

A photograph of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, California. The bridge's iconic red-orange towers and suspension cables are visible against a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The bridge spans a body of water, with steep, rocky hills in the background.

# **DEADLY ERRORS**

**By**

**Robert E. Brisbin**

**Another Jim Richards Adventure**

DEADLY

ERRORS

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## CHAPTER ONE

From a corner window on the seventeenth floor of the Hyatt Regency, Jim Richards gazed northwest to the weather beaten boats berthed at San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf. Beyond the wooden slips of the fishing fleet, a magenta sunset silhouetted the Golden Gate Bridge, casting an elongated shadow across the cold, gray waters of San Francisco bay.

Directly below his glass walled aerie, in the artificial canyons of the financial district, darkness had already fallen. Vehicles crawled from one stoplight to the next. Taillights flashed, turn signals blinked. A pair of shapely legs were momentarily bathed in xenon brilliance, as a comely young lady rushed to catch a city bus. Jim Richards smiled as he turned away from the window, imagining the greeting she'd receive, when, at last, she reached the arms of her waiting lover.

He crossed the room to the console on the nightstand next to the bed. He sat down at the edge of the mauve colored bedspread, to dial the private line that belonged to Ty Harding, founder and President of Ty Harding International. His call was answered on the second ring. Jim Richards identified himself.

"Jim, good to hear from you. Welcome home."

"Good to be home," Richards replied.

"Where are you staying?" Harding asked.

"The Hyatt Embarcadero."

"Excellent." There was a moment's pause. "I have a meeting to attend in fifteen minutes, let's get together afterwards. We'll meet in the bar around eight."

#

Jim Richards stripped off his clothes, and then took a steaming hot shower. He wrapped a towel around his waist, and padded into the suite's dressing room. His body believed it was morning. And so it was in Düsseldorf, Germany where his journey had begun sixteen hours earlier.

He slipped a wafer thin, Merkur blade into a polished brass and stainless steel mini-razor, and then carefully shaved the lines of his closely trimmed beard.

Using the television's remote control, he tuned in to CNN. And listened more than watched the international news, as he dressed in dark blue, pleated dress slacks, and a burgundy, long sleeve pullover. When he heard the opening lines of a report describing three suspected terrorists found dead in Mulheim, he looked at the screen. The details were sketchy. The corners of Jim Richards' mouth turned downward, cynically. There should have been no report at all, but a need to send a signal to those who'd controlled the now deceased required something.

Jim Richards slipped a slender wallet into the inside pocket of a lambskin zip-up jacket. Then checked his appearance in the mirror, bending slightly at the knees to see the whole picture. He stood six foot two, fit and muscular. Fair skinned, dark brown eyes. His fine brown hair was trimmed short, highlights of gray through out.

He took a final look around the luxury suite, memorizing the placement of objects; the wrinkles in the bed covers, the position of closet doors, his clothes hanging in the closet, the arrangement of toiletries. He was a careful man, by nature and training.

#

At the main lobby, Jim Richards paused for a moment to gaze at a rectangular, marble fountain. So finely constructed, a sheet of water forty feet wide poured over its lip without the hint of a ripple. Pure, flowing crystal. He admired the engineering required to create the illusion from several thousand gallons of recirculated water.

Richards walked confidently across the square tiled floor of the atrium to the cocktail lounge. He chose one of the small, round tables near the back of the room. Took the chair facing the entrance. A cocktail waitress, dressed in a long black gown scalloped at the neck and slit to mid-thigh, walked slowly over to him. Her fine hair, and Nordic features, reminded him of someone he'd once loved... still loved. The waitress smiled, and then tilted her head silently, asking for his order.

"Glenlivet Eighteen, neat." He said. And thought to himself, as she turned towards the bar, how much like Misty, she seemed. And then he shook his head. So long ago. She'd not look the same. But no matter how people age, former lovers... and themselves always remember them as they were in their youth.

Later, as he sipped the twelve year old, single malt, Jim Richards slipped into thoughts of a time when he and Ty Harding were new recruits for the Central Intelligence Agency. A training team learning the art of stealth. From the beginning, Jim Richards was a *black agent* with no official affiliation. He preferred anonymity. While, Ty Harding had chosen an officer's career. Nevertheless, he and Harding had remained close. And so it was that Jim Richards became the first *consultant* Harding had hired, when he decided to *retire from* the agency.

"Sorry I'm late," Harding said, breaking Jim Richards' reverie. "I'm afraid the meeting ran a little longer than I expected."

Richards smiled, as he stood to shake Ty's hand. Ty Harding stood exactly six feet in height. He had a strong face, with hazel eyes, and a head of dark hair, streaked here and there with gray. A handsome man in his early fifties, dressed in a well tailored, light gray, business suit.

Jim Richards asked: "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Let me buy you one... at Scott's. I've reserved a table." Harding replied.

#

The Maitre D' at Scott's Seafood Grill on the Embarcadero immediately recognized Mr. Harding. He seated them in a private alcove, overlooking Front Street. Harding ordered vodka chilled up, with a twist of lemon. Jim Richards stuck to his eighteen year, neat. They chatted over drinks, then ordered entrees accompanied by a basket of San Francisco's sour dough French bread, and a bottle of wine.

Ty Harding cut a morsel of sautéed Calamari, and then looked thoughtfully at his friend. "You seem far away tonight, Jim. What's on you mind? The assignment went well; Langley is very pleased with the results."

Richards shrugged his shoulders. "Just a little worn out I imagine."

Harding smiled at his friend. "And well you should be. Old guy like you out there in the woods."

Richards chuckled, and shook his head deprecatingly. "You know Ty; I've been in the business of stealth nearly all my life." He looked away for a moment gazing out the window to their left, at the street below. Then turned his gaze back to Harding. "Started at the age of nineteen, working that volunteer operation for the Bureau. Then there was Operation Chaos, domestic peeping, and to this day I don't know what the hell we accomplished. And so it's been over all the years. Some successes, some failures." He sighed. Took a swallow of wine. "I thought

when the Soviet Union ended, we'd finally won. Until September 11<sup>th</sup>, that is. And so we continue... us old guys. Sometimes I wonder if we're fighting dragons, or windmills?"

Ty Harding took a sip of a chilled Chenon Blanc. "Oh they're dragons all right. In the purest sense of the word: The embodiment of evil." Ty Harding sat back in his chair. His face took on a serious expression. "I know we've talked before about your coming inside. Getting a little more involved in management. You've always resisted the idea. But this war we're engaged in now, will quite likely out last us both. We need to plan for the future, train some younger people to carry on after we step aside, voluntarily or otherwise." He paused a moment to let the thought of mortality sink in. "At the moment our country is focused on revenge, bringing bin Laden and his cohorts to justice. But he's only one of many enemies. And when the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> seem a distant memory, then those of us in the cadre of stealth must carry on with the same degree of focus our country presently has, lest our nation suffer even greater misdeeds at the hands of some future Osama bin Laden." Harding paused again, took another sip of wine, and then continued. "We need your expertise, Jim, at an executive level, part time at least. Full time soon enough."

Jim Richards nodded his head once. "Yes, perhaps it is the right time."

They ordered dessert, and strong black coffee. Ty Harding looked away, and thought for a moment out loud, "You'll need an office, and a small staff. Maybe something down on the Peninsula." He turned his gaze back to Jim Richards. "We're currently working on a couple of new proposals for rooting out sleepers that have successfully evaded the Bureau's sweep of foreign students and illegal aliens. Come by the office tomorrow morning. We'll kick it around, come up with a plan."

#

They crossed the arched, concrete bridge that spanned the street running between the high rise buildings of the Embarcadero Center, then parted company. Harding climbed into a jet black Mercedes. Jim Richards turned away, to ride a cylindrical glass elevator. Jet lag hit him as he opened the door to his room.



## CHAPTER TWO

The one hundred and ten foot yacht, St. Emilion, built by Perini Nave, navigated the rugged California coastline, south of Monterey. Its sleek racing hull, cut through the light Pacific swell like a pelagic shark, making strong headway against the prevailing current. The air was unusually warm. An off shore breeze, generated by a stationary high-pressure system over the state of Nevada, kept the coastal stratus well out to sea. Captain Harry Carroon would have been happier had the fog been in, but, at four in the morning, it was unlikely anyone on shore would observe the illicit drop he was about to make, just off the treacherously, rocky shoreline.

He was unconcerned about Navy reconnaissance, P-1 Orion, aircraft flying somewhere overhead. They'd pay little attention to the St. Emilion, as she made the trip each year, and had been doing so for the past seven. The route plan filed with the Coast Guard, called for her to run within one thousand yards of shore to check newly installed anti-collision electronics. A dangerous exercise, but well within the capabilities of the system.

In the galley, three crewmen sat around a hand rubbed, mahogany table. Drinking coffee, and eating warm Danish pastries. They were happy to be getting home at last. The St. Emilion had been under sail, and power, for the past three weeks, beating its way north from Panama, against the prevailing winds and current.

Captain Carroon stepped away from the glow of the illuminated instrument panel, located at the base of the main companion way. He called to the helmsman, two levels above on the yacht's bridge, ordering him to cut the engine to idle. Then depressed a toggle switch, signaling the crew in the galley to come aft, and lend a hand.

Carroon slipped into a dark green windbreaker that nearly matched his eyes, then climbed the main companionway, following three of his crewmembers to the aft deck. His full red beard, gave him a Viking-like appearance, as he grasped the starboard shroud line for support, while directing the crew to the task at hand.

With grace and agility, the St. Emilion heeled-to abeam Point Lobos National Reserve. Carroon moved aft, and lifted a section of cargo net that contained eight wooden crates. He quickly attached a small diver's buoy, to which was secured a waterproof, low powered transmitter. Using the dinghy boom, the crew hoisted the cargo up, and over the side. While Harry Carroon played out the buoy line smoothly as the cargo was lowered eighty feet to the bottom of the ocean.

Finished with their brief duties, the crewmen returned to their pastries, and conversations below. While Captain Carroon took up vigilance, once again, at the instrument panel. There he monitored local radio traffic, and crosschecked the sonar activated, anti-collision displays, which were duplicated on the helmsman's panel. To Carroon's experienced eyes, everything looked in order, and though there were numerous reefs and exposed rocks, along their route of travel, the AC displays indicated nothing of concern within one hundred yards of their position. Soon they'd pass Mono Lobo reef, and slip into the safety of Monastery Bay south of Carmel. There, they'd anchor, and rest for a few hours, before continuing the final leg of their journey home.

One mile away on the Sally's Ride, Captain Brent Lansing tracked the passage of the St. Emilion on curvature compensating radar. As the blinking phosphorescent blip, under the screen's overlay grid, passed just west of Mono Lobo reef, Brent Lansing pressed the send button on a hand held portable transmitter, directing a burst of discrete electronic queries. Immediately, the transmitter on the buoy left by Captain Carroon responded.

At that moment, two events occurred simultaneously: On the Sally's Ride a micro computer processed the return signal from the buoy, then adjusted the ship's automated steering and navigation systems to track the signal.

On the St. Emilion a tremendous shock reverberated through the hull. The startled helmsman was thrown forward into the windshield, his face slammed against the Lexan window, as the sea boiled amidships. His first thought: Something very large had crashed head-on into the boat. Perhaps, some demented denizen of the deep had decided to attack the yacht.

Just forward of the galley, a jagged hole was ripped into her starboard side. In less than five seconds, the incoming sea expanded the three-foot hole to nearly five feet. Within thirty seconds, the entire forward cabin was swamped with four feet of cold ocean water.

As water poured in, the yacht's weight and balance changed. The St. Emilion began a slow turn to the right. The helmsman, trying to regain his footing, made no attempt to stop the turn.

In the galley, the startled crewmen were momentarily frozen in place, unable to comprehend what had happened. Then as a two foot high surge of water gushed into the galley from the forward cabins, they jumped to their feet and rushed for the hatch that lead into the main salon. One of them attempted to seal the bulkhead, to no avail; the water pressure was just too great.

The three crewmen sloshed and staggered aft to the main companion way that led topside, only to find their path blocked by Captain Carroon, as he held the railing for balance, while calling for help over their ship to shore radio.

One and half minutes after impact, one of the three crewmen ducked under Carroon's arm, and began climbing to the aft deck.

By now the helmsman had regained his footing, and was desperately trying to stop the boat's spiraling turn. But the bow of the boat had already begun to broach the sea; again the helmsman was slammed forward. This time the Lexan panel popped out of its frame, as the stern of the boat heeled up out of the water.

The interior of the yacht went nearly vertical, the crewman who'd nearly climbed to the top the companion way, fell backward, grabbing at Harry Carroon's arm for support. The effort was fruitless, and only managed to drag Carroon backward, ripping the cord of the microphone gripped in his left hand, out of the instrument panel. All four men fell to the forward bulkhead. One tumbled through the open galley hatch, and into the pool of icy water that filled two thirds of the galley.

Each man struggled independently, clawing and grabbing in horrified panic at anything, or anyone, that might offer a hand hold towards the aft companion way.

As the St. Emilion corkscrewed into the depths of the sea, several tons of the cold Pacific Ocean poured into the boat, trapping the terrified men. The increasing pressure and frigid water compressed the air from their lungs, and so against all training and logic they involuntarily gasped for life, and drowned in a matter of moments. The yacht plummeted to the bottom of the sea.

Brent Lansing heard the St. Emilion's call of distress. His powerful hands focused a pair of heavy 50x70 night binoculars against his furrowed brow. His deep blue eyes, set in a strong sculpted face, tanned and weathered by the sea and sun, reflected concern as he peered through the long range glasses. He could see the St. Emilion's mainsail tracing a descending arc through the gray early morning sky, to disappear below the inky horizon. He knew at once, the sea had swallowed the yacht.

Lansing picked up his own microphone. "Coast Guard this is the Sally's Ride, C-A-One-Five-Two-Three Zero-Seven out of Monterey. We're approximately two miles north- northwest of the position reported on that *mayday*, proceeding to help if we can."

"Roger, Sally's Ride." The Coast Guard dispatcher replied. "Give us a report when you make the coordinates. Do you have a visual?"

"Negative on visual." Lansing said. "We'll be back to you, as soon as we've made the coordinates."

"Roger that, and thanks. Coast Guard out."

Lansing ordered his helmsman to ignore the transmissions of the buoy, and proceed directly to the GPS coordinates given by Harry Carroon. The helmsman dialed in the numbers on his global positioning system, and set a course to intercept.

As the Sally's Ride came within one degree of intercept, the engines were cut and high intensity lights illuminated. The fear, now, was of running over a survivor in the water. The fishing boat coasted directly over the spot where the St. Emilion had gone down. Debris, oil, cushions and other flotsam were on, or coming to the surface. Spotlights combed the sea for a hundred yards in all directions, but there were no survivors to be seen. Already, the current was beginning to take flotsam from the luxury yacht towards the beach, in a caravan of expensive nautical debris.

The stunned crew of the Sally's Ride were all on deck, searching for survivors in awed silence. Two of the men were already in wetsuits, in preparation for the cargo recovery operation. They quickly donned the remainder of their dive gear. At a nod from Lansing, they jumped into the dark, foreboding water. They were down for no more than twenty minutes, though the time seemed much longer to Brent Lansing as he paced back and forth at the stern of the Sally's Ride. Suddenly, a diver broke the surface, followed immediately by a second. They finned to the stern, where Lansing had hung an aluminum swim ladder. With his help, they climbed carefully aboard.

"It's no use, Brent. They're all dead. Jesus, they didn't have a chance, not a chance in hell." The first diver said. The second, a younger man, only shook his head. It was clear he'd been shocked by what they'd found below.

Brent Lansing turned away, and climbed the steel ladder to the wheelhouse. He flipped on the computer enhanced down-look sonar, setting the scan depth at eighty feet. Directly below their position laid the St. Emilion, clearly visible on the screen.

He picked up the microphone. "Coast Guard, this is the Sally's Ride, over."

"Go ahead Sally's Ride."

"We're at the may day location, and have searched the area within one hundred yards of the reported coordinates. There's flotsam in the water, but no survivors. Repeat, no survivors."

"Understand, Sally's Ride. Hold position until our cutter arrives."

"Negative, Coast Guard. We're going to mark the spot with a strobe buoy, then proceed south with the current, along the coast as far as Point Lobos, to search for possible survivors who may have abandoned ship prior to impact."

There was a moment's pause, before the Coast Guard came back. "Roger that, Sally's Ride. We'll have a cutter there in about thirty minutes. Request you maintain open channel on one-nine. Expect contact from the cutter, and possible rendezvous request."

"Roger, Coast Guard, going to nineteen now."

Lansing turned to the helmsman. "Okay, head south on that transmitter. We've got to shut that thing down, before the Coastie gets in range."

The helmsman swung the Sally's Ride around, and tracked in on the transmitter tethered to the buoy left by Harry Carroon. Enroute the dive crew strapped fresh tanks into their buoyancy compensators, and then monitored their dive computers as they automatically calculated bottom time, surface intervals, and residual nitrogen estimates. Even with the depth of the previous dive, they'd have enough margins to make the pick up, if all went well.

As soon as the Sally's Ride settled over the drop zone, the divers were back in the water with hand held lights, following the buoy line to the bottom. One of the divers carried a hook attached to a line that ran back to the netting winch.

While the divers were descending, Lansing removed the transmitter from the buoy and smashed it against the side of the boat, cracking its casing, silencing the broadcast. He then tossed the remains unceremoniously into the sea.

After attaching the hook to the cargo net, the first diver gave a tug on the line, causing the orange buoy to submerge, then pop back to the surface. Brent Lansing pulled the start handle on the old electric hoist. It groaned, creaked, and rattled, but steadily reeled in the cargo. The two divers followed the load slowly to the surface, staying well clear in case the line failed. Soon the cargo was lifted from the water, and swung onto the aft deck.

#

The U.S. Coast Guard cutter, Rescue 4, making thirty knots out of Monterey, was just abeam the eighteenth hole of Pebble Beach. Lt. Commander Scott Storm, picked up his transceiver microphone, and hailed the Sally's Ride, asking for its location and status.

Brent Lansing signaled for the crew to finish down loading the cargo, and then climbed the ladder to the wheelhouse. Taking the microphone from his helmsman, he responded to the Coast Guard's transmission. "This is the Sally's Ride. We're one mile south of the mayday, abeam Point Lobos. No sightings of survivors thus far. What's your ETA at the mayday?"

"We estimate mayday in about one-five." Commander Storm responded. "Did you get a reading on your sonar as to the location of the boat?"

"Negative, Rescue 4. Our sonar is intermittent, but I'd say there's no doubt she went down just north of the mayday coordinates, judging from the debris coming to the surface."

"Roger that. What are your plans?"

"No point in our continuing to search with the limited equipment we have. We're heading south for fish, and will come back over this route on return. We'll maintain open channel on nineteen, and contact you if anything turns up. You can contact us later at berth two-two, or we can rendezvous on the way back."

"Understand you'll be open on one-nine. Coast Guard out."

Brent Lansing returned the microphone to its cradle, and then went aft to see how things were coming along. The last case was just being lowered into the holds. He unhooked the cable from the net, and with the help of one of the divers, threw the cargo net overboard, then ordered the helmsman to set course for their fishing grounds, farther south off Big Sur.

Brent Lansing went below, and stepped into the head, closing the small, wooden door. He gripped the tiny stainless steel sink, and lowered his head, fought back tears trying to break through his stoic demeanor. Harry Carroon was the closest thing he'd ever had to family. Every cell in Lansing's body wanted to go down to look for his friend, to find him in a pocket of air inside the sunken yacht, still alive, knowing Lansing would come for him. But Brent knew there were no air pockets for Harry Carroon.

Lansing emerged from the head, his composure regained. As he moved aft through the galley of the fishing boat, he stopped to talk to the two divers. "Good job, guys. I appreciate the hump. We were cutting it real thin with that Coastie on the way."

"No problem man," said the older of the two. He shook his head. "It's a real shame 'bout Harry. I don't think he had a chance."

"Fraid not," replied Lansing. "It was just his time."

Lansing continued aft through the crew's quarters, and dropped down the ladder into the bottom of the hold to inspect the cargo. Installed on the Sally's Ride were custom fiberglass catch bins. The eight watertight crates the divers had recovered were laid into an empty bin, and covered with a false bottom. Ice was layered on top. Later, fish from the day's catch would be placed on top of the ice, with more ice layered on top of the fish.

The Sally's Ride catch bins could be lifted out of the hold, and then trucked to the processing plant. There, perhaps under the watchful eye of an FDA inspector, the fish would be unloaded. Afterward, the apparently empty bins would be moved along a conveyor system into a wash tunnel for cleaning. Inside the tunnel, hidden from outside view, Lansing would recover the cargo, and temporarily store it in an adjacent equipment room.

With casual ease, Brent Lansing hoisted himself out of the boat's hold. He stepped onto the aft deck, and looked up at a slate, gray sky scattered with high cirrus clouds, glowing pink in the early morning sunrise. He took a deep breath, and gazed across the calm water at the sheer coastal cliffs that rose hundreds of feet, topped by towering California redwoods. Headlights flashed momentarily, as a car rounded a turn on the coast road, still cloaked in darkness. Another sleepy driver, making the winding commute north to Carmel. The brisk sea air, and the silence of the early morning, sent a lonely chill through Brent Lansing's body. He felt vacant, empty. The drop plan had been Harry's idea, it had worked before, but this time something had gone terribly wrong. Lansing shook his head, and let out a long sigh.

The morning sun rose over a ridge of the Big Sur Mountains, and a shaft of golden light found a solitary path between the redwood trees to illuminate, and warm, Brent Lansing's face. He was blessed with the kind of good looks that drove most women crazy. And yet, perhaps due to an orphaned childhood, it never occurred to him that he was exceptionally handsome, which of course only added to his attractiveness.

On the other hand Brent Lansing had no doubt about his ability to complete any task assigned. His confidence had been instilled in him by the United States Navy, and a training program known by the acronym BUD/S, Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL.

Climbing to the bridge, Lansing checked the GPS for their position, and the distance to their destination. They were at least another forty minutes from the fishing grounds.

#

By eleven-thirty that morning, the Sally's Ride was again approaching the entrance to Monastery Bay. Brent Lansing picked up the microphone, and established contact with the Coast Guard. "... We're abeam Mono Lobo, off your starboard rail. What's the status of the mayday? Anything we can do to help?"

"Negative." Commander Storm replied. "Everything's under control."

"Any survivors?"

"No survivors. Our divers are down now. It doesn't look good. We'd appreciate a stop by the office, after you off-load your catch. We'll need a report of your findings, and anything else you can tell us about the incident."

"Roger that. I'll stop by around three. If you need me before then, I'll be at the berth, or over at processing."

"Understood. Rescue Four out."

The Sally's Ride turned northeast, away from Monastery Bay. Skirting the shoreline, she soon motored past the fine imported sand of Carmel Beach, pure white in the mid-day sun, shipped by enterprising developers from the New Jersey shore in the nineteen-thirties.

Just to the north, were the lush fairways of the world famous Pebble Beach golf course? From the bridge, Brent Lansing could see several people sitting outside at the umbrella red tables of Club Nineteen, enjoying brunch just off the green of the eighteenth hole.

The trip home provided spectacular views; the famous, wind swept, lone cypress perched on a tiny rock peninsula, and the spectacular houses of the mega wealthy that lived along the Seventeen Mile Drive.

Soon, the Sally's Ride was off the town of Pacific Grove. Then on past the Monterey Bay Aquarium, where throngs of visitors came each day to view marine life through the thick glass walls of a three story, salt water tank. The closest many would ever come to swimming with their ancestors.

At last, the Sally's Ride rounded Wharf One, the tourist wharf. And eased up to Wharf Two, the commercial wharf, where their catch would be off-loaded prior to berthing. The helmsman skillfully maneuvered the boat along the two-story wharf. Brent Lansing leaped from the wheelhouse afterdeck to a stainless steel ladder secured to the wharf, then scrambled up to the top, followed by one of his crew. Once the boat was secured, the diesel engines were shut down.

After off-loading was complete, Lansing gave orders to refuel and berth the boat, and then jumped into the truck onto which the catch bins had been loaded. As he drove along the commercial wharf, he could see tourists meandering along Wharf One. Between the two wharves, lay the floating berths of the Monterey Harbor. And all along the docks, lay sea lions sunning themselves like homeless transients. Turning this way and that, barking like dogs with laryngitis, and generally making a nuisance of them. Lansing chuckled at the thought of his crew, soon to run the sea lion gantlet. The price paid for an early end of their day.

The truck bearing Sally's catch and the words Monterey Seafood Company along its side turned left at the end of the commercial wharf and proceeded down a beach front road to the processing plant less than a mile away.

Inside the plant, the ceiling rose two stories to an open rafted roof. Skylights let natural light into the interior. Along the east wall were offices, rest rooms, and changing rooms for the workers. At the rear of the building, was another wide door that led to a secured parking lot. Brent Lansing climbed down from the cab of the truck, as processing workers began to unload the bins, rolling them over to the sorting tables.

He looked around the cavernous processing plant, and thought about its owner John Richenhauer. John owned two fine dining restaurants: The Sailors Inn on Victorian Row, and Ricotta Ristorante on Fisherman's Wharf. As well as, Sally's Seafood Shanty, a fresh seafood market on the wharf. Lansing didn't know why John Richenhauer liked the name Sally. He'd asked him once, only to find his answer more evasive than substantive.

He'd first met Richenhauer in Colon, Panama when his SEAL unit was on assignment to the CIA. John Richenhauer ran a pipeline into Colombia at the time. But Richenhauer had quit the agency, and returned to his home in Monterey, with enough money to start a restaurant business. Later he added the fishing piece, to cut down on his supply costs.

Brent Lansing, by chance, had dinner one night at the Sailor's Inn. He didn't know that John owned the place. Lansing was burnt out, depressed. Discharged from the Navy as a result of budgetary cut backs, dictated by *apparatchiks* in Washington.

John Richenhauer had recognized him as a former member of his Colombia contingent as he sat alone eating his meal. John insisted on buying his drinks and dinner. The evening ended with an offer of employment.

Lansing had started out as the bar manager at Ricotta, but when he learned that Richenhauer had a fishing boat, he'd asked if he could skipper it. But the *Ride* already had a skipper, who was also a one-third owner in the boat.

Then one night, a package was left at Ricotta with a note indicating that Lansing should give Richenhauer a call. He was told to give the package to a man who'd come in later that night and identify himself as Jim Reed. The man would give Lansing a sealed envelope to be mailed to a post office box in Carmel.

Brent Lansing suspected the package contained something that would not pass the scrutiny of Customs authorities. But he owed John more than just his job. After completing the first transaction, his salary was raised substantially.

After two similar transactions in one month, Lansing suggested they arrange other times and locations for the drops. It was obvious, if they continued using the restaurant, their activities would become common knowledge to the staff.

Six months later, John Richenhauer called Lansing into his office, and explained that the skipper of Sally's *Ride* was retiring, selling out his third. He also learned, if he played his cards right, he could retire in a few short years.

#

It was one-thirty in the afternoon, when Brent Lansing backed his black, GMC Yukon up to the rear entrance of the equipment room. He on loaded the crates retrieved from the catch bins then drove north towards the Watsonville airport. Thirty-five minutes later, he off loaded the

eight wooden crates into a small warehouse located in a light industrial complex across the road from the county airport.

#

At four in the afternoon, Brent Lansing walked into his two bedroom Victorian house in Pacific Grove. Carla, his girlfriend, wasn't home. She'd already left for her Thursday night art class. Lansing was dead tired, and looked forward to a shower, and a long nap before Carla returned later that evening. He stopped by his answering machine on his way to the shower. There was only one message. "Hi Brent, this is John. I need to see you tonight. Stop by after closing.. Cancel tomorrow's trip. Tell the crew to take the day off. I'll explain later."



## CHAPTER THREE

Headquartered on the seventeenth and eighteenth floors of the Transamerica Pyramid building, Ty Harding International was the parent of several diversified businesses known in the trade as *proprietarys*. Each founded to address certain special needs of the intelligence community.

At exactly 09:00, Jim Richards stepped from an express elevator directly into THI's reception area. He took a moment to admire an original Fracé that hung on a mahogany paneled wall. A cougar perched on a granite boulder, with a deep, forested valley behind.

Art adorned all the walls of the spacious, windowless reception area. Jim Richards' gaze passed slowly over each until it fell, at last, upon another Charles Fracé original. He gazed at it for several seconds. Ty Harding had been captivated by Fracé's ability to capture his subjects with the subtlety of a fine brush. A texture of fur here, the tilt of a head there. The depth of understanding portrayed in the animal's eyes. So much so, Harding had commissioned him to paint a portrait of Harding's one hundred and twenty-five pound, black and tan, German Shepherd.

Jim Richards smiled. Aragorn was a great companion. Well mannered, loyal, and courageous. One was not a friend of Ty Harding's, if he were not also a friend of Aragorn's. Sadly the great animal had passed away all too soon. An unfortunate trait of the larger members of an otherwise magnificent breed. Almost imperceptibly, Jim Richards shook his head. Things change. Mr. Gorn was gone, but not forgotten.

Just then, one of two, twelve foot high, polished hard wood doors leading from the reception area, opened. Carolyn, Ty Harding's personal secretary, stepped through to greet Jim Richards. She led him down a long, narrow hallway, flanked by well-appointed offices, to Harding's corner suite.

Ty Harding was seated behind a massive desk. Its top, a solid slab of California jade. Behind and to his left, were green tinted ceiling to floor windows that looked out to the San Francisco Bay. Harding rose from his chair and came around the desk, his hand extended in greeting. He motioned for Jim Richards to sit on the sofa, while he took an upholstered armchair.

"I've got a serious problem I need your help on." Harding began. "Did you see the news this morning?"

Jim Richards nodded his head. "Looks like Arnold's boat had a little trouble navigating Point Lobos."

Harding nodded his head once. "To say the least. There were no survivors. The cause of the sinking unknown." He looked away for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "As you're probably aware, Arnold Batiste runs a covert operation down in the Caribbean; the St. Emilion played a major role in his manuscript.

"Elmo Jefferson called this morning from Langley. He wants us to salvage the boat, find out why it went down with all hands on board."

Jim Richards looked out the window for a moment, and then returned his gaze to Harding. "Anyone claiming responsibility?"

Ty Harding shook his head. "No, but that doesn't rule out sabotage. The Coast Guard sent a dive team down early this morning, they recovered four bodies. Later a Sheriff's patrol picked up a floater, nearly decapitated."

Richards stroked his beard, and thought for a moment. "As I recall, the St. Emilion was steered from an open cockpit."

"That's correct," Harding agreed.

"The floater might have been the helmsman. Probably went through the windshield when it hit whatever it hit."

"Or when the charge blew," Harding said. "In any case, the Coast Guard has a boat and one officer anchored over the spot, to keep treasure hunters away until Ted arrives with the salvage crew. We'll have men under water twenty-four hours a day, until we can float her and tow her out of there. What are your plans today?"

Jim Richards shrugged his shoulders. "Heading down to the Peninsula to re-open my townhouse. Pick-up mail, workout. You know the usual back in the world stuff."

Harding smiled. "Okay. I'll call you at three this afternoon. I should have a preliminary report by then."

Jim Richards nodded once in agreement as he stood up from the sofa.

"By the way," Harding said with a sardonic smile. "Don't make any plans for the weekend."

#

Ty Harding swiveled his desk chair around. He slid open a panel on his credenza, then lifted the receiver of a secure telephone linked directly to Langley. He identified himself to the operator as *Gray Wolf*, and asked to be put through to Elmo Jefferson.

"Anything from your end?" Harding asked, when Elmo came on the line.

"Not yet. We're running a GPS trace on the boat, beginning with her last call, working backward from there." He paused a moment. "What assets have you assigned?"

"Pacific Marine's running the salvage. Jim Richards is on board for the investigation. Central Analytical will do the work up. I'll make contact once a week. Sooner, if something solid comes up."

"Good enough." Elmo agreed. "Keep this thing quiet, Ty."

"I'll do my best. The leak won't come from here."

"I know it won't. Our background on Harry Carroon indicates he was a very experienced seaman. He must have had one hell of a good reason to run *so* close to shore."

"Maybe he had some plans of his own."

"My thoughts exactly. Check it out Ty. Check it out, real good."

#

Jim Richards went through the drudgery of re-establishing his home life, minimal though it was. As always the backlog of unsolicited catalogs and advertisements amazed him. Christ, he thought, there must have been an entire forest's worth of trees used for his solicitation alone. He separated the important correspondence, and recycled the rest. Then changed into gym clothes, and jogged over to Gold's to lift eighty-five thousand pounds of cast iron, over the course of an hour and a half work-out.

Jim Richards trained constantly on a schedule nearly equal to that of a professional athlete. He lifted weights, ran, practiced Tai Chi. and consumed food supplements by the hand

full. As a result, he weighed one hundred and ninety-five pounds with only fifteen percent body fat.

After his workout, he stopped by Heidi's for a protein drink, and then headed back to his townhouse. Harding called at exactly 15:00. "Any plans for this evening?"

"Not really." Richards replied.

"Good. Lynn can't wait to see you. She wants you to come up for dinner. Come by the house around seven, we can talk afterwards. I've received a preliminary assessment from Ted. It looks like we'll be doing some diving this weekend."

"I'll see you tonight." Richards hung up the phone. Then stretched all his muscle groups before lying down to meditate, and take a short nap. As he slowly sank into an alpha state, he could feel the fatigue sag from his body.

At 17:00 he awoke, took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling. For a brief moment he wondered where the hell he was. Then took another deep breath. Stood and faced himself in a full length mirror. The man staring back felt much older than he appeared. He sat back down on the edge of the bed, and focused on his reflection. He concentrated on a spot midway between his eyes, just above the bridge of his nose. It was a meditation technique for imaging one's inner self.

Holding no thought in particular, he allowed his sub-conscious to shape the image. A variety of random thoughts slid across his mind. Suddenly his reflected countenance changed. Chills ran down his spine, as he faced his inner self. And he did not like what he'd forced himself to see: a deadly apparition. An entity that'd seen too much of what was wrong with the world. A presence that had participated in deeds society did not condone. Yet, those acts were performed in the unwavering belief they were required for the security of the nation to which he gave his complete loyalty.

He held the image for a moment longer. Then, unbidden, his normal appearance returned to his consciousness; a strong face, reminiscent of the actor Gregory Peck a little shy of fifty years. But Jim Richards had faced the truth of his inner presence; at least he did not fool himself. And perhaps that was his saving grace. He lowered his head, and sighed.

By 18:00, he'd showered, and dressed in pressed khaki twills, a short sleeve navy pull over, and his usual soft lambskin jacket. Dinner at Ty's was often a combination of elegant dining, and wrestling with the kids.

#

Ty Harding's home in the wooded suburb of Hillsborough, looked east over the city of San Mateo towards the San Francisco International Airport. Jim Richards swung a rented sedan into the long, semi-circular driveway, and parked behind Lynn's mini-van. The old Mustang convertible, he'd restored and kept running for so many years, had finally been placed on the endangered species list. He'd sold it to a collector. As he climbed out of the sedan, he reminded himself he'd have to decide on something new, sooner or later.

As Jim Richards climbed the steps that lead to the rear garden of Ty's house, he heard the delighted cries of children jumping in and out of Harding's swimming pool. Jim Richards swung open the wrought iron gate to the pool level. As soon as Jennifer, the oldest of the children, saw Richards she called his name. "Uncle Jimmy, Uncle Jimmy." And in the twinkling of an eye, all the children, and Ralph, their black Labrador retriever, came bounding over inundating Jim Richards with hugs, and water.

Ty and Lynn came out onto the terrace. "You should have worn a wetsuit, my friend," Ty said.

"No need," Richards replied. "Now I have a *wet* suit."

Jim Richards untangled himself from the kids, and climbed three steps to the deck. Lynn embraced him. She was Ty's second wife, and much younger than Ty, himself for that matter. She had long dark hair, brown eyes, and a petit, lithe figure. Jim Richards handed Lynn a bouquet. And Ty a bottle of fine, French wine purchased, on his way up to the house, from Arnie's Wines and Liquors. The irony was not lost on Ty Harding.

#.

After an excellent meal, Harding and Richards adjourned to his study to discuss the St. Emilion. Harding settled into one of two burgundy leather wing back chairs that faced the fireplace.

The smell of leather and old bookbindings permeated the study, the only room in the house that was not furnished in contemporary style. Here, in ceiling to floor bookcases that lined every wall including the space above the fireplace, were stored volumes of information written by the greatest minds from the world over. Ty Harding was an avid reader who digested huge amounts of data daily and retained the essentials for future reference. Undoubtedly, a trait inherited from his father whose success at law was out stripped only by his success in clandestine operations. Ty Harding was a second-generation intelligence professional.

To Jim Richards this room smelled of excitement. Here, Harding would brief him on the assignments he was to undertake. This was the place from which he was launched into a world of adventure and intrigue. No electronic surveillance could penetrate the thickness of these great volumes. And none but Ty's most trusted colleagues were ever briefed within the confines of this room. However, tonight's meeting seemed almost trivial. But Jim Richards knew from past experience, the seemingly benign often turned out to be the most dangerous. If only because it was least expected.

Ty Harding began the discussion without preliminaries. "Arnold Batiste's operational expenses were originally financed with narcotics, an amusing sideline to his liquor business. That, of course, was supposed to have ceased years ago. My intuition tells me that Arnold never really completely severed his connections. Operationally a wise decision when you consider the perfidy of congressional support. My guess is Harry Carroon decided to emulate his employer, and develop a small market of his own."

Jim Richards frowned. "Perhaps Arnold wasn't satisfied with his off-shore profits, and decided to bring a little candy stateside? Knowing Batiste, that wouldn't surprise me in the least."

Ty Harding shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe. In any case, based on the GPS traces, Harry Carroon appears to have made, or was planning to make, a water drop before the St. Emilion sank. Which would explain his running so close to shore. If we don't find contraband on board, we'll need to determine if a drop was in fact made, and if so, who picked it up."

Ty Harding got up from his chair; he stepped over to a mahogany cabinet built into one of the bookcases. He opened the door and extracted a bottle of Cognac, holding it up with two glasses. Jim Richards nodded his head. Harding continued his thought process. "The important point is... this thing has got to be kept quiet. We don't want anyone thinking something suspicious was going on with that boat. Regardless of our findings, the official story is the skipper screwed up and ran aground."

Jim Richards accepted the snifter of cognac, and nodded his understanding.

Harding took a sip of cognac. "Tomorrow we'll take a run down to Carmel, see how Ted is coming along with the salvage job. Why don't you meet me about eight in morning at San

Carlos airport? On the west side of the field, just north of the tower. I'll have the *Three-Ten* out on the ramp by the time you arrive."

They sipped their cognacs. And reminisced about old times. There was no need to rehash the objectives at hand. They'd each been in the game too long, knew each other's thought processes. It had been that way almost from the moment they'd first met. At last, Harding stood up, Jim Richards followed. Together they walked out of his study, and down the hall. The house was quiet. Lynn was dozing in front of the television, its speakers muted. The children in bed. They walked down stairs to the garage. There, parked side by side, were Lynn's Mercedes SL 500 and Ty's Corvette, cars neither had much time to drive, but were reticent to give up.

Jim Richards and Ty Harding stepped out of the garage by a side door that led to the driveway. A quarter moon was rising across the bay, over the eastern foothills. Stars shown brightly in a clear night sky. Jim Richards sniffed the air, the scent of sea on a chill western breeze.

Ty Harding shook his head at the rented bumper car Richards was driving. "Monday we'll get you into something a little quicker. Did I mention we acquired Easy Eddie's Autorama? Seems Ol' Easy finally turned one too many. The IRS nailed him for tax evasion, looks like he's goin' down for at least three. And about a half mil in fines."

Jim Richards let out a low whistle. "A pretty stiff shot for a little expense oversight, don't you think? I guess the tax Gestapo doesn't want to collect their money. Ol' Easy ain't gonna make no five hundred grand punchin' out license plates."

Ty Harding snorted. "Well it seems Eddie was runnin' a laundry operation for the cartel, and wouldn't roll over on a plea bargain."

Jim Richards grinned. "Probably didn't want his tongue sticking out where his Adam's apple used to be."

"Probably not," laughed Harding. "Anyway we picked up the dealership. I put Lonnie in charge of it. Doin' a hell of a job too."

Richards smiled. "So all the drag racing and hanging out with the grease monkeys finally paid off?"

Ty Harding nodded his head. "Yeah, I guess so. No more booze. No more smoke. But still loves the wheels. Her mom would've been proud after all."

The two friends stared at each other in silence. They both felt their ages weighing down on their shoulders as the memory of years gone by flew across the space between them. Lonnie was born when Ty was just twenty-three years old. His first wife was only twenty at the time, too young for the responsibility of children. But Sharon never had the chance to mature, breast cancer assured her life would end too soon and too young.

Suddenly Jim Richards slapped Ty Harding on the arm. "Hey, I'll see you tomorrow. Looks like a good day for flying."

The sting on the arm brought Harding back to the moment. He smiled broadly. "Every day's a good day to fly."

Jim Richards got into the rented sedan; Ty Harding closed the door for him. Then turned back towards the house.

Richards had to chuckle to himself, as he headed back down the hill to his townhouse in Foster City, Lonnie runnin' ol' Easy Eddie's dealership. Now *that* was a hoot.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Arnold Batiste watched the last rays of the late afternoon sun fade from his meticulously groomed Bonsai garden. At sixty-three he was still a ruggedly attractive man, with closely cropped silver hair, and a strong sculpted face.

Earlier in the day he'd received a telephone call from the United States Coast Guard, telling him his eleven million dollar yacht had sunk with all hands on board. What the hell had happened? Harry Carroon had been sailing his boat for years. He'd worked the route twenty or thirty times, without even a minor incident.

Batiste arose from the glass table at which he was seated, and walked through the immaculate stainless steel commercial, bird's eye maple cabineted, granite topped, kitchen into the dining room. He skirted the polished ebony table, surrounded by over size upholstered chairs that hadn't felt the pressure of a guest's butt in five years, then passed through an arched entry way into the living room. There he opened the doors of a polished blond maple cabinet, and pressed the power button on his Bang-Olufsen music system. He selected a cartridge from a stack of classical CDs, and then programmed the player to start with Gustav Holst's *Planets* skipping the first cut, *Mars the Bringer of War*.

As the music came up, he stepped over to the bar and poured himself a good stiff Tangueray and tonic. Then settled onto a glove leather sofa to gaze out an expansive picture window to the slate gray bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the city of San Francisco beyond. Taking a solid pull at his drink, he relaxed and put his feet up on an inch thick tempered glass coffee table. Then mulled over his past, present, and apparently questionable future.

His father, Joseph Batiste, had started in the liquor business back in the late twenties. And managed to keep it going through out prohibition, in spite of the government's attempts to prevent the import of alcohol. Arnold's grandfather, Armand Batiste had fought with the Basque resistance, and so Joseph was familiar with the basics of clandestine delivery systems.

When World War II broke out, Joseph was recruited by the Office of Strategic Services to run agents in and out of Portugal, using his prohibition experience to deliver people instead of booze. Naturally, Arnold was deferred from military service to work with his father.

After the war, he and his father established a chain of retail liquor stores through out the country. Arnold, always looking for a way to make a buck, had set up a false ID business using a handful of artists left over from the war. The IDs were sold to under age students through a network of dealers run like any other clandestine operation. Naturally, there was a Batiste liquor store in every college community.

By 1966, his old man had passed on to greener if drier pastures. And Arnold Batiste, anticipating a trend in upscale wine consumption, began to corner the market on fine varietals at affordable prices. Also in 1966 the agency decided he'd be an ideal control officer for an operation aptly named *Chaos*. And so in exchange for a substantial capital infusion, Arnold Batiste was back in the intelligence business. By 1968, the youth of the United States of America had discovered another substance to get high on, and he wasn't about to let those profits slip by without taking at least a small piece of the action.

And so, by 1978, he could afford to live the life of a successful, moneyed entrepreneur. His retail management employees were promoted to limited partners in the wine stores they

managed, while his wholesale wine and liquor operation kept them supplied with the majority of product sold. He bought himself a nice little yacht, hired a crew, and sailed around the Caribbean collecting nubile young beauties to satisfy his needs in exchange for a free ride, literally or figuratively.

Then in the early 1980s, cocaine became the recreational drug of choice. He even took a snort himself occasionally. Batiste smiled to himself as he recalled the first time he'd tried it. A young lovely from Santa Barbara, with more money than ambition, had introduced him to it and other prurient pleasures. Immediately he'd recognized an opportunity, a virgin market as it were. Not a market he wished to corner, but one to dabble in for fun and profit.

But it's a funny thing about the business of stealth; one never seems to be able to quite retire from it. Arnold took another long pull at his drink, and continued his ruminations. The agency's covert funds had been cut off by congress, and the Plans Directorate was forced to seek alternative funding for certain unauthorized covert operations critical to the security of the nation and prosecution of the cold war. So once again he'd been called out of retirement, no questions were asked about how he funded his operations.

Later things got pretty shaky. Ollie North went a little too far. It was always a problem bringing amateurs into the brotherhood of stealth. No one but a novice would've conducted operations out of a federal office building, or kept records of activities in hard copy. He should have microfilmed everything, and shredded paper as he went along, storing the film off premises in a safe location where the whole batch could have been sanitized if the op went sour. Jesus, what did he think the word *covert* meant?

Batiste got up and poured himself another drink, shaking his head at the stupidity of the whole mess.

But the agency seldom called on him anymore. Which was not to say they never called him, as there was always some little thing, or another, to do? Especially since 9-11.

The CD player paused to change disks, and for a moment Batiste felt a little lonely. His wife of thirty years seldom came home. They'd drifted apart years ago, losing their libido for each other, finding solace in brief encounters elsewhere. At first they'd tried to remain a couple, for their children and friends. But as the years went by the facade fell away; friends divorced, others died. Soon they gave up the pretense altogether, and just lived apart.

There was no need for divorce; she was financially his other half by law if not by deed. And he did not begrudge her the only token left of a once true union. She'd given birth to, and raised, their children. And stood by him through difficult times. He shook his head. It was time to move out of the house. What the hell did he need a house like this for anyway? The *castle*, some of his younger employees called it. A huge eight thousand square foot home that sat alone on a ridge above the town of Sausalito. Wind swept and fog enveloped, much of the time.

Turning off the music system, and all but one living room light. Arnold Batiste stepped outside to a jet black Mercedes-Benz 600SL parked in the circular driveway. He seldom used the garage, too much wasted time opening and closing the goddamn door even if it was electronically controlled.

He drove down the winding road from his hill top estate, and around the west end of Richardson Bay to his restaurant, The Nautilus, in the town of Tiburon. As usual, the bar was packed with inebriated imbibers listening to a guitar player doing top forty tunes and sound alikes of recording artists from the seventies. Gorgeous cocktail waitresses with well-developed

chests, dressed in tight white nautical pants and deep scalloped T-shirts, weaved between polished wood cocktail tables, to serve noisy patrons.

Arnold Batiste sat down at the end of the long, high wooden bar. Then ordered an Irish coffee, over the din of conversation and music. In a few minutes his manager joined him, sitting on an adjacent bar stool.

"Another good night, eh Roger," Batiste said.

"Definitely, we did nine hundred dinners, and the bar's as good as on a Friday. They like this new music man."

"Good choice, Roge. Treat him right; make him feel like a star. Until his shine wears thin that is."

Roger nodded. "Sorry to hear about the boat."

Batiste shrugged, "Shit happens. But all may not be lost. Tell Jeff to give me a call tomorrow morning, I may have some work for him to do."

Batiste continued to sit at the end of the bar. He had a decent buzz on by one in the morning, and quietly left under the watchful eye of the manager.

The bartender shook his head. "The old guy can really put 'em away."

Roger nodded. "Yeah he can, but I watch him when he leaves. You see that wooden statue of the old fisherman over there?"

"Yeah."

"Well if he bumps into it goin' out, I drive him home."

"And what happens if he bumps into a light pole in that Merz of his?"

Roger shook his head. "If he clears the statue goin' out, he clears everything else goin' home." Then they both laughed.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Carla Simpson pulled her faded, silver gray Accord into the driveway behind Brent Lansing's house, and parked it next to his Yukon. All the lights were out inside the old Victorian, and Carla correctly assumed Brent would be asleep.

Her art class had been on the human form, and this evening the instructor had provided an especially gorgeous model, which Carla greatly enjoyed drawing. As she got out of her car, she thought about making love to Brent.

She depressed the interior lock and closed the door with a solid *whump*, then climbed the stairs to the back door of the house. She slipped her key into the lock. The tumbler turned easily, and she opened the door as quietly as possible, though it squeaked on its hinges in spite of her best efforts.

Carla did not want to creep into the house, something which would have immediately awoken Brent, as she'd found out one evening not long after moving in with the handsome fisherman. He'd seen too much dangerous duty in the jungles of Southeast Asia. He slept warily, and lightly. Loud common noises seldom disturbed him, but the slightest click, or a soft rustle of clothing, awoke him instantly.

She'd come home early one evening. Knew he'd be asleep, and tried to be as quiet as possible. In fact, she'd been rather proud of herself for moving through the house so silently. As she stepped through the doorway leading from the dining room into the hall she'd glanced to her left, then let out a startled yelp.

There pressed against the wall was Brent, gun in hand, stark naked with the most intense expression on his face. His blue eyes were deadly cold. As soon as he recognized her he relaxed, and turned back to the bedroom with an apologetic sigh. "Sorry, Babe," he'd said. "Too many wary nights I guess. Listen; in the future just come in normally. It won't wake me. When you try to be too quiet...well, if they wanted you...they were always quiet. Now it's the smallest noises that awaken me, not the normal ones."

Carla closed the back door, and then turned on the kitchen light. She put her purse down on the table, and draped her old goose down parka across the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

She walked to the bathroom, closed the door, and then took off her clothes. She washed her hands and face, then turned to look at her reflection in the full length mirror that hung on the back of the bathroom door. She did not think of herself as beautiful, she thought her cheekbones were a bit too prominent and her lips a little too full. Although, there were professional models who spent hundreds of dollars a year for collagen injections to temporarily have lips like hers.

She was proud of her body. Full breasts, shapely legs, and a tight round buttocks. She smiled to herself as she brushed her strawberry blonde hair. Yes, she thought, she could have been the model tonight, but that wouldn't have been as enjoyable.

Brent had awakened. Somewhere in his subconscious he'd recognized the sound of her car, then saw the light escaping from under the bathroom door. And he too thought about Carla's gorgeous body.

She came to the edge of the bed and stood facing him. He reached over and gently ran his fingertips along the inside of her thigh. Stroking her, silently calling her to him as he allowed his fingers to brush against the already moist triangle between her firm legs.

Carla moaned as she kneeled onto the edge of the bed. Brent rolled over onto his back bringing her with him, and she straddled his lean muscular stomach. He slid his hands along the outside of her waist, softly brushing the smooth soft skin of her stomach, at last caressing her firm, young breasts.

Moaning softly she tried to lean back away from his searching fingers. But Brent slipped his hands behind her shoulders. As she leaned farther back she could feel his rock hard member poking at her spine, just above the hollow of her lower back. She was very wet.

Sliding as if on silk, her buttocks slipped forward along Brent's hard, rippled stomach. Soon his tongue was bringing her nearly to climax. Her moans guttural. Her heart racing. Her breath came in gasps. Almost falling forward, Carla caught herself, leaning her hands on his muscular shoulders. At that moment Brent rolled her over, and entered her in one smooth motion. In moments his solid rhythmic thrusting had brought her to an overwhelming climax. She dug her nails into his back, calling out in heated passion.

It was midnight when Brent Lansing awoke for the second time that evening. Carla was curled up, sound asleep. He quietly eased out of bed, closed the bedroom door, and then padded down the hall for a shower. He dressed in blue jeans, a black T-shirt, boat shoes, and the red, water proof, parka he always wore. Then drove down to an all night diner for breakfast. At one thirty-five in the morning, Lansing parked his Yukon behind the Sailor's Inn, next to John Richenhauer's black BMW.

After pausing to say hello to Tommy, Richenhauer's ever-present bodyguard, he walked down the hallway to John's office. He found Richenhauer, as usual, sitting at an antique oak desk. The night's receipts spread out before him, taking a tally of meals served and money received. His office was large, but always seemed too small because of the low ceiling, and the clutter accumulated over the years. Light from a Tiffany style lamp cast an incandescent glow over the old desk. Richenhauer looked up as Lansing entered.

"Morning, Brent."

"Good morning, John. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. Sit down a moment, while I finish counting these receipts."

Brent Lansing took a chair across from Richenhauer, and glanced around the room at a jumble of nautical items, wine bottles, books, ledgers, and antique cooking utensils arrayed around its perimeter. Nearly buried on an old table behind John's desk was an eight by ten photo in a tarnished metal frame. Lansing, Richenhauer and Harry Carroon standing in front of a Hughes helicopter. They were all dressed in jungle fatigues, Brent stood in the center with an arm around the other two men. He and Carroon were unshaven, grubby as the jungle itself.

John Richenhauer bundled up the receipts with rubber bands and tossed them into a cardboard box beside his chair. Brent Lansing smiled, he knew about the cardboard boxes. When a box was full, John would write the ending date on the side, then stash it away in the storage shed to become another home for the black widow spiders that lived out there. Every now and then, Richenhauer would need something from the shed, and would go out with an insect bomb and yell: "Fire in the hole." Then pull the tab and toss the can in like a hand grenade, muttering something about *nuking* the bastards.

Later when the air had cleared, he'd rummage around looking for a forgotten file, seldom finding it. Brent figured one day John would just throw an incendiary device in, and then call the fire department. So they could come out and practice their techniques on twenty years of accumulated paper.

John Richenhauer looked up from his desk. "Sorry to hear about Harry. He was a good friend."

"Yeah he was," Brent replied. "He'll be missed."

Richenhauer nodded. "That he will." He was quiet for a moment. Then spoke again.

"Was he able to make the drop?"

"Yes." Lansing replied. "It went right on schedule. I've got the crates stashed in a warehouse near Watsonville airport."

"Good, at least that's not an issue. Have you made contact with the buyers?"

Lansing shook his head. "Not yet. Harry was supposed to call them on Monday, after he'd made port of entry."

"So you're going to call instead?"

Lansing shook his head. "No, I've no idea who the contact is."

Richenhauer looked up at the ceiling for a moment, thinking. Then looked back at Lansing. "Do you want me to look for another buyer?"

Lansing pursed his lips, and then shook his head. "No, not yet. Harry's contingency plan was for me to run a personals ad in the *Chronicle*. If the goods were here, but Harry wasn't, I'm to write: *Jimmy, your sister needs you. Please call. And leave my telephone number.*"

John Richenhauer raised one eyebrow skeptically. "And the buyer's supposed to call."

Brent nodded his head once.

Richenhauer squeezed his eyes closed for a moment. "Sounds a bit shaky." He shrugged his shoulders once. "Give it shot, but watch yourself."

"Okay, point number two. I think it's time we got out of the fishing business. If we keep running this fish scam long enough, they're gonna wise up."

"I've been thinking the same thing" Brent agreed.

Richenhauer thought for a moment. "Okay, tomorrow evening we'll pay off the crew. Tell 'em to take a hike somewhere, and get some sun. Send us a post card in case something comes up."

Brent nodded. "Okay, but what about the Ride?"

"I've got a guy up around Fort Bragg, needs a boat with fish holds like ours. He'll take her as soon as we want. But let's try to move those crates right away; before someone starts asking questions about how you just happened along to fish, when that million dollar tub went down."

#

Brent Lansing was still wide-awake when he finished his meeting with John Richenhauer. He left by the rear stairs, and climbed into his Yukon. There was no point going home, he'd only awaken Carla. So he cruised south on Highway 1, to Monastery Beach. He turned right onto a dirt road that ran out to a point overlooking the southern end of the bay. He parked just short of the cliff, climbed out, and walked over to the edge. To his amazement, the salvage of the St. Emilion had already begun. From where he stood he could see a single ocean tug anchored just off shore. High intensity lights shown under water from beneath the tug, illuminating the sunken yacht. He could see divers patrolling the perimeter of the illuminated area. Returning to the Yukon, he decided to stay on watch. He moved the vehicle closer to the edge in order to see the water from the driver's seat.

At 06:30, Brent Lansing startled himself awake from an unintended sleep. To his surprise another tug, and a barge, were now on site just seaward of the sunken boat. More lights and equipment were being lowered into the blue-green water. He used a pair of binoculars to read the

name: *Pacific Marine*. And a blue and yellow logo depicting two hardhat divers operating underwater torches painted on the side of the tugs' smoke stacks. Staying on watch until about eight, he kept track of the arrival of additional salvage divers in Zodiac inflatables that zipped back and forth between the salvage operation and the beach.

He left his vantage point, and drove back to Highway 1, then turned left towards Carmel. A cobalt blue Bronco pulled onto the highway in front of him, heading up and over the hill, then turned left into the grounds of the Carmel River Inn. As Brent Lansing drove past, he looked left, and noted two other blue Broncos parked by the cabins at the rear off the property. And though he could not make out the lettering, from the color and shape of the logos painted on the doors of the vehicles, he knew they belonged to Pacific Marine.

Lansing drove home, and had a second breakfast with Carla. She'd not expected him, and was excited they'd have some extra time together. While she showered, he called the San Francisco Chronicle, asked them to run his ad starting Sunday for the entire week.

#

At four in the afternoon Brent Lansing was back in John Richenhauer's office. "I took a drive out to Monastery this morning, that's a high powered salvage outfit they've got out there."

Richenhauer nodded his head. "Pacific Marine, they used to run the Glomar Explorer out of Redwood City."

"Really? That dry dock contraption Howard Hughes built to recover the Ruskie sub back in the seventies?"

"Yep, very same."

Lansing frowned. "So what the hell are they doing messing around with a little ol' yacht?"

"My guess? Langley has something to do with that yacht."

Lansing shook his head. "Terrific."

"Pacific Marine's linked to Ty Harding International. A proprietary of varied dimensions, including internal security investigations." Richenhauer smiled cynically.

Lansing raised both eyebrows. "I'm starting to get a real bad feeling, John."

Richenhauer turned his hands, palms upward. "All good things come to end, sooner or later, Brent. Just make sure you're prepared to move quickly, if things heat up. I wouldn't let my passport lapse if I were you."

#

Lansing started his vehicle, then ran through a mental check of preparations required to leave on a moments notice. He was always ready, but the thought of leaving depressed him. He'd built a nice little base camp here for himself. He and Carla were getting along good, even if she was fourteen years younger. And he had a real home, something he'd never had before. But there were times when difficult choices had to be made. And clearly, this was fast becoming one of those times.

## CHAPTER SIX

Jim Richards parked his rental car on the west side of San Carlos airport. Slid out of the car, then easily defeated the locked latch of the security gate, using a spring metal credit card. He walked over to the twin engine Cessna 310. He placed his overnight bag inside the aft baggage compartment. Then stepped around to join Ty Harding, as he checked the propeller on the port engine. Together they completed the pre-flight inspection, verifying the aircraft was ready to fly.

Ty Harding took the left seat. Jim Richards the right. Richards scanned the instrument panel to re-familiarize himself with its configuration. Quickly identifying the critical gauges: Airspeed, altimeter, artificial horizon, directional gyro. And then the engine read outs: Cylinder head temperatures, manifold pressure, fuel gauges. And finally the communication and navigation stack. The cockpit smelled of old leather, sweat, and warm electrical gear. Adventurous scents that peaked his appetite for flight.

Ty Harding began the engine start procedure, as Jim Richards flipped through the Jeppesen flight manual to locate the approach plates for Monterey airport. He secured these to a small clipboard, just to the left of his control yoke, where both he and Harding could read them easily.

Harding placed a pair of David Clark headphones over his ears, pressed the transmit button on his control yoke, and spoke into a tiny boom microphone that curved around to his lips. "San Carlos Ground Control, this is Cessna one-Niner-Zero- Tango- Hotel at ramp five requesting taxi to take-off."

"Tango-Hotel, you're cleared to taxi. Hold short, runway three-zero. Contact Tower on one-one-eight point nine with information Delta when ready for take-off."

Ty Harding acknowledged the clearance, then eased off the brakes and commenced his roll towards the runway. As they taxied, Jim Richards set the navigational radios to the VHF channels indicated on their charts, then verified the accuracy of the coordinates loaded into the Global Positioning System's computer.

Following the engine check, Harding again pressed the push-to-talk button on his control yoke. "San Carlos tower. This is One-Niner-Zero-Tango-Hotel at runway three-zero, ready for take-off, VFR Monterey."

"Tango-Hotel you're cleared for take-off, runway three-zero. Squawk three-three-zero-four. Execute the Woodside Two departure for VFR flight to Monterey airport. Contact Departure Control on one-two-seven point three passing fifteen hundred feet. Have a good flight."

"Tango-Hotel. Departure at one-two-seven point three."

As Harding moved the dual throttles forward, the roar of the twin Lycoming engines increased to an ear-pounding throb. Harmonic propeller vibrations surged through the cockpit. Jim Richards donned the co-pilot's headset, to mute the engine noise, as well as facilitate cockpit communication. The Cessna 310 shuttered as it strove to overcome the inertia of ground friction. Soon the forces of acceleration pinned Jim Richards to the back of his seat. Harding eased back on the control yoke, lifting the nose slightly. The aircraft leaped into the air, climbing into an ice blue sky washed with wispy, cirrus clouds.

Jim Richards stared out the side window, fascinated as always, as the ground seemed to fall away. The altitude gained miniaturized automobiles. Homes and office buildings, an architect's model of boundless dimensions. He broke into a broad grin. Ty Harding leveled off at cruising altitude, then handed the controls over to Richards. "Think you can find Monterey?"

"In my sleep," Richards replied.

"Really. Then how 'bout some hood time?"

"No way," Richards laughed. "The day's too beautiful. Besides I only wear the hood when flying in actual conditions."

Ty Harding glanced side ways at him, and frowned.

Jim Richards grinned. "Had a student once, working on his instructor's rating, in actual out over the valley. ATC vectored us into a cumulus cloud. Bounced that little one-seventy-two all over the sky. Snow was coming in through the vents, for Christ's sake.

"My student looks over at me and says: *I've never flown in actual weather before. All my instrument time has been under the hood. What should I do?* I told him to put the hood on. And you know what? He did."

Harding laughed, shook his head. "Some of those weekend sky jockeys ought to have their ratings stamped: *Valid only while wearing a training hood.*"

Richards grinned. "And followed by those immortal FAA words: *This space intentionally left blank.*"

At altitude they soon identified the Monterey Bay shoreline, running south from Santa Cruz in a wide crescent shape whose southern terminus was a point of land separating Pacific Grove from the town of Carmel. Directly off their nose was the Moss Landing Power Plant, its twin five hundred foot stacks a universal check point for pilots flying to Monterey.

The plateau on which the Monterey airport sat, looked like an enormous aircraft carrier made of sand, sailing through a sea of Monterey pines. Jim Richards identified the runways, and then eased back on the power to let the aircraft lose altitude. He entered a right downwind pattern, as Ty Harding contacted the tower, and requested their landing sequence.

Banking into a low turn over the Laguna Seca Speedway, then right again onto final, Jim Richards lined up with the centerline on runway 28. Then greased the 310 onto the wide flat tarmac. Fifteen minutes later, he and Harding strolled into the airport's restaurant.

Jim Richards gazed through the large, view windows across the tarmac to the executive jets parked out on the ramp. The airport had grown immensely since his days as a flight instructor. Back then, the old field was still reminiscent of the World War Two Naval Air Station it had once been. With Navy Sky Raiders and a few mid-range prop driven bombers parked on the far side of the runway. A poignant smile crossed Jim Richards' face, as he remembered the rugged ambiance of the old field. A tune from the nineteen forties played in his mind: *As Time Goes By*.

His father, a Naval aviator, had been killed in an F4U Corsair while on routine patrol, just after the war ended. Jim Richards' only link, then and now were the old photos, his love of flight, and those occasional places where history was frozen in time. Monterey Airport had been one of those places, but no longer. He let out a quiet sigh. The old fighters were gone. And now the sound system played only elevator music.

Their breakfasts arrived. Ty Harding ended the telephone conversation with his son, and then looked over at Richards. "The St. Emilion is stable, but there are problems. Ted wants us to meet him at the Carmel River Inn. They're using it as their topside base of operations."

#

They rented a Mustang convertible, then drove south along Highway 1. At the entrance to the motel, they turned into the graveled driveway that led to individual the cottages. They parked outside one of several rustic cabins nestled in a stand of three hundred year old Redwood trees.

Jim Richards sniffed the air and grinned, as slipped out of the Mustang. He remembered another meeting at this same location, with a squad of U.S. Navy SEALs to which he'd been attached for one of his field assignments. The squad was retired now, those that survived anyway. He and Vince still kept in touch.

Ted Harding came out to greet them. He had the look of a movie star: Sandy blond hair cut a little long. A square, honest jaw with a wide smile. Sea green eyes. He shook hands with Jim Richards, and then slapped his Dad on the shoulder as he led them both inside cabin number seven. It was set up like a studio apartment: A kitchenette and dining area, bath and bedroom. On one wall, a fireplace with a gas starter.

Gathered around the tiny kitchen table was two of Ted's crew. They were studying a fathom chart of Monastery Bay. Sketches of the St. Emilion were spread out next to the chart, which clearly showed a deep extension of the Carmel undersea canyon running forty-five degrees to the continental shelf.

As Harding and Richards looked on, Ted explained the problem they were facing. "The boat is here, lying on its side." He pointed to a small elliptic circle drawn on the chart in red ink. "Her stern is sticking out over the rim of the canyon. We can't let her slip over the edge. If that happens, we'll lose her in three thousand feet of water."

"What caused her to sink?" Harding asked.

"A huge hole in her side, forward of the galley." Ted replied.

"Any idea what caused the breach?" Richards asked.

Ted shook his head. "Right now she's lying on her starboard side. We can't see the exterior of the hole." He gestured with his hands indicating the extreme list of the hull. "From inside, the hole is partially obscured by sand and debris, which continues to ooze into the cabin."

Ted went on to explain the salvage plan. "On our barge we're manufacturing buoyancy bladders from sheets of heavy vinyl." He shuffled papers until he found sketches of the bladders, and the fill profile. "Because she's in such a precarious position, we've written a computer program to control the rate at which the bags are filled, thus assuring neutral buoyancy as we bring the yacht into an upright position."

Ted stabbed his index finger at the chart. "We can't float her in the usual fashion. The current out there is strong, and could easily carry her over the canyon. If a bag failed, she'd fall in. Instead, we plan to bring her to buoyancy only a foot, or so, off the bottom. Then tow her forward, clear of the rim. Once stabilized away from the rim of the canyon, we can vacuum the sand out and patch her up to create enough positive buoyancy to assure we won't lose her even if a bag does fail.

"It's a major challenge. And knowing how much the two of you love to dive," Ted paused, and smiled broadly. "I thought you'd want to be in on it"

#

They rode one of the Broncos over the hill and down to Monastery Beach, turning into a private driveway. Ted had rented parking space from its owners. It was a good staging area, with a well-worn path to the water.

On the beach, Zodiac inflatable was launched through a moderate shore break. Ted's crew made the task look deceptively easy. Amateurs making their first surf entry with the unwieldy craft usually ended up sideways. Then upside down with their dive gear headed for Davy Jones' locker.

In less than five minutes, they arrived at the leeward side of the Sea Princess. A sixty-five foot ocean tug, the command boat for the operation. They each struggled up a water logged, doublewide, hemp ladder that shifted laterally with each step. And bumped the toes of their shoes and bare knuckles against the rough, sea worn, steel side of the massive tug.

With difficulty, they made it safely to the top, then swung themselves awkwardly over the iron railing, and onto the oil soaked wooden deck.

Once on board, they passed through the aft hatch, then proceeded down the port companionway, turning right, into a cramped control room. Devoid of portholes, the center hull cabin was illuminated entirely by cathode ray tubes that cast a ghostly glow into the dark recesses of steel ribbed bulkheads. The control center was lined with stainless steel racks, which secured rows of instrumentation, computer monitors, and video displays.

Underwater cameras and lights had been rigged to cover every angle of the St. Emilion. The yacht could be seen lying on the sandy bottom. In the background, a forest of giant kelp swayed rhythmically in tidal surges, as puffs of sand kicked up around the edges of the yacht's hull.

Although Monastery Bay had been closed to the public since the yacht's sinking, some recreational divers had managed to get into the water, and make their way out to the sunken boat. On one of the monitors, Jim Richards could see Pacific Marine's diver patrols politely, but firmly, waving them off.

Richards and Harding drew gear from the tug's equipment locker, and then climbed the aft companionway to join Ted and the rest of the salvage crew for the pre-dive briefing. The salvage team consisted of thirty highly skilled men. Twelve were assigned to guard the St. Emilion. Six during the day and six at night. They worked in pairs. Each team patrolling in one hour shifts, no deeper than necessary for vertical visibility, to minimize the accumulation of nitrogen in their bloodstreams. Two-way communications was maintained on secure underwater transceivers. Designed and manufactured by another THI proprietary, set up to handle all of the company's special field communication needs.

High intensity underwater lights illuminated the sunken yacht twenty-four hours a day, powered by 100,000 watt diesel generators located on the service barge. Also on board the barge, were high volume air compressors to fill depleted SCUBA tanks. The compressors would inflate the buoyancy bladders. The barge had a fully stocked machine shop for maintenance and repair of equipment. Four of the salvage team's members were assigned exclusively to these tasks. Another three were pegged for shore duty, ferrying supplies out to the tugs as needed.

Ty Harding and Jim Richards struggled into their wetsuits. Each buddy team had a distinctive color running across their shoulders and down the outside of their legs for identification. The suits Harding and Richards donned were black with bright vermilion. They helped each other into buoyancy compensator vests. The BCs held two steel compressed air cylinders, together providing a hundred and forty-four cubic feet of pure compressed air. Each system was equipped with a primary and a secondary regulator, a dive computer, and a Mark IV compass.



Jim Richards pressed the scroll button on his computer, and then monitored the self-test program. Next, he rotated the timing bezel on the Sea Dweller he always wore, setting the markers for elapsed time. In thirty years of non-stop abuse, his old Rolex had never failed him.

The St. Emilion rested in eighty-five feet of water. At that depth, Jim Richards would have forty minutes of time before decompression would be required. Sufficient air supply would not be a problem, as the twin seventies strapped to his back would last at least two hours.

They donned their masks and communications equipment, checked their airflow, and then stepped through a narrow gap in the railing of the Sea Princess, jumping seven long feet to the chill Pacific Ocean. The first sensation Jim Richards had upon entering the water was the sudden transition from bright sunshine to a dim blue green world. Bubbles foamed about his face, as he spun away from the tug and dove towards the sandy bottom. He worked his jaw muscles to equalize water pressure pressing on the structural integrity of his inner ear, while continuing to fin steadily downward.

He soon felt the chill Pacific Ocean seeping into his wetsuit. But ignored the increasing cold, relying upon the insulating qualities of thick neoprene to keep his body's core temperature within acceptable limits.

The scene directly below looked like a set staged for an underwater movie. The yacht was surrounded by ten, fifteen foot, stanchions topped with high intensity discharge lights anchored against the tidal surge. Some were directed towards the boat, others shined outward to illuminate the perimeter. Thick cables ran from each light stanchion along the ocean floor to five sealed transformers. From the transformers a single power bundle rose upward to a buoyant octopus, and thence to the service barge.

In the surreal glow of the HIDs, the bright work of the St. Emilion gleamed like a bejeweled princess awaiting King Neptune's call. Her polished brass and stainless steel fittings not yet dulled by the ravages of the briny deep.

Earlier, Ted Harding's dive crews had removed what was left of the main and mizzenmasts. Everything removable from the yacht's decks, and interior, had been hauled up to the barge. A taught line ran from the bow of the yacht to the stern of the Sea Stallion, the other tug on station. The Stallion would tow the yacht forward, once neutral buoyancy was attained.

As Jim Richards, Ted and Ty Harding arrived at the aft deck of the sunken boat, two divers emerged from the interior. They stopped to talk to Ted for a moment.

"We're all set," said one of the divers, his voice hollow and slightly garbled inside the neoprene covered underwater earphones.

"Good." Ted made a circle of his thumb and forefinger. "You two are topside for now. But stay suited up in case we need you."

The two divers nodded, and gave Ted the thumbs-up sign.

Ted Harding led Jim Richards and Ty into the once luxurious interior of the St. Emilion to make a final inspection. Visibility was very limited. Shafts of artificial light, which slipped in through the windows and portholes of the sunken yacht, undulated in the tidal surges. Jim Richards soon found it difficult to stay properly oriented; he fought a nearly overwhelming sense of vertigo. Everything seemed disjointed, for they'd entered a topsy turvey world where the laws of gravity no longer applied. The interior starboard bulkhead was now the floor. The floor was where the port side bulkhead ought to be.

Ignoring the flooded upper salon, Jim Richards followed Ted and Ty Harding down the tilted companionway into the communications center aft of the galley. Except for a faint glow

from the HIDs outside, the narrow shafts of the underwater lights strapped to their neoprene hoods provided the only illumination below the main salon. Shadows wafted grotesquely in the corners of the galley, playing tricks with their imagination. Jim Richards turned his head, shifting the beam of his helmet-light left. What was that over in the corner? The narrow beam illuminated a seat cushion drifting near the ceiling, seemingly searching for a way out of its lonely tomb.

They swam cautiously farther forward, penetrating deeper into the indigo gloom until at last they reached the crew's sleeping quarters. Ty Harding swam into the port cabin, Ted continued forward, while Jim Richards turned into the starboard cabin. Though considered spacious by yachting standards, the cabin seemed positively claustrophobic in its present condition; dark, foreboding, flooded with seawater. Richards tried to turn around, but banged his tank into a wall. No, it was the edge of a bunk; the deck was to his left more, or less.

Again disorientation threatened to overwhelm him, quickly he noted the direction of his rising bubbles, and refocused himself. His breathing remained calm, the rhythmic hiss of air taken in, followed by the metallic burble of air exhaled.

Beyond the sound of his own breathing, he became aware of other mechanical noises echoing down from the surface far above. With vision and touch reduced, sound became a heightened sense underwater, augmented by the physics of underwater transmission.

He shined his light into the huge hole in the cabin's starboard bulkhead. Jagged pieces of wood, wires, and piping had been cut away by Ted Harding's divers leaving a clean elliptical opening. Sand oozed through, across the collapsed doublewide bunk. Strands of seaweed wafted demonically in the surge created by Jim Richards' swim fins. Small bits of food from the galley drifted here and there, dispersed by the random current created as water ebbed and flowed through the intricate structure of the multi-million dollar wreck. Small fish nibbled at the food, or tugged at larger pieces, fighting for a share beyond their individual capacity to consume or retain.

Ted Harding's metallic voice broke into Jim Richards' thoughts abruptly. "Everything looks good. Let's get back to the main deck."

On deck two divers hauling the collapsed forward bladders down to the boat from above greeted them. Two others brought compressor hoses. While a third team hauled the aft bag, and its hose. Jim Richards glanced at his watch; barely fifteen minutes had passed; yet the time seemed much longer.

The aft divers ran a six inch wide, sixty ton-test Kevlar strap under the stern of the yacht. The fact the stern was hanging out over the canyon worked in their favor. They passed the strap under the boat like a saddle cinch under a giant horse. Used the propeller shaft bracings to prevent the strap from slipping off the stern.

Forward other divers attached smaller floatation bags wherever a secure anchorage could be found.

Jim Richards swam aft of the St. Emilion, looked over the rim and down into the dark depths of the Monterey Canyon. He wondered what creatures might be found in depths below.

#

Far below, beyond the range of Jim Richards' vision, in the depths of the submarine canyon a young Great White shark, no more than twelve feet in length, cruised the cold mid-water territory he'd staked out northeast of the canyon's south wall. Healthy fish ignored him; he posed no threat to them. The old, the sick, and the injured were his usual prey.

#

Jim Richards turned back away from the canyon and gazed at the aft flotation bladder. It was filled with a small amount of air for buoyancy, and hovered high above the deck, a monstrous black apparition. He swam around it once.

Due to the weight of the engine the aft flotation bladder was of huge proportions. Its size, and the requirement to remain vertical, precluded the use of canvas strapping to attach the bag to the boat. Instead it was secured to the cinch strap with turnbuckles hooked through brass grommets at the bottom seam of the bag.

Richards glided down its length and examined these attachment points carefully. Although reinforced, they were clearly the weak point in the system. Hopefully, they'd hold until the boat was out of danger.

Even as final preparations were being completed word came down from the Sea Princess that the wind had picked up. The sea turning to chop, adding another element of risk.

Jim Richards watched the aft bladder slowly fill to near capacity. Then heard Ted give the order to fill the forward bladders. Topside a computer tracked the pressurization in real time comparing the feed back loops to a predetermined simulation that resulted in an asymmetric fill profile to allow the starboard bladder to fill slightly before the port. If the simulation proved accurate, the boat would roll to a vertical position, and with the aid of its massive keel neutralize in an upright posture.

The seaward surges tugged at the divers. Jim Richards grasped a light standard to maintain his position, and then watched intently as the flotation bags gradually filled with air. The whole team looked like an underwater choreographs from an Ester Williams movie. Ted, having nothing else to hang on to, swam to the aft railing.

At first nothing seemed to be happening, time crept by and the surges grew ever stronger. Jim Richards looked up, watched his bubbles glide towards the surface. It seemed far away.

Suddenly a voice from the control room cut through his headset, "Get ready down there we're reaching buoyant capacity in five seconds."

"Roger that," replied Ted Harding. "Max out the aft bag now."

The Sea Stallion added an increment of power putting just enough tension on the towline to assure the St. Emilion would not drift backwards as neutral buoyancy was attained.

All at once, as if by magic, the sunken boat seemed to come alive rolling up onto her keel like an ice skater coming out of a crouched pirouette. Slowly the Sea Stallion began to tow the yacht forward, the tip of its keel gliding a mere millimeters above the ocean floor.

Just south of the canyon's rim was a flat patch of sand nearly devoid of rocks. Here the boat could be stabilized against the surges, while Ted and the crew examined the damage and completed the salvage work.

As the Sea Stallion reversed her engines to halt her forward motion, one of the grommets securing the aft bag ripped clear leaving a hole the size of a fifty cent piece in the bottom of the buoyancy bladder. The bag began to rise. Slowly at first, but with each increment of decreased depth its speed increased exponentially as the molecules of trapped air began to expand. In less than a heartbeat it had attained the velocity of a pressure launched Polaris missile.

Like a jet-black whale it breached the surface. The still bloated bag roared out of the water clearing the waves by nearly ten feet, and then slapped back down onto its side with a tremendous splash. The impact blasted a quarter ton of air through a hole now expanded to the size of a volleyball. The force propelled the rapidly deflating bladder across the water like an unmanned cigarette boat with a jammed throttle. It skipped and skimmed, zigged and zagged,

bounced twice, then slammed into the side of the equipment barge. Finally, ingloriously, sagging below the surface, a deflated shadow of its former bloated hulk.

As the bladder broke free and shot upwards, the end of the cinch strap whipped around slamming its steel turn buckle, with the sharp edged brass grommet attached into Ted's neoprene hood. The grommet instantly sliced through the soft neoprene and cut a four-inch gash into the skin of his scalp. Then continuing its arching trajectory, the turnbuckle tore Ted's mask, regulator, and transceiver from his face. The impact rendering him senseless, as it knocked him over the aft rail, and cart wheeling into the submarine canyon.

Jim Richards reacted instantly, yet even his powerful fin strokes could not intercept Ted before he disappeared beyond the rim. Richards drove forward, fining at maximum velocity, inhaling increasing quantities of air as he dove downward under ever increasing compression.

He barely cleared outcroppings of coral encrusted rock, weaving between stringers of sea flora, streaking downward in manic ferocity, as he tried to catch the tumbling diver before he disappeared into the gloom of oblivion.

When at last he stretched his hand out for Ted, seizing the strap of his buoyancy compensator vest, flooding the chambers with air to assist in arresting the uncontrolled descent, his depth gauge read one hundred and twelve feet. Stabilizing them both against the rock wall, he glanced at his computer read-out. His tanks were three quarters empty; the air consumption profiles five times its normal rate.

His first concern was for Ted's air supply. He immediately slid his secondary regulator into Ted's mouth, clearing the seawater from its mouthpiece by depressing the purge valve. It was then he became aware of the volume of blood seeping out from under Ted's wetsuit hood. Jim Richards imagined Ted's head split open like an egg, his brains squeezing out through the crack. He immediately pushed the image out of his mind, an apparition of nitrogen at depth.

He grasped Ted Harding by his shoulders, and then planted his own feet against an outcropping of rock. Jim Richards thrust off, fining upward towards the rim of the canyon. Burdened by Ted's limp body, its weight multiplied three fold by the depth, made each fin stroke an effort of supreme will. He'd momentarily considered dumping their weight belts, but discarded the idea; the greater danger was an uncontrolled ascent.

Nevertheless, he feared for the young man's life, and imagined the worst of tragedies. A cold wave of anxiety passed through his body like none he'd ever experienced before, even when his own life appeared forfeit. Cradling Ted's head against his shoulder he continued to fin upward past the rim of the canyon, praying he was not carrying a corpse.

During all this time Jim Richards made no call for assistance. Operating alone in the field so much of the time had forced him to rely solely upon himself when sudden emergencies arose. He'd conditioned himself to deal with them swiftly and silently. It was only as he regained the rim of the canyon, and saw other divers about the yacht, did the thought to call for assistance occur to him.

#

When the bladder had broken free, nearly all the other divers including Ty Harding were swimming towards the starboard side of the St. Emilion to take a look at the impact hole. When the bladder ripped loose, some buoyancy was lost and the yacht toppled over onto its side again. Many of the divers were scrambling out of the way, or watching the bladder soar upward towards the surface. No one except Jim Richards had observed Ted's accident.

#

"This is Jim Richards. I've got an emergency. I need assistance with an injured diver. My location is aft of the St. Emilion, ascending towards the Sea Princess."

Turning towards the canyon, Ty Harding and several of the other divers spotted Jim Richards and Ted Harding as they rose slowly above the rim.

#

The young Great White, attracted by the bright underwater lights and strange vibrations echoing down into the deep sea, cautiously rose ever closer to the canyon's rim, curious to see if fisherman luring Calamari with lights had also attracted his favorite meal, California sea lion.

As Jim Richards cleared the rim of the abyss, the hungry marine predator loomed up out of the dark depths intersecting the viscous trail of fresh blood left by Ted's head wound. The scent of blood was unmistakable, and the primitive brain of the shark triggered a reactive twitch of his enormous tail, which drove him upwards toward the slowly swimming meal.

#

The shark emerged from the canyon focused only on its prey. Had he not been so aroused by the scent of blood he surely would not have ventured into an area filled with so many strange creatures whose breathing apparatuses made unworldly metallic sounds, as the bubbles of compressed air exploded from their exhaust valves.

#

Ty Harding, swimming faster than he ever believed possible, dove under Jim Richards and his son. Drawing his knife, he rocketed forward on powerful leg strokes slamming head long into the shark just as it opened its mouth for a bite of tantalizing legs. Harding had aimed for the beast's eye, but missed by a good two inches. Nevertheless, the shock of impact, the sting of stainless steel, surprised the animal. It turned away from the unexpected attack, ripping through the skin of Harding's wetsuit, cutting the soft neoprene, with the denticle edge of its powerful tail.

Ty Harding tried to retain his knife, but lost his grip as the shark twisted away. The knife stuck in the tough cartilage of its body momentarily, then fell, flashing in the underwater lights as it tumbled downward to disappear in the profound gloom below.

The Great White turned again, at first disoriented by the lights. But then its predatory sense of acquisition took over, and again it swam into the blood trail, to line up for an attack from behind its ascending prey. Harding's heart sank as he realized there was absolutely nothing he could do to stop the ensuing carnage.

He desperately cried a fruitless warning into his transceiver just as the shark opened its mouth wide revealing row upon row of triangular shaped, razor sharp, serrated teeth. Suddenly the mouth snapped shut missing its prey by inches. Ty Harding could not believe his eyes; a Great White never misses its target.

The huge beast shuddered, arching its back in agony as the tip of an ocean spear burst from its port side, protruding through the fifth gill slot. The spear had been fired at near point blank range into the shark's open mouth by one of Pacific Marine's patrol divers, who'd come to aid an injured comrade.

Instantly the Great White broke off the attack, shot straight forward, realizing too late its mortal danger. Clearing the aft deck of the yacht it was met head on by another ocean spear fired by a second patrol diver. The forward momentum of the spear coupled with the forward speed of the Great White conspired to drive the shaft two and a half feet through the hydrodynamically sleek head of the Great White, and out its underbelly.

The shark rolled over and over, blood flowed in cloudy trails from the wounded animal. Twisting and shivering it sank to the sandy bottom in agony and terror. There it continued its flopping dance of death for nearly fifteen minutes, each convulsion weaker than the last.

For a moment the plight of Ted Harding and Jim Richards was forgotten, as converging divers watched in awe and sadness the death of a creature they would have preferred to drive away unharmed. It had meant no malice, but rather followed an instinct appropriate to the food chain within which it lived.

#

All at once Ted regained consciousness; instinctively he began to fin, which helped Jim Richards cover the last few feet to the surface. Half climbing, half hauled up, the hemp ladder; they gained the rear deck of the Sea Princess.

Immediately, the skilled eyes and hands of one of the control crew, who doubled as the team's medic, tended the scalp wound. Ted was pronounced beyond harm's way if only because his head was so hard.

His eyes were already bright and focused. The bleeding quickly stopped with compresses, and a thorough rinsing with distilled water. A sterile dressing applied.

Jim Richards sagged back against the aft railing, his legs stretched out; watching the medic attend Ted's wound. His muscles quivered with fatigue, and the after effect of adrenaline.

Suddenly, Ty Harding popped over the railing.

"Jesus did you see that thing?"

"What thing?" Richards asked.

"That shark." Ty exclaimed.

"What shark?" Ted Harding and Jim Richards asked in unison.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Jeff Thompson's brown hair was bleached almost blond from too many hours in the sun, and too much time in the water. He was big and muscular, yet moved with the grace and efficiency of a predatory cat. He parked his old Jeep Wagoneer adjacent the same dirt road Brent Lansing had used to drive out to the cliffs overlooking Monastery Bay. However, unlike Lansing, he took great care to conceal his vehicle in a stand of Monterey pines; to assure it would not be seen from the highway. Nor was it likely to be noticed even if someone happened to drive out to the point on the old road that night.

Slipping from the driver's seat, he stepped to the rear of the vehicle, and then opened the lift gate. He pulled a pair of black Farmer John skin-in wetsuit pants from the rear compartment. Then spread copious quantities of cornstarch over the insides of the legs. The starch would allow his carefully shaven legs to slip easily into the six millimeter thick neoprene pants. Most recreational divers preferred the impact resistance of nylon-bonded neoprene, with splashes of coordinated color. But Thompson's plain neoprene wetsuit fit like a second skin, and was much warmer than the nylon lined versions. As for color, black was perfect.

He stripped off his blue jeans revealing a black Lycra swimsuit underneath, and then climbed into the long johns, securing the bib at the shoulders with Velcro closures. Next he stripped off his Navy blue T-shirt. Then slipped into a custom-made neoprene jacket, with an integrated hood. Last of all, he pulled on a pair of hard sole neoprene booties.

After removing a few unneeded items from a black rip stop nylon dive bag, he closed the lift gate. Then headed off across the open field, a mere shadow passing in the night. Just before reaching the edge of the cliff, he dropped to the ground, and belly crawled the last ten yards, assuring he'd not present a silhouette to any lookouts that might be stationed on the boats below. At last, he looked down onto the same movie set scene observed by Brent Lansing two nights before.

He pulled a black anodized aluminum piton from his bag, then used the haft of his combat dive knife to quickly drive its shaft deep into the hard packed soil three feet back from the cliff's edge. He then attached a nylon climbing rope, coiled so the midway point of the rope, marked with masking tape, could be snapped into two opposing carabineers secured to the top of the piton.

He tossed the rope well away from the cliff; it unwound to the rocks below, leaving a double strand secured to the piton. Swinging the strap of his dive bag over his shoulder and across his chest, Thompson slipped the rope into a rappelling figure eight, and then rolled over the side. His descent brought him to a small beach just behind the first out cropping of rocks, at the south end of Monastery bay. Leaving the rope hanging against the cliff, he set his dive bag on a rock ledge well above the tide line.

The night was cavern dark, the moon not yet raised. Nevertheless, ambient light from the underwater lights provided more than sufficient illumination for a man capable of assembling his gear blindfolded.

From the dive bag he extracted, then donned, a backpack with two small cylinders of compressed air, each capable of providing twenty minutes dive time. Two, one inch tubes ran from the second stage regulator's exhaust ports, over his shoulders into chambers on both sides of

the cylinders. The chambers were constructed in such a way that air exhausted, after breathing, broke into tiny bubbles that surfaced sporadically, thus eliminating the tell tale wake that trails a diver's below surface travel. To the front of the backpack harness, Jeff Thompson snapped a small unit containing an oxygen rebreather that would allow him to travel producing no bubbles at all.

Next soft diving weights were attached to a web belt wrapped about his waist to counter the buoyancy of his dive suit and bubble chambers. Finally his facemask, compass, knife, and a small underwater light.

Jeff Thompson rotated the bezel on his luminous tritium dive watch, to show an entry time of twelve thirty-five AM.

Cold seawater seeped into his wetsuit as he pulled on a pair of old U.S. Divers rocket fins. Then turned and glided silently just under the surface, clearing the jagged shoreline rocks before diving into a shallow descending trench, just as a shore bound wave loomed up in front of him. He gripped the undersea rocks against the incoming surge, then waited for the return wave to catapult him down the trench, and out under the forested trunks of giant kelp.

Using the seaweed forest as cover, he swam at an angle below the floating fronds until he was directly abeam the bow of the sunken yacht. There he rested for a moment behind an algae covered rock, while he took compass readings to the yacht, and back to his shore entry.

He surveyed the scene before him. Ahead, perhaps fifty feet away, illuminated by the stanchion lights, lay the St. Emilion. Just this side of the perimeter was another large rock. If he could make it to that rock the outward shining lights would be directly over his head, and he'd be able to better observe the activity-taking place around the sunken boat.

He switched to his rebreather, then waited and watched as patrol divers circled just below the surface. Soon a moment came when neither diver was looking in his direction. Seizing the opportunity he shot forward arriving at the second rock in less than ten seconds. It was then that he noticed the cameras.

#

In the control of the Sea Princess only one man monitored the activity below. No curious divers had been around since that afternoon. The crewman turned away from the video monitors to pour himself a cup of freshly made coffee. The aroma had been beckoning him enticingly from the adjacent galley.

#

Jeff Thompson lay against the far side of the rock and carefully peered around at the sunken boat, now only a few yards away. The hole ripped in her side was clearly visible. There was a jagged scrape along her starboard bow.

Suddenly a patrol diver loomed overhead; Thompson lay frozen not daring to breath even on the rebreather, but the diver circling thirty-five feet above passed over without noticing the additional shadow below. When the diver had passed, Thompson eased away, and slithered along the bottom like a giant Wolf eel back towards the kelp bed.

#

The crewman in the control room thought he saw movement in the lower left quadrant of his number two monitor. He stared intently at the screen. Then shrugged and went back to his log entries and coffee. Hell everything down there was moving shadows in the swaying lights.



#

Under the protection of kelp, Thompson switched back to compressed air. He hated the taste of the rebreather, and wished he'd not indulged in the sautéed calamari in garlic sauce at dinner.

As he swam back through the kelp forest he came to the realization he'd made a miscalculation. The ambient light sufficient to guide him to his observation post would not suffice for the return trip. He had no point of reference with nothing but darkness ahead.

Avoiding the trench and the dangerous rocks near his entry point, he swam wide around the outcropping to land on the main beach. From there it was a hazardous hike back to where he'd left his gear. By the time he'd finally managed the task, he'd slipped twice cutting his shin and tearing his wetsuit. Nevertheless, with much silent cursing, he regained the small beach, packed his gear, and then scaled the dark, dangerous cliff.

#

At two-thirty AM Arnold Batiste was jolted awake by his telephone. "This is Batiste."

"Jeff, here. Sorry to call so late, but you asked me to let you know as soon as I had some news about your friend."

"Yes that's fine. How's he doing?"

"I'd say he'll be up and about by this afternoon. And heck, probably home by Monday evening."

"How's he feeling?"

"Well he's definitely had a nasty turn. Seems he ran into something, and truth is, he probably wasn't watching where he was going."

"That's too bad. He was always a careful man. You know I'd really like you to meet him when he comes home."

"My pleasure. I'll be back tomorrow, after I make sure he's really on his way."

"Good. And thanks for the call, Jeff."

"Goodnight, Mr. Batiste."

Thompson reached over and replaced the receiver on the telephone cradle that sat on a nightstand next to his hotel bed. His girlfriend stirred from a light sleep and rolled over, the wispy nightgown she was wearing slipped from one shoulder to expose a taut round breast whose nipple was firmly erect. Stretching her arm across the covers she reached down between Jeff's legs. She massaged him gently, and kissed him on the lower back. "You sure do have some weird friends, Jeffy. But this is the only one I'm interested in."

"I know Baby, and that's why I love you so."

#

As Jeff Thompson rested under the kelp waiting for an opportunity to move closer to the St. Emilion, Carla Simpson counted her bank and the night's cocktail receipts at the Sailor's Inn where she worked three nights a week. In fact, it was on a Saturday night at about this time in the morning she'd first met Brent. He came into the restaurant to see Mike, the bartender, and introduced himself to her.

At that time she was in pretty bad straits, coming off a nowhere relationship. She'd packed the few things she owned into her old Honda, and then headed for Monterey, landing a job at the Sailor's Inn on her second night in town.

On the night she met Brent, it was raining like hell. She'd left the restaurant after her shift, got into her car, only to find the battery dead. Which was just about the last straw to an over wrought day of ducking in and out of a girlfriend's apartment where she'd been sleeping on the sofa trying to make herself scarce while her girlfriend screwed her boyfriend's brains out.

She sat in her car with her head on the steering wheel, near tears, when Brent knocked on the window. Rain was pouring down, running through his dark hair and over the red waterproof parka he was wearing.

"Do you need a ride?" He'd asked.

"I need a drink," she'd answered.

They talked well into the early hours over warm Bailey's at his place. Eventually she nodded off. When she awoke in the morning she was in his bed alone, still wearing the long black evening dress that served as her uniform at the Sailor's Inn.

She got up and wandered into the kitchen. Her car was parked out back. There was a note on the kitchen table that read: New battery under the hood. Empty bedroom down the hall. Your choice."

As it turned out her girlfriend's boyfriend had gone AWOL from the military, so they needed the privacy. With no other options at hand, Carla moved in with Brent that afternoon.

In the evening he returned from whatever business he was about and looked genuinely pleased to see her, something she'd not experienced in quite some time. He asked her out to dinner but she insisted on cooking, and he went to great pains to assure her there were no obligations. He just had the space, liked her, and knew she needed a place for a while. Something he'd easily discerned from the fact that what little she owned was stuffed into her automobile.

After dinner and a nice bottle of Monterey Gamay it hit her, she really had some place other than her car to sleep, and then the tears came. He held her and told her how everyone goes through some hard times. Soon they were kissing, caressing, and falling in love.

But today Brent had said he might have to go to Hawaii for a while, and did she want to join him. But of course she would, however, something in his voice told her he really didn't want to go. Something was wrong.

She had no delusions about Brent's activity, he smuggled. He'd told her so after a few weeks. And she learned from others at the restaurant that some of his dealings were with John Richenhauer. She didn't trust John, and she didn't like him. Especially since he often made lewd suggestions to her, and told her if she ever wanted to leave the ol' fisherman for some culinary perfection he was always available. Who the hell did he think he was, she thought, certainly not God's gift to women?

In a way she hoped Brent would give up smuggling and go to Hawaii, as he and his friend Harry had talked often about doing. He could run a dive shop, and she could help. Waitress, whatever. Poor Harry. She liked Harry.

"What's the matter, Pumpkin," said John Richenhauer, stroking her hair as he passed behind the bar stool she was sitting on at the end of the bar. "The ol' fisherman not hookin' it in for you?"

Carla scowled. "You wish."

"I do, I do," laughed Richenhauer.

Just then Brent Lansing walked in through the front door. John slapped him on the shoulder as he passed Lansing, on the way to the dining room. "You'd better take care of your lady, or that's gonna be one fish that got away story you'll be tellin' the rest of your life."

Brent laughed. "I do my best."

Walking up behind Carla he slipped his hands around her waist, just under her full breasts, partially exposed by the deep plunge of the black evening dress. Then kissed her on the nape of the neck, sending chills down her body.

"John's a creep, you know that?" She said in a small child like voice.

"Naw. He's just John," Brent replied.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Michael O'Donnegan blended easily into the throng of passengers making their bleary eyed way off an early morning Air Canada flight. He walked in an unhurried gait along the powder blue carpet of concourse A towards the main lobby of the Vancouver International Airport. As he strolled along, he gazed through the windows at jet aircraft parked outside on the tarmac. His slow, relaxed pace allowed the other passengers from Flight 207 to pass him by. He was in no hurry; no one was there to meet him.

He had no need to stop at the crowded baggage carousel. He'd carried all he needed with him on board. As he gazed out the gray tinted windows, he noted the reflections of those passengers who walked by him on their way to the baggage claim area.

At the main lobby O'Donnegan stopped at a newsstand. He browsed through the sunglasses on display. As he turned the revolving display, he used the small mirror at the top to continue his post flight surveillance. His ice blue eyes soon spotted a passenger from his flight who should've gone on to the baggage claim area. He bought a pair of sunglasses he didn't need, left the newsstand, and then crossed the main lobby into the men's room. There he washed his hands, took a leak, washed his hands again, and gave the previously identified passenger plenty of time to move along.

Within five minutes of leaving the men's room, he spotted the same passenger he'd noted earlier, now milling about the newsstand. There was little doubt in O'Donnegan's mind that he was being followed.

The petit, young woman at the car rental counter smiled with youthful enthusiasm. She'd looked him up and down as he approached, and seemed to appreciate his lean, muscular body. She flirted with him provocatively, as she completed the paper work on a gray Buick Century, and seemed disappointed when he told her he'd return the car to an affiliate agency across the border.

#

Two and one half hours later, Michael O'Donnegan crossed into the United States just north of Seattle. He had no difficulty using a perfectly forged British passport.

Upon arrival in Seattle, he drove around the downtown area until he found a clean, unassuming motel within walking distance of the Greyhound bus depot. He also noted the alley behind the motel was accessible from the second story bathroom windows. After checking into his room, he took a leisurely walk along the crowded downtown streets. He gazed at store windows, again observing the reflections of people walking behind. Before long, he spotted another watcher.

Michael O'Donnegan began to feel a tingle of excitement. He entered several stores to purchase clothing - blue jeans, hiking boots, underwear, shirts, a sweater, a blue ski parka, and the toiletry items the post 9-11 security restrictions would not allow him to carry on aboard his flight. He also bought a medium size, gray, hard shell suitcase. Then returned to his room.

He took a hot shower, dressed in blue jeans, one of the new shirts he'd bought, the hiking boots, and a sweater. He left the motel again, this time crossing the street to an Italian restaurant for dinner.

From his table next to the front windows, he surveyed the street outside. As he lingered over an after dinner espresso, he identified a four door sedan with two people inside. Intuitively, he knew they were waiting for him to finish his meal.

Returning to his motel, he lay fully clothed on the queen size bed, his head and shoulders propped against the headboard. And watched television until he finally nodded off to sleep.

#

*Beep, beep, beep.*

Michael O'Donnegan awoke. He pressed a button on the side of his digital watch; it was three-thirty A.M. He brushed his teeth in the ambient illumination that filtered through the bathroom window from the streetlight at the entry to the alley outside, and then splashed cold water onto his face. He then squeezed himself through the small bathroom window, to drop ten feet onto a concrete block wall that ran parallel to the rear of the motel. He walked nimbly along the narrow, rough top of the wall until he reached the end, where he silently lowered himself to the asphalt surface below.

Crouching at the corner of the building, he looked to his right, up the street, and noted a man seated in the same car he'd seen at dinner. The watcher seemed to have nodded off, his head lolled back against the doorframe, his mouth wide open.

O'Donnegan stepped from the alley, turned left, and disappeared around the corner. He jogged south to the Greyhound bus depot, where he found the usual mix of drunks and transients asleep on the depot's wooden benches, which were set against the graffiti, scarred walls of the old terminal. He ignored them, and walked over to a bank of coin-operated lockers. There he removed a small round key from his pocket. It had been mailed to him in Quebec the week before. Inserting the key into the lock of one of the lockers, he opened the bent and scarred gray metal door. Inside he found another medium size, gray, hard shell suitcase, identical to the one he'd purchased earlier.

He then returned to the motel, via a different route, coming up silently behind the sleeping watcher. Michael O'Donnegan quietly chuckled to himself, thinking how easy it would be to silence the lazy bastard. But he ignored the opportunity, and crossed the street to his hotel room.

#

As O'Donnegan entered, a man stepped silently from the shadows of the building adjacent to the parked car. He was dressed entirely in black, a wool knit hat pulled low on his head. An earpiece inserted into his left ear. A tiny microphone swept around in front of his lips. He spoke softly into the microphone. His transmission received by another watcher, in a room across the parking lot from O'Donnegan's door.

#

Making certain the blackout curtains were tightly closed, Michael O'Donnegan set the heavy suitcase down on the rumpled bedspread, and opened it. Inside he found a blackened forty-five caliber auto-loading pistol, with one hundred rounds of boxed ammunition, and an extra magazine. He also found a Sionics muzzle blast suppressor. A short barreled CAR-15 rifle with a collapsible stock. Three hundred rounds of .223 caliber ammunition, with three thirty round magazines. And a black anodized Gerber boot knife, with a four-inch razor sharp blade. Each item set into its own polyurethane foam recession.

He removed the auto-loading pistol from its recess, noting the slide was not matched. It was off a Colt Commander, and approximately an inch shorter than the Model 1911. The polished alloy barrel, which protruded beyond the end of the slide, was threaded to accept the muzzle blast suppressor. He then proceeded to load both the primary and secondary magazines.

Next he cycled the pistol several times. Then made certain the silencer screwed on tightly. He then checked the assault rifle, and loaded its magazines as well.

Michael O'Donnegan chose the clothes he'd actually need. He rolled them tightly into tube shapes to fit compactly into his duffel style carry on bag. He'd have to leave his old clothes, and a few of the new things he'd purchased, in the hotel room. His excessive shopping the day before was designed to give his watchers the impression the suitcase he carried contained only new clothes.

Michael O'Donnegan checked quietly out of the motel, just as the sun was rising. He chuckled to himself, as the sleepy tail in the sedan across the street scrambled to get the cold engine of his car started. Taking his time, O'Donnegan drove south on Interstate 5. He stopped for breakfast around ten.

As he left the roadside restaurant, he saw that another car, similar to the first, had caught up, and was now taking its turn following him. While the poor blighter who'd waited outside all night, made a pit stop.

In Eugene, Oregon, Michael O'Donnegan stopped for fuel. He used the telephone, and then headed out through Grant's Pass to the coast of California. There he took a room for the night, just south of Crescent City. On the ten o'clock news, he watched film of the St. Emilion being towed into San Francisco bay. The report indicated a salvage team, sent to recover the sunken yacht, had determined it had run aground before sinking with all hands on board.

Once again Michael O'Donnegan slept fully dressed, but this time with the comfort of an auto-loading pistol at his side.

#

The following morning dawned damp and drizzly; it reminded O'Donnegan of his home in Ireland. He took in a slow, deep breath. Inhaling sea scented air. He wondered, not for the first time, when he would see his home again.

Driving south on Highway 1, he searched for the narrow, dirt road he'd chosen the night before from a map of the area. It would be on his left, just past the Klamath River.

#

"What the bloody 'ell is he doin' now?" James Smithe asked, pulling his vehicle to a stop. He and his teammate Geoffrey Hutchinson waited for Commander Robert Jones to pull up next to them. Rolling their windows down, the three British Special Air Service commandos held a hasty discussion.

"According to this map, that dirt track he's taken, goes out to a native camp, deep in the forest, then loops back to the highway about twenty miles south of here. What do you want to do Commander?" Smithe asked.

"You'd better follow him." Commander Jones replied. "But stay in contact. I'll head south, down the highway to the other end of the loop. Get your weapons up as soon as you're off the highway, that forest is a perfect place for an ambush."

"Quite so Commander. And let's not forget the suitcase he picked up the night before last. I'd dearly like to know what the 'ell he's carrying around at three oh fucking clock in the morning."

Two of the SAS operatives drove on down Highway 1 for a hundred yards or so, then turned left to follow the route Michael O'Donnegan had taken. They were at least a mile behind their target, as a result of the time taken to discuss tactics.

#

Michael O'Donnegan drove back into the silent, redwood forest for three miles, and then pulled the Buick over to the side of the road at a turnout carved into the embankment. He grabbed the suitcase, and his over night bag, and then crossed the road, ducking into the forest. He made certain he left good tracks in the dry red dirt. About a hundred yards into the tree line, he stopped and jumped as far off the path as he could manage, then doubled back about twenty-five feet to set up an ambush.

#

The two SAS commandos pulled up cautiously behind the gray sedan. "Evergreen One, this is Two we've come up on the spot," Hutchinson said over his comm.

"Okay check it out." Commander Jones replied.

Smithe and Hutchinson slipped out of their vehicle, and then carefully approached the Buick, weapons drawn. Hutchinson covered Smithe, as he perused the inside of the automobile. The car's interior was completely obscured by a fine red dust that coated its windows. Reaching the rear bumper, Smithe peered inside, as Hutchinson scanned the surrounding forest for any threatening movement. The hum of a blue wasp broke the deathly silence. In the distance a raven cawed.

"He's gone," Smithe said after a short time. "Bags and all."

The two men searched the ground around the vehicle. It was clear Michael O'Donnegan had crossed the road and entered the woods. Hutchinson contacted their Commander.

"Okay, Evergreen, it looks like we've got a rabbit."

"Damn, which way did he go?"

"North through the woods."

"Could be heading for that road on the other side of the river. I'm turning back now to block the exit. Make sure he doesn't double back on you."

Smithe and Hutchinson moved carefully up the embankment and into the trees south of the road. They set up intersecting fire positions, then waited. The minutes slipped by, an hour passed.

"Evergreen two, you have anything?" Commander Jones asked over their comm.

"No sir." Smithe replied. "What say we take a little look in the woods here?"

"No way." Jones responded. "Wait awhile longer, then pull out."

Smithe shook his head, silently asking himself: What the bloody 'ell were they bothering with all this surveillance crap for anyway? They knew the guy was dirty, yet they'd received no orders to take him out. Now the bastard was in Yank territory, beyond their authority. Nothing to do, but wait and watch. And, kee-ryest, it looked like they'd blown that simple task already. What a bloody mess up. Another hour passed.

#

Michael O'Donnegan waited patiently. From his concealed position in the shadows of the ancient forest, he'd heard their vehicle pull up, but not leave. He'd hoped they'd follow him, but if they chose not to, that was okay too. Silently he moved back towards the dirt road, and then set up a second fire position behind a huge fallen redwood tree. He could hear one side of their communications conversation, but couldn't tell where they were located in the trees above the road.

#

"Evergreen One, we've still got a no show. You?" Smithe asked.

"Nothing here," replied Jones. "Jesus... All right, just pull out. We'll meet up at the bridge."

#

Smithe and Hutchinson arose from their concealed positions. They walked unwarily down the slope. Neglected to stagger their descent. Walking side by side, annoyed with themselves for having allowed their quarry to slip away. A deadly error.

As they stepped down, into the turnout, O'Donnegan opened up on full automatic. Ten .223 rounds sizzled across the road, at better than two thousand feet per second. Their impact equivalent to an eight-pound sledgehammer traveling at a hundred miles an hour.

Two of the rounds nailed Smithe. One to his right thigh. Slamming through to the femur bone, shattering it. The second, close behind the first, blew out his lower abdomen. Sending a splatter of intestinal matter explosively forward. Smithe's short, agonizing scream rose above the roar of gunfire as he collapsed to the ground, like a marionette whose strings were suddenly slashed.

Four rounds caught Hutchinson square in the chest. Slamming the poor bastard back against the embankment. Instantly destroying both lungs, and exploding his heart out the front of his chest in a spray of bone and tissue. An involuntarily grunt escaped his lips, only to be lost in the dying echoes of automatic fire.

O'Donnegan rushed headlong across the road. Laying down yet another burst. Pulverizing Smithe's chest. Nearly separating his entire upper torso from his lower body. Both of the commandos were stone cold dead, in less than eight seconds.

#

Over his open line cellular earpiece Commander Jones heard Smithe scream, and then the roar of automatic fire. Through the open window of his vehicle, he heard the echo of small arms drifting across the valley.

He started his car, hung a one-eighty across the highway, and then roared up the dirt road, careening towards his fallen comrades, unaware of the futility of his pursuit.

#

Michael O'Donnegan ignored the bodies of the two SAS operatives; he knew they were surely dead. Instead he ran at full speed down the dirt road for about fifty yards, and then took up another fire position east of the last bend before the turnout.

He didn't have long to wait. Commander Jones came rushing around the hairpin turns, in desperation to aid his fallen men, presuming O'Donnegan would hit and run, his usual mode of operation.

As Jones rounded the last turn he saw both vehicles parked in the turnout. He slammed on his brakes, pulling up short in a fish tailskid of dust and groaning metal.

Concealed behind roadside bushes, Michael O'Donnegan ducked his head and closed his eyes, allowing the dust to blow over him. Jones' car came to a complete stop almost directly abeam his position.

The last thing Commander Jones saw was movement out of the corner of his eye, as O'Donnegan leaped from his hunched position and emptied his remaining ten rounds at point blank range into Commander Jones. His cranium disappeared in a mist of blood and brain matter, blown out the opposite window and all over the front and back seats. His foot slipped off the brake pedal, slamming down onto the throttle, sending the car careening forward, over the low embankment and into the side of a three hundred foot redwood tree.



O'Donnegan choked and coughed in the dust created by the spinning wheels. He ran down the hill, flailing his arms in an attempt to clear the air, as he approached the vehicle. A headless Commander Jones lay jammed under the dash. Michael O'Donnegan reached slowly in and shut off the ignition.

#

Thirty thousand feet above the California coast, heading south over Eureka a Navy E2C Hawkeye scanned all communications channels, its crewmen listening for drug dealers and smugglers who might communicate over discrete frequencies. They too heard, and recorded, the conversations between Commander Jones and his men.

At first they assumed they were listening to hunters trying to spook a rabbit but as time went by it began to sound more like a stake out. Probably a Federal Drug Task Force team waiting for a deal to go down, but then came the screams and mayhem.

Their directional locators pinpointed the transmissions from two locations. Guessing the firefight occurred in the woods, they contacted the Sheriff's department in Crescent City. Patrol cars were dispatched to the area.

#

By the time the first patrol car arrived on scene, Michael O'Donnegan was several miles away, driving at exactly the speed limit. And taking slow controlled breaths to reduce the effect of the adrenaline surge. He pulled off the highway at a rest stop to clean up.

#

The next morning Federal Drug Task Force liaison officer Bryan Speers filed a report in the National Criminal Intelligence database.

#

On the third morning after the massacre, CIA's Drug Interdiction Unit used its IBM workstation to access the NCI database, and scan for drug related investigations. Among several hundred reports filed the day before, it picked up Speer's report. Then cross-filed it under several headings including: United Kingdom of Great Britain, covert operations.

## CHAPTER NINE

Jim Richards parked the rent-a-heap outside Easy Eddie's Autorama showroom. He slid out of the driver's seat, and looked around at nearly an acre and a half of new and used vehicles. He grinned and shook his head; the place had certainly grown since the days when he'd sold cars for Ol' Easy. To his left was the new car showroom. To the right, set back from the street, a large service bay with space for thirty mechanics. Behind the showroom, a new two-story building he did not recognize.

He walked towards the showroom, and was greeted by a sparkly young woman dressed in high heels, and a pale blue jump suit that fit her athletic body perfectly. An Autorama logo patch depicting a stylized convertible with racing tires identified her as a member of the sales team. Times *had* certainly changed, thought Richards.

"Good morning, sir. Is there something I can show you?"

"To Lonnie's office." Jim Richards replied with a smile.

Together, they walked through the showroom, winding their way around the fully loaded new car displays. She motioned him through a closed door. A woman with long dark hair, dressed in a navy blue business suit with a skirt that ended just above mid-calf, greeted him warmly. It had been several years since he'd last seen Lonnie, the rebel of the family for so long he wasn't sure she'd ever come back to the fold. He had to remind himself this was the same nine year old he'd accompanied on a flight home from Los Angeles, following the loss of her mother.

Ty's parents raised Lonnie because his career took him away from home for extended periods of time. Perhaps it was his absences that led her to believe he would have preferred two sons, and so she'd competed with Ted for what little attention Ty was able to give them both. Perhaps it was the desire to be special in the eyes of her father that led her into a love of auto racing. Or perhaps it was just an escape from it all. Eventually, she ended up as Easy Eddie's first female sales manager, running a team of hot looking women he'd become famous for introducing to a traditionally male business. When the IRS put the dealership on the blocks, there was only one choice for Lonnie's father to make.

"Good morning, Mr. Richards." Lonnie smiled as she stepped around her desk, to move towards him. "Or shall I call you, Uncle Jim?"

"How about just plain Jim."

"Okay, Plain Jim." She laughed as they embraced.

Stepping back Jim Richards looked at her admiringly; the stern attire could not conceal her inherent sensuality. The child had blossomed. "You're beautiful, Lonnie. It's good to see you again, to see you successful." He smiled.

"Well sooner or later we all have to grow up, you know?"

Jim Richards nodded; they looked at each other for a moment or two longer. Then Lonnie took a couple of steps back. "Dad says you need a set of wheels. Something special, not quite standard issue."

"It'll be perfect if it just runs good."

"Yeah, right." She laughed. "Twenty-four hours a day, three thousand miles a month, at one hundred and twenty miles per hour. And only needs to have the oil changed."

Richards laughed in turn. "You got it."

"Come with me, I've got the perfect ride for you."

They left her office and crossed a wide driveway to the building behind the showroom. On the first floor were several repair bays, but these were not for the general public. Mechanics worked on new vehicles that appeared to have little or no mileage on them. Electronic gear protruded from under, or around, their partially stripped frames.

"This is our custom facility," Lonnie explained. "We customize standard factory models for our *special* customers, like yourself."

They climbed a metal staircase to a cavernous upper floor, dimly lit by skylights. Lonnie pulled a large master switch, illuminating the entire floor with incandescent spots. Along one wall, in staggered rows, were a variety of domestic and foreign autos gleaming in polished splendor under the floodlights. Virtually every car imaginable was represented, from exotic Italian sculptures to common economy models. Richards let out a low whistle.

"A car for *every occasion*," Lonnie said. "There's even a couple of armor-plated Mercedes over there."

Parked alone, away from the other vehicles, in a pool of light formed by six bright spots, was titanium gray 1997 Ford Thunderbird. Jim Richards followed Lonnie Harding over to it. "I chose this car for you, but if you don't like it, Dad said I'm to give you whatever you want." Lonnie tapped the left front tire with the toe of her shoe. "Slightly larger than factory, seventeen inch aluminum wheels with Z rated rubber. The sidewalls are lined with Kevlar, bullet proof." Pointing her toe upward under the frame of the low-slung coupe. "Tuned four wheel independent suspension, of course. With slightly oversize anti-sway bars front and rear. Bilsteins at all four corners."

She opened the driver's door, reached in, and popped the hood locking release. Then walked around the front of the car to lift the hood. "Here we have a supercharged, 4.6 coupled to an all-wheel drive system. The power plant delivers three hundred and ten horses at fifty-five hundred RPM. With two hundred and eighty pounds of torque by thirty five hundred.

"This thing runs on plus unleaded, but here," she pointed to stainless steel tubing that disappeared into the fire wall, "is an on demand nitrox enrichment system that kicks in under extreme acceleration, boosts the power available into the stratosphere. This little jewel hauls butt, let me tell you."

"Well you know I never exceed the speed limit," drawled Jim Richards.

"Unless you're in a hurry, you mean." Lonnie quipped in return.

She closed the hood with a solid whomp! Then motioned for Richards to get into the driver's seat, while she slipped into the passenger's. While Richards adjusted the articulated seat to fit his frame, Lonnie reached over and turned the ignition key to the accessory position. Then flipped a panel on the dash above the radio. She pressed a rectangular shaped button, a portion of the dashboard in front of the passenger's seat moved forward on extendible arms, rotated horizontally, and then retracted back. Following directly behind the panel, on an electrically propelled shelf, was an on-board computer with two, four-inch flat screen monitors angled towards the driver, and a mini-keyboard.

"This is your command and control center." She continued. "The computer is up-linked to satellite communications and positioning. GPS mapping programs written into dual plug-in data storage systems are slipped into these slots on the right side of the CPU. The program contains every road, street, alley and address in the United States. Voice or keyboard activated."

She tapped a macro key to activate the program. "Okay, we're in the western U.S. Let's say you want to go from here to Dad's office in San Francisco. Press P on the keyboard or say *position*, then enter. The computer IDs your position, displays it on the left hand screen. The blinking prompt is your present location with GPS coordinates in the upper right corner. Now press D or say *destination*, and type the address or coordinates of where you want to go. On the right hand screen is a map of your route of travel.

"Next hit T...

"Or say *travel*." Richards said intuitively.

Lonnie smiled, "Exactly. And follow the blinking prompt. As you travel, the shortest route to your destination is displayed in red. The window shows miles to go, and estimated time of arrival.

"For tailing purposes, all you do is get a transmitter like this," she held up a small gray device taken from a storage compartment behind the CPU. "Into, or onto the vehicle you're following. Track them anywhere in the U.S., Canada, or Mexico. Naturally were developing programs for the rest of the world as fast as we can."

Jim Richards accepted the homing device, looked at it, turning it over several times in his fingers. It looked exactly like a regulation play domino.

"But wait," smiled Lonnie. "There's also a hands free digital cellular phone in the visor." She tapped the keyboard again. "THI access via the CPU to all data you're cleared for, with multi-channel communications scan for police, fire, and military frequencies all fed through the car's radio." She turned on the radio, and then pressed a button to illuminate the scanned frequencies.

Lonnie slid the keyboard off its shelf, where Velcro attachment pads held it. "If you need to transmit hard copy, hit F. Then scan the document with this reader pen." She reached behind the CPU, pulled forward a rectangular wand. "The program will digitize the scanned input, then send it through the up-link to THI Central, and on to the recipient's workstation."

Richards wagged his head from side to side. "I know where I'll be spending my free time for awhile."

Lonnie grinned. "No worries just press H. The screen displays option menus with balloon prompts. They can be shut off once you've mastered the system."

"How's all this data protected?" Richards asked.

"Once you've signed the papers on this heap. You'll enter a discreet code of your own choosing. No one but you will have access. If anyone tries, the whole system shuts down."

Richards nodded. "What about transmission intercepts?"

"Buffered in and out," Lonnie replied. "And changed daily by satellite query. No one knows the codes; the program's generated by random sequence."

Jim Richards smiled broadly. "Where do I sign?"

"At lunch, you're buying," Lonnie, said with an impish smile.

#

Ty Harding picked up the secure line on his office credenza, and then dialed Langley, Virginia. After a minute or two, his call was put through to Elmo Jefferson.

"How's it going out there?" Elmo asked.

"The boats up, and on its way here. Should arrive by six tonight."

"Probable cause?"

"Ran aground." Ty replied.

"You're shittin' me." Elmo said incredulously.

"Nope. We found fragments of rock imbedded in the hull. Ted traced the GPS route underwater, and found the goddamn rock it hit, still scarred and scraped from the impact."

Ty Harding could almost visualize Jefferson shaking his head.

"Sounds almost too simple, but maybe we can rap it up quickly and quietly."

"Maybe." Harding replied skeptically. "Arnold Batiste is champing at the bit to get his boat back. He called this morning, wants to come down right away and take a look as soon as we get her in."

"Sounds like Batiste alright." Elmo said with a chuckle. "But take a good look yourself *before* you turn it over to him."

#

At two in the afternoon, Jim Richards dialed Ty Harding from his new *ride*, as he cruised north on El Camino Real heading toward Palo Alto.

"How do you like the T-bird?" Harding asked.

"You know the answer to that one. I'll be playing with these gizmos for weeks." Richards replied. "What's the plan for today?"

"The St. Emilion arrives tonight. If you haven't heard from me by tomorrow evening, give me a call at the house. On Wednesday I want you to come by the office to meet your support team. Also, I've decided where I want you to set up." Ty paused a moment. Richards could hear the tapping of a keyboard in the background. "My screen tells me you're approaching Page Mill Road?"

"Exactly right." Richards replied.

"Turn left. Go west about two miles." Harding said. "On the north side is an office complex, beige, two story stucco. We own some space there. The manager's on the first floor in building A. I'll call him. Go take a look at the space, see what you think of it."

#

The space was on the second floor, with a view of a landscaped common area. It had three individual offices, a small conference room, and a reception area. Beyond the window of the largest office was a fountain that shot a column of water twenty feet into the air, feeding the man made lake a continuous stream of recirculated water. Even through the thick thermal glass, the sound of gushing water could be faintly heard. A perfect white sound shield. No need for guarded conversations within the confines of his office. The frequency of the splashing water would cancel any vibrations otherwise available from the surface of the window's glass.

#

Jim Richards retraced his route back to El Camino Real, and then as usual, took the wrong turn at University Avenue. After several failed attempts, he managed to stumble onto High street heading south in the right direction. Creative Concepts, an interior design boutique, was on the first floor of a residential complex that catered to the transient nouveau riche, who came to Palo Alto on short term consulting contracts. The front of the store was all glass, with a half step down to enter from High Street.

Jim Richards walked towards the back of the store. To his left in a small alcove, leaning her elbows on a drafting table, and talking on the telephone, stood a young woman. Her dark auburn hair was cut short, framing an aristocratic face with high cheekbones and honest dark green eyes. She wore a well-fitted, white cashmere sweater that accented the full curves of her breasts, and a soft gray leather skirt that revealed long shapely legs and tight round buttocks.

As she ended her conversation, she leaned forward and set the receiver into the cradle of the wall mounted telephone, and then turned to greet the customer she'd sensed had entered. Ann Simmons took two complete steps towards Jim Richards, before she looked up and froze momentarily in mid-stride. Several emotions seemed to pass across her face in rapid succession: surprise, relief, anxiety, and elation. Then suddenly her demeanor turned distant.

"Jim? I didn't expect... to see you again."

Jim Richards moved forward until he was standing very close. He held out a single rose, which she did not at first accept. He smiled disarmingly. "I've missed you an awful lot." He said in his most sincere voice. "Will you have dinner with me tonight? So we can talk."

Annie looked away for a moment. "I've been trying to forget you, you know? That was our agreement when you left."

"Did you succeed?"

She shook her head. "No."

Suddenly she was in his arms, and he held her tightly against his muscular body. Then kissed her with gentle passion.

## CHAPTER 10

Pacific Marine occupied a three-story warehouse at Pier 68 on San Francisco's Embarcadero, directly adjacent to the China Basin Yacht Harbor. The nondescript, one hundred year old building disguised a state of the art engineering operation, capable of repairing virtually any marine vessel that could be hauled out of the water with a sixty-ton crane.

The St. Emilion, towed by the Sea Stallion, arrived shortly after sunset. Pacific Marine's pier, and the water below, was awash in high intensity light. Engineers used ropes and small inflatables, to nudge the luxury yacht into a lift sling hung from an overhead crane. Carefully and gently the boat was raised out of the water, then loaded onto a wooden saddle, bolted to a flatbed railroad car. The car was then slowly towed into the cavernous interior of the building.

Ty Harding, Arnold Batiste, and Jeff Thompson, whom Batiste introduced as his driver, watched the dry dock procedure from inside the operations tower. When the craft was stable inside the warehouse, the three men, accompanied by Ted Harding, walked completely around the boat. At the stern Jeff Thompson knelt down to adjust his sock.

"Damn shame 'bout Harry," Batiste said, shaking his head. "Least he could've done was lived long enough to let me kick his ass for runnin' my boat aground, for Christ's sake." Batiste shook his head again, more vigorously. Then shrugged resignedly. "Ah well. When can I have her back?"

"Depends on whether or not you want us to rebuild her for you," Ted replied.

"No offense," Batiste responded. "But I'd rather have her brought over to Sausalito where I can oversee the repairs at my convenience. I'll have Perini Nave fly someone over from Italy to supervise the job."

"That's the best approach," Ty agreed. "Get the original builder involved. But we'll need to keep it here for a couple of days, run some tests on the electronics, and on the hull. Just to make certain it wasn't sabotage, made to look like an accident. Soon as we've confirmed the obvious, we'll bring her on over. In the meantime, go ahead and get the dry dock space set up at Henderson's."

"Good enough." Batiste motioned with his thumb towards the two-story roll up doors at the front to the building. "We're out of here, but thanks for letting me come over, and take a first look." He extended his hand to Ty Harding. "This boat, and I, have been through a lot of interesting times together. It's like seeing an old friend in the hospital."

"No problem Arnold." Ty Harding took Batiste's hand. "We'll get her over to you right away."

"And thank you, Ted. You did a real good job gettin' her up with out further damage."

Ted smiled and nodded his acknowledgment.

Batiste and Thompson turned and walked the length of the warehouse. Just outside the front entrance, Thompson knelt down again to adjust his sock.

Ted looked at his father with a sidewise grin. "Guy needs a new pair of socks."

Ty Harding chuckled. "So it would seem."

Outside at the curb, Arnold Batiste slid behind the wheel of his Mercedes Benz. Jeff Thompson slipped into the passenger seat. Leaning forward he unstrapped a digital pedometer from his ankle.

"Did you get what you needed?" Batiste asked.

"Oh yes." Thompson replied.

#

Jeff Thompson stood outside the locked steel-mesh gate of the China Basin Yacht Harbor. A black rip-stop nylon dive bag slung over his shoulder, at his feet a navy blue duffel. He used a small spring metal credit card to open the gate, so smoothly it would have seemed as if he had a key to anyone watching. But there was no one around to see him at three-thirty in the morning.

He walked to the far end of the dimly lit dock, then kneeled down to extract a one-man inflatable from the duffel bag. He pulled the cord on its CO2 cartridge, then waited thirty seconds for the rubber boat to sigh into a recognizable shape. He launched the boat from the gently bobbing dock, then quickly paddled the short distance to the harbor entrance, and on around the concrete breakwater. Outside the harbor, ground swells rocked the boat, and splashed oily water onto the back of a dark blue Gortex jacket he wore over a Darlex dive suit.

He paddled past the north end of the breakwater until he was directly under the wood pilings of Pier 68. The high intensities had long since been extinguished. Jeff Thompson guided the inflatable by ambient light from the Bay Bridge that reflected off the water. He carefully paddled between creosote-pickled pilings until he reached the spot he believed to be directly under the St. Emilion.

Steadying the small boat against a barnacle encrusted piling that gave off an odor of dead fish; he extracted a battery powered LASER measuring device from his gear bag. Then aimed it between the pilings at the concrete wall directly below the street entrance to the pier. The instrument read the return echo down the shaft of coherent light to indicate he'd paddled too far. He oared backwards to a prior set of pilings, and secured the boat.

He took a crossbow pistol from his gear bag, inserted a bolt tipped with a blunt lead weight, trailing one hundred feet of fishing line. Took careful aim, and fired the weapon. The weighted shaft sailed towards the underside of the pier, arched over the highest wooden cross member just below the under-decking, then dropped with a soft plunk into the water not more than six feet away.

Thompson hooked the fishing line with the end of his paddle, then carefully hauled it downward, making certain the two hundred feet of climbing rope to which it was attached snaked smoothly out of his gear bag and up over the cross member. After five minutes of careful execution, he held a double strand of climbing rope in his right hand. He then attached two friction dampened, vertical butterfly trolleys to the rope.

It required some careful maneuvering to slip his climbing shoes into the lower trolley. His hands, enclosed in fingerless climbing gloves, slid into the upper trolley. Then he began the slow, arduous ascent of the free-swinging line. With skill, and gymnastic strength, Jeff Thompson managed to gain the overhead cross member a few minutes later.



The pier's decking was built of eight-inch thick wood, laid over ten by ten timber joists. Over this was steel diamond plating, and on top of it all, three inches of asphalt or perhaps concrete. There was no way he'd be able to cut through the decking.

However, just aft of the St. Emilion was a three-foot refuse hole covered with half inch steel plate. He knew the distance to the refuse hole from the front of the building, but could only guess at the location relative to the south wall. When he reached the under surface of the deck he switched on a small flashlight with a red filter that hung from his climbing belt, then searched for the hole. Unfortunately, it was one piling further over. He hadn't been able to use his flashlight from below, its red beam would not illuminate the decking at that distance, and he dared not attract attention by removing the red filter.

Rather than risk the instability of the boat again, he extracted a grappling hook from the climbing pack he wore at his back, then attached it to the end of the climbing rope he'd hauled up to his lofty perch above the frigid bay waters. After several attempts, he managed to get the rope securely wrapped around a stress joist that bridged the next series of pilings.

Using a dangerous half bow knot, he tied off his end of the rope to the joist he was standing on, then attached two opposing carabiners, and clipped the D ring on his rappel harness into the make shift horizontal trolley. He then hauled himself across the gap. Below the water lapped rhythmically, a constant reminder that an indiscreet move during the traverse would probably lead to a cold and painful death.

He reached the far end of the rope, gripped the joist, unhooked his D ring and lowered his feet to the cross member. Then yanked on the other end of the rope he'd carried across with him, untying the half-knot and recovering the entire line for future need.

He shined the flashlight into the refuse hole, now directly over his head, then inched a little higher on the angled joist. Next he extracted a small cutting torch from his gear bag, and set to work cutting through the three-quarter steel plate. By the time he jerked his shoulders aside, to allow the plate to fall, sizzling into the water below, it was nearly four in the morning. Fatigue was beginning to take its toll, and Jeff Thompson began to sweat.

He waited five full minutes for the metal edges to cool, heaved his gear bag into the warehouse, then reached up and placed a reverse grip on the joist adjacent to the bottom of the hole. He swung his feet up into the warehouse, hooking his legs over the threshold. Releasing his grip on the joist he let his torso swing free supported by leg pressure alone. Then before the pressure failed, reached up and finessed himself through, rolling to safety on the cold concrete floor. There he rested for a few seconds, regaining his breath and strength.

#

The night duty officer at THI Central was alerted by an audible alarm. And a red light that flashed over the number designated for Pacific Marine's warehouse. He picked up his transceiver, called K-9 One Security cruising along the Embarcadero north of Pier 68. They acknowledged his call with an ETA of five minutes to the warehouse.

#

Thirty seconds after the watchman noted the alarm, Jeff Thompson walked over to the stern of the St. Emilion. He climbed lightly onto the railroad car to gain access to the bulbous

stern of the keel. Sliding a specially designed rubber cushioned collar over the end of the keel, he applied equal and opposite pressure to both handles of the tool, unscrewing the end of the keel.

Setting the cover down he reached into the cylindrical opening, unscrewed the cap of a plastic inner liner, and began extracting ten water proof bags, each weighing ten kilograms. He moved the bags over to the hole in the floor in three consecutive trips. Then loaded them all into his gear bag. Next he discarded everything through the hole not needed to complete the mission.

Two minutes and thirty seconds after entering the warehouse, Thompson tied three coils of rope around the duffel bag, then kicked it through the refuse hole, allowing the rope to pay out through his gloved hands until it splashed into twelve feet of polluted bay water, where it sank quickly to the sandy bottom.

He then slipped down through the hole, and dropped onto the cross member under the decking. There he draped the rest of the climbing rope over the joist and made a rapid rappel to the water below. Treading water he pulled the rope back over the joist, and allowed it to sink below the pier as well. At last, as the bitterly cold water began to induce shivers, he swam over to his inflatable boat, climbed in, and paddled away.

Just as two K-9 One Security patrol cars pulled up to the front of the warehouse, Jeff Thompson rounded the breakwater, and slipped into an empty berth at the very end of the first dock. He climbed out, then cast the little boat adrift, pushing it towards the harbor's entrance. The outgoing tide would soon carry it away.

Jeff Thompson was pleased with himself. Tomorrow in broad daylight he'd anchor a cabin cruiser out in the bay with a couple of cohorts on board drinking beer and fishing. The underwater swim to recover the gear bag would be unpleasant in the dark murky water of San Francisco Bay, but not particularly difficult.

Thompson moved silently along the floating dock, then waited in the shadows. He watched as security guards with two German Shepherds searched the outside of Pacific Marine's warehouse. Soon they entered. He could see their flashlight beams dancing about the interior of the building. He took the opportunity to leave the yacht harbor undetected. And walked quickly down the deserted street to his old Wagoneer.

#

Arnold Batiste drove along Highway 1, winding out of Mill Valley, up through groves of Eucalyptus trees. He took a right hand fork in the road that led up onto the western slopes of Mt. Tamalpais, continuing for another three miles until he came to a turn out.

The mist shrouded air seemed to cling like a damp wool blanket, as he climbed a hiking trail that wound back and forth traversing a spur of the mountain until it arrived at a high plateau bathed in brilliant sunshine. The view was spectacular; he paused in his trek to enjoy the scenery as he regained his breath. Spread out below were the tops of coastal stratus clouds, pure white in the morning sun, undulating like a monstrous down comforter. Here and there, famous San Francisco landmarks poked through the low-lying clouds - the Transamerica Pyramid building, Bank of America, and the twin towers of the world famous Golden Gate Bridge.

Reluctantly he pulled his gaze from the fairy tale scene below to scan the field above, until he spotted Jeff Thompson sitting on the hood of his Wagoneer, a half mile away. Batiste climbed the southwest side of the hill until he reached a second, higher plateau.

"Morning, Jeff." He said, between heavy breaths. "How'd it go last night?"

"A tough entry, almost lost it going in. But once inside the recovery was as smooth as silk."

Batiste smiled. "Good. I can't allow my activities to be questioned by Ty Harding or anyone else."

"Not much gets by that guy," Thompson observed. "But I wasn't able to sanitize the job. Not enough time with the infrareds going off the moment I popped the lid."

"No problem. Didn't expect you to, they can guess all they want. The important thing is we recovered the evidence in time."

Arnold Batiste reached into the pocket of his jacket, pulled out a thick document carrier. "Take this for your trouble, there's a bonus inside for hazardous duty. I'm glad you pulled it off without injury."

"Thank you, I appreciate that." Thompson said politely, as he accepted the leather pouch. He hopped down off the hood of his vehicle, then walked around to the back of the Wagoneer. He lifted the tailgate, then slid three beige travel bags to the rear of the oversize station wagon. He reached into one of the bags, and extracted a single packet of pure white powder, and handed it to Batiste. "Ten kilos like you said. Another nine just like it."

Batiste nodded, he poked a hole in the side of the bag with a small pen knife then poured a small amount of the white powder into a glass vial. After sealing the vial, he slapped a piece of plastic tape over the hole in the bag. "Good enough." He handed the bag back to Thompson. "I'll have it tested. Store the rest in our warehouse. Then take a few days off. I'll be in touch with you, soon."

#

Jim Richards opened the door to his Foster City townhouse. He walked around the carpeted interior stairway to the first floor bathroom, then climbed into a hot shower to rinse away the perspiration he'd developed from a three-mile run around the central lake. He toweled off, pulled on a pair of gray fleece lined sweat pants, and then padded into the kitchen. There he set about heating water for a morning cup of coffee.

Outside, patches of sunlight began to break through the overcast, creating islands of blue-green water on an otherwise slate gray lake. Across the water, commuters made the trek down Hillsdale Boulevard toward Highway 101, where traffic would divide north, and south.

Jim Richards measured Jamaican blue into a gold coffee filter, then followed with water just below boiling. He sensed movement from the corner of his eye. Turned and watched as Ann Simmons walk gracefully down the stairs from his master bedroom. She was wearing one of his custom tailored, white dress shirts, and looked as gorgeous as the night before.

"Good morning," Richards said. He sat down on one of the dining room chairs then reached out for her as she came to him. She slid easily onto his lap. "Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"Very, and you?" She replied

"Umm excellent. I've made some coffee, care for some?"

She leaned close, her lips brushed his ear. "I don't think it's coffee I need this morning."

He separated the front of the shirt she was wearing, nuzzled between her breasts, gently kissing her, running his strong hands up and down her back. Jim Richards lifted his head, slid his right hand up to the nape of her neck, their lips met, they kissed passionately. He stood, lifting her easily in one continuous motion, then carried her towards the guest bedroom. They were nearly across the living room, when the telephone rang. He kept walking.

"Don't you think you ought to answer it," she teased.

Jim Richards continued towards the bedroom. "That's what the answering machine is for."  
"Oh," Annie said as she nibbled his ear. "You *have* changed, haven't you?"

#

Ty Harding drove his Lincoln through the triple wide entrance of the Pacific Marine building. He parked near the St. Emilion. As he slid out of his car, Ted called to him from above, on the yacht. Ty Harding climbed a set of rolling steel steps to the aft deck. He and Ted shook hands, then ducked into the main salon to talk.

"Carolyn gave me your message," Ty Harding said. "When did it happen?"

"Around three forty-five this morning. When I arrived, I found someone had cut through the steel plate we bolted over the old refuse hole."

Harding frowned. "Refuse hole?"

"Yeah. Years ago these old warehouses had refuse holes in the floor. Tenants would sweep any old crap through them into the bay."

"Charming. How big is the hole?"

"About three foot square. Anyway, we bolted a steel plate over it. We don't use it. Someone accessed the hole. Got in from under the pier."

Harding shook his head in disbelief. "Guy must have been a human fly."

"Yeah, or one hell of a climber."

"What did he take?" Harding asked.

"Nothing. At least not as far as we can determine."

"Maybe it was just a recon." Harding ventured.

"Maybe."

Harding rubbed his chin, and thought for a moment. "You've looked the boat over carefully?"

Ted nodded his head once. "Haven't had it long enough for a full inventory. But there doesn't appear to be anything disturbed, or missing."

"Keep looking." Harding thought for a moment. "You know I'm beginning to wonder about that guy Arnold had with him last night."

"My exact thoughts," Ted agreed. "A boat like this could have a zillion compartments. Maybe there was something on board, Batiste didn't want us to find?"

Harding nodded. "Quite likely. Do you have you a magnetic imager?"

"Sure. X-ray too."

"Scope out every square inch, Ted. I'm sure you'll find something interesting if you look hard enough."

Slapping Ted on the shoulder, Harding got up and left the salon. He descended the stairs, and walked to the aft of the boat, where yellow tape surrounded the exposed refuse hole. Bright sunlight reflected upward. Dust motes danced in the column of sunlight.

Ducking under the barricade, Harding hunkered down at the edge of the hole and looked through. The cold murky water seemed a hell of a lot farther away than forty feet. Bits of debris floated about the pilings. He shook his head. Must have been damned important...to chance this.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Michael O'Donnegan jumped from the Hyde street cable car as it slowed to make the turn at Beach Street. He jogged between on coming traffic, and entered the Buena Vista Cafe. He sat at the end of the bar. Glanced around the room, noting briefly the signed photographs of the once and famous people that hung in no particular order on the walls.

Round oak tables filled the narrow space between the bar and the windows that looked out on the San Francisco Bay. O'Donnegan glanced about the room, to assure himself the few people drinking their favorite morning wake-ups were either tourists, or hard core unemployed. And of no threat to him.

Michael O'Donnegan shivered once, the temperature inside was chilly. Almost as chilly as outside. The turn of the century, two inch square, ceramic tile flooring and wide open doors at either end kept the room around sixty degrees Fahrenheit. A blessing in the evening, cooling a bar jammed with singles back-to-back and belly-to-belly.

The bartender walked to O'Donnegan's end of the bar, wiped a damp rag once across the surface and asked for his order.

"An Irish coffee, made the real Irish way," O'Donnegan said.

The bartender nodded, and returned with a glass mug of their world famous drink. Placing it before O'Donnegan. "This'll warm the cockles of your heart."

"Aye but it's the cockles of me pants that need a warming," replied O'Donnegan.

Almost imperceptibly the bartender nodded a wordless acknowledgment to the pre-arranged contact code. Soon, he slipped under the bar at the servers' station, and disappeared into a small office.

O'Donnegan sipped his drink, and gazed out one of the large view windows at a containerized cargo vessel passing under the Golden Gate Bridge. As he watched the freighter, he thought about other visits to San Francisco, when the contacts he'd use today were first arranged.

The bartender returned to his duties behind the bar. After serving other customers, he made his way back to where O'Donnegan sat.

"How much do I owe you?" O'Donnegan asked.

"Two dollars."

O'Donnegan proffered a five dollar bill. Under the three dollars change returned, was a note.

Outside, O'Donnegan turned his back to the chilly wind that whipped around the corner, swirling dust and scraps of paper about his feet. He walked up Hyde Street until the wind lessened, then stepped into a doorway to read the cursory directions: *Up Hyde Street two blocks, turn right, second house on right. Ring number three, twice.* He slipped the note back into his pocket, then continued up the steep hill to the address indicated. He was buzzed into a renovated Victorian. At the top of a flight of stairs, he found number three. The door opened, just as he gained the landing.

"Greetings," said James Flaherty.

"Greetings to you," O'Donnegan responded as he entered.

Flaherty closed the door quietly, but O'Donnegan sensed a coolness he'd not expected.

"How was your trip?" Flaherty asked.

"Uneventful. Except for the three Brits I had to waste."

Flaherty frowned, and shook his head. "Newspaper indicated unidentified British subjects were believed to be involved in a drug deal gone bad. Not a good way to start out, Michael."

O'Donnegan's face flushed. "I had no choice."

"Why didn't you just lose them?"

"Oh a good idea that, and wonder for the rest of the bloody mission when they were going to show up again? Have you forgotten Gibraltar?"

"This isn't Gibraltar, this is the United States. And now you'll have every agent in the country after you."

O'Donnegan threw up his hands. "So what else is new? They've been gunnin' for me for the past six years."

James Flaherty thrust his hands into his pockets. Outside, a cable car rumbled by subtly shaking the entire building, a point one on the Richter scale. "You're out of your league if you think that." Flaherty continued. "This country and the Brits are like a hand in glove, you're gonna have the entire CIA upon you."

"No way." O'Donnegan countered. "Those blokes were acting on their own. The Brits aren't gonna disclose this one."

"Maybe, but they're not gonna let it pass either."

"Listen Jimmy, you're livin' in fuckin' fairyland if you think anything's gonna come of it. It happens all the time. We waste one of theirs; they waste a few of ours. It's war, Jimmy, you understand what I'm telling you. Anyway, the goddamn CIA is too busy huntin' al Qaeda all over the planet. They haven't got time to worry about a couple a dead limeys. It's all gonna blow over in a couple of days."

Flaherty paced the room, agitated. "Maybe. But for now, you're on ice."

"You're nuts, I've got a mission to complete. If we don't make contact, the squirrel will go to ground." O'Donnegan's patience waned; he noted wariness in Flaherty's eyes. "You're supposed to give me help. Not advice."

James Flaherty removed his hands from his pockets, and gestured with his palms downward. "Look Michael, calm down. The personals advertisement was run on Sunday. Our buyers have made contact. But Harry Carroon's *safety valve* is out of town 'til Friday, or Saturday. So just relax. I'll put you up at my place in the wine country. Give you a nice Tahoe to drive, and a nice little bird to fuck. Buy some time; make certain you're not public enemy number one. Okay?"

O'Donnegan sighed audibly. "All right. I need the rest anyway. Christ, I've been wound tighter than a cheap watch spring for a week now. But this business with the boat's too coincidental. It smells of sabotage, just like Nova Scotia."

James Flaherty nodded his understanding, and relaxed a little. "I know. We're looking into that possibility as well, but so far it appears to be just a coincidence. In any case, the drop was made before the mishap."

"Jimmy, listen to me." O'Donnegan softly pounded his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "We've been penetrated, at least on the east coast, of that I'm certain. And Sean thinks so too. We're beginning to think this whole deal's a set up."

Flaherty shook his head. "Michael, trust me. We're solid out here. The boat's sinking is bad luck, nothing more. Think about it... you were followed because they lacked intelligence. If we were blown, they'd have known where you were headed. Why follow?"

O'Donnegan rubbed his face. Circles of stress were beginning to show around his eyes. "Perhaps, Jimmy, perhaps. But I'm not taking any chances. Now listen, I'm gonna need new identity papers, some cash, and transportation. And no one's to know I'm here. That's why we set up this meeting the old way. I want to monitor this transaction in person, because in spite of your confidence, there's still a chance we've been compromised."

Flaherty nodded his head resignedly. "All right, fair enough. We can set up secure communications. Nothing will happen as far as the transaction is concerned without my approval.

"An ID's no problem, in fact, you'll have an entire credit history to support everything including a clean credit card. That way you don't have to sweat the cash."

O'Donnegan shook his head. "Forget plastic, I don't want a paper trail."

"In this country cash is suspect. Everyone uses plastic. Don't worry, we'll set it up clean. And you'll have cash too, for an emergency.

"Now look, I didn't mean to come across so strong earlier. Hell, I wasn't there. You did what you had to do. Please sit down, relax. Let me make some phone calls."

#

The sun seemed to set early in the Sonoma Valley. It disappeared behind the steep wooded hills, casting a soft amber glow over rows of nearly ripe Cabernet grapes. Michael O'Donnegan sat naked on the edge of a king size bed, in the guesthouse at James Flaherty's vineyard. He scanned the personals in the Sunday paper until he found the advertisement he was looking for, then wrote the telephone number on a pad of paper beside the bed. He had no reason to suspect Flaherty of disloyalty, but he'd still confirm *all* the information provided. Caution and self-reliance were the reasons he'd thus far managed to beat the law of averages for a man in his profession.

"Michael... please come here.."

O'Donnegan looked into the bathroom. He could see the young, voluptuous girl, Flaherty had provided, lounging languidly in the one hundred degree water of a whirlpool tub. She sipped her Cabernet. Then set it down, and began to massage a pair of exceptionally large breasts lifting them seductively for O'Donnegan to see. She was a big girl, he liked that. Too often they were too small, and he had to hold himself back to avoid hurting them, but sometimes he couldn't. He stood up and walked confidently towards the girl, who smiled lasciviously in anticipation as she stared at the huge member already rising to full erection.

#

Jim Richards awoke, and eased out of bed as gently as he could, making an effort to avoid waking Annie. Quietly, he slipped into his clothes. He was about to leave, when she stopped him with a husky whisper. "Are you going?"

Coming around to her side of the bed, he knelt down and kissed her gently. "I have a meeting."

"What time is it?"

"Five"

"God you get up early. Will you call me?"

"Yes, later today. Go back to sleep."

He kissed her again, then slipped quietly out of her Los Altos Hills town house.

#

Jim Richards stepped into Ty Harding International's reception area. He was immediately shown to a large conference room, adjacent to Harding's office. Several people, including Ted Harding, were already seated at the table. He chose an empty chair next to Ted, as Ty entered the room.

"Good morning," Harding said. "Thank you, all, for being so prompt. Let me first introduce one of our senior field consultants, Jim Richards." Everyone looked in Richard's direction.

"Jim you know my son Ted, on your left. One slot down is Al Short. Al does chemical analysis. Next to Al is Terry White, forensics research. Across from Terry is Sandra Conners, applied biology. And directly across from you, is Fred Poole, meteorology.

Harding then took a seat at the head of the table. "The purpose of our meeting is to determine probable cause for the sinking of the St. Emilion. And if possible, the probable reasons for a recent break in at Pacific Marine. The two incidents may be related. Ted would you begin, please."

Ted Harding sat a little more upright in his chair, then arranged his notes on the table in front of him. "The St. Emilion went down because it struck a large rock. The impact ripped a five-foot hole in her starboard side. The speed of submersion was enhanced by the fact that nearly all her vents, and water tight bulkheads, were open at the time of impact."

Ted looked over at Al Short, who immediately picked up the thread. "Our analysis indicates no explosives contributed to the mishap. There's no indication of sabotage."

Ted again referred to his notes. "It appears the anti-collision system was incorrectly calibrated. We're still tracing maintenance on the system. There's a possibility it might have been tampered with, but I seriously doubt it. The route the boat was following the night it went down is reason enough for a disaster." Ted looked around the table for disagreement, there was none.

"As to cargo. We've determined the St. Emilion was carrying two kinds of contraband. Cocaine was one; we believe it was carried in a tubular compartment inside the keel."

Al Short broke in. "Our analysis showed residue inside the compartment. There were several layers. With the lowest being quite old, at least six or seven years."

Ted nodded his agreement, and stepped back into the conversation. "We feel certain retrieval of the cocaine was reason for the break in."

Excuse me," Ty Harding interrupted. "Are you saying there's a compartment below the water line that's normally only accessible from under water?"

"Yes"

"So when it's opened the compartment is flooded."

"That's correct."

Harding frowned. "How could you find traces of cocaine?"

"Sorry, I forgot to mention the plastic liner. A sealed tube can be removed after unscrewing a cap on the end of the keel. It was in this tube that we found traces of cocaine. Apparently our burglar could not carry a ten-foot tube. So we surmise he removed the contents for transportation."

"How much can the tube hold?" Jim Richards asked.

"About one hundred kilos," answered Al Short.

"Loose?"



"No, probably bagged. There wasn't enough residue for loose pack."

Ty Harding spoke up. "That's a lot of weight for one man, especially hanging upside down under a pier by his toes and fingernails. Yet Security One reported no signs of a boat of any kind when they arrived."

Ted nodded. "Exactly. Unfortunately we found the hidden compartment only after a time consuming, and extensive, search of the entire yacht. As soon as we estimated the weight of the contents, we came to the conclusion the burglar dropped the cargo into the bay after extracting it from the keel. We sent a dive team under the pier, and recovered all kinds of climbing paraphernalia but no cocaine."

Ty Harding grimaced ruefully. "No need to guess who ordered the break in."

Ted nodded. "While we were busy checking out the yacht, prior to finding the compartment in the keel, one of our engineers, performing crane maintenance outside the warehouse, noted a couple of beer guzzlers anchored about fifty yards off shore apparently fishing. A little odd, since no one in their right mind fishes the bay anymore, unless their diet is deficient in heavy metals that is." Ted smiled ruefully. "So he took down the registration number."

"Anyway, after we found the climbing gear, we ran the registration. It was rental. Roger Jones, Arnold Batiste's manager at The Nautilus over in Tiburon, rented the motorboat."

"Umpf," snorted Harding. "So what about the second cargo, you mentioned?"

Terry White took a deep breath. "We found a small compartment forward of the crew's quarters, in the bow. It had been sealed at the time of the sinking, and was, therefore, watertight. Before entering we drilled a small hole in the bulkhead, and took an air sample. Then performed a series of tests on some bits of wood we found on the floor of the compartment, along with dirt, fibers and so forth. Pressure marks on the carpet gave us an idea of the size of the cargo stored."

White shuffled through his notes, then continued. "The St. Emilion carried several wooden crates. We estimate they were five feet long by two feet wide. Pressure analysis of the carpet and under pad indicates the crates weighed approximately one hundred and fifty, to, two hundred and eighty pounds each."

Sandra Conners spoke up. "The wood pieces were definitely from Central America. Moisture content and a specific fungus found in the wood, indicate the country of origin was Panama."

Terry White nodded his agreement. "The age of the wood varied from fairly recent to more than two years. Since we found no cargo, it seems clear it was off loaded before the boat sank."

Sandra Conners continued. "Analysis of the air sample indicates the air in the compartment came in off the coast of California. We were able to determine its origin by pollen count. In fact, I believe I can safely say the bulkhead was opened and resealed somewhere north of San Simeon, quite likely off Big Sur."

Harding raised an eyebrow skeptically.

Sandra Conners continued. "I base this conclusion on the fact that the pollen and dust content had significant traces of Redwood, none of which are found in any quantity south of Big Sur. Most interesting, the pollen count was quite high. Normally with an on-shore breeze the count would have been lower."

Fred Poole nodded his head vigorously. "Yes. But on the night of the sinking, and for two days before, there was a strong high-pressure system over California that created an off shore breeze. Hence the pollen count would be unusually high over the water."

Ted broke in again. "Our conclusion is the cargo was off loaded somewhere south of Monastery Beach and north of Point Sur."

Harding ran his hand over the top of his head. "Do we have any idea of what the cargo was?"

"Weapons. Specifically small arms and ammunition," Ted replied.

Al Short spoke up. "Exactly, no doubt about it. Some of the wood samples were fairly large. Apparently one of the crates had a good size chunk knocked out of it. One side had residue of gun powder and gun oil."

Ty Harding frowned. "But those weapons would be ruined if they were dropped into the ocean. And the AWACS reports from the night of the sinking indicated no rendezvous of any sort."

Ted responded. "In the storage compartment were several thick vinyl bags, and a portable hot sealer; something like an industrial strength hair dryer. The bag sizes were five feet by a little over two feet. The crates were slipped into the bags, then heat-sealed, to render them water tight.

"All of which explains why the St. Emilion was running so close to shore. My estimate is, she off loaded the contraband into the ocean somewhere near Pt. Lobos, to be recovered by divers from another vessel. One that would not be required to clear customs."

Harding nodded his understanding. "Yes. And the other vessel would not have been far away, perhaps even close enough to have been the first boat to respond to that mayday."

Ty Harding paused for several seconds, thinking, then said: "Good work, Ted. And, thank you, all, for your excellent analyses."

The meeting adjourned. Ty Harding and Jim Richards walked directly from the conference room to Harding's office. "This case has taken on a whole new texture," Ty Harding said as he sat down behind his desk. Jim Richards took one of the armchairs across from him. "We're looking at lethal cargo here." He continued. "I need to get this off to Langley. In the meantime, I want you to meet with your support team. Get started on finding those weapons. Langley will want us to pursue them I'm sure.

"I've selected Carl Fortune and Sue Bristol as your staff; you've worked well together before. Any objections?"

"None at all." Jim Richards replied with a smile. "We approach problems from different directions, and work well off of each others ideas."

Ty nodded his head. "My thoughts exactly. What's the status on your office?"

Jim Richards glanced around the room, as if Ty Harding's well-appointed office would inspire his answer. "The interiors were done yesterday. We need communications and electronics."

Harding thought for a moment. "I'll have our people wire you in today. Go ahead and get started on the preliminaries."

Jim Richards raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I'm sorry. Ask Carolyn to show you where Sue and Carl's workstations are, and to find you a free conference room for this afternoon. We'll talk some more after I've had a chance to chat with Elmo."

#

## Great Britain

At a long conference table in the main house of a fine country estate, not far from London, Sir Courtney Winterbourne, Head of Section I of the British Secret Intelligence Service, known as MI-6, brought the meeting to order.

In attendance were six people, all British subjects cleared for top-level security. All deeply involved in a highly classified, reverse sting operation, code-named "Luck". Unfortunately, luck was exactly what they seemed to have run out of quite suddenly.

Winterbourne said: "Gentlemen, I've given you updates on the status of our operation. To recap: For the past two years we've been gradually feeding the Provisional Irish Revolutionary Army, via its front organization Sinn Fein, disinformation that has led to the conclusion we've penetrated their western section and turned one of their highly placed American support members to our service.

"With the elimination of one of their supply boats off Nova Scotia last year, we've solidified their belief in our penetration."

Winterbourne paused for a moment to look around the room. "Recently, the IRA, vis a vis Sinn Fein, has begun to make serious overtures towards settlement of our long standing dispute. Unfortunately, not everyone with the IRA is in agreement with this new course of action. The purpose of "Luck" was to cause IRA dissidents to take action against their people in Canada, and the United States, thus eliminating by their own hand that romantically inspired support, which still provides the IRA with currency and arms.

"As a back up, to assure the assassin, Michael O'Donnegan, would not run amuck among the Canadians or Americans, we assigned a three man team familiar with O'Donnegan, and experienced in surveillance. They followed him into northern California. Their last report indicated the operation was going well. Then they were found dead the following day."

Winterbourne looked around the table at each person. Picked up a glass of water that stood on a silver tray next to a crystal decanter, and took a sip before continuing. "The decision we must make today, is whether or not to let the program run without supervision, or take our hats in our hands, and ask the Americans to help us locate Michael O'Donnegan. Gentlemen I need your thoughts and recommendations."

Peter White, Senior Analyst for American operations, and a direct liaison to the Central Intelligence Agency spoke first. "We can't simply disclose the operation, and ask for help. It will erode, at the very least, if not destroy their confidence in us. The Americans, quite rightly, will be very put off that we've programmed a foreign agent to violate their borders, and possibly assassinate one or more of their citizens."

"Well good grief, Peter," interjected Thomas Matheson, an analyst in Section I on terrorism. "We've been imploring the Yanks to shut down the Provo's operation in the states for years. And they can't seem to bloody do it."

"Quite so, Thomas," said Peter. "But let's not forget they've made serious efforts to reduce the illicit arms trade, especially since September eleventh rewrote their priorities."

"And fell bloody short of the mark." Matheson responded. "The flow of arms and munitions has increased not decreased. It's like a bloody comedy over there. Anyone with the money can get into the arms business."

"Now let's give them credit where credit's due, Thomas." Peter White said. "They've passed legislation addressing the problem..."

"Well bloody good," interrupted Matheson. "Tell that to the mothers of our boys who're getting their Charlies shot off."

Winterbourne raised his hands and his voice to intervene. "Gentlemen please. This is getting us nowhere. I need constructive ideas to resolve this dilemma."

"Certainly, Sir. My apologies," said Matheson.

Ian Smith, Director Plans for the Caribbean spoke up. "It seems to me this is not an either, or, situation. We need not completely shut the operation down. Nor, do we need to entirely disclose it either. Rather, I think we need only give enough information for the Americans to commence their own investigation."

Winterbourne raised both eyebrows. "And how do you propose to do that?"

"I'd suggest we send Peter White to talk with his CIA liaison. We can provide a suitable explanation of who Michael O'Donnegan is; naturally, we don't know the purpose of his visit, something we'd hoped to glean from our surveillance."

Peter White started to object, but Ian held him at bay with a raised finger. "I realize the Americans won't be happy about our not asking for their assistance, or at least informing them earlier, but we can beg off with the excuse O'Donnegan moved unexpectedly."

"Peter?" Winterbourne asked.

White cleared his throat. "It could work. Be a bit dicey if NSA has picked up *Luck's comm.* traffic."

"Not likely," said Harold Grey, a communications analyst. The data was all encoded or hand delivered. And even if we were monitored, NSA is giving us low priority, they're spread so thin they haven't got time to analyze it all anyway."

"Peter, are you willing to give it a go?" Winterbourne asked.

White nodded unenthusiastically.

"All right then it's decided. Peter will arrange a meeting with Elmo Jefferson."

Winterbourne looked sternly over at Peter White. "And Peter, please bear in mind the clock is running."

"Quite so." White nodded curtly. "And let's just hope the bloody alarm doesn't go off prematurely."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Dawn brought patches of ground fog. Formed overnight as the cool air settled to the ground. Michael O'Donnegan restlessly paced the length of the twenty-one foot, redwood deck outside the master bedroom of James Flaherty's guesthouse. He was too distracted by the mission to enjoy the songs of sparrows in nearby trees, or the sight of deer foraging among rows of ripening cabernet grapes. He'd telephoned the number listed in the Personals advertisement. A girl had answered, calling herself Carla. Her boy friend, Brent, was out of town until Saturday, or Sunday.

After breakfast, Michael O'Donnegan decided he and Crissy, the girl Flaherty had provided to keep him amused, would take a leisurely drive over to the town of Santa Rosa. He'd use the Chevrolet Tahoe, Flaherty had provided him. It would give him a chance to get used to the vehicle.

#

They wound their way along Highway 12, through the Sonoma Valley, past grape laden vineyards, and boutique wineries. Through groves of California Oak trees growing in scattered clumps on steep hillsides. At last, they crossed an old wooden bridge, and made their way into the town of Santa Rosa.

"Crissy me love," O'Donnegan said. "I need to do some research at the library. Take the car and do some shopping, then meet me back here at noon."

Although she readily agreed, he knew she'd soon be on the phone to James Flaherty, reporting his activity. That annoyed him, but he ignored the aggravation. Just one of the many inconveniences he'd have to put up with to indulge the egos of those who supported the cause.

In the reference section of the Santa Rosa library he found telephone directories for San Jose, Gilroy, Monterey, and all other areas served by the area code that prefixed the phone number given in the Personals.

He could use the library's computer to access the internet, probably complete his search in less than two minutes. But since 9-11, libraries were paying more attention to who might be using their portals. So O'Donnegan stuck with the slow, old-fashioned method.

Using the three digit prefix guide, he soon learned the telephone number he was searching for was located on the Monterey peninsula. Next he referred to the Monterey directory. And learned the number was most likely in the town of Pacific Grove. Finally, turning to individual listings, and hoping the number would not prove to be unlisted, he began the time consuming task of scanning each name and number. His efforts paid off when he reached the L's under Lansing, Brent. But there was no address listed.

#

Jim Richards sat on one of six round bar stools at the counter of Heidi's. He ordered a protein drink, then watched as Heidi added strawberries, a banana, some yogurt, grape concentrate, apple juice, wheat germ, brewer's yeast, and a protein powder blended especially for her by Protein Research. The concoction that finally emerged from the blender was a meal in itself for most people, a snack for Jim Richards. All the body builders who worked out at the gym just down the mall from Heidi's came in for protein drinks and supplements.

Jim Richards finished his drink, then waved to Heidi as he left. She winked at him and smiled. She was busy selling a new customer on the virtues of vitamin supplements to revive a waning libido. As Richards jogged out to his car, he chuckled to himself, thinking the new customer would surely be convinced; one look at Heidi's buff body would revive any guy's libido.

As he slid into the Thunderbird, the red LED on the dash told him a message was waiting on the computer. Sue Bristol had found the information he'd requested earlier in the day.

#

The conference room at THI's new office was still barren, the electronics not yet fully installed. Jim Richards, Sue Bristol and Carl Fortune sat around a small conference table, surrounded by stark, white walls.

"Here's what I've got so far," Sue began. "The St. Emilion left Santa Marta, Colombia, and sailed north along the coast to Panama, making port of entry on September, tenth. She remained in port for two days, then entered the canal. She again entered port for one day, on the Pacific side of the isthmus. There's no indication any other port was entered between the time she left Panama, and her sinking."

"Communications?" Richards asked.

"Several marine calls were made, each monitored by the National Security Agency. None involved key words that would have triggered analysis, nor recording in full text."

"Who received the calls?"

"Primarily Arnold Batiste. These appear to be routine progress reports, judging from the length of call, and regularity of intervals between each." Sue shuffled through a stack of paper in front her. "Two additional contacts were made before the sinking. Both made to a number in Pacific Grove. According to telephone records, the number belongs to a Brent Lansing."

Jim Richards raised an eyebrow in question.

Sue Bristol smiled ruefully. "The captain of the fishing vessel that first responded to Harry Carroon's mayday call."

Richards raised both eyebrows. "What do we know about him?"

Carl Fortune opened a manila folder, then extracted several papers. "We began with Coast Guard records, then worked our way back through his military file. He and Harry Carroon had known each other for many years. Carroon led a Navy SEAL squad assigned to the agency. Their mission was to recon cartel activity along the Panamanian – Colombian border and to interdict as opportunity allowed. They were also the ones who pulled that controversial hostage rescue off, the one involving the American oil people and the slaughter of nearly an entire village of alleged Colombian left wing rebels.

"After the rescue investigation proved their part in the operation was by the book, the unit was transferred back to U.S. Navy operations. They were deactivated and honorably discharged by the Clinton administration. Billy C's idea of don't ask, don't tell I suppose." Fortune added sarcastically.

#

The rain pelted the Sally's Ride with a steady down pour, as Brent Lansing steered the boat through the leading edge of California's first serious storm of the season. The weather front would bring several inches of rain to the tall redwood trees that climbed the mountainsides north of Russian River.

He'd checked the weather before leaving Monterey, knew of the storm's approach, but felt confident he'd reach Fort Bragg before it arrived at full force. Unfortunately, the winds aloft

forecasts had been conservative, the storm picked up speed as it came out of the Gulf of Alaska. Brent Lansing glanced at the glowing, tritium coated, numbers on his UDT chronometer: 17:30. Perhaps another hour's hard sailing, on this his final voyage with the Sally's Ride.

The final mission always held surprises and unexpected challenges, thought Lansing, as he stared out through the rain swept windows of the wheelhouse, between the slow sweeps of a single windshield wiper. Intermittent views appeared and disappeared. The gray ocean foaming into mountains of froth stained water.

Fortuitously, his direction of travel was into the face of the storm, which reduced the likelihood of being broadsided by a rogue wave. Nevertheless, Brent Lansing needed to use all the skill and endurance he could muster to guide the boat northward. Suddenly, out of the rain swept mist there loomed before him a forty foot, doubled bowed ketch. It was heading in the opposite direction. Lansing's heart surged, as the impact of the scene before him hit home.

All at once the true fury of the night's ocean was revealed for a moment. Alone, he hadn't realized the magnitude of his predicament, but this chance meeting gave relevance to the size of the monstrous waves. The other fishing boat appeared as a still photograph, frozen on the windshield for a fleeting moment. The feeble sweep of the wiper barely able to clear a section of glass long enough to reveal the other boat trapped in the trough of a thirty-foot wave. The swells higher than her cabin. In that split second of time, Brent Lansing realized how precarious his position was, and how important his skill. Any one of the waves that crashed across his bow could swamp the Sally's Ride.

Brent Lansing bent his mind, and will, to concentrate on the task at hand. Rationing his strength for the last few miles of desperate sailing before he reached a safe haven. Yet unbidden, because in spite of the pounding there was a monotonous rhythm to the motion of the sea, his mind slid back to his final mission in South America.

#

An unmarked helicopter had flown in Lansing, Carroon, Yarrow and Anderson. Hovering over the drop zone, they fast roped to a clear area. Then began their search and rescue mission, the last before tour recycle took them back to the states. Intelligence reports indicated a small group of oil company hostages were being held in a temporary compound deep in Colombia.

Making contact with a contingent of special police, they proceeded fourteen kilometers to the coordinates indicated by Intelligence. They spent the day reconnoitering the problem, determining in the process that indeed two Americans were held near the center of the camp. Through out the day, intermittent beatings were administered, then they were returned in a delirious state to the five by five enclosure.

That night Harry Carroon planned an early morning attack with the special police carrying the brunt of the fighting, while SEALs attempted to rescue the two hostages.

At zero four-thirty, the special police launched the attack, taking out perimeter guards with rifles tipped with muzzle blast suppressors. One of the guards screamed a warning, then everyone opened up on the camp. Rocket propelled grenades slammed into the sleeping barracks. Automatic rifle fire withered anyone coming out, or keyed in on return muzzle flashes. Hundreds of rounds poured into the compound from three sides forcing bleary-eyed ELN soldiers to retreat southeast towards the river. There they'd be ambushed by a second contingency of special police.

Yarrow and Anderson covered their teammates' entry. Lansing and Carroon got into the camp, then pulled the two Americans from a pad locked shed. They used combat knives, and brute strength, to rip apart one entire side of the shed.

It took a full day to retreat to their pre-arranged pick-up point, hampered by the two hostages who were in no shape to walk any distance. In the end, they had to carry one piggy back because he was unable to walk at all. They continued their trek northwest, then waited for the chopper. It failed to show at the appointed time.

They moved off the hilltop, then west again to a second pick-up point. Along the way, they contracted diarrhea, from the polluted water they were forced to drink to sustain themselves. By the second week, only ten kilometers from their next pick up point, one of the two hostages reached the point of no return. He ran a constant fever, and could keep nothing down. Carroon and Lansing took turns carrying him. Ignoring the stench of his incontinence. Intermittently, he mumbled about his family back home. He had no idea of where he was, or what was going on about him.

At last they made the contingent pick up point. Waited once again, praying they'd not be forgotten. Unlike the Navy's tradition of never leaving a teammate behind, CIA squads were expendable if politically expedient. While their operations were sanctioned by tacit, if unwritten agreement with the Colombian government, it was just as likely the "special police" who'd joined them for the attack on the compound was in fact a right wing "death squad". In which case, the Colombian authorities would want no part of the operation, might even deny use of their airspace for a helicopter pick-up.

Then in the distance, the sound of a single Huey came to their ears. Soon the chopper settled in, they scrambled into the troop compartment. Carrying their rescued compatriots, neither of whom was strong enough to haul themselves aboard.

At the controls, John Richenhauer piloted the aircraft alone. He'd commandeered the helicopter against the orders of *higher* authority, and flown on his own recognizance.

Over the Caribbean, Jimmy Young died. After six weeks of captivity, and ten days of diarrhea, he just couldn't hang on any longer. There was a moment of clarity before the end, the last thing he said was: "I'm sorry, I was such a burden."

#

Even now tears came to Brent Lansing's eyes when he thought of that last mission. Back then he'd cried like a baby, the exhaustion alone excruciating. Remembering now, those harrowing times, kept him going on days like this, the ocean's fury a minor fear compared to the sheer terror of not knowing in what horrible way you might die when your luck at last ran out.

Loyal friendship was the only thing of importance in life, or so Brent thought. He, Harry Carroon, and John Richenhauer had shared times that could never be fully conveyed to anyone else. And if he occasionally questioned John Richenhauer's motives, he had to also remember it was John who'd risked his life, and career, to come in for them. A lot of guys in his position wouldn't have bothered.

Those were strange and terrible times, thought Lansing. And they were indelibly etched in his mind. Memories create their own conditioned responses. For himself, and he supposed others like himself, there was no sanctuary in the nine to five dollar chase. Win, lose, or draw, it was better to ride the teeth of a storm, than die of boredom. With this thought in mind, he found the entrance to the Fort Bragg harbor. Coaxed another ounce of skill out of his fatigued mind and body, to steer the Sally's Ride one last time to safe harborage. As he passed the dimly lit



breakwater, he laughed out loud, feeling once again the exhilaration of success against all odds. And reminded himself, the only easy day was yesterday. And what the hell today is just tomorrow's yesterday.

#

Carl Fortune closed the file. "Richenhauer picked them up himself, in a commandeered chopper."

Jim Richards nodded his head, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "Now Richenhauer owns the Sailor's Inn?"

"Yes. And Ricotta Ristorante. As well as The Monterey Seafood Company... and two-thirds of the Sally's Ride."

Jim Richards thought for a moment, then said: "I'd say there's a ninety-nine percent chance Brent Lansing made that pick up. I'm going to Monterey tomorrow; see what I can come up with. I'd like you two, to continue your research. If the weapons start to move, they may be picked up through some other investigation."

Jim Richards looked at each for a moment, then said: "And thank you for the excellent work you've done."

#

It was nine in the evening, twenty-one hundred hours in the way Jim Richards thought of time once he donned his *mission* face. He knocked on the door of Ty Harding's home.

The kids were in bed. Lynn on the sofa, relaxing in front of the television. He and Ty quietly moved to the study, where Harding read the reports Jim Richards' staff had prepared. They sat awhile thinking. Watching the fire Jim Richards had built, while Harding was reading. At last Ty Harding said: "I think the analyses your team put together is right on the money. Brent Lansing received the weapons, either before or after the St. Emilion went down."

"And John Richenhauer?"

"I doubt he's involved. Small time stuff for a guy like him. In any case, his record's impeccable. He turned down an opportunity to control the west coast cocaine trade long ago, opted instead to set up a sting he's been running for years now. I don't think he's in on this. Check him out if you feel you need to, but remember he's one of Elmo's favorite people."

Richards nodded. "Yes, and so's Batiste."

"True, but Elmo's well aware of Arnie's proclivities." Ty Harding stood up. "Find out what's become of those weapons, Jim. Before they end up on the street, killing more of our people."

"I'll do my best," Jim Richards said.

"I know you will. Good hunting."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Michael O'Donnegan parked the gray over white Chevrolet Tahoe in the municipal parking lot adjacent to Monterey's Fisherman's Wharf. Earlier that morning, he'd dropped Crissy off at the house in San Francisco where he'd first made contact with James Flaherty. There, in addition to a thousand dollars in cash, Flaherty gave him with a MasterCard in the name of Donald Smith. And a California driver's license.

O'Donnegan didn't like the idea of using a different first name. It was at very least confusing, because one tended to react to one's own name, even when it was addressed to someone else. Nevertheless, without James Flaherty's help he'd have no chance of completing his mission. So he'd just have to get used to being called Donald.

Michael O'Donnegan decided his first chore was to get himself something to eat, lunch would give him an opportunity to try out the credit card. God knows how Flaherty had come by the thing. Probably had it forged or more likely stolen. Either condition might lead to a rejection. Better to find out early on if the damn thing worked, before he depleted his cash reserve. He wandered down Pier One, past souvenir shops displaying ghastly reproductions of paint by numbers art and T-shirts with pictures of sea otters. Farther along the pier were outdoor fish markets that displayed today's *catch*. Fresh from the sea, or so they claimed.

O'Donnegan studied the menu outside Ricotta Ristorante, then decided to try his luck with the credit card. As he passed through the bar, he glanced absentmindedly at the neon-ringed clock on the wall behind the bar, high noon.

An attractive girl in her early twenties, with short blond hair, and a tanned athletic body approached him. She smiled warmly. "Good morning, sir. Will you be having lunch with us?"

"Yes, thank you." O'Donnegan replied.

The hostess led him to one of several tables adjacent a bank windows over looking the berths of the commercial fishing fleet, and the private yachts moored in the harbor. He watched the hostess walk away, her hips swayed provocatively. Michael O'Donnegan smiled to himself, and thought of Crissy. It had been fun after all.

He read the menu and decided on the daily special: A seafood dish served over home made pasta in a light Marinara sauce. While he ate, he relaxed. Enjoying the view from his table. He found himself chuckling at the antics of the sea lions, apparently the true owners of the harbor. He glanced upward through the windows at a blue sky, streaked with cirrus clouds. A jet airliner passed low overhead on approach to Monterey Airport, adding a high tech quality to an otherwise timeless scene of a fishing village active since 1770.

For a moment Michael O'Donnegan wished he could put his past behind him, his mission aside. And become the real Donald Smith. He imagined himself a salesman, with customers in the Monterey area. He'd stay in one of the many excellent hotels. Sell computer products, and make a very good living. Perhaps drive a Cadillac with leather upholstery. At his home in the San Francisco bay area, he'd have a wife. And two little children who were spoiled brats. Who thought his hard earned money grew on trees. Perhaps, here in Monterey, he'd have a mistress to visit on his monthly sales trips. She'd be an artist, who demanded only a little of his time. And most of that would be in bed.

But even as he daydreamed, the reality of his life pushed its way through to his consciousness. And if someone had been watching his face closely, they'd have seen a dramatic change of countenance. A shift that would be the envy of any movie actor who portrays the inner thoughts of his character with only the slightest nuance of facial expression, under close scrutiny of a seventy-millimeter lens. But Michael O'Donnegan's subtle alteration of facial expression was not the result of acting, rather it was a reflection of his inner torment. A look of relaxed humor gradually turned to an expression of pain and intense anger, driven by years of hate. His jaw muscles tightened as he grit his teeth, choking back anguish as he recalled the deaths of his younger brother, and his father at the hands of British soldiers.

Michael O'Donnegan had his head turned towards the windows; no one saw his moment of torment. He shook his head almost imperceptibly. He could never walk away from it. And though he'd avenged the deaths of his brother and father many times over, it had not ended his pain. And so life had no value to him anymore, nor any real joys either.

"Sir, may I bring you some coffee? Would you like to see our dessert tray?"

The waiter's voice shook him from his dark thoughts. "No thank you." He replied. His voice a bit strained. "I'll just take the check. Lunch was excellent."

As he left the restaurant, he bumped into a man who'd been reading the menu board outside. The man excused himself, and went on inside.

Out on the pier, Michael O'Donnegan took a deep breath, his nostrils filled with the aroma of steamed crab. The scent had peaked his appetite earlier, now it seemed uninviting.

#

Peter White sat with Elmo Jefferson on the terrace of his estate in the woods near Alexandria, Virginia. They'd just enjoyed an excellent brunch in the warm autumn sunshine. Jefferson's official title at the agency was Section Chief, Pacific Operations. An intentional misnomer as were most of the official titles associated with executives at CIA. He was, in fact, in charge of covert operations.

Peter White had telephoned Elmo on a *secure line*, something that didn't really exist anymore. Perhaps had never existed. And when Peter asked how Elmo's roses were doing? Jefferson knew a very discreet meeting needed to be arranged. The conversation that followed would have caused any listener to wonder: Why two old farts needed to use a secure line to reminisce about the good old days?

Elmo Jefferson's private terrace was well away from prying eyes and electronic ears. And was well guarded by internal security personnel loyal in the extreme. A white-jacketed waiter served Peter and Elmo a second cup of coffee, then closed the French doors that led from the residence to the terrace, a prearranged signal they'd not be disturbed.

"Well my friend," Jefferson said. "We've talked about everything except that which brought you here today. There will be no better opportunity than the present. What's on your mind?"

Peter looked duly contrite and a bit embarrassed. Which did not fool Elmo in the least, rather it alerted him to the fact he was about to learn something he would not like.

"We've botched a job. And to complicate matters, it occurred on your territory." Peter said.

Elmo raised both eyebrows in question.

"This past Tuesday, three of our people were killed by Michael O'Donnegan a Provisional IRA terrorist. We had him under surveillance by an experienced team. They followed him from Belfast to Vancouver, and thence as far as Crescent City. Then it all went to pieces."

Elmo nodded sagely. "Sounds like you had him exactly where he wanted you. And a nice scandal thrown in for your service as well. Why weren't we informed of the incursion?"

Peter sighed. "It went too fast. We had a deep cover asset in the IRA's Canadian operation. Took us five years to plant him. Solid work, good intelligence coming out. Then we received word the Provos had tapped our boy, and O'Donnegan was on the move to handle the situation."

"No parachute?" Elmo asked.

Peter shook his head. "No. Our boy wouldn't hear of it. Said it's what blew the others before him."

"Guy's got balls." Elmo opined.

"Had balls, he had heart failure just before O'Donnegan reached Quebec."

Jefferson glanced out over his garden at the last of the year's roses in full bloom. And wondered how many more blooms he'd raise before his own ticker gave out.

"Induced?"

"Natural. He was obese. And out of shape. A perfect *cover*. Too perfect, it would appear. Anyway, O'Donnegan left Quebec, and went straight to Vancouver. We told the team to ease back and watch."

"And when he entered our territory?" Elmo asked.

Peter looked duly contrite again. "I have no excuses. Our team moved south, we received two routine reports. Then nothing."

Elmo nodded, there was no point in badgering Peter, and he was just following orders. But clearly, he wasn't telling the whole truth. So what else was knew. "Okay, I'll find out what the current status is on the investigation. By the way, how did you finally learn of the killings?"

"CNN reported it as a drug deal gone bad. We hadn't heard from the team, knew they were in the area. Put it together."

Elmo shook his head and chuckled. "Sometimes I think we ought to buy the network. Hell, half the time they get the intel before us."

Peter smiled and nodded his head in agreement.

"Do you have any current photos of Michael O'Donnegan?" Elmo asked.

"Yes, right here in this dossier." Peter slipped a plain manila envelop across the table to Elmo. "All the data we have on the case to this point in time is in the file. Anything we can do to help, we'll be glad to do."

"Thank you," Elmo said as he accepted the file. "But for now, we need to see how far into the investigation our Justice people may be. If the Bureau hasn't gotten their teeth into it yet, we may be able to keep it quiet for you. If the investigation goes public, there'll be a hell of a stink. Our press just loves this kind of stuff. I can see the headlines now: British Secret Service hit team killed in ambush."

Peter winced. "Our fears precisely."

"We'll do the best we can." Elmo said in a consoling tone of voice. "I'll keep you informed. Otherwise stay out of this entirely. We'll get a line on O'Donnegan, and eventually run him down, or back to you. If we find him, do you want him?"

The corner of Peter's mouth turned downward as he shook his head. "If the opportunity arises, just terminate the bastard real quiet. It'll solve a lot of problems for everyone."

#

Jim Richards turned away from the menu board outside Ricotta Ristorante and bumped squarely into a man coming out the front entrance. The man was of medium height, with blond hair, and icy blue eyes.

After lunch Richards strolled along the sidewalk that skirted the harbor between Pier One and Pier Two. Soon, he came to the Harbormaster's office. He climbed a narrow set of stairs to the second floor, then entered the office.

A plywood counter, topped with glass laid over a marine chart of the Monterey Bay, prevented his going beyond the first few feet just inside the door. On top of the glass was a card dispenser, he quickly scanned the business card it held, noted the Harbormaster's name.

Behind the counter was an office, walled by plate glass that over looked the harbor and parking areas. The room contained four desks. One of which was devoted entirely to communications equipment. Sitting at the desk, in a gray electric wheel chair, was the dispatch officer.

"Roger Unit two. Go ahead and open the gate for Mr. Anders. We'll get a replacement card made up for him. Dispatch out." Setting the microphone down, Melody Gravis swung her wheel chair around to smile up at Jim Richards. "Good afternoon. And what may I do for you?"

Jim Richards returned her smile. "Is Herb Cathay, in?"

"No he's not. Did you have an appointment?"

"No, as matter of fact I didn't. Just thought I'd take a chance, see if I could catch him in."

"Well no luck today. Mr. Cathay is at a Harbor Planning Commission hearing. When he finishes, he'll most likely go straight home, being in no mood to see anyone."

"Oh, one of those meetings." Jim Richards responded.

"I'm afraid so. The Planning Commission and the local environmentalists are in a constant battle over the operation and expansion of the harbor. Mr. Cathay is trapped in the middle. Perhaps I can help you? Or would you prefer to leave a message. I can have Mr. Cathay call you tomorrow."

Jim Richards thought for a moment. "Perhaps you can help me. I'm looking for a fishing boat Captain by the name of Brent Lansing. I understand he pilots a fisher called the Sally's Ride, and that he might help me locate a boat to buy."

Melody nodded her head. "Aha. Well I'm afraid Brent is not around today either. He took the Ride out yesterday."

"Oh. When is he due back?"

"I'm not sure." Melody hummed her chair over to a north-facing window. "His Yukon's still in the parking lot. But I'd guess he'll be back tomorrow, or the next day. The Ride's seldom out more than three, or four days. It's a local fisher, you know?"

Richards followed her gaze to a pair of Yukons in the packed dirt parking area. "The black one down there?"

"No. The blue and white one."

Richards nodded his head, then appeared to be considering asking another question and changed his mind. "I thank you. I'll just enjoy the area until Mr. Lansing returns."

"Would you like his telephone number? He can be reached through the Sailor's Inn."

"Yes, please."

Melody wrote the number down on a piece of scratch paper, then rolled over to the half door next to the counter, and handed the paper up to Jim Richards.

"One other question. Where will I find the Monterey Seafood Company?"

Melody pointed through the north-facing window. "You see that rounded tar paper roof over there? That's the Seafood Company."

#

At the county offices Michael O'Donnegan thickened his Irish accent, and used his considerable charm to convince the matronly lady behind the counter to assist him in finding his long lost cousin, Brent Lansing. It didn't take long to locate the address he needed. Ten minutes later O'Donnegan cruised by Lansing's Victorian home, and noted the tail end of a faded silver Honda parked at the back of the driveway.

#

Jim Richards walked south, away from the Harbormaster's office, and away from Brent Lansing's Yukon. He wanted to get a closer look at the Yukon. Perhaps leave a locator. But knew it would be prudent to wait until later that evening. Hopefully, it would still be there when he returned. He got back into his car, then drove north along a hard packed dirt road that paralleled the shore. He parked in front of the Monterey Seafood Company. Then ignored the sign painted in large red letters that said: OFFICE. Instead he entered through the truck entrance, which gave him a chance to scan the operation before locating the office. He told the manager, he planned to get into the fishing business. The manager gave him a dour look, but also a tour of the plant. Jim Richards noted the conveyor system. He asked the manager about it, and learned that only one or two boats actually used it.

An interesting investment, for so little use, thought Richards. He also noted a door that opened into the steam tunnel from the back of the building. There where no steam nozzles near the oddly placed door.

He questioned the manager about how much fish a single bin would hold. He examined the bins closely, though he gave the appearance of only giving a cursory look, as he prattled on about retiring from the nine to five grind to sail and fish. He noted the ridges near the bottom of the bins. That they were capable of supporting a false bottom. And the space below the ridges, capable of concealing crates the size and shape of the containers believed to have held weapons aboard the St. Emilion.

After the tour, Jim Richards drove to Pacific Grove. There, he located Brent Lansing's house, using information provided by Sue Bristol. He also noted the license plate number of a faded, silver Honda parked in the driveway. He then sent a query to Sue using his on-board computer. He then checked into the Pacific Hotel.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Tell him Gray Wolf is on the line."

A moment later, Elmo Jefferson picked up the secure line. "Evening, Ty. Or is it afternoon where you are? What do you have for me?"

"I interviewed your old friend, Arnold Batiste." Harding replied in a matter of fact tone. "Then ran a stress analysis on the tape of our conversation. He was less than candid, to put it mildly. There's no doubt the residual cocaine we found in that concealed compartment on his yacht was product brought in to the states for future sale. He denied it, of course. But he's lying through his teeth."

Elmo sighed audibly. "And the weapons?"

"Clean. In fact, he was astonished at what he termed Harry Carroon's audacity."

Elmo chuckled, his voice gruff and gravely on the other end of the line. "Typical. The pot calling the kettle black, after spending half the interview lying to you." Elmo paused for a moment. "I'll deal with Arnold. What's the status on Jim Richards' investigation?"

"He's in Monterey right now, following up on the Brent Lansing lead. I'll keep you posted if anything develops." Harding paused for a moment, then asked: "Anything new for me?"

"Nothing substantive. Though I had a curious conversation with a friend from MI-6. Seems an IRA assassin came over the border from BC on Sunday. Monday, he took out an SAS watcher team assigned to surveil him. Maybe it's just coincidental, but I'm getting that old tickle at the back of my neck. If I hit on something solid, I'll let you know immediately."

"What's the guy's name?" Harding asked.

"Michael O'Donnegan. Doubtful he's using his own name though. Like I say, it's probably just a coincidence. Still, you'd better tell Jim Richards to stay on his toes."

"Will do. Can you send me a photo?"

"Yes. Give me a couple of hours. I want to do a little data surfing. Maybe something will pop up that make's a little more sense."

#

Jim Richards stepped out of his hotel room, then walked along a breezeway. He'd chosen the Pacific Hotel because it met his parameters for security: Rooms that opened directly onto outdoor courts, with several exits leading to the street. No need to wait for elevators. Or walk along inside corridors, funneled like a rat in a maze to a central transfer point easily watched by the opposition. Even when operating under low risk conditions, he made an effort to follow good tradecraft. Perhaps it was one of the reasons he'd managed to out live many of his colleagues.

Jogging downhill in an odd, flat-footed gait that cushioned his knees, Jim Richards hustled over to the pedestrian path that ran around the perimeter of Monterey harbor. The sun was just setting behind a bank of fog that would soon move on-shore. He continued north until he was next to the chain link fence that surrounded the parking lot where Brent Lansing's Yukon was parked. He found a gap in the fence, ducked through without breaking his stride, and then jogged over to the blue over white four-wheel drive vehicle. He dropped to one knee, and reached under the rear bumper to magnetically attach the domino sized locator.

#

Michael O'Donnegan watched as Carla Simpson parked her car on Barkentine Avenue, across from the Sailor's Inn. She slid out of the low-slung coupe, then crossed the street to enter the restaurant via the front door. She wore a body hugging, sexy black evening dress, with a deep scalloped neckline. O'Donnegan concluded she was either the hostess, or a cocktail waitress. Either/or, she'd be working until at least midnight. He started the Tahoe, and drove to the Del Monte Shopping Center. The directory outside the entrance listed all the shops and services he'd need. His first stop was a hair salon. The owner was booked until closing, but agreed *to do* him immediately after her last scheduled appointment. She couldn't resist the extra money he'd offered.

He then walked into an electronics store. There he purchased two radio transceivers, ear phones, a tiny amplifier used to boost power to a car stereo system, a small plastic box that contained a blank circuit board, a soldering iron, solder, a pouch of small tools, and several nine volt batteries. Farther down the mall he found an auto parts store where he picked up a motion sensitive auto security alarm. At five fifty-five he returned the salon.

"Oh hello," said Sherry. "I thought you'd changed your mind."

"Not a chance. I'm *so* tired of this look. You have just got to do something for me. I want my hair short and black, something really butch. You know what I mean?" He purposely put a lilt in his voice to give the impression he was gay. He wanted a dramatic change in his appearance. Few *straight* men would change their appearance for fashion alone. And he didn't want the hairdresser wondering why he was disguising himself.

Sherry smiled. "Oh definitely, I know just the look for you."

At seven that evening Michael O'Donnegan walked out of the *Hair's To You* salon, his blonde hair dyed black as coal, in a close military style crew cut."

Next he wandered down the mall to an eyeglass boutique, where he found a pair of photosensitive glasses he could wear day or night. And finally in a boutique that specialized in safari style clothing, he found an *Indiana Jones* hat that could be pulled low over his face, and a photographer's vest with several zippered pockets. Finally, he stopped by a super market to pick up food easily carried and eaten while on surveillance. He returned to his vehicle, then drove to Pacific Grove where he found a motel with several bungalows not far from Lansing's home.

He sat at a small table in the kitchenette, and disassembled the car alarm extracting the motion sensor from it. He then opened one of the transceivers, and removed its transmitter. Using the tools he'd bought and knowledge gained at a British subsidized work-training program. He constructed a device that would broadcast a tone whenever it was moved. He set the sensor's timer to shut off every half second. With batteries installed, he estimated the device would have a transmission life of no less than seventy-two hours even under continuous vibration.

#

Jim Richards slid into his Thunderbird. He retrieved the messages waiting for him. The first was from Sue Bristol, noting the silver Honda he'd seen earlier in the day parked in Lansing's driveway belonged to a Carla Simpson. A review of her financial and credit records indicated she currently worked at the Sailor's Inn. Richards telephoned the restaurant, made reservations for later that evening, confirming Carla was in fact at work.

The second message was from Ty Harding: *IRA terrorist may be in your area to receive arms shipment. Use extreme caution. Back up team is on the way with additional data. Will make contact at your hotel tonight.* Jim Richards keyed an acknowledgment, then sent it off to THI Central. Next he checked the status of Brent Lansing's vehicle. It hadn't moved.



He stowed the computer in its compartment, started the engine, and then drove to Lansing's house. He cruised the neighborhood looking for watchers, before parking a half block away.

The house was dark. Jim Richards inserted an electronic lock pick into the lock on the rear door. It solved the riddle of the tumblers in less than three seconds. He carefully opened the back door; it creaked in protest despite his best efforts. He winced realizing if anyone were home; they'd just been alerted to his entry unless of course they were stone deaf. He waited just inside the door, listening for any presence in the house. Then moved quietly through the kitchen and into the dining room. Turning left from the dining room, he found the master bedroom at the end of a short hallway. He flicked on a small flashlight with a red filter to assure his night vision would not be affected, and quickly scanned the room. Then placed a tiny voice transceiver on the back of the nightstand adjacent to the bed.

He then moved down the hallway, stopping to scan the bathroom. Then on into the second bedroom. It contained art supplies and several canvasses in various stages of completion. In the living room, he found a telephone and an answering machine on an antique desk. Beside the phone was a message pad with a note written on it: *Hi Babe, come by the bar if you aren't too tired. You had two calls, friends of Harry's. They said they'd call back. See you soon. Love C.*

Jim Richards placed another transceiver on the back of the old wood desk. He ignored the telephone, an active listening device was too easily detected. Next he stepped over to the audio equipment rack, where he inserted a small repeater into the 110 volt unswitched outlet on the back of the receiver. The repeater would pick up the ultra low powered transmissions of the other transceivers, and send them up to the satellite for a downlink to his onboard communication system. Someone performing normal housekeeping would not see the repeater. Judging from the accumulation of dust on the backside of the receiver, it had not been looked at for quite some time. Richards wiggled all the lead wires to and from the system to assure electrolysis would not spoil the receiver's reception, also assuring no one would have that reason, at least, to look behind the rack.

Almost as an after thought he placed one last transceiver behind the molding on the underside of the kitchen cabinet, as he was leaving the house.

#

Carla Simpson stood at the cocktail waitress' station, musing on older men. She definitely preferred older men to guys her own age. For example, at the back of the lounge tonight was a very attractive guy. The table he'd reserved was not quite ready when he came in, so he'd chosen a comfortable chair at the rear of the lounge where he could watch the entire room. He'd ordered his twelve-year scotch neat, tipped well, and smiled warmly into her eyes. He was a flirt, and though she would never cheat on Brent, she could not help but return his smile.

She glanced in his direction again. He'd slipped off his leather jacket. He had broad, solid shoulders, a well developed chest, and muscular arms that stretched the fabric of the short sleeve knit shirt he was wearing. She considered sauntering by his table one more time, just see what sort of reaction she might be able to spark. As this thought crossed her mind, Bertrand, the Maitre 'D approached. "Mr. Richards, I have the perfect table for you. And I thank you for your patience."

#

Jim Richards glanced out the window, as he finished a dessert of white chocolate mousse. He noted the expensive cars parked out on the street were the same ones that were there when he

arrived. Yet the dining room was nearly empty. As he continued to gaze out the window, he saw one of the Sailor's Inn waiters climbing into a Porsche 911, another into a Corvette. Richards frowned unconsciously, as his own waiter approached with the check.

"Was everything satisfactory, sir?"

"Yes," Richards replied. "Dinner was excellent."

He put the tab on his credit card, Bertrand returned with his receipt.

"May I buy you an after dinner drink?" Bertrand asked.

"Thank you," Jim Richards replied with a nod. "I'll have a mineral water with a splash of Casis."

"Excellent. Here, or at the bar?" Bertrand asked politely.

"The bar will be fine."

#

Jim Richards sipped his mineral water and thought about Annie. He wished he could slip back to the bay area for an hour or two. A white limousine stopped outside the front door, and a well-dressed Asian male stepped out, leaving the rear door open. Inside, a slinky young woman lounged in a silver sequined gown slit to her thigh, revealing gorgeous legs encased in sheer stockings.

Her escort came into the restaurant, and whispered something to Bertrand, who nodded his head and bowed slightly. They both walked into the dining room, which was now completely empty. Soon they returned, the Asian carrying a foil paper sculpture in the shape of a seabird. Together they stepped out to the limousine, where Bertrand hunkered down at the curb and chatted with the couple for a moment or two, then rose and closed the door to the limo.

As he came back into the restaurant, Jim Richards smiled and nodded in the direction of the departing limousine. "Gorgeous legs. How's the rest of the package?"

"Perfect," responded Bertrand with conspiratorial smile. "One of our best customers. They stopped by after a party for one of our special desserts."

"Oh, I see," said Richards. "I wondered what was in those foil doggy bags that sat on many of the tables tonight. Certainly not left overs?" Richards smiled disarmingly. "For who could refuse to finish such an excellent meal?"

"And we thank you," said Bertrand with a slight bow. "No, not left overs. But many patrons find they have not room for dessert, and so we arrange for them to take something home for later." Bertrand moved closer to Richards, and spoke in a conspiratorial tone. "Would you care for a decadent chocolate tort for later? I'm sure we have some left."

"Ah my weakness," said Jim Richards. "But no, not tonight thank you."

"Another time perhaps."

A smooth operation, thought Richards. And skillfully handled by Bertrand, who should really receive an academy award. Obviously the late arriving couple was not interested in a chocolate tort, nor were the diners who'd received foil sculptures, and arose from tables with half eaten desserts still on their plates.

#

Brent Lansing parked his Yukon behind the Sailor's Inn. He climbed the rear stairs carrying a black hard shell suitcase. Tom, Richenhauer's body guard, opened the door. He smiled and bowed slightly to Brent, then slapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, man. How'd the trip go?"

"Fine. How 'bout things here?"

"Same ol'"

"John countin' his money?"

"Yeah. Hold one, I'll see if he can see you now."

Tom scurried down the short hall and knocked on John Richenhauer's office door. He stuck his head in and told him Brent was outside, then held the door open for Lansing.

John Richenhauer was seated at his cluttered desk, stacks of money and some gold coins mixed amongst the paperwork. Just to his right lying on the desk was a nickel-plated .44 caliber Ruger Blackhawk with an eight inch barrel. Richenhauer looked up as Lansing entered. "Hey buddy, how you doin'? Caught a little weather north of Frisco, eh?"

Lansing nodded. "Yeah, but nothing the Ride couldn't handle." He smiled at the stacks of money. "Looks like you've had another good night."

Richenhauer chuckled. "And I haven't even counted the dinners yet." They both laughed. Richenhauer reached over and picked up a gold coin, tossed it to Lansing. "Now that's real hard currency."

Lansing caught the flashing coin in mid-air.

"You want your share of the Ride in that stuff? Do you good to have some of it stashed for a rainy day."

Lansing smiled. "Anyway you want to do it is fine with me."

Richenhauer nodded at the suitcase Brent Lansing still held in his left hand. "You got the cash?"

"Right here." He hefted the suitcase.

"Lemme see." John Richenhauer stood up, then reached across the desk taking the suitcase from Lansing, as he passed it over. He set it at his feet, then opened it up.

"Counted it?" Richenhauer asked.

"To the penny."

"Good. I'll cut you a check Monday out of the Seafood Company for forty grand, how do you want the rest?"

"The maple leaf's fine. Won't be that much to haul around."

"Naw, be about seventy-five coins," Richenhauer replied. He counted out seventy-four coins from the pile on his desk, then reached into a lower drawer and pulled out a canvass money belt. He unzipped it, placed the coins inside, including the one he'd tossed to Lansing earlier, then swung it across the desk. "Try getting that through airport security."

Brent Lansing hefted the belt to eye level, inspected it as if it were a freshly caught fish. "This thing looks like it's seen its share of jungle."

Richenhauer nodded, "Oh yeah. You should wear it to bed tonight. Tell Carla she's fucking nine-ninety-nine fine."

Brent smiled and shook his head, then turned to leave.

"Hey, thanks for taking care of the boat." Richenhauer said with sincerity.

"No sweat."

"What's the status on Harry's stuff?" Richenhauer asked.

Lansing stopped at the door and looked back. "I found a message at home. Two people called, or one twice. Said they were friends of Harry's. They'll call again tomorrow."

Richenhauer nodded. "Okay, but don't rush it. Check 'em out good. Take Tom and Roley with you for back up, if you like."

"I'll watch it. Thanks."

John Richenhauer looked at Brent Lansing for a moment with concern in his eyes. Then fell back on his standard demeanor. "Okay, get outta here. And for Christ's sake service Carla, will you. She's been actin' like a bitch in heat around here."

"That bad uh?"

"Hell yeah, I thought I was gonna have to take the pressure off for you."

"That *is* bad," Lansing quipped.

Richenhauer laughed heartily, as Lansing left his office.

#

Jim Richards finished his mineral water and was about to leave when Brent Lansing came up behind Carla Simpson and kissed her on the back of her neck. She turned, threw her arms around his neck, and tried to swallow his tongue. The bartender shook his head slowly as he looked over at Richards. "And I gotta go home alone."

Jim Richards smiled and nodded his head in agreement, as he slipped off the barstool. He looked back over his shoulder as he stepped out of the restaurant, froze a picture in his mind of Brent Lansing.

He crossed the street to his car, then deployed his computer. The locator map showed Lansing's Yukon parked nearby. He started the Thunderbird and drove slowly down the street, barely noticing a Chevrolet Tahoe parked facing in the opposite direction. He did not see the driver, whose features were in any case obscured by the reflection of an overhead street light off the windshield.

#

Michael O'Donnegan watched as the Thunderbird cruised by, he recognized the driver as the man he'd bumped into earlier leaving Ricotta Ristorante. A coincidence, perhaps. But O'Donnegan didn't like coincidences, they were bad luck in his line of work.

Michael O'Donnegan was irritable from fatigue. It had already been a long day, and now it appeared Brent Lansing's girlfriend was a bloody cocktail waitress. Fucking terrific, thought O'Donnegan, it'll probably take the little twit half the night to count her bloody bank. He closed his eyes, and rubbed his face hard. For now all he needed to do was make certain the girlfriend went home, and then wait for Lansing to show up.

He opened his eyes just in time to see Carla crossing the street with a man who looked fit and dangerous. He wondered if perhaps he might be Lansing, they were walking with their arms about each other. They stopped at her car and kissed passionately. He continued to watch as they each got into separate vehicles, a blue over white Yukon following the Accord, as they headed in the direction of Pacific Grove.

#

Carla pulled in behind the house, and Lansing pulled up next to her. He climbed out and held her door, she kissed him again, and shoved her hands down inside the waistband of his pants. By the time they'd made it through the back door, the top of her dress was down to her waist, and her ample breasts were thrust against Brent's chest, bare where she'd torn the buttons off his shirt getting it open.

They pulled the rest of their clothes off, as they stumbled through the dining room and down the hall towards the bedroom, falling together onto the bed.

Carla's long strawberry blonde hair, worn on top of her head at the restaurant, had come down completely. Brent grasped the golden tresses like the reigns of an unbroken mare, as they rutted like two rabbits, moaning and crying out in their unbridled passion.

#

Outside their bedroom window, Michael O'Donnegan listened to the sound of passion within, then smiled lasciviously to himself. He turned away, to carefully place the homemade locator into the hollow of the spare tire mounted on the tailgate of Lansing's Yukon. He'd not need to sit on surveillance tonight. They'd sleep like babies when they'd finally spent themselves. Tomorrow, Flaherty's people would call. He'd make certain he was there to watch the transfer. And if by any chance, Brent Lansing attempted to double cross them, by God he'd pay... and so would Carla.

A tingle of excitement ran through Michael O'Donnegan's body. Slowly he turned his head back towards the window, his lips twisted into a cruel, feral grin revealing to the darkness a psychosis that lurked just below the surface of his demeanor. He no longer killed for revenge, he killed for the pleasure it brought him in those final moments of exquisite power.

Silently he slunk away into the night, a shadow amongst the deeper shadows, and as he did he almost wished the deal would fail, if only to provide the justification he'd need to indulge his carnal lust.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jim Richards adjusted the volume on the portable scanner, then set it down on the coffee table in his room. The telephone message light, blinking on the nightstand next to the bed, caught his eye. He stepped over to it. The operator replied to his query. "A Mr. Jensen asked if you would give him a call when you came in, regardless of the time. Shall I connect you?"

He heard the phone at the other end of the line *brrr* twice. Bob Jensen, another of THI's veteran operatives, answered on the second ring. Richards invited him down to his room.

Jim Richards hung up the receiver. As he turned from the telephone, the scanner on the table came to life. There was a tremendous commotion, as if the house where the pick-up was located was being torn down. Someone, or something, slammed up against the kitchen cupboard where Richards had left one of the transmitters.

Jim Richards leaned closer to the scanner, turning the volume up, trying understand what was happening. Again a resounding crash. Intense breathing, and guttural moans. Torn fabric, small objects falling to the floor. He was about to rush out, to head for Brent Lansing's house, thinking something was terribly wrong, when he heard a male voice. "Oh, Jesus. You've ripped the buttons right off my shirt."

A female spoke in a husky voice. "I'm gonna fuck you crazy. You'll be coming for a week."

Jim Richards broke into a wide grin, remembering the welcome Carla had given Brent Lansing at the Sailor's Inn. Richards sat down on one of two love seats in the mini-suite, and visualized the scene in Brent Lansing's house. The scanner's LEDs blinked on and off as the two lovers moved through the house, falling at last upon their bed.

Just then, there was a knock at the hotel room door. Jim Richards got up to answer it. Bob Jensen stood outside, with another man standing behind him.

"Come on in. The fun's just beginning," Richards said, as he stepped back from the door. Then retreated down the narrow entryway. There was no way he could politely step aside and let the two walking condominiums pass.

"How you been?" Jensen asked, as reached out to shake Richards' hand. "Good to see your ass alive. Rumors were, you'd bought it over in Krautsville."

Jim Richards grinned and shook his head. "Fortunately not all the stories you hear about me are true. How are Linda and the kids?"

"Just great. Couldn't be better," Jensen replied. She said to give you a big kiss. I told her I'd pass on that one."

Bob Jensen gestured with a thumb over his shoulder. "The big galute behind me is Frank Robinson, new guy in town. I'm supposed to be breaking him in. Used to be with the not so Secret Service."

"Glad to meet you, Frank," Richards said as he reached around Jensen to shake hands.

*"Oh God, Oh God, Oh, OOOhhh. Oh please, OOH."*

Bob Jensen and Frank Robinson both looked past Jim Richards towards the scanner on the coffee table. Jensen grinned. "You tapped into One-Nine-Hundred-Talk-Dirty, or what?"

"Even better. This is for real," Richards replied. "That's our boy Brent Lansing. Seems to be getting his brains fucked out, as a welcome home after a short absence."

"What happens after a long one?" Frank Robinson asked dryly.

"Cardiac arrest, I suppose." Richards replied. "You two care for a beer?"

He grabbed three cold ones from the mini bar. They all sat down. Bob Jensen and Frank Robinson each took a love seat, facing each other across the coffee table. Leaving Jim Richards to drag an arm chair over from the corner of the room.

*("Oh Baby, Oh Baby, Ooooh,")*

"So what have you got for me?" Richards asked. "Ty Harding sent me a message, said there might be a shooter in the area."

Bob Jensen nodded his head. "Possibly. The guy we're lookin' for took out three British Special Air Service officers near Crescent City, couple weeks ago. Langley thinks he may be after the weapons you're tracking." He passed a file folder over to Jim Richards. "Here are his most recent photos."

Jim Richards pulled two - eight by ten black and whites from the envelope, each taken with a telescopic lens. Neither image was particularly crisp. Also a standard mug shot of the same individual, when he was much younger - sixteen or seventeen years of age.

Bob Jensen continued. "His name's Michael O'Donnegan. Usually goes by the name Michael Shaunessy."

Jim Richards studied the photos, frowning. "The guy looks familiar. Seems like I've seen him somewhere... (*Oh fuck me. Oh yes, Oh yes. That's so good. Aaah So good*)" Richards reached over, and turned the volume down on the scanner until it was barely audible. His train of thought broken by the amorous transmission. He shook his head. "Can't quite place him. It's like a shadow on the edge of my mind. Maybe it'll come back to me later."

Jensen shrugged. "Probably some photo list you scanned, while looking for someone else. Guy's been around awhile, these aren't terribly current photos. Been operating since 1992. You might have seen him on that contact sheet we all got, when the bureau finally started askin' for help on their terrorist sweep following nine-eleven. After they finally got wise to the fact not everyone who qualifies as a terrorist is from the Middle East. Al Qaeda is perfectly happy to set infidel against infidel, long as it suits their interests."

Jim Richards nodded. "Could be. Nineteen Ninety-two you say? Must be pretty good. Folks in his line of work usually have short careers. Anyway, what does Langley want us to do?"

"Proceed with the mission. Find the weapons. If O'Donnegan's the buyer, take him too...alive or dead, makes no difference."

Richards raised both eyebrows, but made no comment.

"And we're here to help you." Jensen continued. "What's your game plan?"

Jim Richards thought for a moment. "I figured I'd keep Lansing under surveillance, see if he leads me to the weapons. If not, I was going to call for back up, then pick him up for questioning. "Richards shrugged his shoulders." Thing is, he may have already delivered the goods. Might have been the purpose of the trip from which he's just returned.

"But, since you two are here, we might as well take him into custody right away. I'll arrange for space over at the Presidio. We can pick him up tomorrow evening, after his girlfriend goes to work. Hopefully he'll cooperate. If not, we'll check him into one of Caring First's hospitals, and have a go with the pharmaceuticals."

Bob Jensen nodded. "Okay, but that brings me to another point. Elmo Jefferson's been in touch with Mr. Harding. He wants you to meet with John Richenhauer, before we take any action against Brent Lansing."

Richards frowned. "Why don't we just go ahead and tell Brent he's a suspect. Then we can count to one hundred; give him a nice head start."

Jensen held up one hand palm outward, for patience. "Elmo and John Richenhauer have been friends a long time." He paused for a moment to let the information sink in. "So we'll do him the courtesy. What the hell. The weapons are probably gone anyway. DEA's been watching the Sally's Ride for quite sometime now. According to AWACs downloads, the Ride made a trip north to Ft. Bragg two days ago, didn't return." He paused for a moment. Took a pull at his beer.

"As usual, the DEA's a dime late and a dollar short. No way of knowing if anything was on board the Ride. My guess is the weapons were off loaded at Bragg, where Michael O'Donnegan's coolin' his heels. Bragg's a hell of a lot closer to Crescent City than Monterey. By now, he and the weapons are well on there way back to Ireland via Canada."

Jim Richards nodded his head. "So we're screwed one way or the other." He shrugged his shoulders. "Let's go through the motions anyway. You and Frank divvy up the surveillance tomorrow. While I have that talk with John Richenhauer. Then we'll decide what to do about Mr. Lansing."

Richards took a pull at his beer. "Brent Lansing drives a blue over white, full size Yukon. California personalized plates: 2 *FISH*. I've got a locator on the vehicle. The frequency's: Three-three-two point seven. If he and Carla go anywhere tomorrow, I'm sure they'll use the Yukon. That little 'ol Honda of hers won't be his choice of transport."

Frank Robinson reached over, and turned up the volume on the scanner. Snores and rhythmic breathing were all there was to hear. "Doesn't sound like they're gonna need much watchin' tonight."

Jim Richards chuckled. "Probably not."

#

Michael O'Donnegan drove slowly past Brent Lansing's house, he glanced at his watch: Seven in the morning. The Honda and the Yukon were still in the driveway, positioned exactly as they were the night before. He turned left into Washington Park, then stopped next to a wooden picnic table in a stand of Monterey pines. From his position, he could observe the house and adjacent streets through a pair of binoculars.

#

Bob Jensen and Jim Richards sat at a small dining table in Richards' hotel room. They finished the last of a breakfast large enough to feed a small army. It had required two servers to bring in all the trays.

A couple Latin girls had served them, about nineteen years of age. Who spoke little, if any English. They seemed almost intimidated by the size of the men, and amazed at the amount of food each consumed. Alicia had remarked in Spanish as they were leaving: "We were lucky not to have been eaten too."

But Alexandra was more mischievous. "To be eaten would be fun. No? And who would dare to say this or that, if my boyfriend were so big."

#

Jim Richards poured a cup of coffee for Bob Jensen, then one for himself. The scanner sat on the wet bar and kept them entertained through out breakfast, a more subdued version of the previous night's performance. Now as they finished eating, they could hear Carla and Lansing's morning chatter, toilets flushing, showers running.



Carla padded off to the kitchen, she nearly blew the speaker off the receiver, yelling questions back to Brent, about two eggs or three, while standing less than a foot away from the transmitter under the cupboard.

"Jesus!" Exclaimed Richards. As lunged for the volume control. "Next time I'll put the damn thing in the ceiling." They both laughed. He and Jensen carried their cups over to the love seats, then chatted about past operations they'd run together. At about nine-fifteen the telephone rang in Lansing's house, they both listened intently to the one sided conversation.

*"Yeah your sister's fine. This is not the time or place. No, in person. Tomorrow at the Forge in the Forest. That's right, just off Mission. Make it eleven. I'll be wearing a bright red parka. No way, we'll set that up tomorrow. That's right. See you then."*

"Well that sounds encouraging," Bob Jensen opined. "Maybe the weapons haven't moved after all. You know the place he referred to?"

Jim Richards nodded his head once. "Yes. Has a nice little patio. And as I recall, there's a two story building across the street that looks down into it."

Bob Jensen finished his coffee, then got up to leave. "Frank's sitting on Lansing's house. I'll go relieve him. Give me a call on my car phone, after you've had a chance to talk with John Richenhauer, we'll see where we go from there."

#

The parking lot behind the Sailor's Inn was empty, except for a black BMW 7 series. Jim Richards pulled the Thunderbird along side. He climbed the stairs, then knocked on the back door of the restaurant.

"Good morning," the man said, who answered the door. "You Mr. Richards?"

"Yes."

"May I see identification please?"

Jim Richards produced his driver's license. Allowing the man to view it through the clear plastic window of his slim wallet.

"Thank you. Please come in." He gestured down the hallway to his right. "Go through door at the end of hall."

Jim Richards paced the length of the hallway. He wondered what it was like, constantly having a body guard at your back. Never a moment's privacy. It didn't sound good. He reached the door, then knocked once, before opening it.

John Richenhauer waved him into a chair, as he greeted him across a cluttered desk. They shook hands over an old Tiffany lamp.

"So you're the *famous* Jim Richards."

"Famous?"

"Oh well, Elmo has spoken highly of you. Been around awhile, I understand. Just surviving this business can be quite a feat. Anyway, I've been expecting someone like you to show up from THI."

Jim Richards raised an eyebrow. "How's that?"

"I heard Pacific Marine did the salvage job on the St. Emilion."

"I don't see the connection." Jim Richards said innocently.

John Richenhauer threw up his hands. "Hey, I'm on your side. Okay? Elmo briefed me yesterday."

Jim Richards relaxed a little. "Okay. Two items: First, what's your connection to the shipment?"

John Richenhauer took a moment to compose his thoughts. "Brent came to me with a plan Harry Carroon had cooked up to sell UZIs to the IRA. It sounded feasible, so I gave him the go ahead."

Jim Richards frowned. "Why would he involve you?"

Richenhauer smiled. "We have an agreement: Any business involving the boat is to be cleared through me first."

Richards nodded his head once. "Okay. So you knew about the guns. Then what? Just let them go through?"

Richenhauer shook his head. "The shipment you're tracking, isn't the first. Harry's plan included two. One last year, one this year."

"And you made no report."

John Richenhauer looked pained, as if he were trying to explain the realities of life to a child. "Not officially. Like THI, my operation's proprietary. I passed the data on to a friend over at ATF. He tracked the weapons from San Francisco to Boston. It soon became clear the people involved were passing weapons on to IRA supporters in Canada. So the case was handed off to the British. They were supposed bring in the Canadian authorities to make an arrest. Instead they blew the goddamn boat up, off Nova Scotia."

Jim Richards frowned. "Why blow up the boat? When they could have picked up everyone along the way, shut the whole pipeline down?"

"Good question, Mr. Richards." Richenhauer said with a sardonic smile.

"And this latest shipment?" Richards asked.

John Richenhauer lifted the edge of the leather-writing pad on his desk, then slid two newspaper clippings out from under it. He pushed them over to Jim Richards.

They were a year old according to the date at the top of the page. One was a story about a fishing vessel that sank off the coast of Newfoundland, no cause cited. The other an obituary, both from the Boston Globe.

"The obit tells the real story," Richenhauer offered. "Two of the lives lost on that boat were eighteen year old kids from Boston. Workin' summer jobs. What the hell did they have to do with the weapons? Nothing. The captain was probably the only one in on the deal." John Richenhauer paused a moment. "This wasn't supposed to happen, Jim. The Brits were supposed interdict, not sink the motherfucker." He sighed audibly. "Christ, they been fightin' the Irish since before our revolution. As far as I'm concerned, the next load can go through. Fuck 'em."

"John, c'mon..." Richards said, a bit exasperated.

"Bullshit. I've spent my entire adult life trying to protect our country, our citizens. Killing those kids was unnecessary." Richenhauer looked away for a moment, and took a deep breath. "I'm not saying we won't cooperate. You want the weapons? Fine, I'll do whatever I can to help you secure them. But I ain't givin' the Brits shit."

"Okay, John." Richards said in a calm tone of voice. "Let's change the subject for a moment. My second concern is this: I was in here last night for dinner. I couldn't help but notice the foil sculptures. A blind man could figure out what's going on."

"Really?" Richenhauer raised his eyebrows in mock surprise.

"John, you're gonna get burned if you keep it up."

"Trust me Richards, I know what I'm doin'. Those little doggie bags contain dessert and nothing more."

"Give me a break." Richards said, sarcasm tingeing his voice.

John Richenhauer spread his arms wide. "Hey, go down stairs right now and check 'em out if you don't believe me. We make them up ahead of time."

"Look, John, nobody pulls up in a white limo with Little Miss Hot Slats in the back for a chocolate tort."

Richenhauer chuckled. "Believe it or not. That's exactly what they got. Of course, there are many forms of mercantile credit, and those are very expensive desserts."

Richards raised an eyebrow. "Where does Lansing fit into this?"

"He runs the boat, picks up the sea drops. Moves the stuff on shore and into the pipe. We spread it around through suppliers, using it to pitch one gang against another. Then let the DEA move in and clean up the mess afterwards. Keeps the stuff under control, limits the supply. Ain't no way to stop it, long as there's demand."

"And Brent Lansing knows you're still working for the agency?"

Richenhauer shook his head. "Hell no. He thinks I'm burnt out. Figures I'm just controlling the territory. Doesn't realize the DEA is hitting all around us 'cause we're calling the shots."

Jim Richards sighed, and looked away for a moment. A line from a song he'd once started and failed to ever finish, suddenly popped into his mind: *Nothing ever really changes, it just rearranges*. He turned his gaze back to Richenhauer. "I need to talk to Brent, get his cooperation. What you've just told me indicates the Brits have some kind of double back going. Most likely a manuscript to set one faction of the IRA against another."

John Richenhauer suddenly looked very interested. "How's that?"

Jim Richards explained, "Last week, three SAS operatives were gunned down south of Crescent City. They were tracking an IRA terrorist. A guy named Michael O'Donnegan. Elmo thinks he may be here in the Monterey to buy those weapons. Unless, of course, Lansing has already passed them on."

John Richenhauer shook his head. "He's still got 'em."

"When's the deal set to go down?" Richards asked.

John Richenhauer shook his head. "I don't know. Brent's waitin' for contact, expects they'll call any day now."

Jim Richards thought about the phone call they'd overheard earlier. "Will he cooperate with us?"

"If I tell him to."

"Please do. We'll contact him tonight, after his girlfriend goes to work. Or is she involved as well?"

John Richenhauer let out a short laugh. "Carla? She's a baby. Thinks she wants to be an artist in her spare time. She's a hot little number who swings both ways. Something Brent hasn't discovered yet."

"But you have?" Richards interjected sarcastically.

"Listen," Richenhauer responded. "When somebody new shows up. And one week later shacks up with my number one *receiver*, you bet I find out all there is to know, and then some." He stared at Jim Richards intently for a moment. "But forget about her, she's harmless. I'll give Brent a call; tell him to expect your visit... and to cooperate."

Jim Richards nodded his head once, "Good enough."

"One thing," Richenhauer lifted his index finger for emphasis. "I want you to take care of Lansing. He's okay. A little screwed up with his priorities right now. But I've got a lot of time invested in him. Make certain he gets immunity."

"That's not my call, John."

"Not good enough Richards. When the bust goes down, he's undercover for you, understood? Otherwise I'll pick up this phone, and he'll be gone faster than you can say John Richenhauer you're an asshole."

Jim Richards laughed at that one. "Okay, John. He's one of us if it comes down to it. But if all goes well, he won't have to surface."

Richenhauer shook his head, and smiled cynically. "Haven't you learned? It never *all goes well*. Just sometimes... it don't go quite so bad as others."

#

Bob Jensen picked up his cellular phone on the second ring. "This is Jensen."

"Richards here, I've got you on the computer at Del Monte Shopping Center. Which row you in?"

"C"

"Be there in five."

Jim Richards parked his car a few spaces away, then walked over to lean on Jensen's open window.

"Having fun yet?"

"A ball."

"Lansing get any other calls?"

"Just one," Jensen replied. "Around eleven this morning, from John Richenhauer as far as I could tell."

"How'd he react?"

"Asked if he should make travel plans. Guess John told him no. He ended the conversation agreeing to cooperate."

"Good," Richards nodded his head. "Maybe we can wrap this up in a couple of days."

Jensen nodded, looking off across the parking lot. "I hope so. L.B's got a big game coming up, Friday. Be nice if we could both make it." He looked up at Jim Richards and smiled. "He always asks about you, you know? Ever since you took him flying for his birthday. Still talks about it. Be thrilled if you made it to the game too."

"Absolutely, let's plan on it." Jim Richards scanned the parking lot, to the right, three rows over was a gray over white Tahoe, not far from Lansing's blue and white. Again, he paid no attention to it. Just one of many urban assault vehicles driven to the mall by harried housewives. He looked back at Jensen. "Were you able to get the building across from the Forge set up?"

Jensen shook his head. "No. The owner wasn't in. It's a candle shop, opens at noon."

"Okay, I'll take a shot at it myself." Richards said. "Let's meet at Lansing's house this evening, eighteen hundred. We'll go ahead and use the Presidio, just in case. Where's Frank?"

"Back at the hotel catching some shut eye." Jensen grinned. "I sent him over to Lansing's last night after we left your room."

Richards chuckled. "Breakin' him in easy, I see."

#

Carmel wasn't the same as in the days when his grandparents had brought him down for weekends. A special time, still not forgotten. The once sleepy little hamlet had long since been

*discovered*, and irretrievably turned into a retail mecca of boutiques and art galleries. Still, there was a natural tranquility about the place. The scent of Monterey pines lay heavy in the hazy autumn air as Jim Richards walked onto the patio of the Forge in the Forest. A young hostess escorted him to a table. He drank an iced tea, and checked out the seating arrangements, making certain there was a clear angle for the camera to take advantage of, then reserved a spot for the meeting.

He crossed the street, and entered the second floor candle shop via an outside stairway. He browsed among the scented candles and colored wax sculptures until other customers had left. "Excuse me," he said to a gray haired lady behind the counter. "Are you by chance the owner of this lovely shop?"

"Why yes I am," she replied, though she appeared to be a bit wary of Richards' insight. "How can I help you?"

"Can you keep a secret?" He asked.

"I think so, it depends on the secret." She replied.

"I'd like to rent your shop tomorrow morning for two or three hours, before you open."

"What in the world for?" She asked, most surprised.

"I'm with a film company; we're taping a segment of *The Meeting Place*."

"Oh my," she said, getting just a little excited. "You mean that TV show where they arrange for people to meet each other in romantic places, and then secretly film them?"

"Yes, exactly." Jim Richards replied with an ingratiating smile. "You must be a fan?"

"Oh yes. It's quite clever. Are you going to film a *meeting* tomorrow?"

"Well no," replied Richards. "We're just shooting for location and lighting. We want to make certain the angles will work." The woman looked disappointed. "But if all goes well, we'll be back again in three weeks for the actual filming." At that she brightened visibly.

#

Michael O'Donnegan watched from his place of concealment in the park across from Brent Lansing's house, as two white sedans pulled up. The sun had already set, and it was difficult to get a good look at the three men who climbed out of the vehicles. Two of them walked down the driveway to the back of the house, the other approached the front door.

#

Brent Lansing lounged on the sofa watching television, drinking a beer. He switched from channel to channel, looking for something interesting.

Jim Richards quietly climbed the steps to Lansing's front door, then knocked twice.

Lansing switched off the television, then looked out through the front window flipping on the porch light to get a better view of the man standing outside. He'd been forewarned by John Richenhauer to expect a visitor who looked like the person now on his porch; he opened the door with out further question.

"My name's Jim Richards."

"Come in. John told me to expect you."

Richards stepped past him into the foyer. As Lansing turned towards Richards he saw Bob Jensen and Frank Robinson coming into the living room from the rear of the house, they were amazingly quiet considering their size.

"Who are you?" Lansing asked. "And what the hell are you doing sneaking in my back door?"

"My apologies," Jim Richards said. "We were just being careful. We need to talk to you, and it may take awhile. If you don't mind we'd like you to come with us to a place where we'll be assured of privacy. If all goes well, you'll be back before Carla comes home. On the other, if our talk takes a little longer than expected there would be no need to involve her."

Lansing did not look happy, but he agreed to go along. Apparently Richenhauer had made it completely clear he should cooperate.

The two sedans drove along a paved road that climbed in wide turns up a steep hill through wind blown Cypress trees and tall Monterey pines. The evening fog grew thicker and wetter as they neared the top of the hill.

Michael O'Donnegan pulled up outside the gate that led onto the grounds of the Monterey Presidio. He wouldn't follow the two sedans onto military property that would be suicide. But, at least, a part of the penetration puzzle was solved. It made sense really, Harry Carroon's cut out, Brent Lansing, would not have known who the first buyers were, but he would've known where the first shipment was bound. And that would have been all the information he could've passed on to his control. But now, with Carroon out of the way, Lansing would meet the buyers himself, and this time both they *and* the shipment of arms would be taken.

O'Donnegan sighed. There was nothing to do but wait and watch. And maybe an opportunity would present itself to turn the tables. At the very least, there would eventually be an opportunity for revenge. And the thought of that, brought a moment of pleasure to Michael O'Donnegan.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Michael O'Donnegan eased out of the Tahoe, and stepped over to a near by tree to take a leak. It was a bitch standing surveillance alone. He looked at his watch. Two-thirty in the morning. He'd called James Flaherty to warn him about the set up, but the team had already left for Monterey. They wouldn't check in until after they'd acquired the weapons. And Flaherty had no way of reaching them, to call them off.

At six-thirty, O'Donnegan awoke suddenly. He'd nodded off around four in the morning, the deadly hour. The receiver he'd installed in Lansing's Yukon hadn't made so much as a peep, since Brent Lansing and Carla had returned from their shopping spree yesterday. He climbed stiffly out of the vehicle, then limped over to the same tree he'd used earlier in the morning. Fatigue was beginning to take its toll.

He pulled a pair of binoculars from the Tahoe's console, then peered between the rough barked trunks of pine trees to surveil Lansing's house. The sedan that had parked outside all night was gone. Replaced by a late model Thunderbird.

At ten-thirty A.M., the homemade locator came alive. Soon Brent Lansing's Yukon backed slowly out of the driveway. In the passenger's seat, a man with a closely trimmed beard. Michael O'Donnegan recognized him as the man he'd bumped into outside Risotto Ristorante on his first day in town. And whom he'd again seen outside The Sailors Inn. He should have known, there were no coincidences. Brent Lansing turned the corner, then headed up Alder street. The other sedan he'd seen the night before pulled up and parked, down the street from Lansing's door. So much for the passing thought of taking the girlfriend hostage.

Michael O'Donnegan waited a moment longer, to see if the watcher would tag along as a delayed back up. When this did not occur, he started his vehicle, then left his surveillance spot, exiting the park well beyond the viewing range of the watcher. He caught sight of Lansing's Yukon, as it turned right onto Forest Avenue.

#

A comely waitress dressed in well fitting khaki shorts that revealed tan, athletic legs greeted Brent Lansing and Jim Richards. She wore a sweatshirt with the Forge's logo embroidered on it: A friendly sea otter with a big smile and sunglasses, floating on its back inside a martini glass. The waitress escorted them to the table Jim Richards had reserved the day before.

"May I adjust the umbrella for you gentlemen?" She asked sweetly.

"Yes, thank you," replied Richards. "Would you tilt it to the right just a little. Oh that's perfect, now I can enjoy the tall pine trees and that quaint old building across the street. Ahh, the air is so crisp this morning"

"Yes it's a beautiful morning." She agreed. "May I bring you both coffee? Or a drink?"

"Coffee would be fine," Richards replied.

Lansing just nodded. He raised an eyebrow, and looked sideways at Jim Richards, as the waitress retreated to get their coffee. "The. quaint.. old. building across the street?"

"Video," Richards nodded towards the candle shop.

Lansing looked around casually, then up at the shop windows, and silently formed the words, *hi Mom*, with his lips, then smiled. He could not see Frank Robinson, or the camera. They were both obscured by sunlight reflecting off the windows.

Five minutes later, a man walked into the patio. He sat down at a table not more than five feet away. He wore a photographer's vest, dark glasses, and an Indiana Jones hat. When the waitress came to take his order, he wrote something on a cocktail napkin and motioned with his hands that he was deaf. The waitress nodded solicitously.

At five minutes after eleven, two men of medium height entered the patio area. One was in his early twenties. He wore dirty blue jeans over scuffed and ill cared for cowboy boots. A faded green T-shirt, and an old surplus Army fatigue jacket. His complexion was bad. His pale blue eyes had the vacant look of someone who'd spent most of their time scheming ways to avoid work.

The second man appeared to be around thirty-five. His brown eyes were set deep in his face, surrounded by dark circles of stress. Unlike the first, he appeared to be someone who worked incessantly, always hustling another way to make a dollar. He too wore blue jeans, though they were decidedly cleaner. A white T-shirt, and a dark blue windbreaker. His eyes flitted nervously about the patio; it was obvious he was looking for someone. Brent Lansing got up, walked over to where he stood.

"Are you looking for Jimmy's sister?"

"Yes, I am."

"My name's Brent. Will you join me for a cup of coffee?"

Lansing led them over to the table where Jim Richards was sitting. He got up as they approached, solicitously offering chairs. Pulling them around to make certain the new arrivals faced the camera.

When they were all seated, Brent Lansing began the conversation. "Who are you?"

"I'm Roger," said the older of the two. "And this is Johnny."

"Pleased to meet you," said Lansing. He shook hands with both in turn. Repulsed by the dead fish grip he received from Johnny.

"Harry said if anything went wrong, we were to contact you through the personals ad." Roger said in a matter of fact tone of voice.

"What were you expecting from Harry?" Brent asked.

"One hundred and sixty units. Plus six thousand beans. We fronted a hundred and thirty K. I've got a hundred more with us."

"Greens?"

"Of course."

As Roger and Lansing talked, Jim Richards observed Johnny from behind a pair of dark green aviators. Johnny's eyes wandered constantly, looking here and there like a monkey watching warily for predators.

Lansing continued the conversation. "We'll meet tonight in Watsonville, two-thirty in the morning. There's an industrial complex at the corner of Airport Road and El Gato Street, across from the airport. Pull into the driveway, and stop about half way down. Just the two of you, alone in one vehicle. I'll be watching, if I don't like what I see, the deal's off."

"Hey no problem, man," Roger said soothingly. "We just want the deal to close that's all."

"Good enough." Brent replied. "Two-thirty A.M.." He paused for a moment gazing from one to the other. Then said: "Now let's not all leave together, like a Girl Scout troop. It's been nice talkin' to you."



Johnny and Roger finished off their coffees, then left the Forge. Shortly after, the deaf mute finished his Irish coffee, and left as well. He turned down Mission Street heading in the same direction Johnny and Roger had gone. This caught Jim Richards' attention.

"Think he's with them?" Richards asked, nodding after the deaf mute.

Lansing looked around, then shrugged. "Possible, but I doubt it. Probably just coincidental. These guys have dealt with Harry before. I recognized them as soon as they walked in. I was Harry's back up on the last deal. There's just the two of them." He paused a moment, to finish off his coffee. "So where do we go from here?" Lansing asked.

"Your place, 'til it's time to deliver the goods. No offense, but with that IRA bloke possibly in the area, I want to make certain there are no slips 'tween the cup and lips." Jim Richards replied.

Lansing nodded his head, the corner of his mouth turned downward. "Hope you like beer and football."

#

Bob Jensen and Frank Robinson sat stake out, at the warehouse. Just to make certain the buyers didn't try to find it on their own, and save themselves a hundred grand.

Michael O'Donnegan watched from behind a thick hedge of wild Blackberries. He considered making contact with James Flaherty's buyers, then setting up a plan to take the weapons. But gave up on the idea as soon as he saw the two of them enter the Forge. A couple of bozos. What the hell was Flaherty thinkin'. Christ what a fuck up.

When it grew dark, Bob Jensen moved into the warehouse that held the weapons. Michael O'Donnegan gave thought to slipping up behind the watcher in the car, and taking him out with the silenced .45 autoloader. And then neutralizing the one in the warehouse. Taking the weapons. But he figured it unlikely he'd make it into the warehouse, unnoticed by the watcher inside. Undoubtedly, he and his partner were in communication, although O'Donnegan had heard no crackle of transceivers in the still night air.

In the end Michael O'Donnegan elected to climb a maintenance ladder bolted to the backside of the building across from the warehouse. From there he'd have a clear field of fire, should that option present itself. Again he nixed the idea almost as soon as he thought of it, as the area was populated just enough to assure the noise of a fire fight would bring law enforcement to the scene before he could load the weapons into his vehicle, and escape. He seethed in frustration, nothing to do but watch and wait.

At around eight in the evening Frank Robinson used his cell phone to order pizza. Then he and Bob Jensen sat outside space D, to share the meal.

#

The night air was cold and damp, coastal fog had settled in by the time Roger and Johnny pulled into the driveway in an old Chevrolet van. Brent Lansing watched their arrival from between two pallets, loaded with overstock cartons destined for the manufacturer in space C. As the van came to a stop abeam his place of concealment, Lansing stepped around the pallets then opened the passenger's door without warning. The interior light flashed on, and Roger nearly toppled out onto the ground. Brent pushed him upright in the seat.

"Jesus, you scared the shit out of me." Roger said.

Lansing pressed a snub nose thirty-eight against his neck, then looked back into the interior of the van. It was empty except for a single suitcase. "Sorry. Just being careful." Lansing

offered in a matter of fact tone of voice. "Pull around, and back up to that door over there to my right. I'll open it up for you."

He slammed the van's door shut, then stepped back into the shadows. Jim Richards remained out of sight behind a pallet of cartons.

Directed by Lansing, Johnny carefully backed the van halfway into the warehouse. He left the front protruding beyond the entrance. Roger jumped out, then came around to the rear of the van, as Brent Lansing turned on the interior lights. Meanwhile, Johnny stood out front. His hand resting on the butt of a 357 magnum, stuffed into the waistband of his jeans.

The small office, built inside the warehouse, made an L behind which Bob Jensen stood with his back against the wall. A nine-millimeter Beretta 92 autoloader in his right hand.

The weapons were in wooden crates stacked in the center of the floor. Roger opened the doors of the van, then spun the suitcase inside the van around, popping the clasps and lifting the lid. Inside the case was one hundred thousand dollars in one hundred dollar bills. As he stepped away from the van, his windbreaker came open revealing a Browning autoloader carried in an inverted shoulder holster.

Brent Lansing walked over and looked at the fresh crisp money, the thirty-eight still held openly in his hand but pointed down towards the ground. The atmosphere in the warehouse was tense. Lansing motioned to the crates with his left hand, and Roger began opening them up one at a time, using a small crow bar. Inside each were twenty UZI micro-submachine guns, greased and sealed in plastic. Also a thousand rounds of nine-millimeter parabellum ammunition. He cracked the lids verifying the contents, while Brent Lansing counted the money.

"You satisfied?" Lansing asked as he finished his count.

"Looks good to me." Roger replied.

"Give Johnny a holler, and get him in here to give you a hand loading." Lansing said, rubbing his lower back. "I strained my back trying to lift the goddamn things by myself, when I stashed them here."

Roger nodded and called to Johnny. Lansing slid the suitcase over against the office wall. As soon as Johnny came inside, Jim Richards and Frank Robinson came up silently to the entrance.

Bob Jensen waited patiently as the two men loaded the weapons into the van. He peeked around the corner cautiously, as they lifted the last of the crates and slid it into place.

"It's been nice doing business with you," Roger said. "Anytime you got some more of these to sell, just run the ad. We can always move 'em out for you."

He and Lansing shook hands. And then Lansing reached towards Johnny who responded automatically to the ritual parting. Just as their hands met, Jensen stepped around the corner and crouched into a combat position, the Beretta held out front in a two handed grip. "Freeze." He commanded.

Johnny obeyed only because he had no choice. He tried to yank his hand away from Brent's grip without success. But Roger, whose body was already leaning in the direction of escape as he closed the rear doors to the van, bolted for the driveway. He ran full tilt into Frank Robinson, who decked him with a forearm block. He slammed down onto the concrete floor, with a hollow thud. Then lay still, out cold. Frank Robinson reached down casually, and picked up the unconscious man by his belt, supporting his upper body with a handful of windbreaker.

As Roger hit the concrete floor, Jim Richards moved quickly behind Brent Lansing, making certain the barrel of his forty-five was actually aimed over the top of his head. Bob

Jensen closed on Johnny, shoving the Beretta up under his chin, while at the same time pulling the .357 out of his waistband. Only then did Brent Lansing release his grip on Johnny's hand.

Bob Jensen frisked Johnny for weapons. But just as he was about to slide his hand along the inside of Johnny's left forearm, Frank Robinson walked around the back of the van carrying Roger. He inadvertently jostled Bob Jensen, as he lowered the unconscious man to the floor at Lansing's feet.

At that moment Roger moaned, then let out a long rumbling fart as he stirred to consciousness. All five men looked down at Roger in surprise, and amusement. And Johnny took the opportunity to loose the dagger he'd strapped to his left arm under the sleeve of his jacket. As quick and deadly as a striking snake, his arm arched cruelly upward towards Jim Richards mid-section, the razor sharp stiletto driven with all the strength he could muster.

Jim Richards' brain registered the threat almost in slow motion, yet his body had no time to respond. He watched as the tip of the blade began to penetrate the soft leather jacket he wore. Deja Vu he thought, but he'd been younger then and quicker. His stomach muscles tightened anticipating the searing pain to come. With almost hypnotic fascination he saw the blade suddenly cease its fatal inward movement, then withdraw, blocked and thrust aside by Lansing's counter blow.

The frozen moment of time melted and flowed into reality, as Jim Richards blocked Lansing's right hand before it could crush Johnny's larynx. Jim Richards pressed Brent Lansing against the wall, halting the momentum of adrenaline that had driven the life saving action. "Don't kill him, Brent. He has information we need."

Frank Robinson pulled Johnny away, then slammed him hard to the ground, knocking the wind from his lungs. He gasped, flopping back and forth like a fish out of water.

For a few seconds Brent Lansing, Jim Richards, Bob Jensen and Frank Robinson stood staring at one another, and alternately at the two dirt bags on the ground. They took several deep breaths, regaining control.

Jim Richards broke the silence. "All right. Let's get these two assholes out of here." He dropped to one knee, and roughly cuffed Johnny's hands behind his back, using plastic lock ties he brought for the occasion. Bob Jensen did the same with Roger. Then they propped them both up against the office wall, their legs thrust out in front.

"Bob, take the van." Jim Richards directed. "Move the weapons to the warehouse in San Jose. Then transport these two bags of dirt to THI Central for interrogation."

"Understood," replied Jensen, obviously embarrassed by the deadly error he'd made, missing the knife when he'd frisked Johnny.

#

Michael O'Donnegan shook his head in utter frustration. The fracas he'd witnessed from his spot on the roof had lasted less than thirty seconds. But still it would have been enough time to have killed or wounded them all, had he been set-up a little closer. Fatigue had dulled his intuition, slowed his thinking. But now adrenaline was driving him forward. He scurried on all fours to the backside of the roof, and dropped down the steel maintenance ladder to the ground below. He'd follow the van. It would be a large target, so he could stay well back. Perhaps another opportunity would present itself.

Back in James Flaherty's Tahoe, he scrounged through his meager supply of dwindling provisions for the diet pills he'd bought three nights before. There were six left, he took them all. The stimulants they contained would keep him going for a while longer.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Frank Robinson took the lead, as he and Bob Jensen pulled out of the driveway onto Airport Boulevard. They headed east into the foothills behind the town of Watsonville. Rather than use Highway 1, they'd decided to take Summit Road north along the spine of the Santa Cruz mountains, connecting to Highway 17, then east again through Los Gatos, and on into San Jose.

Summit Road was used primarily by local residents, and would lower the risk of detection by the California Highway Patrol. There was no telling where, or how, the two gunrunners acquired the van. THI wouldn't want law enforcement involved. This was a private affair, as far as the intelligence community was concerned.

In the town of Freedom, Bob Jensen noticed a pair of headlights closing swiftly from behind. It seemed odd. Another traveler along the main street of a sleepy village at three-thirty in the morning? The headlights turned down a side street. Jensen unconsciously shrugged his shoulders, probably a local coming home late after a long weekend.

#

Michael O'Donnegan grumbled to himself, as he turned off the main thoroughfare. He'd not intended to catch up to the two vehicles so soon. Where the hell was he anyway? He pulled over to the curb, consulted a map of the area. Clearly his targets were headed for Summit Road, the only route shown that connected to Highway 17. He'd overheard someone giving orders, directing the others to take the weapons into San Jose. O'Donnegan traced the route of Summit Road with his fingertip, a cruel smile gradually formed along his thin lips. His finger stopped at the side bar adjacent to the route: "Steep and Dangerous Curves".

#

Jim Richards parked outside an all night Denny's. The morning air cool and still under a low ceiling of coastal stratus. Moisture dripped from the branches of pine trees over hanging the roof of the twenty-four hour restaurant. The scent of pine overlaid by the sea, hung in the air.

He and Lansing walked together into the restaurant. They took a booth next to the windows at the back of the dining room. Ordered breakfast from a waitress who looked as weary as Jim Richards felt.

Richards looked at Brent Lansing for a long moment. "You seem wide awake, Brent. Must be normal working hours for you."

Lansing nodded his head once. "You get used to it. Right now I'm running on force of habit. My body thinks it's time to go to work. But I'd say I'm one step up on you... *you* look whipped."

Jim Richards chuckled. "Yeah. But not as bad as I'd look if you hadn't stopped that knife. Thank you. I owe you one."

Brent Lansing shrugged his shoulders. "No problem. I didn't trust that little bastard from the moment we met. Bob Jensen missed Johnny's shank on his frisk, easy to do with all the confusion. A simple mistake." Lansing shook his head slowly. "I should know, I've made enough of my own. Usually, Harry was around to save my butt."

Jim Richards nodded sympathetically; he could see that Lansing genuinely missed his friend. "What were you and Harry planning to do with the money?"

Brent Lansing turned his head, looked out the window at the empty parking lot. "There's a dive shop for sale over on Kauai, in the town of Poipu." He returned his gaze to Richards.

"How much?"

"Including the boat we intended to buy, about three hundred grand. The shop already has a twenty-five foot reef diver, but we wanted something capable of inter-island trips. Do the Napali coast; scoot over to Niihau, that sort of thing."

"And the equity in the Sally's Ride, not enough?"

Brent Lansing shrugged his shoulders. "Harry needed to contribute his share. Most of his earnings as Captain of the St. Emilion went to support his ex-wife and their three kids."

Jim Richards nodded. "So he cooked up the gun deal. But never mentioned who the buyers were? I mean clearly the two assholes we nailed tonight, weren't the final receivers."

Lansing shook his head. "Like I said at our meeting the other night, I was just the cut out. Harry wanted me insulated in case anything went wrong."

Jim Richards pursed his lips. "And he figured you wouldn't roll over on him, if you got nailed with the goods after the drop?"

Brent Lansing replied: "My exposure was small. Possession of automatic weapons."

"It's a three year hit." Richards remarked. "But you were willing to chance it? Even though it wasn't you who needed the money?"

Brent Lansing smiled ironically, tilted his head to one side. "It's all chance anyway. You go out there to fish, get broad sided by a rogue wave, and that's that. Only difference, you die broke."

They're breakfasts arrived, they ate in silence. They were both famished, an inevitable side effect of any operation. Jim Richards pushed his plate to one side, took a sip of coffee. He looked across the table at Brent Lansing. "Somehow, I don't see you running a little ol' dive shop on an island surrounded by two thousand miles of ocean. Little tame for a guy like you. Don't you think?"

"Seemed like a plan at the time." Lansing replied.

Jim Richards smiled. "I mean let's face it, you'd be goofy in six months. You're an operative. That's never gonna change."

Brent Lansing sat back and looked at Jim Richards skeptically. "I feel a pitch coming. What's on your mind, Richards?"

Jim Richards turned his palms upward on the table. "The war on terrorism isn't over, may never be over. I could use a guy with your instincts on my team."

Brent Lansing raised an eyebrow. "Well, the *war* may never be over, and I'd tend to agree with that. But sooner or later the bleeding hearts back in D.C. are gonna want to spend the money on something else. Then I'm back on the street again."

"We don't report to Congress, and we're not dependent on their funding."

Lansing turned his head away, gazed out the window. Jim Richards could see his reflection in the glass, almost see the wheels turning.

Brent Lansing returned his gaze to Richards. "I'll need some time to think about it. Tonight was a rush, for sure. Made me feel decent again. But I'm not sure I want to re-enlist, so to speak."

Jim Richards nodded his head. "I understand. Take some time to think it over." He reached into his pocket, withdrew a business card that had only his name and a telephone number on it. He handed it to Brent.

#

The sun was just turning the early morning sky gunmetal gray, as they drove into Pacific Grove. Jim Richards pulled his Thunderbird up to the curb outside Lansing's house.

"The offer stands, if you want to accept it," Richards said. "But if you decide to get back into the weapons business, there'll be no deals the next time around. Understood?"

Lansing nodded his head. "I definitely get the picture. As for your offer? It's intriguing. But you know as well as I, if I get busted on one of your gigs, no one's gonna know me."

Jim Richards shook his head. "THI doesn't play it that way. We take care of our own, long as you hold up your end of the deal."

Brent Lansing smiled cynically. "That's what the Navy told me."

#

Headlights appeared in Bob Jensen's rear view mirror for a second time. He reached up and flicked the mirror off its dimmer position, tried to make out the size and shape of the vehicle rapidly closing from behind. It was overtaking them at an extremely high rate of speed. Soon it resolved into the outline of a pick-up truck, or perhaps a sport utility vehicle. Then it was upon him. A Chevrolet Tahoe. He braced for the impact as it roared up within five or six feet of his rear bumper, its headlights on full bright completely obscuring the features of the driver. At the last possible moment, it swerved around and passed. Held the on coming lane until it cleared Frank Robinson up ahead. Then roared off down the straight away and into the next turn, tires squealing in protest as it whipped out of sight.

"What the hell was that all about?" Frank Robinson asked over their transceiver.

"Ah, some cowboy in a hurry to die." Jensen replied. "We'll probably find him piled up against a redwood tree. Crying for mama, as his brains ooze out all over the dash."

"Yeah, ten-four on that one." Robinson came back. "Damn, I'm beat. I'll be glad to dump these two scumbags, then get some shuteye. How you doin'?"

"All right." Jensen said. "Good talkin' to you though. Engine noise inside this van's gettin' monotonous as hell."

"Well then," laughed Robinson. "Did I ever tell you 'bout the time we were baby sittin' the Gipper?"

#

Michael O'Donnegan roared along Summit Road, trying to put as much distance as possible between himself and his prey, while he kept one eye out for the right spot. Twenty minutes later, midway between Mount Madonna and Highway 17, he found what he was looking for.

At the bottom of a steep hill, following a straight run of about a thousand feet, the road took a sharp turn to the left then switched back to the right, plunging through a stand of California redwoods. The east side of the road dropped off into a gully, tall redwood trees marched up the nearly sheer side. The west side abutted a steep bank, with a turn out at the entry to the second curve. O'Donnegan side drifted into the turn out, dust billowed around the Tahoe as he slid to a stop. He kicked the transmission into reverse and backed the vehicle into position facing in the direction from which his targets would come.

Slamming the selector lever into four-wheel drive, he pulled the vehicle onto the embankment running the front wheels up a steep angle of dirt. He then flipped on six Halogen road lights, affixed to the light bar that ran across the top of the cabin. The Halogens lit the approach to his position momentarily, before he switched them off again.

He waited patiently, at first. Then with increasing impatience as the time for his targets to arrive seemed to become excessive. Had they turned off the road? Or back tracked? He was just about to give up, and go look for them when he heard two vehicles approaching.

#

Bob Jensen eased his foot down onto the brake pedal making certain he did not put too much weight on the front wheels. The old van was squirrely going down hill. He began to creep up on Frank Robinson, as gravity increased his downhill speed.

Robinson glanced in his rear view mirror; saw the van inching closer to his tail. He held steady, knowing his partner would back off as soon as he could do so safely. Suddenly, Frank Robinson's eyes were dazzled by high intensity light. Jesus, he thought, we're gonna head on. He whipped the wheel to the right, trying avoid what he perceived to be a head-on collision with the dazzling lights. The abrupt maneuver sent him straight into the side of a two hundred and fifty foot redwood tree.

The impact was overwhelming. Yet somehow his mind seemed to perceive the events in slow motion. He watched in detached fascination as his hands performed the seemingly impossible feat of bending the steering wheel flush against the sides of the steering column. And then he wondered why the seat belts weren't working, as the steering column surged towards his chest. He did not realize the front of the sedan he was driving had accorded as if it were made of nothing more than aluminum foil.

He felt no pain at first. Even as the steering column was driven completely through his upper torso. But then, stark terror and unbearable pain registered on his consciousness. He let out a terrible scream of agony, just as the final darkness over took him.

#

Bob Jensen watched in slow motion disbelief, as Frank Robinson's car careened to the right. His higher angle of vision from within the van clearly delineated the Tahoe parked off to the left side of the road, its off-road light bar ablaze.

Desperately, Bob Jensen tried to avoid colliding with his partner's rear quarter panel. He slammed the van's brakes on so hard; the brake pedal went all the way to the floor. Instantly, the weight of the van transferred forward, causing the four wheel Cracker Jacks box to snowplow into the rear quadrant of Robinson's sedan.

The rear window of the sedan shattered, as its rear end twisted nearly forty degrees left of center. Metal fenders, and steel under pinnings, groaned and pranged in protest. Inside the sedan, the van's impact caused Johnny, who'd already been slammed forward against the back of the front seat, to bounce backwards. The upper half of his body propelled through the shattered rear window.

The van tilted forward onto its front fender. All four wheels left the ground as it went vertical. Then rotated on its front fender, one hundred and eighty degrees. It slammed down across the upper half of Johnny's prone body. Crushing him, screaming, into the buckled metal of the sedan's trunk.

All eight cases of submachine guns, which were riding untethered on the floor in the back of the van, dropped forward. Several slammed into the back of Bob Jensen's seat. The seat's attachment points severed. Jensen, too, dropped forward. His face contorted in terror, smashed against the front windshield.

The van toppled over, onto its port side. Bounced once. Another crate of Uzi's spun forward, crashing through the windshield. And nearly tearing Bob Jensen's head from his

shoulders, on its way out . His only perception of the fatal impact was a tremendous cranial pressure suddenly relieved, as his world went blank.

Michael O'Donnegan watched in awe. The van, totally out of control, slid its final forty-five feet down the hill, completely on its side. Sparks flew from the groaning steel that screeched and popped, as it scraped along the rough asphalt roadway. It rolled once more, coming to rest on its roof. It port side against a stately redwood tree.

O'Donnegan doused the high intensity light bar. He jumped from the Tahoe, the silenced forty-five autoloader held out in combat firing position. Though he truly doubted anyone could have survived the horrific collision he'd contrived.

The air smelled of burnt rubber and spent gasoline. Escaping fluids hissed and sizzled over hot engine parts. Cast iron creaked and groaned, as gravity exerted its inevitable force in directions never intended by their designer.

He checked the sedan first. Frank Robinson was obviously history. As was the mess on the trunk. Shining a flashlight between the front and rear seats, he saw Roger. His watery eyes already glazing over. As O'Donnegan shined the flashlight onto his face, he expired, drowned in his own blood and saliva.

Michael O'Donnegan moved quickly to the stricken van. The rear doors were thrown open by the impact. Climbing forward, he confirmed Bob Jensen was dead as well. Six of the crates were still intact, held together by metal bands. These he quickly transferred to the Tahoe. But it took him another five minutes to gather most of the weapons scattered inside the van from the two broken crates. Several weapons had tumbled out of the van, and fallen into the gully. At least a thousand rounds of ammunition were strewn beyond immediate recovery.

Ten minutes later, painfully aware a Sheriff's patrol might pass at any moment, Michael O'Donnegan drove carefully onto Highway 17.

#

The telephone jostled Jim Richards from a deep sleep. He fumbled for the receiver, his hand searching back and forth across the nightstand, unable to immediately zero in on the sound. Finally, bumping the receiver off its cradle, he managed to get it to his ear. "This is Richards," his speech heavily slurred.

"Jim, wake up! This is Ty...Are you awake?"

"Okay...Okay...What time is it?"

"Eight-thirty."

Jim Richards struggled to sharpen up, he took a deep breath. "All right, I'm awake. Sorry it's been a long night."

"Frank Robinson and Bob Jensen are dead."

Jim Richards' heart klanged. He sat completely upright in bed. Then began to shake all over, as adrenaline surged through his system. "Jesus, Ty...What happened?"

"They piled up at the bottom of a turn on Summit Road. We got a call from the Sheriff's department about seven-thirty this morning."

"Summit Road? What the hell were they doing there?"

"Good question. Thought you might know the answer."

"What about their passengers, and the cargo?"

"Everyone's history. The cargo mostly gone. Where's Brent Lansing?"

"At home, I dropped him off around zero-five-thirty. When did the accident occur?"



"Not sure." Harding replied. "Best estimate is sometime after four AM. I'm on my way to the accident scene with a damage control team, as we speak."

"Who else is in on this?" Richards asked.

"Just the county Sheriff so far. But the evidence found at the scene is causing some questions. I've got a call in to Elmo for a manuscript."

Jim Richards took a deep breath, calming himself down. The beat of his heart gradually returned to normal. "What do you want me to do?"

"Make certain Brent Lansing is at home, and that he stays there. Keep him under surveillance until we arrive. I want to talk to him."

#

Ty Harding, along with Jill Hemmings from THI's psychological assessment unit, and two THI field operatives, arrived at Brent Lansing's house at around eleven-thirty in the morning. Lansing opened the front door, as Jim Richards, Harding and Jill Hemmings approached.

"Jim?" His face showed surprise. Then concern. "What's happened?" Brent Lansing held the front door open to let them in. Carla stood in the dining room, a dishtowel in her hand.

Ty Harding did not immediately respond. He first introduced himself, and Jill Hemmings. Then said: "Bob Jensen and Frank Robinson were killed in a car accident this morning."

Brent Lansing face blanched. "Oh Jesus, no." He led them farther into the living room. Then turned and looked at Ty Harding for a long moment. He seemed to have an epiphany. "You think I set them up, don't you?"

"Did you?" Harding asked.

"No. Of course not. I wouldn't double cross you, or endanger your people." He looked from Harding to Jim Richards for support.

Harding glanced over at Jim Richards, then back to Lansing. "Clearly, someone knew of your meeting last night. A back-up member of the buy team, perhaps?"

Lansing nodded his head in agreement. "Possibly." He then glanced momentarily over at Carla, as if he'd only then realized she was in the room, listening to all that was being said. He returned his gaze to Harding. "Leave her out of this. She has no idea of what's going on here."

Harding shook his head. "I'm sorry. She's involved now. *We* don't know what's going on here. You both may be the killer's next target. At the very least, we need to put you some place safe until we can sort everything out."

#

Michael O'Donnegan took the Hamilton Boulevard exit from Highway 101, just south of the town of Novato in Marin County. He found a gas station. Refueled. Then called James Flaherty. "Mr. Flaherty? This is the delivery service. I have those items you ordered from the Monterey area."

Flaherty's voice sounded strained at the other end of the line. "Were you able to pick up the entire order?"

"No, only part of it. It was a real hassle."

"I see. Well, take it up to the country. You know the way. I'll make sure you're expected."

#

Jim Richards sat alone on the sofa in his hotel room. He glanced at his watch, eighteen hundred. He felt depressed. Ty Harding and the others had flown back to the bay area. But he'd insisted on staying to continue the investigation. He thought about Bob Jensen's wife and children. Then about the last time they'd all been together, and the times before that. He thought

about the other night, when Bob Jensen had walked into the room with the "new" guy, Frank Robinson. They both seemed so much larger than life then.

Suddenly unbidden, his thoughts leapt to the photograph of Michael O'Donnegan. The one they'd brought to the room that first night. Immediately, Jim Richards jumped from the sofa to retrieve the black and white eight by tens he'd tossed into his brief case. Jensen and Robinson had been on the look out for a Michael O'Donnegan. And had presumed he'd be one of the buyers. When it became was obvious he wasn't, they'd let the matter slide. A deadly error. Michael O'Donnegan certainly had the training necessary to pull off the kind ambush that had occurred on Summit Road. Could he have been watching them all along?

Jim Richards laid the photos out on the coffee table. He looked at them carefully. Again, Michael O'Donnegan seemed familiar. Jim Richards stared at the photos. He did not try to remember anything in particular. He just let his subconscious roam at will through the living archives of his mind. The room was quiet. Nothing interrupted the passive memory process. Suddenly, it dawned on him. Outside Ricotta Ristorante. They'd bumped into each other. And of course, Michael O'Donnegan would have recognized him later if he'd been watching Brent Lansing's house. Perhaps from behind a tree? In the park across from the old Victorian that Brent Lansing had restored.

Jim Richards thought for a moment longer. Would someone at that restaurant remember Michael O'Donnegan?

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jim Richards eased onto a bar stool at the end of Ricotta Ristorante's blue tiled bar. A young barmaid with shoulder length hair leaned forward and slid a fresh cocktail napkin across to him. She tilted her head to one side, wordlessly asking for his order.

"Glenlivet Eighteen, neat," he said with a smile.

When she returned with his drink, Jim Richards showed her an official looking ID, with the seal of the United States embossed in gold. Beneath the seal in black ink were the words: Department of State. He asked to speak with the manager. The barmaid nodded her head once, then turned away looking across the bar towards the reservations podium. After a moment or so a man standing at the podium looked in her direction, she motioned him over.

"Good evening My name is Robert." He said as he extended his hand towards Jim Richards. "How can I help you?"

Richards noted the sincere grip, then said: "I'm looking for a man who may have had lunch here last Friday." He handed Robert the photo of Michael O'Donnegan.

The manager glanced at it for a moment, or two. "I wasn't on duty Friday afternoon. However, our cocktail waitress, Yvonne, was hostessing. Let me show this photograph to her."

Robert left, then returned shortly thereafter with an attractive girl in her early twenties, short blonde hair. Jim Richards recognized her as the hostess at lunch on Friday.

"Mr. Richards, this is Yvonne." Robert said. "She does remember the man in the photograph."

Yvonne nodded her head in agreement. "He sat in the corner, by the window. Came in a little ahead of the lunch crowd. In fact, if I recall correctly, he left just before I seated you. You could've passed each other at the door."

Jim Richards smiled. "Do you recall if he paid for his meal with cash, or by credit card?"

Yvonne thought for a moment. "I can't remember. But Gino served his table on Friday, he may recall."

Jim Richards nodded, then looked at Robert. "Is Gino here tonight?"

"Yes. I'll ask him to come over as soon as he can break away from his tables." Robert walked off, and Richards thanked Yvonne. He was just starting on his second drink, when Gino came over and introduced himself. Jim Richards showed him the photo.

Gino looked at it carefully, then nodded his head. "I served this gentleman the seafood combination at table twelve."

"Do you by any chance recall if he paid for his meal with cash, or credit card?" Richards asked.

"He used a credit card. Gold MasterCard, as I recall."

Jim Richards tilted his head to one side, and smiled. "You've a good memory."

"Thank you." Gino replied. "A good memory is a pre-requisite for a waiter, your tips depend upon it. However, I remember this particular customer because I was concerned about the validity of the credit card he was using."

Jim Richards raised his eyebrows. "Why's that?"

"He had a very distinct Irish accent, but the name on the card was not Irish."

"Do you remember the name?"

Gino nodded his head once. "Smith...Donald Smith."

"And *was* there a problem with the card?"

The waiter shook his head. "None what so ever."

Jim Richards smiled. "Thank you, you've been very helpful."

Gino nodded and turned to walk away, then stopped and turned back towards Richards.

"It was stolen wasn't it?"

"Possibly, we're just doing a routine check on Mr. Smith's itinerary."

Gino nodded, but looked skeptical of Richards' answer.

"Listen Gino, if Mr. Smith happens to come in again, please call me at this number."

Richards handed Gino one of his cryptic business cards. "How's the abalone tonight?"

Gino slipped Richards' card into his shirt pocket. "It's excellent. Shall I find you a table?"

"Please... in your section, of course."

#

"Care for a Cognac?" John Richenhauer asked.

Jim Richards shook his head. "No thanks, John."

They were standing at the bar in the Sailor's Inn. John Richenhauer motioned with a swing of his head towards the stairs that led up to his office.

"So how can I help you?" Richenhauer asked as he eased down into his old desk chair, once they'd reached his office. "You seem to be carrying the world on your shoulders tonight."

"I may have a lead on that IRA shooter." His voice bore no enthusiasm.

John Richenhauer frowned. "Is Brent all right? Cooperated with you, and so forth?"

"Yes he's fine." Richards replied, his voice flat. "We have him and Carla stashed at a safe house in the bay area, 'til we get things straightened out."

Richenhauer frowned. "What's the problem, Jim. You're holdin' something back. It's kinda hard for me to help you, if I don't know the whole story."

Jim Richards took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "Bob Jensen and Frank Robinson, my back up team, were killed in an ambush last night out on Summit Road."

"Oh no..." Richenhauer shook his head sadly. "What happened?"

"We don't know for sure. It looks like Michael O'Donnegan may have been in the area after all. According to Langley it fits his M.O."

John Richenhauer sighed, staring thoughtfully at Jim Richards. Then said: "Don't blame yourself. You can't cover all the bases, all the time."

Richards glanced down at the floor for a moment, then back at John Richenhauer. "Last Friday, I literally bumped into Michael O'Donnegan as I was going into Ricotta. Unfortunately, I didn't have the intel on him at the time. Anyway, one of your waiters remembered serving him. Even remembered the name on the credit card he used."

"Really." Richenhauer's eyes twinkled. "Which waiter?"

"Gino."

John Richenhauer grinned. "Gino? Sharp kid. Been thinking 'bout recruiting him, as a matter of fact." Richenhauer thought for a moment, then swiveled his chair around, and began to root through a cardboard box on the floor behind his desk. Tossing stacks of rubber banded receipt bundles to the side, all the while muttering to himself as he went through names and dates. "Here we go Friday, October Eighteenth. Right where it's supposed to be. What name's O'Donnegan using?"

"Donald Smith."

"Smith? Right. Real original..." Richenhauer flipped through the stack of receipts. "Here we go. Had the ol' Seafood Combination, house special." John tossed the merchant draft across to Jim Richards. "You'll want to keep that."

"For awhile."

"It's all yours."

"Thank you, John." Richards got up from his chair, started for the door.

"Hey, Richards." Richenhauer said in a serious tone. "You find that asshole in this area, you call me for back up. Don't go trying to cowboy this thing alone. I've got guys down stairs that took on the Colombian ELN leftists, and kicked ass long before they started waitin' tables, and drivin' Porches." He paused for a breath. "Michael O'Donnegan's bad news. Seen his type before. He's probably got some kind of revenge thing goin'. Doesn't give a fuck for his own life, or anyone else's. You watch yourself."

"I hear you, John. And thanks. But, if I'm not mistaken, he's long gone. He has what he came for, now he's headed for home."

#

Jim Richards used the satellite link in his Thunderbird to call Ty Harding at home. He'd already requested THI central to down load a transactions report on Donald Smith's credit card via their MasterCard data link. "Take a look at this." Richards keyed in the code to link up with Harding's home terminal. "You on screen?"

"Yes."

Jim Richards activated the cursor and scrolled. "We've got motel charges. Ricotta Ristorante. A clothing store, a hairdresser, an electronics retailer, and an auto parts store. All in Monterey. And all in the last three days.

"I'll check the hair dresser first thing tomorrow, he's probably changed his appearance. Sue Bristol can research the real Donald Smith, if he exists. Maybe there's a connection between he and O'Donnegan. Card's legitimate, wasn't reported stolen."

"Worth a shot." Harding agreed. "When are you coming back to the bay area?"

"Soon as I run out these leads." Richards replied. "Hopefully, tomorrow night."

#

Sue Bristol greeted Jim Richards warmly as he came into the office Tuesday morning. Carl was out in the field, running down additional leads, a result of their records search on Donald Smith. "Morning Jim. Nice to have you back, safe and sound. Shame about Frank and Bob.

Jim Richards nodded his head sadly. "I'm having a tough time reconciling it."

Jensen's funeral was that afternoon. He'd stopped by to see Linda and the kids, on his way home yesterday evening. His gut was still in a knot. He felt responsible. One reason why, he preferred to work alone. He crossed the reception area to his office. Sue followed him, took a chair across the desk from Richards.

"Do we have anything on Donald Smith?" Richards asked.

"Other than the fact he's dead, you mean?" Sue replied.

"Dead?"

"Killed in a car accident three weeks ago."

"And it took this long for the credit card company to be notified?"

Sue nodded her head. "Yep. I notified them myself this morning. Seems Donald Smith was a bachelor. No close relationships. No family in the area. No one to tidy things up when he died."

Jim Richards frowned. "No will? No executor?"

"Nope."

"Who handled his personal effects?"

Sue smiled, glad they were in sync. "Carl's checking that out right now."

Jim Richards thought for a moment. "The video tape that Frank made of our meeting in Carmel. Was it recovered?"

Sue nodded her head. "Yes. Would you like to see it?"

"Please. How soon can we get it?" He replied.

Sue arose from the chair, stepped towards the doorway. "I'll give THI Central a call; see if it can be data linked right away."

#

Jim Richards busied himself with the mail, and reports that had come in while he was in Monterey. After several minutes, Sue came back into his office.

"I've got the video cued up. Want to take a look?"

Richards got up from his chair, and walked into the conference room. He was amazed at the change, as the electronics installations had all been completed while he was away. Against the far wall, a component rack spanned the width of the room. Mounted on it were monitors and keyboards. Receivers, amplifiers, speakers, and editing equipment. Drives, printers.

LEDs winked blue, green, and red. Power sources hummed. Cooling fans whirled softly, permeating the room with low-level white sound. On the left hand wall, a relief map of the United States. On the right, the world. Pin lights delineated the locations of THI offices, or subsidiaries.

Jim Richards let out a low whistle. "What is all this stuff?"

"A mini command center, tied into THI Central." Sue replied.

Richards smiled. "Let me see the video."

Sue pressed a macro key, the thirty-two inch center monitor came alive. Richards watched, as he and Lansing strolled into the Forge. Then took seats at a table in the left hand corner of the patio. As he continued to watch, the deaf-mute photographer crossed in front of the camera, and sat down at the table near the patio's circular fire pit. Jim Richards noted he'd not waited for a hostess to seat him, but rather chose the table himself.

"Wait a minute, Sue. Back the video up would you please?" Richard asked.

She tapped the keyboard, reversed the tape up and froze the picture.

"Can you center on that guy?"

She tapped the keys again. Then moved in closer, using the computer's program to resolve the image.

"Jesus," exclaimed Richards. "That's Michael O'Donnegan."

"You're kidding?" Sue said with surprise.

"No, I'm not. The guy was sitting right next to us. Look at his clothes. They're all on the transaction list we obtained from MasterCard."

Sue nodded. "You're right. Wait a second, I'll bring up the composite we did from the hair dresser and motel manager's descriptions." She tapped more keys, another screen came on, a color composite of Michael O'Donnegan with short black hair."

"Sue, can you improve the composite, working off the video?" Richards asked.

Using the keyboard, she split the original screen then brought the composite image over to the right hand side of the screen. She tapped commands, and set the program to auto compare and resolve. The software brought the two images into compatible resolution, so that size and

contrast factors would not affect the comparison. The screen was then split again and the original eight by ten photo added to the collage. Assigning binary values and interpolating for depth in a three dimensional field, the program compared and overlaid the images, producing a new image of Michael O'Donnegan. Sue then entered more commands. The program now produced images of O'Donnegan with and without sunglasses, and provided both face on, and profile views.

"Perfect," said Richards. "Now let's generate gradual hair lightening back to his natural color, some lengthening as well."

Sue tapped away at the keyboard, soon the images appeared in one frame sequences depicting Michael O'Donnegan as his hair gradually grew back to it prior length.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The guesthouse at James Flaherty's vineyard was the bottling building when the old winery still produced wine. Flaherty's wife, Julia, remodeled the stone building, turning it into elegant guest quarters. On the ground floor was a great room, dominated by a gray river rock fireplace that rose floor to ceiling. There was a kitchen, bath, and bedroom on the same floor. A master bedroom and bath took up the entire second floor.

James Flaherty and Michael O'Donnegan sat in front of the fireplace, sipping Irish mists. "I'm afraid you're rapidly wearing out your welcome here in America, Michael." Flaherty said without malice.

O'Donnegan chuckled. "Aye, you be a tellin' the truth Jimmy. And I'm sorely sorry to be so troublesome to you, but *soom* times there's just *nu* other way." O'Donnegan responded, his Irish accent thickening with the consumption of alcohol.

Flaherty shrugged his shoulders. "Well what's done is done. Except, now you've given the authorities another reason to hunt you. The sooner you get yourself away from here, the better. Every cop in the country has your photo by now." He paused for a moment, thinking. "Why don't you let me handle the shipping. You get yourself home through Mexico, they'll not look for you on the southern route. When you arrive in Belfast, the goods will be waiting."

O'Donnegan shook his head. "No Jimmy, I'm gonna see this one through myself. And I'll need your help a bit longer. I need to keep the Tahoe."

Flaherty nodded his head once. "That's not a problem, but I'm concerned your plan is flawed."

Michael O'Donnegan smiled confidently. "Not at all. The last thing they'll expect is for me to take my bloody time about leavin'. Sure they'll be lookin' for me, but their concentration is short. With everyone tasked to track down al Qaeda sleeper cells, they'll throw my case in the dustbin after a couple of weeks. Then I'll walk right out of here. Don't you worry 'bout me, Jimmy, this is child's play."

#

Jim Richards and Sue Bristol returned to the office around seven in the evening to meet with Carl Fortune. "This is what I've got so far," Carl began. "Donald Smith was involved in a head on collision as he drove through Golden Gate Park approximately two weeks ago. He was transported by ambulance to Parkwest Hospital, and pronounced dead shortly after arrival. The next day his body was taken to the San Francisco morgue pending notification of next of kin."

"Were you able to get a list of his personal effects?" Jim Richards asked.

"Yes. Neither hospital or Coroner documentation shows a Gold MasterCard."

"So either the card was snatched at the scene, or lost earlier." Sue interjected.

"So it would seem," Carl agreed. "However, I obtained a copy of the police report. The investigating officer placed Smith's keys, wallet, pen, and money clip with sixty-dollars into a zip lock bag. Tagged it, and gave it to Parkwest Admittance to retain for the victim as he was initially expected to live. The police report also lists the contents of the wallet: Driver's license, Social Security card, and various credit cards, including a Gold MasterCard."

Jim Richards nodded his head. "So the paramedics didn't handle the personal effects at all?"



"No. Only the police, and Parkwest Admittance. The clerk on duty that night did not process the personal effects, because Donald Smith was not actually admitted for care; he'd already died by the time she checked with Emergency for his status. She locked his effects in a file cabinet, and left a note for the morning shift to contact the county morgue. Then ship Smith's personal effects over, unless a family member came in to claim them first"

Sue frowned. "So either the night clerk, or one of the day clerks, pulled the card."

"Yes." Carl agreed.

"Can we set up a sting?" Sue asked.

Carl nodded his head once. "We can have personal effects delivered to the same night clerk under similar circumstances. Then recover them first thing in the morning as next of kin."

Jim Richards shook his head. "If anything turns up missing, we'd have to go through a formal inquiry. We won't find out what we need to know soon enough to do us any good. Our chances of nailing Michael O'Donnegan stateside are slim to none as it is, without any additional wasted time."

"Video," Carl proposed. "Assuming the hospital will cooperate. We can install a camera over Admittance, broadcast live."

"Perfect," Richards agreed. "Then surveil the *taker*, and possibly ID the buyer."

"And if that doesn't work, show the tape and cut a deal." Sue suggested.

"Maybe," Richards replied skeptically. "But let's hope we won't need that option. How soon can we set it up, Carl?"

"Assuming our suspects' work schedules coincide, we can be in place tomorrow night."

#

Michael O'Donnegan and Zack, a mechanic Flaherty recommended, grunted and sweated like two wrestlers locked in martial embrace, as they removed the forward transfer case and drive shaft of the Chevrolet Tahoe. With concentrated effort they lowered the heavy front drive mechanism to the ground, then dragged the component out from under the four-wheel drive vehicle.

Zack removed the cluster gear, and axle. He took all the measurements he needed, then left the vineyard. He returned three hours later with welding equipment, and parts acquired from local salvage yards.

Using the original case and shaft, he custom built a standard front axle. Which to all appearances looked like a front-end drive unit. It was nine-thirty in the evening when he and O'Donnegan finally completed reinstalling the front unit. They were both exhausted.

"Well that be a day's work," Zack said with a long sigh.

"No shit. Me arse is draggin'" O'Donnegan agreed.

"You wanna get a beer or somethin'?"

Michael O'Donnegan shook his head. "Appreciate the thought, Zack. But I'm just gonna grab me a sandwich and hit the rack. Fix you a bite?"

"No thanks, man. Gotta head back to town anyway. I'll see you in the morning. The heaviest stuff is behind us. Tomorrow, we'll get to work on the interior."

#

It took the whole day to remove the rear seat, and fabricate a hollow pedestal out of sheet aluminum reinforced with tubular bracing. Then build a hollow aluminum seat back. With skill and artistry, Zack upholstered the rear seat with foam rubber and cloth. When he was through, only a very experienced eye would discern any changes to the original interior.

#

The blue and white Gulfstream, owned and operated by ExecuJet West, a subsidiary of THI, founded by Ty Harding's younger brother Matt, taxied to a stop outside Butler Aviation at the northwest end of San Francisco International Airport. Elmo Jefferson descended the narrow steps with care; they were not designed for a man of his size and girth. He looked across the tarmac to where Jim Richards waited, leaning against a limousine with blacked out windows.

Jefferson had a shock of pure white hair, cut a little long. A full white, closely trimmed beard. In fact, he looked a lot like Santa Claus but that was where the similarity ended.

Jim Richards strode forward his hand outstretched in greeting.

Elmo responded in kind. "Hello, Jim. Thank you for meeting me. It's been a long time. I see you're still keeping yourself as fit as ever." Elmo patted his expansive belly. "Fraid I can't say the same for myself."

They walked together to the limo, where the rear door was held open for Jefferson by another THI consultant. The drive took less than twenty-five minutes.

They met in Harding's corner office.

"I was saddened to learn of Bob Jensen and Frank Robinson's passing. They were good people." Elmo shook his head sadly. "What in the world possessed them to use Summit Road?"

"God knows," Harding replied. "Tired. Trying to maintain low visibility. Maybe afraid of being followed, figured the old route was too lightly traveled to allow a watcher to stay buried in traffic. Or maybe they just thought it would be shorter."

"Bob Jensen was very experienced. Never thought he'd buy it this way." Elmo said.

"No one did," Richards added.

"How long you out for?" Harding asked.

"Just today. A few loose ends I have to tie up, better done in person. Seems we have a problem. The Bureau wants intel on the Michael O'Donnegan case. One of their agents stationed in Britain picked up the scent from MI-5. Fortunately, so far, they haven't caught on to the weapons connection. Sooner or later that's going to become self-evident. The Bureau's thorough if nothing else. Once they zero in on the St. Emilion, it's all over. Except for the finger pointing and name calling that is. That's why I'm out here. Want to make certain Arnold Batiste, and John Richenhauer, shut down their operations.

"I also want to make certain the St. Emilion gets repaired and moved out of here, before the Bureau slams an impound on her."

"What about Michael O'Donnegan?" Harding asked.

"He's got to be stopped." Elmo's face flushed. "Who the hell does he think he is, dragging his puissant violence over here? I want all investigative data sent directly to me from this point forward. Use a secure F.O. connection. I'll cross reference every piece of intelligence we get 'til that little cocksucker shows up." Elmo let out a long sigh. "Naturally, I'll do my best to keep the Bureau misinformed and off track until we can resolve the issue."

Jefferson got up from his chair, then stepped over to one of the windows overlooking the San Francisco Bay. Ty Harding and Jim Richards exchanged glances, but said nothing. It was rare to see Elmo in such a mood. Two of their own had been lost for no good reason. *Wasted* was the only term that applied.

Jefferson turned around, silhouetted by the sunlight beyond the window. "Tell me about this Brent Lansing fellow. Is he clean? Will he come aboard?"

"He's clean," replied Harding. "But he's not on board. If the Bureau gets a line on him and starts hammering away, there's no guarantee he won't roll over especially if he's facing five to ten for drugs. Might cop a plea to the arms in exchange for immunity on the sanctioned stuff. Of course, if they get that far with their investigation the ball game's over for us anyway."

"I suppose you're right about that," Jefferson agreed. "Where's Lansing now?"

"We just released him. Interviewed his live-in, Carla Simpson. Ran a full PSI on both of them, no negative results. She knows Lansing smuggles contraband, marijuana is what she thinks it is. Her generation, that's no big deal."

Elmo nodded his head once. "All right, keep them both under surveillance. Are the bugs still hot?"

Harding smiled. "Yes."

"Fine, that'll do for the time being. If the Bureau gets too close, we'll deal with the problem then. In the meantime, keep up your recruiting efforts. Sweeten the pot if you have to, there must be something we can offer he'll go for. I'll talk to John Richenhauer." Jefferson sighed. "I'd rather have Brent Lansing on board and under *our* control, than a loose cannon we have to deal with later."

"Understood," Harding agreed.

Elmo turned both palms upwards. "Well gentlemen, I must be moving on. Keep me posted and do your best to find that IRA asshole. The search area is the world, as far as I'm concerned. He's taken two of ours; I don't give a shit where he holes up. No sanctuary, no zones." He paused and looked directly at Jim Richards. "If you get him in your sights, terminate the bastard."

#

Arnold Batiste gazed out the window of his living room at a gray overcast sky; rain was predicted for early evening. The weather fit his mood. He'd just found out, Roger, his restaurant manager, had been killed in an automobile accident near Santa Cruz.

The doorbell rang, he glanced at his watch. Probably Elmo Jefferson. He rose from the sofa. Hell of a time for a visit. He took a deep breath, then opened the front door with a smile. "Hello, Elmo. Come on in." Batiste said gregariously. Holding the door open wide, stepping back to let him enter. "How was the trip?"

"Just fine, Arnold." They shook hands. "How are things with you?"

"Not bad, all things considered."

They walked into the living room.

"Can I pour you a drink?"

"Thank you," replied Elmo as he settled into a club chair.

Batiste stepped over to the bar. "Scotch and water?"

"That'll be fine."

He poured a scotch, and splashed in a little bottled spring water. Then poured himself a Tanguerey and tonic. He handed Jefferson his drink, they clinked glasses. Batiste took a solid pull at his highball, then sat down at the far end of the sofa.

"Now tell me. What brought you all the way from Washington D.C.? Surely not the desire to see an old campaigner like me?"

Elmo smiled. "As a matter of fact, that's exactly why I came. There are times when only a face to face meeting will suffice."

Batiste dropped his jovial countenance. "What's up?"

"Things are starting to go to shit for us, Arnold. I need your one hundred percent cooperation. The current administration has no idea of what we've been doing. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Of course."

"I'm not screwing around here. The Federal Drug Task Force is moving to shut down all domestic operations, sooner or later they'll hit yours. If that happens, you're out in the cold. There'll be nothing I can do for you."

Batiste smiled disarmingly. "Elmo, I'm into wines..."

"Bullshit. I've known about your unsanctioned enterprise for a long time. And I've chosen to ignore it. You've been shipping cocaine to this country for years. Small quantities, granted. But profitable nevertheless." He took a pull at his drink. "So don't give me any crap about being in the wine business. We've known each other too long for that." He paused for a moment. "Now I want you to flush your inventory immediately. Take the loss, and get the hell out while you can."

Batiste passed his hand down over his face. "Look, Elmo, I'm moving the stuff as quickly as I can. Soon as it's paid for, I'm outta here."

Elmo's face turned a bright red. "Am I talking to the goddamn wall, or what? Flush it."

Batiste shook his head. "I can't... it's in the pipe."

"Oh Christ." Jefferson sighed, and shook his head. Then raised his left hand, palm outward. "All right. So be it. But don't fuck up. If you do, we've never heard of you." He stared hard at Batiste for several moments "Next point. What the hell was Roger Evans doing buying guns for the IRA?"

"What? Who? What are you talking about?"

Jefferson stared at him in silence. Then said: "He was picked up last Monday in a *sting* operation down in Watsonville. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately from your perspective, the agents transporting him were involved in a hell of a car wreck, everyone was killed. Including your boy, Roger. As I'm sure you are aware by now."

Batiste stared in disbelief. "Elmo I have no idea what you're talking about. I know Evans was killed. I...I just found out today. But as far as weapons receipt..."

"You playing footsie with the IRA?"

"No."

Elmo raised an eyebrow. "You sure? Your old man sure as hell was, remember?"

"That was fifty years ago."

"Maybe it runs in the family."

Batiste shook his head emphatically. "I'm tellin' you the truth. This is really a shock to me." He stared out the window for a moment or two. "But it does explain Harry's connection. When Ty Harding asked me about the weapons transported on my boat, I was totally taken aback. Surprised at Harry's involvement, but now I see the connection." He turned his gaze back to Elmo. "Roger was a gun nut. He'd get involved in something like this just to pick up another weapon for his collection." Batiste shook his head derisively. "He was always talking about conspiracies to take away our right to bear arms. Christ, he must've owned a dozen assault weapons. Mac 10s, C.A.R.s, you name it. Always lookin' for a select fire UZI to add to his arsenal. One of those three shot a pull models."

Elmo raised an eyebrow. "Any idea who *his* buyer was?"

"No. But I can check around."

"Please do. If something turns up let me know immediately."

"Of course." Arnold agreed contritely.

"Okay. Last of all, what's the status on your boat?"

"We started repairs last week. Probably six weeks before she's ready."

Elmo shook his head. "Not good enough. Step up the pace. Get her seaworthy and out of here. Sail it to Australia, you can finish the creature comforts there."

Batiste frowned. "What's going on Elmo. It can't be unraveling that fast."

"It may. If anyone starts nosing around, torch it. I mean it."

"Jesus, Elmo. I love that boat." Batiste shook his head and looked out the window, then spoke softly, almost to himself. "Christ, we piss away more hardware than we use." Batiste stared down at the floor, and rubbed the back of his neck. "Okay, you have my word. If things get shaky, I'll torch her myself."

Jefferson nodded, then finished his drink in one swallow. He stood up extending his hand to Batiste. "I've got to go. Another meeting, another mess to clear up. Take care of yourself, Arnold. This isn't like the good old days. Every move we make, someone or something sees. Then some hot shot starts putting the pieces together. Before you know it there's a leak, and the press is ripping us a new asshole."

#

Michael O'Donnegan was beginning to grow tired of the work required to retro fit the Tahoe. Today, Zack was building a false floor under the rear storage deck, where the remaining UZIs, that wouldn't fit inside the rear seat pedestal, would be placed. Finally, the original carpeting would be reinstalled.

O'Donnegan stepped outside to take a break. He'd spent the morning unbolting and removing the swing out spare tire rack, the over cab Halogens, and every other unneeded accessory to lower unsprung weight. Now he was working on removing the air conditioning system. Once all of the unnecessary accessories were removed, and new aluminum wheels installed, the vehicle would nearly equal the manufacturer's empty weight while loaded with weapons and ammo.

#

Elmo Jefferson buckled his seat belt as the Gulfstream broke out of the gray overcast on final approach to the Monterey Airport. Rain had begun to fall as they climbed through the clouds out of San Francisco, it looked as if it would soon be falling here as well. The executive jet set down solidly, then taxied over to transient parking. John Richenhauer waited patiently, standing next to his black BMW.

Elmo gazed through the small porthole window at Richenhauer, and thought about the missions they'd run together in the early days of the Southeast Asian conflict. One mission always seemed to stand out from all the others. Joey, his oldest son, had gone down in an Air America C-130, hit by ground fire over Cambodia. He and John had gone in with a team of Special Forces volunteers to attempt a rescue. They'd found Joey dead in the aircraft when they finally reached it, the rest of the crew captured by the Khmer Rouge, taken to a small village nearby. They'd had no trouble tracking them.

The Cambodian communists tortured the crew for intelligence, one lay dead on the ground, a result of their failed attempts to extract information he probably didn't have anyway.

Jefferson established a free fire position on the summit of a nearby knoll and methodically took out the camp's defenses, laying in rounds to cover the Spec 4s as they extracted the two

remaining crewmembers. Even though he knew he was being flanked, he continued to lay in cover fire. Death seemed preferable to facing his wife, and his own remaining days without his son. But John, with one of the Spec 4s out flanked the advancing Cambos, and cut them down with well-aimed M-14 rifle fire.

#

They shook hands when he reached the tarmac. Jefferson put an arm around John's shoulders as they walked towards the car. "You're putting on some weight my boy," chuckled Elmo. "Pretty soon you're gonna look like me."

#

At the restaurant, they settled into a private dining room. An antique oak table was set with fine china and crystal, placed on immaculate white linen. Three waiters, dressed in short white jackets over evening-dress pants, with red cummerbunds, served them.

John Richenhauer had personally supervised the preparation of their meal. Appetizers of alligator, fresh sea urchins, and raw oysters. A lobster bisque. Entrees of roast duckling, rotisserie lamb, and baked baby Coho salmon. With servings of steamed vegetables, a dab of saffron rice. California and French wines by the glass were poured according to each entree, with time between to clear the palate, to chat about times gone by.

At last, after a dessert of bananas Foster, they each lit an excellent Cuban cigar, and sipped a thimble of Drambuie. Elmo Jefferson got down to the business he'd traversed over three thousand miles to discuss. "How close are you to shutting down your operation?" Elmo asked.

"Very close." John replied. "There are two more loads coming in overland next week. I've got three hundred kilos set for dealers in the valley, then we sting 'em, and I'm out of here."

Elmo shook his head slowly. "Forget it. They're gonna have to skate for now. Take some cash, go to Switzerland. Stash it away over there for a rainy day. I want you out of here and in Europe by next Wednesday."

John Richenhauer scowled. "For how long?"

"Til I tell you it's safe to come back. Probably six to eight weeks."

Richenhauer puffed on his cigar, then blew out a slow cloud of blue smoke. "I'll have to flush the inbound loads."

"Do it."

He tapped an ash into the crystal ashtray at his side. "Okay, it's done."

"Do you need any help here at the restaurant?" Jefferson asked.

Richenhauer shook his head. "No, I've got a loyal crew. Nearly the entire Colombian team, as you know. Anyway, they're used to my taking sabbaticals now and then, when the boredom gets to be too much." Richenhauer smiled at his own sarcasm.

"Good, then I won't worry about *you* at least."

"There is one favor you can do for me." Richenhauer said.

"Name it."

"Take care of Brent Lansing. Harding wants me to keep him occupied, I can't do that in Switzerland.

"We'll watch him, he'll be fine."

John Richenhauer gazed at Jefferson for several long moments. Then said, "Elmo, we've been friends a long time. I like the kid, and his girlfriend too. I don't want *anything* to happen to them."

Elmo returned Richenhauer's steady gaze. "Then I suggest, if you have any influence at all, convince him to accept our offer. It's best for all concerned."

John Richenhauer nodded his head slowly. "Easier said than done."

"Then maybe it's time to enlighten him. Sooner, or later, the Bureau's gonna come knocking."

Richenhauer scowled. "I'll see what I can do."

Jefferson drained his glass, then pushed his heavy body up out of the chair. "I've drunk too much, and probably talked too much. But it was good seeing you again, John. There aren't too many people in my life who go back far enough. You do what I say now, and take care. Times have changed, you screw up, and I can't help you."

#

John Richenhauer stood in the light rain and watched the G-II lift off. Seconds later it disappeared into an overcast sky that reflected the glow of the airport lights below.

Inside the aircraft, Elmo Jefferson immediately fell into a sound sleep. In the morning, he'd be back at his desk at Langley, pulling another string in the endless dance of puppets.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

A steady rain rattled onto the roof of the mobile communications center. Now and then, a larger drop would fall from the tall eucalyptus tree overhead, adding a solid thunk to an otherwise monotonous drumming. Inside the van, Jim Richards and Carl Fortune sat before a bank of video monitors. Their earphones crackled with the banter of conversation going on within the Admittance area of Parkwest Hospital.

The hospital was especially busy tonight, the season's first storm had made the streets of San Francisco dangerously slick. Every twenty minutes, or so, another ambulance would arrive carrying a rain related injury.

The mobile unit Jim Richards and Carl Fortune occupied, was painted to resemble an adult diaper delivery van. Carl had positioned it earlier that evening. He and Jim Richards each took turns monitoring the video feed, its remote fiber optic lens and microphone concealed in the acoustical tile ceiling of the Admittance office.

The decoy of personal effects had been delivered at eleven-thirty PM or 23:30 as Jim Richards thought of time, by the same police officer who'd delivered the personal effects that had belonged to Donald Smith. Keeping everything as routine as possible was the most effective way to make certain Admittance personnel remained at ease.

The graveyard clerk had come on at 23:00, and would work until 06:00 the following morning. She'd then be replaced by the first of the day crew. At 07:00 another day clerk would arrive. At 08:00, yet another.

Jim Richards suspected the night clerk, or perhaps the first day clerk, as likely candidates. They were the ones alone in Admittance, with the best opportunity to *lift* a credit card.

The night clerk was an attractive black woman of about thirty. She appeared to be exceptionally tired, or perhaps that was her chronic condition. All through the first two hours of her shift, her children telephoned her to ask questions, or just make contact. Finally at 01:00, her husband called, and they had a tense conversation about paying a past due bill.

Jim Richards stepped out of the van to take a breather, and a short walk. The rain had ceased, there was a clean, crisp scent to the early morning air. To his surprise, when he reentered the van, a volunteer worker wearing the tightest pink Nurse's Aide outfit he'd ever seen had replaced the night clerk. The clear outline of her panties showed through the short skirt that hugged her tight round buttocks. Her breasts came to a full, deep cleavage revealed by a partially unzipped top. "Whoa," Richards said, as he pulled a chair up next to Carl. "What *have* we here?"

"I don't know, but it definitely woke me up." Carl replied.

"Where's the night clerk?"

"Gone to dinner" Carl answered. "Or, whatever the hell you call it at this time of the morning."

"No action?"

Carl shook his head. "Nope. Took the decoy bag, made a notation in her log, then placed it in the file cabinet. But hey, look on the bright side, now we've got Little Miss Pink 'n Tight to entertain us."

They both watched the monitor intently, making lewd and lascivious comments at every possible opportunity. A way of passing time. After a while the volunteer looked over the log,



glanced up and down the hallway, then opened the file cabinet. She reached in and extracted the bag of personal effects.

"Here we go." Richards said, a broad grin on his face.

As they watched intently, she opened the bag, extracted the MasterCard, slipped it into her pocket, and then returned the bag to the file drawer. It was done so casually, it was clear this was her normal routine.

Jim Richards said: "I'm going inside to get her name, then I'll stake out the employee parking lot."

He slipped out of the van, then sprinted across the street. Entering the hospital through the emergency entrance. Inside, things were hectic. Patients were waiting in chairs out in the lobby. In the E room, all the beds were occupied. Jim Richards turned left and walked down the hall towards Admittance. Just as he turned the corner, he ran into the Nurse's Aide coming out the door to the Admittance office. Begging her pardon and smiling, his eyes dropped to her chest to read her ID badge, Miss Robbins.

She smiled coquettishly and ducked under his arm, then headed off down another hall. Jim Richards walked quickly out the front entrance, then jogged across the street to his car. He jumped in, circled the block. He parked near the exit from the employee parking lot.

After an hour's wait, a dark blue Camaro came out. For a brief moment, the light of a street lamp illuminated the driver, and Jim Richards caught the profile of Miss Robbins.

Jim Richards spoke to Carl Fortune on his hands free cellular phone. "I'm heading west on Lincoln Avenue, tailing a blue Camaro. License number 1LUST987. Have you got me on the locator?"

"Yes, you just turned right on Nineteenth Avenue."

"Good, keep track of my progress. It's difficult reading street signs in the dark at this speed, my target thinks she's at Laguna Seca."

"Like I said, Pink 'n Tight." Carl replied.

Richards accelerated through the park, keeping the Camaro's lights in sight.

"Can you run that plate for me?"

"Will do."

"Damn, she just ran a yellow, hell of night to rush reds." Richards slowed at the stoplight. He saw no oncoming traffic, so proceeded through, increasing his speed to get the taillights back into view again. At Funston, Miss Robbins turned left, then headed west for eight blocks, then north. Jim Richards turned his headlights off just before making the next turn. The Camaro was a block and a half ahead.

At Geary Boulevard the blue Camaro turned west, Richards relit his lights. By the time he reached the next intersection, the light had gone red, and this time there was too much traffic even at three in the morning, to chance. When he finally turned west, the Camaro was nowhere to be seen.

"I've lost her, Carl. Have you got that plate?"

"No, the system's gone down in Sacramento. I can't access DMV."

"Okay, keep trying. I'm going to cruise Geary, see if I get lucky."

He continued west on Geary as far as Sea Cliff Avenue, then began cutting back and forth along the intersecting streets on either side of the thoroughfare. At 04:15, he gave up the hunt.

"It's no use Carl, she's gone. Probably realized I was on her tail. You may as well go home. We'll pick this up tomorrow. We can always get her address from the hospital."

"I've got to turn this van in," Carl replied. "I'll just grab a couple hours sleep at the garage, then hit the phones in the morning when I wake up. I'll call you as soon as I have something."

#

Jim Richards reached for the clamoring telephone more in an effort to stop the racket than to answer its incessant ring. His mouth felt like burnt cotton. Adrenaline pumped through his body, stirred by the rude awakening. His hand shook as he brought the receiver to his ear.

"This is Carl. You awake?"

"I am now." Richards replied just above a mumble. "What time is it?"

"Ten."

"Feels a *lot* earlier. What have you got for me?"

"I spoke with my contact at the hospital. Pink 'n Tight's full name is Candy Robbins. She works two or three nights a week. We just got lucky. It varies, but she was working the night Donald Smith was brought in. Also they've had several complaints about personal belongings disappearing. Watches, jewelry, credit cards and so forth. There's a frequency of loss on the days she's on duty. Not one hundred percent, but more than coincidental." Carl paused a moment. "I checked out the address listed for her by the hospital. She moved six months ago. No one at her old place knows where. Also, I finally got through on the Camaro's plate. It's registered to Edward K. Levine."

Jim Richards took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, gradually waking up his sluggish brain. "Stolen too?"

"No. At least not according to the DMV. Anyway, Levine shows his address as 561 Front Street."

Richards frowned. "That's in the financial district. No residences there."

"Exactly, it's the address of O'Toole's."

Jim Richards' eyebrows went up. "That old Irish pub, where they throw the big blow out for St. Patty every year?"

"That's the one. I gave them a call, asked for Eddy Levine. They told me he wouldn't be in 'til four-thirty this afternoon. So having nothing better to do, I decided to check out Mr. O'Toole. Found out he don't own it no more. Been dead about fifty years. It's now owned by James Flaherty."

Carl Fortune paused for several seconds, Jim Richards could hear papers being shuffled in the background.

"I ran a financial on Flaherty. Turns out he owns a lot of property. Couple bars, three restaurants, a vineyard, and several houses. Including one out in the avenues, not far from where you lost Little Miss Pink 'n Tight."

Jim Richards swung his feet over the side of the bed, sat up on the edge. "Good work, Carl."

"Wait. I'm not through yet. I ran a financial on Eddy Levine as well. It shows his current address as 321 Thirty-Second Avenue. One of Flaherty's houses, and about three blocks northwest of the point you lost Candy Robbins."

Richards smiled. "Excellent."

"Thank you." Carl said matter of factly. "Shall I bug the place, sit on it, what?"

Jim Richards thought for a moment. "First put the information you've just given me on the system. *Eyes Only* to Elmo Jefferson. Add this query: Do we have anything on James Flaherty. Any IRA sympathies?"

"Then get some rest. You've done a whole day's work already this morning. Meet me at the office, three this afternoon."

"Will do."

Jim Richards hung up the phone, took another deep breath and rubbed his face. He remembered how excited he'd get working a case when he was Carl's age. He stood up slowly, then walked into the bathroom. His joints crackled loudly, nitrogen bubbles in the synovial fluid of his joints popping in response to his first steps of the day. It didn't matter how hard he worked out, there was no stopping the inevitable aging process. And mornings like this only reminded him of that fact.

#

Carl Fortune tried to nap. Couldn't. His mind kept running over the facts of the case. Looking for options. He got up, went out to the pool at his apartment complex and lay in the sun. Still couldn't stop thinking about the case. Even watching his favorite brunette didn't interrupt his thoughts for long. At two o'clock he was back at the office.

"Anything in from Langley?" He asked Sue Bristol, as he walked in the door to their reception area.

Sue shook her head. "Nothing on Flaherty, other than he was a suspect in an FBI investigation five years ago, no charges were brought."

"What kind of investigation?"

Sue looked through her notes. "Trans-shipment of computer parts to Ireland."

Carl raised an eyebrow. "Interesting."

He walked into the command center, sat down at the console, and then cued up the videotape of Jim Richards and Brent Lansing's meeting in Carmel. Setting the replay to slow motion, he watched as Michael O'Donnegan walked by Jim Richards' table, turned the corner, then walked down the street. In the past, they'd always shut the tape off once O'Donnegan went off camera, but this time Carl let it run, carefully watching the background.

Suddenly, O'Donnegan reappeared crossing the street, three or four minutes after he left the restaurant. He walked directly to a gray and white Chevrolet Tahoe, with off road Halogens across the top of the cab.

Carl froze the display, then used the computer program to zoom in and clarify the picture, pixel by pixel. The Tahoe appeared no older than 1998. He could not identify the exact year, nor see the entire license plate.

He downloaded and printed a hard copy, then let the tape run until Frank Robinson finally shut down the camera.

He sat for a while staring at the hardcopy photo, suddenly an idea came to him. Rolling his chair down to another keyboard, he accessed an automobile inventory program used by the THI service department at the Easy Eddy dealership. From this database he located the VIN numbers that identified Chevrolet Tahoes. Then used macro commands to auto load all Tahoe VINs.

Next he accessed the Department of Motor Vehicles registration database. He set the computer on a search mode to match color codes to registrants. Then finally, hand scrolled through all gray and white Tahoe's registered in California since 1998. Two thirds of the way through the list he found on a 1998 Tahoe registered to James Flaherty. Bingo, thought Carl, there are no coincidences.

#

Michael O'Donnegan felt restless, anxious to get going, but still there was work to be done on the Tahoe. Right now Zack was putting the finishing touches on a dark gray paint job. It would take at least a day to dry.

Zack had managed to scrounge up several different license plates from states other than California. These O'Donnegan would use, and switch as needed. Since the registration stickers were not current, Zack had hand painted reasonable facsimiles in the appropriate places. Then artistically muddled each plate to conceal his handy work. At highway speeds they'd pass police inspection.

After Zack left, Michael O'Donnegan took the vineyard's old stake side lorry into town. Time to change his appearance once again. This time his hair was cut even closer than before. He then went shopping for a do it yourself hair bleach kit, a cowboy hat, and a sheep's skin jacket.

#

The Stag's Leap valley, as Flaherty's place was known locally, was in deep shadow when Michael O'Donnegan drove the gravel road through Flaherty's vineyards. When he drove up to the guesthouse he found his benefactor's Mercedes parked out back.

Grabbing a bag of groceries off the front seat, he entered the guesthouse through the rear door. Then set the groceries down on the kitchen table, and went into the living room. James Flaherty was just starting a fire in the stone fireplace.

"Hello, Jimmy. I was hoping you'd be here." O'Donnegan said.

"I thought you would be. Zack tells me the Tahoe's ready to go."

O'Donnegan nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, he did an excellent job. And I paid him exactly what we agreed."

"Good. I was afraid you might whack him too," laughed Flaherty.

"Now, Jimmy, that's not a nice thing to say. I only kill the enemy, not those who help."

"Only kidding, Michael." Flaherty stepped over to the bar to pour a couple of Bushnell's. "I've set up contacts for you along the route you gave me." He handed O'Donnegan a drink, then spread a map of the United States out on the dining table.

"Your first day of travel will take you as far as Elko, Nevada." Flaherty pointed to the town on the map. "A god forsaken place, but you can safely take a hotel there. The drive's about ten hours.

"The next leg is over more dessert, through Salt Lake City and into Rawlins, Wyoming. We've got *friends* there who support the cause. Call this number." He handed O'Donnegan a small spiral bound notebook with several telephone numbers written in it. He pointed to one of them. "Ask for Sam. Use your first name only."

"Plan on spending a couple of nights. I'll get word to you, if there's trouble. These people will take care of you. They have their own share of problems, and know how to avoid the authorities. If there is a problem, and you don't hear from me, you can trust them. However, don't let them know you have weapons. Assault weapons have become the new medium of exchange. In some places, more coveted than gold."

O'Donnegan nodded, a gleam in his eye. The adventure of evading the hunt was beginning to take hold.

Flaherty continued. "Now the only problem I can foresee, is winter coming on fast this year. You may have snow before you reach New York. If that happens you can jog south, then come up the east coast. All of our interstates are good, and if you obey the speed limits you won't have any problem."

Flaherty opened his brief case and gave O'Donnegan a new ID, credit card, and another fifteen hundred dollars in cash. "The credit card's brand new, poor blighter died in a car wreck, no family. There'll be no report to the credit company, so you'll have no problem with it. In fact, we've matched your other IDs to it. Hell even the first name's convenient."

O'Donnegan looked at the card: Michael Stevens.

"Thank you Jimmy. We couldn't do without you."

Flaherty nodded. "I owe it to my dear old grandma, who brought me here when I was just a wee one, after the bloody British bastards killed me grandpa and ma. Now you just get those weapons back to the Emerald Isle, and I'll be happy."

Michael O'Donnegan and James Flaherty drank their whiskeys by the fire. After an hour or so Flaherty got up from his chair. "Well Michael, I must be going. You have a safe trip. Drop me a card when you get home."

"I'll do that, Jimmy. And maybe one day you could come over and say hello. And I'd be sure to show you a good time."

"Perhaps I will one of these days, Michael. Perhaps I will."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The table in the southwest corner of the Nautilus Restaurant was reserved exclusively for Arnold Batiste. Jeff Thompson sat in a captain's chair on the far side of the polished mahogany hatch cover table, sipping a freshly poured cup of hot chocolate.

"The product you picked up for me is aging past its prime." Arnold Batiste said. "Roger was supposed to sell it, unfortunately he can't now."

Jeff nodded his head once. "Would you like it sold as individual units, or all at once?"

"Preferably as a single package." Batiste replied.

Jeff Thompson gazed out the window at the boats moored in Tiburon harbor, then said: "I'll see what I can do. The usual asking price?"

"Let's discount it, to generate an immediate response." Batiste wrote an address on a cocktail napkin under the Gin Fizz he'd just finished. "I'm taking Kelly, Roger's live-in, out to dinner, tonight. Here's his address." He slid the napkin over to Thompson. "He has a small gray telephone book that contains the names of his buyers."

Jeff Thompson looked at the address, memorized it, then slid the napkin back to Batiste, who folded it up and stuck it in the pocket of his shirt.

"Certainly worth a look," Thompson said. "Say about seven-thirty this evening?"

"That would be perfect. Try not to disturb anything. But if you have to, make it look like a burglary. You'll find the data you're looking for under the "D" divider in his telephone book."

Jeff grinned, and shook his head. "Not very creative."

Arnold Batiste shrugged his shoulders. "Roger wasn't given to much imagination, which is probably why he's no longer with us."

#

As Jim Richards climbed the stairs after his morning jog, he heard the shower running in the master bathroom. On his pillow, a note in Annie's hand: *Carl called. It's important.*

Jim Richards dialed Carl Fortune's number. It was answered on the second ring.

"I've got a line on James Flaherty." Carl said. "A friend of mine at the Bureau confirmed he's still considered a target by the FBI, contrary to Langley's information."

"How close are they to an arrest?" Richards asked.

"Don't know." Carl responded.

Jim Richards shook his head. "Shit. We've got to get to him first."

"My thoughts exactly." Carl agreed. "I've continued my inquiries into his daily routines. Usually on Saturday night he closes O'Reilly's Grill in Sausalito. The place is real quiet after closing, especially in the part of town where the Grill is located. We could do a pick up."

Jim Richards thought for a moment. "Sit tight. I've got to check with Ty on this one." He hung up on Carl, then dialed Ty Harding's home phone. Call forwarding transferred him to his cellular phone. "Ty, I need to talk with you. What's your schedule today?"

"I'll be back at the house by noon. Why don't you come up, we'll throw something on the Q."

As Jim Richards hung up the phone, Annie stepped out of the shower, a towel wrapped around her lithe body. She walked provocatively over to Richards, stepped between his legs and pressed herself up against him. Just then, the towel slipped away.

#

Ty Harding and Jim Richards sat alone in his book-lined study. Outside, the children laughed and played. While Annie and Lynn chatted by the pool, Jim Richards brought Harding up to date on Carl's information.

"So the Bureau's playing games as usual," Harding said.

Jim Richards nodded his head once. "Fraid so, and we don't have time for a politically correct solution."

"What do you have in mind?" Ty Harding asked.

Jim Richards smiled cynically. "A mugging should do. Transport him over to Caring First's Greenbrae facility. Then find out where Michael O'Donnegan is, or at least was, and hopefully recover the weapons in the bargain."

Ty Harding frowned. "Assuming they're not already aboard ship." He thought for several moments. "I'm concerned about a mugging. James Flaherty's a respected businessman. Banging him around won't go unnoticed."

Jim Richards nodded his head in agreement. "It's risky, but Carl indicates he often closes O'Reilly's Grill alone on Saturdays. If we snatch him right after closing, we can have him in and out of the facility by mid-day following."

Harding frowned, tilted his head to one side skeptically. "Yeah, but the guy's all messed up. Wife's gonna want some explanation when he finally gets home. She'll probably have already filed a missing persons report."

Jim Richards gestured with his hand, brushing the complication aside. "Police won't act on a missing person for seventy-two hours. Monday morning, earliest, even supposing she pulls some strings. The FBI is forcing our hand, we may not have time to handle it any other way."

Ty Harding got up from his chair, then paced about the room. "We're not talking about a foreign operative here, Jim. This is a United States citizen. I presume you plan to use hypnotics. You know the risks, if we lose him... its murder."

"If those weapons reach their destination, how many people will die?"

"Not our people." Harding replied coldly.

"Are you sure. Can we be certain those weapons aren't destined for our own streets?"

Harding looked at Jim Richards, and shook his head. "You're grasping at straws, Jim. Why would the IRA smuggle guns into the United States?"

"Why would they smuggle them all the way across the country?" Richards countered. "Maybe they just want the cash to buy something else. What do you suppose an UZIs worth on the street since September eleventh?"

Ty Harding looked at Jim Richards for a long moment. "I'll talk to Elmo."

#

Carl Fortune came out the back door of O'Reilly's Grill, then crossed the nearly empty parking lot, and slipped into the driver's side of Jim Richards' Thunderbird. Richards' checked his watch. "What time do they close this place?"

"Last call's about one-thirty." Carl replied. "We can expect James Flaherty sometime between two and three this morning. Are we set up at the hospital?"

Jim Richards nodded his head up and down. "We'll call the ambulance at O-two-hundred. They'll park near by, ready to roll as soon as he's down."

#

At 02:35, James Flaherty stepped out the back door of O'Reilly's Grill. His midnight blue Mercedes was parked not more than ten feet away. Two standard one hundred and fifty watt outdoor spots sparingly lighted the area behind the restaurant. He carried a bank deposit bag in his left hand, resting it in the crook of his arm the way a woman might carry a clutch purse. His right hand was just inside the left quarter panel of the golf style windbreaker he was wearing, resting on the butt of a thirty-two-caliber Colt Mustang auto-loading pistol.

#

Three blocks away, two Sausalito City police officers who'd normally cruise the street behind O'Reilly's at closing, were engaged in taking the statement of a slightly inebriated but very attractive young woman. The woman wore a black knit dress that fit her lithe angular body like the proverbial glove. Her shapely breasts presented delectable curves beneath the soft fabric, nipples protruding taut and hard in the cool night air.

The woman's fine blonde hair was cut in a longish pageboy. She brushed a wisp of golden strand from above her right eyebrow as she plaintively explained her predicament, accentuating each word coquettishly with a seductive look from her azure blue eyes.

The two officers thoroughly enjoyed their role of rescuer, neither could imagine why any man would leave a woman alone outside No Name Bar, saying he was getting the car, then failing to return. As they listened to her story, each officer tried to figure out a way to assure he'd be the one to drive her home.

#

James Flaherty walked quickly to his car. He reached the driver's door in five steps. His car keys hooked over the little finger of his right hand, ready to instantly unlock the driver's door. Just as he was about to activate the keyless entry, the keys fell from his hand to the ground. He bent over to pick them up. In so doing, he presented an excellent target for Jim Richards, who stood patiently in the shadows at the corner of the building.

James Flaherty heard the muffled sound the air pistol made, as Jim Richards squeezed off a tranquilizer dart. He did not recognize the sound, and would not have had time to react even if he'd known what was coming at him. The dart traveling at eight hundred and sixty-five feet per second, struck James Flaherty square in the center of his right buttocks. Where it caused him to jerk suddenly upright. For a moment he stood on the toes of his canvas shoes. A short groan involuntarily escaped his lips. He took a half step backwards, whipping his head and upper torso around in reflex to the pain. His right hand reaching frantically down and behind to grasp at the dart protruding from his butt.

His heart automatically pumped adrenaline through his system at one hundred and seventy beats per minute. As he attempted to remove the dart, his mind searched for an explanation of what had hit him. He kept imagining an attack by some monstrous insect. He grasped the dart, and cursed loudly as he attempted to pull it out, but the suction created by the moist tissue and depth of penetration made it extremely difficult to remove. His attempt failed, and he leaned forward onto the roof of his car to relieve the pain a little.

His next thought was that someone was about to attack and rob him. And so, forgetting the pain, he pulled his gun from out of his waistband, then spun around to face his attacker.

A shadow moved towards him. He tried to raise his weapon, to pull the trigger. But all strength seemed to ebb from his body. A profound fatigue, such as he'd never before experienced, gripped his entire being. Confused and disoriented, he stumbled forward. Somewhere in his addled brain he sensed he was falling, falling endlessly.



#

Jim Richards tried to reach James Flaherty before he collapsed, but Flaherty's weapon caused Richards to jink left, throwing his timing off. Flaherty toppled forward, face first, without the feeblest attempt to break his own fall. But Jim Richards managed to grab the collar of his jacket just before he hit the ground, reducing the impact enough to avoid shattering his facial bones.

Richards pulled the tranquilizer dart from Flaherty's flank, then rolled him onto his back, and examined his face. There would be serious bruising. Jim Richards shrugged inwardly, at least the *manuscript* would hold.

The ambulance arrived. Paramedics loaded Flaherty onto a stretcher, then into the back of the vehicle. Jim Richards climbed inside with Flaherty.

#

As the ambulance headed north up Highway 101, Carl Fortune pulled up to the curb, adjacent to Sue Bristol and two Sausalito police officers. Fortune climbed out the car to a barrage of verbal abuse from Sue Bristol. "Well it's about time, you stupid nincompoop," she exclaimed. "Where have you been? I've been waiting here in the cold forever! If it weren't for these kind officers, who knows what might have happened to me." She fumed, both fists on her hips. "You just take me home, right now." With that she opened the door slid into the passenger seat.

Carl Fortune smiled sheepishly at the lead officer. "I couldn't get the car started." He said plaintively with a shrug of his shoulders, hoping for a little male support. There was none forthcoming. "Took me a half hour to find someone to give me a jump."

"Better make certain your battery's charged, next time." Was all the cop said.

As Carl pulled away from the curb, Sue called out a thank you. And blew the two young officers a kiss. They watched as the T-bird's taillights faded into the night, down Bridgeway Avenue. The lead officer looked at his partner: "How does an idiot like that, get a fine piece of ass like her?"

His partner shook his head disgustedly, his fantasy of a heavenly close to his shift shattered. "Go figure."

#

The Safe Haven ambulance turned into the emergency entrance of Greenbrae Hospital. Technicians wheeled James Flaherty, strapped to a stainless steel gurney, into an unoccupied operating room. He was hooked up to monitoring equipment, his vitals checked. Next a highly experienced physician gave him a thorough examination, his injuries expertly treated.

While Flaherty was being treated, Carl Fortune arrived with Sue Bristol. Sue assisted with his make-up to assure he'd resemble Michael O'Donnegan. Elmo had not approved the hypnotics, too risky. Deception, and sedatives, would have to suffice.

From surgical, James Flaherty was wheeled to a private room. A quarantine sign was posted at the end of the hallway, and a guard stationed. Only authorized personnel would be allowed past the checkpoint.

Flaherty was then administered an I.V. that could be controlled to put him in, or out of a deep sleep. He was given eye drops that caused dim light to seem bright. In this condition, he'd not be able to clearly see Carl Fortune, making the resemblance to Michael O'Donnegan easier to convey. By varying the room's light, as well as the flow of sedative, James Flaherty would be convinced several days passed in only a few short hours.

Adjusting the sedative, he was awakened. Then put through a routine of apparently seeing daylight wane and darken, falling asleep again. Nurses asked how he was feeling, the television was turned on and off, a tape played news coverage from four days prior. In this way, he was awakened and sedated four times in a one-hour period. Then the nurse indicated he had a visitor.

Carl began with his best Irish accent. "Jimmy, Jimmy are you okay? I've been worried about you."

"Michael?" Flaherty's speech was slurred.

"Yes, it's me."

Flaherty tried to look about the room. "What's happened to me? Where am I?"

"You were mugged, Jimmy. They took your wallet, money, everything."

Flaherty tried to bring himself to full consciousness, but it seemed just beyond his reach. "How long have I been here?"

"Just three days." Carl responded.

"Three days?" He seemed unable to grasp the concept. "I can't see good. What's the matter with my eyes?"

"Now Jimmy, don't you go a worrying. Your eyes'll be fine. They're just reacting to the blow you got to your head. I had the same thing happen to me when a bloody British grenade went off near me."

James Flaherty tried to raise himself, his mouth opened and closed several times without any further sound coming from his lips. Finally, he managed to speak again. "Where's Julie, is she okay?"

"Yes, Jimmy. She's fine. She was here until just an hour ago. But Jimmy, I need your help. I need to get going. Who do I contact.?"

Flaherty seemed to be struggling with the concept, something wasn't quite right. "But I told you...yesterday."

"No, Jimmy. You didn't make it."

"I'm sure I did. What day is it?"

"Monday."

"Monday? I can't remember. You...you were going east."

"Yes, of course."

Flaherty struggled to understand. To express the hundreds of thoughts that seemed just beyond his range of comprehension. "East...go through Nevada. To Rawlins ...Wyoming. Call...Sam"

His breathing was becoming labored, he tried to fight the urge to let go, to fall into oblivion. He was so sleepy.

"Sam? Sam who?" Carl asked.

"... in the book I gave you." Flaherty said softly.

"Book? What book, you didn't make our meeting."

James Flaherty struggled with the concept. "No, no meeting? Okay... Oh god I'm so confused. So tired."

Flaherty drifted off to sleep. The doctor in attendance spoke up. "He's exhausted. I can bring him back one more time, after that we're risking his life." He adjusted the I.V..

"Jimmy try to think. How can I reach Sam in Wyoming?" Carl asked.

"Sam...Michael? What's going on?" Flaherty said incoherently.

"Jimmy try to concentrate, this is important. How can I reach Sam in Rawlins?"

"The tavern...Mooseleg Tavern... Sam... Owner... sleep now. I want..."

The doctor shook his head. Jim Richards nodded his. The doctor removed the I.V..  
Inserted another. Then he, and the nurse, rolled the bed into an intensive care room.

#

Jim Richards waited in the doctor's office. "How is he?" Richards asked with professional concern only, when the agency doctor returned at last.

"He should be okay. We'll have to watch him carefully, to make certain his heart doesn't give out."

"Does he have a heart condition?" Richards asked, concern in his voice.

"Not that I can detect, but the sedatives we've been using are hard on the central nervous system. If it rebels and shuts down a vital function, the heart can fail, we lose the patient. I hope the information you received tonight was absolutely necessary. If this were a field job, the poor bastard would be dead by now."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The motel was a long, one story affair, with an L shaped appendage for the manager's office. The rooms were let by the day, or by the hour. Michael O'Donnegan kicked aside a tumbleweed lodged against the door. He turned the key, and stepped into a cheap single sleeper just outside Elko, Nevada.

He spread a map of the United States over the bed, then studied it carefully. He had no intention of following the route James Flaherty had chosen for him, and certainly no intention of making contact with any of his people.

He turned on the small black and white television, surfed all three channels. There were no alarming news reports. Still he slept in his clothing, a weapon near at hand.

In the morning he drove one a mile east to a truck stop. Filled the Tahoe with fuel, checked the oil and tires, then went inside for breakfast before starting the next leg of his journey.

#

Jim Richards made it to the office at 08:30 Monday morning. He was fatigued from the long hours he'd kept the last several days. Sue Bristol greeted him with a cup of strong black coffee. "Thank you." He said as he accepted the proffered mug. He took a sip. "By the way, you did an excellent job Saturday night."

Sue smiled, "Kind of fun actually."

"How 's Carl coming with the vineyard?" Jim Richards asked.

"He flew up yesterday," she replied. "Taped everything. Said he'd be in around ten this morning. Also, Ty Harding has something new from Langley. He'll be in around the same time."

#

Jim Richards, Sue Bristol and Ty Harding sat around the small conference table in the communications center, listening to Carl's report, as they watched the videotape he'd made of the investigation at Flaherty's vineyard.

"We arrived at three in the afternoon," Carl began. "You can see the main house there to the right. To the left, on the other side of those fruit trees, is the guesthouse. As we pan right you see some utility buildings, a little farther up the hill. Keep that barn in mind." Carl paused the tape for a moment, and pointed to one of the utility buildings with a LASER pointing device. "This is where we found the most interesting evidence."

He restarted the tape. "We put the helicopter down between the utility buildings and the guest house." The image suddenly jinked to odd angle. "Whoops, sorry 'bout the camera work. I tripped getting out. Okay that's better."

"The people you're looking at here are the caretakers, the only people on property when we arrived. We showed INA identification, checked their green cards, told them we needed to look around."

"Juan Mendez interviewed both of them, while we checked out the buildings. He told them James Flaherty was in the hospital, but he assured them he'd be fine. He also told them he thought someone who might have stayed in the guesthouse recently was responsible for Flaherty's injuries."

"They confirmed a guest had stayed for a few days, twice in the past two weeks. They said he was a good friend of Flaherty's, at least they assumed so because he took the Tahoe that was normally kept at the vineyard. Mendez asked them the name of the guest, they said Flaherty had called him Michael."

Carl hit the fast forward and zipped past shots of the interiors of the various buildings until he got to the one he'd pointed out earlier. "In the barn we found the parts you see displayed here. We also found plastic sheeting covered with flecks of gray over spray."

"Last night I accessed the same data base I used to find Flaherty's Tahoe the first time around. I then identified the parts. Their combined weight is nearly equal to the estimated weight of the UZIs delivered by the St. Emilion, less the ones found out on Summit Road." Carl shut off the video.

"My conclusion is this: Michael O'Donnegan is transporting the weapons in the Tahoe, which has been painted a dark gray. The weapons are most likely concealed under the rear passenger seat which was gutted and re-built."

"Good work Carl," Jim Richards said.

"Sue do you have anything to add?" Ty Harding asked.

Sue Bristol shook her head. "No."

"Jim?"

"I'll take it one step further," Richards responded. "The only reason he'd go to the trouble of maintaining net vehicle weight was if he planned to ship the Tahoe, weapons and all, over seas. As long as the vehicle looks stock, and its weight corresponds to the manufacturer's figures,

Customs is unlikely to tear it apart for contraband." He paused and looked around the table for contradictory comments. There were none forthcoming.

"One of the issues that's bothered me all along is why the IRA would go to the trouble of transporting weapons all the way across the United States? The answer's really quite simple. There are vast stretches of sparsely, or completely uninhabited coast along the western United States, making delivery of weapons relatively easy, as we've seen.

"The British are focusing nearly all their efforts on the east coast faction of IRA support, virtually ignoring the west coast. Although time consuming, Michael O'Donnegan's route is virtually fool proof, or would have been if he'd ditched that British SAS tag team instead of wasting them."

Ty Harding nodded his head in agreement. "Exactly. But it's all academic now. Here's the bad news. I got a call this morning from Langley. Elmo wasn't able to cut a deal with the Bureau. They want Michael O'Donnegan."

Carl and Sue groaned. Jim Richards just shook his head disgustedly.

"MI-5 and the FBI have been conducting a joint IRA investigation for the past eight years. They're very close to shutting down much of the support effort here in the United States, and they want James Flaherty's operation as well." He paused for a moment. "If the Bureau bags Michael O'Donnegan, the investigation will definitely spread to the St. Emilion, Arnold Batiste, and beyond."

"What does Elmo want us to do?" Carl asked.

"Find Michael O'Donnegan before the FBI does. Then shepherd him, and the weapons out of the country."

Jim Richards was livid. "No way, Ty. No way is this bastard going to skate."

Ty gestured patience, palm raised outward. "What we do with him once he's outside the country is our business, or rather yours."

Jim Richards shook his head. "We need to take him here. Once he gets out of country, we lose jurisdiction. MI-5 will take over, or Interpol, and we'll be locked out. They'll never sanction a termination."

Harding nodded his head. "Perhaps, but those are our orders. Elmo will misinform the Bureau, lead them to believe Michael O'Donnegan's headed for Mexico. That'll give us at least ten days to assure he leaves the country. But first we have to find him. That's your assignment, Jim."

Richards scowled angrily. "Do I have your permission to shadow him, beyond our borders?"

"Yes. You have my permission to do whatever the hell you want with him after he leaves the United States. As a matter of fact, MI-6 will be more than happy to assist anyway they can."

Jim Richards thought about his friend Bob Jensen, and young Frank Robinson. His eyes turned deadly cold. "Just tell them the best assistance they can provide is to stand aside, and give me a clear field of fire."

#

Jeff Thompson sat on the hood of his Grand Wagoneer. The afternoon, hot and still on the leeward side of Paradise Drive. He looked across the ravaged, parched, shale quarry towards the turbid waters of Raccoon Straits. He was waiting for Steven Hernandez, one of Roger Evan's contacts, a name he'd recognized from prior surveillance, when Arnold Batiste was spot-checking Roger's honesty. At least he'd know what Hernandez looked like.

Steven Hernandez was nearly thirty minutes late, and Jeff Thompson was just about to give up when a black Mercedes sedan pulled up next to his old four-wheel drive. Thompson hopped down off the hood, and stood staring at his own reflection in the blacked out windows of the German touring sedan.

The rear window slowly descended. Steven Hernandez made no attempt to get out of the car, and Jeff Thompson made no attempt to approach. Hernandez had the cock sure look of sullen contempt displayed by so many street thugs who have made their mark in the drug trade. Jeff Thompson returned his stare evenly.

"Afternoon, Jeff," Hernandez said. "I didn't know you were in the business. Roger never mentioned you. I thought you were just partial to the *candy girls*."

Thompson smiled cynically. "Pussy 'n coke were made for each other."

Hernandez nodded, but looked at Jeff Thompson skeptically. "Take your shirt off. I want to make sure you not wearin', *amigo*."

Thompson unbuttoned his shirt, and slipped it off, then turned around once slowly.

"You workin' for Roger?" Hernandez asked.

"Myself."

"Really. What you got?"

Jeff Thompson stepped over to the Wagoneer, he pulled a half-kilo of cocaine off the front seat. Turned, and tossed it to Hernandez, who caught it inside the sedan with one hand.

He set the packet down in his lap. From inside his shirt pocket he withdrew a small vial filled one third of the way with a clear liquid. He opened the packet of cocaine and lifted a small amount out, using the nail on his right pinkie finger, grown long for the purpose. He tapped the powder into the vial. The liquid immediately turned a pale, iridescent blue. He then sucked the residue from his finger, looked over at Thompson, and smiled. "This is pure man, better than gold. How much you got?"

"100 kilos." Thompson replied.

"Price?"

"Three hundred."

"Dollars? Hey that's a good deal," laughed Hernandez.

"Three hundred thousand dollars, in one hundred dollar bills. And not too crisp, thank you." Thompson said in an even voice.

Hernandez nodded his head. "A bargain. How come?"

Jeff Thompson looked at Steven Hernandez, his eyes as cold as a shark's. "Let's just say the original seller met with an unexpected accident."

Hernandez smiled slowly. "Too bad. I hate to hear hard luck stories. I can't take delivery all at once. We'll do it in four splits."

Thompson shrugged his shoulders. "Never mind. I'll find someone who can handle it all. I ain't got time to screw around."

Hernandez thought for a moment. "All right, I'll take it all. Tomorrow night, Holiday Inn Terra Linda, cocktail lounge. Seven PM."

Jeff Thompson nodded his agreement. "In the back to the left of the stage, there's a nice dark booth." He turned around and reached into the Wagoneer again, he withdrew a plain canvas duffel bag, then tossed it to Hernandez. "I have another one just like it. We'll exchange there."

Hernandez grinned, nodded once slowly. "Look for a skinny kid, 'bout twenty five, blond hair to his shoulders."

#

Michael O'Donnegan stretched his neck from side to side, and rotated his shoulders forward and backward, trying to coax ten hours of non-stop driving to leave his tense, tired muscles. The drive to Denver had taken him through spectacular mountain terrain. Soaring peaks, sheer granite walls that seemed to touch the clear blue sky above.

At the Marriott Hotel, he asked to use a FAX machine, and a word processor. He was shown to a small cubicle, where the equipment he needed was made available to hotel guests.

#

Herr Klaus Herschel  
Flamwerken Verteiler  
C/O Crest Hotelier  
Ratingen, Germany

Dear Klaus:

The trip is going well. I've managed to find 90% of the items we're planning to distribute. And would you believe, I've purchased the perfect vehicle to travel in, a Chevrolet Tahoe. Please arrange transport.

As well as this trip is going, I can be at our first shipping point by 3 November. Please contact me at my host's sister's place. Oh and did I mention Danny Brown will be at Grand Ol' Opry the day after tomorrow?"

Paul.

#

Michael O'Donnegan filled out the transmittal form, directing the FAX to Margaret Murphy, then gave it to the helpful clerk with instructions to send it the following day to the German number listed on the form.

Letters were often opened by wary international postal inspectors, and took forever in any case. Telephone calls were monitored by all the intelligence services, with computers seeking key words in conversations, or voice modulations that identified suspects under surveillance. Ditto for e-mail, which left a trail to back track, in any case. FAX transfers could be couched in disarming language, and delayed long enough to allow their sender to evacuate the area. Still he could not chance sending one directly to Ireland.

#

Margaret Murphy sat at a word processor next to the Hotel Crest's incoming FAX machine. It was one of her responsibilities to receive all incoming messages and route them to guests, and hotel personnel.

Margaret read Michael O'Donnegan's message as it came off the machine, then carefully folded the sheet of paper, placed it in an envelope, then placed the envelope into her *IN* box, which sat right next to her *OUT* box where all incoming FAXs normally went. She was careful to do this in such a way that none of the other workers in her office would notice, including one clerk she suspected of receiving a little something extra to report her activities to German Counter-Intelligence.

At lunch Margaret drove her twenty-year-old Volkswagen Beetle into Ratingen to have lunch and listen to an Irish singer, who played for the crowds of shoppers that meandered through the center of Old Town. She was careful to assure she wasn't followed.

The outdoor cafe served an excellent German sausage, with warm pickled red cabbage, and dark molasses bread. Margaret listened to the music and enjoyed the clear, brisk lunch hour weather. She knew rain would fall again in the evening.

She'd just finished her lunch, when the guitar player took a break from his performance. He was tall for an Irishman, with strawberry blonde hair cut long, and steel blue eyes. His mother was German, and he spoke the language perfectly. Kyle Kennedy had his guitar slung over his shoulder, his music sheets in an old leather portfolio. He purchased a lager beer, turned, and then meandered casually over to where Margaret was sitting.

"May I join you?" He asked.

"Please do," she responded. "I like the way you sing."

"Thank you."

As Kyle sat down at her table, he set his portfolio on top of a magazine Margaret had carried with her to lunch. Between its pages, the FAX she'd received earlier. They chatted about music and travel. But soon Margaret indicated she had to get back to work. She arose from the table. Kyle stood as well, saying he hoped she'd come back again soon to listen to his music.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The electronics room at Jim Richards' office had become an extension of THI Central. Reports from field agents across the country flowed to its terminals. Field personnel covered all Interstate routes heading east across the United States. It took less than twelve hours to locate the truck stop where Michael O'Donnegan had eaten breakfast the day before.

East of Elko, there were only two routes of travel for someone crossing the United States in any kind of a hurry. And two choke points: Rock Springs, Wyoming. And Thompson, Utah. Operatives out of Denver were dispatched via Execujet West. By six-thirty that evening, they had confirmed that Michael O'Donnegan had spent the prior night at a motel outside Thompson.

It then took four associates all night to locate where Michael O'Donnegan had stayed while in Denver. They spoke with hotel management, learned they'd missed him by less than an hour.

At eight that evening, Jim Richards squeezed himself into the co-pilot's seat of a Lear 25. Matt Harding took the left seat. Stowed in the passenger compartment was Richards' overnight bag, and the laptop version of the tracking computer installed in his car.

#

At the Holiday Inn, Marin, a solo guitar player sang Neil Diamond's hit from the swingin' seventies, *Cracklin' Rosie*. Jonathan Strider knew he should've quit the music business and found something to do that would've provided some security. But no, he figured he'd make it to the big time, see his name in lights, his face on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Well he saw his name in lights all right, only they weren't the ones on the marquee outside the Hollywood Bowl.

He finished the song, then reached over to adjust the gain on his amplifier. Maybe he just didn't have the talent. Or perhaps the good luck. His life seemed to be nothing more than an endless CD, spinning through red neck bars and honky tonk hotel lounges. He squinted into the darkness beyond the stage lights, trying to see if there was anyone sitting at the round cocktail tables scattered through out the room like toadstools in an unkempt backyard. Hard to know for certain, with the multi-colored spots killing his low light vision. Still the clatter of barware, and the murmur of conversations implied a few stragglers had stumbled in during his set.

He glanced at the fake Rolex Perpetual on his wrist, twenty more to go until break time. He slugged his way through several more songs, popular when he'd been young and virile. And to his surprise actually received a rather robust response from the apparently rapidly growing audience. There was only one problem, the applause was entirely male. This is weird, he thought. He stepped around his sound equipment to a place where the lighting was less intense. Nearly every seat in the house was filled with men.

#

Jeff Thompson walked into the lounge at the Holiday Inn. He looked casually around the room; it seemed crowded for a Tuesday night. He frowned. Not even a band. Just a guitar player, and he was on break. Perhaps there was a conference at the hotel, as they all seemed to be businessmen, judging from the coats and ties. The booth to the left of the stage was vacant. He walked over to it, sat down, and ordered a beer from the cocktail waitress. The brewski arrived, he paid for it, took a sip. He glanced around the lounge, saw a thin young man with shoulder length blonde hair approaching. He was carrying the canvas bag given to Steven Hernandez two

days before. He walked straight over to where Jeff Thompson sat, grabbed a chair from around the corner in the dining room, and placed it in front of the small table. He straddled it. "Your name Thompson?" He asked.

Thompson took in the stranger's emaciated appearance, then wrote him off as a user. "Yeah. What's yours?"

"Tony."

The cocktail waitress came up. Tony waived her off, then looked at Jeff Thompson and smiled. "Well?"

"You got the money?" Thompson asked.

Tony nodded. "Oh yeah. You got the stuff?"

"Yes, but we have a problem. There are too many people in here tonight. Place should've been empty on a Tuesday." He paused a moment. Then said: "I hate an audience. So we're gonna have a nice little chat, you and me. Then you're gonna get up and walk back out with that same bag you came in with. I'll be along shortly. We'll make the exchange outside if everything looks good."

Tony just shook his head very slowly. "Guess again Jocko, you're under arrest."

Jeff Thompson started to get up from the table, twenty-five hands reached inside the lapels of their sport coats. The skinny guy smiled. "Don't even think about it, you'll never make it out the door. We call it a choke point, you know. A place where escape routes are easily blocked. Too bad you didn't notice that when you walked in, might of made a difference. So just sit still, and listen to what I have to say: You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say, can and will be used against you in a court of law..."

Jeff Thompson did not relax, his gaze flitted about the room looking for escape. There was none. As Tony finished his Miranda spiel, five DEA agents eased over to take Thompson into custody.

#

Jonathan Strider watched with amusement from a seat at the far end of the bar. At forty-two he figured he'd seen it all, and this wasn't the first time a sting had been pulled off in a bar he worked. Still it was odd, so many agents waiting for one guy. They must have been expecting trouble, or hoping for it.

The agents gradually filtered out of the lounge in pairs, leaving Jonathan with his usual Tuesday night crowd: Four bankers, one single mom waitress, and a middle aged bar fly hoping to get lucky. There was also an African American dressed in brown, double knit slacks, a tan shirt, and black leather jacket.

Seated two stools down, Jonathan Strider was in no rush to get back to the stage. It was his last night, anyway. So, he sipped a scotch and soda, and thought about the Hungry Hunter Steak House. The next place he'd play. Hoped it would have a little more girlie *action* than the Holiday Inn. Make the nights pass a little quicker. Just then Steven Hernandez walked in.

It wasn't unusual for Hernandez to come in on a Saturday night, but never on Tuesday. Jonathan Strider decided to see what would happen next. The DEA pukes should've stuck around a little longer, he thought. They might have bagged something bigger than the: *I got my gym shorts in this bag*, dope mule. Jonathan Strider chuckled derisively. Then noted that Steven Hernandez was wearing his usual dooper-pimp smirk, accompanied by the brunette with huge tits.

Hernandez held a chair for her, theatrically. The way a Maitre'D might. As she sat down, he waved the cocktail waitress over. Tossed some money on her tray. Then leaned down and

whispered something into his date's ear, or maybe he just breathed heavy. Jonathan couldn't really tell from where he sat. The bountiful brunette watched Steven Hernandez the way a puppy watches its master, as he walked over to the bar.

Hernandez stood next to the guy in the tan Sans-a-Belts. "How'd it go?" He asked.

"Just fine," Roosevelt Carter replied.

"Good, then I don't want no more heat for another six months," Hernandez said. "You dig?"

Carter nodded. "Sure Steve, no problem. Six months you be coastin', then its payday again. Or I be pickin' you for hard time."

Jonathan Strider downed his drink. He had his head turned away, watching the highlights on ESPN over the bar. He'd heard enough, in fact, he'd heard more than enough. It might not be good for his health. As he rounded the bar, Steven Hernandez swiveled around. Stopped him with the palm of his hand in the center of his chest. "Hey J. S. Time to play *Donna*. And play it real good for me, so I be sure to get my pussy tonight. You dig?"

Jonathan Strider took the five-dollar bill, Hernandez proffered. What the hell, he thought, his money's as good as anybody's.

#

Jeff Thompson sat in one of five identical interrogation rooms at the county jail, enduring his third hour of questioning. Combined with the six-hour grill he'd been through the night before, he'd listened to three separate DEA agents for a total of nine hours. Thompson had never done jail time. Never been arrested. He'd heard stories of homosexual rape. Knew AIDS was rampant among prisoners. And wasn't any too happy about the turn of events. He was unprepared for the noise, stench, and overcrowded conditions, which conspired to keep him awake most of the night. Then just as he was nodding off, the morning wake up call slammed him back to reality. He was marched off to a pathetic communal shower for a tepid wash. Needless to say, Jeff Thompson was in no mood to listen to Agent Harris needle him about his misplaced loyalties.

He'd been given his one telephone call the night before, after processing. He'd called Arnold Batiste. Arnold assured him he'd have the best criminal attorney in the bay area on his case. So far, no one had shown up to talk to him. Batiste had always lived up to his word, but maybe this time he intended to distance himself. Thompson had no way of knowing. And as the hours crawled by, the likelihood he'd been abandoned appeared more and more probable.

Jeff Thompson mentally shook his head, disgusted with himself. He'd been too quick to agree to the assignment. It wasn't like other jobs he'd done for Batiste. He'd never sold drugs before. Still, it seemed simple enough, and he'd thought it might move him higher in Batiste's mind. Make him more valuable. An opportunity for more money. Especially with Roger Evans out of the picture.

"Why don't you just give it up, Jeff," Harris said. "Look you cooperate with us, and I'll personally make certain you get a light sentence."

Thompson ignored the offer. "It's time you answered some questions for me," He countered. "Where's my lawyer?"

"What lawyer?" Agent Harris replied, then looked over at his partner, Agent Nelson. "We ain't seen no lawyer."

Jeff Thompson's face flushed. He was losing his patience. Fatigue was beginning to take its toll. "Don't give me that shit. I called my lawyer last night. He said he was on his way down to bail me out."

"Oh that lawyer," Harris responded with a sarcastic grin. "Well he didn't show, pal. May be you need a better lawyer."

"I'm entitled to see my lawyer." Thompson said angrily.

"You deaf or what." Harris moved his face an inch closer. "Read my lips, he..did..not..show."

Agent Nelson stepped into the conversation. "Hey now take it easy, Bill." He put a restraining hand on Harris' shoulder, the younger agent seemed to be losing his patience too. He and Thompson were leaning closer to each other, posturing dangerously. Nelson wanted to keep Jeff Thompson right on the edge, not over. If Thompson lost it, and physically vented some of his anxiety, they'd have to start all over again. And there was no time for that.

"Bill, why don't you take a break. We all need a break. Go get some coffee. Jeff, you want some coffee?"

"No thanks."

Too bad, thought Nelson, nothing like a little caffeine to keep the nerves frayed. "Okay. Bill, go get some coffee. And bring me one with cream and sugar, would you?"

Harris nodded morosely, then left the room, closing the door hard behind himself. He stepped into the hallway, turned right, and immediately entered the adjacent room. Behind a one-way mirror, another DEA agent ran a video recorder. Harris leaned forward and whispered for the video operator to get the coffee, then turned back to the one-way mirror to observe and listen.

#

"Hey look, Jeff," Agent Nelson said. "I'm sorry about Harris. He's young, and a little hot under the collar. But we're not jacking you around here. No attorneys have come to see you. Now listen, if you tell me who your attorney is, I'll give him a call right now, get him on the line. Then you can talk to him. How's that?"

Thompson shook his head as if he were disoriented. "I don't understand, he assured me he'd be here last night."

"Well you know, Jeff, you're here on a felony arrest for trafficking in a controlled substance. A substantial amount of uncut cocaine was found on your person. We're not just gonna let you walk. And your attorney knows he ain't gonna come waltzing in here, and put up a five hundred dollar bond. There's gonna be an arraignment, the judge will set bail. And then, assuming you got the money, you can be released. Now that's gonna take a couple days."

"Couple of days?" Thompson grimaced.

"Well yeah. I'd say, with the docket filled up as it is, probably ten days at least, maybe longer."

"No way." Thompson fumed. "I want to talk to my lawyer now."

"Take it easy, Jeff." Nelson said in a comforting tone. "These lawyers know how the system works. No point in wrecking their evening when they can't accomplish nothin' anyway. I mean be reasonable."

"Fuck reasonable. I'm sittin' in the bucket."

"Well yeah, I understand what you're saying, Jeff. Now listen, we got a phone right here. You got your first call last night, okay, nice and private on the pay phone in the hall. I can't give you that privilege twice, not without some cooperation. You know? To put in my report. But, hey, give me the guy's name and number. I'll dial it right here in front of you, and you can talk to him. I mean, you don't have to get detailed. Just tell him to get his ass down here. Then he can

request privacy, and we'll have to comply. But listen, let's get this done before crazy Harris gets back, because I know he ain't gonna go for it."

In the next room, Harris chewed a fingernail. They had Thompson cold, but clearly he was an amateur. No arrest record. Not even a traffic ticket. Smart lawyer would get him off easy. The real question was: Who did he work for? They'd tried to pry that out of him earlier, to no avail. But since Thompson had no criminal record, he probably didn't know any criminal lawyers. So logically he'd call his employer for advice. Harris was relatively certain of that. But the first call was on a public phone, too short to trace. If Jeff Thompson went for Nelson's offer, used the phone on the interrogation table, they'd be ready to trace.

But time was running out. Last night, Lindsey Nichols had sent an associate from his criminal law firm down to talk with Thompson. The boys out front managed to shine him on with misdirected paper work. Sent him on a wild goose chase to another facility. Now Nichols himself was out front, and he wasn't buying the lost paperwork.

A light blinked on the inter-department phone, Harris picked it up. It was the watch supervisor. "We can't hold Nichols off much longer, you're gonna have to give up your boy."

"Okay, just ten more minutes," Harris replied in a stage whisper.

"No way, this guy's hot."

"Fine. Ten minutes." Harris hung up, then turned back towards the one-way glass.

Agent Nelson slid the telephone closer, lifted the receiver and waited.

"His name's Arnold Smith..." Jeff Thompson gave him Batiste's message number. Nelson dialed the number, then handed the receiver to Thompson.

It rang several times before the answering machine picked up. "This is Jeff. I thought you were coming down last night. I really need some help here. I'm at the Marin County jail. This is the last call they're gonna give me. I'm counting on you."

#

Michael O'Donnegan was exhausted. He'd been driving for hours through unfamiliar territory, maintaining constant surveillance to assure he wasn't followed. Once, or twice he thought he saw a highway patrol vehicle behind. Hanging back as they sometimes did, hoping the driver up ahead would lose concentration and start gradually creeping up on the speed until a ticket could be written.

#

He checked into the Marriott Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee. When he was given his room key, he asked if there were any messages. The desk clerk checked, then returned with an envelope. He didn't bother to read it, as he intended to have a hot shower, order a bottle of whiskey, and take a good hour's nap before he tackled the coded message.

#

Jim Richards crossed the Cumberland River into Nashville, just as Michael O'Donnegan stepped into his shower. The old skyline had changed dramatically since the days when he'd worked the Caring First case. Nevertheless, a flood of memories filled his mind. Some bitter, some very sweet.

The laptop computer sat on the passenger seat of a two door Explorer Sport he'd picked up in St. Louis. The day before a THI associate had managed to place a locator on Michael O'Donnegan's Tahoe, when he'd stopped for lunch southeast of St. Louis. At a red light, Jim Richards tapped a macro key, then waited a few seconds for the computer to display O'Donnegan's position.

Later, cruising the parking garage at the Nashville Marriott, Jim Richards soon found the gray Tahoe. He parked the Explorer a few slots away. Then extracted his overnight bag, and checked into the hotel.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Arnold Batiste walked the length of the lushly carpeted hallway that led to his bedroom, then parted the clothes hanging within his cedar lined walk-in closet. He pressed inward on a particular panel, then immediately released the pressure. A small door opened. Reaching into the concealed cupboard, he extracted a gray plastic box then carried it over to a telephone that sat on a narrow mahogany table under the window.

The box contained two devices. The first monitored the incoming line for spurious impulses indicating a telephone tap. The second was a digital scrambler that garbled words spoken unless a matching device was used to receive the transmission. Arnold Batiste assured both units were operational, then placed a call to Elmo Jefferson at his private residence in Alexandria, Virginia.

"What's on your mind?" Jefferson asked.

"I've really screwed up this time, Elmo." Arnold replied. "Jeff Thompson, one of my domestic operatives, was arrested while attempting to move the goods we discussed."

"I told you to flush it." Jefferson said, irritation fringing his voice.

"I know. I should have listened to you."

"Will he keep quiet?" Elmo asked.

"I don't know. According to Lindsey Nichols, they kept him on ice last night. No sleep, followed by heavy interrogation. Convinced him Lindsey was a no show. Then offered to let Jeff make another call, in their presence of course."

Elmo groaned. "And he went for it?"

"Yeah, called me a second time. Didn't know what else to do. Never been in prison before. No prior record. So, no need to know a criminal attorney."

Elmo sighed. "I told you I couldn't help you if you blew this one, Arnold."

"I know," Batiste agreed contritely. "We were set up. Roger was set up. Regardless of who'd run this load, it would've gone down the same."

"Of course you were set up." Jefferson's tone of voice conveying irritation. "The territory was bought and paid for long ago. You've been lucky mainly because you stayed small, and anonymous. Dealing a few grams here and there. But trying to move quantity? No way."

"I'm getting too old and too slow, Elmo. This shouldn't have happened. I'm sorry."

Jefferson let out another sigh. "All right. Now listen carefully. And this time do exactly as I say. Pack your bags immediately, and get the hell out of the country. Not tomorrow, tonight. Take a flight to Sidney, and plan on staying awhile. I'll get Harding to watch the house. If it isn't seized by the DEA, we'll sell it for you.

"There's nothing you can do for your boy right now. The bottom line is Lindsey will have to cut the best deal he can. And that means a partial roll over, at least. What does he know about your Caribbean operations?"

"Nothing," Batiste replied confidently. "He was a local gofer. I was grooming him to recruit later, if the need arose. He just handled some domestic work for me, mostly keeping my managers honest."

"Alright, at least the damage he'll do is limited." Jefferson thought for a moment. "Most likely the DEA has already identified you. So you'd better transfer some money down to Sidney, it may be your final place of retirement."

"What about extradition?"

"I can handle that." Elmo replied. "But that's all. You show your face back here before I tell you to, and they'll nail you to the wall."

"Understood." Batiste paused for a long moment. "I'm sorry, Elmo."

"You've already said that Arnold. We've been working together too long to part angry. Just do as I say, and I'll do what I can. Go to the airport, there will be a ticket waiting for you on the next available flight." Elmo Jefferson paused a moment, then said: "Good bye, Arnold."

Batiste heard the impersonal click of the receiver at the other end of the line being returned to its cradle. He knew Elmo would do whatever he could, if only to protect the integrity of his own operations. They'd not speak again, he was sure of that; from this point forward he was on his own. Arnold Batiste put his head in his hands, as the enormity of the situation dawned on him. The DEA would impound as many of his assets as they could lay their hands on, claiming they were acquired with drug-tainted money.

Blind trusts had been set up for the kids, and his wife had funds and property in her own name, but so much would be lost that he'd spent a life time to acquire. God what a mess he'd made of it this time.

Batiste got up from the bed, paced slowly over to the hidden cupboard once again. He found a black leather portfolio, one of three, which contained a complete new identity: Passport, currency, and credit cards. A checking account with an international bank. This particular portfolio had been established specifically for Australia. There was another for Monaco. And yet another for Brazil, created before inflation had racked that country's viable economy.

#

Elmo Jefferson made two telephone calls after he'd finished speaking to Arnold Batiste. The first was to Ty Harding. He asked him to have someone go over to Batiste's house, surveil it 'til morning. Make certain Arnold did as he was told. Then a THI team was to go through the house thoroughly. Inventory and impound anything that might be of value to the DEA. Then assign someone to sit on the house. With luck, and a few markers called in, Jefferson might be able to salvage Batiste's private residence.

Elmo Jefferson's second call was to an unlisted number at an industrial pier on the Alameda estuary. Jefferson had access to two squads of *former* Navy SEALs. Designated Alpha and Bravo, each squad consisted of seven operatives, led by an officer, with support personnel and equipment for insertion and extraction. The squads had been sanctioned as rescue units for his Central American operations.

#

Bill Hendricks, NDO for SEAL team Alpha, punched the button adjacent to the blinking red light on his multi-line telephone console. A code word was spoken, the NDO acknowledged it with the appropriate counter-code, then hung up the phone. He rolled his chair across the concrete floor to a computer keyboard. There he entered the appropriate codes. Detailed instructions immediately appeared on the monitor. He picked up the secure duty line, and contacted Alpha team leader, Frank Taylor.

"Frank, looks like we got a live one. Local op. You ready to copy?"

#



Seaman First Class Samuel Vaughn, aka Silent Sam, accompanied Frank Taylor to the ordinance locker located at the bay end of the over water warehouse. Taylor spun the dial on a combination padlock, admitting them to the caged supply room. There they selected the equipment they'd need for the night's mission.

Taylor and Vaughn then walked over to a forty-five foot, jet-black Aronow ocean racer, and climbed aboard. An overhead crane, through an access door, to the dark murky water below, then lowered them.

Frank Taylor turned over the racer's powerful engines. Slowly the sleek craft moved from under the pier into the estuary's shipping channel. The deep, baritone exhaust of the boat's engine echoing off the walls of buildings that lined the narrow waterway.

Out on the open waters of the bay, Taylor increased power, moving the dual throttles smoothly forward to their stops. The boat leaped into the night, slamming its fiberglass hull from one swell to the next at nearly seventy miles per hour. It took less than twenty minutes for the Aronow to reach Richardson Bay. Taylor cut the engines. Silently the sleek, black hull coasted the last two hundred yards bobbing to a stop, off the town of Sausalito.

While Frank Taylor remained on board, surveying the shore through night vision binoculars. Silent Sam slipped over the side, and swam the final one hundred yards to shore. He lay quietly in the gently, lapping surge. All but invisible in his jet-black wetsuit. A shadow within the shadows cast by the shore side buildings. His earpiece crackled with the staccato sound of Taylor's voice indicating the open terrain ahead was clear. There were no watchers at or near the target's location.

Silent Sam slithered up the concrete boat ramp, which was owned by Henderson Boat Repairs of Sausalito. He removed his swim fins, then hooked them to the back of his utility belt. He quickly crossed the distance from the boat ramp to the chain link fence surrounding the repair facility. There he removed a pair of wire cutters from the tool bag attached to his belt, then cut a hole in the fence. His powerful hands working the cutters across the heavy gauge wire as easily as a child cut paper. Scrambling through the hole, he climbed the wooden steps to the starboard railing of the St. Emilion, where he armed and set, four incendiary devices.

#

The fireball that completely engulfed one of the most beautiful sailing yachts in the world could be seen from as far away as Oakland International Airport. All the Sausalito fire department could do was contain the blaze, and try to save the other boats stored at the repair facility.

#

The wide body jet banked steeply, skirting the shoreline of San Francisco. In the first class section of the Qantas airliner, Arnold Batiste gazed upon city lights he knew he might never see again. And noted the glow of fire reflected off scattered coastal stratus, drifting on-shore over the Golden Gate Bridge. Idly he wondered: What could cause such a bright glow? But then his thoughts turned to the future and to the opportunities available to a man such as himself. A man who'd gained, and lost, more than most people ever dreamed of. He silently toasted his resilience, then downed the glass of whiskey brought to him by the first class steward.

#

Michael O'Donnegan slept longer than he'd planned. He ordered dinner from room service, then settled down to decode the message received at check in. The text covered nearly an entire

page of letter size paper. Indecipherable by cryptologist or the sophisticated software programs employed for such work at the National Security Agency.

But the code had serious drawbacks: It was time consuming to construct, though somewhat easier to decode. It required both the sender and receiver to have identical copies of the same book. Almost any book would do, a novel, a cookbook; it didn't really matter as long as the editions were identical. And erudite enough to contain words needed for the message.

In a pinch, and there was always a pinch, thought Michael, an *enclaire* word could be used here and there. But this was always dangerous, for if the opposition got hold of the message they might be able to deduce enough of its content to react.

Finally, if either sender, or receiver, were captured with the book, well that was the ball game. Still it was the best, albeit low tech, code ever devised. O'Donnegan unfolded the paper and laid it out on the table in front of him.

Mr. Paul Michael  
C/O The Marriott Hotel  
Nashville, Tennessee

Dear Paul:

As per our conversation, enclosed are the serial numbers requested.

32-7-3/14-3-4/12-6-4/10-3-6...

Each number group represented a word to be decoded. The first number was the page of the book on which the word would be found. The second, the line that contained the word. And finally the word in the line counted from left to right.

The message read: I'm pleased at your success. Proceed to Charleston. Contact exporter as discussed prior. He will ship. Margaret will receive in Holland, and drive to Germany. She will disclose location of vehicle and rendezvous instructions when you arrive Germany. Final shipment in small quantities by boat. Meet Margaret in ten days. Do not stay on US east coast, you are hunted. All departure routes watched. Go back to the west coast. Go to Orange County. Go to health club named, Fitness For Family. Ask for John Johnson. He will assist with IDs. Take German charter flight to Düsseldorf to meet Margaret. Good luck.

O'Donnegan read the message, then tore both the encryption and its translation into small pieces, and flushed them down the toilet.

#

Jim Richards finished the breakfast brought by room service. All night the laptop computer had remained on, its audible alarm activated, in the event the Tahoe moved during the night. Additionally, a contingent of associates from the Nashville office kept watch on the hotel.

Jim Richards was restless. He wanted to go out for a run, but could not. Murphy's law guaranteed Michael O'Donnegan would move as soon as he broke surveillance. He contented himself, as best he could, with push-ups, dips, crunches, and Tai Chi exercises. At 08:00 the audible alarm sounded. Jim Richards grabbed his overnight bag, closed the laptop computer, and left the hotel.

#

Michael O'Donnegan headed south towards the tri-corners where Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama come together. Jim Richards used his cellular phone to contact THI Central. He requested a thorough investigation of O'Donnegan's stay at the Nashville Marriott. He was curious why Michael O'Donnegan chose to stay at the same brand of hotel twice. It wasn't good tradecraft. But perhaps there was some service offered that Michael O'Donnegan needed.

#

Nine years, five months, two weeks, and one day before Michael O'Donnegan checked out of the Marriott Hotel in Nashville, Ronald Anderson entered a five-story office building in Palo Alto, California. He noted, from the directory inside the main lobby, that the building had only one tenant: The Federal Bureau of Investigation. Their offices were listed as being on the second floor. The metal-framed directory did, not disclose who occupied the other floors.

Ronald Anderson took the only elevator to the second floor. He stepped into a dreary hallway, lit by ambient light from a frosted glass window at the far end. There was no carpeting to cover the cheap composite tile flooring. His footsteps made hollow echoes, as he slowly searched for the office number given to him earlier over the telephone.

The interior walls of the dingy hallway were painted beige, and were sorely in need of freshening. Along both sides were nondescript wooden doors, stained a dark walnut. There were no names on the doors, no indication of what might lay beyond. But each door had a fish eye lens, and over each door was a black plastic strip with white numbers stamped into it. He eventually found the room number he was looking for, on the right hand side of the hallway.

He knocked. The building strangely quiet. As he stood outside room 212, he had the feeling he was being watched. That eyes were peeping through each of the fish eye lenses that looked onto the hallway. As he continued to wait, he found himself stealing furtive glances toward the other doors, inadvertently focusing on the cycloptic eyes in each. In one, he thought he saw a shadow move.

He could hear the muted roar of traffic outside on El Camino Real. Its cacophony filtered by window glass. But he heard no telephones ring, no conversation from behind closed doors. No sound of printers, copiers, or other office machinery. Only the silence of a vacant building. He was about to leave, when out of the corner of his eye he sensed movement behind the peephole in door 212. Suddenly the door opened.

Ronald Anderson expected a male FBI Agent to appear. Instead, he faced an attractive woman in her mid-thirties. She stood five-foot four, with what he estimated to be a thirty-eight inch bust. She wore a gray, pin striped woman's suit, with a well-fitted calf length skirt that curved tantalizingly over her athletic buttocks.

She did not stand to one side, the way most people would when opening a door. In fact, her posture indicated she had no intention of letting him enter. She looked him up and down once. Anderson had the distinct feeling she was memorizing his appearance in case she had to make a positive identification at some time in the future. In her right hand she held an identification wallet, which she flipped open and held up for Anderson to see.

"I'm Special Agent Susan Capri of the FBI Special Task Force on Technology Theft and Proliferation. This is my identification."

Anderson looked at the ID badge, and was about to acknowledge its validity when Susan snapped it shut again.

"Who are you?" She asked.

Suddenly he felt intimidated. Here he was faced by a woman half his height. Less than half his weight. And it was he who was on the defensive. Amazing. "I'm Ronald Anderson."

Agent Capri stared for a moment, as if she were making a decision about whether or not she believed he was who he claimed to be, then stepped aside holding the door open a little wider. "Come in."

Anderson stepped into a narrow hallway. Immediately, Agent Capri closed the door behind him, he heard a solid click. To his immediate right the hallway ended. To his left, it ran for a short distance, then took a turn to the right. Along one side were doors leading to small cubicles.

Agent Capri stepped over to the first, and opened it. "Please go in, Mr. Anderson."

He felt as if he were back in school, shown into the Dean's office for another little talk, which would be followed by a good sound paddling. He thanked Agent Capri as he stepped into the room. He didn't know why he'd thanked her, but somehow he felt better for having done so. She followed him in, then closed the door. Again the latch clicked solidly into place.

Ronald Anderson noted her odd movements, unfeminine yet not butch. Rather she seemed to move in exaggerated steps. Always distancing herself from him, always facing him.

The room was sparsely furnished. There was a small rectangular table on metal legs with some sort of composite writing surface glued to its top. Two metal chairs stood opposing each other across the table. There were no ashtrays, or pencils. Only a plain yellow pad starkly contrasting the drab gray color of the table's surface.

Agent Capri directed him to sit at the table. Only after he was settled in his chair, did she sit down. She took a small note pad from an inside coat pocket, flipped it open and began the interview. "As I understand it Mr. Anderson, you called our San Francisco offices asking to speak with someone in charge of high tech information transfer. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And what prompted your call?"

"A news broadcast I saw concerning the problem." He replied.

"I mean, what is it you feel you need to tell us?"

Anderson collected his thoughts. "About three weeks ago, I was sitting in a restaurant in Mountain View having lunch when I overheard a conversation between two employees of a high tech firm."

"Which restaurant in Mountain View?" Susan asked.

"I can't remember the name. I don't normally eat there. I just stopped in that day because I was between appointments, and it was convenient."

Susan Capri nodded. "What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a Loss Control Consultant for an insurance company. I call on our commercial accounts; help them with their safety problems. Try to reduce their claims."

"Where exactly is the restaurant located?"

Anderson thought for a moment. "Just off Highway 101, on Wolfe Road. In fact, you have to make a U turn to get back to it after you exit the freeway going south. One of the big chains, all booths. No single tables, just booths."

"Okay," nodded Agent Capri. "There's a Big Boy restaurant on Wolfe Road."

"Could be," Anderson agreed. "I really don't know. Like I say, at the time I wasn't paying attention. That may sound goofy to you, but I eat out every day at a different place. My expense account is very limited, after awhile the chain restaurants all seem the same. Certainly the food all tastes the same."

Susan Capri smiled for the first time in their conversation, and nodded her understanding. Anderson relaxed a little, and thought her quite lovely when she smiled. "Anyway you know how it is when you're eating alone. You end up listening to conversations around you. One in particular caught my attention. Two young women sitting in the booth next to mine were apparently talking about one of their bosses at work. One gal indicated the guy she worked for was coming on to her, and had invited her to dinner. At dinner he seemed more interested in how she accessed certain secure programs within the computer network with which she interfaced.

"At first she apparently thought this hilarious, a new kind of come-on, but it turned out he was serious. She told her friend she was really put off by the creep, as she called him, but was afraid to say anything to anybody because she could not afford to lose her job."

"Did she mention any names?" Susan Capri asked.

"Well yes." Anderson reached into his inside coat pocket, Susan Capri stiffened, her hand slipped back toward the edge of the table. "Here we go," Anderson said, as he withdrew a napkin on which he'd taken some notes. "Raji Hetini was the name she referred to.

"Her friend then indicated, he had approached her as well. When she also worked for the company. When she refused to provide the information he requested, he got her fired. The first gal told her friend she should have sued for wrongful termination. But her friend seemed really afraid of this guy, and said she just forgot about it and found herself a better job."

"Did you get the name of the company they worked for?"

Anderson nodded. "Yes. Later in the conversation, the one who'd been telling the story says: I tell you what, I hate that rag head. If it weren't for the fact the benefits are so great at Eagle I'd tell him to stuff it, and quit today."

Susan Capri raised both eyebrows. "Eagle Technologies?"

"Yes. They're one of my accounts Miss Capri. They make precision triggers that can be used with detonators; the type used in nuclear weapons."

"You're very well informed Mr. Anderson. What's your security clearance?"

"I told you I'm a Loss Control Consultant for an insurance company. I read technical data all the time. But it's not *my* security clearance I would be concerned about if I were you Miss Capri. It's Mr. Hetini's and *his* friends."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Harold Reid kissing and sucking the nipples of her full round breasts awakened Susan Capri. She resisted a momentary urge to knee him hard in the groin. Not that Harry was all bad, she thought, as she gradually became aroused. He kept himself in pretty good shape. Was clean, gentle, and loved to screw her brains out as often as she'd let him. But nurturing their relationship was just part of the long, deep cover job, and it had paid off well in the trust he'd placed in her, and the intelligence she'd gained.

Unfortunately, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> were forcing an early conclusion to the operation, as the FBI was now more concerned about arresting suspects than following the pipeline to its ultimate end.

Her initial assessment of Ronald Anderson, so many years before, had been that he was just another wanna be secret agent, an FBI groupie. Still, she'd gone through the motions. And low and behold, it had paid off. She took a deep breath, and let out a long sigh.

"Does that feel good, Baby?" Harry asked, taking her sigh as a sign she was heating up.

"Oh yeah, Harry, oh.. yeah. You're the greatest, Sweetie."

Could she return to a normal life? The truth was she enjoyed the feeling of power she got from manipulation. She wondered if she could ever again have a legitimate relationship. There'd be constant turmoil with a strong man. Disrespect for any who were weak, and too easily manipulated.

Harry began to gently stroke her inner thighs, brushing lightly against the downy fur between her legs. The nipple he'd suckled had turned deliciously hard. Soon he began to slide his lips along her stomach, while his soft hands gently massaged her breasts. He lingered awhile just above the rapidly moistening object of his desire.

Her breathing deepened, and her heart leaped as Harry's tongue worked its magic. And when at last he entered her, thrusting a member so engorged that many smaller women would have cried out in pain, she was glad she'd restrained her errant knee. She soon forgot this was supposed to be strictly business. All she knew was that coming over and over was wonderful.

#

Jim Richards eased down on the accelerator, gradually closing the gap between himself and Michael O'Donnegan. They'd soon enter Charleston, South Carolina. He didn't want to lose sight of the Tahoe in the late afternoon commute traffic. Earlier that day, O'Donnegan had stopped at a travel agency in the town of Columbia. Jim Richards had called Sue Bristol; she quickly researched tickets originating from the agency during the time period Michael O'Donnegan was inside. She then arranged with THI Central for surveillance teams to cover O'Donnegan's planned route of travel, since Jim Richards' assignment was to assure the Tahoe was safely placed aboard ship.

#

At five-thirty in the evening, Michael O'Donnegan pulled into the driveway of Harold Reid Motors. The sun was setting; it cast a warm glow across the triple rows of parked automobiles, and reflected off the tall plate glass windows surrounding the new car showroom. O'Donnegan was shown to Harold Reid's office.

"Mr. Michaels." Reid said with a grin and a wink that implied: *I know Paul Michaels is not your real name, but we'll keep up the pretense.* "What can I do for you?"

"I've a Tahoe I need to ship... to Holland." O'Donnegan replied.

"Certainly," Reid said. "No problem at all."

"I'll also need three thousand dollars cash." O'Donnegan held Reid's gaze with his ice blue eyes.

Harold Reid raised an eyebrow. "The shipping charge is thirty-five hundred dollars. What do you have that I need, or can sell, worth sixty-five hundred dollars?"

Michael O'Donnegan smiled slowly. "Six UZI micro submachine guns."

Reid's eyes opened a little wider. "Okay, that takes care of five thousand. What about the other fifteen hundred?"

"I thought you were one of us." O'Donnegan said tersely, irritated as much by driving fatigue as Harold Reid's unexpected response. "The weapons are worth two thousand on the street."

Reid smiled but his eyes remained serious. "I don't sell arms, Mr. Michaels. I sell cars. I have to move those weapons through a dealer. If I'm lucky I'll get eight, maybe nine hundred each. What the dumb schmuck on the street pays is meaningless to me."

O'Donnegan scowled, "I've also got an M-16A, and a forty-five long barrel fitted with a Sionics suppresser."

Reid nodded and thought for a moment. "Okay, you've got your money. Where's the Tahoe?"

#

O'Donnegan pulled the Tahoe around behind the showroom and onto a vehicle scale. It was within 100 pounds of factory weight. They returned to Reid's office.

#

"So where you headed now?" Reid asked.

"The airport. Can someone give me a lift?"

"Certainly. I'll have Kathy drive you over."

Harold Reid removed a cash box from the lower left hand drawer of his desk. He opened it, and took out three thousand dollars in one hundred dollar bills.

#

In Dallas, Michael O'Donnegan deplaned with a large group of people. He was observed walking down an access ramp towards the hub where he'd catch his next flight. One of the THI associates assigned to maintain surveillance in Dallas passed O'Donnegan off to a colleague, waiting farther along the concourse. The second associate identified O'Donnegan as he headed for the Los Angeles departure gate, and passed word via an ultra high frequency radio link to yet a third associate in the gate lounge, where he waited to board the same flight.

Michael O'Donnegan continued down the concourse towards the Los Angeles departure gate, but as the group he was walking with merged with other passengers from other flights, he eased his way to the edge of the crowd, then slipped off in a different direction.

Later, O'Donnegan paid cash for a ticket to Phoenix, under the name of Fred Johnson. He had just enough time to call ahead, and make reservations at the Registry Resort in Scottsdale. It would be a well-deserved respite, he thought, no one would be looking for him there. A pang of concern crossed his mind, he did not like leaving the Tahoe, and the weapons, totally in the hands of Harold Reid. But there was no way for him to stay with them all the way to Ireland. Sean had used Reid's services successfully in the past, and apparently trusted him. O'Donnegan sighed, there were times when the only choice was to follow orders. He'd done as he'd been directed, there was no more he could do to assure the arms would reach their destination. But if they did not, Harold Reid would pay, of this O'Donnegan was certain.

#

At twelve midnight, Jim Richards learned the Dallas surveillance team had lost Michael O'Donnegan. He was livid. How in the hell could those idiots have blown something so simple. Ty Harding would be even more frustrated. A review would be conducted, additional training provided, procedures changed. Heads might roll. But the fact would remain, their target had disappeared.

Jim Richards fumed, every time he had to depend on someone else to cover his target they screwed up. Story of his life for Christ's sake. And now he was stuck in Charleston, baby-sitting a gray Tahoe full of contraband weapons.

He glanced at the telephone. Then looked at his watch: 21:30 in California. He dialed Annie's number. The phone rang several times. He wondered if she were out for the evening? Just as he was about to hang up she answered. "How you doing?" He asked.

"Jim, I've missed you so much. Where are you?"

"South Carolina."

"No. You're kidding?"

"Got any plans for the weekend?"

"Nothing I can't change. Why?"

"Can you be at the airport in two hours?"

"Sure." There was curiosity in her voice.

"Your ticket will be waiting for you at the American Airlines counter. I'll meet you at Charleston Airport tomorrow morning."

"You're crazy, you know that?" She laughed.

"Are you coming?"

"Of course."

#

They spent the morning enjoying the Charleston area, and the afternoon appreciating each other. Now, as their waiter served dessert, their conversation turned to the future.

"I've been doing a lot of soul searching, Jim. And I think I've made some decisions about us. I know you won't give up your career. I've come to accept that, but I fear one day you won't return from one of your trips. I lost my father that way, as you know. One day he left on an assignment, and never came back. The Navy would not confirm his death, and my mother went to her grave believing he'd return one day."

Annie's eyes filled with tears, but she did not break down. Jim Richards reached out, and took her hand.

"I'm so sorry, Sweetheart." He said. "Before I left on my assignment to Europe, I asked Ty to do whatever he could to find the answer to that question for you."

Annie nodded her head. "I know you did, and I thank you." She paused a moment. "Ty somehow managed to get Dad's file. It said he'd died trying to save a teammate. They were in combat somewhere, some quiet action no one will ever hear about. At least you cared enough to find out the truth for me. That's more than anyone gave my mom." She brought Jim Richards' fingers to her lips.

Richards said: "Ty and I have spoken about making some changes in my assignments, reducing my exposure."

Annie shook her head. "No, my love. I know you too well for that. You'll always be the one who jumps into the fray, especially now with the country at war. I don't expect, nor really want you to change. The person you are is who I fell in love with, the qualities that attracted me to you in the first place."

She held his hand to her cheek. "But I've made Ty promise me, I'll be the first to know if, God forbid, anything should happen to you. I've put my demons behind me now; I only hope you still want me as much as I want you."

#

Jim Richards eased out from under the covers taking care not to awaken Annie. It was 04:45 as he brushed his teeth, then dressed in a T-Shirt, blue jeans and running shoes. He left the hotel, carrying the portable up link computer with him.



Richards switched on the laptop before leaving the hotel parking lot. The locator indicated the Tahoe had not yet left the dealership.

The parking places on the street directly across from the showroom were all vacant, except for one near the corner. It contained a delivery truck with graphics and advertising on its sides: Milk and Dairy, delivered to your door.

Jim Richards frowned. Why would a dairy van, which should be out on its route at this time of the morning, be parked across the street from Harold Reid Motors?

Jim Richards turned right at the corner, and continued up the side street. He looked to his right, as he passed the driveway that ran behind the showroom. The Tahoe was number two in a column of five vehicles parked nose to tail in single file. He doused his lights, then parked far enough up the side street he could not be seen by anyone who might be watching from the dairy van.

Jim Richards got out of rental car. Then jogged north around the block, and came up silently behind the delivery van. He allowed his breathing to return to normal before taking a pair of mini-binoculars from his jacket, and carefully surveying the vehicle. He noted the license plate number. Then scanned the van's body. It soon became obvious the truck had never been used on a dairy route. There were none of the characteristic dents and scratches found on all such active vehicles.

He watched for several minutes. As time went by, he noted the truck seemed to shift from side to side almost imperceptibly, which clearly indicated someone was inside. Probably more than one person.

He returned to the rented Explorer, and accessed THI command central via his computer. Ten minutes later his request came back down the digital flyway, the truck was owned by a leasing company. It would take some time to find out more about the vehicle.

At 07:00 a car carrier rattled into Reid's driveway. Its metal ramps clattering along behind the tractor. Devoid of vehicles the carrier ramps and chains were a wonder of cacophonous sound. It was soon loaded, and on its way by 09:00. Jim Richards followed at a discreet distance. It took approximately forty-five minutes to reach the Charleston embarcadero.

Jim Richards parked the Explorer parallel to the curb, then crossed the street, and walked onto the wharf. No one challenged him as he slipped behind a stack of containerized cargo. Richards was a consummate actor, always able to blend into his surroundings. Ty Harding had once called him the *invisible man* because of his unique ability to get close to a target without being seen.

From his concealed position, he was able to watch the receiving process. He stayed until the gray Tahoe he'd followed for so many miles, had been run up the loading ramp and into the ship's hold. He then eased quietly away.

Outside, he strolled along the sidewalk to a chain link fence that over looked the wharf where the freighter was docked. Jim Richards surreptitiously gazed about to assure he was not being watched, before slipping behind a nearby dumpster. Gradually making his way forward between the wall of the warehouse and the dumpster, he found a spot from which he could scan the building directly across the street from the warehouse. Using his binoculars, it took nearly five minutes to locate the observation post. Behind windows on the third floor of the building, he noted two men. One peered through tripod mounted military binoculars. Another operated a long lens camera.

When he returned to the hotel, he reported his observations directly to Ty Harding. The Tahoe, specifically, or coincidentally in conjunction with some other operation run on Harold Reid Motors, was being watched, most likely, by the FBI.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Michael O'Donnegan packed his overnight bag in preparation for check out from the Marriott Resort. He felt completely relaxed and refreshed. And actually looked forward to shepherding the weapons from Germany, on the last leg of their journey to Ireland.

Departing the United States would not be difficult, but it would be time consuming. First there was the need for transportation to Mexico. Then a flight to Cuba, and a brief stop over for public relations. The assistance of Cuba in the IRA's battle against the British government was much appreciated. From Havana, it would be on to Eastern Europe, and another round of public relations with IRA's *friends*. And finally, surreptitious entry into Germany.

O'Donnegan had not conferred with Sean about the change in his travel plans, because the travel instructions encoded in the message he'd received at the Nashville Marriott were in fact a contingency option, should the longer route prove unfeasible, or if the southern border of the United States was being closely watched. But Michael felt certain he'd allowed enough time to pass. His trackers would assume he'd already left the country. He'd watched the national and local newscasts each night, border focus was on men of Middle Eastern descent trying to enter the country. Not fair skinned Caucasians leaving.

Almost as an afterthought, before going down to the lobby to check out, he switched on CNN, thinking it would be a good idea to catch up on what was going on in the world.

*"Federal Bureau of Investigation agents arrested Harold Reid, a prominent Charleston automobile dealer, for conspiracy to arm known terrorists. And possession of automatic weapons. The FBI also confiscated hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of high tech circuitry capable of being used for triggering timed explosives. Many of these items were concealed in the bodywork of automobiles and trucks Harold Reid was shipping to Europe.*

*In Holland, France, Germany and Great Britain, other arrests were made as Interpol agents rounded up nearly one hundred suspects. Alleged members of the same terrorist organization. These arrests culminate an investigation of several international terrorist groups, an investigation that spanned the United States of America from coast to coast, and across the Atlantic ocean to Europe."*

Michael O'Donnegan was dumb struck. He absentmindedly sat down on the edge of the king-size bed, as he stared in disbelief at the news footage. How could this have happened? His shock turned to rage as the enormity of the situation dawned on him. He shook his head, gnashed his teeth, and pounded his fist so hard onto his right thigh that he actually bruised himself. All the time, money, and effort...wasted.

#

The resort's bill came to twenty-seven hundred dollars. Michael O'Donnegan decided he'd need to husband his cash, so he used the credit card James Flaherty had given him.

#

At THI Central an audible alarm went off as the card came up on a CRT monitor dedicated and locked into credit card transactions nationwide. No other warnings were issued. As far as the vendor was concerned, everything looked normal.

THI associates in Phoenix were called. It took less than twenty minutes for Robert Hatfield to reach The Marriott Resort. By then, Michael O'Donnegan had already left for the airport. Or so the checkout clerk told Hatfield.

#

Robert Hatfield began his search at the Southwest Airlines counter. It took nearly two hours to cover every out-bound flight. By the time he was through, he was certain Michael O'Donnegan had not taken a flight out of Phoenix.

#

The Pacific's Edge Restaurant at The Highlands Inn, Carmel serves an excellent Duck L'orange, with wild rice and baby carrots. Jim Richards and Annie sat alone in the southwest corner of the dining room, high above the crashing ocean surf. Annie gazed at the flawless one-carat diamond, flanked by three equally pure one-quarter carat stones on the third finger of her left hand. Then she looked into Jim Richards' eyes, her own glistening in the candle light, more radiant than the diamonds she now wore. Their hands met. "You are really quite romantic, you know? And I love you so much." Her voice deepened with emotion, as she squeezed his hand tightly.

Jim Richards smiled. "I was afraid you might not say yes."

"Not a chance." She raised his hand to her lips and kissed his fingers.

#

Jim Richards drove north towards Pacific Grove. He was pleased Brent Lansing had decided to accept Ty Harding's offer. It would solve a number of problems, and bring him back under their direct control. The FBI had quickly made the connection to the St. Emilion, as a result of James Flaherty's plea bargain. His arrest, part of the larger investigation that had netted the Reid automobile dealership. But with Arnold Batiste out of country, living under an assumed identity. The St. Emilion a pile of charcoal, and Harry Carroon dead lead, the FBI would have to be satisfied with the publicity gained from the arrests made. When all was said and done, IRA arms were only a side issue in the larger picture of world terrorism.

#

As Jim Richards entered Pacific Grove, his cellular phone hummed. He pressed the hands free pick-up button. It was Sue Bristol. "The California Highway Patrol has located the Ford LTD, Michael O'Donnegan is believed to have bought in Arizona. It was found in the parking lot of Keefer's Restaurant in King City, around eight this morning. We just got word."

"Anything reported stolen in that area?" Jim Richards asked.

"No." Sue replied "But the body of a local farm laborer was found in a ditch just off highway one oh one, four miles north of King City. The county Sheriff's checking it out right now."

Jim Richards automatically increased pressure on the Thunderbird's accelerator as he turned right heading for Brent Lansing's house. "Ten to one O'Donnegan's responsible," Richards said. "And King City is only about an hour and a half from here. Patch me through to Lansing's house."

Sue Bristol set up a conference call. Jim Richards could hear the beeps as the auto-dialer accessed Brent Lansing's number. There was no answer.

"Do you want me to call the local authorities?" Sue asked.

"Not yet. If O'Donnegan's in there, the police will walk into a fuselage of bullets. There's no way they can handle this without tipping him off. Are the transmitters still hot inside the house?"

"We've got one left, the battery's weak but it's still transmitting. It's in the living room nearest the repeater. The rest are dead." Sue replied.

"Patch me into that one, and stay on the line."

#

Brent Lansing turned left off Lighthouse Drive, then headed east on Forest Avenue. He felt good about deciding to accept THI's offer. He'd discussed it with Carla. As he pulled into the driveway, he saw Carla's old silver Accord parked behind the house. He wanted her to sit in on the meeting with Jim Richards. There'd be no secrets between them now. At least not as far as the basics were concerned. There would of necessity be other secrets, but that came with the territory.

Brent Lansing climbed the rear steps to his house. He carried in his hands the fresh steamed crab and shelled shrimp he'd picked up at the wharf. Carla wanted to do a salad with Scampi for them. It would be a pleasant way to handle the formalities of consummating an arrangement that would alter their lives for a long time to come.

He set the packages of seafood down on the counter next to the sink, then entered the dining room. He called out her name. As he turned the corner of the dining table, he saw that the telephone cord in the living room had been disconnected, the end lying on the carpet. Lansing stepped over to it, and bent down to reinsert the connector. Carla must have caught it while vacuuming, and was unaware it had detached.

As Brent Lansing finished reattaching the telephone cord. Michael O'Donnegan stepped to the center of the archway that lead from the dining room into the living room. He held a .45 caliber automatic to the side of Carla's head. The gun's original ejector slide substituted for one that was much shorter. Attached to the protruding barrel was a homemade muzzle blast suppresser.

Carla's face was pale. She looked terrified. And nearly fell into Brent's arms, as Michael O'Donnegan shoved her over to him. Then leveled the ugly bulbous nose of the homemade silencer.

After a moment of stunned silence, Lansing asked. "Who the hell are you?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. What matters is whether I do you quickly, or slowly." O'Donnegan replied.

#

Jim Richards turned left on Juniper Street. From the speaker in his Thunderbird, he could clearly hear Lansing and O'Donnegan's words. His mouth went dry. There was the taste of copper. A too familiar taste. The taste of fear for someone else's safety. His heart pounded, adrenaline surged through his body.

"Jim, do you want me to call the authorities now?" Sue Bristol asked over the hands free telephone link.

Jim Richards was less than a half block from Brent Lansing's home. "Yes, but warn them there are armed men inside. Make certain they understand who I am, and that I'm armed as well. And for God's sake describe the hostages clearly."

#

Brent Lansing tried to swallow, but there was no saliva to lubricate his throat. The back of his tongue seemed to stick to the roof of his mouth. Carla was trembling. Lansing slowly moved her over to his right, trying to offer some protection with his own body.

"Why?" Lansing asked, trying to gain some time.

Michael O'Donnegan barked a cruel laugh. "Oh that's a good one." He shook his head derisively. "Don't give me that crap, you bloody bastard. Did you think you could fuck up the delivery, and there'd be no reprisal?"

Brent Lansing's only thought was of how he could protect Carla. "Jesus. Leave the girl out of this, she had nothing to do with it."

But O'Donnegan just shook his head slowly.

Lansing knew he had only one option. With a sweep of his right arm he thrust Carla behind him, pushing her towards the front door and propelling himself towards the IRA terrorist.

A forty-five-caliber bullet travels at approximately nine hundred and thirty two feet per second. Its velocity would be somewhat reduced by the silencer. There was no way it could pass completely through his body to strike Carla. Somehow he had to stay on his feet, and take at least three rounds. Each with the impact of an eight-pound sledgehammer traveling at sixty miles per hour. And pray that in those last excruciating moments of shock and pain, Carla would have the survival instinct to make it through the front door. Beyond those few moments of time, he could give her nothing.

"Run!" Lansing screamed as he lunged forward. Releasing all his bottled up rage. And steeling himself for the impact of the searing rounds.

#

Several events occurred simultaneously: Michael O'Donnegan swiveled at the sound of shattering glass, and fired at the figure of Jim Richards as he jumped head long through the front window, his leather jacket flung before his face to protect his body from the shards of glass.

As Jim Richards bounced off the sofa and rolled to an upright position, Michael O'Donnegan's bullet caught him in the rib cage. He let out a grunt as the bullet struck. It tore through his lung, then stopped just below his shoulder blade.

The force of the .45 caliber round slammed Jim Richards against a bookcase that was to the right of the sofa, causing him to discharge his own weapon involuntarily. His bullet struck Michael O'Donnegan on the outside of his right shoulder, tearing across the deltoid muscle, spinning O'Donnegan to the right. His weapon flew from his hand, as he momentarily lost all grip strength.

Brent Lansing continued the headlong lunge begun just as Jim Richard smashed through the front window. But Lansing's lunge missed the IRA terrorist completely, as Michael O'Donnegan spun away from the impact of Jim Richards' bullet.

Brent Lansing's momentum carried him forward into the dining room. He ran into the back of a chair. Crashed head over heels onto the dining room table. Then skittered across and onto a chair on its far side. The chair in turn collapsed, in a crunch of splintered wood and torn fabric.

#

Michael O'Donnegan recovered his balance first. He looked around in vain for his weapon, but missed it lying on the floor. He saw Jim Richards struggling to regain his balance in spite of his shock and pain.

#

The gun in Richards' hand felt like a hundred pound dumbbell, as he tried with all his will to raise and fire it. He staggered forward, pushing off the bookcase. It seemed to grasp at him, like the hands of a thousand drowning men.

#

Michael O'Donnegan spun once, and heel kicked Jim Richards square in the chest. Driving him back against the bookcase. Knocking the gun from his hand, and the breath from his body.

#

Brent Lansing dove for Michael O'Donnegan's weapon, where it lay on the living room floor. He seized the gun. Then pulled off two quick rounds as Michael O'Donnegan leaped through the shattered front window, and ran for his life towards the old Chevrolet Impala he'd stolen from the farm laborer he'd killed near King City.

Lansing scrambled to his feet. He glanced at Carla. Asked if she were all right? She nodded a terrified "Yes." He told her to call nine-one-one. Then he too jumped through the window, in pursuit of Michael O'Donnegan.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The engine was still running in Jim Richards' Thunderbird. Brent Lansing did not hesitate. He leaped behind the steering wheel, as Michael O'Donnegan squealed off in the old Impala.

"Jim, is that you?" Sue Bristol asked over the car's speakerphone. "What's happening? I heard shots fired. Are you all right? Jim? The police are on their way. Do you need an ambulance?"

Brent Lansing could hear her, but had no idea of who she was, or where she might be located. Apparently close enough to hear the gunfire. He ignored her queries. He turned right onto Lighthouse Drive. Pressed the accelerator to the floor. And tried desperately to close the distance between himself and Michael O'Donnegan.

#

Carla staggered to the telephone. Her mind in a daze. She managed to dial nine-one-one, crying for help and an ambulance. Then leaving the phone off the hook, she stumbled across the room to where Jim Richards lay. She felt numb all over. Her ears rang from the loud report of Jim Richards' unsilenced gun. But O'Donnegan's had sounded like a firecracker set off under a pillow.

#

Jim Richards knew he was losing consciousness. He tried to gain control of the pain. Breathing seemed impossible, unbearable. He gasped for air, but it would not fill his lungs. The pain seemed to spread through out his chest.

#

Carla knelt at Jim Richards' side. There was blood everywhere. The entire front and back of the light blue Polo shirt he wore was saturated. She marveled at how dark the blood looked. Not bright red, as so often portrayed in movies.

Jim Richards was like a wounded animal, refusing to give up the fight. He struggled to get to his feet. Twisted this way and that, grunting in his in his torment. His foot would gain a momentary purchase, then slip from under him on the ooze that was spreading across the floor.

Carla tore the sweatshirt off her own body, which left her naked from the waist up. She pressed it against Jim Richards' side in an attempt to slow the bleeding. He tried to pull away from her, but she held him close. Whispered to him to stay calm.

To Carla, her cries for help to the police outside seemed to come from somewhere else. Her voice horse from the force she put behind it. She looked down at Jim Richards, and saw his eyes begin to lose their focus. Oh God, she thought, he's dying. She put her lips to his mouth, willing life back into his body, praying all the while the stupid bastards outside would come to her aid.

#

Jim Richards felt Carla's warm breath expanding his injured lungs, as darkness seemed to slide in from the edges of his vision the way a camera lens slowly closes down. He could sense her lips on his, and wondered how strange it was: An erotic dream here at the end of his life. There was no pain now.

Suddenly, something cold was on his face. Oxygen seemed to flow into his lungs without his making the effort to breathe. His mind cleared a little, the camera lens opened a bit wider. He saw Carla pulled away by an apparition in some sort of uniform. She held a blood soaked



sweatshirt in one hand, her round young breasts almost teasing him. He didn't understand what was happening. The images that fluttered across his consciousness were disjointed. Maybe he was already dead. And this was the last gasp of a brain struggling to eke out a few more precious moments of life. He sank into dark oblivion as the vision of Carla rose above him, and drifted away.

#

Carla stepped back into the middle of the living room. She stared down at Jim Richards. She knew he was gone. So much blood. So pale. A coat was put around her, and she was led farther away from the carnage. Into the dining room, as para-medics scrambled to get Jim Richards onto a stretcher. At last, he was carried to a waiting ambulance, an oxygen mask over his face, and an IV in his arm.

Carla began to cry. Then, suddenly she remembered Brent, her tears stopped. She grasped the officer's arm tightly, digging her fingers into his uniform shirt. "Brent. Where is he? He went after the gunman. Please, help him."

#

Michael O'Donnegan tore north along Lighthouse Drive, weaving through traffic as he careened towards the Monterey harbor. He had no idea of where he was going. He'd been so bent on revenge, he'd made no plan for escape afterward. He'd presumed there'd be no interference.

He ran through red lights. Drove at oncoming traffic, the accelerator pressed to the floor. The old V-8 roared in protest, but slung the bent and rusted Impala along at eighty miles per hour. A last glorious gasp of the once fabled engine.

Brent Lansing kept his foot on the accelerator as well. Gaining precious feet on Michael O'Donnegan at every opportunity, but wary of striking some innocent bystander. The two vehicles roared around the sweeping turn that borders Monterey harbor near the old Coast Guard Station. Past the Monterey Presidio. And down into the tunnel under Pacific Avenue. Sounds of exhaust and strained engines echoing of the tunnel's tiled walls.

Exiting the north end of the tunnel, Michael O'Donnegan managed to avoid a near collision, as he fish tailed around a truck crossing Del Monte Boulevard.

Brent Lansing was forced to slow, as a senior citizens' mini bus crossed his path. The old folks inside shook their heads incredulously at the affront to their otherwise sedate and orderly ride to Fisherman's Wharf. The mini bus passed, and Brent Lansing regained sight of Michael O'Donnegan, a half block ahead.

As Michael O'Donnegan approached Figueroa Street, his mind began to clear. Ahead, no more than two miles farther, was the on ramp to Highway One.

Suddenly, his thoughts of escape were dashed. The old engine blew an aging rod right through its faded green, sheet metal hood. The rod sailed into the air, then spun end over end, to land bouncing and clanging onto the asphalt roadway. The ancient V-8 shook and shuttered in protest. It bounced up and down on its engine mounts. And spewed oil from its punctured valve cover, like an arterial wound in the neck of bull elephant. The oil ran down, and over, the super heated exhaust manifold. Instantly, it vaporized into a cloud of blue smoke that poured out behind the wounded Chevrolet Impala.

Michael O'Donnegan spun the Impala's steering wheel left, then skidded to a halt at the entrance to the commercial fishing wharf. As the old car squealed to a stop, the vaporized lubricant ignited, sending orange flames licking up through the space between the hood and the right front fender. Raw fuel, leaking from the carburetor's float reservoir went next. In the time it

took Michael O'Donnegan to put fifteen feet between himself and the burning car, the vaporized gasoline blew the entire hood and most of the left front fender, off the old coupe.

Brent Lansing skidded to a stop twenty feet behind O'Donnegan's car, just as the fuel went off. He heard the muffled wump of exploding gasoline. And watched with sordid fascination as the Impala's hood rose into the air, turned over twice, then slammed down onto the hood of Jim Richards' titanium gray Thunderbird. The metallic crash, catapulted Brent Lansing out of his momentary catatonic state.

Michael O'Donnegan was one third of the way down the pier, when Brent Lansing jumped from the Thunderbird. Where O'Donnegan thought he was going, was beyond Lansing's comprehension. Maybe he thought he'd just leap into the ocean, and swim all the way back to Ireland. Or maybe he wasn't thinking at all.

As Michael O'Donnegan jumped from the burning Impala, he pulled a Mossberg pump action twelve-gauge shotgun from behind the front seat. Another *present* from the Yuma, Arizona gun store he'd burglarized. As he ran down the old wooden wharf with Brent Lansing in pursuit, he slammed the cocking mechanism back, and rammed a round of double O buckshot into the chamber.

There were few people on the commercial fishing wharf at this time of day. The fishing boats had berthed hours earlier, unloaded their day's catch. A few old souls fished over the railing, and a young couple strolled hand in hand.

As Lansing gained ground on Michael O'Donnegan, the Monterey police roared onto the pier behind the two running men. Suddenly, O'Donnegan stopped. Spun to his left. And brought the Mossberg to bear on Brent Lansing.

But Lansing did not hesitate to sacrifice his body to the rough wood and asphalt decking. He dove to the right, just as Michael O'Donnegan cut loose with a blast from the old *alley sweeper*. Fifteen, thirty-caliber lead pellets ricocheted off black asphalt, only to careen harmlessly in to the water beyond sending miniature geysers of sea water upward upon impact.

Michael O'Donnegan pumped another round into the chamber, and began to swing the barrel towards Brent Lansing.

Lansing rolled to a prone position, and returned fire. Unfortunately, his headlong leap had jammed the home made silencer, still attached to the auto loading pistol, to one side. The bullet leaving the .45's barrel, blew the silencer to pieces in a splattering of grease, steel wool, and plastic shards. And thus, the deflected round missed Michael O'Donnegan by inches. It slammed harmlessly into the wooden wall of the old bait shop.

Brent Lansing rolled again. He tore at the remaining parts of the silencer in a desperate attempt to clear his sight picture.

Michael O'Donnegan's second blast would have taken Lansing, but the wound he'd received earlier from Jim Richards shot, hampered his mobility. The torn deltoid muscle adversely affected his aim. Again his pellets went wide.

At last, the Monterey police roared up in their patrol cars. One officer swung open the right hand door, then used it as cover. He laid his weapon through the open window. "Freeze!" His order directed at Brent Lansing, who'd rolled against the wall of the bait shop, in reaction to Michael O'Donnegan's latest attempt to kill him. And at Michael O'Donnegan, as he pumped another round into the firing chamber of the Mossberg.

Other officers alighted from their vehicles, with weapons aimed at Michael O'Donnegan.

But Michael O'Donnegan was not about to obey their commands. He opened fire. An officer crouched behind the door of his squad car, took three glancing pellets to the neck and forehead. The pain and surprise caused his hand to jerk upward, banging it into the door's window frame. A bullet discharged involuntarily from his weapon, and took an arching trajectory that sent it a half-mile out over the Pacific Ocean.

Michael O'Donnegan spun right, and headed towards the pier's railing in full out run for his life.

The other officers opened up with Berretta nine-millimeter automatics. The first six rounds coming out so fast, the reports sounded like a single roar rather than individual shots. None of the rounds found Michael O'Donnegan, as he dove to the deck, rolled, and came up running again. He careened wildly towards the pier's wood railing.

The police swept their weapons in pursuit, and continued to fire. Rounds slammed into the wall of the old bait building. Crashed into the pier's decking. Ripped into the pier's railing. Split and splintered the dry aged wood. And one round found its way into Michael O'Donnegan's left hamstring.

He yelped involuntarily. His upper torso snapping upright. His head thrown back, as if it were attached to a leash someone had yanked. His left hand shot downward, grasping the back of his leg. He spun. Stumbled. And crashed backwards through the old decrepit, wood railing. Its strength and integrity defeated by time. And more recently, by several bullets. The railing gave way with a snap and a crunch. A shaft of wood split into a long triangular spear.

Michael O'Donnegan sailed out over the water. Launched by his own momentum from the decking of the pier that stood thirty feet above the dark, green harbor. He fell, cartwheeling once as his legs described an arc away from the pier. The shot gun wildly spinning away from his tumbling body.

Directly below the spot where Michael O'Donnegan went through the railing, was a floating dock moored to the pilings of the old wharf. As he fell, the splintered railing that preceded him, turned until its point was aimed skyward. It landed butt end down onto the surface of the floating dock. Michael O'Donnegan saw it hit. And in a compressed instant of time, knew his fate. Then experienced it, even as his brain formed the patterns of a scream.

He slammed down onto the point of the shaft at just the instant it momentarily stood in perfect balance. Before kinetic recoil would have driven it back into the air, and hence harmlessly into the water.

The shaft entered Michael O'Donnegan's stomach. Was driven by his weight through the large and small intestine. Then upward through his lungs, to exit just to the left of his spine below the clavicle. For a long terrible moment, after his feet had slammed down onto the floating dock, he stood frozen in time. A grotesquely skewered tripod.

Michael O'Donnegan's brain activated his vocal cords, but only spasms of air could be forced from the ripped tissue of his punctured diaphragm. Yet in his mind he seemed to scream forever. An agonizing eternity of pain. Until he lost all consciousness as a gurgling death overtook him.

But to those with the stomach to watch, he simply sagged over, toppling slowly into the dark, cold waters of Monterey bay.

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Jim Richards lay in the intensive care unit of the Monterey Community Hospital. Tubes and wires seemed to sprout from every quadrant of his body. Oxygen was forced through his

nostrils. Monitoring equipment beeped in chorus with his labored breathing. He was a mass of swollen glass cuts, and impact bruises. Some of his wounds were dressed, others only coated with an antibacterial salve.

Annie sat at his bedside grasping his hand in hers, praying he would not give up the fight. Every now and then he would come to consciousness. His eyes would flutter open. And he would look at her, but he did not seem to recognize her.

The doctors had given him a fifty-fifty chance.

Brent Lansing quietly entered the room, and walked to Jim Richards' side. He looked down at Annie, and nodded to her in sympathy. They'd met in the hall of the hospital earlier, while Jim Richards was under going five hours of surgery to remove bullet fragments, and to patch his damaged chest.

Jim Richards came up from the dark pit where his mind wandered down canyons filled with dreams of pain and suffering. He recognized Annie, felt sorry for her. She looked so distraught, dark circles of stress and tension surrounded her beautiful green eyes.

He also recognized Brent Lansing, and tried to ask about Michael O'Donnegan, but the words would not escape the prison of his parched and cracked lips.

Brent Lansing locked onto Jim Richards' eyes, and leaned close to ear. "He's dead."

Jim Richards seemed to understand. He blinked once. Then looked once more with love at Annie.

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## Epilogue

The tropical sun slowly set into an azure blue ocean. The air, moist and fragrant. Waves crashed on the rocks. Sending a cooling mist of sea spray upward, where prevailing winds brought it ashore.

Two rattan lounge chairs were placed at the cliff's edge, overlooking the sea. They were spaced closely, so their occupants could hold each other's hand. A wide lawn ran from the cliff, back to the veranda of a single story, ranch style home. Its blue tile roof matched the ocean's color.

Two people sat side by side in the chairs. The woman had thick auburn hair. And deep green eyes. She was younger, clearly younger, than the man who sat at her side. He seemed aged, not so much by years, but more by the events he'd lived through.

When the sun had set at last, the woman arose from her chair. She helped the man, who with great effort struggled to gain his feet. He stood for a moment, slightly bent. Regaining his breath slowly, as if the mere effort to stand was nearly more than he could manage.

Gradually, he straightened himself. And with the assistance of the woman, slowly, though with dignity and determination, made his way towards the house by the sea.

In the distance, music of guitars and ukuleles drifted on the evening breeze from an elegant hotel, a mile or so upwind.

When they reached the three wide steps that led to the veranda. They both paused for a moment, and turned to gaze at the purple and gold cumulus clouds that sailed the western horizon. A stand of palms, rattled gently in the warm evening breeze.

"I suppose," he said. "I should start tomorrow. They would make good books, you know? The adventures, I mean. I wonder where I should start?"

The woman smiled warmly, and gazed into his eyes. "I would start at the beginning, Jim. It's usually best. But please... try not to let them end too soon."