation from the luxury of my yacht, this time I'll actually be in the field."

"And why, pray tell, would you want to do that?"

"Has to do with the extra duty I'm asking you to undertake."

"And what might that duty be?" asks Harry cautiously.

"Merely riding herd on two Palestinian prisoners, who have been released into Rachel's custody, and preventing them from escaping or worse."

"Worse?"

"Killiing us."

"And why should we involve ourselves in what sounds like a dangerous operation?"

"Because the young woman we will be helping is Rachel Mordechai, the older sister of Debra Mordechai."

"Debra? You mean that young Mossad agent we extracted from Iran. The daughter of Ehud Mordechai, the diamond cutter?"

"Rachel's half sister."

Near Ashkelon, the Warden is in the process of transferring custody of Marwan Jerrar and Adnan Fares from Shikma Prison to Rachel Mordecai and Issa Said. Finally, the Warden addresses his two prisoners.

"If the mission for which you are being released is successful, then your sentences will be commuted and you will be free men. Get out of line and you'll end up back here. That comes directly from Shayetet-12.”

At Shayetet-12 Headquarters, once again, Rachel Mordechai is seated opposite Lt. Col. Gur.

"As you know, to distance Israel from having anything to do with your mission, should you or your team be exposed, we will muddy your name. First, you'll be dishonorably discharged from the Israeli Air Force. The reason given will be rather vague but will hint at possible treason," states Gur.

"I understand," replies Rachel.

"So where are you keeping Marwan and Adnan?”

"My beach house, at Caesarea."

"How do you plan to get to Tunisia?"

"My father's 60-foot sailboat."

"He is financing your operation?"

"Yes, he is. He wants to bring these monsters to justice as badly as I do," comments Rachel matter-of-factly.

"I suppose that as a world-class diamond cutter and dealer, if anyone can afford it, he can."

At the Caesarea beach house, Rachel, Issa, Harry, Marwan and Adnan are pouring over the large maps I had laid out on the eight-place dining room table. Using a pointer to outline points of interest, I was explaining the mission at hand, beginning with the Mediterranean trek from Caesarea to a Tunisian beach.

"Once we enter Tunisian waters, the yacht "Rachel" will become the yacht "Abu Jihad," I explained. "We still don't have a location on Abu Jihad's house but we have the location of several places he is known to frequent. If we can pick him up at such a location and follow him home."

Marwan yawns. As I looked at him, he yawns again.

"I believe that's enough planning for today," I said. "Why don't we relax or take a swim before dinner. We'll take this up again in the morning. Any questions?"

"When do we set sail?" asks Adnan.

"Tomorrow, at noon," I replied.

Issa and a topless Rachel are in the pool's shallow end, sitting side by side on a built-in underwater bench.

"Are you sure you really want to do this?" asks Issa.

"What do you mean by this?" inquires Rachel.

"Sacrificing your life and career to settle a thirty year old grudge."

"You wouldn't do the same, given the circumstances?"

"I'm not a vengeful person. I suppose that's why I'm considered somewhat of an outcast in the Palestinian community. I'm of the opinion that one revenge only triggers another in which case nothing is ever settled."

Rachel studies Issa's handsome face with renewed interest, "You're a very strange man."

Inside the beach house, in the den, Harry and I were mixing ourselves drinks and discussing the operation at hand.

"When do I start calling you Robin Templar instead of Harry Fletcher?”

"This has the feel of a legitimate operation, not a caper. I don't think we'll be needing the services of Robin Templar."

"Hope you're right. What do you think of our team members -- Marwan and Adnan?"

"Likeable rogues," remarked Harry.

"Yes, but rogues they are. I pray I'm wrong, but my guess is they won't be there when the chips are down.”

In the bedroom of the beach house, Marwan has just gotten out of the shower. Wearing only his robe he is combing his hair when there is a knock at the door. Shortly after the knock, Adnan enters without being invited. He is dressed in reasonably good clothes, if not of a designer label.

"Feels good to once again have your own bedroom and shower," comments Adnan.

"Marwan begins dressing, saying, "I agree. Something very fortuitous has happened to us. We cannot make our escape while in Israel. For that we'll have to wait until we reach Tunisia."

"But why escape before seeing if we can actually pull off the mission?" asks Adnan taken aback.

"Because the mission is impossible," retorts Marwan.

In the dining room, instead of maps, delicious food is placed on the eight person dinner table. Marwan, Adnan, Issa, Harry and I were already seated. The food is being served by the husband and wife staff. Finally, Rachel enters with a 40-plus-year-old Frenchman in tow.

"Gentlemen, this is Claude, our yacht's captain," announces Rachel.

Claude and Rachel take their places at the ends of the table.

"Claude, who speaks only French and English, holds a master's license -- as I believe does Mr. Moore," reports Rachel.

I nodded in the affirmative.

"Claude has generously brought some Bordeaux wines from his home to help celebrate our journey's launch," comments Rachel.

From a valise, the captain extracts five bottles and places them on the table. The husband and wife team begins the uncorking process. The wines are of two labels-- Haut Brion Blanc and Lafite.

The yacht "Rachel" is at sea -- in full sail. Rachel herself is manning the large, wooden steering wheel. On a deck lounge located aft of the wheel, Captain Claude is giving everyone aboard their marching orders.

"Since we'll be traveling at full sail day and night, and the cabins are few, half of you will be crewing during the day and the other half at night. Sleeping arrangements will be what submariners call hot racking. Jonathan and I will share the main cabin while the rest of you will choose your hot rack partner. Only Miss Mordechai will have her own cabin, which cabin will be the basis for further operational planning. The galley is fully stocked and Fletcher, who I understand is a gourmet cook in his own right, will be in charge. Now for the lecture. To keep a yacht of this size at full speed takes a lot of tacking and tacking takes skill. Skills Mr. Moore and I are going to be teaching you. Thanks to the skills of Jonathan and Rachel, we managed to get launched. When we get to Tunisia, you'll all be equally skilled."

While maintaining full sail, on the fantail of the 60-foot twin mast yacht, Marwan and Adnan are dangling over the stern from ropes, painting over the name "Rachel - Caesarea" and replacing it with that of "Abu Jihad - Tunisia."

At Mossad Headquarters, Tel Aviv-Yafo, Lt. Col. Gur Schreibman and Mossad head, Yosef "Yossi" Meir Cohen are seated across the desk from one another.

"I'm not going to divulge any Mossad contact information to your rogue intruders -- but I will have agents contact the intruders once inside Tunisia. Frankly, I'm confused, "G," this mission doesn't seem like anything you would sanction," states Yossi.

"It isn't," replies Gur sheepishly.

The sails of the newly named yacht are coming down. From here on she will be operating by diesel engine. Slowly, the crew members begin filtering into Rachel's cabin where I had a map of Tunisia laid out on the bed. Using my pointer, I went over what was supposed to happen next.

"We're here, about two kilometers offshore from Carthage, which is located near our goal, the city of Tunis," I said, pointing to the map. "A little north of Carthage is the harbor. But we're not going to anchor in the harbor. Instead, we're going to anchor in a little used cove on the Mediterranean side of the harbor."

"Once moored in the cove, Marwan, Adnan and I are going to hike the three kilometers to the harbor and, using my credit card, rent two large vehicles, SUVs if possible. We will then drive the vehicles to the cove. Due to the terrain, we won't be able to actually reach the cove, but should get within half a kilometer."

At the Carthage Harbor, Marwan, Adnan and I finally arrived by foot. Several businesses operate on a street paralleling the inner harbor, one of which is a national car rental agency. I pointed out the rental agency and the three of us headed in that direction.

**Chapter Three**

The discrete two-story, 3,600 square foot Mossad safe house is located at the end of a cul-de-sac. The cul-de-sac is by design as it allows for escape by a little used road in the back of the house.

The four Arab Mossad agents are made up of two husband and wife teams, one couple being Fatima Haniyeh Saridi and Avish Saridi and the other Uataf Allem Najib and Gearge Najib. Neither couple actually lives at the safe house. Everyone is gathered in the living room.

"Gur's mavericks should be arriving any time now," says Fatima. To Gearge, she asks, "Is your man staked out at the harbor?"

"Since we don't have a description of the yacht, but know they'll have to rent one or more vans or SUVs, I have my man staking out the harbor's sole rental agency," reports Gearge.

"What's our mission once we find these rogues?" asks Uataf Najib.

"Only to help them locate the domiciles of Abu Jihad and his henchman, the man known as Scar," answers Avish Sandi.

"You sure that's such a good idea?" asks Uataf.

"We'll have to play the hand we're dealt. Once that objective is met, our job is done. We're not to risk compromising our positions by assisting in what Gur calls a rogue operation. In other words, don't do anything that might implicate or compromise Israel." states Fatima.

At the Carthage Harbor, Marwan, Adnan and I enter the car rental agency. Lounging outside, Kamran Shah decides to follow them in, listening to their conversation with the rental agent.

Inside the car rental agency, Marwan addresses the attractive rental agent, speaking in Arabic, "We will need two vans or SUVs. Preferably of a dark color."

While conservatively dressed, the Muslim Rental Agent does not wear the hijab or any other sign of her faith, speaking in Arabic, "I think we can accommodate you," as she produces the paperwork and places it on the counter. "If you'll just fill out the rental agreement, show me two driver's licenses and a credit card."

Marwan turns to Jonathan, speaking in English, "She needs a credit card and two driver's licenses. I have my international license."

"I have one, as well," I responded. .

Marwan, smiling broadly at the agent, says "Then we're set."

Two identical vans, one black and one dark green, are wending their way towards the cove. I was driving the black van while Marwan is behind the wheel of the green van, with Adnan his passenger.

"I don't understand. Thought you were going to split once we hit Tunisia. So why are we following Jonathan back to the cove?" asks Adnan.

"As you once said, why escape before we see if we can actually pull off this stupid mission?" says Marwan.

"What changed your mind?"

"I find this Jonathan Moore and Harry Fletcher very interesting."

Following the two vans is a nondescript vehicle, being driven by Kamran Shah, discreetly and expertly following the two vans. The road doesn't go all the way to the cove. The vans pull up at road's end and the occupants climb out and briefly huddle.

"We'll leave the vans here. Lock the doors and leave the keys on top of the left front tire," I directed.

Kamran Shah's vehicle pulls up, spots the scene and quietly backs off. Kamran parks his vehicle so as to block off the dirt road. He then climbs out and approaches the group huddled ahead.

Marwan, Adnan and I then begin hiking in the direction of the cove, which Kamran discreetly following.

At the Cove, the yacht is anchored about 75 yards offshore. Piloted by Rachel, the FC-580 RIB Zodiac, with its twin outboard engines, leaves the yacht, headed for shore.

On shore, Marwan, Adnan and I patiently awaited its arrival. Suddenly, the three are joined by Kamran Shah, who introduces himself. "I believe you are part of the group I am seeking."

Everyone is gathered in Rachel's cabin where Kamran Shah is explaining his presence and laying down the rules.

"You will not contact us. We will contact you. We have been asked, unofficially of course, to assist you in locating the homes of Abu Jihad and the man known only as Scar; rumored to be located in or near Tunis. This we are prepared to do. Now, if you will give me the name of the hotel where you'll be staying, my people will be in touch.

The Four Seasons Hotel in Tunis, a 35-suite, 203 room hotel, is located on a hillside, beachfront setting in the affluent Gammarth neighborhood; 20 minutes from the Tunis-Carthage International Airport. In Jonathan's suite, a meeting is taking place. In attendance are Rachel, Harry, and I representing one side, and Fatima, Avish and Kamran Shah representing the other.

"We have put together a list of places in or near Tunis where Abu Jihad has been seen in the recent past. By combining our resources, I suggest we cover these sites. If Abu Jihad is seen at any of these locations, then we will follow him home. As for the man known as Scar? He will be much harder to locate," explains Shah.

"You're aware of the small number of people in our group. What about your people?" asks Harry.

"I cannot divulge our numbers, but rest assured, we have enough to do the job," responds Shah.

"Then I suggest we get started," I declared.

At this point Fatima jumps up and passes out 3 x 5 cards to Fletcher's group, telling them, "Here are the locations we will need to cover."

Fatima's husband pipes up, "Let Fatima know which locations your people can cover. Our people will cover the rest. If that's it, then we will do as Jonathan suggested.... get started."

At the Four Season’s Creek Bistro Chic Restaurant, Rachel, Harry and I are at a table enjoying the terrific food and going over the 3 x 5 location lists given us by Fatima.

"How are we going to cover all these locations with only two vehicles?" I asked.

"We'll just have to rent more," urges Rachel

"Hopefully that won't be necessary," comments Harry.

"How so?" asks Rachel

"First thing in the morning, Jonathan will purchase six prepaid, burn, cell phones, one for each of us. Jonathan will be in charge of the black van and Marwan the green one. Both will locate themselves in areas where our prey is most likely to appear,” explains Harry.

"I get it. The person spotting the prey, as you call him, phones the one with the nearest van and together they follow him, hopefully to his home," answers Rachel.

At various locations in and around Tunis, I dropped off Rachel, then Harry. At the same time, at various locations, Marwan drops off Issa, then Adnan. Then I drove to yet another location where Abu Jihad has been known to frequent. I parked and exited the van walking to a location where I blended into the crowd. Marwan, driving the other van, does the same.

At the Creek Bistro Chic Restaurant, the waiter escorts Rachel, Harry and I to a table and hands each of us a menu, saying in English, "Cocktails?"

Rachel answers him in French, "A bottle of Eau-de-Vie. You pick the label."

"I will do my best, mademoiselle."

"Eau-d-Vie?" queries Harry.

'Water of life. Refers to a fruit-based distilled brandy," Rachel explains. "Sounds interesting. As for tomorrow, we do the same thing, and the day after that, if necessary," states Harry.

"Fatima and her team are working the night shift. Maybe they'll come up with something," I added. .

At this point, an older man with an attractive female 20-years his junior in tow, is escorted to a nearby table. Rachel nudges Harry and me, "Notice anything unusual about the man being escorted to his table?”

Harry and I cannot help noticing the scar on the man's cheek. Harry reaches into his inside jacket pocket and pulls out a series of 3 x 5 photographs. Comparing one set of photographs with the man at the nearby table would indicate a match. Indeed, the facial features and shape of the scar are identical.

"That's him," says Harry.

"What'll we do?" asks Rachel.

"Calmly finish our meal. When he leaves, so will we," I stated.

Finally, Scar and the young woman exit and head for their car in the parking lot. Mere moments behind them, Rachel, Harry and I also exited only to make our way towards our van. Scar and the young lady reach their car moments before we reached our van. As the car pulls out, Harry and I purposely appear to be in no hurry. I slowly climbed in behind the wheel and started the engine. Then, keeping the lights off until we reached the street, the van discreetly follows the sedan. At a stop light the van has no choice but to slip in behind the sedan. Rachel takes the opportunity to record the sedan's license plate number. When the light changed, I stayed as far behind the sedan as possible, without losing track.

In the van, Rachel makes clear her objective, "I and I alone will be the one who kills Scar. I want that, understood."

"And Abu Jihad?" asks Harry.

"The same goes for him!"

The van continues following the sedan through the streets of Tunis. Finally, the sedan arrives at its destination; the apparent residence of the man known as Scar. The van parks a half block from the house.

"We need to make sure we have the right place," states Harry.

"How do you propose doing that?" asks Rachel.

"We do a recce," says Jonathan.

"Recce??" asks Rachel.

"Reconnaissance," I answered.

"When Jonathan and I get out, you get behind the wheel and be prepared to get us out of here in a hurry," asserts Harry.

Fletcher and I climb out of the van and cross the street, heading for the house.

Rachel, Harry, Issa, Marwan, Adnan, Fatima, Avish and Kamran Shah and I are gathered in Jonathan's suite.

"It's Scar's home, all right. He rents it from a large real estate firm," reports Harry.

"I want the raid to take place in three days -- three nights, to be precise," pro-nounces Rachel.

On a nearby table, I had my ubiquitous maps laid out, "Let's get busy with the planning."

Everyone gravitates toward the table.

In the black van, Harry is behind the wheel; Rachel in the passenger seat, with Marwan, Adnan and Issa in the back.

"What happened to Jonathan? Why isn't he here?" asks Rachel of Harry.

"Jonathan is the planner. He never goes in harm's way."

The black van and blue SUV each enter from different ends of the street and park. The occupants pile out and head towards the house. Suddenly, the front door of the house opens and Scar and the girl friend emerge. They hasten to a sedan, parked in front, and step in; starting the engine, with Scar behind the wheel, the car heads down the street. Both Fatima and Harry's teams scramble for their vehicles in order to give chase. As the sedan approaches the end of the street, Scar notices the woman and an unusual number of men making their way towards a parked black van. Sensing trouble, he steps on the gas and roars down the street.

As the sedan roars past, Harry's team jumps aboard their van. Turning the vehicle around, they give chase. The sedan, followed by the van, is on a dangerous, high-speed chase through the streets of Tunis. There are numerous near misses with both pedestrians and other vehicles. To avoid traffic, both sedan and van occasionally resort to driving on the sidewalk -- with all the chaos and flying debris involved in such a move.

There are the sharp turns where only skilled drivers could avoid losing control. Gunshots are fired from both vehicles. In the background, sirens are heard. Finally, Harry is able to get a shot off that blows the left front tire and causes the sedan to crash into a building. According to the sounds of the sirens, the police are closing in.

Harry pulls the van up, next to the sedan, where Rachel can get a clean shot. With the passenger side window rolled down, Rachel takes aim with her Glock 9mm and fires two shots. Both shots hit their mark. Rachel gets set to fire again, this time at the girlfriend. It is Issa who quietly voices objection, "No Rachel!! It's not necessary."

Rachel hesitates, and then lowers her weapon without firing. As the police approach, Harry peels out and now another chase is on. Only this time it's between the van and several police units. Sirens are screaming!! By skillfully maneuvering, Harry manages to put a little distance between the van and police units.

"Up ahead I'm going to make a right turn in front of a hotel and come to an abrupt stop. You will, of course, flee the van and enter the hotel. Be careful not to flash your weapons," states Harry.

Harry makes the turn and pulls to a stop in front of an inexpensive hotel. Everyone but Harry flees the van and heads for the hotel lobby. Harry then puts the pedal-to-the-metal and roars down the street with the police units close behind. This chase is pretty much a repeat of the previous one; sharp turns, driving on sidewalks, numerous near misses with both pedestrians and other vehicles.

One of the police units with two officers inside manages to come alongside of the van. Still moving at high speed, one of the officers points a gun through the passenger side window and fires at Harry. Through his open window Harry returns fire, but aiming at the patrol unit's tires. The left front tire explodes, resulting in the patrol unit losing control and crashing into a parked vehicle, barely missing the van.

As the chase continues, the second patrol unit pursuing the van pulls next to it. Shots are exchanged between the patrol unit and the van. Shots fired from the patrol unit are aimed at the van's driver. Suddenly the back window explodes. Those shots fired from the van are aimed at the pursuer's tires. The right front tire of the second patrol unit explodes and the unit crashes into a concrete wall.

At this point, three patrol units coming from the opposite direction appear in front of the van. Harry has no alternative but to pull up and surrender.

**Chapter Four**

It’s nighttime at the Tunis Police Station as Harry's prints are being taken electronically. He is then placed in a cell as at the same time everyone is once again gathered in Jonathan’s Four Seasons suite.

"I don't understand why Marwan and Adnan are late. Issa is checking their rooms," reports Rachel.

At this point there is a knock on the door. Fatima opens the door. It is Issa. He enters and reports, "Marwan and Adnan have checked out. I checked with the bus and train stations then the airport. They caught a flight to Morocco."

“I can't believe they would do this, especially now that we need them," responds Rachel, devastated.

"The Warden warned us they would cross us the first chance they got," states Issa.

"Forgive me for not understanding, but why would we need them now?" asks Shah.

"To break Fletcher out of jail!!" pronounces Rachel.

In an interrogation room at the Tunis Jail, Fletcher is being questioned by Lieutenant Ban Ali and a sergeant who calls himself Beji, "Is there a reason you did not have any identification on you? Not even a passport?"

"Must've misplaced it."

""I'll tell you why? Your prints came back, Major Harry Fletcher, formerly of the Marine Raider Regiment, a division of the Marine Corps Special Operations Command. Correct me if I'm wrong, but Special Forces personnel do not carry personal ID when on a covert operation," states LT Ben Ali.

"You've got an impressive war record, Fletcher," states SGT Beji.

"Now I want to know why a highly decorated U.S. Marine Corps officer was involved in a shootout with my patrolmen," requests LT Ben Ali.

"We dug two 9mm slugs from that Palestinian you shot and his lady friend says the shots were fired from a van just like the one you were driving," reports SGT Beji.

"The gun we found on you was a 9mm, was it not?" asks LT Ben Ali.

"I suggest you check ballistics," comments Harry.

Noticing the sergeant and lieutenant exchanging looks, Harry, smiling, says "You've already done that, haven't you. And the results?"

"Even without ballistics, with all the charges we've got against you, you're likely to be spending the next three years with us. Believe me; I'm going to get to the bottom of this, one way or the other. If you have anything to say, say it now," demands LT Ben Ali.

"How's the food in this joint?" asks Harry.

Over drinks from the mini bar, at the Four Seasons Resort in Marrakech, Marwan and Adnan are discussing their present situation as well as their future.

"I've tapped into my Swiss bank account. We've enough money to live like kings, at least for the next year or so," reports Marwan.

"And after that, we can always go back to what we do best," comments Adnan.

"Which, you'll recall, landed us in jail."

"As one popular TV detective once said, "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time."

In Rachel’s Suite, the handsome and physically fit Issa is in bed with Rachel. Under the covers, they are discussing their current situation.

"I wouldn't worry too much about Marwan and Adnan. They will be back. I wouldn't have recommended them if I felt differently. They have a lot to gain should our mission be successful," says Issa reassuringly.

"With or without them, and with or without Harry, we need to plan our raid on Abu Jihad."

"And why is that? You got the man who killed your mother, isn't that enough?"

"Not until I get the man who gave the orders. It took me several years to work myself to the point where I felt able to coldly assassinate someone. It's now or never," asserts Rachel.

"Never couldn't be too soon for me."

Later, Rachel and Issa are huddled with me in my suite.

"Fatima's team should've come up with an address on Abu Jihad's location by now," reports Jonathan.

"Frankly, I doubt they're working in our best interests," remarks Issa.

"Why say such a thing?" asks Rachel.

"i don't think anyone wants us to complete our mission." asserts Issa.

"I tend to agree. If I were advising you, I would say forget about Abu Jihad and get out of Tunisia soon as possible. I, of course, will stay and do whatever it takes to get my partner out of jail," I added.

Suddenly there is a knock at the door. Rachel moves to open the door. Upon opening she is greeted by the cheerful and smiling Marwan and Adnan.

"Sorry we're late," Marwan tells her.

"There's this restaurant, the Casa Lalla, in Marrakesh that we just had to try," adds Adnan.

"And the food?" asks Issa.

"Pardon?" asks Adnan.

"Was the food worth the trip?"

"That depends on what happens next?" says Adnan.

"What happens next is you two break Fletcher out of jail. Then we take out Abu Jihad, Rachel fires back.

In the hotel business center, Adnan is seated in front of one of the hotel's computers, working the keys. Marwan is standing behind him, watching the screen.

"Okay, I've got the name and manufacturer of the Tunis Police Station's cell locks. You'll be happy to learn that it's a manufacturer we've dealt with before," comments Adnan.

Back in my suite, Marwan and Adnan are briefing Rachel, Issa and me.

"The best way to get Fletcher out of jail is for me to be arrested and put in the same or nearby cell," explains Marwan.

"But, if you're arrested, won't your Israel criminal record turn up? Couldn't that be problematic?" asks Rachel.

"Could, except I don't plan to be in jail that long; Still, I doubt Tunisia has an extradition agreement with Israel," reports Marwan.

"You'll need to commit a misdeameanor, one that will only get you jailed overnight," suggests Adnan.

"Drunk and disorderly comes to mind," says Marwan.

"To get arrested on a drunk and disorderly charge, you'll have to cause some kind of disturbance," states Issa.

Located on the beach, the upscale Sinbad Resto Lounge caters to Europeans and the price of the beer, wine, and cocktails is reasonable. An apparently inebriated Marwan takes a swing at the security guard, knocking him to the floor. As the floored guard climbs to his feet he reaches for his cell phone and presses a button that automatically dials the Tunis Police Department, saying, "That was very stupid. Then, coming from the cell phone, "Tunis Police Department. How may I direct your call?"

A handcuffed Marwan is led into the cellblock. The handcuffs are removed and he is tossed into a cell next to that of Fletcher. Marwan's cell contains two other prisoners and Fletcher's cell three extra prisoners. Recognizing Marwan, Fletcher, now wearing an orange jump suit, gravitates to their mutual cell bars -- where Marwan, in his street clothes, is waiting for him.

"I'm here to get you out. Of the other prisoners in your cell, do any speak English?" asks Marwan.

"They all do."

"Good. Tell them that if they keep quiet while I unlock the cell doors, they might have a chance to escape."

"You can do that?"

"That's why I was hired, wasn't it?"

"So you unlock the cell doors, we're still in a police station with patrolmen wan-dering the corridors?"

"That's the pièce de resistance. Only to access it, I'll need a moment on the toilet."

Fletcher's eyebrows rise.

Back in my suite at the Four Seasons, Rachel, Adnan, Issa and I are checking our watches. Rachel is looking through a packet containing the passports and driver's licenses of Marwan and Fletcher.

"What've you got there?"Adnan asks of Rachel.

"Marwan and Fletcher's IDs; passports and the like. According to his passport, this Harry Fletcher is one well traveled individual," reflects Rachel.

"Marwan wants us to be circling the block in which the police station is located -- beginning at 2 pm," states Adnan nervously.

"We still have 55 minutes," comments Issa.

In the cellblock, Marwan is at the sink, washing a small canister, approximately 4 inches in length. Again he approaches Fletcher at their mutual cell bars. Through the bars, Marwan hands the canister to Fletcher.

"Might I ask if the contents of this canister are lethal?" asks Harry.

"They are not. It's an old Russian based formula that I cooked up which immediately knocks out the victim from 15 to 20 minutes."

Marwan then opens the heel of his remaining shoe and extracts what looks like a lock pick kit. "Now, let's get the hell out of here," he urges as he goes to work on the lock.

In the hallway of the police station, Marwan, in his street clothes, drawing minimum attention, makes his way down the deserted hallway leading from the cells. In his hand he holds the aerosol canister. Following at a safe distance is Harry, in his yellow jump suit. Following along behind Harry are the remaining prisoners.

Suddenly, a jailhouse officer appears in the hallway, "Sorry, sir. But I'll need to see some identification."

With the aerosol canister held behind his back, Marwan approaches the officer -- his free hand pretending to reach for his wallet. Finally, standing in front of the officer, Marwan whips the canister from behind his back and sprays the contents in the officer's face. The officer's legs buckle and he slowly drops to the floor.

On the street in front of the Tunis Police Station, Marwan and Harry rush out of the police station just as Rachel pulls up in front. The escapees climb into the black van and Rachel roars off.

Heading for the Four Seasons Hotel, Rachel addresses Harry, "You cannot afford to be seen on the streets, so once we reach the Four Seasons, we'll depart and you will drive the van to the cove, where you'll prepare for our escape once I've killed Abu Jihad."

:"You can't be serious," asserts Harry.

"But I am."

Seated in the passenger, I interrupted as Harry started to protest. "Harry, Rach-el's right. At this point, should you be picked up, it would only hamper the operation."

On the street in front of the Four Seasons, the black van pulls up in front of the hotel and all but Harry climb out. Harry replaces Rachel behind the wheel.

"You may need these," says Rachel as she hands over Harry's passports and license.

The van then drives off, disappearing into the night.

It’s a moon bright night as the van pulls up at the end of the road leading in the direction of the cove, and parks. Climbing out of the van, before starting his trek towards the cove and the yacht, Harry places the van's keys atop the vehicle's left front tire. Then he is on his burn phone, calling Captain Claude. Getting an answer he demands, "Pick me up on the shore in twenty!" He clicks off the cell phone and starts the short walk to the Mediterranean beach.

**Chapter Five**

Again, at Rachel’s Four Season’s suite, Issa and Rachel are under the covers. As it is almost morning, neither is asleep.

"Why risk going through with the assassination? Harry is already aboard the yacht. We could round up Jonathan, Marwan and Adnan and join them and be on our way back to Israel?" asks Issa.

"Because my job is not finished. Abu Jihad is the one who sent Scar and his men to attack the Mother Bus. You think I would let him go free??" declares Rachel angrily.

"I was wishing for exactly that."

Stunned, Rachel sits up in bed, "I don't understand."

"Since embarking on this mission, are you not aware of what you've become?"

Rachel, Issa, Marwan, Adnan, Fatima, Avish and Kamran Shah are gathered in my suite.

"Don't ask me how but Jonathan has located the house being rented by Abu Jihad. We take him down tonight!!" retorts Rachel determinedly.

There is a car parked in front of Abu Jihad’s house.

"You're sure that's his car?" asked Rachel.

"Positive," I answered.

Carrying a large box of chocolates that conceal her hand, holding a silenced pistol, Rachel approaches the vehicle. Reaching the car, she shoots the bodyguard through the head. The combined team quickly surrounds the house. Fatima's team breaks through the reinforced wooden door with the help of specialized, noise reducing equipment. Both teams then sneak into the house. Avish waits outside as security.

Marwan and Adnan head for the basement while Rachel, Issa, Fatima, Avish and Shah rush upstairs, toward Abu Jihad and his wife's bedroom.

In the basement, Marwan and Adnan kill the second bodyguard, as well as an unlucky Tunisian gardener who had chosen to sleep there.

Abu Jihad isn't sleeping. Instead, he's in his office sitting at his desk writing a letter. A faint noise outside startles him. Jihad picks up his special silver-handled pistol, and turns toward the entrance. Opening the door, Abu Jihad finds himself standing before Rachel, Issa, Fatima, and Kamran Shah, their weapons drawn. Jihad's wife, Umm Jihad, is standing in the background.

Abu Jihad raises his pistol and prepares to fire. But Issa jerks the weapon out of his hand. Umm jumps forward and throws her arms around her husband. Their 16-year-old daughter Hanan, awakened by the disturbance, bursts into the room. The two-year-old baby, Nadal, wakes up and bursts into tears.

Issa, Kamran Shah, and Fatima await, ritual like, while Rachel approaches Abu Jihad, weapon in hand. She puts the gun to Abu Jihad's head and prepares to fire. There is a long pause, finally she lowers the gun and lets it fall to the floor, "Enough!!" she says aloud, then rushes from the room, fleeing downstairs and outside the house.

Only Issa allows himself a slight smile.

"What the hell do we do with him??" asks Shah.

"Nothing," replies Issa.

Without harming Abu Jihad, his wife, daughter or the two-year-old, the team quickly descends the stairs and rushes outside.

Marwan and Adnan are ripping a small safe out of the wall and taking most of the documents therein with them.

Outside Rachel is shouting, "Allez! Allez!"

Knowing it's only a matter of minutes before the alarm is sounded, Rachel, Issa, Adnan and Marwan climb into the van and with Jonathan behind the wheel, speed away.

Police are setting up roadblocks. An announcement is made, closing the airport, "Attention: Flights out of Tunis-Carthage International Airport are delayed until further notice."

Ground forces and helicopters are scrambled.

Meanwhile the van, heading toward the secluded cove where the yacht is anchored, is playing hide and seek with oncoming headlights in the fear such headlights might belong to a police patrol unit.

The van finally arrives at the harbor and the dirt road to the cove. Reaching the end of the dirt road, Jonathan parks the black van next to the blue van and Marwan, Adnan, Rachel and Issa climb out. While placing the keys on top of the left front tire, Rachel whips out her burn phone and dials Harry.

"We're at land's end. Be there shortly," Rachel tells Harry.

Everyone starts walking towards the cove.

Next to the yacht, engines are fired up and Harry steers the Zodiac towards the shore.

On the path to the cove, the pace of the team seems a bit faster than usual as they want to get-out-of-Dodge quickly as possible. The team reaches the cove and is greeted by Harry and the Zodiac. They climb aboard as the twin engines are wound up.

The sun is just starting to rise as the Zodiac approaches the yacht and Captain Claude prepares to take it aboard.

Back in Israel, at Shayetet-13 headquarters, as usual Lt. Col. Gur Schreibman is at his desk, working around the clock. His phone rings. He picks up. "Hello? … Rachel?"

The yacht is under full sail. Sitting beside me in the fantail lounge, Rachel on her cell.

"We're on our way home. Scar is dead. While Abu Jihad is still alive, I have a feeling he will be dealt with shortly. We cleaned out his safe of what looks to be his top secret reports and orders; could be a treasure trove of intelligence."

The expression on Gur's face is one of sheer delight as he responds, "That's terrific. Call me as soon as you're back in Caesarea."

As Rachel clicks off her cell, I whipped mine out, "I better phone the rental agency. Tell them where to pick up the two vans and where to find the keys. Otherwise they'll keep billing my credit card."

The yacht, in full sail, has tacked its way home and now, with sails down, is preparing to tie-up at the beach house pier.

Inside the Caesarea beach house, seated at the table in the dining room, are Marwan, Adnan, Issa, Rachel, Captain Claude, Harry and I; food being served by the husband and wife staff. Rachel stands and addresses the group.

"Everyone; that is except for Captain Claude, Harry and Jonathan, has an appointment to meet with the heads of Mossad and Shayetet-13 at Mossad headquarters, 11 am tomorrow. Marwan and Adnan, you'll personally turn over the intelligence you recovered from Abu Jihad's safe."

Rachel then takes her seat and the wine flows freely.

Lt. Col. Gur Schreibman and Mossad head, Yosef "Yossi" Meir Cohen, are seated across the desk from Marwan, Adnan, Issa and Rachel. Yossi, addressing Marwan and Adnan, says, "I understand you have some documents for me."

Marwan places a large brief case on top of the desk, "Yes, sir. It's all here."

Yossi and Gur exchange looks and then Yossi takes charge of the briefcase after which he addresses both Marwan and Adnan, "You both deserve the President's Medal for your contribution."

Gur, interrupting, "Instead, as I promised, you get your freedom. Rachel, your rank as an officer in good standing in the IDF will be reinstated. But first I have an assignment for you, details of which we'll discuss later."

As Yossi stands, they all stand.

"Thank you for coming. It would be my personal pleasure to shake all your hands. You all deserve medals, but since it was a rogue mission, well -- ," states Yossi.

"Sir, we understand," says Marwan.

Yossi shakes Marwan's hand first, followed by the others.

Issa and Rachel are laughing, hugging and kissing while visiting many of Northern Israel's top tourist spots, including Khan al-Umdan, the City Walls and the Citadel of Acre; Nazareth and Mary's Well and the Basilica of the Annunciation; the Church on the supposed site of Joseph's workshop; Tiberius, from the hill overlooking the city and Sea of Galilee.

Back at Shayetet-13 headquarters, Rachel is again sitting across the desk from Lt. Col. Gur Schreibman.

"Hamas is up to their old habits of digging tunnels and lobbying rockets into Israel and if they don't stop, the Israeli Air Force is going to have to launch some raids," states Gur.

"And you want me to go undercover and pinpoint coordinates for the Gaza sites where they are storing their rockets? You’ll also need casualty assessment," comments Rachel.

"You know their propensity for storing ammunition in schools and hospitals. Giving coordinates that won't put civilians in harm's way will be extremely difficult. You won't be alone, but I'm relying on your accuracy."

"I understand, sir."

**Chapter Six**

At the family’s Montefiore quarters, Rachel and Issa are enjoying dinner with Rachel's father. They are at the point where dessert is being served by the maid/cook.

"At least you were able to avenge your mother's murder at the hands of the criminal, Scar. Nobody can fault you for failing to get Abu Jihad, as well," asserts Ehud Mordechai.

"I understand Abu Jihad has since been dealt with," states Issa.

"At least I wasn't a part of it," says Rachel.

"I don't understand," says Ehud, taken aback.

"Revenge only leads to further revenge. It poisons the mind. At some point, the cycle must stop!!" responds Rachel

In the Old City, Issa and Rachel are walking along in front of the Western Wall. "You know with this revenge thing no longer on your mind, you're actually a delight to be around. But I don’t understand why you would put yourself in danger by going undercover into Gaza?”

"That information is highly classified. You must never mention it again!!" exclaims Rachel, taken aback.

On the Temple Mount, the Al Aqsa Mosque rests on the southern side of the Mount, facing Mecca. The Dome of the Rock currently sits in the middle, close to the area where the Holy Temple previously stood. Facing each other, in front of the Dome of the Rock, Rachel and Issa are in a heated discussion.

"But I can give you cover. If you pretend to be a journalist for Reuter's or the Daily Mail then, with me as your guide and interpreter you can go practically anywhere in the strip," persists Issa.

"You're that well known?" inquires Rachel

"I am."

On a Gaza City Street, Issa and Rachel are walking past a mosque. In her hand, Rachel is carrying a high-end digital camera, with her press credential badge pinned on her suit jacket.

Indicating the mosque, Issa remarks, "I wouldn't be surprised if that mosque contained all kinds of bombs and ammunition."

"I've already texted enough coordinates to keep the air force busy for days. We better find a shelter. They could start bombing any time, now," reports Rachel.

"Yes. Those 2000-pound, laser-guided bombs can ruin a person's day should one be only slightly off course."

Issa no sooner finishes his remark that the sound of F-16s and AH-64 Apaches are heard in the distance.

"Here they come," cries Rachel, as they both start running towards a shelter.

While the Apaches suppress ground fire, smart bombs roll off the rails of the approaching F-16s. Bombs explode and several buildings receive direct hits. The roar of the jets is deafening but it's over in less than 20 seconds as the aircraft head out over the Mediterranean and climb to altitude.

Issa and Rachel emerge from the protection of a doorway structure.

"This will likely be followed by another in 20 minutes or so," states Rachel.

"And these bombs are falling precisely on targeted locations?" asks Issa amazed. "Can't say they weren't warned. The IDF has been dropping leaflets and sending phone messages warning of the raids."

"Hopefully, Hamas will come to their senses and cease lobbing bombs into our southern cities."

"Hopefully, this operation won't escalate into a ground operation.  
 "My thoughts, exactly."

Suddenly, the sound of approaching jets. Issa and Rachel duck into the protect-tion of the doorway structure.

Once again, smart bombs roll off the rails of the approaching F-16s. Bombs explode, with secondary explosions as buildings receive direct hits. The deafening roar of the jets recedes as the aircraft head out over the Mediterranean and once again climb to altitude.

In the IAF Operations Center, the Air Ops Officer is receiving reports from his people on the ground through phone and text messages, "Sir, reports are that we are occurring some civilian casualties, but below what we estimated. Dropping the pamphlets seems to be paying off," reports the Communications Officer.

"The question is whether or not to launch a third raid before getting all the casualty reports," mutters Air Ops Officer.

"If we don't strike, by tomorrow all the bombs and ammunition will be moved and our current coordinates won't be worth a damn," says the Communication Officer.

"I agree," adds the Air Ops Officer. Turning to his Strike Officer, he orders, "Launch the third strike."

Back at the Gaza City street, once again Issa and Rachel emerge from the protection of a doorway structure. They hug each other more for their good fortune to still be alive and uninjured than for any romantic inclinations. But that soon changes. The hug evolves into a passionate kiss.

Finally breaking off, Issa comments, "Please, don't make me tell you how much I love you. It's against my nature."

Again the sound of approaching jets.

"I fully understand," affirms Rachel, delightedly.

Hearing the sounds overhead, once again they duck under the protection of the doorway structure. This aerial attack is no different from the previous two. The Apaches come in to suppress ground fire while the F-16s launch their smart bombs at the GPS coordinates given them by ground operatives. Smart bombs roll off the rails of the approaching F-16s. Bombs explode and the targets receive direct hits.

A rocket missed by the Apaches lifts off from the ground with one of the F-16s as its target. Getting a possible lock, the F-16 immediately dispenses both chaff and IR flares. The rocket approaches the fighter but runs into the chaff-flare combo and explodes prematurely. Although the blast does little harm to the F-16, it does rock the aircraft just as it launches one of its laser-guided bombs. The bomb goes wild and lands on an unintended site, a Gaza City street. The explosion is tremendous. The deafening sound of the jets subsides as they disappear over the Mediterranean.

The bomb has hit the street not far from where Issa and Rachel are holed up under the doorway structure. Slightly stunned, Rachel starts to exit from under the structure but notices that while Issa is on his feet, he is unresponsive. She tries to keep her lover on his feet but his legs slowly buckle and he sinks to the ground. She quickly checks for vitals. No question that her close friend is dead. Then Rachel collapses, putting her arms around Issa’s neck, pleading for answers, just as she had done with her mother, all those years ago.