

CHAPTER ONE

What the Mannequin Saw

I picked up the sealed envelope from the counter and headed for the train. The October morning air was chilly, and the sun was just starting to come over the distant hills in the east. I was hesitant about opening another cold case from my dad. As a long-time sheriff's detective, he regularly sent me copies of old cases that had turned cold, if they took place anywhere near the Coaster Train corridor which ran from Oceanside California to Downtown San Diego. While most were interesting to read, a few had led to danger and possible death. Like most people, I like adventure, but the danger part has always been a problem.

Like a letter from the IRS, I tend to hold these at arm's length until I can muster up the nerve to break the seal. My name is Cory London, I'm a guy, 35 years old, and been through a lot, but the fear is still there, especially in the last case that had a gun pointed at my chest.

Thankfully, as I entered the train that morning, my two train mates were already on-board car number three, sitting at our usual table number one.

Smiling, I said, "Good to see both of you this fine Monday morning."

Both nodded. Shelly said, "It's too early for that big of a smile, Cory. What's up?"

I held up the envelope. "Look what I have. Another sealed envelope. Care to open it with me?"

My petite French friend Amie sat forward, with an inquisitive look in her eye. "Oooh, an envelope. What kind of mystery will this bring?"

Shelly laughed, "You sound like Nancy Drew, Amie. Maybe it's 'The Mystery of the Crooked Stick.' Possibly the 'Mystery of the Haunted Bridge.' Could it be the 'Secret of the Hidden Lair?'"

I piped in, "Maybe it's 'Footsteps Under the Window,' like the Hardy Boys."

Amie shook her head. "I don't get it, who are Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys?"

"Those are American children's detective series heroes. Nancy Drew for girls and Hardy boys for the guys." I said.

"Oh, I've seen French copies in one of the larger bookstores in Paris. So now this adventure will have to have a certain air of mystery. You're a writer, Cory. You need to chronicle our adventures and come up with compelling titles. Now I definitely want to see what's inside the report."

I put the official looking government envelope on the table in front of us. As I ran my finger along the tab to open it, I could see both girl's eyes firmly staring at the contents. As I pulled out the usual three sheets of paper, I did a quick perusal and then handed the materials to Shelly. "Since you have a new position as County Office Manager, Shelly, why don't you give us an overview of the case?"

She took a minute and looked over the three pages and then went back to the summary. She said, reading aloud, "This is a case of robbery at a Tina Tahiti clothing and accessories store in the beach town of Encinitas. It appears that expensive one-off fashions and jewelry are missing from thefts overnight. According to the report, complete outfits are disappearing off the main mannequin in the window, while other mannequins are in different positions in the morning that they were the night before. The alarm never sounds, and there is no apparent break-in."

I laughed. "So, we have a case of mannequins coming alive at midnight. Sounds too funny to be true."

Amie took the report from Shelly and looked at the particulars. "Wow, according to this over 50,000 dollars' worth of clothing was stolen in a one-month period alone. Currently classified as a possible inside job. Employees were interrogated, but no arrests have been made. The thefts started in January of this year and have continued unabated throughout the year. This case was referred to the insurance company, and has been put on hold with the Sheriff's department, given no discernible break-ins."

"Who is Tina Tahiti and why are her clothes worth so much?" I asked.

Shelly looked at me a little dumbfounded. "You don't know who Tina Tahiti is? Tell me that you are not that disconnected from the entertainment news."

"I really don't know. Never heard of her. Fill me in."

Shelly beamed, "Tina Tahiti is an Indy film star, surfer, and singer. She has starred in remakes of some of the sixties beach classics such as Beach Blanket Bingo, Where the Girls are, and Surf Party. These movies all have new names, and her co-star is bachelor hunk, Stefano. Her real name is Valentina Tagliacozzian, but after winning the Tahiti Surf Championship, she got

the nickname Tina Tahiti, which is much easier to pronounce. Every gal who has ever surfed a wave knows who she is."

"What makes her so special?"

"Looks for one. Her dad is Italian, and her mom is Asian. She has this amazing look. She is tall, with long mahogany brown hair, and a perfect figure, and a great surfer to boot. Then there is her singing voice and musical talent. She is the queen of surf rock and can hit really high notes with her voice as well as play amazing Led Zeppelin riffs on an electric Ukulele."

I could hardly keep from laughing. "You got to be kidding, hard rock riffs on an electric Ukulele. I've got to see that."

Amie interjected, "While she is famous entertainer world-wide, her main claim to fame is her fashion line. She has a patented series of garments called Mermaid Flow, that feature invisible sculpted foam and spandex that expand in the good areas and tuck in the not so important ones."

Shelly interrupted, "It's even better than that. Her company came up with a process that creates a seamless fabric that completely changes the way a garment fits and looks. There are no seams, and each size is created to maximize feminine curves, basically make your chest bigger and your stomach smaller."

Amie was excited now. "Don't forget the Stefano pecks line. Subtle foam and spandex combined into one shirt that guys love. Makes your shoulders and arms look bigger while tightening your pecks and adding subtle ribs across the abs. You basically get six pack abs in a shirt."

"Now that I must see," I said. "So how do you guys know so much about this gal?"

Shelly pulled out her phone. "YouTube. She has her own channel. Millions of views. Based in Encinitas. Local success story. Haven't you heard the song, The Girl from Encinitas, sung by Stephano? Where have you been Cory?"

"Now I've heard it all, The Girl from Encinitas. I imagine a rip from the regular song?"

Shelly nodded. "Was sung by Stephano to Tina at a benefit concert for homeless vets. She is definitely tall, tan, and young and lovely."

"So you two seem to know a lot about Tina. I feel like a total dweeb. Where have I been?"

Shelly said, "You're a guy, and unless you are into surfing, you probably wouldn't know about her. I got into the surf scene for a little while a couple of years ago. An old boyfriend tried to teach me to ride the waves Not much luck there, but I did hang out with him at the beach a lot. Unfortunately, he was away a lot on surfing trips, so we drifted apart. When I was hanging out with that crowd, I did purchase a couple of Tina Tahiti halter tops. Expensive, but worth every penny. The fit was incredible."

I shook my head. "What I don't understand is, what makes her clothes so expensive? How can she have lost fifty thousand dollars in a month?"

Amie sat forward. "I can answer that. Her new model line this year is state of the art. Nothing else like it on the market. Her company bought one of the leading manufacturers of wetsuits. With this additional fabric technology edge, they have taken surf and loungewear to new heights. They created a garment that is ultra-thin, but shapely, breathes well, resists moisture and makes you look incredible."

"But how does it make you look better? I don't see how that might work?"

Cory, let me explain this from a girl's point of view. Take me for instance. I'm five feet three and skinny as a rail. If you put a traditional black dress on me, I look like a kid. No curves anywhere. I've tried a lot of styles at different stores, but I usually look like I'm ten years old. Shelly and I were in Encinitas a

couple of Saturdays ago. As a hoot, I tried on one of Tina's Mermaid Flow, little black dresses. One look in the mirror and I was sold. I had curves from neck to knees. I had a supple chest, tight waist, and curvaceous hips, all without seams or bulges, and the comfort was unreal. It didn't pull, or bind; it just fit."

Shelly smiled, "She didn't look like the same person."

I gave Amie a wink. "I hope you bought it."

Amie shrugged. "Not yet. As good as I looked in the mirror, the 350-dollar price tag was just too much for me. And that was a previous version on sale. First run styles are over a thousand dollars. Special colors and one-off celebrity styles bring 5,000 dollars or more. I can easily see a huge loss on her part if their flagship models are being ripped off."

"So here is the question," I said. "How is someone stealing the clothes from the mannequins? It says here in the report that the doors are dead-bolted, the ceiling has no access panels, the room has an alarm with motion detection and there is a security camera that covers the main showroom. Nothing is showing up, yet the flagship garments disappear overnight, usually once or twice a week."

"And," Shelly added, "the other mannequins are in different positions in the morning that they were the night before. Talk about creepy; this sounds like something out of an old Twilight Zone episode, where mannequins come to life."

Amie picked up the report and studied it for a minute. "My question is, where are the garments going after they are stolen? According to the recovery section, they are showing up on eBay from a variety of sellers within a month, mostly from international dealers. Someone is getting them out of the store and then out of the country."

I nodded. "Someone is whisking garments out of the states and then brazenly selling them on eBay. My guess is, it is almost

impossible to prosecute sales in other countries, and I bet they sell almost as fast as the ad is put up, so eBay may not be able to police the vendors."

"In France, they have really cracked down on eBay transactions, but the other problem is fakes. For every ad about a real item, there are knockoffs. For someone like Tina, once an item is out of the store, it's almost impossible to recover the real thing."

"I can see why this case has gone cold with the police. Without a physical break in, there is nothing to prosecute, and the items for sale are out of their jurisdiction. So, guys, are you up for doing a little investigating in this case?"

Shelly nodded. "I love her products and any excuse to peruse the store is OK by me."

Amie agreed, "Moving mannequins has me intrigued."

"So, if you are agreeable, how about we stop at Encinitas on our normal train home and then take the late evening train out fifty minutes later. The store is a five-minute walk from the station. It will give us about 40 minutes to check things out."

Both gals nodded in agreement. This case seemed simple on paper. Catching a thief stealing an outfit off a mannequin in a store window couldn't be easier. We know the location, and we have a general time. But something told me that this case might be different.

All during Monday at work I kept rolling ideas around in my head. As the three of us met up on the train home, I said, "I've been thinking about this all day. Seems to me it must be an inside job. They get a police report and then steal their own clothes. The insurance company pays off, and they double their money."

Amie nodded, "Could be, but insurance companies don't pay off willy-nilly and certainly not time after time. My guess is, those items are now uninsurable."

It didn't take long to find out. The train arrived in Encinitas at 5:40, and after a short walk, we were standing outside of the Tina Tahiti store.

"Wow guys, this store is bigger than I thought. Almost half a block long. I didn't realize they have surfboards, sporting goods and a whole line of clothes."

Shelly smiled, "Truly a surfer's paradise."

Amie looked around the store and shook her head. "Why just steal a mannequins' clothes when all these other items are available?"

"Good question," I said. "Let's find the manager and find out."

The three of us walked in and looked around. Shelly pulled me over to one of the Pecks T-shirt displays.

She smiled. "Let's see how ol' Cory would look with a six-pack. Here try this tester shirt on." She handed me a form-fitting tan shirt. I went to the dressing area and put it on. Shelly handed me a camp shirt over the dressing door to go over it. "Put this casual camp shirt on, but leave it unbuttoned. Let's see the results."

I walked out of the dressing area and headed for a mirror. At 35, I'm in reasonable shape with a little bit of a gut. I could stand to lose ten pounds or so, and I certainly don't have six-pack abs. As I turned to face the girls, they both whistled.

Shelly said, "My, my, you just added a year in the gym to your physique."

Amie ran her hand over my now shrunken gut. "Ten pounds gone in a flash. Looking good, Cory."

I looked in the mirror and couldn't believe what I saw. The fitted tee shirt gave the appearance of having a six-pack, and the

padded shoulders and sleeves added bulk under the camp shirt. It was a subtle look, but one that most guys would have to work very hard to get. Looking at the price tag, I could have this look for only \$299.

"I'm a little short on cash today, but I see what you mean. What an amazing store."

Shelly said, "Check out the surf video on the large screen monitor. That's Tina in her famous Tahiti Surf Contest winning ride back in 2015. Look at that giant set of waves."

"You're not kidding, wow. What great shots. Is that a DVD or something else? The clarity is amazing."

"That's the new Google cable feed. They are now streaming 4k video in some parts of Encinitas. The surf channel features Tina a lot. No better way to sell surfboards and surf wear. Check out the hosts. The guy and gal are both wearing garments from her flow line."

She was right. The hosts looked terrific in ultra hi-def. No seams, gaps, or rolls. Quite a testament to the new fabric technology. I reluctantly changed back into my street clothes and said goodbye to my enhanced body. After a chat with a clerk, we soon found ourselves directed to the office of Brenda Billings, the store general manager. She was middle-aged with dark hair, a full figure, and a nervous attitude. I handed her my detective business card and said, "My name is Cory London, and these are my associates Amie, and Shelly. We are following up a cold case for Sergeant Norm Cord of the Sheriff's department. We wanted to see if items were still being stolen from your window."

She gave me a grimaced look. "You don't look like cops. Why should I talk with you?"

I showed her the police report and replied, "We do undercover work for the department. If you would like to talk to the sergeant, I can put him on the phone."

"That won't be necessary," she smirked. "I can tell you this. Our insurance has run out on our clothing line. I'm about to lose my job over this whole thing. The insurance company thinks it's an employee that is stealing the items or me. I've held off putting anything new in the window for a few days. I need my job, Mr. London, but our sales are based on moving our new line of clothing. When the window is empty, people don't come to the store and buy. This store is in a prime location on Coast Highway. Thousands of people drive by every day. Many of my local customers wait for the latest items to be displayed. Putting them on a mannequin shows how good they will fit and how they will look on."

Shelly nodded at me, "You're not going to spend hundreds of dollars for an outfit limp on a hanger. With this type of fitted clothing, you need to see it displayed."

Amie held out her hand to the manager. "Hi Brenda, I'm Amie. Would you be willing to run an experiment?"

"Maybe. What do you have in mind?"

"Would you be willing to put a first run item out as bait, but mark it internally so it can be tracked?"

Brenda gave a reserved nod. "I've got a customer return on our latest run. Black skirt, wrong size. I won't be able to sell it as new, so it would be a little easier to get past upper management. We can go for it."

Amie walked over to the showcase window at the front of the store, facing the street. "Can you show me how the display window works?"

Brenda took her keys out. "We just had this display updated. It goes for one whole storefront and contains four regular

mannequins, two males, two females, and the larger one formed as a mermaid. The glass facing the street is hardened and reinforced internally with smash resistant plastic. The glass on the inside of the display case is the same security glass as the front, set in deep hardened metal tracks and secured with a hardened lock and latch. The platform they stand on is solid hardwood, and the top of the case is a hardened still grid with hardwood above it. I don't see how anyone would get into this case, inside or out. I'm the only one with a key, and I'm offsite all night in a verifiable location."

"Can I see how the mannequin's move?"

Brenda opened the sliding glass panel. "The four regular dummies have full bodies, so we can show tops and bottoms. The limbs are hinged and flexible. They match human arm and leg positions well. The mermaid is set for women's wear and usually shows off blouses, halter tops, and dresses. The arms are jointed at the elbows and shoulders and has a prominent chest. Since the bottom is designed like a fish, there are no legs, so we can't show pants."

Amie checked the sliding door. "Can you put the dress on the mermaid for me. I want to see how it fits."

Brenda went to the back of the store and returned with a packaged black dress. She tilted the mermaid down into the showroom and put the dress over its head and the arms through the sleeves. Then she pushed the mannequin back upright and locked it into place. Amie walked over and checked the fit. "This dress looks wonderful, Brenda. The shapely mermaid shows off all the curves. I just love this material; it's strong and looks amazing with no seams. Can you take a Sharpie marker and put the number 9494 on the inseam.?"

Brenda nodded and marked the garment on the inner seam. "The mermaid flow line is our best seller, and this mannequin sells the product. What woman wouldn't want to look like that!"

Amie and I conferred for a minute, and then I reached out to Brenda. "Thanks for showing us the setup and putting a real item in the display. Amie and I will take the 6 am train tomorrow and double check on the display. Before we leave tonight, I want to take a cell phone pic both in the store and out for reference. Can you also show me the doors and alarm setup?"

Brenda locked up the display and showed the three of us around the store. "Here is my card with cell number Cory. I come in at 9 am, and the store opens at 10. If anything happens, please let me know."

"I can't see how anything could happen without setting off that alarm. I'll call you before seven and let you know that everything is OK.

Amie agreed. "All the entrances are sealed. Unless someone is turning off the alarm, there is no way they would be able to get to the window without tripping a sensor. By the way, Brenda, do you have a piece of Scotch tape. I'd like to tape your card to the report for reference."

She handed Amie some tape, and she taped the card to the report and taped the envelope shut. As the three of us walked out of the store, we went to the end of the block and circled the building and checked the rear door and window one last time.

Shelly said, "I can't see how anyone would get into that display. Solid on the top and bottom and hardened glass front and rear. You guys let me know if anything happens. I've got to take the late train tomorrow because of an evening meeting."

Amie and I nodded. I examined the deadbolt on the door and looked at the latch on the one paint covered window. Those were the only entrance points at the back of the building.

"Everything is secure. This window has probably never been opened."

After taking the late train home, I slept well that night feeling sure that the display would be intact in the morning. I met up with Amie on the 6:05 train, and we stopped off at the Encinitas station at 6:20. After a short walk, we turned the corner onto Coast Highway and faced the store. In the distance, I could see the mermaid had been disrobed, and all four other mannequins had their arms and legs helter skelter. Someone or something had been in that display . . .

Amie let out a yell. "Oh my gosh, they hit again. Look, Cory, the mermaid is naked, and the others look like zombies."

I replied, "I would have bet you money that they couldn't get in. Either this is an inside job, or we are missing something."

Amie stood at the corner and looked at the building and the entire block. She paced back and forth for a few minutes in thought, mumbling the words, missing something. Amie walked the whole neighborhood across the street from the storefront looking at the building from different angles. As she walked back to the corner, she stopped and turned to the building again. She shrugged and said. "I need to check something I set up last night. Let's walk around to the back of the building."

We circled the block, and she walked up to the rear door and window. "Just like I thought. The Scotch tape I put across the door frame, and windowsill are untouched. No one came in this way."

"I didn't even see you do that last night."

She said, "I just wanted to double check on Brenda and the other workers. I didn't think it was an inside job, but I needed to make sure. Let's go back out front."

As we got back to the corner set paced again, looking up and down the block. Suddenly she threw up her arms and roared, "How could I have been so stupid. It's right there."

"What's right there?" I asked.

"Stand here and look at the building. What do you see?"

"I see the Toni Tahiti store. It takes up two standard width storefronts. There is one set of double glass entry doors. There is a single width coffee shop on the right that goes to the corner, and sporting goods store on the left. Down the street to the left is a bakery/restaurant and then a jewelry store. That is the entire block."

"You're correct, Cory. That is exactly what I saw last night. But this morning I see something else. Look closer."

"It's a newer building than some of the others in town. Built almost like a strip mall."

She nodded, "Yes, you are correct, but that isn't what I see."

"I'm not sure. The whole block of buildings are connected, but there are solid walls between each one."

"Yes, most of the storefronts in town are connected, but that isn't it."

"Then, I'm stumped. I'm not sure what you see."

"Cory, you see, but you don't observe. Shelly gave me a clue the other night. I'm so dense it didn't register."

"So are you going to tell me what it is?"

"No, I'm going to give you a bet."

"A bet?"

"If you will have Brenda set up another set of clothes and then accompany me tonight in my car, I'll bet you we will find the perp, the fence, and the tool they use to secure the items."

"Man, that's a tall order with Brenda. I can't imagine she would be very trusting right now, but I'll take you up on the bet."

Hook or crook, I'll get it set up today. I still don't see anything that makes sense, so it seems like easy money to me."

She laughed, "OK easy money, do you have a DSLR camera with a telephoto lens that we can use tonight?"

"I can check one out from work."

"Good. We'll meet at my condo at nine tonight. Our stakeout will take at least a few hours, so you might want to nap when you get home."

I'd known Amie for a few months, but this was the first time she took an active lead on a project and the first time her competitive streak came out. I liked the idea of a bet, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out what she had been looking at. As I worked through the day at the office, a picture of the storefront rolled around in my head, but nothing clicked. To tell you the truth, I was a little bugged at the situation, especially her remark about not observing. I did observe; I just didn't observe anything out of the ordinary.

Riding home with the duo, I was unusually quiet, mainly because I had no clue how to move forward, and the role reversal between Amie and myself had me somewhat miffed. As the train pulled to our home stop in Carlsbad Village, Amie asked, "Did Brenda get the mannequin setup?"

"Top of the line one-off celebrity halter top. Big bucks on this one. So, is the bet still on? I'll let you back down. We all make mistakes, you know."

She gave me a severe look. "Still on, mister, and thanks for bringing a camera home. We will certainly need it. By the way, do you own a handgun?"

"I have a 9mm Glock at home, why?"

"Can you bring it along. Put it in the trunk. No idea who we might run into tonight."

"We seem to be getting really serious here. Cameras and guns."

She gave me a sly smile. "You got me into this, Cory. It was your envelope, remember. I just want to make sure we survive tonight."

I gave her a surprised look. "Survive tonight? Who are you expecting?"

"Someone after a high dollar garment. When money is involved, no telling what might happen."

"I'll bring it in a common wooden case. I can't believe you want me to bring a weapon and I certainly don't want to get busted for it."

"After our last adventure in L.A. with a gun pointed at my head, I'm not taking any chances. You're a dangerous man to be friends with, Cory London."

I gave a wry chuckle. "I was expecting a snooze fest tonight. I guess I better take a nap when I get home."

"See you at nine at my place."

As nine o'clock approached, I picked up my camera and handgun and put them in a backpack and walked the two long blocks over to Amie's condo. As I approached, Amie waved from her white Toyota Corolla in the drive. She said, "I wanted to catch you outside. Shelly already went to bed, and I didn't want to wake her. She's got an early morning meeting, or she would have gone along too."

I nodded. "Let's put this gun in your trunk before we take off. I don't have a carry permit, and I don't want trouble if you get pulled over."

Amie opened the trunk and then got in the drivers' seat. "You'll need your camera up front. We've got a long night, so I'll stop for coffee."

After a stop at Starbucks, we headed for downtown Encinitas. In the dim light of evening, we could see that most of the shops were closed for the night. Amie drove up and down Coast highway a couple of times and then chose a strategic parking place in a side parking lot across the street from Tina's surf shop.

Amie turned off the car. "This parking spot gives us a front view of Tina's building. I parked away from the streetlight, so we will be in the dark. Keep your phone off or down, so the glow doesn't give us away."

"Will do. What are we expecting?"

"Nothing for an hour or two."

I laughed. "So, I have to sit in this cold car and shiver all night?"

"I did bring a blanket if you get cold. Just keep your eyes peeled for anything suspicious."

"I'm not sure what I'm looking for."

"I'll clue you in when it happens. Watch the whole strip of buildings."

Amie and I talked quietly for over two hours. A few people walked by on the sidewalk out front, and the rest of the businesses slowly went black. It was after eleven when Amie sat up alert. "Right on time. See the white van pulling in at the end of the building? I expect the driver to go into that maintenance door next to the jewelry shop."

"What does that have to do with Tina's place?"

"You'll see."

Just as Amie said, the driver got out of the van and took a key from his pocket and entered a white door at the end of the building. He was short, dressed in coveralls, and carried a toolbox.

"We'll give him a minute to get set up, and then I want you to walk me down the street, so we are directly across from the mannequin in the window. Pretend we are on a date. Hold my hand and put your arm around me. Don't be obvious about looking at the surf shop."

I smiled, "An actual date with Amie Dubois. Do I get to kiss you?"

"Only if I kiss you first," she smirked. "A little romance might be necessary for me to get into position to see what is going on in the window. See that low planter in front of the restaurant across from Tina's. Since you are much taller than me, I'll stand on that low wall and pretend that I'm kissing and caressing you. I want to get my face next to yours, so I have an unobstructed view. We may have to make out for a few minutes depending on how it goes."

"Fine by me," I laughed. "I hope your boyfriend doesn't mind."

"My old boyfriend is in France. You're much better looking anyway."

"That's good to know."

Amie had become a good friend over the past few months, and we had numerous adventures together, but our relationship had always been intellectual. We loved solving problems together, but now I was facing a time with a little romance. At five feet three with a pixie brunette haircut framing her face, she was adorable in her own way. I suppose it was her curt manner and stoic personality that drew me to her mind instead of her looks, but this episode would be a fun experiment anyway. We got out of the car and slowly walked to the corner a block down the street.

Amie said softly, "Your hand is warm. Put it around my shoulder and draw me close."

I put my arm around her shoulder and hugged her a little. Her sweater felt soft to the touch. "I might get used to this, Amie."

"Don't get carried away, mister. Remember, we have a job to do."

"I know, but we might as well have a little fun pretending."

She smiled, "I like that. I've liked to pretend ever since I was a little girl. Will you pretend to be my prince charming?"

"Of course," I laughed.

Within a few minutes, we were directly across from the surf shop.

Amie stood on the low retaining wall and put her head next to mine. "I can see the store good. The mannequin is still undisturbed."

As I softly hugged her, I said, "You smell good, like hot chocolate and peppermint."

"Hold me a little tighter, Cory, I see some movement."

I gave her a tighter caress, "What's going on?"

"The light above the mermaid has been moved slightly, and a hook on a string or something like that is being let down."

"Really, so that's how they are doing it."

"There it goes. Quick, hold me tight and swing me around so you can see."

I held her tight against my chest and pretended to swing her around. I caught a glimpse of the window just in time to see the garment disappear through the top of the case. I turned Amie back and put her back down on the wall.

"It just disappeared in a split second."

"Kiss me now, in case he is looking this way. Make it believable."

I kissed Amie, and even though it was supposed to be make-believe, I felt a wave of warmth come over me.

"Wow Cory, that was sort of amazing."

Whispering in her ear, I said, "I can get used to make believe."

She paused for a second and then said, "I'm going to put my head next to yours again, so I can watch what he does to the other dummies."

As her head rested on my shoulder, she said, "Now there is a wire with some type of metal object on it. Looks like a magnet. He can stick and unstick it to the limbs. He is moving them helter-skelter."

"Maybe an electromagnet. But why bother with the rest if he isn't going to steal their garments?"

"Probably to try and make it look like this is a supernatural event."

"So how did the security camera miss this?"

"It only scans every thirty seconds. He's really fast."

"So how did you know this was going to happen?"

"The light is moving again. Kiss me again, and then I'll tell you."

I kissed her a little longer this time, and then lifted her back down to the street.

Amie looked at me for a second and then said, "Somehow that didn't feel like make-believe. It felt real."

"Maybe it was," I chuckled.

She squeezed my hand, "Let's run back to the car. We need to get pictures of this guy."

Within minutes we were back in her Corolla. I rolled down my passenger window and aimed the camera at the van. In about five minutes the guy exited the service room and put his tools and bag in the back of the truck. He then pulled out his phone, and it lighted up as he made a call.

"Did you get shots of that?" she asked.

"Got ones of all his movements."

"He made a call to someone. Let's hang out for a few minutes and see if anyone shows up."

"In the meantime, I need you to tell me how you knew this was going to happen. How did he get to Tina's shop from the maintenance closet down the block?"

"It's what you didn't observe the other day even though you were staring right at it."

"Staring at what?"

"The five cable satellite dishes on the corner wall."

"Cable dishes? What does that have to do with anything?"

"Five fiber optic cables are coming out of the dish area. How do those cables get from the corner wall to each business?"

"I never thought of that. I guess they are run through the attics of the buildings?"

"Nope. Each building has a firewall. It is against code to breach a solid firewall."

"So how then?"

"If you walk to the corner and look up, you'll see that the cable bundle goes from the plastic conduit pipe into a large air vent."

"So, the cables are run through the HVAC duct system?"

"Exactly. When Shelly pointed out the amazingly clear video on the TV, I realized it was a 4K feed. To get a super high def signal like that you need fiber optic cable, not the old outdated coax that is usually run in buildings."

"If you want the latest hi-def cable feed someone is going to have to run it."

"In the newer connected strip mall type buildings, many have large HVAC ducts run through the entire complex. This allows for a central HVAC system, which is much cheaper to run than individual units."

"The cable company must have to work with an HVAC contractor to run the cables."

"Exactly," she said.

"Which means that someone like we saw tonight, has access to the whole complex."

She nodded, "They physically need to be small enough to climb through the ducts, but once inside they have access to the attic areas that won't set off interior alarms."

"But wouldn't those vents in individual buildings be secured from inside each business?"

"They would until someone ran a cable through them and left an access door unlatched from the inside."

"You are a genius, Amie. How did you know all this?"

"My boyfriend in France used to be a cable installer. I learned a lot about the business from him. Hottest and dirtiest job ever. You must be extremely small in stature to be able to fit in the required places. He is shorter than I am. Attics, ventilation ducts, security closets and other small spaces are what he specialized in. Work during the day is brutally hot. That's why most companies work at night. That's why someone doing cable maintenance overnight would not be suspect at all."

"Our cable guy still has one problem though. He gets out in the attic, but there was a four-inch metal grid around the top of the display case. How does he get through that?"

"Cable guys have a wide assortment of cable pulling tools. He just moved the overhead light bar back and used a thin cable snake to grab the top seam of the outfit and pull it up through the four-inch square opening in the grid. What looked impossible became easy and quick for him. He was able to snatch the garment between the security camera's 30-second scan. To the camera, it just disappeared."

"Wow, I never would have guessed that was the ploy. I was sure it was an inside job that would involve someone with a key and alarm code." I sat up in my seat and pointed. "Look at our perp. He's getting back out of his van."

"Check out what's pulling up. He's meeting someone in a bakery van. Get your camera ready again."

Looking through the telephoto lens of the camera, I said, "Look at that. Money is changing hands for a small package. Our garment is now heading out via bakery truck."

"Look at the bakery name. Bisco's Bakeries who have manufacturing plants in Tijuana Mexico."

"Now we know how the perps are getting the goods out of the country."

"What do you want to bet there is a lot more to this than stealing surf garments."

"I say we follow that bakery truck and see where it goes. You up for that, Amie?"

"At this point yes. He showed up quick, so the drop off point must be close. I'll back my car out and follow at a distance."

Amie drove down two-lane coast highway and then made a U-turn, so she could park on the same side of the street as the bakery van. With lights out we watched the guys get back in their vehicles.

Amie said, "Make sure you get photos of both license plates. Hopefully, the photos we have will help your dad and his detective team bust these guys."

I nodded. "Do you think the photos give us enough evidence yet? Should we call it quits for the night?"

"I'm not letting you quit on me this early, Cory. We've got to see where this truck goes."

We sat on the curb for a few minutes and then the white van and bakery truck exited the parking area into the street.

Amie started the car, "Keep an eye where the van goes, Cory. I'm going to concentrate on the bakery truck, but I need to stay back, so we aren't noticed."

We started down the block. "The van is turning right at the light at E street.," I said. "Probably headed to the freeway."

"The bakery truck is still going straight. Make a note of the street name where the van turned."

We kept going for another block and then the bakery truck got into the turn lane.

Amie slowed the car. "He's turning left on D street. Probably headed to the little industrial section one block over. I'm going to try and make the turn light, but I'll drive past, so we aren't recognized. Have your camera ready if he pulls in somewhere."

It was almost midnight as we made a left turn. The bakery truck turned left and then did a quick right into an industrial section. As we drove past, I took some photos of the vehicle pulling into a driveway.

As I clicked the shutter on the camera, I said, "He just pulled into the bakery headquarters. Why don't you park a block up and we can walk back? Looks legit from here."

Amie parked on the side of a residential street a half block up. We walked down D street and stopped at a corner adjacent to the bakery area. We kept out of sight in the shadows of a massive tree.

I pointed at the building. "He pulled his truck past the chain-link entrance and is parking his truck next to other ones like it over on the side. Watch where he goes."

Amie whispered, "That's strange. He has the package in his hand, but he is not going in the bakery building. He looks like he is headed out of the bakery complex and across the street. We need to get closer."

"Be careful. There is a streetlight on the right corner."

"Let's stay to the left of the access street. That corner is dark."

We walked across D street, staying out of direct sight of the driver. As we got to the corner, I poked my head around the side of the dark industrial building that was across from the bakery. "He's going inside this building. What is this place?"

Amie squinted in the darkness, "I can barely make it out. It looks like an antique warehouse or thrift store."

I walked a little way down the street and turned back. As I walked back to Amie, I said, "It's a ThriftVet store and recycling center. This front part is a showroom; the back part is where they repair and recycle items. The bakery guy walked in a side door at the back."

Amie thought for a second. "What a suitable place to fence expensive items. Even better than a pawn shop."

"I'm beginning to see what might be going on here," I said.

Amie touched my shoulder. "Watch yourself. Headlights just came on over at the bakery. From the sound of it, it sounds like a semi-truck. Let's walk back across the street under the tree."

She was right. From the back of the bakery complex, a semi-truck started slowly making its way to the front access gate. Just as it pulled into the street, our original guy came back out of the ThriftVet center carrying a large box.

"Check it out, Amie our bakery perp is handing off a box to the semi driver."

"You're right, Cory. Look, the driver is getting out of the cab and putting the box in the first trailer."

"Now our bakery perp is bringing out two more boxes."

"Fenced items I bet."

"I can barely make it out from here, but I think the words on the box say donaciones. Spanish for donations."

"Look at the license on the truck. Baja California, Mexico. No problem getting over the border with stolen items."

Amie said, "We've just stumbled upon something big here."

After the boxes were loaded on the truck, the driver got back in, and the two trailer semi-truck headed out of the complex and down the street towards the freeway. We stood at our dark post under the tree for a few minutes and then our perp came out of the thrift store warehouse again.

"Look, our guy is locking up," I said. "He turned off the lights in the back."

"Watch where he goes."

I pointed to the bakery area. "It looks like he is headed back to his original truck. More overnight bakery deliveries to local stores."

Amie smirked, "Just a little side job during his regular store delivery schedule. Two guys working into the evening. One picks items up; the other donates them to Mexico."

"We have seen three guys tonight. One very tiny who can access ventilation systems and other tight areas. Then we have a guy at the bakery who has access to a thrift store warehouse, and then we have a foreign truck driver headed to Mexico."

Amie shrugged. "But we don't know for sure if our semi driver is in on the deal. The other two guys certainly are. This might just be small time, or something much larger."

I shrugged. "What do we do now? It's getting past midnight."

Amie smiled, "Let's take a few minutes and do a little research at the back of that thrift warehouse."

I walked down the street to the corner and then came back to the tree. "How are we going to get into that warehouse? It's right next to the bakery with lots of lights on?"

Amie walked up the street the opposite way and then came back. "I think we might have a shot at it on the west side. There is a walkway down that side. A block wall sits between this building and another business which is dark. I see a door almost at the back. It's dark there, so we should be able to work on the lock without being seen."

"How are we going to work on the lock? I don't have any tools."

"As a former carnival worker, I always come prepared. I have numerous pins and clips in my wallet which might work."

"What did working at a carnival have to do with picking locks?"

She smiled. "Country carnivals in Europe are a collection of equipment from many different countries. Almost everything has a lock on it. There are padlocks, door locks, and even bicycle style cable locks. In public areas, things walk quickly if they aren't secured. As a worker, you learn quickly how to pick many brands of locks. There was always one person that had a collection of keys, but it often took hours for them to come around. Pick and click is what we used to say."

"OK Miss pick and click, let's see what you can do with this lock. I didn't see the guy set an alarm as he walked out so we may have lucked out there."

Amie pulled my hand and guided me across the street and down the sidewalk next to the building on the west side. With tall walls on both sides, it was very dark.

"I can't imagine anyone being here this late," she said. "These places use mostly volunteers who aren't going to stick around

for the evening. Let me see if my basic number lift pick will work?"

I nodded. "The whole building looks pitch dark. So what are we looking for if we do get in?"

She shrugged. "Not exactly sure. Things of value. Things that people would not ordinarily donate."

"What do we do if we find something?"

"Well, Mr. Detective I think we defer to your dad."

"I don't know, Amie. We've seen a lot of things tonight and even have some pictures but proving theft in court is a different matter altogether. Just think, our one piece of evidence is on its way to Mexico. A dumb halter top is not going to trigger anything, even if the truck is searched. My dad would probably just laugh."

"So, you're saying we need something big."

"Big and obvious. Like a case of computers or something."

"Well, here is some good news, my tumbler picks just opened the lock. Shall we?"

"Hang on. Before you open the door lets be prepared for a dog, a door switch alarm, or a motion detector."

Amie shook her head. "Then I'll let you lead the way."

We slowly opened the door a crack. I inspected the door frame but didn't see any door switch. I picked up a rock and tossed it in. No flashing lights. I whistled, but no response from a guard or dog. It appeared the coast was clear.

"I think we should be in the clear. I'll head in, you follow. Keep the door open slightly if we need a fast exit."

"Wow, Cory, it's really dark in there. This part of the building has no windows. Probably want to use your cell phone flashlight."

I pulled out my burner cell from my pocket and activated the flashlight. Shining it in the door, I could see stacks of donations in all directions. "Follow me," I said.

I walked in the door, and Amie slowly closed the door behind us. I could hear the latch click closed. The room was utterly dark. There was only a hint of light from a vent near the ceiling.

"Most of this stuff looks like it was just picked up. Old furniture, TV's, lots of clothes."

Amie tapped me on the shoulder, and I jumped about a foot. "You scared me silly. What?"

"Look at the back by the roll-up doors. There are two cargo vans parked inside. Maybe they have something in them?"

"Worth a shot," I said.

With my flashlight beam leading the way, I opened the back door on one of them. There was a stack of boxes at the back, covered with a tarp. "Hold this light for me, Amie while I unfasten this blanket."

I pulled the blanket back and had Amie aim a light at the stack.

"Hmm, she said. The boxes say Chocolate Fudge cookies. Why would they have chocolate cookies in a thrift store?"

Amie pulled the tape back off one of the flaps. "Oh my God," she said. "Ten iPad boxes in this one case. It's a hidden pallet of Apple iPads and iPhones. The boxes look new. Hundreds of them. Gotta be worth over a hundred grand."

"Check out the lettering on the side. Bisco's Bakery. Look at the license, California. These are probably going out of the country. Probably hotter than a firecracker."

Amie shook her head. "I'm not sure. Are these coming in or going out this van?"

"What do you mean?"

"These might have just been stolen. The perps have stacked the iPad boxes in the cookie cases and covered them up. My guess is they will actually go out to Mexico via a semi with Baja plates or be delivered locally to other fences."

"Check this out, Amie. This box has Bisco's cookie boxes on top of the iPads. Unless you dig down, you wouldn't see them."

"So, these are hidden from casual view."

I closed the back door of the van and turned to view the rest of the room. What I saw changed everything.

"Look at this signboard; it says that the ThriftVets are donating five thousand iPads to wounded veterans. All you have to do is sign up with military and medical documentation and pick up your iPad from the Encinitas ThriftVets location. It's good until supplies run out. It's sponsored by Apple."

Amie walked up and looked at the sign. "So, a few hundred missing iPads may not be noticed if their accounting is not accurate. The vets get screwed, and someone makes a lot of money."

I walked over to the other van and opened its door. This one had two smaller Cookie cases. I pulled back one of the flaps. "Gee, I wonder what type of cookies these are?" Pulling up a couple of boxes, I said: "Well what do you know, under the vanilla cremes are brand new thousand-dollar smartphones."

Amie walked over. "This is a major operation, Cory. I can't believe it isn't being guarded. The phones are probably part of the free phone for vets' program. Here again, a small percentage missing will probably go unnoticed."

I nodded in the dim light. "We've got phones, iPads, expensive clothing and who knows what else. We've got local delivery vans and Mexican trucks as well as a cable guy with access to hundreds of buildings. These guys can move goods in and out of the country, and they are all based on legit businesses. Who is

going to suspect a bakery, a thrift store, and a cable installer? All these companies operate parts of their business at night on a regular basis. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Amie said, "I still can't figure this room out. There are thousands of dollars of stuff unguarded and in process. It's like we caught these guys sleeping or something."

Just then a voice spoke from the darkness. "You just woke me up."

I shined my light in the direction of the voice. There was a mean looking dude, covered in tats, pointing a gun at me.

The guy spoke again. "You're locked in. There is no escape. Get ready to die."

One look at the tattoos let me know we were in trouble. This guy was part of the noxious K15 gang that operated out of Mexico and Central America. There would be no questions or walking out. These guys specialized in cement overshoes and personal ventilation with bullets. We would soon have a free ride in one of those vans.

Amie was standing behind me, but off to the side behind the free iPad sign, where she couldn't be seen. She whispered very softly, "Cory, we need the element of surprise. At the count of three. Turn off your phone and hide on the floor behind that workbench by the door we came in. Stay low, don't move, and don't turn on the phone unless I tell you."

I made an OK sign behind my back with my fingers. She softly counted down from three, and then I hit the power button. The whole place was suddenly in darkness. I quickly ran and ducked behind the long metal workbench.

The gang perp yelled out, "Where are you? Turn that light back on, or I'll shoot this place up."

I could hear Amie running to the back of the room. There was the sound of a metal box opening and a switch being thrown. She had cut the power. The exit signs and other dim security lights went out. Now we were all in almost total darkness. The odds were evening up.

"Turn that light on, or I'll shoot."

I could hear him fumbling on a table, and suddenly a flashlight came on. "Where are you?" he screamed as he shown the light across the room.

He picked up the gun and fired at the door. I could hear a bullet ricochet. Wherever Amie was, she was quiet. He yelled again. "The room is locked. Give up now, and I might let you live." He showed the light on the back of the room and fired another shot at the door to the ThriftVet's showroom. I could hear here the thud as it splintered the wood.

"You can't get away. I'm going to shoot up this room till you die." Suddenly there was a noise by the other exit door at the back. He turned to face that side of the room with the light. He pulled the gun up and aimed it at the exit door. Just as he was about to fire, I saw Amie in the glow behind him with a large frying pan. She clobbered him on the back of the head. I heard the gun and flashlight drop and him writhing in agony. Amie screamed out, "Turn on your light, Cory."

I turned on the phone, just in time to see her hit him again, this time on the side of the head. He slumped down.

She had the pan ready to strike again as she called out. "Hurry, tie his hands behind him with this lamp cord. Tie his legs too."

Within minutes he was bound fully. He was half groggy and starting to move.

"We need to get out of here, Amie. I need to call this into my dad. This place has plenty of evidence. Thankfully, that tat boy didn't get a good look at us. The 13 gang will search anyone that comes against it and hunt them down. Neither of us wants to be associated with this crime."

"I agree," she said. "Check his pocket for the keys so we can get out of here."

Soon I had the door open, and we headed back to Amie's car. I called in the report to my dad at the Sheriff's Department. He said he would have the local guys raid the place and he would check over later. He mentioned our 'anonymous' tip was eligible for a reward. As I explained the story, dad said he would try and stop the bakery truck at the border.

Within minutes we could hear the sirens approach. We parked up the adjacent street, so we could see the goings-on. I had transferred the digital photos from my camera, including license numbers, to my phone and then texted them to my dad.

Within the hour, the place was ablaze with light, and numerous detectives arrived on scene. By 2 am, my dad came and met us up the street before he went on the scene.

He said, "Great work, you two. We have been trying to infiltrate this ring for some time. We had two deputies shot and one left for dead at one of their robbery locations. The K15 gang doesn't mess around. It appears that the bakery and store were not directly involved. In the case of the thrift store, they were being robbed blind. These gang guys had taken over jobs in the night crews and had access to numerous vehicles and tools. If someone crossed them, they died. You are so lucky you came out as you did."

"I have Amie to thank for that."

Amie smiled, "It's pretty easy for me to work in very dark rooms. I used to run the funhouse for the carnival in France. It

was my job to subdue the rowdies, so this guy was a piece of cake. Thankfully the main circuit breaker was inside the room. Once the lights completely went out, he was mine. I just used the old 'throw an object the way you want the perp to look' trick. He fell for it, and I'm sure he has one splitting headache now."

Dad said, "I'm sure you guys would like to get home and get some sleep. I'll let you know how this turns out. By the way, we did stop the semi-truck at the border and recovered some garments. I'll touch base in the coming week to get them returned."

We said goodbye to my dad and headed home. As we pulled up to Amie's house, she said, "You might as well come in and sleep on the couch. We need to debrief on this in the morning."

"OK, I can arrange to work from home tomorrow."

As we walked in and she set up the couch for me, she stepped up and put her arms around me. "I really enjoyed our 'date' tonight, Cory."

"I did too, especially the 'fake' kissing part."

"Are you sure that was fake?"

I smiled, "I'm not telling."

"Why don't you try it again?"

I kissed her and then she said. "That wasn't fake." Then she smiled and said, "Good night, Cory." And she walked to her room.

Over the next week, we got the excellent news that Tina Tahiti herself wanted to meet us and reward us. She was in town for an event and the three of us, Shelly, Amie and myself got a chance to meet her at her store in Encinitas. She said, "I want to thank you three for solving an unsolvable mystery. I thought we had haunted mannequins. I'm glad to know it wasn't an inside job. As a reward, I'd like to create a custom dress for each of you girls, and create a custom fit shirt for you, Cory."

We all thanked her and picked up the garments the following week. They arrived the same day our reward check came for ten thousand dollars. It seems the K15 gang had stolen millions of dollars' worth of items over the last few months. With bakery trucks, donation vans and a tiny and talented cable installer and thief, they had made off with every electronic device imaginable, many times without triggering an alarm, or even being detected. The reward came from multiple sources, including many of the big box electronic stores. It seems they were donating to this gang and they didn't even know it.

After Amie and I split the reward and gave Shelly a great tip for helping us out, the three of us headed to an expensive restaurant on the beach to celebrate our prize and show off our new clothes. Amie and Shelly looked spectacular in their original black dresses, and I wore my new shirt under a sports jacket. As we watched the surfers in the water, I said, "Another unsolvable mystery in an envelope solved by three friends on a train."

Amie smiled, "And I got an amazing dress and a kiss from my prince charming."

"And who is your prince charming," asked Shelly.

"This gentleman named Cory sitting across from you."

"You kissed Amie?" She smiled. "I have to say, Cory, I'm a little jealous."

"Don't worry, Shelly, they were fake kisses," I said.

Amie laughed, "They were about as fake as this money we just got."

I smiled, "No counterfeits here."

She smiled back, "No counterfeits here either . . ."