

INVADERS

Prelude.

“Attention!”

“Captain Margaret O’Toole, front and center.”

The Secretary of the U.S. Navy stood and moved to the dais. Marine Captain O’Toole crossed to the Secretary, holding her body in perfect stance, at attention.

“At ease, Captain.”

At 5’10,” Maggie radiated health and vitality. She was 30 years old, blue eyes offsetting her dark Irish black hair. She relaxed her body a bit, focusing intently on the Secretary.

He started to speak, his firm and confident voice communicating his power. “Before I read the formal citation of your bronze medal award, I wish to say a few personal words of thanks for your service to our nation.”

He continued, “I want to publicly acknowledge your exceptional contributions prior to the action for which you are being honored today. As the Marine provost marshal in Afghanistan, your command solved three major infractions of U.S.

Military Code of Justice. Your personal leadership in recovery of the art objects stolen by two marines and two army officers was exceptional.

“Your being honored by the Afghan government brings credit to you and to the Corps.

“Your team’s recovery of the multimillion dollar embezzlement and the solving of the triple murder of Afghan civilians should have been recognized, as well as your most recent heroic and brilliant capture of the Marine Gang of Five.”

The formal citation followed and then he pinned the bronze medal to the lapel of her jacket. Shaking her hand, he said, “May your retirement be as successful as your Marine career. God bless you and God Bless the United States of America.”

Chapter 1.

Santa Cruz, California

Maggie reached for her cell phone.

“Good afternoon. May I speak to Ms. O’Toole?”

“Speaking.”

“Please hold for the Mayor.”

Maggie was about to ask which mayor when she recognized the voice. “Maggie, this is Mitch. I heard you retired and that you had come back home. Are you planning on staying?”

“Hi, Mitch. It is great to hear your voice. I’m not sure about the future, but I did want to spend some time with my dad.”

“Welcome home. Any chance you could make time for lunch on the pier, tomorrow?”

“Absolutely. I haven’t had a good seafood meal for over two years. How are Beth and the children?”

“They are doing well. Beth also wants to have you and your dad for an old fashioned Sunday after-church dinner this weekend.”

“I’ll talk with Dad and let you know tomorrow.”

She replaced the phone and lay back on the lounge. She looked up into the trees. *“Twenty more minutes of rays before old Sol hides behind the tree tops.”*

As the shadow began to cover her long legs, she reached for her halter, pulled it to cover her breasts, then reached for the light blanket to ward out the cool air while she opted for another fifteen minutes of the ocean air that moved up Soquel Creek every afternoon at this hour.

When she finally decided to go into the house, she paused to thank God for her loving dad. He had opened the house, which had been closed and uninhabited for three years. He had removed all the sheets that had covered the furniture, washed them at home and stored them in her guest bedroom closet.

She was pleased that he had hired outside help to vacuum, dust the furniture and wash the windows. She only wished that the cleaning woman had not used Lemon Pledge! Meanwhile, she had already opened the doors and windows to air out the house.

Since Dad was out of town for a day, she was eating alone tonight. She opted for scrambled eggs and bacon. But first, crackers & cheese with two shots of scotch.

The usual morning overcast was just moving back over the bay toward the ocean as she parked her car at the edge of the Santa Cruz pier. She was wearing an oversized woolen pullover and some old jeans. She wanted to be up-to-date for the new look that had (according to her dad) swept the Central Coast.

Mitch Bailey rose from the bench in front of the restaurant as she approached, opening his arms wide. “Welcome home, Maggie. You look ravishing, in spite of trying to hide behind those baggy clothes.”

She laughed. “It seems you are hiding behind that beautiful gray suit and blue tie instead of old tweed, the badge of my favorite professor.” Mitch was a tall man, broad shouldered, with a bit of gray hair sprinkling the brown, emphasizing his distinguished look.

Mitch laughed. “That’s what happens when you become a politician.”

Mitch Bailey had been her criminology professor at UC Santa Cruz and then her counselor when she decided to continue in grad school.

They settled down into a booth with a huge window, opened a crack to allow the breeze from the Monterey Bay to waft lightly over them.

The surf was up. There were more than a dozen surfers taking advantage of the moderate waves. The view from their window seat was spectacular, an azure sky serving as a backdrop to the white-capped waves rolling into the shore.

Most of the lunch time was spent catching up. Maggie told her story first.

It was while Mitch was telling about being drafted to run for mayor that his real reason for their get-together came out.

He asked, “How serious are you about working for the Marine Criminal Investigative Service? You seemed more enthusiastic about that than about the FBI or the Treasury Department.”

“It is closer to what I have been doing, and I have had a real offer. The only problem is that I have to start in D.C. I love the West, although I would like something that takes me overseas part of the time. MCIS does offer that possibility.”

“The reason I ask is that the City Executive and I have a problem that you might be able to help solve.”

Maggie’s eyes lit up. “Tell me more.”

“You remember Jud Wright, our police chief. He is nearing retirement and not totally up to the new challenges we face. I agree with Max Steel, our City Executive. He doesn’t want to force a retirement, so when I mentioned that you were coming home, he suggested a possible invite for you to serve as Assistant Chief of Police, in title, but having more responsibility than the title implies.”

“What are the new challenges?”

“It appears that we may have two new rival gangs, one inside the city and one in the county. I am talking gangsters, not youth gangs, although it appears that the kids are being used by professionals.”

“Have you and the county the number of personnel to face this challenge?”

“The City and County Executives have been in discussion with their respective budget committees and seem to have “go” signals for increased personnel and technology.”

“Have you invited in the FBI or notified them?”

“They are aware of the problems, but that is all as of now. So far, other than the budget committees, no others on City Council or the County Supervisors have inkling. Jud Wright thinks that one of our council members had been approached, or is even on the take from one of the gangs.”

“Wow. That sounds like a real challenge.”

“Maggie, would you be willing to consider joining us in what may be our greatest threat to date? I hate even the thought of being invaded by the Mob.”

Maggie did not hesitate. “Yes, but only if the first meeting with the various representatives provides the information I need. If that works out, then I would like a joint meeting with the key county officers to clarify leadership and cooperation with a joint task force.”

“I’ll get both set up. I am so glad you will be with us. You’ll probably be the task force leader. But, I also hate the idea that I am asking a friend to take on this risk.”

“Please don’t look at it that way. If I say yes, it is because I want to do this, because it needs to be done, not because I am your friend.”

Maggie saw Mitch checking his watch. She said, “Dad and I will see you at church and join you for lunch. Now, I see you’re getting antsy. Just let me know about a meeting.”

Maggie drove down to Mike’s place (her dad) to pick him up for church. Afterward, they went to Mitch’s place for lunch.

It was a joyous occasion. Mitch’s daughter, Emily, and her husband, Peter Slater, joined them for lunch. She and Maggie had been classmates at the UC Santa Cruz, both graduating Magna Cum Laude. Mitch and Mike were old friends, and the conversation was lively.

Emily and Maggie offered to clear the table and load the dishwasher. In the kitchen, Emily asked, “How would you like to have dinner with Pete and me later this week at the new restaurant on River Street?”

“I’d be delighted. Knowing you as well as I do, the question is, ‘who are you inviting as the fourth?’ I hope he is handsome.”

They both burst into laughter. Emily had acted as Maggie's dating bureau all through their years at UC and not once had she disappointed Maggie.

"His name is Tom Cipriani. Blond, green eyes, six foot two. He played linebacker at UCLA. He is as sharp as you are, and "real." His eyes crinkle when he smiles and his laugh is always honest. How does that sound?"

"That's almost too good to be true. If it were anyone else telling me, I figured they were blowing smoke, but not my Emily. All right I'm in."

Taking Bay Avenue into Capitola, Maggie cut over to a side street that headed down towards Riverside Avenue along the side of Soquel Creek. Mike's place was near the train trestle, with a view of the Soquel Creek Lagoon.

She pulled in to her dad's driveway to drop him off. He said, "Come in for a spell. There is something on your mind, and I have time and a willing ear."

"Oh, Mike, you still read me like you did when I was ten."

He smiled. "Thirty years as a detective does help one to read body language."

Ten minutes later, her scotch in hand, Maggie asked, "Mike, have you heard anything about organized crime moving into the area?"

He nodded. “Yes, it seems that there are two groups, one reminiscent of the Gambino family, but on a smaller scale, at least for the moment. The other is focused only on the financial side, with a lot of smarts and subtlety.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Difficult to determine, but word has just come to my attention, which makes me think that both are even now testing the waters.”

“Are you still meeting with the RORTH?”

“Yes, the Retired Officers, Ready to Help is active, but only Jud, Santa Cruz City Police Chief, still calls on us. The younger men see us as old fogies, not retired police and other public officers who can really help. That’s stupid, when you realize that we represent big city police, small town police, FBI, Provost Marshals, T-Men and even the Secret Service. That is a lot of brain power, and even some fire power from the younger of us.”

“I’m glad to hear that.

“Mike, I am being offered the job of Assistant Chief of Police for the City and the real head of a special task force of city and county officers. The intent is to stop the infiltration of organized crime into Santa Cruz County.”

“That came fast. I see the hand of, Mitch, our new Mayor, at work. He always held you in high esteem, telling me he never had a student of your caliber before or since.”

Maggie's blush was enough, thanks to her dad. He loved her, not only as his daughter, but also as a close friend. Hence, the casual use of first name instead of Dad when she addressed him. She picked up her story. "Of course, it depends on my acceptance by the county officers and two of our senior police veterans. I may be seen as too young and inexperienced."

"That may be their attitude starting out, but you'll prove otherwise before those meetings adjourn."

He continued. "The real problem is the danger you will face. The county gang members are ruthless if they are like the Gambino's."

"Well, I expect that you will have my back and you are still a sharpshooter with a nine millimeter or a rifle."

Mike nodded his agreement.

The meeting day arrived quickly. The joint meeting of law enforcement officers had been set up. Maggie found the County Executive, Phil Alexander, and his assistant to be forthcoming, as were the City Executive and his assistant.

Except for Maggie, none of the others had knowledge of the agenda. The County Sheriff, Henry Castor, who had been brought up to date by the County Exec., Phil, was to moderate the meeting. It had taken some convincing to have Maggie, as the new City Assistant Chief of Police, be given the responsibility of heading the joint task force.

Once Sheriff Castor had accepted the job as Chairman of the Task Force, he had put his political skills to use. He called the meeting with an early morning start, supplying OJ, coffee, doughnuts and sweet rolls. The informal get together would allow for the participants to exchange background information. He was extremely pleased to see a long conversation between Maggie and his own number one, Under Sheriff Tom Akins, who was twenty years older than Maggie.

The orientation went pretty smoothly, as well as the question and answer period. Grumbling could be heard when it was clear that Maggie was being chosen to head the task force. The first vocal opposition came not from a deputy sheriff, but from the senior member of the city police, Steven Pulaski.

He tried to be as diplomatic as possible but his upset was impossible to hide. “Pardon my saying so, Ms. O’Toole, but you are the youngest and least experienced person in the room. It may be difficult for more senior officers to take orders from one so young.”

Before Maggie could respond, Dick Komar, the senior deputy sheriff, spoke up. “Steve, have you read the profile in your folder? When you do, you will not raise the question of experience. May I suggest that we start with questions and her answers before we rush to judgment about maturity?”

Looking chagrined, Steve apologized. “Dick, you’re right. I’m sorry Ms. O’Toole.”

At the end of a long period of questions, it was Steve who said, “I will be proud to serve under your leadership, Maggie. I

like the fact that we should call you Maggie and that you seek a collegial style of operation. Working as a team will be the most effective way to move forward quickly.”

The tenor of the other voices was definitely affirmative.

Maggie accepted the mantle of leading the Task Force and made a few closing comments that surprised the group. “Up until this moment I had not presumed that I was your leader. I had told your bosses that I would accept the job based on today’s outcome. I would not have assumed the position if I did not believe that I had one hundred per cent support.”

She was interrupted by a loud round of applause.

Nodding, she continued. “It will soon be time for lunch, which will be served in the next room in about 25 minutes. May I suggest that, before then, we break into three groups of four to have some informal conversation and get to know each other?”

“In the dining area, there will be three tables set for four. Please choose your place so that the groups are a new mix for further conversation. This afternoon, we can do some brainstorming. All subjects are welcome. We will attempt to categorize the input if you precede your comment with “This I know” or “This I heard” or “This I read” or “This I believe.” Our professional stenographers can record your words if you speak clearly.”

After the afternoon session, Maggie reflected to herself that she was surprised and impressed with the amount of knowledge accumulated from the participants. She saw this as a good a starting point.

Chapter 2.

Maggie was having a glass of chardonnay with Emily and Pete at The Blue Lantern when Tom, her blind date, arrived. Emily had lived up to her past reputation as the best dating bureau in California!

Tom did fill out the dark single-breasted suit nicely and looked smart with his white shirt open at the collar. After the introductions, with Maggie's heart was still slowing, Tom asked, "May I pin this small bunch of violets onto your collar? Emily was right. They will match your eyes." He smiled down into her eyes, and she was momentarily entranced by the vivid blue of his eyes and the contrast between his tanned skin and his sun-bleached golden hair.

Maggie was caught completely off guard and stammered an okay. She stood and noted that he was about 4 inches taller than she, an aspect of him that she immediately appreciated. She shuddered ever so slightly when the back of his hand lightly pressed her breast as he pinned the small posy in place.

Pete, the much practiced host, started the conversation that paused only when a waiter came to their table. Maggie learned that Pete and Tom had been classmates at UCLA and had renewed their friendship when Tom moved to Santa Cruz about six months ago. He had a house on the hill above East Cliff Drive overlooking the harbor beach and Schwan Lagoon.

Tom admitted to being a sports psychologist, having moved to the California from Chicago.

Maggie was caught off guard for only a moment when he asked about her work. “I’m just resting up after separation from the Marine Corps last month.”

She hoped he wouldn’t pursue the subject. He must have read her mind, because he switched to Pete and reminded him that Pete owed him \$5 for the bet on the Army-Navy Game.

“He must have heard something in my voice that said I didn’t want to go there. I think I am going to like this guy.”

Soon Pete was telling stories of their undergrad days and of Tom’s feats on the football field.

At the first opportune moment, Tom led her to the tiny dance floor. She melted into his arms, feeling like she belonged there, and they enjoyed two short numbers.

He had little to say, but she kept receiving warm vibes. When he did speak, his voice was warm. He asked more questions than he answered, and Maggie had to judge her responses carefully, not wanting to give away anything about her present position. It was not yet public information.

While trying to steer the conversation about the present to the past, she probably told more about herself on a first date than she would have thought wise.

Just as she was finished her lamb chop, she found herself waiting for the bejeweled woman to return from the behind the gilded door. She heard Tom ask, “You, too? Are you waiting to see her? She is the third one who entered that door but never returned.”

“I was waiting. I only saw one previously.”

“Your back was to the door when we were dancing. Two well-dressed gentlemen exited through that door.”

Maggie whispers to Tom, “Just what do you think is going on back there?”

He looked down into her inquiring face and raised his eyebrows. “Must be ritzy, whatever it is.”

Wanting to change the subject, away from suspicions, Maggie told him, “I have to say that you are a great dance partner. This is my first time in ages. We seemed to glide across the dance floor.”

“That’s exactly how I feel.”

The conversation had sparkled at the table all evening. They covered politics, religion, and the recently ended drought. All subjects were fair game for this foursome.

For a few moments, Maggie lost track of the conversation. She found herself wondering about the activity behind the one-way door into which the woman with the glitzy jewelry had passed.

She was brought back to the present when Pete reached for her hand, inviting her to dance. A minute later, over his shoulder, she was admiring the way Tom moved with Emily in his arms.

Back at the table, Emily invited Tom to cap off the evening with a drink at the house. Maggie held her breath waiting for his response. She sighed with relief when she heard him accept.

She did not want the evening to end. She needed to know more about Tom. She had always been a sports enthusiast but had never given thought to sports psychology. He had aroused her curiosity, and other things were stirring within her.

Sometime later, at the house, Emily could see that the talk had drifted to a two-person event. Tom and Maggie were totally wrapped up in their conversation.

She announced to her guests. “Time for us married folks to hit the hay.”

Tom stood to thank his hosts and offered to take Maggie home. Maggie said, “I’d love that but I’m staying here overnight.”

Emily said, “Stay up as long as you want, Tom. Our bedroom is at the end of the house. Your conversation will not disturb us.”

Maggie silently thanked Emily and was pleased to see Tom nod his acceptance.

Tom joined her on the sofa when she asked, “Would you tell me a bit about sports psychology? I never thought about that aspect of the game.”

“The subject will bore you. I’d rather hear about your life to date. Emily says you are a decorated hero and had some special experiences in the Marines.”

She laughed. “I asked you first and besides I do not think you will ever bore me or anyone else.”

“Thank you, kind misses.” He chuckled.

“Okay. Here goes. Sports psychology borrows from a number of other sciences. It involves the study of how psychological factors affect performance and how participation in the sport may affect psychological factors. In addition to instruction and training of psychological skills for performance by athletes, sports psychology may include work with coaches and parents who want to support their kids.

“After World War II, psychologists and medical doctors began to notice a new trend. People were living longer because people were less likely to die of contagious diseases.

“However, medical problems, due to lifestyle choices, were increasing. Obesity led to heart disease. Smoking lead to heart disease and/or cancer. Stress lead to cardiovascular problems, etc.

“So, the bio psychosocial model was created.

“Providers now need to examine all aspects of a patient's life. The physicians treat the physical causes, while it is the psychologist's job to identify the behavioral contributors to medical problems.

“For example, does someone smoke because he is classically conditioned, like with Pavlov’s work? Is hypertension caused by job stress?

“The psychologist then has to design interventions to address the problem behaviors.

“My job then is to get to know my client, and give the proper recommendations that will get him or her to adopt the right life style or mental attitude to improve performance.

“That’s the short lecture, oversimplifying my job.”

He loved her next words. She was grinning as she said, “That’ll do for the present, but I will need a follow up so I can really get to know you.”

“In the meantime, do I know any of the names of your clients?” She was intentionally keeping the focus on Tom, not on her past.

“You might, but I am not ready to share that info at the moment. Let’s wait until we are closer,” he whispered as he circled her shoulders with his right arm.”

“You, Tom Cipriani, are clever, but I think I will hold you off for the time being.”

She loved the way he beamed. “May I presume there will be a next time?”

“If you were to ask me, I would say that I’d like that. Now, I have to work in the morning and it is late.”

“I will need your number.”

She laughed. “Oh, you already have my number... but you also want my phone number. Call me at the police department.”

At the door, she was planning to plant a kiss on his cheek, but suddenly she was embraced by his arms, and her lips were responding to his. Yummy!

She knew that she had given him a positive answer, and she broke it off with a warm smile.

Chapter 3.

She was presented formally to the entire police staff that morning in a brief ceremony that extended the morning roll call. From their expressions, she judged that most were welcoming, a few noncommittal, but two were cool. Patrolman Mick Irish seemed almost hostile, scowling darkly.

Jud, the chief, expressed his thanks for having an assistant and explained that most of her responsibilities would lie with major crimes and the detective squad.

For some reason, that seemed to lower the tension in the room, although she noticed patrolman Irish deepen his frown.

The entire detective squad of six, including those off duty, was invited to meet with Jud and Maggie. Coffee and doughnuts and juice were served in Jud's large office.

Nels Nelson, the chief detective, made the introductions and, as requested, he gave her the current situation. Six cold cases, four of which were homicides, two current homicides under investigation and an assortment of felonies and misdemeanors.

Maggie asked, "How about gangs?"

Nels replied, "Some. Like any community, we have our share, but nothing extreme."

"Any major crimes attributed to gangs?"

Sargent Pete Peterson said, “Some of the burglaries recently seemed to be more professional than historically in our area.”

“Anything new or different catching our attention?” She was interested to see if there was any suspicion of what she thought was gambling in the backroom of the Blue Lantern restaurant.

No one replied, but she wondered if she detected an uneasy non-response from Detective First Class Bill Gavin, who avoided her questioning eyes.

They dispersed after agreeing to a weekly department meeting, unless some special information made an urgent meeting necessary.

Maggie met Dick Komar, the chief Deputy Sheriff, for lunch. Her question was essentially the same as she posed to her detectives and for the most part the answers were the same as related to the county.

After lunch, she went home, changed into jeans and a sweat shirt. She was going sleuthing in her dad’s second car, a nondescript, gray ten year old Chrysler.

She patrolled the hillside areas, home to working couples whose children were in school. This was prime territory for day time burglaries.

Twenty minutes into the ride she spotted a black GMC Crossover, mud splattered license plate, with a driver tensely watching the door of a newish home.

She knew the signs, that he was the lookout and driver for a small gang burglarizing that house.

She called dispatch and requested two patrol cars to ease into the location without delay. Seven minutes later, three hooded men were dashing for the Crossover while the patrol cars arrived from two ends of the street.

Within minutes, the trio and the driver were handcuffed. Maggie continued her patrol.

When parents and children began arriving, Maggie moved her patrol to the poorest area of the city, hoping to get a glimpse of some of the gang leaders. She saw several shady characters but nothing she could pin down to actual crime.

She stopped by the office for a chat with her boss, Jud. “Hold it minute, Maggie. I’m filling out the order for your car.”

“That is what I wanted to discuss with you. For a short time, I prefer to stay unnoticed. A ten year old Chrysler is a better cover for an Assistant Chief who wants to prowl around the city at all hours of the day or night. I will appreciate the Mustang, but what I could use in both vehicles is the same communication set up that we have in the patrol units.”

Jud shook his head but said he would submit the request. Jud also gave her the name of a Councilman whom he suspected to be on the take from one of the gangs.

Maggie decided to check out the councilman.

John Stamp, owner of a downtown coffee shop and city councilman, closed his café at eight. Diners after eight went to restaurants, not cafes. Maggie found out that he was divorced. His ex and two grown children did not reside in town.

He did not head for his home but drove directly to the Blue Lantern. He parked at the rear and entered through a backdoor. Maggie was close enough to notice that it was not the kitchen, the windows of which were farther to the right.

“I think I ought to get here about closing time to verify my suspicion,” she thought.

Later that night, she was parked behind the Blue Lantern, scrunched down so that she could not be seen by anyone passing by. With her window down, she would be able to hear the sound of anyone leaving through the back door.

She had been there for about fifteen minutes when the sound of voices got her attention. Customers were emerging from the extra back door. She figured it was the room the jeweled woman had entered from the restaurant.

She turned on her high powered night vision camera and began a series of rapid shots, getting one or more pictures of each departing guest.

She waited to see if all the employees were gone. Soon, she saw the waitresses and the Maître d' emerge from the other door, followed by the kitchen staff.

She waited; sure there would be a few others. She was rewarded when two well-dressed men and a beautiful woman came out of the door. Her camera recorded a multitude of shots as they moved toward a black Lincoln Touring car.

The next day, she and Jud were having a sandwich in his office. She laid out the prints to see if he recognized anyone.

“Where did you get these?”

“First, identify, and then I will tell you.”

He began pointing. “Our very successful funeral director, supporter of the mayor, the owner of our locally-owned department store, friend of one of our long standing councilman and this one, a very wealthy attorney. Councilman Stamp. Where did you get these?”

“They were emerging from the rear of the Blue Lantern after the closing.” She then told Jud of her observations while at dinner

and her need to verify her hunches. She wondered, “*Could these people be gambling in the back room?*”

“I’ll be damned.”

He looked at all the pics but said he recognized no one else.

“For some reason, these two with the woman make me think of twenty first century hoods.”

“That’s my guess. Maybe the FBI can help us.”

Three hours later, Maggie was awaiting the results of the photo ID process. Mark Stutz, the resident FBI agent was frowning, “Ms. O’Toole, you have found two of our wanted racketeers, who went off our radar screen some months ago. I have no idea about the woman, but we want to take those two in.”

“I hope that you will not preempt our investigation by rushing to apprehend the men until we can uncover the full extent of their operations.

He acted surprised at her comment. “They are under indictment and were scheduled to go to trial when they skipped town in Chicago.”

“But the FBI must realize that they didn’t come here by chance. Surely, their superiors have plans that are greater than one illegal casino operation. I would like a conference with your Special Agent in Charge. Is he in San Jose?”

Maggie could see that he was annoyed but knew that he would bend to her wish.

Mark called his superior, who agreed to drive over the hill for a six o'clock meeting.

Buzz Thompson, the SAC, arrived in good time, considering the commuter traffic over Highway 17 from Santa Clara County. After Maggie and Mark filled him in on the Task Force's mandate and the wider implications, Thompson agreed that Mark should be invited to the Task Force and hold off arresting the fugitives until the threat here was resolved.

Just before their meeting ended, the SAC said, "Ms. O'Toole, these men are dangerous, not only because they can be ruthless but also because they are part of an international organization with great plans that threaten western governments. We all need to tread carefully."

Maggie answered her phone at the precinct, surprised to hear Tom's voice on the other end.

"Maggie, "I'm glad I caught you. I just received a fresh 15-pound Chinook salmon from a friend. It's on ice, and I'm hoping you will let me fix you dinner at my place. Can I pick you up later?"

Catching her breath, Maggie took her time replying. “Well, this is a surprise! But, yes, I’d like that, Tom. How about 5:30?”

“Perfect. I’ll be waiting for you outside your office.”

Having been distracted often during the afternoon, Maggie wished she had told Tom she needed to go home first. She would like to have showered and changed her clothes. But, too late now!

She had just exited the building when she saw Tom’s muscle car inching over to the curb. A bright red Camaro, with the top off. Her huge grin displayed her approval as she slipped into the passenger seat after Tom had reached over to open the door for her.

“Nice wheels, Mr. Cipriani!”

“You deserve the best, Ms. O’Toole,” he countered, with a proud smile.

Taking 7th Avenue toward the Small Craft Harbor, Tom made a left onto East Cliff Drive and drove along the beach, curving uphill around Schwan Lagoon. At the top, a narrow alley heading toward the Bay took them to the back door of his place, which was on top of the small hill overlooking the lighthouse and jetty.

Passing through to the front of the house, Maggie appreciated the stunning view made possible by the windows across the front of the house. She just stopped to take in the scene...the lagoon,

the beach, and the lighthouse, the jetty and small boats approaching the harbor at the end of this day. She was enthralled.

“Tom, this is enchanting! I never knew this kind of view existed. Wow!”

Tom smiled. “Glad you like it, Maggie.”

He had a salad ready to toss and Maggie saw the huge beautiful salmon on a small table on the deck out front.

After offering her a glass of white wine, Tom started the grill and they settled down on the deck chairs. Maggie found herself feeling completely at ease with Tom and their conversation flowed smoothly, touching on boating and fishing and water sports.

When Tom reminded Maggie that he had shared about his work with her and it was now her turn, she found that she was ready to trust him. Looking deep into his eyes, she saw the soul of a man with integrity and deep intelligence. Slowly, but gaining in momentum some, she told him of the Task Force and of her surveillance of the back of the Blue Lantern.

Tom’s attention was unwavering. He asked a few pertinent questions, and Maggie could see that he was both interested and assessing the various points of suspicion.

Bringing him into her complete confidence, she took the surveillance photos out of handbag and showed them to Tom. He recognized the woman with the jewelry as well as the two men he

had seen going into the back room at the restaurant. He also noted the maître's who had shown him into the restaurant that night he had met Maggie.

After watching a beautiful sunset shimmering over the Bay, Tom drove Maggie back to the precinct to her car in the parking lot. Turning off the motor, he reached for her arm and said, "Maggie, let me come around to help you out of the car."

Maggie's breath caught a little in anticipation of a kiss. As she stepped out, Tom caught her to him in a big hug, and they just stood there enjoying their intimacy and the quiet evening. Finally, his fingers pulled her chin up to meet him, and he kissed her. He was tender and inviting, and she responded fully, but only briefly.

Leaning back, she said, "Tom, thank you. It has been perfect!"

"Yes," he whispered, his warm breath just fluttering her cheeks.

Prior to the next meeting of the Task Force, Maggie conferred with the City and County Executives, as well as Jud and the sheriff, about inviting the FBI to the meeting. They concurred.

Once the Task Force meeting convened, she introduced Mark, but half the group was already acquainted with him, some not too thrilled with the idea of the FBI being included.

After hearing the Blue Lantern story from Maggie, Sheriff Dick Komar said, “If there is one in the city, the odds are that another casino is operating somewhere in the county.”

There was general agreement, and locating that casino was put on the agenda.

Jud pointed out that, while they had funding for additional staffing, the process of recruiting and training would take time and not be of help for the task at hand.

Steve Pulaski asked, “Maggie, do you think we could get permission to use those funds to bring in some experienced officers from neighboring departments on a temporary basis?”

Maggie heard the murmuring of approval. “Great idea, Steve. If everyone agrees, I can start the politicking as soon as we adjourn.”

By the end of the day, she had the Monterey County Sheriff and Monterey City Chief willing to get permission to loan officers to the investigation.

She then went to work on the Santa Clara County Sheriff and both Los Gatos and San Jose police chiefs.

It took about ten days to work its way through the expedited political processes, but Maggie had seven additional officers available for the Task Force.

Chapter 4.

True to his word, Jud had both Maggie's cars fitted with the special communication devices within the week.

She was sitting in her office while the tech was installing the equipment. The intercom sounded. "Ms. O'Toole, you have a visitor."

"Thanks, Millie. I'll be right out."

A few moments later, she was saying, "Tom, what a delightful surprise."

"Hi. I was hoping you might be free for lunch."

"I am and I'm hungry."

The Crow's Nest at the harbor was not too busy, the rush hour just coming to a close. The view of the bay was spectacular. The clear blue sky formed a backdrop for a half dozen sails in the light breeze, very few white caps in evidence. Fishing boats and pleasure boats maneuvered their way in and out of the harbor entrance by the jetty. The old light house had been kept up in appearance and added the perfect ambiance to their time together. A few people were strumming ukuleles below on the sand, their voices lifting up above the sound of the surf. Maggie couldn't imagine a more delightful scene.

Each was sipping a chardonnay while waiting for their lunch to be served. Tom asked, “Are you available Saturday afternoon and evening? I would like to take you sailing at Lexington Dam.”

“That sounds delicious. I am available, and I appreciate your invitation. Count me in.”

“The house I rented is just above the lake, with a pier below. The other evening I took a sail along the shore line and saw some folks tying up their boat. Guess what? The male in the group was the Maître d’. There were no children. The three women seemed about his age, early forties, which is how I pegged him.”

Tom was aware that he had peaked Maggi’s interest. “I thought we could sail past and then return with the hope of seeing something worthwhile.”

Maggie found it difficult to mask her excitement.

As they walked from the restaurant, Tom said, “I forgot to tell you. There is a rental fee for the sail. The price is allowing me to get to know the essential you.”

She laughed. “Any discount available?”

“Nope. I want the whole story and the real you.”

That afternoon she called Emily and invited herself to dinner. She needed a lot more information about Tom. His friend, Pete Slater, would be her source. The two had been friends since they

were dorm mates and had stayed in close touch in all the years since graduation.

Everything that Pete had to say was filling in a picture of what she always dreamed would be the man in her life, the one who had, up 'til now, never arrived.

Her heart almost cried out when Pete told her of the accident, ten months ago, caused by a kid on Meth that took the life of Tom's wife and young daughter.

She thought, *“That would account for the bit of sadness that is present in his eyes.”*

The gamut of thoughts that raced across Maggie's mind while she tried to decide the tone that she wanted to set for the weekend, set her heart to beating faster. Yes, “weekend,” because she was ready for something big with Tom and she was convinced that he had not dated much during the last ten months. She wanted him for herself.

She stopped at her favorite boutique on the way home to do some shopping, with Tom in mind. She chose each item carefully.

When Saturday arrived, Tom picked her up at home. She had invited her dad to be present when Tom arrived. She wanted his take on this man.

As she watched the two men in dialogue, she felt the instant connection between them.

As Maggie and Tom were leaving, Mike signaled her with a “thumbs up.”

Surprising Maggie, Tom didn't take Highway 1 directly to the Highway 17 route to Lexington. Instead, he went down 7th Avenue and curved around to the harbor. He drove directly to the loading area and backed his pickup to the ramp. Maggie was surprised to learn that Tom owned a sailboat and a trailer.

Within a half hour, they were on their way again, towing Tom's motored sailboat. The trip over the coast mountain range was beautiful, mostly shaded road with tall trees and sunlight dappling through the branches. Maggie felt herself relaxing in a way she hadn't been able to achieve for quite a long time. She was feeling almost serene by the time Tom turned off for the Lexington Reservoir.

Tom expertly backed the boat down the ramp below the house he had rented.

It was already hot, as promised, when they arrived at noon. Tom said, “The temperature gets up in the 90's, but the water is cool. Would you like to swim while I put together a light lunch? The bedroom is down the hall to the left.”

Maggie nodded. She found the room and changed into her bathing suit and a short cover-up. When she re-entered the

kitchen, Tom gave her an appreciative smile and said, “Sandals help since there are little pebbles along the path.”

He watched out the window, admiring her long, beautifully shaped legs that emerged from the short beach robe.

She was swimming back toward shore when he dove into the cool water. “*Wow!*” She felt her body stir in response to her view of his near-naked body.

She was about 10 yards out when she was grabbed around the middle and lunged out of the water. Tom had come up behind her and swept her into his arms as he broke the surface. Gasping from surprise and laughing out loud, she shot a huge grin at him, the sun twinkling on her wet eye lashes.

Walking up onto shore where she slipped on her sandals, Maggie wrapped her body in a large beach towel and sat in the shade of the huge umbrella while waiting for Tom. She was trying to decide whether or not to test her plan.

Since that first evening together, she had spent a lot of time thinking about the two of them. Both had lost loved ones very dear and beloved. Both were drawn to each other, and that shared experience of loss added a special intimacy. That was so obvious to her.

Thoughts were running in her head. *In his loneliness he must feel akin to feelings I have. I would love to be with someone with whom I could find intimacy, emotionally and*

physically. I have been so lonely for all of these months. I hope he, too, wants to share these experiences deeply with me.

She decided to implement the plan. As Tom stepped out of the lake, she stepped out from under the umbrella, intentionally dropping the towel. She could not help grinning as he stared at her body in a tiny light blue bikini that accented her 36-24-36 shape.

She watched as his eyes widened with pleasure and a man's hunger. He kept moving toward her and then stopped with three feet between them.

Maggie knew that her daring plan had been the right decision. Her grin changed into an inviting smile. "If it gives you pleasure, don't stop. Keep coming."

Tom smiled. "It's hard to choose between looking and holding."

In the next moment they were clinging to each other, both bodies burning with desire.

His eyes asked and hers affirmed. He carried her to the shade of the umbrella, turned the umbrella to give them privacy. They deftly removed each other's bathing suits, luxuriating in the warm skin. Nothing remained as hindrances in their pathway to joy.

Despite the urgency after months of abstinence, both opted for the pleasure of getting to know each other's physical attributes and needs before they exploded.

After recovering his breath, Tom turned on his side and Maggie turned toward him. He whispered, “Thank you. I had started to believe that might never happen again. I needed that connection, something greater and more profound than just sex.”

“That’s how I felt, Tom. Now, just hold me close. I want to be sure this is not a dream.”

It was a long time before they separated and opted for showers up at the rental.

As they pulled on shorts and tees for the rest of the afternoon, Tom said, “After lunch, we can take a short sail. The afternoon breeze will give us a brisk ride outbound and on the return. We might get lucky as we sail past that certain pier. Now, during lunch you can start with a down payment of the fee by starting your personal story.”

Maggie smiled, “I’m glad you are pressing me, Tom. There is so much I want to know about you. Therefore, I am willing to tell you all you want to know.”

“Here goes. I am an only child of doting parents, who nurtured me, tutored me about real life as well as in my school studies. I have a high IQ, a desire to learn new things and a scorn for pretense.

“My mother was murdered when I was twelve. She was in a bank when it was robbed by some stupid teenagers. They were caught, but that was no consolation to me. Only a loving father, like Mike, could have the skill, love and patience to bring me to the other side of my teens, whole and loving and caring, which I believe I am.

“I excelled in high school and at the university. Perhaps I was too mature, but the guys in my classes always seemed like boys instead of young men. That kind of turned me off and limited my sexual education.

“At the university, I did go steady with the boy who took my virginity, but that didn’t last long. During my senior year I slept with a few guys but never found the satisfaction that so many of the girls I knew kept talking about.

“It was Emily, my friend for all these years, who helped me through those years and many times since, though we were separated when I was with the Marines.”

Tom asked Maggie for some details about her sports activities, the studies that most interested her and other things that interested him about her life. Maggie answered every question that Tom asked.

“How’s that for a down payment? I’m not only ready for a sail but also for my first sailing lesson of the many that I hope you are willing to give me.”

Her words were good news to his ears. He was planning to go very slowly, just so that he wouldn't scare her off, and to prolong the times he had with her.

The first lesson was comprised of learning the basic terms and concepts of sailing. While Tom pulled the craft on its trailer down the ramp to the water, he started to explain about the boat. Even though she had been a marine, her work had not taken her into the water, but into investigations.

Despite his several warnings, Maggie was almost decked when the boom shifted as they turned into the wind. Since the wind was light, he put her in the rear seat to steer, to let her experience the boat's reaction as she changed directions by moving the tiller.

He asked her to hold steady as they neared the location where he had seen the maître d'. He placed himself so that he could get a good view over her shoulder. In a voice that carried as far as the pier, he shouted, "Now, practice coming about."

It was a prearranged signal so that Maggie could see the faces on the pier. She almost lost control, but Tom saved them just before the wind toppled them.

On the return trip she had complete control of the tiller so that Tom sat facing forward and both had clear views of the pier. Tom and Maggie waved as they sped by, downwind. Just prior to their coming close, he took some photos with Maggie's special camera through her long range zoom lens.

The next lesson was to bring the boat alongside the dock and securely moor it. Tom jumped out onto the wooden platform and explained how the stern line and bow line held the boat in place with the ropes wrapped around the cleats.

They climbed up to the house. Yawning, Maggie said, “Now I need a nap, from which my prince may awaken me with a kiss that will lead to something heavenly.”

Maggie, who had learned the process of quick naps in the military, was gone within a minute, but Tom found sleep elusive. His mind was filled with images of the after-swim love making, images of a twelve-year-old who lost her mom, images of a teenager being nurtured by her loving father.

He was suddenly caught up in memories of his great love for his wife and daughter, who had been stolen from him. He thought about the last months, living in the desert of loneliness and self-imposed isolation. Except for the respite of his work, he had been cut off from personal contact in his solitary life.

He had no idea how long his reverie lasted. He awoke to the sensation of her fingers caressing his lips with erotic magic. “The princess awaits her prince, who promised to awaken her with a kiss.”

The prince did not try to make up for lost time but slowly transformed the princess from patiently waiting to one demanding more intimate attention to her driving need.

She lay cuddled close to him, almost as if she feared he would vanish if she let go. She thought, *“I am so glad I seduced him at the start of the day. I am thrilled! He is absolutely precious to me. He’s kind and caring and listens with his heart and mind as well as his ears. I could feel his empathy as I told him about growing up. He seemed to identify with me in some intimate way.”*

She heard Tom’s voice asking, “Care to share your thoughts? I will if you will.”

Maggie’s reticence had disappeared. *“With Tom I can bare my most private thoughts.”*

In reply she spoke softly, “I was thinking about what has happened to me in these few hours. I have never felt this way before. It is not who I have been. For some mysterious reason, I have a sense that you are trustworthy and would never do anything that might hurt me. Am I judging you, correctly?”

He kissed her forehead. “Absolutely, and I will explain when you finish.”

It was enough to encourage her.

“As I thought about your life during the months since losing your family, I identified with the loneliness that permeated you. I have known a similar loneliness since my lover was killed by a sniper thirteen months ago.

“I was attracted to you on our first date. I was eager to have you call me for a follow up. The invitation to come to your place brought up a dream. Somehow, I would find a way to help both of us break through our secret malaise.

“I created this dream that having you make love to me would be a start to the healing process for both of us. I went shopping to find what I thought would be irresistible.

“I acted like a brazen hussy this morning, totally out of character, and then I was pleased that it seemed to be what you wanted or needed.

“The wonderful surprise is that making love on the beach was just the start of your making love to me all day. I have been so moved, soaking in your loving attention as you listened with empathy to my ramblings. Your eyes expressed love; at least I was hoping it was love, as you patiently taught me the rudiments of sailing.

“I didn’t think it was possible to have someone make love to me all day. I can feel the tears of joy coming on, and I feel a need to repay you.”

Tom was stunned with her statement. He would have said that he was the sole beneficiary of the day and he told her so. He made his statement with a question. “How does a loner like me fall in love in the space of hours? I thought that nothing could ever help

heal the wounds of losing Sue and Michele, but I am feeling a peace come over me that I had despaired of ever feeling again.

“I realized the courage it took for you to wear that bikini. You must have thought about the risk of embarrassment. I am so glad that you took the chance. Given all my hang ups, I’m not sure that I would have been able to ask you to; although that had occupied my mind once I issued the invite.

“You are right about noticing that I was showing love in everything I did during the day. I was working at cementing a relationship that would continue. Maggie, now that I found you I don’t want to lose you.”

“There is little chance of that. I want to be with you, working to have you love me, not like you love Sue, but in a joyous, sharing way

“Maggie, I don’t know what’s possible, but I, too, want a deep and satisfying relationship. Only since I have begun to know you has the possibility of finding love again even entered my mind.

“That is all I need to hear,” she whispered.

Now, about dinner... Let’s eat in. Restaurants can be noisy. I don’t want to share you, and I want every word we articulate to be heard and understood.”

“I like that. I have a full refrigerator and an adequate pantry.”

The beautifully laid plans were interrupted by a call to her cell. “Sorry to interrupt, Maggie. This is Jud. Our team has discovered the location of another casino operation in Aptos. Dick thought you might want to be there about closing time to identify the operators when they leave. Can you meet Dick here at about ten?”

“Definitely. Will you be there?”

“Not necessary, with the two of you representing us.”

“I agree. I’ll see you on Monday.”

Maggie turned to Tom. “I have to work tonight. That means you will have to take me home to fetch my car before ten.”

“I would love to be with you, unless it is too risky for you.”

“It shouldn’t be risky, but I want our relationship to stay out of the public eye, or, at least beyond the ken of my associates.

“Now, I’m starved for food. Last one in the shower is a monkey’s uncle!”

As they neared her home, Maggie said, “I have an idea... This operation should take only a few hours. Why don’t you take a nap in my bed? That way, you can be there to rub my back when I return, tense and tired.”

His hand on her knee was his way of saying, “I’ll be waiting.”

Chapter 5.

At eleven twenty-five, Maggie was at the Golden Pheasant shooting a series of long range photos zoomed in on people leaving the restaurant by a back door.

Back at the sheriff's office they began running facial recognition programs. One of the tuxedoed males, probably the maître d' of the restaurant, was on the FBI list for racketeering. The only other familiar face was that of the unidentified heavily jeweled woman, who was already in their file.

Dick Komar said, "I'll continue work on these in the morning. I'll send the pics to Mark, the FBI agent, who may be able to get more information."

He turned to Maggie. "I have an idea. May I use some funds to have some observers at the restaurant for the coming weekend?"

"Absolutely! Have them wear lapel cameras, taking pictures of as many patrons as possible. Six nights over three weekends might reveal some solid information. Be sure they get clear pics of anyone approaching what they will identify as a door into the casino. In fact, I think you ought to take the first evening so you can brief others. Take your wife. She will likely reward you for a special night out."

He burst into laughter and thanked her.

It warmed her heart to be welcomed with the amber glow of light from her porch as she drove up the driveway. Tom was opening the door as she mounted the steps to the house. He was still fully dressed. His arms enveloped her, cocooning her into the safety of his embrace. She was home.

A minute later, he was removing her light jacket. He didn't stop there. He lifted her into his arms, walked into the bedroom where he gently removed the rest of her clothing. The undressing was seductive, enervating her body. Watching him strip only exaggerated the feelings.

Her whole body was humming by the time he turned her onto her stomach and applied a bit of oil to initiate a massage. She was to have an experience that had never crept into her dreams.

It was almost noon before they arose. Tom slipped out of bed, made some coffee, poured some OJ, toasted muffins and returned to the bedroom with a breakfast tray.

They drove down to the beach and walked, holding hands, and making plans for the next weekend. Tom told her that he had to leave before dinner. "I'm flying to New York this evening and will be gone most of the week."

She chuckled. "Damn. There goes my dream of another night like our last one."

Without a word, she began leading him toward the parking lot to head back home for something they would both remember while they had to be apart.

The police staff meeting on Monday morning yielded some interesting information.

Two burglaries, high in the hills of the city, had identical MO's to three during the previous weekend. All five families had been away. In some manner, the silent alarms had not registered on the monitors of the alarm service.

Only expensive items of jewelry and art were taken and whatever cash was hidden in drawers of dressers and cabinets. In each situation, every bit of cash had been discovered and taken.

Nels Nelson, the chief of detectives said, "This is not kid stuff. If it is, they are well coached by a top professional. This smells of an ex-con or a newly organized crime ring. Maggie, I heard something about a Task Force on crime to which Jed assigned you. Can they help?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"At the county police officers' summer barbecue."

"Do you have a name?"

"No. Just a voice in a crowd."

“The answer is, “yes.” I am part of a special task force that is supposed to be a secret for the present. If you hear any more, please let me know immediately. In the meantime, I would appreciate your keeping this between us.”

“I certainly will.”

Just before noon she headed for Jud’s office to acquaint him with the new info. Just as she started to enter the room, she became aware of another person present and started to turn around.

“Come in, Maggie. I want you to meet a very close friend of mine and of this department.”

“Tex Turner, may I present my assistant chief, Ms. Margaret O’Toole, known to us as Maggie.”

Mr. Turner, a tall man, removed his Stetson and offered his hand. “Congratulations,” Ms. O’Toole. I am delighted to make your acquaintance.” His Texas drawl was unmistakable.

Maggie bowed her head in response. Her first thought was, “*Mr. Turner reeks of money and power.*”

While Jud talked with Mr. Turner, Maggie took stock of the Texan. His light gray gabardine suit was tailor-made, not off the rack. His tie must have cost a hundred bucks, and his Stetson was of the finest quality. He was impressive.

Jud was saying, “Tex moved here from Abilene about three years ago. He is a major sponsor of the Police Athletic League and a Deacon at our Baptist Church. And, I can assure you he is an extremely good bridge player.”

He turned toward Turner. “Maggie served as a Marine Provost Marshal and studied criminology at our university. In fact, our mayor was one of her professors. Her dad is a retired police officer.”

“Now, Maggie, what do you have for me?”

Maggie hesitated.

“Go ahead, Maggie. Tex is a privileged person in this department.”

She responded, although not feeling completely comfortable with the idea. “We uncovered some information that leads us to believe that high yielding burglaries are the work of organized crime, not kid gangs as we have experienced previously.”

Jud asked, “Should you alert the Task Force?”

Maggie was surprised. All the key persons had been asked to keep the TF a secret for a while and here was Jud talking in front of a civilian.

Jud saw noticed her expression “It’s all right, Maggie. Tex knows how to keep a secret.”

She smiled and nodded. “I’ll follow through with the alert. We can talk later. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Turner.”

“Thank you. Please call me Tex. Everyone does.”

She called Dick and Steve, her Task Force buddies, and asked them to meet her for lunch. She informed them of the new evidence of organized crime. When she also mentioned the question posed about the existence of the Task Force, both became irritated. “We’re not ready yet,” said Steve. “Who’s got a leaky mouth? Dammit!”

“There’s more.” She told them about meeting Turner and Jud’s loose lips.

After cursing, Steve said, “Turner is a close friend of the chief and also of a couple of councilmen. He is a big wheel in the community, but Jud still should be careful. I think I will have a chat with Jud. We go back a long way.”

Mark from the FBI called her later that afternoon.

“Two of those in the photos are also on the wanted list of the Chicago police. One is on our watch list, suspected of being a high ranking Mafioso, but never caught or arrested.”

He finished with a request. “Ms. O’Toole, I was instructed to ask if your Task Force would be willing to have a session with our specialist from Washington, who focuses on three of the world’s

largest organized crime syndicates. If so, please let me know the date of the next meeting when a large bloc of time can be committed to this subject.”

“Thanks, I’ll get back to you.”

She called back with a meeting date for the next Monday. She set up the agenda and emailed it to the members. Only three items were scheduled: Updates on findings, The FBI specialist and the use of RORTH.

Jud agreed to take the weekend duty so that Maggie could have a free weekend. Although Maggie chaired the Task Force, Dick Komar was the operational chief and wanted her cell number in case of a major turn of events.

Friday evening at eleven thirty, a tired traveler, Tom, dropped his bags at the door of his home and headed for the showers. He shed his clothes and left them on the floor of the bathroom. He was still drying off and walking toward the bed when the click of a switch lit the soft lamp light on the far side of the bed.

There was his Aphrodite, his Venus, with outstretched arms of welcome. After the passionate embrace and lip exchange, she invited, “Lie on your stomach.”

He did and a moment later he felt her fingers beginning to spread massage oil over his body.

At breakfast, Tom said, “Maggie, you amaze me. Finding you here, waiting for me. What an act of love!”

She smiled and said, “I remember coming home to a cold, dark house after days away. That’s a downer for anyone, and I thought I could at least brighten your arrival after one of those long, tiring transcontinental flights.”

Tom asked, “Anything special that you would like to do?”

She said, “I figured you might like to watch the Giants playing at Chicago since you have two clients on each team. The game starts at 10:45.”

“Are you sure?”

“Definitely. I like baseball. Besides we will be cuddled up on the couch allowing for some extracurricular activity if we get bored.”

When they tuned in the game, they discovered that the game had been postponed because of heavy downpours that were to continue for hours.

“Tom, I have an idea. Since you are new to the area, let’s explore Silicon Valley, starting with Levi Stadium. You did say that you have three Forty-Niners under contract, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “I like your creativity, Honey.”

“Thanks. I hope you like more than that before the weekend is over. Let’s pack our tooth brushes. Who knows where our journey will take us.”

They took Highway 17 over the Santa Cruz Mountains, part of the Pacific Coast Range. In Santa Clara, they were both impressed with the new stadium and the facilities for the players as well as the fans.

When they were ready to leave Santa Clara, Maggie said, “I read about a great museum at Moffett Field in Mt. View, north on the San Francisco Peninsula. It covers the history of the field from the construction of that huge blimp hangar, including the loss of the Macon, the dirigible which went down in the ocean south of here.”

They enjoyed checking out the models of the Macon, the blimps used in WWII and the various models of planes stationed at Moffett post war.

Maggie’s enthusiasm for museums then took them to the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum in San Jose, at the southern tip of the San Francisco Bay. Its pillared entrance was impressive, as were the many ancient Egyptian artifacts and the planetarium.

Tom, having had his fill of museums and tiring a bit, called a halt.

She said, “We’re going to have to get you in shape, Lover Boy. Okay, let’s have a drink at the Fairmont Hotel. Just drive east. It is less than five minutes away.

They chose the red carpeted lobby lounge, with its tall potted plants providing a cozy atmosphere. They savored the cool interior, and sampled the hors d'oeuvres, winding down from the whirlwind past few hours.

An hour later, Tom signaled the waitress for the bar tab. “I have my second wind now. What does my beautiful tour guide suggest?”

“Well, it’s too early for dinner. We could drive up to Stanford, explore the campus and then go to the City for dinner, or...” She paused.

Tom asked “Or what?”

Or we could save that for another trip and head for Carmel for dinner. We can find a motel or inn and spend tomorrow exploring Carmel, Monterey and Pebble Beach.”

Tom said, “I defer to the tour guide.”

They headed south. Dinner was rather late.

During exquisite seafood repast that left them wide awake and too soon for physical activity, Tom coaxed Maggie into telling him

about some of her Marine service with the Provost Marshalls office. They lingered over their decaf coffees.

She finally gave in with, “Okay, one story. It’s now history and no big deal. One does what is required and, when it helps others, it is especially gratifying. Here are the highlights of the story.”

“A shipment of local currency, equal to a million dollars, U.S, was being transported to several major encampments north and east of Kabul, Afghanistan. Although the amount was large, it was decided that a good-sized entourage with guards would attract too much attention from the Taliban.”

So, an armored car with a driver and two passengers, guards, would be less likely to draw attention. Another vehicle with two guards would follow at two hundred yards to the rear.

About six kilometers beyond the city limits, the backup vehicle developed a flat tire and could not keep up. About two kilometers farther down the road, two men in native dress, shot out the tires of the front vehicle and began shooting at the cab. One shooter must have had armor piercing ammo, while the other was using standard ammo. The guard in the rear took several rounds into his protective gear and one that nicked his upper arm. The other guard had glass splinters on his hand and forehead. The driver halted and the three exited the vehicle.

The highwaymen tied up the three and made off on foot with the cash, in a crudely made wheel barrow.

Approximately forty minutes later, the trailing vehicle arrived and liberated the captives. A primary search of the area discovered the abandoned wheel barrow and a set of tracks that seemed to be similar but not identical to the treads of their vehicle. They took pictures and called it into the Provost Marshall's office.

“I was assigned to head the team on the spot, and I asked the sergeant in the field to protect the area until our team arrived.

“We did a thorough search and bagged any material that could be helpful. We also made a cast of the tread marks.

“We had little to go on. There were only two leads, one being the tread that we had. Our team recruited some helpers and a comparison was made to every vehicle in the locale with vehicles that had similar tread.

“The other lead was the fact that only a few persons had had information regarding the shipment. But that wasn't necessarily reliable, since soldiers and locals who worked with our troops were careless with what we considered to be confidential information.

“We considered one or more of the trio carrying the cash. We ruled out any leak from the driver and two guards, since one had taken direct hits, although not fatal and the other also was wounded, although only superficially. I personally grilled the driver and was certain he played no part in the holdup.”

Maggie paused to gatherer her thoughts. Tom was intrigued and could hardly wait for her to continue.

“One of my team, who kept insisting that this was an inside job, meticulously checked the roster to determine the location of everyone remotely connected to the disbursement office. He found nothing.

“We checked and double-checked all the civilians who were attached to the disbursement office. Nothing came of that.

“My team and I were frustrated, being unable to find any clue that might lead us to the highwaymen.

It was two weeks before we caught a break. A young Afghan bought a soccer ball and two goal nets at the local general store. I had befriended that proprietor on several previous occasions.

The shop keeper came to our office to explain that he did not believe the young boy had access to the kind of funds that he spent.

I went back to his place of business to pick up the bills used by the boy.

Sure enough, the bills were part of the payroll shipment. We were able to identify the boy quickly and put him under surveillance.

On the evening of the second day, we watched him go to a hiding place in a retaining wall and take out a small handful of bills.

One of our team followed him. I was called to the location, where I accompanied two of my team to search the wall. There, we uncovered all but two hundred dollars of the stolen funds.

Under gentle questioning, the lad admitted seeing two soldiers hiding the bags.

He was now a frightened boy in police custody, willing to help, begging not to be arrested. Within two hours of looking at photographs, he identified the soldiers.

I sent a team of six to pick up the suspects. They returned with four. The two suspects were enjoying a beer with two buddies, the two guards from the armored vehicle with the cash.

Eventually, under intense grilling, the four admitted to the plot, the two willing to take minor injuries to avert suspicion. One shooter was a specialist, a sniper who had no trouble making the shooting look real, while inflicting minor injuries.

With the information they provided, we found an old armored car in the junk yard and matched the treads to our mold and pictures.”

Tom said, “I’m impressed.”

“Thank you.”

They spent the night, snuggling quietly, at La Playa, a quaint and lovely hotel, with a view of the ocean out their bedroom window. The sound of the surf lulled them into deep, dreamless sleep, their bodies resting within each other in intimate comfort.

The next morning, they drove to the Pebble Beach Lodge for brunch on the porch overlooking the eighteenth hole of the world-famous golf course. Later, they drove north on the Seventeen Mile Drive and took pictures of the stunning scenery with their cell phones. Maggie insisted on wading in the tide pools, pointing out the various forms of life that delighted Tom, who had never spent any time at a sea shore. They saw crabs, abalone, mussels, sea anemones, and star fish and, fortunately, they spotted an elusive octopus.

Further south, at Point Lobos, they found some rocks at one spot that no one else had taken, and they sat on a flat space, watching the breakers pounding into the rocks many feet below. Seals were sun bathing and some were barking. The spray from the pounding waves sprinkled the scene with miniature rainbows.

“Tom, when I was a young teenager, I used to cycle north of Santa Cruz to a secluded spot, wild much like this. It was a place I could go to be alone. I found solace in the relentless, never-ending waves and soaked up the sun or huddled in my sweats in the fog.

“I found another similar place in Afghanistan, after I lost my beloved fiancé. He was the only man that came close to being my one and only love.

“Except for work, I chose to cut myself off from my fellow marines. In my isolation, I often dreamt of returning to that spot north of Santa Cruz, listening to the seals barking and dreaming of my lost love.

“If you haven’t guessed, that magical time under the umbrella was the first time that I had made love since I lost him. The sequel that we are living is more than I ever dreamt or hoped for.”

She could feel his empathy through his fingers that were massaging her knuckles. For some reason she started to pull away her hand, as though she had overstepped her bounds, but Tom would not let her hands leave his.

“Maggie, don’t retreat. I promise that you are safe with me. I want to hear anything you feel a need to say. If you are willing, I will reciprocate. We must be open with each other and share each other’s pain as well as our joys.”

“Oh, Tom, I want so much to love you in that way, but I have built walls that will have to be torn down.”

He pulled her head to his chest and whispered, “I am betting that we will do that together. You aren’t the only one. I need your help with my walls.”

Clasped in each other's arms, they let their tears mingle until Maggie said, "I will always be here for you, Tom."

They drove through Pacific Grove where the Pacific Ocean meets Monterey Bay and headed for the Monterey wharf and an early dinner before starting for home.

Chapter 6.

Maggie addressed the Task Force on Monday morning. "Gentlemen, may I present Fred Wilson of the FBI, specialist in international organized crime."

The tall man, his brow knotted in frown lines, his black goatee dotted with gray, stood and looked around the room, making eye contact with each person.

He began, "First, thank you for inviting me. Unfortunately, I only have bad news. Based on identification of some of the persons photographed, we have concluded that you may have uncovered the initiation of new operation by one of the largest international crime organizations in the world. The enterprise that you have uncovered is a small part of their plans, or it may even be a blind, a red herring, so to speak.

"The gang may figure that local law enforcement will eventually discover their game and close it down, and close the book on their activity. That will allow them to conduct whatever is their main business, which is one or more forms of racketeering.

"That could include extortion, burglary, money laundering, murder, protection for businesses, smuggling, and so forth.

"The illegal casino operations are important, because they provide an easy way to launder money, but we believe there is a grander scheme in the future. Uncovering that scheme, we believe,

should be the main goal that we share, as well as ridding your community of racketeering and other organized criminal activity.

“On a higher note, fortunately we now have RICO as the main tool to combat racketeering. Let me just recap as I conclude my comments.

“The Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act permit law enforcement to charge individuals or groups with racketeering. This law made it so that organizations or individuals can be charged for up to ten years of ongoing criminal activity.

“The leaders of those organizations can be charged for activities that they order others to do, such as murder and extortion. This gives all of us in law enforcement more tools to combat racketeering.”

Mr. Wilson responded to a myriad of questions, including the need for more field personnel. He expressed regret at the lack of field agents nationally, as well as in local administrations. He did say. “I would suggest that you seek advice or volunteer manpower from retired police who live in your jurisdiction. Their experience and wisdom can be invaluable.”

His departing statement was, “Please continue to work with our SAC in San Jose and our local agent. We must work together.”

After a coffee break, the meeting resumed with reports. One important report was confirmation from a waitress that a casino was in operation at the Blue Lantern.

Maggie introduced the subject of additional help. “My dad, Mike O’Toole, says that he and a group of retired officers might be available.”

There was enthusiasm for exploration of the idea and Dick Komar was asked to talk with Mike.

Before the group adjourned, Maggie said, “I have another idea for us to think about for our next meeting. Wilson told me that, in their experience, in the early activities of opening a new territory, the Mafia type gangs usually spread money to lower level police and/or civic leaders, like Councilmen or Supervisors. We ought to be alert to that possibility.”

On her way out, Maggie saw Phil Alexander, the County Executive. He had just said goodbye to a well-dressed couple who were walking away. Maggie thought she recognized the woman, but could not be sure, since she could not see her face. What she did recognize was expensive clothing that adorned both figures and the glint of diamonds on the woman’ fingers.

For some reason she sensed that the man and woman were friendly, but not like a husband and wife.

Back at the office, Maggie briefed Jud on the statement and suggestions from the FBI and stressed the comments about officers and officials being recruited by the crime organization.

“Jud’s reaction was, “I can’t speak about elected officials but I am sure none of our officers are in that category.”

“Would you mind if I do a little checking?”

“Go right ahead, but I think it’s a waste of time and energy.”

Maggie made no mention of the suggestion of using retired officers who might be willing to help. Jud had recently turned down her dad, Mike, when he had offered to help on the string of jewelry store burglaries.

That seemed strange to Mike because it was the first time Jud had ever turned him down. Perhaps the chief of detectives refused outside help.

She spent the afternoon reviewing the crime reports from the weekend and typing up her own report of today’s action. She called Mike to invite him to dinner and business talk.

Maggie decided to discuss business before dinner. She poured scotch for Mike and herself. “Mike, are you ready to offer your services and wisdom to the city police department?”

“Any time you ask!”

She smiled and nodded, not expecting any other answer. “How about some others from your RORTH organizations?”

“I believe I could recruit eight or twelve, depending on the type of service needed.”

“Great. I’ll fill you in regarding the recent developments during dinner and then get your advice on how you and the others may help. By the way, Dick Komar will be calling you regarding our Task Force’s interest in getting help.”

After the full briefing, Maggie said, “I need to find a way to discover if any of our police have been approached or already in the pocket of our criminal invaders.”

“I presume that means using none of your Internal Affairs or security team to do the investigating.”

“Right.”

“Well, it just so happens,” he said, “that two of our group was IA staff, one in Oakland and one in San Jose. Both know a lot of people, since they are active in their communities. They often recruit volunteers for their non-profit organizations and so are asking people a lot of questions.”

“Sounds like the kind of men I need. May I presume they will be discreet?”

“Guaranteed.”

“Mike, you are my savior. After your talk with Dick, you and he can let me know which of your buddies will work with the Task Force and which should be assigned to the city police department.” By the way, start the investigation of detective Rear and Patrolman Irish. I have a hunch.”

Dick, Mike and Maggie met Friday noon for lunch and to pool information. Maggie was pleased as it came together and Okayed their plans

When Dick left, Mike said, “I have preliminary info. Gavin has known about the Blue Lantern for quite a while. His wife loves to play poker and is quite good. She was one of the early

patrons. Gavin is torn about telling you and getting his wife into trouble.”

“Family loyalty versus professional resistibility. That’s tough. Protocol says he should be fired.”

Mike smiled. “You are sly, daughter of mine. You are bending the rules and are using a very good detective to keep you apprised of developments.”

Maggie thanked him, and both laughed and then moved on.

“Mick Irish is definitely on the take. He has been spending money well beyond his patrolman’s salary. His wife is not working. He was also seen taking an envelope from a stranger at Councilman Stamp’s cafe.”

“By the way, Stamp is a regular at the Blue Lantern. There is no way of knowing whether he is just a gambler or if he has been recruited. It won’t take the organization long to get him into debt, compromise him and have him in their pocket.”

“Mike, that is solid information and so quick!”

He grinned. “I recruited a retired detective from the Palo Alto department. He is a recent addition our group. B the way, what are you going to do about Mick Irish?”

“I will make sure he is out of the loop and find some other duty until this project is complete. Then, I will terminate his services.

Secrets of public agencies do not remain secrets for very long. Certain that the Mafia knew of their meetings, the Task Force decided it was time to go public. Reports of some of their operation were given to the City Council and the Board of Supervisors.

Maggie, with the agreement of her fellow TF members decided to test the loyalty of Councilman Stamp. She announced to the Council that a raid of the Blue Lantern would take place after ten on Saturday evening.”

One of the Task Force members, who were dining there intentionally, reported later that no patrons entered the Golden Pheasant’s back room door that evening.

The raid showed that, as presumed, a very large room that didn’t look like a storage room was neatly stacked with cardboard cartons with canned food labels.

It was observed that the Blue Lantern casino did not operate for two evenings, but it resumed activity on the third evening.

Mr. Stamp had been tested and found wanting. Maggie decided not to get diverted from the real objective so she recommended no action be taken against Stamp, except that the council not is privy to Task Force plans.

Maggie felt sure that, based on past experience and Wilson’s caution, the casino owners would expect another raid. Because the casino was so lucrative, they would risk a raid that resulted in a temporary shutdown but did not expose their broader operations.

Sure enough, lookouts were observed on the perimeter. The lookouts could signal early enough for the patrons and key staff to vacate the casino.

Maggie devised a method of taking out the lookouts if and when they decided on the next raid.

Meanwhile, with the additional help from the volunteers, the Task Force began to spread the net wider. The search was aimed at discovering one or more of the usual forms of racketeering.

That could be activities like extortion, burglary, money laundering, murder, protection for businesses, smuggling, and so forth.

None of the two recent murders had signs pointing to executions or even gang-related activity. The burglaries of the well-to-do families were well organized and executed, but they were attributed to a skilled individual artist.

That proved to be the case when a pattern was detected and resulted in the capture of the thief himself.

Dick Komar called Maggie. “If you’re free, I’d like to pick you up for a ride to Soquel; I want your opinion about an idea.”

Dick pulled in to the parking lot of the Chubb National Bank. Maggie said, “I’ve never heard of this bank. I thought this was the Soquel Bank.”

“It was until five weeks ago. Quite by accident, one of our officers spotted a member of the gambling staff carrying a large bag of cash into the building. At least, he thought so. He was too

late to see the man by the time he entered the bank lobby. He presumed that the courier had gone to a special room for counting cash, a room for their merchant customers.

“Based on that assumption, we put Meg Whalen on the job to monitor customer traffic for several days. Each day two singular bags arrived, both brought by the same courier. We were able to determine that the second bag came from the Golden Pheasant in Aptos.”

Maggie said, “Before we jump to any conclusions, we need more info. I suggest you call Mark Stutz of the FBI and see if the FBI can identify the owner of the bank and any possible relationship to the mob. It is possible that this could be another method for laundering money.”

“Owning your own bank makes it difficult for federal agents to uncover the laundering.”

The following day, Dick called. “Stutz says that the feds are already digging into the multi-players of a bank in Ocean City, Maryland, that appears to have similarities at various levels of ownership. By the way, that community is having experiences similar to what we are facing. Their history with the Mafia goes back about as long as ours does.”

“Damn. Dick, let’s call an emergency meeting. I think the Task Force should send you to Ocean City. The FBI should be able to pave the way. I have an important date. You have my proxy. If any doubts are raised, call me on my cell.”

She was running late. Emily, Pete, Tom and the mayor, Mitch, and his wife were due for drinks and dinner within the hour. She smiled as she pulled into the driveway. She saw Mike's car and knew that he had made the salad and defrosted the shrimp. He was glad she had mentioned the dinner when she had chatted with him earlier in the day.

“Mike, you are a doll! Now, how about running home and changing. I think you would be a good addition to the dinner conversation.”

She told him, “Both couples know that this is an orientation meeting for the mayor. Since my few friends are totally trustworthy, I decided to mix business with pleasure.”

Her cell phone was ringing as she stepped out of the shower. It stopped even before she grabbed a towel. Across the room was Tom, grinning from ear-to-ear as he ran his eyes over her dripping body.

“Yes. I'll give her the message.”

She laughed. “I'll get even with you later. I wasn't ready to share the news of my love life with my colleagues.”

Tom took the towel and gently massaged her glistening body. “Dick thought I was your dad. He is flying out in the morning.”

“I came early in case you needed help, but everything is under control.”

“Thanks to Mike.”

Tom was the only stranger in this crowd. He was introduced around. Mitch Bailey (the mayor) and his wife, Annabel. She made an attractive partner as a political wife, almost as tall as Mitch, slender and professionally presented.

Tom, of course, knew Emily (Mitch and Annabel's daughter) and Peter from their dinner at the Blue Lantern. Tom and Mike had become good friends since he and Maggie were spending a lot of time together, and they naturally hit it off, anyway.

Later, Maggie heard Annabel saying to Mitch... "Maggie knows how to pick her men."

After hearing Maggie's recap of problems and progress with the investigations, her guests and Mike played a guessing game as to what was the real goal of the invaders. They considered various angles and matched info as they tried to get a handle on these intruders on the peace of Santa Cruz County.

Pete insisted that the bank, which could, over time, launder millions, had to be the ultimate objective. Both, the Mayor and Mike disagreed.

Emily said, "It has to be drugs. That's where the big money is made. The local bank will be a convenience, since they will not have to transport a lot of bulky cash to some distant bank."

Tom said, “That makes a lot of sense, but why Santa Cruz? It’s easier to hide in a metropolis or an uninhabited area than in a peaceful university/resort community by the sea.”

At some time in that conversation, Maggie started referring to the whole problem as the Invaders. It was an easy way to refer to this mysterious enemy.

In wrapping up the conversation, Mike said, “What is the real goal of the invaders? Hopefully, some insights will result from the conversation we have had tonight.”

“If you folks don’t mind, it’s past my bed time,” Mike said, as he reached for his jacket.

Annabel and Mitch said, “We should be going, too. Besides, Mike, we are parked behind your car.”

Before Tom had even closed the front door, Maggie heard the mayor’s voice. “Dammit to hell, who would do this?”

Everyone piled out of the house to the driveway. What they saw was all four tires sliced and flat. On the rear window was sprayed “A Warning.”

Everyone returned to the house, where the mayor placed a call to the AAA auto service. Maggie brewed more coffee while speculation of who and why became the hot topic.

Maggie insisted it was not the Invaders. “This doesn’t frighten anyone, even though it stirs up anger. If it is anyone on their staff, I feel sorry for him or her when the big cheese finds out.”

At that point, they saw the rotating light of the tow truck announce its arrival.

At brunch the next morning, Tom and Maggie continued to share some personal information with each other. Maggie mentioned her past failures. The surprise for Tom was Maggie saying that, through her teens, her biggest problem was lack of confidence.

“Thanks to a loving father, who proved to me that there was no basis for doubt when faced with a major decision? He developed a set of exercises that we used for months. In many ways, I owe Mike for what I am today.”

How did he do that?”

“The one I remember, off hand, is a game of “True or false” in subjects that I in which I had little training. He kept telling me that that I was wiser or smarter than I thought. He proved that I would choose the right answer more than seventy-five per cent of the time based on my intuition.”

“He did a hell of a job, dear. I love the way you face your professional challenges and will always be happy that you dared me to love you that afternoon at Lexington.

Maggie laughed, “As long as you remember that I needed you as much!”

Chapter 7.

The Task Force had invited both the City and County execs to be present. Funds were running low. That was the only item scheduled for a decision. A few updates of activity were given and Maggie announced the date of the first raid on the Aptos property which, they were certain had an operating casino in the rear of the Golden Pheasant.

After the raid, late in the evening, Dick Komar was cussing. “Maggie, how the hell did they know we were coming tonight? We all know, without a doubt, that the Invaders are operating a casino at this spot. No evidence now!”

Maggie said, “I am sure it is not one of the Task Force members.”

“I agree, but no one else knew.”

“Dick, is there any possibility that the room is bugged?”

“Nope. My technicians swept the room and the outside area within thirty minutes prior to the meeting.”

After observing each evening, the casino did not function for four evenings but resumed on the fifth evening.

A planned raid was set for two weeks hence and was executed. Despite the catching the operator’s red-handed, they gained no new knowledge and understood that the operation would resume within a reasonable period. The task force agreed not to charge the

operators with a felony since they were only the hired hands of someone higher up the chain.

Why the first raid had failed was still a mystery.

That evening about midnight, Maggie decided to take the old Chrysler for a night patrol. It had been her practice since her first week on the job. She saw little that was suspicious on those patrols. But this evening she ran across a parked SUV, dark, with no front license plate. The driver was on watch in front of a large home, his hands playing a rhythm on the steering wheel.

She drove by and did a U-turn about a half mile beyond, then parked about fifty yards behind the SUV. No plate on the back either. A bit later, just as she saw a man dashing from the house, her window was hit with a spray of paint, obstructing any view of the action ahead.

She opened the car door and saw a form dashing toward the SUV. She heard him shout, "Another warning!"

The incident convinced her that this was a local gang, some of whom had been caught. The large gang had others to cosine the burglaries but now with an additional lookout covering their escapades. She scraped off the wet paint as best as she could and drove home.

Days later, the lab reported that the paint was identical to the paint from the incident at her home. She called the mayor.

“Mitch, I think I found the culprits who slit your tires.” She told him of the incident in which her windshield was sprayed. “The kid yelled ‘Another Warning!’ as he ran to the SUV. The lab established that the paint was from the same batch. That paint was used on your car.”

“Thanks, Maggie. I agree. It was probably related to that news article in which I pledge to stop the burglaries and the vandalizing of buildings with the spray paint.”

Maggie said. “That’s probably right, but I wonder about the warning. It must have something to do with the paint.”

How’s that?”

I’m not sure. Can you get extra some funds for overtime? I have an idea.”

“Certainly. Send me an invoice.”

Maggie huddled with Jud and told him about the conversation with the mayor. “I think the most likely target for vengeance might be city owned property. Essentially that would be this building and the police cars.

The storage yard has a high fence that is scalable and no alarm that would warn of a break in. I think we should set up night guards. It will cost for the overtime but we also will have volunteers. Most patrolmen can use the extra money.”

“That sounds like a plan. Let’s do it.”

As she was leaving his office, she heard the receptionist announcing the arrival of Mr. Turner.

Deputy Sheriff Dick Komar called her on her cell phone. “Maggie, I just remembered something we overlooked. The day we announced the first raid on the Golden Pheasant, we had two visitors at our meeting, our county and city executives. You might want to chat with Max. I talked with Phil Alexander, the County Exec., who admitted that he let slip the information about the raid in the presence of Jack Johnson, the wealthy flower exporter who is Sheriff Castor’s largest financial supporter.”

“Nice going, Dick.

“Now we need some photos of the Johnson family and their connection to the casino. Meanwhile I will talk with Max (City Exec.) What we also must do is make sure that Phil’s mistake was an honest one. I am now so suspicious, that anyone outside our Task Force and a few personal friends is worth a second look.

On the following Saturday evening at eleven o’clock, Maggie’s cell phone rang. “Dammit!”

“Maggie, Jud here. Schmidt at the police car overnight storage called. They have just apprehended four gang type kids, who were trying to scale the fence, with shoulder bags loaded with spray cans.”

“Thank you. I’ll be there 15 minutes.”

Tom had awakened and was running the shower for Maggie. The cell rang again. “Ms. O’Toole, this is Harold Mix at police headquarters. We just caught three kids with spray cans starting to spray the front of the building, and...”

Before he could finish, Maggie interrupted. “Put them in the clink. I’m on my way to the yard first where others were apprehended.”

Other than names and their driving licenses, the four boys and three girls gave the interrogator nothing.

Maggie called in six detectives. When they arrived, she dispatched each to the addresses shown on the licenses. Each had a patrolman for company. “We need to get to their families while they are off guard. Perhaps we can glean some information.”

Five hours later they had samples of the items stolen during the past months. Two caches were under guard until instructions were received

A crime scene investigator was sent to gather evidence at the two locations. When she was finished about ten the following morning, all the items were taken to be stored in a bank vault.

Before noon, an attorney arrived and arranged for bail. The kids were back on the street and probably ready to start over again.

Maggie had arrived home about one p.m. Tom ran a deep warm bath, undressed her and eased her into the tub amidst bubbles. He slipped her out of the bath, dried her off as she leaned back against the wall, half way asleep. Once he put her on the bed, she was asleep within a minute. But Tom stood watch for the two hours she slept.

He cooked an early dinner that evening and gave her the royal treatment until it was time to leave. “Tom, unless you have an early appointment, please stays the night. As you probably

noticed, I am at sixes ad sevens. I am pleased that we nipped that small gang, but I'm deeply saddened to see that three of them are only sixteen.”

It took about three more days to complete the work of the lab, the crime scene report and the interrogation of four others whose prints were found at both locations. Two of those were sixteen.

Most of this week's meeting of the Task Force was devoted to reviewing pictures taken at the marina and those taken by the coast guard.

Two typical gambling yachts were anchored just beyond the seven mile limit.

Small boat traffic between the marina and the yachts was rather heavy as gamblers came and went, probably depending on their luck.

Three weeks prior, the city had set up cameras at key sites at the marina. Concurrently, the Task Force had alerted the Coast Guard to their suspicions of smuggling by the Invaders. The two 200 foot yachts, which had moored in the Bay outside of the marina, had recently been noted by the Coast Guard.

Any boat departing or arriving after dark got the attention of special police, who were stationed as employees of the marina.

If drugs were involved it was thought that sizeable containers would be used, such as food or drink coolers. Careful watches by the police were given to such containers, if they seemed unusually

heavy when being unloaded. So far, that approach had produced nothing.

As to the possibility that the smuggling was something going out, the pictures never identified any person related in any way to Golden Pheasant or the Blue Lantern.

The Coast Guard monitored both yachts on the three nights each week that they ran huge sea going parties. The Coast Guard stayed out of sight but had both yachts under radar surveillance at all times. It was noted that once beyond the seven mile limit; the yachts anchored and spent most of the night. The accurate assumption was that the casino could operate without interference.

Up until now, no visible contact was ever made with another vessel and neither ever approached the harbor during the journey.

Photos taken at the marina of crew and patrons of the party ships were examined and a head count of the passengers taken, just in case a contact was made at sea.

Dick Komar closed off the meeting with his report on the County Executive. “A thorough vetting has been completed. Phil is cleared. We even had him tested by a pro and he came out clean.”

“The Johnsons, on the other hand, may be connected. Both are heavy gamblers. I decide to purse that trail to see if anything showed up.

“They dine often at the Golden Pheasant and have been photographed boarding the ‘Lone Star,’ one of our two seagoing casinos.

We have the FBI doing a complete check of the Johnson business, including close look at the firm's tax returns. They will get back to us.”

At the next meeting, Dick said, “The Johnsons get an okay from the FBI. The IRS, which had completed two audits in the past five years, gives them an all clear. They seem to declare true gambling winnings”

A knock at the door interrupted the proceedings. Dick was summoned and listened to the messenger for two or three minutes. He returned and said, “A body has just been discovered on a truck farm outside the city limits of Watsonville. At first glance, it seems to be a gang style execution, small caliber to the back of the head.”

Questions were suddenly being shouted. Dick held up his hand. “I have nothing else. Would you like to adjourn until after dinner? I may have something substantial to give you by that time.”

Dick invited Maggie to join him as an observer, since the crime was committed in his jurisdiction. The crime scene investigators and the county coroner were already on the scene. The two detectives were arriving at the same time as Dick and Maggie, one frowning when he spied her.

Dick saw the question in the young man's frown. “She's here with me as an observer. It's all yours, guys.”

While Mike Fox, the senior officer from the sheriff's department, talked with the scene investigator, the young man began viewing the photos. He turned and waved the two observers to join him. "Recognizable?"

Both shook their heads. He handed three other photos to Dick. Each showed the entry wound from a slightly different angle. He acted surprised that Maggie didn't flinch at the rather horrible sight of the wound. It was obvious that he thought of her as a civilian observer, unaware of her status.

Dick told the senior detective, "There's nothing for me to do here. I would appreciate your letting me have a photo of his face. If you like, I can get the FBI started on a possible facial recognition."

"Thanks, Dick. I'll send my newbie detective to start with the mug books. By the way, the coroner's first estimate is between five and six this morning."

Back in Dick's office, while he was sending off the photos to the FBI, Maggie decided, on a whim, to see if she could find a match of the dead guy with any of the shots taken by the camera at the marina. Dick joined her when his task was complete.

Twenty minutes went by. Maggie sighed. "My eyes are burning and...."

She was interrupted by, "I got it. Hot damn! Great idea, Maggie! Look."

There he was, all decked out in the Lone Star crew's uniform.

Maggie nodded her head in approval but continued to stare at a photo before her.

Dick asked, "Have you found something else?"

"Dick, is this Tex Turner? He seems to be avoiding recognition."

"You may be right. Let's look at photos of other evenings."

Twenty minutes later, they agreed that Turner was a regular and was trying to avoid being photographed.

Maggie went to the rest room to freshen up and dabbed some water on her eyes. She wanted to do more study of the photos, now that Turner had identified.

She decided to look for the woman whom she had seen with Mr. Johnson. She finally recognized a woman's back and the large diamond, but she could not get a clear look at her face. It was as if she, too, was avoiding identification.

She also recognized a profile of the woman with many jewels that she had seen at the Blue Lantern that first evening.

In each photo, both women were quite close to Mr. Johnson, but Maggie could not decide which, if either, his wife was. She suddenly remembered where she had seen the woman with the diamond. She had been at the Blue Lantern.

Dick invited Mike Fox, from the sheriff's department, to the evening meeting of the Task Force. There was little to report, but he gave them what he had.

After giving them the basic facts, he said, "Thanks to Dick's identification, we began talking with the first officer of the yacht. As a result, we do have a suspect. The night before last, our victim, Mike Vukovic, won big in a poker game, most of it from one fellow staffer. The employees seem to have a running game when off duty.

"Vukovic was accused of cheating by the big loser, who threatened him. By the way, if I were to guess, these employees are all part of some organized gambling organization. It smells like Mafia to me."

"Do you have any reason to believe this is a gang hit?"

"Not at this time. Our suspect, Rossi, cannot account for his time or else he won't. He definitely has motive. He also admits to owning a .22 but says it was stolen recently."

Maggie asked, "Do you have any thoughts about the location of the body?"

"Oh, I forgot to mention. The coroner says the shooting took place somewhere else and the body was moved to this spot."

She then asked, "How about Mr. Johnson or one of his employees? The body was on or very near his property line. Am I right?"

“That’s correct and I will look that direction, but so far nothing points that way.”

Two days later, Mike Fox told Dick that they found the murder weapon in an irrigation pipe on the adjacent property. “The serial number has been filed off, but the city’s lab has offered to help us. There are times when they can still detect a faint remainder of part of the number.”

“Even though the gun was wiped clean, that lab may find a speck of DNA. By the way, Dick, thank Ms. O’Toole for paving the way for that lab work. Our key personnel are out with some virus.”

Meanwhile, the work of the Task Force was made public and demands were being made for progress. Words like “organized crime” were unwelcome in this quiet community, where a large part of the population was retirees or students and academics.

Progress was slow. There was no real advantage to continuing frequent raids on the casinos, although the occasional raid suspended play for some period of time

On no occasion were the raiders able to find patrons in the casino.

Fox briefed Dick and Maggie before the next Task Force meeting

“We have a new twist in our investigation. Jimmy Chan, Mr. Johnson’s right hand man and personal bodyguard, was in that same poker game. It seems that Johnson goes no place without Chan. Since he is off during some of Johnson’s private moments

on the yacht, he sits in on the employee games. We need to find some way to check his DNA to see if it matches that found on the weapon.

“Meanwhile, we are questioning another employee, Tom Lee, who threatened our victim after losing big to Vukovic, a week ago. Suspects are lining up.

“The lab picked up a partial print on the gun. I had no trouble obtaining DNA samples from Rossi and Chan, but neither was a match. In the meantime, the latest suspect, Tom Lee, refused to give a sample and would not produce an alibi. ‘Why should I? I haven’t done anything but express my anger at Vukovic, like a few others. I’m glad he’s dead but I had nothing to do with that.’”

His refusal again to give a sample and his smooth answer made Fox more determined to get the sample. He assigned his newbie detective to follow Lee until he discarded something that contained his DNA.

By the evening, Fox had a glass from a café where Lee had eaten dinner. By the next afternoon, he had a match and picked up his prime suspect.

Fox briefed Dick. “It took five hours, but the complex story finally unraveled, although Tom Lee never admitted killing Vukovic.”

Fox said, “We have enough to indict Lee and Chan but, although I believe Johnson is involved, we will never prove it.

“What we gleaned from all the details was that Chan hired Lee to take out Vukovic. The set up was to make it seem that blame could be laid on anger at being cheated.

“What I believe that we can prove is that Vukovic was attempting to blackmail Johnson for cheating on his wife. Husband and wife gambled in different rooms, she liking Mah Jongg, while he played poker and dallied with a waitress twice a week.

“We will never know how Chan discovered the blackmail attempt, but protecting Johnson is paramount for Chan. He bought Lee to do the shooting and provided the gun.

“Lee has given us all the details, but in piecemeal only, and still denies killing when asked directly. Eventually, we will find the money and clinch our case.

“Johnson is posting bail for Chan and, of course, will have nothing to do with Lee.”

Chapter 8.

Maggie called her dad. “Mike if you’re available, I’ll cook up some spaghetti this evening.”

“I’ll be there and bring my thinking cap.”

She leaned back in her swivel chair, closed her eyes and reflected back on the last weeks. She was relieved that the murder had not been directly related to the Invaders.

She tried to figure out why Turner was attempting to hide his love of gambling, since the Lone Star parties were legit. She was certain that something else was happening during those cruises. It was hard to imagine any crime organization working strictly legally, when the legitimate business could hide something more profitable. She wondered what it could be.

“I need some input, and who better than Mike?” she thought.

In the midst of their discussion, Mike said, “You’re right, Maggie. There is more. Your team has ruled out big time money laundering, although that does occur. You are quite certain that this is not related to drug trafficking. The setup is too elaborate for those two activities.”

“Mike, that’s why we need to get our camel’s nose under their tent. If we could find the right person, I have fifty grand to use as gambling money that could get us inside the casino.”

“I hate to disillusion you, sweetie, but that may not be enough to play at the big table. I may have a solution. A good

friend of mine, Jack Jones, who is loaded and loves poker, might be our answer. Let me make a call.”

Ten minutes later. “Maggie, he loves your idea and will be happy to be the new camel’s nose in their tent.”

Maggie and Dick convinced their associates to put more effort into discovering the real work of the Lone Star and her companion yacht.

With the help of the retired officers, they soon had two people at the marina. Two others were dispatched to loaf at a bar where many yacht employees spent their afternoons and early evenings.

One managed to get a job washing all the dinnerware and glasses on the Lone Star. This was a tedious chore because every wine and drink glass had to be hand-dried, but everyone nearby ignored the man, which made it possible to hear things that might be withheld from other employees.

Maggie was getting impatient. She knew in her heart and brain that the Task Force and she were not even close, except for the belief that the Lone Star was the key.

She worked late that Thursday, because she planned to take off on Friday. She wanted to clean the house and wash the windows, inside and out. That would be good therapy and would clear her mind. Tom was coming tomorrow evening. She would have pizza and salad delivered since she would be too tired to cook.

It was eleven when she left the office. Within a quarter mile, she was aware that she was being followed. With a few subtle maneuvers, she identified the vehicle as a black Crossover.

She dialed her dad. “Mike, I’m being tailed by a new black Crossover. I can think of no reason other than some gang members. The Crossover looks new and may be stolen. Would you like to join the parade about four miles from home?”

She drove at her normal pace as though unaware of the following vehicle. A hundred yards after she watched Mike enter from a side road, she pulled to a stop, surprising the driver of the black vehicle. Mike pulled in behind the Crossover and carefully got out of his car with weapon drawn.

Maggie slipped out the passenger side, weapon pointed at the black vehicle. She had her car between her body and the other vehicle.

The two occupants of her tail got out with hands held high. “FBI, Ms. O’Toole.” Both were holding badges in their right hands.

Mike gave them permission to toss the badges in his direction while Maggie kept them covered. A moment later, “You may drop your hands and explain.”

“I’m Jesse Grant, from the San Jose office. Matt and I were just approaching your office on an important errand when my cell phone rang. It was our office with an urgent message. ‘There is a strong indication that an assassination is on for Assistant Chief O’Toole. Notify her and protect her.’” We saw you enter your car

and zip out of the yard. The only recourse we had been to trail and be alert for any attempt on your life.”

Mike said, “Thank you for your attempt. I apologize for the rude welcome. Let’s get out of here. Follow us as I take the lead to her home.”

Maggie put on the coffee pot and found some sweet rolls to serve her guests. Meanwhile, Jesse called his office. When he hung up his phone, he turned toward the three of them.

“We have a wiretap on the phone of one Mafioso, who, we believe, is a major player in the organization located in the East. The message was encoded but we have broken it. You are to be eliminated because it is believed that the Task Force will be crippled without your leadership.”

“I wonder how he came to that understanding.”

“Washington believes that someone who knows your operation made the request.”

Maggie was frowning. “I don’t see how any of the local organization leaders could possibly understand my role.”

Mike interrupted with, “I agree but it could be someone on your police staff, which I doubt.

Maggie thought about that. “The only people who know my real role would be the members of the Task Force, the Executives and members of the Council and Board of Supervisors.”

Jesse said, “That’s quite a few people, which means, knowing the loose lips of politicians who love to brag about what secrets they hold, two or three times that many.”

“Maggie said, “That is a complete misreading of my role. Others, like Dick and Steve would press even harder if any Task Force member were murdered.”

Young Matt said, “Perception can be a stronger force than reality, Ms. O’Toole.”

Maggie nodded, acknowledging the truth of his statement.

Agent Grant said, “I am asking Matt to take the watch for tonight. I will plan to relieve him at seven a.m. May I assume you will not leave home before seven?”

“You may, but the night watch is unnecessary. Mike will stay the night.”

“That’s fine but I have my orders and will provide protection until ordered to do otherwise.”

Maggie said, “I understand, but my movements will be hampered if the FBI insists on having someone hovering nearby. I need to talk with your boss tomorrow.”

Maggie was awakened from her deep sleep when she heard Matt’s voice shouting, “Stay in the car, hands on the wheel, where I can see them.”

A minute later she heard his question. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

She heard Mike running down the hall, probably with his gun in hand.

Maggie pulled on her robe and reached for her weapon.

She heard a familiar voice asking in a firm tone, “Who the hell are you?”

“FBI and don’t make a move.”

Maggie heard Mike burst into laughter.

Maggie jerked the door open. “It’s okay, Matt. He’s my fiancé.”

“Are you sure it's okay?”

“Yes.”

She ran to open the car door before Matt could stop her.

Tom was asking, “What’s going on. Why the FBI?”

She heard Matt asking, “Ms. O’Toole, Are you sure?”

“I am, Matt.”

She said to Tom, “I’ll explain when we are inside.”

Tom was shaken with the information that Maggie was a target of some hit man. Maggie tried to assure him that it was a mistake, but she was fooling no one, even herself.

“I wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow evening.”

“I am free tomorrow and I missed you. I was hoping for a romantic interlude and then planned to do some minor repairs on the house, as we discussed last week. That agent sure scared the hell of me.”

“I’m sorry, Tom. I was hoping to keep to keep you out of my professional life.”

“That, sweetie, is not what we pledged. Transparency is our motto, especially now that we are unofficially engaged.”

In a surprise tone, she asked, “When did we get engaged?”

“About twenty minutes ago.”

“Tom Cipriani, “Are you going crazy?”

He laughed. “Maggie, I swear that I heard you tell that FBI agent that I was your fiancé.”

“Oh.”

“Even if it was meant to save a life, I loved hearing it from you. I assume that, even though we haven’t said the words, you must think of me that way. I sure hope so.”

“Well, yes I do. It just happened one day. Suddenly, I was assuming that we would spend the rest of our lives together. I forgot how dangerous it is to assume.”

“Not in this case. Tomorrow, let’s go shopping for a ring.”

“Tom, that’s foolish, especially now that someone is planning to ‘remove’ me.”

“Someone may be planning, but I’m betting on a different outcome.”

In a moment she was on his lap, covering him with kisses and then signaling that there was a more comfortable place for her to accept his proposal.

She called Emily in the morning and spent a half hour telling her the news and intermittently laughing and crying. They ended with plans for a celebration at the Golden Pheasant on Saturday evening.

It was an intimate and fun celebration. Mike had been invited but demurred. “This is a party for young folks. I am so happy for both of you.”

Mike had shown Maggie a picture of his friend, Jack Jones. Just as they were seated in the Golden Pheasant, she saw him with a beautiful woman, two tables away. They seemed to be enjoying their dessert.

A few minutes later, his companion was saying good bye and Jack was headed for the special door. He winked at Maggie as he passed their table.

Wednesday evening, Mike came by when Maggie called to let him know she had arrived home. He had a report from Jack.

He said, “He made a nice stash at the Golden Pheasant and received an invite to take a sail on Tuesday. I had given him the photos of the two men and two women as you requested. He said that he saw no contact between any of them except that the women went to the rest room within a few minutes of each other, overlapping for about four minutes, hardly enough time to make him suspicious. Each played at separate tables during the entire cruise.

He did say that when he decided to go for a walk, he was firmly but gently told that there were limits to his wanderings, since much of the boat had private quarters as well as crew quarters. He thought he sensed, rather than heard the presence of, another vessel.

You might want to verify with your radar watchers. He will be going again tomorrow evening. He was surprised that the Coast Guard remained out of sight as they did, but he guessed that discretion was required since they had no real reason for snooping.”

Maggie showed her disappointment, but Mike reminded her that it was one night only. “Jack lost enough money to be invited for another cruise.”

On Friday morning Maggie hosted a coffee klatch for Mike and Jack Jones. She thought, and they agreed, that Jack should not be seen publicly in Maggie’s presence.

Jack had more to report. “Both ladies made two trips to the ladies’ room, but only one overlapped. This time for two and

half minutes. I can't see any significance, but I thought it worth reporting. I saw no other contact between any of the four."

Maggie's reaction was, "Another theory shot to hell. This is getting really frustrating."

Jack asked, "Did your radar people or the Coast Guard detect the presence of another vessel?"

Maggie said, "I called early this morning and both had reported negative on that."

Jack picked up with, "I took my walk a little later last night. I had that sense again, especially when I heard some muffled clanking top side. Then, I can't swear by this, but I thought I hear the muffled sound of an engine starting up. It only lasted a few seconds. I felt no vibrations from our vessel, so, if I did hear something, it was an engine on another boat."

Maggie seemed to wander off mentally. Mike recognized the sign and signaled Jack to pause.

She began, grinning. "Damn smart. It is smuggling and the smugglers are using a submarine that's coming from somewhere in Mexico. Jack, I am sure that you have made a significant discovery."

"Thank you for the compliment, but I don't think I did much."

Maggie said. "Don't be modest. I'm betting that our Task Force and the FBI will be thanking you in the near future."

She said, “Have some more coffee and scones while I make a call.”

When she returned, she asked, “Mike will you whistle for Matt. I haven’t been able to get rid of him since he was assigned the task of protecting me. Either he or Joe or Jim is always within shouting distance, 24/7.”

Maggie told Matt what she had learned and her suspicions so he could forward the info on to his FBI supervisor.

Maggie called a meeting of the Task Force at one p.m. and then the Task Force with the FBI and Coast Guard at two thirty. Dick agreed that she should have Mike and Jack available for the meetings.

Maggie’s associates were excited for the first time in months. They invited Mike and Jack to tell the story and then adjourned until the two thirty meeting.

Maggie took almost an hour to lay out all the steps that had been taken over the months, including those that produced no results. When she finished the list, she then put forth the Task Force’s decision to focus on the two yachts.

She asked Jack to relate his findings which had led Maggie to her conclusion that there were smugglers and using a submarine of some sort. The ability of the yacht and a submarine to meet twice a week pointed to Mexico as the best source of whatever product was being smuggled.

The Coast Guard commander was not ready to believe Jack's story, but he agreed that he had never been close enough to have detected an approaching sub.

Maggie said, "Commander, if I were guessing, I'd say the sub would have arrived earlier so as to be on station when the yacht dropped anchor.

"It is also probable that the sub did not start its return until you were returning to port."

She got a nod of agreement. She turned to Mark Stutz of the FBI. "Mark, if our judgment is sound, then this is now bigger than our Task Force affair, but we need to be a part of the continuing operation and prove to our constituents that we are part of the solution to oust the Invaders from our peaceful community."

"I agree. Homeland Security will want to join with more than just the Coast Guard, since your guess is that an alien vessel is involved. It could become a possible threat to our national security as well as the criminal smuggling."

Maggie reminded everyone that this was still speculation and, if proven to be the case, the material that was being smuggled was yet to be determined.

Dick Komar, the deputy said, "We thought we had ruled out drugs, but that possibility is back on the table."

Maggie said, "I hope that is all there is."

Stutz asked, "What makes you think there is more?"

She laughed, “It’s what most of you don’t like to hear. My gut.”

Most of the laughter was not very hearty.

As the three of them walked from the meeting room, Matt approached. “Ms. O’Toole, I’ve had another message saying some attack on you is imminent. I would like to offer the three of you a ride in my vehicle with our driver. One of my team will drive your car with two agents posing as passengers.”

Maggie looked at Mike, who nodded his approval. She thought Jack uttered a sigh.

The agent driving her car had a two minute start.

The drive had been uneventful. They were approaching the last major curve before Maggie’s driveway. Suddenly loud sounds of an engine backfiring filled the car. But Maggie knew it was high-powered weapons...the rapid fire of Glocks and Birettas.

“Down!” shouted their driver.

A moment later, Maggie realized that the firing was up ahead and definitely not aimed at their vehicle. She heard the car door open and took a peek. Their driver was holding a shotgun at the ready, pointing toward some brush to the left of the road.

He demanded, “Come out with your hands up and no weapon.”

Maggie heard nothing but kept her head down.

“I’m warning you. Come out.” Silence.

The next sound was the roar of the shot gun.

That must have been a warning shot because she then heard, “I’m coming. I’m coming.”

All three passengers lifted their heads to look. Maggie whispered, “He’s one of the older busboys at the Golden Pheasant.”

From up ahead, Maggie saw two armed agents slowly approaching. They took the busboy prisoner and said something she couldn’t hear to the driver.

He opened the car door and said, “Matt’s team took out a youth and captured another adult. His message is that it is safe to proceed.”

In the brief grilling, the team could get nothing from their prisoners, who were taken to the city jail.

As she walked through the door of her home, Maggie was feeling a bit woozy. When he noticed, Jack took her arm and said something quietly to Mike.

In a few moments, Maggie was swallowing a shot of brandy. Jack dropped a light throw over her shoulders.

A bit later she was aware that Mike was talking on the phone with Tom. “Yes, if you can. You are the best medicine for her at this time, Tom.”

She wanted to protest but could not. Her dad was right. She wanted the comfort of being enfolded in Tom’s arms.

Mike insisted that she lie down in her bed and nap if she could. He called Dick Komar to tell him of the attempt and got Dick to postpone the Task Force meeting for a day.

Chapter 9.

Dick moderated the meeting after he and Maggie had agreed upon an agenda. The group agreed with what had been Maggie's recommendation.

“We need to determine the destination of the drugs once they are off the yachts; that is, if that was indeed what was being smuggled. Remember that all this is still speculation.”

The group consensus was that drugs were probably being brought ashore by the crew members. Following them after departure from the yacht would require some man power. The men lived in rented rooms across the various communities.

The women were housed in one motel which was located on Highway 1 further south in the county.

The photos of the previous evening departure and arrival of both yachts were studied by each of the members. Maggie heard someone say, "This is unusual. Eight patrons, who usually board the Lone Star, went to the other yacht last night.”

When Maggie was shown the photos, she realized that the Johnsons were among the eight. *“I wonder if that has any special meaning.”*

A few days later, Mark Stutz of the FBI stopped by to update Maggie. He said, “The Coast Guard has a dozen boats that will try to pick up the sub’s route and point of origin. His crew will plan to use their special magnetic underwater detectors when the yachts are anchored on game nights. Homeland wants us to

add two of their agents to review all the photos taken for twenty-four hours before, during and after each game night.

“The Homeland people believe the real information is someplace in those photos. They are happy that you are continuing to locate any possible receiving station as well as concentrating on the pics.”

Two week later, Mark stopped by again. “Ms. O’Toole, we owe that imaginative mind of yours a big vote of thanks. The sub route is confirmed and a similar duo of gambling yachts off Morro Bay is contacted much later in the morning on those same days.

“The Coast Guard also noted that the sub, once out of sight of its contacts, comes to the surface to run at faster speed between stops.” **Dad, see attachment to email.**

“What are the next steps, Mark?”

“The decision is yet to be made, but I can guess that everyone wants the big fish. That means “No Action” until we get the evidence on the possession by the final receiver here on the coast.”

“Thanks Mark. Have you had any luck from the would-be assassins as to their employer?”

“I am sorry to say, ‘No.’ it is evident that they fear their employer more than they fear us.”

A little later in the day she had a call from Dick. “Maggie, one of your volunteers has a woman in sight that matches

the woman you see in the photos. She is the one walking away from Phil Alexander and Johnson that one afternoon. As I recall, Phil did not know who she was.”

“Have her followed. Perhaps he can find a way to discover her identity.”

Two hours later, Dick calls Maggie with a report. “I’ll come to your office rather than talk on the phone.”

A bit later, the receptionist called to say that Mr. Komar was in the waiting room. Maggie walked out to get Dick and bumped into Jud, who was walking his guest out.

“Hello, Ms. O’Toole, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Oh, Hello Mr. Turner. How are you?”

“Just fine. I pray that you are the same.”

Maggie said, “I am, thank you. Sorry, but I have someone waiting. Please excuse me.”

“Certainly.” He turned to say goodbye to Jud.

Dick, who witnessed the meeting, asked “Who is that good looking, and I’m betting, wealthy, gentlemen with the ten gallon hat? He’s in the photos, I think.”

Maggie waited until they were in her office. “You’re right. That’s Tex Turner. He is apparently wealthy and a friend of Jud’s.”

Dick gave a snort. “What a coincidence!”

“Meaning what?”

“Our volunteer who followed the lady, reported that she used her credit card at the tea shop and that he was able to discover her name. He then followed her into the country where she pulled into a long driveway to a farmhouse. The mailbox had the same name, ‘Turner’ printed in large letters.”

“Interesting. You’d never guess that from their postures in any of our photographs. I had a secret bet with myself that she was the woman seen by that blackmailer, the one that Johnson was supposedly dallying with.”

“That’s not out of the question. Their properties are adjacent. In fact, I believe that the body was found on the Turner property, but I’m not sure.”

Maggie said, “Nothing we’ve seen so far indicates that they know each other. That’s understandable, despite the adjoining properties. One grows flowers, the other vegetables.”

Dick said, “Nothing about either’s appearance indicates ‘farmer’ to me. Gentlemen famers may be.”

“Dick, I have that gut feeling again. I would like to put an eye on both properties for a few days and maybe have someone scout both properties to see if there are indications of any drug storage or movement.”

“That sounds like a long shot, but let’s do it.”

Maggie's FBI constant after-hour's guardian was waiting for her at the office door. "Maggie, do you know the whereabouts of Mr. Cipriani?"

"Yes, but why you ask?"

"We now have reason to believe that he is in danger."

"Damn! Damn! Tom is flying in from Dallas, due home about eight."

"Would it be possible to have him drive here instead of going to his home?"

"Certainly, but why here?"

"We want to offer him protection but we are running shorthanded."

She interrupted, "I get it. Of course I will call him, but he will have to go home eventually."

"Given enough time, we can set a trap for anyone contemplating an attack on Mr. Cipriani."

It was nice having Tom every weekday night as well as the weekend, but the reason was anything but comforting. The short stay was ended three days later when the trap led to the apprehension of two would be killers, one seriously wounded and the younger one having given himself up. He refused to give over any info to the police.

Some key members of the Task Force met Tuesday evening, after observing the loading of passengers for the two gambling yachts.

They ordered Chinese takeout and held their meeting while sharing their dishes with each other.

The first order of business was Dick's report from the scout. "He says that he was on the Turner property at dawn, the best time to scout without someone seeing him. He says there are only four buildings on the property: The main house, the detached three-car garage, an outbuilding for farm equipment, and another dwelling. He did see an elderly Spanish or Mexican woman walking around in the kitchen. He was not sure about other occupants, who may not have been out of bed that early.

"He then went to the Johnson property. They have a lot of visitors. One of the employees, thinking he might be a buyer, welcomed him and gave him a grand tour, then told him to feel free to roam through the fields. His judgment was that there are many places to hide drugs, but the attitude of that employee, which was so welcoming, made the scout doubtful about drugs."

Everyone was let down with the report. This was another blind alley.

At ten the following morning Mark Stutz dropped in. "The Coast Guard notified Homeland and the FBI that they confirmed the connection between the sub and both yachts. Each stop took approximately twenty-five minutes. They report a lot of activity and voices chattering during the stop."

He could see Maggie's look of satisfaction. Her deductions had been proven correct.

Mark continued. "Homeland and we would like a session with your representatives to view the photos from last evening as well as the first video of the departure and arrival."

"Would two o'clock be agreeable?"

Mark smiled. "You read my mind."

They were thirty minutes into the video when an expert from Homeland Security, Jon Jackson, and Maggie began to speak at the same time.

She nodded for him to continue. He smiled and said, "I think I see something. Look carefully at those two lovelies with their large purses. Now look at the same ones and their purses when they come off the yachts. I am sure each purse is a bit heavier than when they left earlier in the evening."

He looked at Maggie, who was smiling. "Thanks for letting me take the credit. You saw what I did."

"Yes. It seems that we should have paid more attention to those young ladies of the night."

After almost an hour, seven people agreed with that observation. Dick was saying, "There was no way that we could have seen that with the still photos."

Someone asked, "Is there enough of any drug that it could make this a really successful operation?"

Mark said, “I’m betting that it’s pure heroin at fifty grand per pound. There are sixteen “so called” lady crew members for each yacht. If each brought ashore a pound or so, that’s thirty-two pounds at fifty grand each, about a million and a half per night. Add that to each Casino’s nightly take and you have a worthwhile enterprise.”

Maggie hardly participated in the conversation, because she was intrigued with some anomaly she had seen in the video.

There was something about two of the returning young women staffers that needed analyzing. She decided to study it again, but for now she needed to return to her task of moderating the discussion.

After another half hour of study of the video, Jackson from Homeland Security said, “My job here is done for the moment. I leave you crime detectors to do what is necessary. Ms. O’Toole, you have keen eyesight and a good instinct for finding what is hidden in plain view.”

Mark suggested that they delay planning the next steps until the FBI had their representative in the meeting.

Maggie said, “Call them, Mark, but I think we should continue and bring them up to date when they arrive.”

“All right. Let’s break for a half hour. I need a snack and a bathroom break. Maybe I can get someone from Homeland Security on the way by then.”

Janet Jones, Senior Investigator with the FBI, joined the group seventy-five minutes later, having been flown by helicopter from San Francisco and dropped off at Dominican Santa Cruz Hospital Heliport.

Ms. Jones was a quick study, and she had a grasp of the situation within fifteen minutes. Maggie suggested that Jones take the leadership role since this was mostly a federal issue.

Jones was good. She kept the group focused.

An hour later she was summarizing. “We need to be patient, because we want to net the big one here. Assuming that the young ladies are carrying the drugs, we need to set up a surveillance that leads us to the delivery location beyond the motel.

“I think we can assume that the removal will occur within a short time after their arrival to an interim holding station. It is the next delivery that should be to the ultimate local destination.

“If we play our cards right, we can terminate this operation and arrest all the players together with the most important player, the ring leader.”

Dick Komar asked, “Ms. Jones, will you assume the field leadership?”

“No. That task belongs to the local FBI and the cooperation of your Task Force and related personnel. I would like at least one of our staff present when the group is ready to take the final destination and the big fish.”

He replied, “The only reason I asked that is to cover all bases. I am now convinced that this submarine operation posed no threat to the nation, but I didn’t want to be caught off base.”

At dawn on Friday morning, a team of four watchers trailed the thirty-two young women to the motel. Each woman dropped her purse behind the counter of the registration desk. Two hours later, they saw a supposed messenger arrive and walk out with two heavy suitcases. He was joined by a husky gent and ushered into a waiting black SUV.

The watchers trailed the SUV to a motel in Watsonville where the three took the two suitcases into room 32.

The watchers were in constant contact with the leader, Mark Stutz, who was with a team of two others following the surveillance team, about a quarter mile behind.

Meanwhile, Maggie had continued analyzing the video.

Her eyes were bleary, but she had discovered the other major secret. At least eight of the returning young women, while they wore the same clothing, not all fit the clothing as well as the ladies who had boarded. That spurred her to look more carefully at the faces and prove to her that these women were not the same ones who had departed the evening before.

She called Dick, who verified her findings. Dick said, “Slave trade. Wow!”

Maggie said, “Human trafficking is high on law enforcement’s lists these days. Some of the beautiful exotic women from Asia and the Middle East can bring as high a price as a pound of heroin. If there were eight per yacht for each trip, the income just doubled.”

Dick Komar said, “For all our work, we missed the boat. It never occurred to me that we should keep a constant eye on the motel. Those girls had to be moved out and the regulars returned to keep this process ongoing.”

“You’re right; Dick but we can’t beat ourselves up for those mistakes. So far, because of our watchers, we do know that no girls have been moved yet. Let’s concentrate on the possibility that the movement will take place today or tomorrow, probably at night.”

Dick said, “We need to call Mark. If we are right and the girls are moved today, they may be headed for the same location. That means more guards and a high risk of confrontation.”

Mark had a hard time believing what he heard, but he had come to trust the work and insights of Maggie and Dick. They had done a superb job during all these past months. “All right.”

“Keep me posted if you see any movement.”

Maggie and Dick decided to be part of the team following the girls. They joined the watchers at Jake’s Café. The window seats provided a great a view of the motel and the parking lot. They had just taken a seat when Maggie heard, “Good afternoon, Ms. O’Toole.”

She was startled. The last voice she expected to hear was that of Tex Turner, her boss's friend.

Turner came to stand next to the booth. "Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Turner."

He smiled. "I wish you would call me Tex. I was just paying the cashier when I saw you enter. I was expecting to see you at the office. I'm off to see Jud. He invited me to dinner this evening. My wife is busy and I am not partial to eating alone."

She nodded, saying, "Mr. Turner, may I present Mr. Komar of the sheriff's office?"

The two men acknowledged the introduction.

"Oh, yes. That Task Force that Jud mentioned."

Maggie nodded and hoped Dick didn't show his surprise.

"Well, I must run to the bank before I meet Jud. And then head north to Santa Cruz."

"It was nice to see you gain, Tex."

After Turner left, she explained to Dick about the reference to the Task Force with, "Jud has loose lips around people he trusts."

It turned out to be a long wait.

At dusk, two Lincoln Town Cars pulled up in the parking lot at the rear of the motel. Eight girls were casually loaded into the vehicles and were invisible behind the smoky windows.

Ten minutes later, Maggie called Mark, “We’re headed for Watsonville. Eight girls are in two Town Cars.”

Mark acknowledged. “Let’s keep our cell phones open for rapid communication.” Ten minutes later, she heard Mark saying, “Our targets are on the move.”

A few minutes later, he reported, “They’re turning toward the hills.”

Maggie said, “That’s farm country. Lots of acreage for vegetable and flower growers. Mark, I’m guessing they’re headed for either the Johnson or Turner farms. You remember that they are adjacent.”

“Yes, but we ruled out Mr. Johnson and we never had Turner in our sights.”

“I know. We just saw Turner, who has a dinner date with Jud.”

“Then, why do you think that is the destination?”

She laughed. “I know you hate to hear this, Mark, but my gut says it’s Turner’s place. Besides, we have combed this county with no results.”

Maggie was thinking to herself, “*That second residence on the Turner property has never been fully explored. It is large enough to house a dozen or more girls.*”

Mark said, “My driver reports that we are headed in that direction.”

“So are we, Mark.”

Mark agreed that his team would probably arrive first and would await the others. As they neared the entrance, their targets turned into the property.

Satisfied that no one could see inside their vehicles, Mark asked his driver to drive past the Turner gate in order to see if any guards were posted near the entrance.

One guard, casually puffing on a cigarette was seen leaning against one end of the entrance. Apparently, he wasn't expecting any trouble.

The small cavalcade stopped just around the bend, less than a quarter mile past the gate. Two agents were dispatched to take care of the guard.

The two waited until they saw the arrival of the Lincolns with the girls. Two minutes later, they had the guard gagged and trussed and hidden behind some bushes.

The two task force teams move silently past the main residence which was lighted but appeared to be unoccupied. Satisfied that it was safe to continue, they did, leaving one agent to cover their rear, just in case.

The babble of voices reached their ears before they were within fifty yards of their target. They detected two guards, chatting and smoking. Five minutes later, the guards were gagged and trussed. The team signaled “all clear” to Mark.

The teams were deployed to cover all exits, including the exit from the basement. Since no visitors were expected, the doors were unlocked, thus allowing silent entry by the teams.

Mark eased the door opened and peeked inside. He saw three guards in conversation with two older women with their backs toward the door.

Dick and Maggie were in position at the rear entrance to the large family room, opposite Mark's position. When Dick eased open the door and she peeked, she pulled back immediately and covered her mouth to prevent an audible gasp.

Dick stared at Maggie. He had never seen her react this way. He asked in a whisper, "What is it?"

"Take a look. I would never have guessed. The key figures in our mystery are Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Johnson. I can't believe it!"

At that moment, she heard Mark's voice on her cell phone. "Thirty seconds."

As Maggie handcuffed Mrs. Turner, she complained loudly, "Get your hands off of me! I'll sue you for assaulting an innocent woman in her own home."

Maggie laughed as she looked at twenty some bags of drugs, probably heroin, sitting on that table in the center of the room. She gently pushed Mrs. Turner into a chair, cuffing her to it, and waived to the other female agent.

Together they walked to the second floor. She turned the key of the door leading to a large room furnished with rows of double bunk beds and a group of frightened girls huddled in the far end of the room.

All the girls or young women were beautiful. Most were Eastern Asian and a few appeared to Maggie to be Eastern European.

Ellen Chen, the other agent, was a Task Force member. She was a second generation American of Chinese parentage. She walked over to the group and spoke to three of the young ladies. Maggie could see their bodies relax a bit although they remained leery. Ellen turned Maggie. “These three were abducted in Hong Kong almost two months ago. They have been counting the nights since then. I’m sure that, with gentle questioning, we will get their story.”

“What is your guess about the others?”

“My guess is Vietnamese and Thai. I have no idea of the Europeans.”

One of the young Chinese women called to Ellen and said something. Ellen said, “She says there are two other women from Hong Kong who were separated when they got off the boat. My guess is they may be in another room.”

That turned out to be the case. Twelve captives were being held in the basement dormitory.

Maggie joined Mark, when he initiated questioning Mrs. Turner. She refused to talk and requested her attorney.

Mrs. Johnson was frightened and trembling. “Jack is going to kill me! He told me that associating with Lori was playing with fire.” Realizing that she was probably saying too much, she abruptly stopped talking and demanded an attorney.

It was after midnight when Maggie turned into her driveway. She was delighted to see Tom’s car and a light in the window.

She nearly jumped out of her skin as she stepped out of her car. “Maggie, its Matt. Oh, Sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you. Congratulations. I had a call from Mark.”

“Thanks, Matt. I guess this will mean ‘good bye.’”

“Not until we’re sure. Word is not to be made public for a couple of days, so I will still be on the job with my team.”

Tom, hearing the car door slam and voices, was standing in the doorway. His arms enveloped her as she approached. It wasn’t long before the light in the house vanished.

Chapter 10.

The Task Force erupted into chaos with the news at the morning meeting. A special luncheon was held at the Golden Pheasant, as a bonus for the hard work and overtime given by the members during the past months.

Maggie informed them that it might be weeks before they heard the whole story. She was certain that Jack Johnson would push for special consideration on behalf of his wife before she would tell her side of the story.

She was sure that Lori would demand even more consideration. Maggie was sure that she was the real power in the partnership with Mrs. Johnson.

It was months before Mark, on behalf of the federal agencies, invited the Task Force, Jud, the Mayor and the Chairman of the Supervisors to a special gathering in which he gave the short version of the outcome.

Both women are serving shortened jail time due to the information they had given up.

Both women were heavy gamblers and had gotten to know members of the Contino gang. Lori, in fact, had a brief affair with the Capo, Jimmy Contino.

She had convinced the Capo that she and Mrs. Johnson could manage a smuggling operation out of Santa Cruz. Jimmy

agreed to furnish manpower and split the take if the women agreed to include trafficking of women as well as drugs in the operation.

The Blue Lantern was set up as a distraction to the main operation. The maître d', who was doing well with the casino, got greedy and began to work with the local gang.

The casino at the Golden Pheasant was another red herring that was to keep the police looking in the wrong direction, while the legal gambling yachts not only made good gambling returns but were the main performance.

Dick asked, "How did they manage the space on the sub for all the women?"

"That was easy. When the special group of girls was on their final break, they exited to the sub. The imports came aboard to replace the employees but stayed out of sight until the debarking.

The employees were taken to Southern California, unloaded and flown up to San Jose, then driven over the coast mountains to the Highway 1 motel, free to live their lives as they saw fit until the next working evening."

"How about the victims?"

"Like so many victims of the slave trade, they were threatened, brainwashed, trained in the art of prostitution and then resold into a waiting market. It was Lori's responsibility to initiate that process. She is one tough lady. She is the daughter of a Mafia soldier who got a good education, found a well-to-do husband to

present a face of respectability but got bored with the gentle lady routine.”

“Do you know how the women became partners?”

“It seems that Mrs. Johnson was bored. Jack was all about growing flowers, creating new varieties and making money. He gave her all the money she wanted in order to keep her happy.

“She was ripe for adventure and Lori discovered that somehow. Two bored younger women, bored with their married lives, sought excitement.”

“Did you discover any more about the Vukovic murder?”

“Nope.”

Mark ended with, “Now, you know what I am allowed to tell you and I know nothing about what else the Home Security people know.”

Just as they were about to adjourn, Maggie looked out the window and saw Tom pull into the parking lot.

She said, “I have a brief statement to make. Four weeks from Sunday, I will be walking down the aisle. You’re all invited.”

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