

Dead Hippie Chicks

by Dayle C. Hall

1.

The word was synesthesia.

Back in the bad old days when I was peeling spuds and otherwise shirking my duty above, beyond and under the bounty main, I turned off my sense of smell, put the olfactory workers on strike, dig? Pretty much had to, the Manta wasn't that big (Barbel class) and 62 smelly swabs had to co-exist in this tight tube for insanely long periods of time. It was a survival thing, because there was no way a sensitive cat (like me for instance) could last in one of those stinking sardine cans without losing their sensibilities, sense of humanity, and sensitivity. So it was like a light switch, dig? Two states, on and off, smell or no smell. My buddy 'Tack was the first who told me this was called a binary state, saying the future was all about ones and zeroes, and graffiti like: "There are 10 kinds of people in this world, those who dig binary and those who don't" was side-splitting, but like I didn't get it back then. My state was usually altered while 'Tack was an electrician; so his state was solid, dig?

I won't get into my discharge except to state for the record that it was honorable, despite what my XO (a mean, racist S.O.B.) wanted. I celebrated my release by buying a beat up yellow Oldsmobile Rocket 88 off a used car lot. I didn't have any plans, I just wanted to head south, to somewhere where it didn't rain all the time. Right before curfew I drove up to the perimeter fence of the base, honked a couple of times and then, after a brief strip tease, started a small fire, burning my uniform and all Navy paraphernalia to a crisp. I was like Jimi at Monterey, spraying lighter fluid on the pile of clothes and as the flames got higher, cheers erupted from those still within, still serving their sentences. A ritual cleansing, hear me brother? I said a few words, took a bow and then it was *adiós muchachos*, to the accompaniment of the radio blasting and a peel of rubber. I think I'd

almost made it to Gig Harbor when I saw the cherries in my rear view. It threw me for a bit of a loop, so much so that while I knew that I had been speeding, I forgot that I was still dressed in my birthday suit. Took some explaining, but eventually I convinced Broderick Crawford that it was his patriotic duty to let me go (though first I had to get dressed in some lame, ill-fitting civvies that I had in the trunk—three year old threads, square man, real square). I had a hard time expressing it at the time, but something about that fire was liberating. I wasn't drunk, but I felt high as a kite, my shackles unshackled. My mind, body and soul belonged to me again. As it was in the beginning, dig?

Long story short, the Olds made it as far as San Rafael, California, before the engine threw a rod in a spectacular display of blue smoke. Seeing the large hole in the block convinced me it was terminal. I was upset for a bit, shouting a few choice words and kicking the tires but finally a sense of calm or resignation took hold. I took the temp registration from the glove box, unscrewed the plates and tossed them into the weeds, grabbed my duffle bag from the trunk and left the short on the shoulder of the road. I hiked a quarter mile or so to the nearest on-ramp and stuck my thumb out. Figured I'd stop in San Francisco for a couple of days.

As soon as I crossed the bridge my senses started coming back, one by one. I started hearing vibes off fragrances, started seeing music in chicks' ankles. And it all smelled like heaven. Honest brother, it was all happening when I was still straight, before some cat (maybe my buddy Anagram Fats) slipped me my first hit of Window Pane. Well, if my senses were cross-wired before, you can image what they were like after a less than gentle push from Dr. Hoffman's little concoction. Jubilation: my senses all entwined in their very own love fest! What was not to dig, dig? I could smell the salt

in the air and breathe in the Pacific without having to fear it. Safe on terra firma (relatively like, here in the land of Jell-O strata) where it would take real work to drown. Lord almighty I loved looking at the watercolor-water but I'd grown to hate being over, on and under it. Poseidon and me had made an uneasy truce and I was doing all I could to uphold my end of the bargain. I just hoped he continued to hold up his end.

Within a week I made the discovery that my old Navy buddy Ramón Zenitram Martinez Nomar had moved to the City a few months earlier and he introduced me to a few cats and let me crash in his office, a small second story flat above the Savoy Tivoli bar on Grant Avenue. We called Ramón “Thumbtack” because of his long name and short stature. No big thing, more like a Thumbtack than some hardtack, dig? So Thumbtack was shortened (due to the basic requirements of slang) to ‘Tack. But face-to-face I usually referred to him as Ramón. Then again, I'm a polite guy. It's a respect thing, all about good karma and two-way streets, both of which were in short supply in this burg.

While ‘Tack was already making some decent coin fixing TV's and Hi-Fi's, I bounced around doing a little of everything, office work, manual labor and a few things that weren't legal and won't be discussed here. My real career started slowly at first, finding a lost dog, then someone's lost lover and before long I had developed a bit of a reputation for being able to track down all sorts of people and things. I kept jacking up my fees and people (desperate people) kept paying me.

I was able to get a nice pad at the top of Vallejo street so I didn't have to crash on his couch, but ‘Tack and I had gotten used to each other's company so it was decided that we would split the rent of the office. I needed a place other than a local bar to meet with

clients and he could be gone for days at a time so it was a good fit. Inside of a year I was an established P.I. -with office, business cards, name in the phone book, a license, the works. Crazy man, crazy.

We weren't in business together, though sometimes 'Tack helped me through a rough patch and sometimes I helped him by being a third hand. Helped when he was soldering. Señor Nomar was an electrical demon and in addition to repairing stereos and turntables he had started hanging out with some rock bands, customizing their amps and working out light show stuff. Western, not Northern lights, dig?

Life was pretty good, with hot young chicks and quick-witted friends willing to provide and accentuate the essences of life, and all at a very affordable price. It was a scene we'd had joined quicker than we'd split the last mob (Navy, dig?) and we'd let our respective hair down. Like it had been a couple of years since the last time our locks were shorn; 'Tack had grown a nice long ponytail and I let mine frizz out into a large 'fro. Typical rebellion I guess, but as necessary as breathing after the arcane, obsessive and stultifying regime of life in the water-borne branch of the armed services.

'Cause dig, in the military mind, everything breaks down into procedures. And that governs like *everything*, takes all the gray (not to mention fun) out of it. It reduces the mess of life into a simple state: a procedure being followed or not followed. And like if there's anything that slips through the cracks of the above procedure, then clearly we need a new procedure. Yikes!

Bounced out of that world, we shed our amphibious epidermis along with our conceited lack of humanitarianism. A submarine makes a poor substitute for a cocoon, but the trip out of it is no less joyful, am I right?

All part of the evolution from sub-human to...

Well, human I guess.

So this morning it was a quarter tab, just enough to take the edge off from the night before and put the crispies on the morning after. How else was I supposed to feel the global pulse, the big vibe? It was chilly as usual in this burg, maybe 50 something. The wind blowing in from the ocean headed for Sacramento and beyond while the fog was still making everything soft, diffused and pastoral. I've never dug mornings, but if I have to get through them, it's better to ease into the day like Bill Evans painting a cool Monet than jump-starting it with alarm bells, heat, fanfare and a Sousa march.

Dig, I was somewhere in the middle: starting to come down and waiting for the pulse to start up again. I had my heart set on watching the sunrise (such as it would be, like a big soft light, obscured by mother fog) from the Vallejo steps. But I had spent the night at a shindig out in Cow Hollow, so I only made it as far as Aquatic Park. I sat on the far end of the breakwater, watching old Sol vainly trying to burn a hole in the clouds while I finished putting a Schlitz 40 where it belonged. At one point there was a break in the clouds and warm, soft light briefly appeared, but as soon as I started digging it, it left, swallowed up into the blue-gray. I answered the low bray of a foghorn with an equally low belch. Still connected to my salty brethren, still doing my duty of trying to keep sailors on their toes and away from the shoals.

Afterwards I headed back toward North Beach to the office via Muni and my own two feet. Despite having missed out on sleep the night before I wasn't tired. Dig, it would be hard to sleep as long as phosphorescent particles were jumping through my

plasma and my neurons were blasting non-stop and having an elliptical rap with God, Buddha and Ganesh in a confused, flowing jumble through my pan goo. *Zzzzzzzz*. If I looked at my hand I could almost see right through it, see the millions of tiny...*things* pulsing in my personal protoplasm. And if I closed my eyes I could see bright white vibrations fading to dark purple in stunning geometric shapes that were like organic crossword puzzles without answers. Better to keep the lids peeled behind my shades and my teeth on my tongue to prevent a goofy grin. Folks get suspicious of grinning lunatics, or maybe that's just more drug-fueled paranoia. Six of one...

I had planned on picking up some smoke from the office safe and then hiking back up Vallejo Street to my second floor flat or just crashing on the well-worn office couch. But I got sidetracked or sideswiped by a call from a cop I knew, inviting me to check out a scene. A little background here: two months or so prior, he had referred a depressed dad and his humorless lawyer to me and they had seen fit to give me the task of trying to find a missing daughter. The referral wasn't really much of a gift; I was working it 'cause it was officially a cold case and the regulars had pretty much given up on it. Besides, they had their hands full with the routine and the spectacular—things like traffic scofflaws, wife beaters, insurance scams and murderous madmen, though luckily for all of us, the cat who called himself Zodiac was sticking to the burbs, like Napa, Vallejo and Benicia.

And to this crazy mix of humans behaving badly, add in the siren-like lure of Scott McKenzie et al. extolling the utopian virtues of this here forty nine not so square miles in their post-pubescent tenors. This had police departments from Bangor to Maui telephoning, telegramming and telefaxing pix, descriptions and heartfelt pleas to the Ess

Eff Pee Dee. It added up to thousands of young kids who had vanished from their previous lives and had somehow transmogrified into reams of official forms and documents.

So in an effort to appease this local well-heeled family on a case that seemed no different than all of these other missing persons cases that had overflowed their filing cabinets, the cops pretty much off-loaded it to me. Don't get me wrong, I appreciated the work. I mean we all need bread, dig? But deep down I knew it was probably an exercise in futility. I knew this, the man knew this and maybe even the chick's family knew it. And hear me out my brothers and sisters, being an instrument of last-gasp hope is a tough gig. I had to toe a fine line between offering hope and preparing them for the worst. I mean it's tough being the last straw, know what I mean? One minute you're a ray of hope and the next minute the dromedary's backbone is busted. Snap your finger: it's that quick.

Anyway, instead of heading homeways and smoking a pinner and spinning off to bed, I dropped another quarter tab and grabbed a cab over to the Haight. After all, I was back on the clock, so I could avoid the 30 Stockton and a couple of transfers. This was work, so this was an expense. Of course the hack still looked at me funny when I asked for a receipt. A solid receipt—not one of those tricky liquid ones that were spilling all over the dashboard.

Back to synesthesia, dig? 'Cause the smell of patchouli oil was almost thick enough to see, or maybe it was a crazy mixture of incense, pot and some kind of animal funk dancing in front of my eyes. There were yellow and orange tie-died bed sheets being used for curtains which gave the late morning light an almost bronze cast in an otherwise dark second-story Victorian flat off of Masonic. The place was a mess, but

then I'm a slob, so it's that pot-kettle thing all over, dig? I was taking my time in the front room, absently checking out the bookshelf, because the record selection was rock stuff, not really my taste. The books ranged from the Bhagavad-Gita to texts on civic planning, the taste of an unformed mind, which was cool by me. Student stuff. The cinderblock and one by four bookshelf also held a couple of candles, a stack of records and a cheap modular hi-fi. There was a futon next to a curved bay window and an unrolled sleeping bag on the floor. One of the uniformed cops was hanging over my shoulder, his bad breath adding to the general noisome brew. Eggs. He warned me not touch anything for the thirteenth time and I made my usual non-committal noises in return. He was also upset because I was tracking dirt into his crime scene, but like it wasn't my fault that they were tearing half the street apart and leaving piles of mud everywhere. I didn't mean to step in one of those piles and I didn't mean to leave it all over the place. Sometimes stuff just happens, dig?

I was thinking that the Window Pane was probably cut with a little too much speed. Sadly, what was advertised as pure Owsley was anything but. Or maybe I was less than precise when I was cutting the hit with my X-Acto. Regardless, I had a bad case of cottonmouth, my fingers were still tingly and the light outside and in pulsed in tandem with my over-exerted heart.

I was, after all, planning taking the day off, but then I got that call from Zyzck. Inspector Brad Zyzck was a plainclothes lieutenant who wasn't my friend but he wasn't quite my enemy either. We co-existed on this planet, sometimes in an edgy adversarial frug, sometimes in an almost chummy pas de deux and usually stumbling around, stepping on each other's body parts in a grudgingly awkward tango. In Dr. Pangloss' best

of all possible etcetera's, our twain would never have met, but show me where it says this or any world is perfect. Perfectly dreadful most of the time, but I had to remind myself to keep it on the good foot, especially with another quarter tab (or more) still playing charades in my dome.

“Pike, take a look in here,” came the gravely bellow from the cop we called Eye Chart. Not to his face, you know, because he lacked as many funny bones as vowels. For a fat dude, he was like all right angels, I'm saying he was as square as they come, but he was also a reasonably straight shooter so like I say, we co-existed. If we were anywhere other than Ess Eff we would be enemies, but tolerance is something that seeps into you in this burg. Must be something in the fog. Bygones become bygones.

He was in the next room over, so I shook off my uniformed flypaper, took in this room once more with a quick 180 scan (almost too quick, like there weren't any tracers, but I was tracking faster than my brain could take it in) and headed back into the dark hall. A slight head rush forced me to steady myself against the white plaster wall as my Chuck Taylors silently padded down the hardwood. There were a couple of posters tacked onto the opposite wall, one for a band I never heard of (Morte Aeterna) and one was for a Family Dog concert out at the Avalon Ball Room done up in contrasting Blue and Red with text that almost vibrated off the paper. Even in my state I couldn't read the text. The Avalon poster had to be a couple of years old at least, and the frayed corners showed tack holes from multiple moves. Home is where you hang your art, dig? The next room on my right (all the rooms were on the right, as the left was a common wall with the flat next door) was probably the dining room, but it had been converted into a bedroom. There could have been anywhere from three to ten people living in this pad.

This room was bathed in red light and it was obviously the source of the funky stench. I instinctively turned my head to get some cleaner air in my lungs and gingerly stepped in. Zyzck had his back turned to the bed and was talking to a Medical Examiner (I detected this 'cause CORONER was written in bright yellow on the back of his dark blue jacket). The cop turned and gave me a nod and a shake of his head, pointing me toward the bed. More pulsing, like everything in the room was alive. Everything except the girl...

It's never good to see youth and beauty snuffed out, always takes me a moment to compartmentalize it. I can do it though, and sometimes it scares me how quick I can flip the switch from the real to the abstract. Must have something to do with my Navy training. This was a young redhead, her painfully white and almost blue nude body wrapped in a huge California state flag bed sheet. There was plenty of extra red in the white expanse of the flag so it was a good guess that she did not go gently into that good night. I was close enough to hear the M.E. saying that the meat wagon was waiting outside and they'd take her as soon as Zyzck was done. I shook a Pall Mall out of the pack and tamped it a few times, but I knew better than to light up despite the smell because the inspector didn't like his crime scenes contaminated. So I passed the weed under my nose for a quick sniff and then stuck it back in the pack without looking. I felt a hand on my shoulder and I winced a little bit, I was wired, because like I said, the little miracle juice that spiked my blood was making me a little too sensitive.

“Jumpy?” It was the fat cop, his breath smelling of dark brown bacon and bright yellow cheese. Normally I wouldn't mind, but because of the mix of smells and my heightened sense of everything it was almost more than I could take.

“A little. Too much coffee and no sleep,” I lied about the coffee part. “Bad scene man.” I took another gander at the bled-out wraith, protected once and forever more by a large Grizzly. There was problem when I moved my head too fast. I’m not sure if it was some kind of persistence of vision thing, but the Grizzly might've moved. I also never noticed the state bear smiling before. The more I looked at it, the more malevolent the grin. “Bummer,” I added weakly.

“Bummer, huh. Says you. You know what your bummer is? Your bummer is when we gotta tell her mom and dad...”

“Save it, Inspector.” Like I didn't need to hear his broken record routine.

Not sure, but he might've been looking at me funny. I think he disapproved of my shades and scent but he didn't mention either. Or maybe I was just being paranoid. Easy enough when you're high and rapping with the man, I suppose.

“It's not her,” he added. No question, just a statement of fact.

‘Yeah.’ Like I couldn't argue. I crouched down for a closer look and briefly flipped my shades up. ‘It's not her. Bummer,’ I said again for no reason though maybe I was thinking it was a bummer for the young chick, for her friends, her family, the cops, the landlord and maybe even a little for me, because I wasted cab fare and was likely not going to be able to expense it. Like it was a drag on a whole lot of levels. The shades went back down.

But it most definitely wasn't her, wasn't Julia Pancetti— the missing heiress I had been hired to track down. Her granddaddy had made a lot of money in the construction biz and her daddy had played the market well enough to add a number of extra zeros onto the fortune. This dead shell was once a young redhead and that's the

only thing she had in common with Julia. Skin was wrong, teeth were wrong, everything pointed to a lower economic strata than the Pancettis inhabited. She was also probably younger. My Julia (the relationship had become more possessive of late) was in her early twenties, making her only five or six years younger than me. This chick might have made it to fifteen before running away from Omaha or Riverside or some other stifling burg. She would never see sixteen.

“Looks like you got yourself another Jane Doe.” I was looking at her arms, but it wasn't moving protoplasm, just so much meat; her skin pockmarked with purple tracks. Zyzck followed my gaze and nodded.

“Another junkie.”

“There's a lot of it around lately. Meaner streets, harder drugs.”

“Maybe. I don't know that I catch the distinction. All streets are mean, all drugs are hard.”

“Look, I'm no more gonna argue about gateway drugs than I am about the domino theory. But I think this is one sorry scene, some young thing runnin' away from square mindless oppression and straight into a buzz saw. Sad thing is that this coulda happened anywhere, even back in dullsville. Some possessive boyfriend flips out and grabs a kitchen knife and then splits. He's either at the Greyhound station or sobbin' in some church. This ain't Pancetti, and it ain't no criminal mastermind. This is just jealousy. Routine-like, should be easy enough to track down. You don't need me around here.”

“Yeah, looks like it. Sorry I called.”

“Yeah, no, that's cool. You didn't know it wasn't her. Coulda been.”

“Yeah, instead we got ourselves another dead hippie chick.”

“Yeah, well one more is like one too many, dig?”

“Sure, I dig,” answered the cop, with almost no irony.

When I got out onto the front steps I took a medium-sized gulp of air and tried to center myself. Too much bad karma, too much mindless authority, too much death. You try to act like an upright human, or at least a *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, but trouble weighs you down and before you know it you're back dragging your knuckles, an agéd *Australopithecus*. Reverse Darwinism, dig? Why not? What goes up comes down and what goes around comes around. So man ascends and descends on an Escher-escalator, from the good news back to the bad ooze. Oscillations; one big wave, enough to give me a sinusoidal headache. I felt like I should do like Mr. Leary and drop out (I omit the other two, 'cause like back then I was already turned on and I was almost always in tune). Times like this I found comfort in a familiar farcical fantasy: Farmer Pike I was, thumbs latched under my overall suspenders, a wilted piece of straw dangling from my mouth and always the weary eye trained on the next weather front. Like I could've found myself a nice plot of land in the North Bay and put my hoe to the row. I could've sprouted sprouts, or tilled tomatoes. Or grown some green. Or 'shrooms, you know. Something we all could've used to expand both our bellies and our noodles. But here I was, stuck on vibrating stairs in a pulsating universe, trying to put the bad trip inside outside my skull. But even with my eyes shut tight I could still see the image of the sweet young thing turned sour, and only the distant and shrouded sun shining through my lids kept things from getting too dark. Deep breaths Wendell, yoga-like, let the flow slow. I fished around my jacket and found the crushed pack of Pall Malls. I looked and saw that I had

three left. Cool. I fired up the weed with a matchbook from some auto boneyard – I couldn't tell which one 'cause I'd torn off the cover for a crutch. The smoke felt good in my lungs and calmed me down a bit more. So things were getting back to normal and I was thinking that I could even grab a burrito from Zapata's on Haight before heading homewards. I wasn't really hungry, but I knew the issue would become more than academic sooner than later, dig?

But damn it, this day was all about interruptions and here was another. Inside the cops and the M.E. were walking on eggshells (pretty useless really, like they weren't really going to wake the dead) but this noise was from the outside, off to my left. I followed it to the side of the building. The sun was fighting a losing battle trying to say hello through the heavy mist and playing off a badly trimmed hedge while a couple of birds were doing their high-pitched chattering and still the noise continued like the flow of traffic below your pad. It was almost tidal, almost musical, but natural enough that it didn't alarm the California Towhees. Or maybe they were just robins. Heck, maybe, maybe, but I wasn't no Batman. Nor a Birdman for that matter.

The noise was bubbling forth like sadness itself, ineffably gloomy; the soft sound of a broken heart coming from somewhere behind a little hedged off area in front of the side of the Vic. I stood for a moment. One of 'Tack's one/zero things. I could split, go home and crash or get something to eat (and drink), or I could follow the sound like scything through the underbrush to get down to the river. Again, like the short dude preaches, always follow the flow, dig, whether it's electrons on a wiring schematic or roads on a map. The flow always takes you home. Or at least to ground. I took a large hit off the Pall Mall parked in my mouth and almost sighed.

I could leave or I could check it out. Smart money said my job here was done (wasted though it was) and I should have like hightailed it and started in on some carnitas and rice, chased with some tequila and cervezas, followed by a civilized siesta. Give me a pancho, a sombrero, a lid of Acapulco Gold and sign me up for la vida simple. *Oh, déme un hogar, en donde el búfalo vaga...*

But on the other hand, there was my nagging conscience and innate fixation for pulling at every loose end until it unraveled into a messy pile. Sometimes I even had the energy to put things back together again. What to do, what to do? My neurons were chattering away at the speed of light bouncing through my gray matter, from frontal to temporal to parietal to occipital and back again. Every choice and anti-choice lit up, spun its tires and left the line in a cloud of smoke. I could almost smell the burnt rubber and 40 Weight. Well, screw it, I thought. I was here to do good work if not God's work, right? What's the difference, give or take an o. If it wasn't his work then it was somebody else's, dig? Dig. We are all archeologists. Dig we must. I detect; therefore, I etcetera. Sometimes it's not so much about making choices as having them made for you. Stick that in your global consciousness bong and fire it up. So somewhat resigned to the pawn-like nature of my existence, and mildly cursing the grand universe for picking on a little prawn like me, I lightly stepped down on my tennies and poked my head around the prickly green growth.

He was young, maybe not quite as young as the chick inside, but still too young for what he was going through. His hands were covering his face, and even from there I could see that they were dripping in crimson and dried brown. His face was framed by

longish dirty blond hair and a nascent, adolescent beard that was so sparse you could miss it altogether if you weren't looking closely. Both his jeans and his fringed leather jacket were covered in the same dark stains. I approached slowly and played it like Willie—say hey, softly like, so as not to frighten him. I'm saying he was like a blasting cap, dig, ready to explode. I watched the TV; I knew I was supposed to call the authorities. I knew the drill, it was like the old line about having sex with critters: 'approach the beast with caution...'

He looked up startled, his confused mind messing with his fight or flight instinct so he just stood there blinking. I only had two left, but I offered the pack as a token of non-aggression and he took one and put it where it belonged. He also grabbed my butt with his left hand and fired up the bent weed with it. So we smoked in silence, the sadness creeping over to me like a kind of contagion or some science project ivy. The sobs stopped, but he still shuddered every couple of seconds. I spent my time staring at the crushed pack. *In hoc signo vinces*, it said. I looked to the sun trying vainly to cut through the low clouds but failed to see any sign there. Then again, I was no Constantine. Back to the pack, and like wherever particular people congregate, dig? Well I'm thinking that I'm particular, don't know 'bout my sobbing smoking buddy. Particularly weird, maybe.

“So,” I said, pointing with my butt toward the flat in a lame effort to break the ice, “friend of yours?” I think he shook his head in response, though it could just as well have been more of the sob-less sobs. “You wanna rap about it?” Again, more shakes. I put my hands up in an effort to be both self-effacing and non-threatening. “It’s cool if you don’t.” He was still an origami human, folded in on himself. I figured I had to break

through the haze. “Hey there, hey! Up here. Take a look here.” I loosely grabbed his arm and tried to get him to look me in the eyes. He was still like a downcast rag doll. I couldn't tell if he was scared or still in shock. Six of one, dig? “Look man, check it out, I'm not a cop. Would a cop look like this?”

He slowly took in the dark, frizzy-haired maniac trying to shake him out of his reverie. Again with the head shakes. “I...I...guess not.”

“Damn straight. They got dress codes and...stuff.” I tried on an easy, self-assured look, while fully realizing that I probably looked more crazy than controlled. And like every now and then I had to duck and get out of the way, 'cause all this time stuff was flying by my head at alarming speeds and it was hard trying to convince myself that most of these airborne thingies probably weren't real. I took a deep hit off the weed and tried to project rational-like. “We're just rapping, that's all. Just smoking and rapping”.

“Ok,” he replied, in a way that was anything but.

“Hey, be cool. Relax. Take a deep breath,” said Mr. Pike, the Yoga Bearer of false reassurance and bad news. I let a few moments go by, looking from the sky to the road, where somebody was slowly trolling in a powder blue Fury, looking for Ess Eff gold (aka a parking place).”You got a name?”

“Blair. Blair Poundstone,” he squeaked as he stole a furtive glance my way and shyly stuck out his mitt. I politely refused the shake what with the mess his hands were in and tried changing my map into one big friendly grin.

“Hey, Blair. Call me Wendell. Wendell Pike. You know what happened in there?” I made a half turn and pointed toward the door, but the body shakes returned

which I took as the affirmative. He started to make a higher pitched noise and I shushed him. It took a while. “Can you do me a favor?”

He looked at me like I was from Mars. Maybe I was, maybe he was. He had an odd pulsating halo floating over his dome, but I put that down to a trick of the light and, of course, the acid. Then again, maybe it was something else. *In hoc signo vinces* indeed.

“I want you,” I said in a slow motion cadence, “to stay here for a moment. I’m gonna get a couple of...friends,” well not really, but I figured the lie would have to do and ‘sides, there’s no way I could explain the complicated relationship between myself and Inspector Eye Chart in any kind of thumbnail sketch that this poor boy could understand in his messed up state and that I could lucidly offer in *my* altered state. “They’re gonna want to hear what you have to say and, um, help you out. So can you do that? Can you stay here for a moment?”

He quickly nodded a couple of times and opened his mouth into something that was supposed to be a smile. It was as strained as a speed freak’s promise. I dug into my coat pocket and found a business card and a Cracker Jack prize, one of those little toys where you had to navigate three small ball bearings through a maze. The background was done up in some plains war motif; I think it was supposed to be about getting rescue wagons over the fields and through the woods past maniacal bloodthirsty braves to the safety of an army fort. I handed both over to him and he grabbed it with his left hand, while his right was scratching his thin beard. After staring at the card and the toy in a confused funk for almost a full minute, Blair took the bait and started playing the game, rhythmically tilting it and trying to roll the little balls through the right path. I hoped it

was enough to keep him busy and headed back up to the stoop and to the open front door. The smelly cop was still in the front room but the cat from the Coroner's Office and Zyzck weren't around in the second room. The limp, lifeless shell was still lying under the protection of the flag of the great state of California. Trick of the light or something, but I could swear that Mr. *Ursus arctos horribilis* was winkin' at me. I shook it off, too much input and not enough time to process it. Now the damn bear was back to grinning. I wanted to be done with this room and I had to find the inspector because of my new psycho friend waiting outside, but I couldn't move. Now the Grizzly was nodding his head toward to the window. The window was closed, but I pulled my right arm into my jacket and used the sleeve to grab the handle. It opened with a groan and I poked my head through. Nothin' much on the other side, just another house maybe ten feet away, probably less. Below were some scrub bushes on either side of cement walkway and I was almost ready to re-enter the room when I caught a silver glint shining through the green. When I leaned back into the room *Ursus* was giggling. "Some protector you are," I growled under my breath as I left the room and started looking for the cop, ready to offer up a twofer. I walked down the narrow hall and into the kitchen, where it was a little cooler, approaching cold. Back door must've been open. A lot of these Victorian flats have a little utility room off the kitchen and then a wooden stairway leading down to the garbage cans on the ground.

Zyzck and the coroner were in the utility room talking low and moving with a bit of difficulty, like there wasn't enough room for the two of them. I started to interrupt but something else grabbed my eye. It was a bit of bloodstained buckskin. Like I got a weird

feeling about this and my instinct was to run back out the hall, but it was frantic fascination that took hold and I poked my head through.

No wonder about the difficulty moving, 'cause there were three in the room, but like only two of them were extant, dig? I was getting a little freaked out, cause it was like seeing double or some kind of persistence of vision thing. Again. The supine body in front of me matched my friend outside, buckskin for buckskin, bloodstain for bloodstain. I had to stop, bend over and take a deep breath, so much so that Zyzck shot me a look.

“Pike,” he half growled. “I thought you had left. What's wrong?”

“Wrong? Nothin' man, I just thought...” I wanted to say that I saw a ghost, or some kind of freaky, funky doppelganger, but I kept it short and said, “Inspector man?”

“Jesus. Now what, Pike?”

“Who's that?” I asked, momentarily distracted like. That's me, flash something shiny before my eyes and I'll get distracted.

“No ID. Female vic, probably a few years older than the one in the room there. Ted there,” he motioned to the M.E. who was on his knees probing with a thermometer, “seems to think the blood is transfer.”

“Yeah,” said Ted, completely distracted by the task at hand, “no obvious wounds. Reticular hemorrhaging maybe, but it's slight. Off the record I would say asphyxiation, but that's a guess. Need more time and a look inside.”

“Inspector, got a sec?” I gave him a shake of my head toward the kitchen. He grunted, half at my interruption and half at having to move his mass into an upright

position. He followed me into the kitchen and asked me what was so Goddamned important that it couldn't wait.

“I got somebody that I think you’ll need to talk to. Kid named Blair Poundstone, says he knows her,” I tossed a thumb in the direction of the bloodstained denim, “or maybe her,” I said pointing my last crooked Pall Mall toward the dining room. “I think he's related to the one in the back room, but that's only a guess. He's dressed like her so I think he looks like her?”

“What?”

“I dunno.” Again and slower: “I don't know, but he’s pretty messed up...”

“Drugs?”

“Who knows? Sure, could be, I mean probably, but I would say that right now it’s got more to do with stress. Like man, the cat’s freaked out. Bloody hands and somethin’ weighin’ heavy on his conscience.” I looked over toward the latest casualty. “I don't figure him for any of these. Just seems young and scared, maybe a little stupid, maybe a little high, I dunno?”

“He's high?”

“Jeez, man, get off the one track, ok? Sure high maybe or in shock. I'm no doctor; it's just a guess. But he's not firin' on all cylinders is all, or maybe he's just slow.” I felt a tremor go through my body and I remembered the bear. What was I sayin' about shiny things? “Oh, and another thing, don't get upset but I think there's a knife in the alley between the houses, tossed out of the room. You may be able to get prints from the window. It's open now, but it was closed.” I saw the look on his face and I shook my head. “Hey man, I know better than to mess with prints, dig?”

He just shook his head, he hated people messing with his work and his people probably would've found the knife sooner or later, but he didn't like to be trumped like that. I knew this so played it cool as I continued to press on “So like I said, this cat is named Blair Poundstone and I told him to stay put and that you would want to talk to him, help out a little, yeah?”

“He's in here?” the cop bellowed.

“Just outside, actually.” Like I had nothing to hide, but I was starting to feel the pressure. “It's cool, man, I've got him parked and amused.” I was hoping that the stupid game was still holding his attention, but the air was escaping that balloon *tout suite*.

“He’s just standing there?”

“Yeah, well sittin' actually.”

He started lumbering down the narrow hall. I was impressed; he could haul it pretty good for a fat guy.

“Jesus, Pike,” he called over his shoulder, “what’s preventing him from taking off?”

“My guess would be gravity?” I lamely offered behind him.

The inspector made a bunch of noises in his trip down the hall and stairs, most of them unprintable. I mean it was nothing I hadn't heard before (being ex-Navy and all), but I just best leave it to your imagination, eh sister? But at one point, I had to keep from laughing cause I started to see the fat cop huff and puff leaving a trail of planets, pounds, percent signs, asterisks and ampersands in his wake. It was cartoon like, and in any other situation would've been sidesplitting. He yelled at eggs Benny-dick (the other smelly

cop) to check the alley between the houses for a knife and we were once more into the pulsating universe. It turned out that all that haste made waste, 'cause Blair was just sitting there cross-legged (I almost said Indian-style) getting injun-injured palefaces through the red man's treacherous maze. Zyzck shot me a look that told me I was lucky, 'cause if Blair would have split, I would have been in it deep. But again, I had to stifle a giggle, 'cause the inspector was shooing away something from his head. So I guess they were real, bees, flies, whatever. Made me feel a bit more grounded and also made me feel that maybe I was coming down. Then I got distracted enough to watch the drizzle drizzle, and I swear I could see every distinct drop falling which was pretty cool in a slo-mo kind of way. I shook my head a few times when I heard Eye Chart's vox cut through my personal little impressionistic painting. I looked over and asked him, "What?" He shook *his* head (for very different reasons) and pro forma-like offered to have me sit in on the interview but dig, I figured he had enough back-up and some invitations are nothing more than openings for polite refusals. It's a cultural thing I guess, part of the veneer of civilization. I begged off telling him that a giant food log awaited. He told me to enjoy it and take it easy, both of which he didn't mean and I thanked him again for the call, which was just as disingenuous. I also might have absently asked him to let me know how this mess turned out, but he may not have even heard me as I started to hoof it down to Haight.

I would like to say that the sun broke through the clouds and my hunger returned, but instead the clouds got lower still and the drizzle turned into a steady rain. In my distracted state I almost got collected by somebody in a beat-up green V-dub squareback with a couple of flower stickers randomly placed on the hood. A raised middle finger

from the driver was my thanks for the good work that I had completed. So much for peace and love. I added that to the irritation I had caused Eye Chart and the loss of cab fare to get out here. Sometimes it's just not worth it, dig? I try, I suppose we all do, but life frequently is an exercise in frustration. Tilting at windmills and all that.

So I got on a number 7 inbound, away from the comfort of Zapata's and on to Market to pick up a 15 back to the office, but not before stopping off at Wing Fat's for a pack of Pall Malls and a six of Coors tall. I was planning on sucking down 64 ounces or so before crashing on the couch, but life had other plans. 'Tack was entertaining, holding court with three Chinese chicks, two of whom might have been sisters. 'Tack liked to do the multiple thing, but I always found it too distracting. Anyway, I offered the six-pack and 'Tack got out some Thai stick. I think we all were in more or less the same state, dig, half-high, depressed and desperate, so we started drinking, smoking and (eventually) laughing. One thing led to another as the late morning turned into an early evening and 'Tack wound up with the two sisters and I led this young thing, I think her name was Suzi, to the back room. Don't remember much, except Suzi liked to bite and I returned the favor. The pain from the bites and the pleasure from everything else reminded me once more that I was lucky to be alive, and despite the day's balance sheet being negative, things could've been a heck of a lot worse.

Suzi was long gone by morning and I found a roach in the ashtray and fired it up while staring at the ceiling. I was trying to remember a dream that was full of all kinds of crazy things, but the only images that stuck were a flock of dark birds circling the top of some church and some shaved headed monk with a glowing halo. Like weird man, weird.

So I hiked uphill to my pad and felt better after a shower and then looked around for some clean threads. I had to make my weekly grovel out to the Sea Cliff district to kneel (figuratively, like) at the feet of the Pancettis, or more probably, Mr. P and his lawyer. They didn't like it any more than I did, but they were clinging on to hope as much as I was clinging on to their checks, which still cashed at the bank without problems. I called City Cab and told them to pick me up at Mario's Bohemian Cigar Store, a small restaurant/coffee shop on Columbus. Resplendent in dark slacks tucked into black boots, a white turtleneck and a purple velour suit coat, I grabbed my keys, a lighter, my smokes and dark shades. I checked myself out in the hall mirror and had to admit that I looked good.

At Mario's I had just enough time to down an espresso and pick up a coffee to go before I heard the horn. The Ford was ancient, and the hack had some classical station that was playing some early music — recorders and sackbuts. Sounded a little somber-like, but then I had to remind myself that this was serious business. The sun was breaking through, so that made me a little happier.

The hack let me out on the 200 block of Sea Cliff Avenue leaving me to make my way up to the imposing entrance and ring the buzzer. The pad had impressed me on the first couple of visits. I mean it looked, I don't know, substantial enough from the outside, a dun colored, stucco clad, two-story with a brick tiled roof. Not much landscape in front and that which was there was covered in shrubs and a lawn that featured a good thirty-degree rake. Tough gig: the Pancettis' lawn boy, he must've needed anti-gravity boots. Maybe he got the anti-grav footwear selling *Grit* in his spare time. If *Grit* really exists

and isn't just another form of slavery, dig? I'm just saying seeing as how I've never seen a copy, only references in the back of comic books. Not that I read them. Much.

Comics, I mean. Anyway, the trick thing about this place was that the lot on which the house was built was deeper than it would first appear, so that once you entered through the columned portico you found yourself lost in the funhouse, so to speak. The joint went on for days, all kinds of odd rooms that I had only read about (in a side bar featurette puff piece in the *Chronicle* when Julia first went missing)—libraries (two), a music room, solarium, and multiple bedrooms. There was even a small house behind the multi-car garage that served as the servant's quarters. Yeah, the Pancettis had a servant, he had told me his name once, but because he looked at me past his long crooked nose with more than a little haughty disdain (fed by an obvious distaste for my hue and for the fact that my profession was less than honorable in his eyes—though I would argue that work is work and honor is both flexible and democratic and I can't do anything about my skin color or the racists bastards who have a problem with it) and because he always asked for my name, whom I wished to see and would I give him my card. He probably had more of my cards on him than I had; maybe he planned on papering the walls of his garage-house with them), and because it got under my dark skin every time we had to go through this little scene, I took to calling him Jeeves, which sort of cemented the bad first impression into a very terse relationship. Hey, I never said I couldn't be petty. He didn't want me dirtying up 'his' place, and I treated him like a necessary evil, the gatekeeper to this house's inhabitants.

Jeeves asked for my hat and overcoat, which was his way of joking because I wasn't wearing either. Then he left me cooling my jets in the front library, his footsteps

dying out on the white Italian marble. It was his favorite game, leaving me waiting with nothing to do. I was supposed to wait patient-like for him to get Mr. Pancetti. It was usually Mr. P usually played twenty questions before giving up a check with a pained expression, so I girded up for what would probably be the same ritualistic dance. I had been in this room before and it wasn't that impressive. It featured a high plaster robin's egg blue ceiling, a half-dozen red upholstered Louis the something or other chairs that looked comfortable but weren't, a nice sized antique globe (allowing me to compare the relative sizes of Siam and Prussia), and dark brown bookshelves offset with bright yellow spines that represented maybe every *National Geographic* ever published along with a bunch of books that looked like they were purchased new in a collection and had never been cracked. I was supposed to stay put—he had made it all too clear on a number of occasions that I was not free to move about the pad—but telling that to a dick is pretty much useless, dig? We have to scratch an itch, that's one of the reasons we do what we do. So it was probably a good five minutes of me playing with an unlit cigarette (I was forbidden to smoke as well) and idly studying a map of the Atlantic Ocean floor in the latest *Geographic* before I got antsy and decided to disobey Jeeves and take a walk.

I think it was the last visit when I got chased out of the kitchen off to my right, so I decided to veer left when I heard the faint tinkling of somebody tickling the 88's. After pushing down on a large brass handle and slowly opening the thick oak door, the music got louder. It was something contrapuntal, that much I knew, so I guessed Bach and took a glance inside. Nobody in the room save for the pianist herself, pounding away on the ivories. I remembered that the Pancettis' older daughter had studied abroad on some kind of fellowship so I guessed that this must be her. I made as little noise as possible

and slipped in, planting myself with my back to the door and listened. I'm no expert on baroque keyboard works, but it sounded like she was putting all the notes in the right places. Like music doth have charms, dig? It was easy enough to forget myself in the interlocking melodies that spit out like bullets from an M60. I couldn't see much of her, just the top of her reddish-brown hair bobbing behind the sheet music. Then she got to a point where the music had a sort of quick jaunty dance feel and she made a couple of clams. The moment was lost. She had lost. Or Herr Bach had won. Same difference, dig? It was like she'd been riding a bronco and been thrown off. After trying to start from the same place a couple of times, she let out an epithet accompanied by a tonal cluster, both produced with a vehemence bordering on violence that surprised me. She stood up, messaging her neck with one hand and shaking out a cigarette with the other. She did a pretty classic double take and squinted at me through her cheaters.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you come in..."

"No, I'm sorry, I thought this was the library," as lies go, it was maybe the benchmark in bad for the day, dig? "Then I heard the music...it's Bach right?"

This caught her off guard and she actually let loose a small grin. "Very good. I'm surprised."

"You sayin' I'm country?"

"Well, no, it's just that," she blinked a few times. It was as if you could see the computer in her brain spitting out the punch cards. "It's just that Bach isn't that popular these days. I mean it's not rock and roll, you know?" I have to say that she looked pretty good, everything in the right proportions if you know what I mean. Not too big, not too

small, kept herself in good shape and a quick glance under the piano showed some pretty good legs. Her hair was bright red, no, make that orange, though there were blond highlights where the light caught it just so. The color was one thing, but the hair seemed to shoot out of her head without regard to gravity, some of it standing up, some of it plastered down and some of it gathered in a partially successful pony tail. Her skin was bright white, and unlike a lot of redheads she didn't have any freckles, but then I suppose she spent all of her time in practice rooms rather than the beach. Her mouth tended to curl in a slight smile and there was a small mole or beauty mark on the side of her nose. She had a pair of dark green eyes, though she hid them behind a pair of thick, old-fashioned horn rims. If she did something with her hair and got some hipper glasses, she could have been a real fox. With all she had going for her, there was still an aura of un-hipness, and I guess the best way to put it would be to call her look a bit on the bookish side, but that wouldn't be doing justice to some pretty good genes. She was trying to play the sophisticate but it was clear that she had spent too much time in practice rooms. Not anti-social, just not properly socialized, dig?

I shook my head a couple of times both to clear my head and to demonstrate my antipathy toward rock 'n roll. "I'm not that fond of rock music," I said with a trace of understatement. "However, I do like jazz."

"Really," pronounced 'Rilly'. "I'm afraid I don't 'get' jazz. It's too free, too...amorphous. I appreciate structure, I suppose that's why I like Bach."

"Yeah, well except for Ornette, the Art Ensemble, and cats like that, most jazz has structure. You just have to listen for it. But Bach's cool, yeah."

"Do you play?"

“Nah. My mom did. She tried to give me lessons when I was little, but it didn't take. I don't think I had the patience, know what I'm sayin'?”

After a beat where her eyes were doing the fluttering thing again, she got back on comfortable ground. “OK, so you know the composer, but do you know which piece?”

“Really, I don't have a clue.”

“I'll give you choice, it was either (pronounced 'eye-ther') the Partitas or the French Suites. Sorry, but I can't get more specific than that.”

“I dunno,” I looked down toward the floor, maybe the answer was spelled out in the parquet. After another quick glance toward her, I could see a yellow-jacketed folio to the side of the music rack. Though it was partially covered, I could make out the first couple of letters so I filled in the blanks. “French Suites?”

She looked surprised and scrunched up her face a bit. “Yes, that's right.” Then with a smile that I might describe as coy if it had any experience behind it, “Know which one?”

I dug through the dusty pile in my dome. I remember my mom playing these things, a long time ago. My brain was telling me that there were probably a half-dozen total, so I had a one in six chance of nailing it. “Not sure. But it's in G, right?”

She lowered her glasses and took me in. “Yes. That was number five in G major. How did you guess that?”

I didn't want to tell her that G was a bright orange and E flat was darkish blue, but that would lead to the “what note am I playing” game and I had been through that dance too many times.

“Lucky, I guess.” It was my turn to come up with the small talk. During our chat I had slowly advanced toward the back end of the mahogany colored grand. I found myself lightly strumming the strings, but not hard enough to make any sound. “You know, I actually prefer Bach on the piano. Harpsichords are too...fussy.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“Yeah, no, it's just that I actually agree. I had an argument with one of my professors; he's really into authentic performances of early music. He thinks we lose subtlety when we use modern instruments. I see his point, but it's hard to hear the real power these pieces have on a harpsichord or clavichord.” She stopped and fumbled around for a moment before striking a match and took a large hit. She then decided to play the coquette and offered me a lame wink. “So, are you here to see Daddy or to rob him? I know where all the good stuff is, you could pawn it and we could split the spoils 70-30.”

“As long as I'm on the 70 end, but judging from your reaction” — she had started an exaggerated comic frown—”that's not what you had in mind. So yeah, to answer your question, I'm here to see Daddy. My name is Wendell, Wendell Pike.” Rather than give her my hand, I gave her a slight bow and she answered with a carefree rolling hand action.

“I know who you are and why you're here. I'm not stupid.”

This was one of those moments where a comment could be construed any number of ways so I made do with a meaningless gesture as if I was brushing a fly from my forehead.

She continued, “I know you’re still looking for Jules. You can question me, but I was away at school when she...she went missing. Mum and Daddy wanted me back here, but I had to finish the semester. Don't look at me that way.”

“What way? I didn't think I was...”

“Like I'm a...subject.”

“Suspect?”

“Yes, sorry. Suspect. Look, I’ve been on the Dean’s List for three years and I wasn’t going to risk damaging my collegiate career by taking an extended leave of absence.” She tilted her head to one side in a way that reminded me of a small dog. “It's not that I don't care about Mum and Dad, or Sam or Julia for that matter, but I can't put my life on hold while the police and others,” —this said looking straight at me—”flail about. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, fire away.”

“Do you think that makes me a cold person?”

“Cold? I dunno. Practical maybe, then again everybody has their own way of dealin' with...this kind of thing. Mind if I join you?” I asked, waving a pack of Pall Malls at her.

“Your funeral.” So I moved over to the keyboard side and fired up a weed.

“So you’re Dawn. Hi.” I put my paw out and she reciprocated in a limp shake.

“Before Europe, you were down on the farm, right?”

“Huh? Oh right, go Indians,” this last said with an attempt at irony that rang false, the kind of self-deprecation intended to put a lower-class person like myself at ease by mocking Stanford’s mascot.

“Music major?”

“Performance. Poli-Sci minor. Where did you go?”

“Haven’t yet. Spent my time in the submerged branch of the armed services. I plan on going in a year or two, on the Bill.” Which may or may not have been the truth, and even if it was, it wasn’t going to be any place like Stanford. Probably more like SF State. Or City College.

“My brother Sam is in the Armed Forces, but you already know that. Daddy tried to get him to enlist in the Navy, but he chose the Marines. I think he figures we're doing the right thing in Viet Nam. What do you think?”

“Me? I don't know.” I don't usually like to talk politics with clients or their family; it never really helps. But rules are like made to be broken and I thought that there was a chance that she might be a little different, so I made an exception. “No, that's not true. Honestly? I can't see the purpose. South Viet Nam, Siam, Prussia, take your pick. Borders are mutable, names change. We should be using the money to visit Mars, or chart the ocean's floors, that's what I think.” I looked for the warning signs of conservative rage and saw none.

“Have you talked to Sam?”

“Your brother? A couple of times, yeah. Once when he was on shore leave in San Diego around the time that Jules—Julia—went missing. After that he shipped back for a second tour and then got bounced, insubordination or some such. That was in Pendleton and it was a wasted trip—I mean there was your lawyer, I mean your family's lawyer, and some military advocate and I could barely get your brother to spit out his name without the two of them advising him to clam up. Cost me plane fair and a cab and

I had a hard time getting my expenses paid. Can't say as I blame them for that; it really was pretty worthless. But still, I put in the time, ya know?"

"What did he say?"

"Like I said, not much. The first time he was pretty...gung ho. The usual garbage about how hippies are destroying the country, if we don't make a stand here and now we'll all be eatin' rice and raw fish, and we have to stand behind the president. The usual. Actually, he said very little about Julia. Again, the second time, next to nothin' about her or anything else. Seems he didn't know her very well either. I guess she didn't fit in?"

"Well, she was the youngest. It's a burden, I suppose, to try to...develop an identity, a unique identity from your other three siblings."

"Three?" First I heard of it, I only knew Julia, Sam and Dawn.

"Sorry. I thought you people," —she paused for a beat knowing that what she said could be like misconstrued— "detectives I mean, I thought you picked at all the bones."

"Sometimes we miss something. We're only human. Well most of us, anyways."

"Well, you see, this is rather awkward, we had...another brother." She started twirling her hair around her finger, a little nervous tick. "He died from an accident when he was five. There are some times when I imagine he's a little angel protecting us and some times when I think he's a burden. The ideal child that you can never measure up to, does that make sense? I'm sure Mum and Dad think of him as perfection personified. I think it's because he never had enough time to get into trouble or cause problems. You know the 'terrible twos'? Supposedly, he never cried, but those who die young tend to

develop the biggest...I don't know. Myths?" She stabbed out her Kent for emphasis and started in on a new one. "I'm the second oldest, so I can sort of remember Gene, but there are times when I can't even remember what he looked like. Isn't that queer?"

I stared at my cigarette as something to do. "So Gene's death, you don't have to talk about it, but I guess that changed things?"

"Hmm. I couldn't really see the change in my father. Mum...I don't know. I suppose it's a cliché to say that part of her died along with Gene."

"Did Sam or Julia ever talk about Gene?"

"No. No he was ancient history. Everything was BG and AG. They only heard the stories and by the time Julia came around, well, it sounds terrible, but we just didn't talk about it. You know, the way families avoid certain...subjects."

I let that go. I mean maybe it had something to do with Julia's psychological profile, but I didn't want to or need to go there. I filed it away as slightly interesting and left it at that. It was very quiet in there, despite the large glass windows that gave a million dollar view of the bay, there was pretty good sound proofing, so much so that I almost jumped when a swallow smashed into the glass in an attempt to land on the nearby hedge. I shook that loose and tried to get back on track. "Did you get along with Julia?"

The bird distracted her for a bit as well, but then she focused back on me. "I'd be lying if I said yes, I suppose. I mean we're not that far apart, age-wise, but she has a different spirit. She got hooked by all that hippie stuff: dope, free love, you get the picture. She lacks discipline. All that...stuff," — she wanted to say something stronger, but she was staying cultured—"is foreign to me. Also, she's everybody's favorite, all she has to do is bat those pretty green eyes and she gets what she wants. Don't get me wrong,

we're not—I mean I'm not—hurting here. It's the extra stuff that..." She started to go somewhere and then trailed off. I liked her use of tense; it's always a good thing when they still refer to the missing in the present. "Anyway, young boys to hippies to you name it. Sometimes I didn't even recognize her, she was that different. To think there can be that much change in a few years. I shudder to think what's next," she continued.

"Picture phones and two-way wrist radios maybe." This didn't register so I continued. "So you didn't know any of her friends?"

"I met a couple of her classmates when she was in high school, but only in passing. After she graduated, she started hanging out with a different crowd, so I suppose the answer would be no. We are very different, the two of us." The flickering returned for a brief moment. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, ask away."

"Do you think...do you think she's still alive?"

"I think that..." I started to make the usual comforting noises but the oak door opened and Jeeves poked his big fat head through the opening.

"Forgive me," — like the words were saying it was probably his fault but his demeanor spoke otherwise—"I thought you were told to wait in the Library?"

"Sorry, Jeeves. Dawn and I share a fondness for the baroque." I walked toward the door but slowed and did a half turn. "Maybe we could continue this?"

She pressed her brows together. "I'd like that. Perhaps I could call you sometime. To help out the investigation," she lamely added.

"Sure. I'd give you a card, but I'm fresh out. Maybe you can get one from him," I threw a thumb toward Jeeves, shot her a quick grin and headed back to the library.

Once back into the library, I sensed a change. First off, Mr. Pancetti wasn't there. There was only Chas (not Charles) Niscemi, the Pancettis' humorless lawyer. Last time I had to deal with him was when I was trying to talk to Sam and he was doing everything in his power to keep the kid's trap shut. OK, lawyers make easy targets, but there wasn't much to like with this bug. As far as I saw, he was a thin-lipped weasel with dreamy eyes that conveyed no mirth. I never saw him laugh; I mean I could imagine him laughing at dirty jokes at the club, but only for form's sake. I don't think he possessed a sense of humor and that disturbed me. He was sitting in one of the chairs as if it was the most comfortable one in the world, a coffee mug in one hand, and absently spinning the large globe with the other. He was dressed in a blue pin-stripe number, Savile Row I'd guess, the waist cut of the jacket being a little too tailored, a wide silk tie in some kind of blue and red paisley pattern over his light pink shirt and the pants flared ever so slightly over his Italian leather boots. He wore his hair just long enough to spill over the collar and hid his milky eyes behind tinted aviators. His existence stank of serving a purgatory between hip and square. Like some cats can't make their mind up, dig? Which side are you on?

"Mr. Pike. Good to see you." Here we go again, words saying one thing and everything else screaming the opposite. We really have to develop another language. Or something. "Have a seat," he continued.

"Sure. Where's Mr. P?"

“Mr. Pancetti sends his regrets. He can't be here today. I'm afraid...”—he took a deep breath and I was thinking here it comes, (it's not like I'd never been dumped before) — “I'm afraid we have to make a change, Mr. Pike.”

“OK. Let's hear it.” The chair was digging into my tailbone.

“We, the Pancettis and myself, feel that we haven't been getting—How shall I say this? Haven't been getting the value we were promised. Frankly we've been disappointed in your otiose efforts. Meaning no disrespect, but we've decided to go in a different direction. We respect” — now there was another lie—”your efforts, but we would appreciate it if you would cease your inquiries. Certain people have been upset by some of your lines of questioning. This is not a bowery case, or finding some low life...trollop.” Trollop? **Trollop?** Who the heck talks like this? More artifice, more jive, more bullshit. But just like a lawyer, the words continued to flow, a Niagara of lies. “This family, and the friends of this family warrant a certain level of courtesy. In a nutshell, we don't feel that this is a very good fit. You needn't provide us any more of your colorful” —this accompanied by a one-handed air quote— “reports. Please accept this”— he flashed a check in front of my eyes—”as payment in full for your services. I would also ask that you sign this.” He got up and walked over to the table where he had some kind of document typed up in triplicate on 8 1/2 x 14 paper.

I got up and followed him to the table. I picked up one copy and studied it for a bit. Typical party of the first part, blah, blah, blah stuff. “So I sign this and stop everything? Is that pretty much it?”

He tried forming a smile with his thin lips. It didn't take. “Yes, that's the gist.” He reached into his jacket pocket and slowly extracted out a hefty gold pen.

“OK, if that's the way you want to play it. I would have liked it to come from Mr. P himself, but I understand.” I ignored the proffered Mt. Blanc. “You won't mind if I take a copy and have **my** lawyer look at it?”

“Certainly not,” said Mr. Niscemi, in a tone that implied anything but what he was saying. I mean it didn't exactly drip acid (the bad kind) but it didn't say that everything was copasetic either.

“Cool. I'll be in touch. You can hold onto the check until I get this back to you, OK?”

“Of course. You can drop it off at my office on Green Street. The address is at the top of the first page. My secretary will be instructed to release the check upon receipt.”

“OK then. Catch you on the flip-flop. Tell Jeeves that I'll let myself out.” I folded and pocketed the document and put my shades back on. I flashed a quick peace sign and reinforced it. “Pax, man.” Then I left this nut house with a bad taste in my mouth. I decided I needed to walk a bit, so I shook a roach loose from my cigarette pack and fired it up. It was pretty quiet around here, so despite being a fish out of water I figured I could at least enjoy the hike up to California Street. But of course, after only a couple of hits I noticed a prowler car trolling a half block behind me. I put the roach out on my tongue and swallowed it, then sparked a Pall Mall. I hadn't made it to Lake before the Plymouth was along side.

“Hello sir. Can we help you?” This from inside the ride. Yet again the words said one thing, the context meant otherwise. No wonder some folks are schizo...

“Yeah, no. Just walking. Enjoying the day, officers.” Damn, I hate when I can detect a vestige of Tom in my voice. It must be in my blood, forced there after generations of oppression. By this time I had stopped and was looking at the cop. He was only a couple of years older than me and looked to be carrying a serious chip on his shoulder. His partner was older, had cop sideburns and a cop mustache and seemed preoccupied with his belt or its futile effort to contain his growing girth.

“Can we see some ID?” Like here we go again. Somebody who looks like me in some place where we're not supposed to be, got to check it out. I could be a murderer, rapist or robber. Best to have a pre-emptive strike, take me out of the equation before I have a chance to do whatever nefarious deed I've planned to commit. Half of me, upset by my dumping a few minutes previous, wanted to make an issue out of it, but the other half calmly got out my CDL and handed it over. The younger one studied it for a while as if it held a lot more information than my vitals. “You have business here?”

“Yeah.” I leaned in as far as I dared and handed him the contract. “I was doing some work for the Pancettis.” I thumbed in the general direction of their pad. In my quick glance, I could almost swear that the door was open. Damn it, the only question was if it was a neighbor, Jeeves or the lawyer that dropped the dime.

“Where are you headed?”

“Headed? I'm heading toward my office. Then maybe home, I dunno. I have to call my lawyer.”

That did it. The six magic words. He might not have trusted me, probably knew I was a little high and really didn't think I belonged here, but he didn't want to have to deal

with any legal stuff. He handed the kill contract and my license back. "Can we give you a ride somewhere?"

"No thanks." Like I've got a real aversion to the back seat of cop cars, dig? "It's a nice day, I'll hoof it up to California and grab a 5. Peace, OK?"

"Fine. Enjoy your day." With that they drove off, the older one barking something into the radio. Now as far as harassment, that was nothing, just the usual low-level shit that goes on everyday. They didn't search me, didn't throw me against the car, didn't cuff me. No, the hatred is subtler in this burg, just a little reminder of who is in control around here and who isn't. I resisted the urge to give them the friendship digit and instead flashed the peace sign again and muttered something unprintable. This wasn't turning out to be one of my better days. I needed something. I needed to talk to somebody. I needed legal advice.

Screw that, I needed a drink.

Well, this was a bit more problematic then it would first seem. See, I used to hang out at Vesuvio, but that was before I broke up with Helen. Well, I guess I would describe it as a mutual thing, but if you would ask her, I'm sure she would say that it was mostly my fault. Usually was. Is. Whatever. I'm not saying that there was a lot of animosity between us, more like there were a few unsaid things that would be better left unsaid. OK, water under the bridge and all that, but the problem was that I was trying to hook up with "my lawyer."

Gerald Brundage used to have a lot of work in this burg, but that was before he developed a weakness for expensive tail and Johnny Walker Black. It was also before he

got disbarred for jury tampering, a charge and a verdict that he denies to this day. I guess the bottom line is that he wasn't a good enough lawyer to get out from under the law or maybe the evidence was pretty overwhelming. Like I say, whatever, man. At first he was full of vitriol, shaking his fists at Lady Justice, and he started putting a big dent into his savings, drawing up plans, hiring top-shelf legal talent. But one day he just said forget it and decided that all this angst was turning him into some kind of Ahab. He turned off his anger and set about becoming a professional drunk, a position at which he performs admirably to this day. He invested in Dow Chemical (no moral compunctions here, something we have argued about on more than one occasion), lived on his savings and pretty much hung out at one of four bars, Vesuvio, Spec's, Tosca and the Savoy Tivoli. So I had to poke my head into enemy territory (Vesuvio) resigned to the possibility of some collateral damage (like encountering a certain upset ex) as an additional karmic charge along with the price of a couple of shots of Black Label in order to get a legal opinion. I poked my head in and asked if Brundage was in, but the waitress just shook her head. I didn't recognize her; she was new and still shiny. I was tempted, lord knows I was tempted, I mean she was a fine rack of lamb, but the last thing I needed in my life was more complication. Simplify, simplify, dig? I didn't leave a message, just gave her a quick wink and a wave before jaywalking across Columbus and headed over to Spec's. I recognized the bartender but couldn't remember his name, so I just said, "Hey man" to which he responded, "hey" so that made two of us. He was mostly busy trying to get one of the taps fixed so I settled in and ordered a bottle of Pabst. I tried asking a couple of questions, but was mostly ignored. I did find out that Brundage hadn't been there all day either, so I finished my self-appointed tasks of tearing the label off the bottle

and putting the hops in the hopper and left some change on the bar. My wallet was getting light, but I was on a heavy mission, or at least I felt like it was important, so I headed down the street to Tosca.

Bingo.

He was sitting on a stool and was in rapt conversation with the man behind the stick. Even though he had let his gray hair flow into a short ponytail and had grown a pretty substantial goatee, he still favored tailored three-piece suits. A nod to comfort over fashion would be the loose knot on his regimental and the undone collar button. His large blond (and plenty beat up) leather shoulder bag was on the stool next to him and, like always, he was in rapt conversation with somebody. The man liked to talk, even though he could no longer bill by the word. Old habits die hard, am I right? In this case he was talking to the massive bartender. “Silo” Silas (built like his nick, and an amazingly hirsute dude) owed me for a small favor I once did so this was cool, but “Silo,” due to his former career as a professional wrestler, had taken one too many head shots into the turnbuckle. I might be Wendell or the Queen of England depending on how his neurons were firing. I gave him a half salute and a round motion with my index finger pointing toward the disbarred and then the bar before planting myself next to the ex-barrister.

“Counselor.” I put out my hand and he shook it in the traditional fashion.

“Mr. Pike. How's Tricks?”

“Things are cool, man, things are cool. Can I buy you a drink?”

“What a question.” He started laughing, a nice low guttural sound that exhibited genuine mirth. “Of course you can. Hey Silas...,” but before he could finish, the

barkeep planted a shot and a Pabst on the plank. The juke started up, somebody was playing *Nessun Dorma*, and not for the first time judging from Silas and Brundage's unison wince. Silo leaned in close enough so I could smell the cheap brand of bourbon he favored.

"Sixth time so far," he said in a scratchy, conspiratorial whisper. "Had a fight with his ex. Plays it again and I'm pulling the plug, I swear." His dim eyes finally flashed a bit of recognition. "Wendell! How's it hanging man?" We went through an abbreviated soul shake which was probably embarrassing for both of us. But the effort was cool, so I didn't complain.

"How much I owe you?" I asked, like it's best not to assume, dig?

"What? Let me see," and Silo actually started trying to tally it up in his dome, but then he cracked a wide smile that showed off fractured teeth and bad gums. "Who are you kiddin', Fish? This one's on me." He rapped the bar twice with his knuckles and headed over to try to plead with the opera buff, his self-satisfied smirk turnin' into a look of concern with every step.

Brundage gave me a once over. "Fish?"

"Pike. I think he picked it up from Ramón. Navy nicks, man, they stick."

"And how is the little guy?" This was said without malice, but it still rankled. But I was after information so I kept this to myself. "Ramón's good. He's got a gig with some rock band rebuildin' their amps. This is on top of his *Western Lights* stuff."

"Yeah, I saw something about him in the *Oracle*."

"He's famous."

"Well, so are you."

“Yeah, small pond and all, and well it's fleetin', dig?”

He raised his glass in a grand theatrical gesture and pronounced each word with equal emphasis. “*Sic transit gloria mundi.*”

“Yup. **That's** what I'm talkin' about.” I had picked up the beer, but hadn't taken a sip. He laughed again. If he gained twenty more pounds, he'd make a good Santa Claus.

“Tell him I said hi, will you?”

“Sure thing.” I took a hit off the beer and felt on solid ground for the first time in a couple of hours. I reached into my pocket and put the kill contract on the bar, where it promptly started absorbing various liquids. I leaned over and grabbed a couple of napkins from behind the bar, sat back down and patted the document dry. The damage wasn't too bad, a couple of sentences were a little hard to read, but other than that, it was cool. “So counselor, is the office open?”

He smiled. “You know, Wendell, one of these days I might get my license back. If I do, expect to be billed retroactively for all this advice.”

“Advice? I thought we were just rappin'.”

“Well that, like everything else, is subject to interpretation.”

“Right. And speakin' of which, could you just take a look at this?” I shoved the contract over to him, being careful to avoid any errant spills.

“What's all this about?”

“Well, long story short, I was hired by a family to find their daughter. She's been missing for a while.” I didn't feel the need to elaborate.

“Lot of that going around these days. Did you find her?”

“No, no I didn't. I mean I haven't.”

“Is that what stings?”

“What? No. I just got started and...they decided that...” I called over to the barkeep: “Silas, do you have a dictionary?”

“What? A dictionary? Sure thing, next to the Guinness book.” He lumbered back and thumbed through the shelf, found it and flipped it over to me.

“Thanks.” My catch was clumsy but I only bent a few pages that had already been mutilated by a half-decade worth of drunks. I started to look for the word, but I must have been spelling it wrong. Like all my attempts today were futile dig? “Sorry,” I said to no one in particular, “I think he called me something bad.”

“Who?” answered the ex-lawyer.

That knocked me back to earth. “Their lawyer. Cat named Niscemi.”

Brundage turned his head away from me and let out a theatrical spit. “Bastard.”

“Hah. Yeah, I would tend to agree with you on that point. Anyways, they, by which I mean he, said they didn't need me, and then he gave me this.” I tapped the contract twice with my index for emphasis. Pride might be a sin, but I was nonetheless proud of myself for staying on the subject. *Lard* knows I can wander some...

The ex-lawyer reached into his vest, retrieved some gold-framed reading glasses and picked up the document. Nothing wrong with vanity. It's a common affliction that affects us all. Knowing the way he worked, I kept my mouth shut and got Silas' attention for two more and then buried myself back into Merriam-Webster. In a few minutes Brundage sighed, put his glasses back in his vest, laid the document back on the bar and sighed again. He probably would've kept sighing but Silas brought the round so the stall

wasn't necessary anymore. I gave up on my quest, threw a few bills on the plank and waited.

“Oh, thank you.” He tilted his head back like it was a gift from above, not connected with any previous conversations. Just like a lawyer. “It's pretty standard. They're paying you a kill fee.”

“Thanks for nothing, I mean I could of told you that and I didn't go to no fancy school.”

“So it's the Navy vs. Hastings?”

“Sure. We'll fire some serious barrage, kick your tail and accept your surrender. Then you'll sue us and you'll garnish our wages or put liens on our ships and our houses. But we don't have to do this dance, 'cause I gots news for you brother. I'm broke and I rent.”

“No offense intended. I was thinking out loud.”

“OK, sorry, man. Like no offense from me either, dig?”

“Sure, sure.” His eyes got kind of far away and he finished half of the Johnny in one swallow. “You know, it's sort of like paying farmers not to grow things. Nice work if you can get it.” His eyes got back in focus when he turned toward me. “What's your problem? It seems like good money.”

“Well that's just it, man. It's a little too good. My standard contract calls for two fifty. They added another zero.”

“A typo?”

“No. At least I don't think so. It could be. I mean they've always been generous. It's just seems a bit much.”

“So that's your problem?”

“Yeah, no. Like it's not really a problem, I just need to know how tight the restrictions are. They're payin' me to do nothing, like you said. I dig the analogy, man, they're payin' me not to grow beans. But I'm worried about the...ramifications of signin' this and then continuing to work the case, either on my own or if somebody else hired me.”

“For the same job?”

“Maybe for the same job. Maybe for some ricochet case.”

“Ricochet?”

“Yeah, well, sometimes it works like a pinball machine, dig? I mean I can't guarantee that I won't cross them again. Like it's been known to happen. Lots of missing young things out there, some of them bound to come from money. You look for one, you find another. I'm just sayin' that it's been known to happen.” We both took a moment to sip our respective poisons and got reflective-like.

“Well, it says there that they could ask for their money back.”

“The kill fee?”

“Yes, I mean no, not just the kill fee. Everything.”

“Like everything?” What do you mean, everything?”

“I mean everything. Everything they've paid you. This contract, it's pretty standard stuff. At first glance there don't seem to be any hidden clauses.” He looked up at me with wary, bloodshot eyes. “But as a piece of non-sanctioned, gratis legal advice, I wouldn't trust Niscemi as far as I could throw him. He's pond scum, a first class jerk and a lying little weasel.”

“No bad blood there, right?”

“Sure, he screwed me over once, but I wouldn't hold that against him.”

“Professional courtesy, right?”

“Something like that.”

“OK, so we both belong to the Chas Niscemi anti-appreciation league. Cool. But gettin' back to the document in question,” I made a clumsy gesture toward the contract, “as long as I don't sign it, I'm not bound to anything, right?”

“Not from what I read. What, I thought you said you were broke, yet I find that you're independently wealthy these days, buying drinks and turning down large sums of money.”

“Huh. No, anything but. But you know me; I don't like to be tied down. Any advantage I might have in my chosen field is the latitude I afford myself, hear what I'm sayin'?” I took another pull off the Pabst. “I dunno, it seemed pretty open ended when I glanced at it.”

“And you're not a lawyer.”

“Thank God for the mysteries that He performs.”

“Cute. Well, you've got one week to sign it.”

“Where'd it say that?”

He didn't bother putting the specs back on, just flipped to the third page and pointed out a paragraph that I had missed. “Right there. But again, as your non-lawyer, I would advise you to sign it.”

“Yeah, I dig. I mean that makes sense, it's just that...”

“What?”

“I dunno. I dunno. I don't dig bein' played. Like it rubs the wrong way, you hear what I'm sayin'?”

“Sure, I do, but where's the harm? Easy money if you ask me. So you've got some kind of scruples now? Do us both a favor. Let go of them.”

“Thank you Zen master.”

“I'm serious. You've got to let go of these things. Let go of it all. Let go of the pain, let go of the girl. Plenty more where she came from, yes?” I couldn't argue there. But then again that's why you pay for counsel, dig? It's as much about giving out a certain amount of common sense as for deciphering the gobbledygook. I shook my head to clear the cobwebs and Brundage was still going on. “Speaking of which, how's Helen?”

I didn't want to pull at that string, nor did I need that kind of advice, especially from a disbarred lawyer still paying alimony to at least three exes. I tried on a smile that I hoped was both bittersweet and somewhat rueful and shook my head. “Long story, counselor.”

“Suit yourself.” He started to try to get Silo's attention for a refill. I figured it was time to leave rather than pay for a couple more rounds. I studied the contract for another minute, put a couple of more bills on the bar and waved to Silas. I thanked Brundage and made my exit just as *Nessun Dorma* was starting again. Silas' face started to cloud. I didn't blame him one bit.

I stopped off at Wing Fat's and got some smokes, a six of Coors and a pint. Boy Scout in me, don't you know? Because you never know when you'll run into a couple of

young things partying in your office. But alas, there wasn't any rack of lamb, there was only 'Tack, looking shaman-like with his hair all frizzy and the light playing off his smoking soldering gun. He had the curtains drawn so it was pretty dark if not perfect pitch black within the space and he had a small lamp behind him illuminating the circuit board he was working on. The light threw his shadow across the room, and I remember thinking that it was such a large shadow for such a small cat. Like maybe shadows illuminate the soul, dig? He was listening to his current favorite: Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge* (at a very modest volume level for him) and even through the thick conjoined odor of sandalwood and solder I could detect more than a hint of Moroccan Blond. I cracked open a cold one and searched around a bit before finding the pipe. Still something left in it, so I sparked it and took a nice-sized toke. I could feel the smoke expanding in my lungs. My eyes started to feel like they were bugging out and finally the reflex kicked in and I started to cough violently.

"Smooth," I stated with Carson-like exaggerated diction (in between fits). 'Tack didn't respond, so I sparked it again and had a little better luck, maybe a couple of small hacks, but my lungs were starting to get used to it. I put the small pipe down and chased the hit with some Coors. "Can we get some light in here?" I asked. I started to walk toward the nearest window but Ramón stopped me.

"Hold on one sec...", he started, blowing on the circuit board to cool the solder. We have argued about that in the past, I remembered reading an article somewhere that said it weakened the joint, but he thought that was just a bunch of bull.

"What are we...", I wanted to ask what were we waiting for but he waved me off and got that crazy look in his eyes. I knew better than to disturb Einstein, so I waited for

the punch line. After he was satisfied that the solder joint was good, he put down the gun, leaned back, turned off the lamp and turned down the stereo. We were now in total black.

“Cool. Fish, check it out.”

I waited for a half-minute maybe. “OK, I'm impressed. You've invented dark. Let me be the first to congratulate you.”

“Small minds,” the small guy stated in a tired singsong. Must be tough for geniuses to deal with us regular folk, no doubt about it. I was getting used to the lack of light and could make out that he had started messing with a pot on the board and then a switch that was still connected to a small box. “OK, Wendell, clap your hands.”

I started with like golf claps and I could barely make out his form shaking his head. “Nah, clap loud-like.”

“Like this?” I did one loud thunderclap that was instantaneously followed by an incredibly bright flash. I was stunned by some sort of persistence of vision thing.

“Did you do that?”

“No, you did. Try it again. Clap a couple of times.”

So I did, and the result was the same. It took me a minute to readjust my eyes.

“OK. So it's a mic hooked up to some kind of gate that triggers the strobe right?”

He sighed. “You know my methods too well Watson. Got a spare brew?”

“Absolutely. You have any more 'sheesh?”

“Of course.”

“Mind if I open the drapes now?”

“Nah, go ahead.” So I opened the drapes and hit the light for good measure. I looked over to see Ramón framed against his old blackboard. As always, the blackboard had all kinds of wiring diagrams and other electronic hieroglyphics.

We both blinked a little trying to get used to the light. “I didn't mean to belittle the effect. Pretty cool, a neat trick. Haunted house gig?”

“Nah, but that's not a bad idea. It's for a drummer, Kimi Ingstrøm. You heard of him? Plays for a band called Morte Aeterna. He's also starting up a new band called Pacific Telephone and Telegraph.” I started to interrupt but he continued, “I know, I've hinted at the fact that a drummer makes a lousy front man. And he doesn't want to mess with Ma Bell, but he thinks it's a grand name,” the last said with possibly the worst Scandinavian accent a Mexican-American could put on, but like I got the gist. “He wants a light show that will react to his drum hits. The basics weren't any problem.” I should point out that this wasn't bragging, it's just the way ‘Tack saw it. “It's a question of sensitivity and making the envelope short enough that multiple repeated hits, like rolls, don't confuse it. An interesting problem, but I've come up with a couple of ideas that may yet bear fruit. We're trying it out next Friday at a small party out on Stanyan. To which of course, you are invited.”

“Thanks, man. This is weird, 'cause it's a bit of a coincidence. You see, I was out the other day at this crime scene,” I paused to accept the proffered pipe and took a deep breath as ‘Tack lit the fuse. I continued in a pained, high-pitched voice doing my best to try to keep air (and precious smoke) from escaping my lungs. “There was this poster for that band,” and here I let all the smoke out and coughed a couple of times. “I hadn't heard of them before.”

“P.T. &T.?”

“Nuh-uh. Morte Aeterna.”

“Well, I wouldn't think they would be your cuppa. Wheezing organ, loud guitar and lyrics about hell and devil worship.” I shot him a glance and he just shrugged.

“That's their thing, but there's an interesting group that follows them around. Some nice young things and if you are still looking for your redhead you could do worse than look there. But remember that I warned you, you will **not** like their music.” He refilled the pipe and took a nice toke and continued in an oxygen-strained voice. “On the other hand, you might like PT&T, they've got horns,” as if their presence made rock music tolerable. We've argued about that in the past and genius or not, he doesn't get it. Like jazz is more than just horns. Look, if violins were all it took to make up classical music, hillbillies would be scratching out Albinoni. But he just didn't get it.

“Doesn't matter anyway.” It was my turn to fire up the rock. “I got fired today.”

“Really. Oh the Pancetti thing? Well, OK, so much for your redhead.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, bright side and all, it was a bit of a long shot. I mean the bread was cool, but I don't think” —and here he got kind of apologetic-like—“even someone with your particular...skill set would have much success. Trail's cold and all. I'm just sayin',” he added.

“Sure, sure. Still I think the daughter, the other daughter, knows somethin'. Or maybe she was attracted to me, not sure which. But there was,” I let a load of smoke escape my lungs, “somethin' there beyond the usual sibling rivalry stuff.”

“Hand me that will you? So are you going to go all Don Quixote on us?”

“Nah, I'm gonna let it all come to me for a change, dig?”

“Mountain to Muhammad, like?”

“Yup, Insha' Allah,” I said, bowing with my hands pressed together.

“Thank you, Carnac,” was as good as Ramón could come up with.

The next couple of days were something of a blur. It started with a party at Anagram Fats' new pad. Anagram was another North Beach émigré who had moved to the Haight. At this time, he was seeing a chick named Cherri. She was a pneumatic blond whose bright green eyes showed more promise of something behind them than actually existed, and she seemed to have trouble focusing them to boot. But Cherri could be a lot of fun, and that counts for something in this often-dreary world, dig? This night she was poured into embroidered bellbottoms and was wearing a small tank top that wasn't doing a very good job of keeping the goods under wraps; I mean there seemed to be occasional *spillage*. Not that she or anybody else minded. Like I said, a lot of fun. Her curly hair was partially contained under a cowboy hat with a purple sash on the brim held in place by a large peace sign pin. She had one of those corporate "my name is" name tags that said Rich Hermits pasted on her upper arm, but then I remembered her last name of Smith, so it sort of made sense, but it was a little forced, like trying to belong to the same species as Fats. And brother, they broke the mold when they created **that** genius genus. Still, she made for a pretty good hostess and a silly yin to Fats' occasionally dour yang. She liked themes, so tonight it was all things Kafka, and while there were a few cats who looked like they escaped from *The Penal Colony*, most took this to mean roaches (of the insect variety).

There was even one chick wearing a roach costume, but it looked like more trouble than it was worth, what with the extra arms and all. I'm saying she knocked over more than one beer can while I was there, and I wasn't paying much attention. She probably broke a lamp as well. I'm talking about a total train wreck, 'cause she was pretty

looped and would randomly break into a (possibly) helium-aided, “I’m Greta!” at odd intervals. It got old quick, trust me. The theme continued with a miniature racetrack dubbed the Samsa Speedway featuring small lanes to contain the six-legged contestants, each with florescent green numbers scribbled on their tiny backs. The track was painted with day glow colors as well, and the whole thing was lit with a couple of black lights. But of course, a bunch of cats had the same funny idea, so a lot of smoke was blown their way (roaches for roaches, dude!) and the bugs weren’t all that interested in completing the course, despite the promise of cheese and crumbs at the end of the rainbow. They were too busy contemplating their navels, or whatever passes for a navel on the thorax of a *Periplaneta Americana*.

Within a couple of seconds of entering the second-story walkup on Cole Street I was handed a pipe and a beer. That’s called hospitality, my brothers and sisters. It was a bit of a juggling act until I found the kitchen and dropped off my eleven pack (one for the road, dig?). I have to say that I was nervous about running into Helen, but that problem quickly took care of itself. She was like the first person I recognized. I literally bumped into her and a friend, I think her name was Linda, and the two were kind of at it or in it if you catch my drift. Helen flashed me a wide smile and started to giggle before getting back to it. Or her. Whatever. Obviously, I had a lot of catching up to do, chemical-wise. I grinned and flashed a peace sign in return for her lewd grin and headed into the living room.

Fats used to have a huge, Panzer tank-like Mehlin Grand in his old pad, but he’d gotten wired like everybody else and now he was noodling on an electric organ that had its guts exposed. Not my thing, but I’ll admit that he was getting some spacey sounds out

of it. He was jamming with a Fender bass player and a conga player, and the trio was like way horizontal, which is cool if you're Trane. But hear me out, *mi amigos*. An organ can't communicate human feelings like a sax. It's too mechanical, too electric, too...robotic. A note is a note is a note. No bending, modulating, wailing and pleading, just automatic screaming. No thanks, man. So I was trying to get into the music when somebody handed me a hit of what they claimed was Orange Sunshine and I swallowed it, chased with a hit of beer. Then I folded my back into the wall, letting the sounds bounce in my dome. I might have been standing there for five minutes, or maybe it was an hour. Hard to tell. After a while, Fats looked up, recognized me and stopped playing, turning a mic over to some fat guy who started improvising bad poetry. We did our little complicated handshake thing and laughed. I passed him a joint and he took a prodigious hit, holding it in before decompressing and letting it flow out like steam from an old train.

“Fish,” pronounced with exaggerated length.

“Fats.” Just being close to him made me smile, because Fats is good people.

“Great to see ya, man.”

“Likewise, brother, likewise.” He adjusted his black, yellow and red dashiki because it was gathering around his neck. “What do you think of the new digs?”

“Cool, man. But I miss the Mehlin.”

He didn't bite. “Come on.” He started to walk away, grabbing a half full bottle of Sangria on his way.

“Where we goin'?”

“Check out the roof man. It's outtasight.”

It wasn't easy making our way through to the kitchen and into a back room full of boxes. Fats was a pack rat and it would take him a while to unpack, if ever. We squeezed out a window (Fats lived up to his nick and was approaching three bills at this point) and climbed up a rusty service ladder which took us up to the roof. Somebody was barbecuing on a small Webber and there were a few colored lights strewn about. Smelled like chicken and looked like Alaska. For the first time that night, I felt stoned, like it had been hiding and creeping up but now it was there in all its glory. The magic moment when reality had been stowed away for a bit, all bets were off and there was possibility in the air.

Fats plopped himself into a complaining lawn chair while I gingerly sat onto the pebbled roof. I offered him a Pall Mall and stared into the fog. A slight persistent drizzle fell, but it didn't feel cold at all.

“What do you think?”

“About this? Nice roof. It's a cool party. Cool pad. I'm happy. You got it made, man.”

“Nah, it's a cool scene, but I'm struggling.” He took a large hit off the Sangria and passed it over. “No one wants to hear “I Thought About You” anymore. Standards ain't standard anymore. American Standards means toilets these days, ya know? Got to keep current. You said it yourself once Fish, you gotta...surf the zeitgeist.”

“Yeah, but do you really like this...electric stuff?”

“It ain't bad. I'm adapting. Huh.”

“Huh, what?”

“My old man used to have a sign over the garage. He was pretty good with tools and cars. I think I told you that?”

“Might've mentioned it once or twice.” I searched around in my pocket, found a roach and was thinking about a crutch, but both covers had already been torn off so I had to make do with an airplane. I lit the matches, blew them out and placed the roach in the makeshift splint. Then I fired it up, took a hit and passed it over to Fats, sparks shooting out into the night.

“Thanks, man. Where was I?”

“Your dad and tools.”

“Huh?” He passed it back to me. “Right.” Again drawn out like Cosby as Noah. “Well, he spent a lot of time in the garage, while Mama spent her time playing Debussy and the like in the front room, which she called the parlor. Stopped a lot of arguments—when things got sticky they both retreated to their respective corners. Might help couples to have different interests, you know? Screw counseling, develop hobbies.”

“Separate interests might work as a wedge as well. Cuts both ways. “ I let loose a mild curse, 'cause the roach had burned to almost nothing and my fingers were paying for it.

“I guess it do. I guess it do. Anyways, Papa had a sign over the garage entrance from the house, just a placard with three hand-painted letters: AMD. You know what that stood for?”

I took a large gulp of Sangria and immediately regretted it. “I've got a feelin' you're gonna tell me?”

“AMD, that was his mantra. The world of choices in the human existence distilled to three words: Adapt, Migrate or Die.”

“Papa was practical.”

“That he was.” Someone on ground level set off a bottle rocket and Fats cursed. He liked low key, and that kind of shit got the police interested. Part of him wanted to get out of the chair and chase down the malefactor, but the larger (literally) part of him wanted to stay put. Inertia is a mighty powerful force. He finally waved the problem away like it was a large Blue Bottle Fly. “Damn, Wendell, in the end, I’m all about adapting. You miss the piano. Well, sometimes I do, too. But it’s still there,” and here he made a kind of squid-like motion with his hand outstretched, “just like candles are still there.” I passed the bottle and he continued. “We live in a world with electric lights, Fish. Electricity is currency,” and he laughed at his own joke. “Like literally, man. Look out there.” He pointed out through the mist lit up in white, blue pink and orange. “Nobody’s using candles anymore. We’re all wired. Get with the times, my friend.” He patted my knee and thrust himself up with a large grunt. “Got to get back to the party. Later man.”

I let him go. I was into an introspective thing, letting the drugs make me feel one with the universe. But after a while I just felt cold and wanted to get back to some company. Human company. Human female company. It was a bit more treacherous on the way down, as the ladder’s rungs had acquired a fine mist and I wasn’t as coordinated as before, but I got back into the kitchen and grabbed a beer just as a chick clad in only a large snake shotgunned a hit into my lungs. I blinked and grunted “hi”. She just laughed and jiggled. The snake seemed blasé about the whole thing.

And that's how I wound up spending a few days in Stacii the Dancer's pad in Dogpatch and learned that Fats could be wrong—not everybody had turned on the light switch. Sure, by the modern world's standards, it was crude, all candles, books and paintings. No radio and no TV, but I didn't miss it. We were high the whole time and only dealt with the outside world when we had to get more food and booze (and ice, like her fridge didn't work either). I think she was squatting, but I didn't mind if she didn't.

Oh yeah, I learned the name of the snake—BenWa.

Of course.

It was a few days later, like after Labor Day. I had lost count, but the cat in front of me hadn't. He had a tendency to shout, maybe like he was hard of hearing. Or more likely, he was just angry, your humble and obedient, etcetera being the target of his rage. He was upset 'cause he'd been trying to get in touch with me for a couple of days. Like **he** never took a day off. So we had gotten off on the wrong foot and it had gone pear-shaped from there. I'll admit I wasn't at my best, hung over would be a charitable way of describing my oeuvre, know what I mean? Like the funk had seeped down from my clothes to deep within my skin if not my soul. My t-shirt was the same one I was wearing when I connected with Stacii. The shirt said "*L'ennui est contre-révolutionnaire*" in a pretty trippy typeface. I don't think he understood French, but it didn't stop him from disliking it. Actually, I don't think he understood or liked much of anything at this point. He was real square, from his hush puppies to the t-shirt showing through his yellow polyester short-sleeve.

"I don't like your type. I'm not sure I should be here at all. I mean to have a word with those peace officers, don't think I won't. For Pete's sake, I don't know how in all good conscience they could recommend someone...someone of your type for something like this." Hey sat there trying, for the umpteenth time, to press out the sharp crease in his Haggars, and I sat there trying to refrain myself from cold cocking him. Being a diplomatic cat and a Libra as well, I'll have to admit it wasn't easy for either of us.

Like it hadn't been smooth, dig? Once again, I got a referral, not sure if it was from Zyzck or not, but whoever did it owed me one. Big time. This was like getting my teeth pulled the old-fashioned way, no Novocain, just pliers and elbow grease. For the

fifth or sixth time I had been insulted and I was starting to find out just where my patience ran out. Like there could be a couple of different interpretations of his last statement, someone like my type being black, my type being hippie-ish, my type being the kind of being that caused his kids to flee for the coast, or my type relating to the possible job at hand, i.e.: a P.I. A Dick by any other name. Consider the sewage worker, a fine calling and all that, but you wouldn't want to be in the same room with one after he have finished his shift, smell me? Which is a way of saying that some people find my profession as noisome as the noble sewer rat at quitting time. And sure, sure, I had asked a couple of questions that might've hurt some, but it's not like I completely lack tact, dig? I can be civilized when I have to be. Every time I unloaded one of those queries, I made sure to prep him, to let him know the high hard one was coming. But it didn't do a damn bit of good, and I didn't know if he didn't know the signs or was just being deliberately obtuse. Whatever, our little *tête-à-tête* was just pissing him off. Which in turn was doing the same to me. What goes around, dig? I leaned back and started playing with an unlit Pall Mall, unlit 'cause Mr. Poundstone didn't like smoking, considered smokers inferior. Like it was a moral weakness.

Because Mr. Poundstone was, more than anything else, a very moral man. He was probably the pillar of his community back in Nogales, church-going, non-drinker, non-smoker. Maybe playing pinochle or whist for pennies or matchsticks was as wild as he got. He was a vet so I thought I could work that angle, but he considered us—anybody who hadn't fought Jerry or Tojo in WWII—all sissies. Plus he was infantry through and through and submarines had as much to do with real fighting as rocket ships and robots. Yet as much as I wanted to hate him, from the tip of his hard salt-and-pepper

buzz cut to the bottom of his soft brown shoes, I had to cut him some slack. He was in enemy territory here, and totally out of his depth. He was pained and he was sad.

Another reason I was cutting him some slack. I kind of groked what it must've been like; losing people is like the worst, and he had lost his daughter and at this stage he very well could lose a son. He fought to control it all, let his anger bathe his guilt. The guilt was repressed sure, and not something he would share with anyone but it was there. Two of his three kids had left home, run away, followed the siren sound of pop music and the seductive smell of cheap weed. And now. Yeah man, another bummer, one of them was dead and the other was in County with a ridiculously high bail. Although Mr. Poundstone would never allow it to escape, somewhere deep in his unconscious was that buried guilt: big, heavy, sweaty, and stinky. But just because I understood this didn't make things any easier.

“Look, Fred, Mr. Poundstone—for the last time, if you don't want to hire me then fine, nobody's forcing you.”

“Fine. I don't know why I should have to hire you. I thought that's why we have police.”

“Hah.” It just slipped out, a moment of pure mirth.

“Are you mocking me?”

“No sir, not at all. You know, I admire you in a particular kinda way. I mean you and me haven't exactly hit it off, but I gotta admit that you are the original thing. And a comment like that shows just how outta your element you really are.” I shook my head in what I hoped was a mild show of bewilderment.

“Are you making fun of me?” This stated with thinly concealed rage.

“No man. It's just...It's just that, I dunno, maybe things work differently out here than in Arizona.”

“How do you mean?”

“Do you really want it?” He didn't respond one way or the other so I kept going. “The primary purpose of cops is to protect property, and to protect those who have property. It's like the Maginot line, dig? Vital, but easy to circumvent. Their resources are limited, and they focus the remaining resources on whatever their bosses tell them to focus on, which is related to several things: the press' *bête noire du jour*; protecting the mayor's political capital, by which I mean his large behind as well as his funds; and the safety of the homes, cars and toys of the people who matter. Voters are fine, but money can buy you votes. They have to keep these folk safe at all costs and keep everyone else at bay.” I leaned back and made a tent with my fingers and lowered my voice, the very picture of levelheaded discretion. “I hate to say it—trust me when I say that I really do—but the fate of Suzanne and the plight of Blair are minor in their view. On top of which, they think that they've got everything wrapped up—Suzanne and Karen's deaths. Karen was the other young chick....girl found at the scene. And in their view, the cops' view, Blair was the perp. Sorry, the perpetrator, the one responsible. As far as they're concerned, all that's missin' is the Christmas bow.”

I couldn't decide whether or not he was going to hit me. I don't think he could decide either. I recognized the look and was almost ready to offer him a drink. Like almost.

“Is that what you think? Do you think Blair...did... was capable of...”

I shook my head. “My opinion? No. No I don't. And to answer your next question, I'm not just sayin' that to take money out of your wallet. Might surprise you, but not everybody in the big bad city wants to pick your pocket. I only talked to him for a few minutes, but I don't think Blair would be capable of violence. Frankly, on his own, I don't think he's capable of much. No offense man, but I think he's a confused young dude and I think he has a dependent personality. I think Suzanne led him here, but again, that's my conjecture. Take it gratis, man. Blair is a gentle cat and he's in a very bad spot. This is probably difficult for you to grok, I mean dig, understand, whatever, and parenthetically, I'm findin' it tiresome havin' to translate myself into square, like where was I, oh yeah—it may strike you as heresy, but sometimes the man, the fuzz, the cops, Jeez, like everybody, heck everything, 'cause I'm like including electrons as well, sometimes they all take the path of least resistance. I ain't blamin' them one bit; it's the way the world is wired. I'm just sayin'...”

Evidently that was the last straw and without another word, Fred got up and split. He had trouble messing with the door lock but I was beyond helping him, being busy sparking my Pall Mall. After finally getting the door open he started to turn and then thought better of it and dived, there's really no other word for it, he dived out the door and down the steps.

“Good riddance,” I said to no one in particular, wasting my friendship salute on the closed door. The cigarette tasted fabulous, and I had no doubt that chasing it with a distilled adult beverage would make it even better. But the best laid plans, etcetera, etcetera, 'cause no sooner was I ready to head down to Wing Fat's (not quite the duration of an entire smoke) than the doorbell rang. I deflated, like there was no way I was ready

for round two, but dig we must and all that, so I got up and buzzed him in. I left the door open a crack and searched around the ashtray for a roach. I was tired of playing nice; he's the one who fell through the rabbit hole not me. Let him deal with it.

And of course, I was thrown for a loop because this little brunette mouse in an off-the-rack brown pantsuit peeked her head around the door and asked if she could talk to me. Didn't take much of a detective to figure out this was the misses, and after a brief set-to in the short, she had decided to fix things. I figured she had been fixing things all her life. I had to stifle a chuckle when she fixed a disapproving gaze at me and asked in a hushed tone:

“Is that marijuana?”

I have to admit that that one stopped me dead in my tracks. I had no clever answer, but I tried anyway.

“It better be, ma'am, otherwise I just bought a three years' supply of oregano.”

She was still pressed against the door jam, waiting for the world to explode. “Just what do you plan on doing with that?”

I would have been more sympathetic if her old man hadn't pissed me off as much as he did. So I smiled (which might have looked a bit like a leer) and answered the only way I could, “I plan on smokin' it ma'am. Want a toke?”

“Most certainly not. Isn't that...illegal?”

“Probably. How intrusive do you want your government to be?”

She thought about that one for a bit. Got to give her a bit of credit, she *was* trying to process it. “Well,” she finally continued, “if you persist in indulging your” —she

wanted to say filthy but she stopped herself—“drug habit, could you at least open a window?”

That one threw me for a loop as well. She was running rings around me logically, so to speak. I shrugged and opened the window, taking the time to appreciate the sounds spilling up from the sidewalk below. “No problem ma'am, I meant no offense. It's just my way of relaxing. Consider it a martini.” If I looked closely, there might have been a hint of a smile. It had clearly been a long time since she had so much as grinned. Life had changed and what was unthinkable a year ago was now mind-numbing and routine. Sure, sure, there was too much makeup and her jet-black hair was sprayed into a helmet, but there was intelligence there. There was guilt there, as black as her hubby's, but hers was buried in sadness, not anger. And there was determination as well. My initial take was that she was one of those women who look like they can float on the breeze like a dandelion seed and then surprise you with their concrete and rebar backbone. “Where was I? My manners. Here,” I put the roach into the ashtray and slid out one of the chairs facing my desk. “Have a seat. I won't bite, honest.”

Again, almost a glimpse of a long-buried sense of humor briefly flashed through her firm facade. “You know who I am?”

“Modesty aside, I would be a pretty bum detective if I couldn't figure that one out. The other half stewin' in the car?”

“Knowing Fred, he's probably in the bar downstairs ordering a scotch right about now.”

“Scotch is good and Tommy—he's the bartender at the Sniv—I'm sorry the Savoy Tivoli, pours an honest shot. But heck, I could've offered him a beer if he would have stayed.”

“That's not his style.”

“I suppose not. Is it yours? Would you like a drink?”

“A glass of wine if you've got it.”

“Not big on wine.”

“Then I'll take that beer if you've got one?”

“That I can do.” I rummaged around for a clean glass and found a yellow, textured plastic tumbler, probably a give away from a gas station somewhere. The cartoon character had all but completely rubbed off. But it was clean, so I grabbed a bottle from the small office 'fridge, found a church key in my desk drawer, tilted the glass and poured a bit of Adolph Coors' finest into it. She accepted it and took a demure sip and tried on a sad grin. She'd been charming Lions and Odd Fellows for years. A freak like me was cake.

“You know what did it?”

“Did what?” I asked, sweeping aside some papers on my desk and making room to park the bottom of my lap.

“Pushed him over the edge.”

“I figured it was just the cut of my jib.” I perched myself on the same side of the desk and stared at her. Sometimes the proximity thing unnerves clients, sometimes not.

“Jib.” The phrase tickled her. “Well, there is that. But you mentioned something about the Maginot Line being easily penetrated. He disagrees. He was there, well, not

there, not in *Alsace*, he served in *Ardennes*, but he was rather pointed on the fact that it was the German bombardment, not a defect in the fortifications that...I'm sorry I haven't introduced myself. I suppose with what we've been through, I'm not sure I am myself, if that makes any sense."

"Makes perfect sense to me." I gave her a lazy, half salute and cracked open my own beer. She was almost coquettish, definitely a charmer and in her day, a pretty good match for Fred. "I'm Velma, Velma Poundstone."

"Wendell, Wendell Pike. Pleased to meet you." I was starting to warm up to her a little.

She took a larger sip of beer and glanced around the office. It wasn't exactly *Sunset* magazine, but she didn't fear it, which was a good sign. "We're strangers here, Wendell. Fred is a well-respected man in Nogales and throughout Santa Cruz County. We both know that he's a little out of his depth here."

"Is that so?"

"Absolutely. He gets stressed out when he isn't the one controlling things."

"And you?"

"What?"

"What are you like when you're out of your depth?"

"I'm not sure I understand the question." I wasn't sure if she was just being disingenuous-like or if she was trying on some kind of low-key indignation, but it rang false. Or maybe I was looking at everything through the wrong end of the telescope. Sure, sure, there was a lot of effort, but she **was** holding it together, so I had to give her a great deal of credit for that. I fired up a cig and made a show of heading over to the

window. There was a dark blue, almost black Lincoln Continental taking up a couple of spots across the street. From this angle I couldn't see the plate, so I couldn't be sure if this was a for-hire short or if they drove the whole way. My money was on the later.

Nonetheless, it was a big car, and generally people who drive big cars either have, or want you to believe they have, money and power. All that...prosperity, the whole damn American dream and yet... And yet here they were upside down, in a world where cops barely pay lip service and all their coin gets them is a big car, a nice hotel room and me. Not quite the brass ring, dig?

“What was she like?”

“Who?”

“Suzanne.”

“You're asking in a professional...”

“Sorry to interrupt. I'm asking 'cause I need to know. And to answer your next question, I'm not a psychic or any other kind of fakir. I don't divine things from tea leaves and charge you accordingly.”

“Then why...?” for the first time, her façade was starting to crack. I mean like literally, the pancake was starting to chip off her face.

“I need to know her. I need to know what kind of music she liked, what were her aspirations, what kind of things would she gravitate toward, dig?” Which was both true and false, 'cause I'm sure she liked rock music, wanted to do something that would save the planet and gravitated toward groovy scenes. Just like so many others. But I tried to look sincere and darn near struck a pose.

“That's the problem.”

“What?”

“We're lost here. Those are simple questions, Mr. Pike. Questions that any mother should be able to answer, but I'm afraid that I can't help you. Not for the life of me.” She reached into her purse and carefully took out a small four-by-six color photograph. “This,” she said in a halting voice, her eyes already starting to leak, “is the only recent picture I have with the two of them. It was taken almost...almost a year ago exactly. We got along fine, though with hindsight, I may have given them a little too much room. Suzanne wanted to take a trip, see some things before continuing college. She left three months ago. We didn't think there was any trouble. She would call and send postcards regularly, said she had a friend she was staying with.”

I had to interrupt. “Did this friend have a name?”

“What? I'm sorry. I don't think I can remember that. I'm not even sure if Suzanne ever mentioned her name.”

“Well, think about it. What about Blair?” I asked.

She smiled wistfully. “Blair is...a good person. He's...simple and by that I don't mean stupid or slow. He's tested as pretty smart. But he likes simple things, playing with his racecars; you know the small ones that run on the tracks? Or sometimes he'll just take walks for hours at a time. He'll disappear and then come back with plants or small animals, spiders, scorpions, butterflies, you name it. Blair would spend hours looking at the postcards — not what she wrote but whatever the picture was. He was captivated by the strangeness. He left a month or so ago, I gave the police the exact date, you could get it from them.” She started to sniffle and dab at her eyes with a tissue from her purse.

Great, now it seemed like she would come completely unglued. I decided to press the mundane, get her back to the here and now.

“OK, maybe you can think of some more things about the two of them. You might be surprised at what comes up. In the meantime, and I hate to be crass, but we don't have all night. You and the mister have a decision to make: do you want to hire me or not?”

“What?”

“Cards on the table. I can't do anything about Suzanne. Lord knows I'd like to be able to, but that's between you and...whatever you think is up there,” pointing toward the ceiling for emphasis. “But you've got a problem that is much more suited to my line of work: your son's in lockup and the cops think they've got the right cat for the crime. Putting it bluntly, you need someone to get him off.”

“I suppose...I suppose we do.” I hadn't paid attention, but she had finished her beer. She looked at the glass blankly, like she couldn't believe it either. “What...what can you do that the police can't?”

“Well, for one, they're not interested in any further investigation, so that's a difference, a big one. See I'll dig, dig? Secondly, I am more connected to the scene than they are. Some folks clam up when they see the man approach. I'd call it dealin' with one of their own if I was feelin' charitable-like and a pretty good camouflage-based con when if I were more self-critical. Thirdly, and I'm not just sayin' this...”

“Do you always talk so much?” she interrupted.

“I don't know how much is too much. You like your spirits distilled? OK, what it boils down to is that I think Blair is innocent. That pithy enough?”

“How can you prove that?” Her eyes were somewhat cloudy, funny that I hadn't noticed that before. I had moved back to the window and started rubbing the ancient curtains up and down almost as a nervous tick, except I had nothing to be nervous about. Maybe it was like a professor rubbing his beard or something. Ruminating like, dig?

“I can poke around, check alibis, check out the cats who lived there, talk to people that Blair and Suzanne knew. But the surest way is to find out who actually did it.”

“You can do that?”

“Honestly? I dunno. I can try.” I had moved over to the desk, opened the bottom drawer and took out a fresh contract and some carbon paper. “Look, there's no easy way to shift gears here, at least I've never found a good way. But it's like this. If you want me to do this, to find Suzanne's killer and get Blair off, then you should hire me. And if you're gonna do that, well then, these are my rates.” I passed a mimeographed sheet over to her. “And they are not negotiable. I would also like to take that photo,” I reached over the desk and put it to the side. “I can get copies made and ask people about them. I'll give you the original back.”

She pulled out some elaborate, sparkled cheaters from her little black bag and went over the numbers on the contract. “Fifty dollars a day? It seems like an awful lot.”

“That's what it costs. You're welcome to try someone else.” I dug around on the floor behind my desk and found the yellow pages. I opened them to a well-worn, dog-eared page with a bit of a practiced flourish. “Start at A and work your way down. But my advice would be to skip any firm that calls themselves quick, discrete or reliable. 'Cause like very little in this business exhibits those attributes, dig?” She blinked and

knew that, as horrible as I was she couldn't go through this with a half-dozen other P.I.'s who might be even worse than me.

“We'll get an account of these...expenses?”

“Yes ma'am, absolutely. I'll mail you a weekly report of my activities, or if you choose to remain in town, I can have them delivered to you by courier. Unfortunately, the expenses don't stop there. You're going to need to hire a lawyer, here's a couple I recommend, but it's your call. Stay away from the public defenders. They're overworked and underpaid.” I passed along another mimeographed sheet with the names of a few barristers I actually trusted. “Doesn't have to be one of these, but just let me know whom you hire so I can work with him. I can also...”

At this moment, ‘Tack appeared in the doorway looking like a refugee from a midget auto rodeo. It was clear he hadn't slept in days. He was betrayed by the bags under his eyes and a certain *je ne sais quoi*, something between overly ripe Camembert and ancient 30 weight. He was filthy, dressed in a brown mechanics jump suit, his thick black hair was blown up into an explosion of frizz and he was cradling a box of Puffa Puffa Rice. “Hey Fish,” he asked through a mouth of cereal, “got a beer?”

“Check the fridge, Ramón.” Like my train of thought had left the track. “Now where was I?”

Velma stared wide-eyed at ‘Tack. What was she going to tell her husband and friends about this freak show? She looked back at me and asked, sotto voce-like: “Is he a detective too?”

“Ramón? No ma'am. He answers to a higher power. He's an electrician. Ramón, meet Wilm..I mean Velma Poundstone.”

“Pleased to meet you,” mumbled ‘Tack, his gob full of heap big flavor and beer.

“Ramón works with me from time to time and is very discrete. Anything that is said here stays here. You can trust me on that.” I tried to look trustworthy and ‘Tack continued wolfing down the newy newy taste treat.

Velma was staring out the window, but her focus was like way off. She was trying to connect to **her** higher power and was finding it hard. She caught herself and shook her head hard enough to dislodge one of the plastered down strands of hair. “I’m sorry. It just seems too much. I’m not used to all this libertine behavior. Suzanne obviously thought this was some kind of heaven, but I’m not so sure it isn’t the opposite. The things I’ve seen in the last few days, men holding hands out in the open, women walking around half naked, open drug use. No offense...”

“Hey, none taken.” I had gone back to fishing through the ashtray...

“I really don’t know what to make of this. Any of it.” She had the contract in her hand but hadn’t signed it. And you know what? I honestly didn’t care. She could fill it out and get it to me or not. I suppose that was a little petty, but I hadn’t gotten over the abuse from her old man. That and the fact that my latent laziness was starting to creep in. Another drink should help that along just fine, kick that latency into something full-blown-like. I was surprised when I noticed that Velma was almost halfway out the door when she turned back toward me and said, “How can she...they...you...live like this?”

I was going to start on a rap about freedom, following your heart, endless possibilities versus the mundane but like I was beaten to the punch. By which I mean that the little guy quickly grinned and added his two cents. “Lady,” he said, putting on the Mexican dialect a little too thick for emphasis, “I’ve been living in this town for a

while. Heaven or Hell, AC or DC, heck, after a spell in this loco town you'll find that the anodes frequently get reversed. Lead-neutral, neutral-lead, you get used to it. Your meter will give you 120 either way.”

Of course she had no response so she just thanked him with a confused look, nodded toward me, mumbled something about being in touch and stepped so lightly down the stairs that she was almost floating.

“Did I say something wrong?” Like ‘Tack just wanted to know, you know?’

“I don't know. Don't think so. You missed the main event; this was just a *divertissement*, like. Real squares from Arizona, lookin' for help. I can help them, I just don't think they're ready to admit it.”

“So do you think you've got the gig?” He was back to stuffing himself with ‘Oceans of Energy’.

“Where else are they gonna go?”

“Beats me.”

“What's with the look?”

“This? Oh yeah, I spent the day in a junkyard off of Third Street. Looking for headlights.”

“J'a find any?”

“Oh yeah, man, like I was telling you about P.T.&T? Morte Aeterna? Well I got their space **wired**. You're coming, right?”

“Huh?” I asked, momentarily distracted.

“I told you about the party on Stanyan, right? It's this Friday.”

“Oh yeah, right. I forgot. You got your magic show all set up.”

“It's pretty cool, man, even if I say so myself. You **will** dig it.” He was really pleased with himself and somehow, despite the jive I'd been dealing with, it lifted my spirits a bit.

“So what do you say we get some noodles and adult beverages?”

“What about take-out from Sam Wo and a fifth? Roast pork rice noodle roll and raw fish salad?”

“I'll deal with Edsel if you can deal with the kid at Wing Fat's.”

“No problemo, dude.” He produced a beat up twenty and snapped it in the air a couple of times for effect.

“Well, I'm glad one of us got paid.”

Edsel was Edsel Ford Fong. He was **the** waiter at Sam Wo's. He'd gotten written up for his behavior by Herb Caen and had become a bit of a local legend. When you said something stupid like, “I'll have what they're having,” he was the guy who would grab the plate off the other table and land it on your desk with a flourish. Edsel could be pretty surly, especially if he thought you were slumming. Of course, this made the squares even giddier. All great fun being put in your place by the help, hysterical really, and it kept them coming back for more. Who knew the movers and shakers all craved abuse like this? Basically it was one big show and the man knew how much to pump up the act depending on the crowd. At this time of day business was pretty light so instead of upstairs doing his thing, he was parked against the side of the building, puffin' on a weed.

“Hey, man.” To Edsel, everybody was man. He recognized folks but couldn't be bothered with remembering their name. Price of fame I suppose. Everybody knows yours and you're expected to reciprocate? Fat chance, baby.

“Dude.” Two can play this game, dig? “What's happenin'?”

“Nothin'. Lost my shirt down at Bay Meadows. You know ponies, man, they no like me.”

“We all have our ups and downs, good days and bad days. Up and down, one big sine wave.”

“Forget that. I lose my shirt.” The big man ran his hand over his crew cut, stopping at the back to scratch an itch.

“Sure, sure. Sorry man, give me a second to order, K?”

“Yeah, you order. You order.”

So I did at the counter. Sam Wo's was a tall skinny building. Three stories and each story had maybe eight tables jammed together in a space that would easily accommodate four. All the food came up through a dumb waiter, but the smart waiter had to work the joint and like there were lots of stairs. The food wasn't good, but it was cheap, time capsule Chinese stuff, greasy but filling. I put through my order at the desk next to the kitchen in the front and told them to get me when it was ready and went back outside to burn one. Edsel gave me a look like he finally recognized me.

“You Wendell?” he asked.

“That's right. I'm Wendell and you're Edsel,” I said, using my index finger for emphasis. “Nixon is president, we landed people on the moon, Ho Chi Min just kicked, Rocky Marciano got a permanent KO the other day, the Giants split their series with the

Mets, I just ordered Roast Pork Rice Noodle Roll, Raw Fish Salad and Chow Fun, and you just lost your shirt. That about covers it, right?" I got a Pall Mall out of my pack and offered him one, sparking both with a match. Edsel didn't say thanks, just nodded and put the weed between his third and forth fingers.

"Guy looking for you. White guy, thin, kinda nervous."

"Cool." I took a big hit and stared at the activity on Waverly. The afternoon crowd was starting to grow, as the shadows got longer. I never liked being in Chinatown after dark. Too many alleys; that and tunnels running underneath the ground. Basements had basements. It's tricky waters to navigate if you stand out like I do. I went back to Edsel, "Cat got a name?"

"Sure. America. Bruce America."

I let out a loud guffaw. That was one priceless handle, even in my circle. "Sorry, man, but that's some name."

"I think it's funny too, but he didn't laugh much. He spell it with a K."

"What?"

"He told me, tell you he spell it with a K."

"OK, I dig. Sure, sure, like Amerika?" I spelled it out for him.

"Yeah, I guess."

"So what does Mr. Amerika want?"

"He says he want to buy you a drink sometime at Li Po."

"Sometime?"

"Sure, he says sometime. Anytime, I didn't ask."

"Anything else?"

“Nah. I no like him. He was...” Edsel was running his hand through his short salt-and-pepper crew cut and searching for a word through his data bank but the English, Cantonese and slang were colliding. I could see the sparks from where I was standing. “Queer.” He said this with the utmost distaste. Somebody from the kitchen came out with my order. I handed him a ten and a couple of ones and handed another fin to Edsel.

“Thanks, man. Come by Spec's sometime, I'll buy you a drink or two.”

“Maybe, maybe I do that.” He wasn't smiling, but then again he had lost his shirt, so I figured he wouldn't find his grin until he was up large playing Ma Jong or Pan Gai or whatever they played upstairs in the early morning after the place shut down.

I had scored and ‘Tack had scored, so we munched down the bad food and chased it with so-so scotch and even worse weed. Not a meal to remember, but we were both hungry and thirsty so we didn't complain. Come to think of it, we didn't talk much either, just blasted through the fish, noodles and pork, and fifteen minutes later all that was left was a greasy residue in a couple of white cartons and we were half-way through the bottle. I told ‘Tack about Mr. Amerika and he started singing “There he goes, Mr. Amerika,” and it was pretty funny or we were kind of stoned. Whatever, man. Ramón was not into heading out for a nightcap, claiming he wasn't dressed for it and needed a shower. I wasn't going to argue with either fact, so I told him I might see him later, put on a thick brown coat with fur that I thought was a good fashion statement when I bought it (I was pretty high at the time), grabbed my keys and headed back to Chinatown, a short walk from our neck of the woods.

The sun had disappeared into the fog and the streets had thinned out some, though there were still a lot of folks waiting at the bus stop for a 30 Stockton. I looked down the street and saw three on their way. Typical Muni, wait for an hour for one bus and finally three would show up.

I'd been to Li Po before. I'd gotten into trouble in Li Po before. I didn't like Li Po. Therefore my spider senses were tingling, though they were somewhat dulled by the smoke and booze. I always tripped out on the doorway, the way it looked like some kind of cave. When I shouldered myself in I was surprised at how crowded it was. Every other time I'd been in here it had been Deadsville, but what do you know? The light was a dim yellow/orange and every table had a candle going. Some bad Chinese pop music was playing on the juke and no one was paying attention. I passed a couple on their way out and dived into their booth, claiming as my own, dig? The waitress came and started cleaning the table. She looked at me like I stole her tip, but grudgingly accepted my order for a Johnny over and a Pabst back.

Time passed like it does in bars. I had a couple of drinks; my head was getting heavy and my wallet was getting light and still there was no sign of Mr. A. I threw a tip on the table and went to the head. By the time I got back out there was another couple in the booth looking like they had been there a while and intended to stay even longer so I decided to call it and hoofed off into the fog. I got as far as Vallejo when somebody asked me for a light. The voice was soft and sibilant, but it grated-like. I nodded, got out a matchbook and struck one. In the yellow light his face glowed with a sick white luminescence. He wore his hair in a sort of page cut, something like a blond Prince Valliant. He had a Wyatt Earp mustache, a pockmarked face and was wearing clean and

tight white bellbottoms that left little to the imagination, a dark t-shirt, a red bandana casually tied around his neck and a new-ish jean jacket. He stayed in place, sucking on his weed and stared at me with his head cocked to the side.

“Do I know you?” I asked, breaking the ice.

“Not yet. But I,” he answered with a small, self-satisfied smile, “know you. I know lot's of things.”

“I'll bet you do,” I responded in a way that I hoped was as non-committal as possible.

“You're Wendell Pike.”

“OK, I'm admitting nothing here, but for the sake of argument, say I am. That makes you...?”

“Bruce. Bruce Amerika. With a 'k'.”

“Well Bruce with a k, what can I do for you?”

If he had a sense of funny he kept it well hidden. “I'd like a moment of your time. I have something in which you may be interested.” Again, with an almost sing-songy lilt to his vox. His map was bathed in a self-congratulatory smirk.

“I thought you wanted to buy me a drink back at the cave?”

“Where'd you hear that?”

“Not sure. Something somebody said.”

“Yes, well, it was too crowded back there. Too many eyes, too many ears.”

I checked my watch and it was still early. “We could go up to my office. Plenty of privacy if that's what you're after.”

He nodded. “Go on ahead. I don't want to be followed.”

I started to raise an eyebrow but thought better of it. “Cool. You know where...”

“Yeah, I know. Fifteen minutes.”

“OK, fifteen minutes.”

So I headed back to the office and waited. I'm guessing I waited an hour and he still hadn't showed. I sparked one and looked out the window but I couldn't see anything but spots of bright fog painted around the streetlights and shop signs of Grant. I figured he got spooked and that was it. So when fifteen minutes became two and a half hours, I was both pretty drunk and stoned from the leftover scotch and pot and decided that an early evening would suit me just fine. I started to shut the place down, closing the big window and turning out the lights. Of course, that's when the buzzer went off. The curse wasn't mild this time. I was pissed off. I kept most of the lights off except for my desk lamp and buzzed him in. My mood lightened somewhat when I saw that he had brought an almost full fifth of Johnny. So he was buying me a drink after all.

OK, my powers of observation had been seriously dulled, but I did detect that he was sweating profusely. Said powers were helped by the fact that Bruce with a k didn't believe in deodorant, or rather he believed in the mighty power of cologne over bathing. So the window went back up letting in clean, fogged-filtered air.

“Sorry,” he lisped out of breath. “That took me longer than I expected. I'm...I'm having a bit of a bad day,” he said with an apologetic chuckle.

“No problemo,” I responded. “Would you like a glass?” Heading right to the point, that's the ol' Wendell style.

“No, that's not...not necessary.” Was that a hiccup?

“Cool.” I fired up a Pall Mall for something to do. “Have trouble findin' this place?”

“What? Oh, no. No I had...other business. It ran long,” he said with a smile that conveyed nothing.

“Well now that you're here do you want to tell me what's on your mind?”

“What? Oh, yes. Might I have one?”

I shook a cancer stick out of the pack. “Your funeral.”

“Thanks.” He lit it with a gold Zippo. Seemed a little over the top, but I was starting to think that that was what Amerika was all about.

“So Bruce. Let's start simple like. What do you do? For a livin' like? If you don't mind,” I quickly added.

He had caught his breath and was looking around the office. I don't think he approved of the décor, but the electrical stuff in Ramón's half had him stymied. “Hmm? Oh, yes, well, I'm an importer.” He let it stand there like that was it, so I had to ask.

“Thailand? Michoacán? Acapulco?”

“The north coast, actually. Redwood burls, used for tables and...stuff.”

“There's a market for that?”

“Sure.” It was bullshit and he knew that I knew it. I let it stand for the time being.

“OK, but that's not why you're here.”

“What? Right, not why I'm here at all. I've...I've got some information for you.”

“And what makes you think I'm in the market...I'm sorry, can I have a hit of that?”

“What? Oh, yes.” He had been protecting the booze like it was his only child, but he reluctantly handed it over.

The stuff did its thing and I felt a bit better, warmer maybe, or at least willing to hear this crazy dude's story. I set the bottle down on my desk and planted myself in my green chair. I leaned back and asked what his story was.

“It's like this. I hear you're workin' on the Pancetti thing? I know some people who know you and they say you're OK, that you'll pay for information. And I,” again with the lilting inflection, “have some information.” He reached for the booze with a lazy stretch, took a hit and cradled the bottle as before, looking up at me with his baby greens. Everything but a flutter of his lashes and I wondered what kind of crazy seduction this cat was playing. It was a fine thing either way. Sure, sure, we could sip a little more Red Label and talk about redwood burls, butcher blocks, and salad bowls or I could tell him that my quest had been like prematurely brought to an end. Because of or in spite of the booze and weed I was feeling a bit run down and less than curious. Bed and Darkland were looking better and better.

“Look, Bruce. I do appreciate information but as it turns out I'm not in the market for stuff about Julia.”

“You found her?” There was something behind his look, maybe suspicion? Worry? As I said, my senses were pretty dull by this time. But for all of that, I had no reason not to tell him.

“Nuh-uh. Somethin' else.” I weighed it in my small brain and decided that I should just tell the truth. I was too tired, drunk and stoned to do otherwise. “Actually, it's like this: I've been fired.”

“What?” Initially he looked angry, and then he tried to cover it with a bit too much nonchalance. Not just an actor, an over-actor. Great, it was all I could do to keep from rolling my eyes. “You can’t, I mean you can, of course, but what about...?” He wanted to say “what about me?” but he left it out there like a big nasty.

I don’t know why, probably the whisky, but I felt somethin’ for the guy. Not empathy *per se*, just somewhat sorry for being one more cat responsible for his groovy day goin’ south. I took out my wallet and looked at it under the desk. Pretty weak, a ten and a one. I had spent way too much the past couple of days. Whatever happened to my budget? Just another spendthrift, easy come, easy go. Still, I knew there was more in the safe and I just wanted to do the right thing. “OK. Lookit, I’m not on the case anymore, heck, I don’t think I can even talk about it. Some stupid non-disclosure thing. But I...appreciate your concern.” I placed the bill on the desk and threw my hands out. “All I got man, and you don’t have to give me anything in return.”

That got his attention. Like what kind of scam was I giving out? Free money? Yeah, right.

“You’re giving me this?”

I did my best imitation of a Jewish comedian’s shrug.

“This isn’t very much. My...information is worth much more than that.” He was upright in his chair but slinked back.

“Who said anything about information. Man, you’ve gone through something to get here. I grok and it’s cool. Take the bread. I truly don’t need to hear about Julia. She’s gone with the wind, man, like yesterday’s news.”

“So why,” his mind was trying to wrap around this. Every fiber of his body knew this was some kind of con, but he couldn't figure it out. “Why pay me?”

“Bruce, the world is, or should be, all about trust. You came here; you put yourself out on a limb because of trust. I can't do anything more than reimburse you for the Red Label, but I might need something someday or you might need something and I would like you to think of me. Information is only valuable if somebody wants it. Today, right now, stuff about Julia Pancetti is useless to me. I get more money not lookin' for her than I do lookin'.”

“Is that on the level?”

“Absolutely. I'd swear to anything if there was anything that I believed in.”

“Hmm.” He greedily glanced at the ten spot like a hungry viper and then looked back to me. Seeing as I wasn't objecting he pocketed the bill and looked at me with his head cocked to the side. Finally he shook his head. “Look man, this is too weird. I have to give you something for this.”

“Suit yourself.” I wasn't in the mood for more palaver; I just wanted to button up the office and head homeways and bedways.

But Bruce stayed put and after bumming another smoke he started in on a very strange tale. It was all second hand and some of it was a little too graphic for my taste, but once he started he couldn't be stopped.

“OK, so I had this...friend in the service, Second Battalion, Fourth Marines,” he began. “He spent time on a base in Viet Nam called Con Thien. Ever hear of it?” I shook my head. “Well, it's pretty close to the DMZ and it didn't sound like a very fun place, you know? There were so many firefights around there that when the Tet

Offensive went down, they couldn't tell the difference. Anyway, Ar..., my friend got to know a young grunt named Sam. Sam Pancetti. From what I gather, he, Sam I mean, he wasn't very popular. A red ass, I think is the term. Telling everybody that they were doing God's work killing gooks. This kind of talk is fine back here in the States, but my friend said that over there things vacillated between ennui, terror, alcohol and drug-induced stupor. There's not a lot of time for smug moralist behavior, if that's the right word. Words. Whatever. Somehow or other, the two got on OK, at least well enough for the two to get blind drunk a couple of times and I don't know what all else transpired. But Lance Corporal Pancetti told my friend a couple of interesting things. One of them was that he didn't volunteer, but that his old man forced him into the service because of some things that somebody had said to him about his daughter, that would be Julia, some things that Sam had supposedly done. To her." I was trying to track where this was going. I didn't like it. "Oh, he denied the charges, saying it was all a pack of lies but he couldn't properly defend himself and for some reason, Julia wouldn't tell his father the truth and that really pissed him off. He figured that she was the reason he was getting his ass shot at. Said he would settle the score sometime."

The words shook me awake. "Sam said that? That he would settle the score?"

"Words to that effect. I wasn't there. It's just the gist, right?"

My bullshit detector clicked on. Move along here, nothing to see. "I guess."

"You sound dubious."

"Ya gotta admit it is a little fantastic."

"I don't know one way or the other. I'm just telling you what I heard."

"You know where he is now?"

“Last I heard he was in the Brig in Pendelton. Something about fragging, but I don't know anything about that.”

“Really? I heard it was him going AWOL or hitting an officer.”

“I think it was heavier than that, man. You go AWOL or punch a lieutenant, I think they bust you and ship you back to the front, walking point with a rifle in your hand and 24 pounds of radio gear stuck on your back. From my understanding, it takes a little more than that to wind up back in a brig in the States. I don't know, the fragging thing...that's just what I heard, but it was second...maybe third hand. But I wouldn't put it past him, you know? From what my friend told me, the boy had a mean streak. Put that together with a sense of entitlement and you've got a bad mix. But like I told you, I don't know anything about that, only what I heard about his...threat to his sister. Seemed weird that he spouts something like that and then...poof.” He accompanied this last statement with a weak exploding hand gesture. “The chick vanishes.”

My mind was dulled by the long day, the pot and booze. I wasn't sure that any of it made any sense, but I figured I would have to speak to Sam again. But then I remembered that I didn't have to, that I wasn't working the case. So even though it bothered me, I mean I wanted to pull at that loose thread, but dig, brothers and sisters, I reminded myself that I was getting paid pretty good coin for not pulling at it. 'Sides, I might have to work the Poundstone case and there could be bread there as well. Despite myself, I let out a heavy sigh. The silence hung in there for a bit, so I made a show out of sparking up a Pall Mall.

“OK, that's all pretty fantastic. I'm not saying I buy it or I don't, it's just pretty heavy, man. You've told this story to the cops?”

“No. I don't...I don't need to have any...deal...”, I think he almost said more—
“dealings with them”. What he did say was, “I'm certainly not going to initiate contact
with them,” accompanied by a wan smile.

“What about your friend? Is he still around to corroborate this?”

He made a brief tisk sound and looked down at the floor for a bit. “Unfortunately
no. He was...he was taken out by an NVA mortar round. K.I.A.” He waited a beat and
looked back up with a sort of weary defiance. “There's no reason for dragging his name
into this. He went through...,” here it was almost like Bruce was tearing up, wiping his
nose on the sleeve of his jacket. That seemed out of character, but then in the hour or so
that he took to tell his story, he'd gone through so many emotions that I couldn't be sure
what was real and what was an act. And Lord he loved to act.

“His family has already gone through enough.”

He got up to leave and put the remains of the fifth on my desk.

“I realize there's not much you can do with this information, and if it's like you
said then you don't need it anyway. But somehow, I feel better having told this to
someone.” He concluded with a weak, “Dig?”

“I dig,” I answered, not sure if I did or not.

When he got to the door he half turned and gave me a look. The smugness was
gone; he just looked tired. I think he wanted to say something else, but he just shook his
head once and headed down the stairs. I tracked him from the window for a bit but he
vanished into the Grant Avenue fog.

“Now **that** was weird,” I said aloud to the empty room.

I was feeling a little slow, so I took it slow. I probably got to the office around eleven and spent a little time uncrossing the puzzle in the morning Chron and sipping coffee out of a Styrofoam cup. I hadn't got any coin from the safe so when I got to Mario's it was just a coffee 'cause I needed cigs as well and I didn't feel like playing the credit game with Wing Fat or his nephew. I was also trying to process Mr. Amerika's story and see how it fit into what I already knew, but then I reminded myself that I wasn't working that case. To make it clearer in my own mind, I hunted through the stack of papers on my desk and found the kill contract. There it was in black and white. Like they were paying me to forget all about it. I weighed the pros and cons in my mind. Part of me was playing at being a Fabian Socialist, just doing nothing until the time was right. The other part of me was just being lazy. No sense putting something off today that I couldn't put off tomorrow, dig? To heck with it, I got out the pen and filled in my John Hancock, backdated it and then spent a few minutes looking around for a legal envelope and a stamp.

The incessant ringing of the phone jolted me out of my stupor. It was Fred Poundstone and through all his bluster I think that he said that they wanted to go ahead and hire me and that he would get the contract and a check out to me today. I said there wasn't a rush and that I trusted him. He didn't know what to make of that so he just repeated himself and rung off. I shook my head a few times to clear it. Like here we were again, no trust. Bummer. But on the plus side I was working again; that was cool. I knew that there was still plenty of bread in the safe, but I get more relaxed when I know that there's more where that came from. I finally got the stamp and envelope licked and

sealed and put the kill contract in my jacket pocket for an afternoon trip to the post office on Stockton and Filbert.

Almost on cue came a call from some secretary from Nicsemi's law firm inquiring if I had gotten around to sending in the contract. I lied and said I had a couple of days ago and that she didn't need to send me the check, that I'd be by to pick it up. She was trying to be polite, but she didn't dig having to bug me about the contract. Surely her firm had bigger fish to fry and if she was the one relegated to playing nanny with me then she must be pretty low on the totem pole. I told her she could expect it any day and to call me when she got it. She sounded upset, and like I couldn't figure out why.

Next was a call into Zyzck, but he was out. From my end of the Ameche the North Beach Station sounded like WWII was being fought with Underwoods and Phones, so I left a message for him to call me when he got a chance. Like I needed to start working on the Poundstone thing. I tried one more number and got lucky. Sort of. See, it turned out that I had a cousin, well a half-cousin but who's counting, in the lower levels of the Ess Eff Pee Dee. She could be used to get information but it always came with a price. Like everything, dig? Her name was Llanna, two l's and two n's, Freeman and she was a very religious chick. She belonged to the First Church of our Electric Savior (I think I've got that right) and volunteered three or four nights a week aside from spending all day Sunday, sitting through three separate services and dishing out coffee and cookies in their fellowship hall before, in between and after each one. The church was an outfit out on Ocean Avenue and I could smell the stench of fraud all the way up here in North Beach. The pastor was one of those slick southern white cats, spoke in rhymes and spun off the deep end of the New Testament into the dark reaches of

apocalyptic nonsense. So it followed that any time that I needed to get information from Llanna, I had to promise that I'd go to one of her wacky Sunday soirees. She always held me to it as well, so I had to think twice before calling her.

She picked up on the fourth ring and after we said the usual stuff I asked her if she was hungry and she said she could eat so we made a date for a late lunch at a sandwich place called Dharma 2 near the Hall of Justice on Bryant.

So Muni did its usual thing and I was late, which was a bit of a drag, 'cause Llanna wasn't high enough on the food chain to have an extended lunch hour. Meaning we had maybe fifteen minutes to rap. She was dressed in a trim blue suit with the skirt cut modestly below the knees, dark nylons and white flats. Her beige blouse featured a high collar held in place with a plain costume brooch and just to drive the point home, a pretty large silver cross hung on a thin metal chain around her neck. Neat, professional, no-nonsense and deeply, madly in love with the guy on the cross, that was my Llanna. I gave her a smile and a small salute and put in my order for a lettuce, tomato and avocado sandwich, chips and a coke. They said they would call me so I paid and headed over to her table. The place was fairly busy with the lunchtime crowd of cops, lawyers, and bored citizens who weren't lucky enough to be able to duck out of jury duty. It catered to this crowd and survived on the noontime trade only, dig: location, location, location.

The décor was wood paneling and framed pictures of local small-time celebs, TV and Radio personalities, a couple of politicians, all hand-signed with glowing tributes to the gastronomic pleasures they consumed (though in truth, the food wasn't anything special).

Anything longer than a quick glance at these pics would show that most of these dated from the previous decade and the plastic, red and white checked, plastic tablecloths managed to be greasy and sticky at the same time. Llanna greeted me with both hands held out, so I took them and leaned in and bussed her on the cheek.

“Hey Miss Llanna, you’re looking good.”

“Hey yourself.” She lowered her cheaters and fixed her disapproving gaze at the heathen before her. “You still messed up in all that stuff?”

I didn't have an answer and was glad that my sandwich and chips arrived in a little plastic boat. I was told to get the coke over at the machine, so I did and smiled at my cousin when I returned with the drink. “Not sure to which stuff you refer, but generally I'm involved in all kinds of things, some of it cool, some of it not so much and most of it pretty messy. So yep, same stuff, different day.”

“You always make me laugh, Wendell.” She did have a nice laugh, a gentle contralto.

So things were cool. I bit off a piece of a pepper and winced. “I hate to bug you on official-type business, but like I need to know some things about a kid being held.”

“Straight to business, huh?”

“I assumed because I'm running late that you are too. Sorry for that by the way, but you know what Muni's like.”

“Don't I though. Sometimes I would love to have a car, but I can't afford to park it.” Again the small laugh. “That's funny isn't it? Costs more to park a car in this town than it does to drive it.”

We both pondered that bit while she demurely sipped the last of her Dr. Pepper and I took a couple of bites of my sandwich.

“So this kid...”

“Yes, who is he? Where is he?”

“White kid, named Poundstone. He's being held for murder, somewhere across the street. They think he killed his sister and some other girl.”

“Serves him right then.”

“Sure, sure. If you believe he did it.”

“You don't?”

“I don't.”

“But you're being paid to believe he didn't do it, am I right?”

“Yeah, I'm being paid for it. Of course I'm being paid for it, it's what I do. And I don't get along with the kid's father and I don't trust his mother. There's another aspect to the thing that bothers me. Add all of that and take away the bread and I still don't think he did it.”

“Gut feeling?”

“That. That and I know his type. He couldn't have done it.”

“You are something Mr. Wendell.”

“Nuh-uh, I'm not anything. I just don't see this kid being capable of it. He's...he's soft, he's weak and he's a mess. But no way he could do it.”

“I've heard about kids high on drugs doing bad things. Terrible things.”

“Yeah, well I've seen straight people, drunk people and stoned people doing terrible things. Where do you think the common denominator is there? I'll tell you, it's all people.”

Llanna had reached the bottom of her soda and was making a louder sucking sound through her straw. She looked up at me and shook her head in resignation. “I just can't say no to you cousin. You know that? I just can't say no. So do you need me to get something to this kid? I don't have any interaction with prisoners. You know that.”

“Yeah, no, I don't need you to talk to him or anything like that. I just need...I just want some information. Could you tell me what they have on him? Evidence of any kind? I need to drive a wedge into something, but I don't know where to start.”

“Do you have anything? Anything other than your famous feeling?”

“Llanna, I've got the middle of a doughnut. Less than that. But I'm pretty sure he didn't do it.”

“What's the kid's name. I'm not promising you anything, understand?”

“Sure, sure, I understand. I took out my small notebook and started writing. His name is Poundstone, Blair Poundstone. I think they're holdin' him as a material witness right now, but they're thinkin' they have him for two murders.” I tore off the page and handed it to her.

She took the paper and made a small clucking sound. “His sister and another girl..., I don't know. Did you ever consider that the fact that we, I mean that the police might be right?”

“Sure. I’m a big boy and I’ve struck out from time to time, sometimes weakly on some tricky off-speed stuff and sometimes spectacularly, swingin’ for the fences and late on the high heat. It’s possible he’s just another psycho. But I don’t think so.”

“You sure throw a lot at me in a short period of time.”

“Well, I figured you had to get back to work. Of course, I’d like to spend more time catching up and finding out how things are at that Electric Church you go to.

“The Temple of Power?” Llanna started a hearty laugh. “Gosh sakes, child, I haven’t been going to that place for months.”

“Really? I mean you seemed, I don’t know, committed,” I managed through a mouth full of sandwich.

“Wendell. Wendell. There’s a new church I’ve been going to. It’s pretty special. I think you would like it, some of it fits into your...crazy worldview. There’s people like you there, Wendell, some young people. Black, white, it doesn’t seem to matter. We’re building something new and it’s powerful.”

“Llanna, you know I mean no disrespect here, but that’s not really my thing. Me and God, God and me, we’ve got a private kind of understanding.”

She made the same disapproving noise. “That’s not real. This...this is real. We’re building something special, mark my words.”

“So who are these people?”

“Well, they moved from Ukiah. They had a paradise in the woods and they would have stayed there, could have stayed there, but they recognized the need to save more souls. Or he recognized it.”

“And who is he?”

“Our pastor. He really is something special, Wendell. Oh yes, Reverend Jones is surely something special...”

We spent the rest of Llanna’s lunch hour talking family talk, nothing worth repeating here. She told me she would be in touch and I told her to give me a call and I would make it some Sunday to her new church. She shook her head again in a disapproving way and smiled.

After finishing the sandwich, I headed outside. It was colder than I remembered and I buttoned up my pea jacket and put my shades back on. I was just standing contemplating my next move when some suit bumped into me and called me a name. I asked him to repeat it and he didn't turn around so I got into his face and then a couple of cops got between us and pushed me out. I was about ready to unload on them, but then again I was in a very bad spot for messing with the man so I just offered the friendship digit and started walking to the corner, but I was able to flag down a cab (after three empty ones passed me by) and I got out of there before I did something really stupid. I told the hack to drop me off near the post office on Washington Square and actually stood in front of the joint for a good half minute before shaking myself out of my funk and dropping the contract through the slot and into the waiting arms of the United States Postal Service. “That's that,” I said, to no one in particular while making the wiping hands motion. I looked around slightly embarrassed before I hiked back to the office and started to work on the Amechee.

Dig, the first hour was like an exercise in frustration, I was burning up the phone lines but it was as if I was shouting into a cave, all echoes and hearing my words repeated back to me. I'm saying everybody was out and all I could do was leave my name and number over and over again. Then there was nothing to do but wait. I paced around a little, fussing over things and rearranging the stuff on top of my desk into different piles. I found a small roach in the ashtray and fired that up, burning my fingers in the process. I spent some time going through the morning fish wrap, working the Jumble and reading some small page 5 news items. My brain got stuck on the headline "Shark Attacks Puzzle Experts" when the phone jolted me back to reality, or what passes for it in my neck of the woods.

The voice on the other end belonged to a sometime drinking buddy (well, we both hung out at the same bars) named Roddy Bolds. Roddy was a Brit Ex Pat who worked part time in the coroner's office. He started off saying he didn't have much time because it was busy — he was in the middle of a double shift. He also apologized for eating while talking, but I said that was cool, man's gotta eat and all that. He grunted and filled me in, his mouth full of a tuna salad sandwich.

Suzanne Poundstone's stomach showed some alcohol content, but as near as they could figure it, nothing more than maybe a beer or two. Too early for the blood tox work but they had found a small vial prescription Librium and a two joints on her person. Hardly earth shattering or unusual. There was no evidence of anything harder, and she seemed to be in something close to perfect health. They had confirmed that her death was caused by asphyxiation by strangulation but that was pretty much old news. Time of

death was fixed at around 2 a.m. on the 18th, so that would be about eight and a half hours before I entered that flat off of Masonic.

It got a little more interesting when he shifted to the other victim found in the flat, the young redhead named Karen Broomfeld. A quick test had confirmed the presence of heroin (“a lot of it, and surprisingly pure,” was how Roddy put it) in Karen Broomfeld's body. The heroin probably killed her before the stab wounds did. There were twenty-three wounds ranging from superficial to extremely traumatic, though some of the worse wounds looked to be post mortem. Time of death was around four hours earlier than Suzanne, which I said was weird but he just answered with a noncommittal grunt. There was also evidence of sexual assault, though they didn't really pursue that angle. She was just another junkie after all, and junkies need money. It sounds (and was) pretty cold, but the thinking was that because she didn't have any means of support, she was probably hooking to feed her habit.

Roddy then went into a mini-rant, because it seemed that Karen's parents (they were from Crescent City up north) were refusing to talk to the police or the Medical Examiner's office **and** were refusing pickup of the body. It sounded like they had disowned her and wanted nothing to do with them, so that was creating a bit of a red tape backup at the morgue making his life difficult. I reminded Roddy that things could be worse, he grunted again before I thanked him and promised a couple of shots the next time I saw him.

I got another return call; this one was from Llanna. She was on her afternoon break and was calling to tell me that she had found out a few things for me, so I was now

doomed to spend a future Sunday listening to some raving lunatic preach about sin, salvation, and Armageddon.

I thought that they were holding Blair as a material witness, but it turned out he was being held on a psych watch — a suicide watch according to Llanna. The scuttlebutt around 850 Bryant was that they were getting ready to arraign him on both a 1st degree murder charge and a manslaughter charge, along with a couple of lesser drug charges. Also, City Hall was pressuring the D.A. to get this sewed up in a hurry, as a shining example of the efficacy of the mighty men in blue. They were getting ready to announce it, maybe as early as tomorrow morning. Blair was left-handed, the stab wounds on the chick were done by a port-sider and his fingerprints were on the knife as well as the transferred bloodstains on his sister. The stains were on her clothes, face, hair and most importantly, neck. They were painting it as a drug fueled rage: Blair goes nuts, offs the first chick, and then strangles his sis to keep her quiet. Further incriminating him was the fact that the kid had barely barked out a paragraph and what little he had offered was along the lines of he didn't remember. Not always the best defense in the world. Llanna asked if I still thought the boy was innocent and I answered in the affirmative. She responded by making her disapproving clucking noise. We spent another few minutes talking about her new church before she rang off, her break over.

The next thing was to head out again, toward the Haight, see if I could question anybody near the crime scene. Sure it was cold and usually I left this sort of thing in the hands of the cops — they're much better at doing all the legwork. I mean, dig, I'm like one man and they've got an army who can fan out and cover a huge territory, look into

every dark corner and turn over every rock. Of course, that's when they're motivated and right now, I got the distinct impression that they weren't. Motivated that is. So with the coat and shades back on, I grabbed my smokes, Zippo and keys and headed out.

I spent way too much time showing the picture of Blair and Suzanne to way too many young kids. I also shared more than a few joints and pipes with them and handed out dollar bills like a southern politician. I went to the usual places, the panhandle, the free clinic, and a couple of head shops and got the same negative response from all of them. Sure, the brother and sister hadn't been here very long, and they certainly didn't make much of an impression. Or more likely, I was asking in the wrong circles, but I didn't have much to go on, dig? I knew it wouldn't be easy and wasn't counting on anything but blind luck. I had to go through the motions; it was what I was getting paid for after all. I also asked about the flat where we had found them and a couple of kids said they had heard about some parties there but it was all second or third hand at best.

It was late afternoon and the fog had burned off. It was warm enough for me to be carrying the coat rather than wearing it. I got out of the hack at Masonic and walked the half block to the flat. Looked peaceful, quiet-like. Who would have guessed what had happened there? I hung around for a few minutes, just loitering and burning one, when I got lucky in that somebody was walking toward the flat with her arms full of a grocery bag.

"Hi there, need a hand?" I asked, moving my shades to my forehead. The woman looked at me with distrust.

"No, I'm fine."

"You live here?"

“What, why...?”

But I didn't let her finish. I went into my standard rap about working alongside the police, flashing her my license and explaining what I was looking for. She was still looking at me with distrust and I could tell the bag was starting to get heavy. “Look, I see you have to get in, but after you get the bag down and the ice cream into the freezer...” She shot me a look — like how did I know there was ice cream in there, but I recognized the Foremost label and she looked like she liked her ice cream if you hear what I'm saying.

“Who did you say you were again?”

“Wendell Pike, ma'am, but you can call me Wendell.”

“You're with the police?”

“Working with them. I can give you a name of an inspector if you want to check.”

She did, so I gave her Zyzck's name (I had to spell it a couple of times) and dropped a business card into the bag. I also offered to carry the bag for her but she declined. She huffed up the steps and wedged the bag on her knee while she fished around her purse for her keys. I stayed on ground level, trying my best to look all Boy Scout-like. When she got in, I sparked another Pall Mall and waited. It might have been five minutes, but she did lumber down the steps and the door opened a little.

“Mr. Pike, are you still out there?”

“Yes ma'am,” I answered. Damn, again a bit of Tom entering into my intonation. Happens when I try to put on the trust thing — it's a fine line between being helpful and non-threatening to being downright obsequious.

“I can give you five minutes. Out here.”

“That's fine.” So I walked up the steps and leaned against the railing. She still wasn't sure if she could trust me or not, but she did step out onto the landing with her back to the door, still open, ready to make a quick retreat. She was on the plus size and looked to be in her late forties. Her hair was cut short and she was dressed in baggy jeans, a green sweatshirt and a red plaid jacket. Her cheeks were almost as red as the jacket; she wore tortoise shell specs and Birkenstocks. No jewelry of any kind.

“I called the number you gave me,” she nervously spat out. “They said Mr. Zyc...Zyzck was out. They also said they knew you, so I guess you're OK. So what's this about? I've already talked to them about...you know.” She ran her hand through her spiky, graying hair.

I got out my little notebook and pencil. I didn't really need the notes, I mean I could remember it all pretty well, but it occasionally helped with details and, more than anything else, it sort of like established the proper dynamic. People might not trust you any more, but in my experience they will fear you a lot less if you're holding a tiny notebook and pencil than if you're pointing a big ol' loaded gun at them. Also it's what was expected of my role, so play it I did. Like all the world's a stage...

“First off, if we could start with the basics...”

I won't go through the whole talk, but it was longer than five minutes. I got the impression she was a bit lonely, spending a lot of her time either cursing her neighbors under her breath or sitting in her front room staring out the window, keeping a watch on all the horrible people coming and going from the flat. Her name was Cheryl Montgomery and she had rented the flat next to the one in which they found Karen and

Suzanne. The rental was through a property management company, Willins/Baker. They had an office on California Street close to downtown. Cheryl had been sending the checks to their office by mail every month for close to four years. She lived alone if you didn't count her three cats that were technically forbidden by the terms of her lease, but there wasn't much contact between her and Willins/Baker. There was a maintenance company that came out twice a month and cleaned up the common areas and did light yard work but that was it. She didn't know who originally had the lease on the flat next door, but she was pretty sure it had been sublet several times over. The latest tenants had been the worse, partying at all hours. Cheryl worked at a small vacuum cleaner store on Page, mostly light bookkeeping and office work and she had to start work at 8:00 every morning. Meaning she had to get to bed early and even with earplugs it was hard sometimes. Because there were all kinds of sounds coming from the flat—music, bedroom noises and arguments—and they could start up anytime and last for hours. She suspected drug dealings because there were lots of visits to the flat at all hours as well. Mainly hippies, she said, though occasionally some well-dressed swell (that's what she called him, a swell) would be there as well. I showed her the picture of the brother and sister and she nodded her head in recognition. She had met Suzanne twice, and said she was nice enough and had even volunteered to cat-sit if Cheryl ever needed it. She never actually met Karen, though she would occasionally catch a brief glance of her and she had never laid eyes on Blair. There were a couple of others that she would see from time to time, one was a blond hippie guy who might have lived there, maybe a friend of Suzanne - at least they seemed close based on her seeing them enter the flat arm in arm one time. I asked her to describe him and she described a tall Scandinavian type, blond,

“really long hair, down to his bottom” and clean-shaven. The “swell” was just described as a suit, and well groomed, so nothing much there. There was also occasionally a very large “oriental-type” who showed up. I asked what she meant by large and she said, “Not tall, you know those people don't get very tall, but not fat, very muscular.” His hair was cut very short and he may have had tattoos, maybe something religious like a cross and some words — maybe something from the Bible. She got the impression that he wasn't a friend; after his visits there would usually be loud arguments inside the house. She went on for a few more minutes, but it was just a loop of what she had said previously, so I tuned her out. When she finally stopped to take a breath, I made a show of closing my notebook and thanked her. She blinked at me and then realized we were done, so she wished me luck and slunk back inside. I could hear her labored footsteps and then I couldn't. I tried the door to Karen and Suzanne's flat, but it was locked. I walked down the steps and rang the house next door but didn't get an answer and was about to try the house on the other side when their garage door opened and a shiny new brown Ford Maverick exited and headed out to Masonic, the door automatically closing behind them so I gave up and headed back to the office.

Once back in the cozy confines of the office, I called the answering service and got a couple of messages, one personal and two from Zyzck. I started to call him back, but then I checked my watch. It was after five. While it was partly my job to poke the big man with a stick, I knew better than to bug him when it was likely that he was at Fannie's on Seventh. Big cop crowd there, cheap beer and well drinks. The inspector liked his happy hour, so I figured I'd keep him happy and rap with him in the morning.

The doorbell rang. I let it ring. It rang again. Like damn, how's a cat supposed to get any work done around here? I ignored it, but then after five minutes or so it started up again. A few minutes later I heard the unmistakable sound of the big metal gate closing and a couple of sets of footsteps on the stairs. Then there was the sound of a key in the lock and the door flew open. 'Tack had kicked it open because his hands were full of a couple of large bags. Trailing behind him at a discreet distance was Velma Poundstone. Ramón looked over at me somewhat apologetic-like, shrugged his shoulders and went over to his workspace to unload his bags of tricks. With his back still turned to me, he started yapping.

“Hey Wendell, sorry 'bout the intrusion, but she was pretty insistent, said she had to talk to you,” he said as he straightened out and faced me. “She was waiting outside and said she planned to continue waiting. I mean it's a nice enough night and all, but I figured she could come in and wait, no harm right? Also I saw the light on so I figured you could be here...”

“Yeah, no, I was...on the phone, dig. Kinda delicate matter. I finally turned over to Velma. She was dressed in an off-white blouse and crème colored skirt that was cut well below the knees. Her hair and makeup were as before, the former glued in shape with some aerosol plastic and the latter liberally applied with a plastering trowel. I motioned for her to sit down when another call came in, this one from Dawn Pancetti. She said she was in the neighborhood and wanted to know if I was free. To my experienced ears, she sounded slightly drunk. I asked where she was, she said Spec's so I

told her she might want to grab a bite but I could be there within the hour. She said she was going to stay put, so I said I would see her when I saw her.

“Sorry 'bout all that, Mrs. Poundstone,” I lamely offered. “I’ve been a bit busy.”

“Do you always ignore the phone and doorbell?” This wasn’t asked with any malice, more like she was studying some strange tribe where phones and doorbells were some kind of unknown technology.

“I’ve been out, and then I was on the phone. A couple of calls I had to take, calls I couldn’t interrupt. It’s all like a flow, dig? I say hold on and then the conversation ends or starts someplace else.”

“I’m sure I don’t understand. You picked up the phone when I was here, don’t I demand the same sort of...respect?”

“Sure, sure. But like we hadn’t started rappin’ yet. Mrs. Poundstone,” I said, checking my watch and planting myself in my squeaky green office chair, “for the next thirty minutes, you have my full and undivided attention.”

Velma glanced over at Ramón, but saw that his map was buried in a wiring schematic. “Really?” I didn’t answer so she went on. “Well, first off, I...we wanted to know if you have received the check and the...executed agreement?”

“No on both counts, but the mail takes it’s own time around here.”

“Do you even check your mail or is it like the phone and doorbell?”

“What?” Like I wasn’t offended, just surprised. “No, I checked it when I got in,” I lied. “Nothin’ but junk mail.”

“But you’re still, you’ve started to...”

I threw my hands up and interrupted her. “Yeah, I'm workin' it. I told you I would. I'm not going to sugar coat it, dig. What little I've found out hasn't exactly been good news. Did you get Blair one of the lawyers I suggested?”

She nodded and reached into her large handbag and fumbled around for a bit before coming up with a card. She handed it over to me. I read the name “Edwin Cornwall.” I knew Ed, pretty straight shooter for a lawyer, hadn't worked with him much 'cause his rates were a little high. Our paths had crossed on a blackmail case a year or so before. He wasn't on the list I had given her at our first meeting, but at least they had hired somebody.

“That's good,” I continued, handing her the card back. “What's the news from him?”

“Not much, I'm afraid, that's why I'm here. He was saying that these things take time, and we have to wait for the charges to be filed. He says...he says Blair isn't doing very well. He, Blair, doesn't really have the...constitution to deal with things like this.”

“Well I don't have much to add. I'll start with the positive and like I always want you to keep this in mind, first and foremost: Blair didn't do this; he's not capable of doing this. In the next weeks, you're gonna hear all kinds of b..., stuff about how mild-mannered folks turn into monsters under the influence of various drugs...”

“Do you think,” she interrupted, “that Blair was doing drugs?”

“I don't know. Probably.” She actually winced, cracking the pancake foundation while I continued. “But there's lots of drugs out there and they all have very different effects. There were heavy drugs going down in that flat, but I don't think Suzanne or Blair were involved.”

“You think?”

“Well, I've got pretty concrete evidence when it comes to Suzanne, the reports, toxicological reports didn't show any hard drugs in her blood. Blair isn't showing any kind of physical withdrawal symptoms so I think they both were pretty clean. Maybe a bit of pot, and I know you don't dig the distinction, but a joint is like worlds away from a needle. Now the other chick, uh, young woman they found did show evidence of some pretty heavy usage. I'm talkin' heroin, which is about as hard as it gets. I still need to check out that angle and track down some of the people who either lived there or were visiting.” Her eyes were starting to leak so I changed the subject. “Have you seen Blair?”

She stopped herself, fumbled through her big bag and pulled out a pink Kleenex with which she proceeded to demurely tap around her eyes.

“We did see him once, but he was...It was almost like he wasn't there. Have you talked to him?”

“No, but I did find out a couple of things, and that's the bad news I mentioned earlier.” I gave her the gist of what I had gotten from Llanna. Aside from her fist tightly clutching the tissue, she didn't react until I was done. She got up and started for the door. “Thank you, Mr. Pike. We..., Fred and I are going to be out of town for a few days, at least through the weekend. They're releasing Suzanne's body and we're having her flown down to Nogales. We'll drive down there and are having the services this Sunday. I'm not sure how long it will all take...I...I don't have to tell you that this all overwhelming. We need to regroup, talk to family, our friends and pastor, but we'll be back up here next week. Call us if you find out anything more, OK? If we're out, you can always leave a

message, we have some help at the house and they're staying with us for the next...until things return to...normal? As if that's possible. But please keep us informed. The worst part," she paused for a moment, the reality of the whole enchilada hitting her like an uppercut from Ali, "no, there are so many worst parts. It's a jigsaw puzzle of worst parts. But it hurts to not know, you know?"

I made what I hoped was the appropriate soothing remark as she let herself out. The silence hung in the air until I heard the metal grate slamming shut.

"Well, Ramón, what do you think?"

"I think you were better off chasing down the rich chick. Small chance of success or failure with that one — just keep cashing the checks until they stop. This one, I don't know, man, I don't know. If it's like you say, it's going to be hard to convince a jury that he didn't do it. Don't know about motive, I suppose they'll get some shrink to fabricate some elaborate five-syllable condition-thingy that the kid suffers from. Means and opportunity seem to be a sure thing. Especially with him playing at being dumb." He paused for a moment, looking askance. "Like in both senses, dig?"

"Yeah. I dig. I think it would be harder to prove he didn't do it. So I need to find who did it."

"Simple as that."

"Sure."

"Well it makes sense, but how do you propose to do that?"

"Honestly? Right now I don't know. I'll have to work on somethin'."

"Like answering the phone and doorbell?"

I muttered something unprintable and then changed the subject. “What's with the bags?”

“Oh that. I went down to Zack's. I'm working on some guitar effects — it started with that gate light thingie. So along with the gate, I'm using the envelope follower — this for audio processing, you know? There's a couple of interesting things I can do with filters, inverters and a balanced modulator.”

“This for that rock band?”

“PT&T? Nah, this is a vanity project, though I think I'll eventually have something worth selling.”

“When's that party?”

“Oh, right, I forgot. It got changed to next Saturday, I mean the Saturday after next. Kimi had some problem he had to get taken care of, he's down in L.A., I think.”

“Well remind me, I'd like to blow off a little steam, dig?”

“Sure.”

“And speaking of steam,” I said while grabbing my coat off the back of the chair, “I'm going to blow off some. Might drink some too. Want to head over to Spec's?”

“I thought you were going to meet that rich babe?”

“Well yeah, but it's not like a date-date, you know.” Actually, I didn't really want to invite him, but I figured I'd do it out of courtesy.

“Nah, I'm going to work on this for a bit and crash early.”

“Cool. If you change you mind, you know where to find me.” I got my smokes, Zippo and keys off the desktop and headed downstairs, into the night.

Small delicate fingers of fog had started to descend, some of them crowning the streetlights with dull orange halos. Despite the fog, it was still warm and a little humid with little wind, which was weird for this town and this time of year. Traffic was light and the sidewalks were pretty empty. I figured it was in between dinner and drinking for most folks. Things would probably ramp up a little later, but then again, it was only Wednesday and around here the weekend didn't start until Thursday. It was a short walk to Spec's, a small bar in an alley off Columbus. I recognized some of the crowd, said the usual greetings and ordered a pitcher of Anchor Steam and some cheese and crackers, 'cause I realized I hadn't eaten anything since lunch. Dawn was perched on a stool in front of a small table. She was dressed in a fairly low-cut peasant blouse and a pair of denim bellbottoms. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail except for one lone strand that cascaded over the left side of her face. Draped over one arm was a large canvas bag that was covered with a flower pattern and she was wearing different glasses, having substituted a pair of grannies for the no-nonsense cheaters she had worn when I last saw her. She looked pretty good, if a little unstable. I went up to greet her.

“Hey there, what's a nice girl like you...?” I didn't finish it, because there wasn't any look of recognition on her map. “Hey you, remember me?”

“I'm sorry,” she said, slurring her words a bit. Actually a lot. “Do I know you?” Then she broke into a big grin. “You're Wendell. Hah.”

“That's right, I'm Wendell and you're Dawn. What are you drinking?”

“Whaddaya got?”

The bartender gave me the high sign, so I paid for the beer and crackers and transported the pitcher, plastic plate and glasses in two trips. After I had the steam in the glasses and some of the red wax stripped off the cheese, she started in.

“I heard,” she said, wrapping the rebel strand of hair around her index finger, “that you aren't looking for her anymore. ‘Zat true?”

“Well yeah, seems your dad and his lawyer weren't impressed with my otiose efforts — don't be impressed, I had to look it up. I signed a document saying I was done with the whole deal and they paid me, well, they're gonna pay me a big pile of dough,” I laughed.

“Don't you want to find her?”

“No, it ain't a question of what I want. Well, scratch that, it is. What I want is to get paid, to make a decent amount of coin so I can spend it on things like this.” To emphasize my point, I cut a decent sized slab of cheese, sandwiched it between two saltines and shoved it my mouth, chasing it with a healthy slug of suds. With my mouth still full, I continued. “In a perfect world, I'd still be looking for her because I don't like to leave things unfinished. It bothers me.” I swallowed. “Sorry, I may be a slob, but I am a bit obsessive, dig? ‘Sides, leaving a case like this screws up my batting average.”

She took a sip off her beer and squinted at me. “What about the police?”

“What about them?”

“Are they still looking for her?”

“Officially? Sure, sure. Off the record? Why do you think they tossed it over to me? Lookit, they're overwhelmed right now. People are scared of the Zodiac, afraid that he'll move from the hinterlands and on to our bigger stage. So the man is tryin' to deal

with that while they're also tryin' to deal with drugs, wanna be hippies who are still streamin' into the Haight and a thousand other garden variety crimes: vandalism, protests, traffic violations, muggings, bank robberies, murders, you name it. So yeah, while the case is still open, they've got they're hands full and then some. Talk about yer otiose efforts..." We both stared off into space, surprisingly comfortable in the silence. I had some more cheddar on slightly stale Nabisco crackers and chased it with almost a full glass. I turned my head, covered my mouth and let loose a polite burp, then turned back to her. "So let me ask you a question."

"Shoot," she said, actually making a gun motion with her fingers. She must've thought it looked cute, but it was kind of lame.

"Why the sudden concern? I thought you said you weren't that close?"

"Well, I suppose it's a couple of things. One, I think we, the whole family, need to get past this, and we won't be able to until we have some...resolution. I mean she could be happily living in a commune in Humboldt County or she...she could be gone. I think...I feel that we need to know this."

"So why did daddy turn off the money flow? Why was I canned?"

"Canned? Oh, I don't know. Money **is** important to him, and while to some people it may seem like he has enough, or maybe even too much, he's...protective of it. He's tried to instill that in us, his kids, but I don't know..."

"OK, so he figured I was a waste of money, do you think he's hired somebody else?"

"It wouldn't surprise me."

“Well in that case, my feelings are hurt.” I got up to go to the bathroom. “If you'll excuse me, I'll be right back.” I looked around and noticed the joint had started to fill up. I caught the bartender's attention and made a motion for another round. Dawn gave me an unsteady OK sign and I squeezed my way through the crowd. Coming out of the bathroom I stopped for a bit. There were some stairs that led to an upstairs door. Usually, the door was closed, but it was open and some bad rock music was spilling through. The good part though, was that the open door gave a groovy view of the stage of the Adam and Eve club, and there on stage was Stacii doing her thing. She looked outtasight and suddenly I felt like ditching the rich redhead and hanging around 'til Stacii's shift ended. Then somebody from upstairs closed the door and I shook myself out of my reverie. If that's what it was...

Dawn was still there, weaving slightly on her stool, like her gyro was kaput. I didn't know where this was headed, but I figured we could continue. I paid for and picked up another pitcher and brought it back to the table, then brought the spent one back to make room. When all this was done, she started to talk again.

“Actually, I almost forgot, I wanted to give you something.” She reached into the huge canvas bag that served as her purse and started to rummage around, putting things on the tabletop. It was all the usual stuff, lipstick, compact, wallet, hairbrush and it was creating a pretty big pile. Finally, with a drunken “Aha!” she found what she was looking for. “I wanted you to keep this for a while...”

She had handed me a small black and white photo, like the kind you would get taken in a photo booth at Woolworth's. While she put her things back into her purse, I took a look. It was Julia with some blond hippie guy. Usually, in those kinds of photos,

the couple looks goofy, or gooey eyed or are comically jammed together. But in this shot, they looked like Nan Wood and Dr. McKeeby, I'm saying that all that was missing was the pitchfork and barn.

“They look pretty serious, stoic almost.”

She repeated the word, “Stoic,” then let out a small giggle.

“Dawn, you know I'm not working the case and still you give this to me. It's like I told you, I'm getting paid not to work it. In fact, there are like penalties if I do. Are you trying to get me in trouble?”

“No, I don't know, I thought you could take a look at, or maybe pass it on to somebody. Maybe somebody knows the man in the picture?”

I took a look at it again. When I first glanced at it I was concentrating on Julia, which wasn't hard because she was easy on the eyes. So I purposely put my thumb over her and the back of my brain started to itch.

“Huh.”

“Huh? Huh what?”

“What? Huh? Yeah, no, it's just that,” I shot another look at the photo, “I think I recognize him.” I returned my gaze back to her, using a bit of effort to keep looking at her face instead of her chest. I guessed that I was starting to get a little drunk as well. “I take it you don't know his name?”

“No, I just remember Julia saying something in a letter, that she was seeing some Swede...”

“Swede?”

She shrugged. “Swede, Finn, Dane, Norseman,” the last drawn out for comedic effect. “What do they call it? The land of the midnight sun...”

I wanted to think about this a bit, and I needed to be by myself to do it. I opted for a lame segue. “Well, speaking of midnight, maybe it's time to get you home.” She protested that she just wanted a couple of more drinks, but I had seen this one from both ends of the periscope and more drinks weren't going to help. So I grabbed her and got her on her feet. Trailing her, with my hands around her waist, I guided her through the crowd. I let go when we finally made it outside and that's when she turned around, threw her arms around my neck and planted a wet one on my lips. I'm a weak man, so I returned the favor and we stayed like that for a while before I broke it off. “Look, it's late. Let's get you a cab and get you back home.” She protested a bit, but I managed to flag down a Veteran's Cab, planted her in it and handed the hack a couple of bills, gave him her address and watched her slink back into the rear seat, ready to pass out.

I decided that it was a good idea for me to get home as well. The thought of another night on the office couch was unappealing, so I hiked up the hill to my pad. Once there, I sat in silence for a while, puffin' on a weed and slowly draining a couple of Coors talls that I found in the fridge. I put some Bill Evans on the turntable and let my brain take off and act like an autonomous piece of machinery, no more connected to me than a telephone. The sound of the turntable doing its auto shutoff routine snapped me out of it and I trundled off to bed.

I got down to the office around nine, which was early for me. The room already reeked of a heavy, smoky incense of pot and solder. A very greenish brown aura and a mixed fog hung in the air. ‘Tack was behind his desk plunking a string on a beat up Les Paul and getting all kinds of weird complaints out of a small Fender amp. I sat down at my desk and started to check the box scores as I sipped some decent Graffeo java out of a Styrofoam cup. Things would be peaceful like, and then he would pluck a note and all kinds of horrible sounds would cascade out of the amp. He would spend the next few minutes fiddling with five knobs on a breadboard and then he would pluck another note and a new series of aural pandemonium would erupt. Finally, after about a half hour of this, he played a chord with a great deal of violence and the thing let out a timid high-pitched squeak. I couldn't help myself; it was pretty funny.

“Look man, no offense, but that's some bad, and I mean like awful stuff there. I grok that you need variety, but...”

“Yeah, it's not working the way I hoped. There's a window where there's some cool stuff, but it's a very small window and it's really hit or miss. I had a couple of groovy sounds before you got here, but I think I lost my mojo. I need more resistance, methinks.” He looked down at the breadboard and tried to visualize changes to the circuit.

“Ramón, that drummer guy, what's his name, Kimi?”

“Ingstrøm, Kimi Ingstrøm,” he answered without looking up.

“Do you know how to get a hold of him?”

“Not right now. I told you didn't I? I can't remember.”

“Yeah, you told me. You said that he's down in L.A.”

“Uh hum, yeah, I heard he's down there with his manager. I'm not sure why. Why?”

“Huh? Well I saw Dawn, Dawn Pancetti, last night.”

“She's the, uh, sister of Julia, right?”

“Yeah, that's the one.”

“How did that go?”

“I'm not sure. She was pretty lit. It was...interesting.”

“OK,” he responded, drawing out the sounds of each letter.

“She's a pretty good pianist, classical stuff, and she seems smart enough. I thought she was a little stiff, but she can loosen up a bit. Actually, judging by last night, she can loosen up plenty. Honestly, I don't know where it's headed.” I thought of the kiss from the previous night and shook my head to clear it. “She handed me a photo of Julia.”

“What the...? I thought you were off that case.”

“You thought and think right. I was and I am. But there is another person in the picture. Tell me what you think.” I got up and handed him the small black and white photo.

“Tack stared at the pic for a while and then looked up. “She’s some dish, but you know that and didn't show me that to look at her. So yeah, that's him. What the hell are they doing together?”

“I don't know. But I need to show that pic to somebody else. I also need to talk to Kimi as soon as possible, so can you try to track him down?”

“Well sure, but why are you back to the Julia thing?”

“I'm not.” I was about to go on when the phone started ringing. I waited a couple of rings and picked it up. It was Eye Chart returning my previous calls. As usual, he started off complaining that he didn't have time to waste and what was so Goddamned important? I said I loved and missed him too, which made him bluster even more. I asked about Blair and he said that was one of the reasons he was calling. They were getting set to announce the charges, and it turned out that Llanna's info was spot on. Blair was facing one count of 1st degree murder, 1 count of 2nd degree murder, a couple of drug charges and a conspiracy charge which confused me—but I think it was related to the drug charges.

“Wendell, all bull aside, we think we've got this one wrapped up pretty tight. Are you still working for him?”

“Yeah, or for his family, yeah. And I know you didn't ask this but I'll say it anyway, the kid is innocent, like in all senses of the word, dig?”

“Sure, I hear what you're saying, but our shrink says that he's missing some brain cells or something upstairs. Seems to think that it has something to do with drugs...”

“...and not the fact that his sister was killed and he's getting blamed for it? That would freak anybody out, man.”

“I'm just telling you what we've found as a courtesy. If I were you, I'd start looking for another job, because this one is gonna be over before it even starts.”

“Says you.”

“Sure, says me. But of course, not the wise, all-knowing St. Wendell, patron saint of lost causes...”

“That would be Jude the Apostle.”

“What?”

“He's the patron saint of lost causes.”

“Lost causes have a saint?” The big man let out a grunt. “I suppose that's a good thing.”

“But I don't think Blair's cause is lost. Lookit, what about the gap?”

“The time difference confused us at first, sure, so we looked at that. He kills the redhead first, waits around until his sister gets home and, in his confused state, does her in.”

“But I heard that the cause of death for Karen, the redhead, was an overdose. A lot of the wounds were post mortem.”

“Sure, but where did she get the drugs?”

“So Blair is a big time drug dealer now?”

“Doesn't have to be big time. Small time works just as well.”

“It doesn't fit.”

“Knock yourself, out St. Jude. Knock yourself out.”

The rest of the conversation was about Marichal, Perry, Mays, and McCovey, and the Jints' chances for a flag. One nice thing about our relationship: dig it, when things got testy between us, we could always retreat to baseball and either find common ground or, more likely, something else to argue about. But it kept us talking and, given our respective professions, that wasn't such a bad thing. We rang off on civil terms and I gave ‘Tack a couple of raised shoulders as a response to his unasked question. Gathering

up my stuff and wishing ‘Tack luck on getting his gizmo to work, I did a quick spin and a jump shot, tossing the empty cup into the trash and headed out.

Willins/Baker had a mid-sized office on the fourth floor of a high rise on California. The receptionist was a young Filipino chick, her dark hair cut short, her face a little plump and she had a small mole on her left cheek. She was dressed conservatively; a dark gray blouse buttoned all the way up and I couldn't see her dress and footwear because her desk covered everything from the waist down. Her nametag said Jennie. I had given her one of my cards that just had my name, number and the words 'Insurance Investigations'. Not quite the truth, but hey, I've got a bunch of cards and they all say something different. I try to match them to the visit, sometimes it works and sometimes not so much. She looked at the card and scrunched up her nose a bit, like it smelled funny. Maybe it did, I dunno. After putting it off to the side, she resumed pounding away at a modern IBM electric typewriter and took an occasional call, writing the caller's info on a pink “While you were out” slip. In general, she was giving off the impression of being too busy to be bothered and in particular, she was doing her best to ignore me. I parked myself into a comfortable chair and picked up a building trade magazine for something to do. After fifteen minutes of reading about the latest in fire alarm systems I was getting ready to split, but then this cat came in dressed in a dark blue pinstriped number but sans tie with an overcoat draped over his arm. He and Jennie spoke to each other in hushed tones for a few minutes. Then he grabbed my card, a stack of pink notes, and looked over my way.

“I’m kind of busy this morning. We had a problem at one of our commercial properties. The electrical was out and I was trying to deal with one of our contract electricians and the city. It was a typical blame game, gets old fast I can tell you. I can give you five minutes. Then I have to return these,” he said, waving the pink scraps and then motioning me to follow him with his head.

His office was fairly large, though with two desks fully outfitted, I gathered he shared it with another manager. He put his leather briefcase down on the floor next to his desk and set the notes next to the phone. He asked me if I wanted a cup of coffee and I declined, knowing that the brew would be pretty deadly. After casually depositing his dun Burberry trench coat on a hanger swinging from a hook on the door, he reached over and gave me a quick handshake.

“Dan Baker.” He withdrew his hand, brushed a comma of blond hair from his forehead and flashed a pair of light gray eyes at me. He wore a class ring on his left pinky and a large Timex on his right, worn upside down.

“Wendell Pike.”

“Have a seat, Wendell. What can I do for you?”

“Well Mr. Baker,” I started.

“Dan, call me Dan. Mr. Baker’s my dad,” he said for probably the millionth time, but with enough conviction to make it sound fresh. “Orin Baker started up this company, along with Keith Willins. Orin’s my pop, Mr. Willins never had kids.”

“OK,” I threw up my hands in mock defeat. “Dan, I’m working with the police and I need some information on a property.” I gave him the address of the Victorian off Masonic. “I need to know the lessee.”

“Give me a few seconds, OK?”

“Sure, sure, take your time.”

He left the office for a minute or two and came back with a large manila file folder. Dan Baker was probably about my age, though it was clear he had gone through the business school grind. He was reading something in the file and absently sat down.

“This is the place where those two girls...”

“Yeah. I know this may be futile because I think it was sublet, but I'd like to try to track down the tenants.”

“Good luck with that, and I'm not being sarcastic. Some owners are particular about who they rent to, and some...well some aren't as...fastidious. There are four units in that building, all rented out.”

I went through the routine with my little notebook, turning back a page or two. “I talked to Cheryl Montgomery, she has the flat next door, so that would be the upper left flat. She had some...beefs about noise, but if what she was saying is true, I would guess that the bottom flat would have had even more.”

“Well, no, I remember this now and I did talk to the police about this—what, could it have already been a week ago? In many ways, Miss Montgomery has been an ideal tenant—quiet, neat and always on time with the rent. She has, however, lodged a complaint or two. Noise complaints, complaints about the hot water and other plumbing issues, but mainly noise complaints. She's in Unit 4, Unit 3 is where the uh...bodies were found. Unit 2 is rented by a stewardess, works for TWA, she's some babe, let me tell you, but she doesn't spend a lot of time there. The tenant in Unit 1 is an older pensioner, pretty much deaf and close to blind so there's not too many complaints on file from him.

From what we've seen, most of the grievances were from Miss Montgomery, and while we take complaints seriously here at W/B, sometimes..." He let it hang in the air.

"So were there any problems in unit 3? Rent paid on time? Complaints?"

"No, the rent is always paid by an accounting firm here in the city, 38th Avenue Accounting, LLC. The lessee we have on file is Harold Chin, but we have a note here in the file saying that the phone number needs to be updated." He reached into his shirt pocket with his left hand and withdrew a gold Cross pen, then got a card from a pile on his desk and wrote a few things on the back. "You can use that as a calling card if you like, an introduction."

I didn't know if this was the right time, but I had to ask. "Look, Mr. Baker..."

"Dan, please, it's Dan. I told you...", he responded with an open grin.

"Sure, Dan. Would it be possible to get a key to that place? I would like to look around a bit."

"I'm not sure, what about the police?"

"Oh, I'll check with them beforehand," I lied.

He didn't like it, but he was still being a nice guy. "I don't know, we've got certain rules, and we haven't had time to evaluate the property."

"I'm just gonna look, not touch anything. Lookit, you can come with and keep an eye on me."

"I don't really have...the time for that."

"Send Jennie with me. Call the police, they can vouch for me."

"Well, we'd need the keys back within twenty four hours..." he was starting to cave.

“No problemo, I can get it done today and get them back by this evening.”

“No, that's OK, if you can get them to us by tomorrow morning?”

I said sure, which meant another form had to be filled out with all my pertinent info. All of which I dug, dig, but it was enough paperwork to qualify me to rent the pad myself. He left for another minute and came back with a couple of Schlage keys on a ring with a large tag that had the address and flat number written in blue ink.

“Thanks, man, much appreciated. One more question—what about the owner?”

“Yes, he...he lives out of state, in Montana. We manage a few of his residential properties here. He lived here but then he hit it big with some investments, poured it into real estate and retired. He used to come out here every year, then every other year. It's been three years since he was last out. I can give you his information, but he won't be of much use.”

“Well, you never know.”

“I suppose not.” He started writing down names and numbers while he absently grabbed his coffee mug with his right hand and took a healthy sip. He then gave me the other names and numbers which I wrote down in the little book. He put the cup down and stole a glance at his watch, so I took the hint, thanked him for his time and got up.

“Well, like I told the police, I'm happy to help in any way that I can. Call me if you have any further questions, but if you'll excuse me, I have a few messages I have to return.”

I thanked him again, said I'd let myself out, gave a smile and a quick wave to Jennie and walked down the hall and into the elevator.

Once I got out of the lobby I walked a half block down California and found a small storefront, so I went in and bought a Coke. It wasn't cold enough but I still drank it while I ran Mr. Baker's rap through my dome. It didn't add up. Sure, sure, there are cats out there who are nice and happy to help, but people don't volunteer stuff that easily, most people anyway. Or maybe I was just being paranoid.

I wanted to talk to the other tenants and I wanted to talk to that accounting firm, but that was way out in the avenues and I didn't feel like heading out to the Haight and the Richmond so I figured I'd let my fingers do the walking, dig?

So it was back to the office and 'Tack had split, though he had left a couple of messages on my desk. I know he didn't like to play secretary, and it's not right for me to criticize, but it was always hard to make out his messages. First, his handwriting was as bad as a doctor's, and then he had a weird way of capitalizing certain words: sometimes it seemed like it was for emphasis and sometimes it just seemed totally random. Call her in the morning could be CALL her in the morning, Call HER in the morning, Call her in the MORNING, and well, you get the picture, dig?

First things first, I put in a long distance call to Nogales, and got Velma on the second ring. I gave her the gist of my rap with Eye Chart, a brief outline of my recent efforts and told her I would update her when I had something more concrete. She thanked me and rang off. Next, I had to call Niscemi's law office because even though they had received the contract back, there was a problem with my signature or initials or some such. They wanted me to swing on by and they would have the check waiting for me. So that meant in addition to the Haight and the Richmond, I now had to go to the Marina. What was next, Daly City? I put a call into Fats, but he wasn't around. He had

an old BSA and if I had to cover this much real estate, I figured I might be able to borrow it for a day or so. I left a message with Cherri, though she sounded a bit out of and I don't think she recognized my voice or my name. Kind of weird. Then I called the names I had gotten from Dan Baker and had even less luck. Linda Zorn, the Stewardess, had an answering service and they said she was traveling and would be out for the next few days, the deaf person in Unit 1 (Gordon Rikel) never picked up and the accounting firm played the "no speaky English" routine. I was thinking what a lousy job I was doing when the phone started ringing. I picked it up and found Ramón on the other end. He hadn't gotten through to Kimi's people but apparently there was a little problem. He had heard something from somebody and it would be better to tell me this in person, so I said we could meet at Tosca in an hour or so and have a drink. He said that sounded like a plan so we left it at that.

I got to Tosca around five thirty. 'Tack and Roddy were outside and Roddy had his hand cupped. I could see a little bit of smoke coming from it. Pretty brazen, but it didn't stop me from joining them for a couple of hits. We got to the bar, and I ordered for the three of us. Silo did his usual recognition/non-recognition thing and we all sat down at a table toward the back. I noticed the juke was dark, the plug conspicuously hanging over the top of it, which made me smile. Silo called my name (or rather, called out "Hey, Fish") so I ambled over to the bar and we went through an awkward pay/no pay dance. In the end the drinks were free and the tip was enough to cover them, which worked for both of us. Once back at the table, Roddy started in complaining about his job. He had seen too many drug overdoses lately, some very pure stuff that was way too strong. He had three OD's come into the morgue the previous night, the oldest might have been 20

and the youngest could have been around 16. No tox reports on them yet—that would take a month and change—but it was pretty obvious. Heck, there were still needles sticking out of two of them. He asked me if St. Wendell needed any more lost causes and I started to correct him but then realized he had rapped with Zyzck in the interim so I gave him the friendship digit and told him he could perform a certain impossible act. All good-natured like, so we had a few laughs. When things got quiet again, ‘Tack continued on the subject of overdoses which led, naturally enough, to a discussion of drugs both pro and con. The lack of regulation was a problem, sure, but how much government interference did we want or need? A pipe dream in any case according to ‘Tack, ‘cause there was no way the man wanted to legalize anything. There's money, big money in drugs, prostitution and other vices. He was pretty convinced that a portion of that bread went into City Hall through the back door. Besides—chipped in Roddy—drugs and hookers kept the poor and working class otherwise occupied. Take that away and they might rise up and cast aside the shackles of oppression. To which both ‘Tack and I groaned. I mean, I'm as in favor of the little guy over his overlords as the next cat, but Roddy tended to get strident in all his pro-worker anti-business rants. Well, just look at prohibition, added Ramón, trying to change the subject and that got us on a sideways tangent that led to some trivia on Al Capone (like did you know that he was thrown out of the sixth grade or that after the Crash of ‘29, he was one of the first guys to open up soup kitchens?). So yeah, the consciousness stream was flowing (though some would argue that it wasn't just consciousness, but bullshit but it was entertaining enough). Eventually Roddy had to split; he was working a double and had to get back to the office.

“So what do you think?” asked Ramón a few minutes after Roddy had left.

“'bout what?” I signaled to get Silo's attention. It took a bit but he eventually noticed me and started working the stick for two more Anchor Steams.

“Your case.”

“Don't know. A lot of people comin' and goin' out of that flat. Hard to track 'em down. I got the keys to the pad so I'm gonna take a look. You wanna check it out?”

“Nah, I'm not into B&E.”

“Hey, it's perfectly legit. I had to sign a bunch of stuff with the management company, but they gave me the keys and everything's above board.”

“Doesn't matter, I'll give you the same answer. That's your thing, not mine.”

“OK, that's cool, just askin'.”

“Really? You're OK?”

“Yeah, no, I'm cool.” Silo showed up with the drinks and Tack paid for them. The big lug didn't have any problem taking money from Ramón, that's for sure. So we were back to sipping our pints when I remembered. “Hey, what is it that you wanted to tell me?”

“Oh yeah, that. You were asking about Kimi?”

“Yeah, you said he was drivin' up from LA.”

“Yeah, well I found out something today, first as a rumor and then it was more or less confirmed. He wasn't down in LA. That's like a cover story. Really he's been checked into a rehab joint on Sutter. Apparently, he was off the rails and pretty sick.”

“Smack?”

“That's what it sounds like. There's a certain Dr. Cisneros...”

“Dr. Feelgood, yeah, I've heard of him. Treating addiction with ‘vitamin’ shots,” and yeah, I actually used the air quotes.

“Mm. He's got a small converted Victorian on Sutter near Divis. Kimi has already been there a week and is gonna spend at least the next week or so getting the cure.”

“What's the chance that we could see him?”

“Not great.”

“Dude, that sucks, I've got to talk to him.”

“Well, it's not going to be easy.”

“Not impossible though.”

“Knock yourself out...”

After finishing the beers, I got Silo to let me use the bar phone and checked the answering service. There were a couple of calls, but nothing urgent-like. ‘Tack had to get back to work and I needed something to eat, so we each went our separate ways. I hoofed down to Clown Alley and grabbed a burger and fries — which I knew was a mistake, but I needed something to absorb the Steam. Satiated for the moment, I headed out and looked for a cab. Eventually I gave up and hopped a 15 for a short ride to Market and then transferred to a 71 (which took forever to show up). The wind had picked up and the fog was coming in pretty fast, which was pretty normal for this time of year. But then the fog turned into a consistent drizzle and then actual rain which wasn't normal for this time of year. The bus was fairly crowded, which made me realize that it was getting late. I asked one of my fellow sardines for the time and he looked at his watch and

answered in a gruff monotone: 6:34. It was maybe 25 minutes later that I arrived at Haight and Masonic. Within minutes of getting off the bus, I was wet, cold and needed to use a restroom. I was surprised that it had started to get a bit dark out, and I cursed myself for not bringing along a flashlight. There was a hardware store nearby and it was still open, so I bought a bright metal flashlight and a couple of D batteries along with a cheap umbrella. The clerk looked at me funny when I said I wanted a receipt and an extra plastic bag. Evidently that was more work than he wanted to deal with. Then I headed over to the Top Hat, a small neighborhood bar. I ordered a Jack neat with a Steam back, but they didn't have any Steam. In fact, they didn't have much of anything, so I had to settle for a Pabst. The vibe was off in the place, like it was a joint for professional alcoholics and they didn't appreciate my presence or my color, dig? Also, those that had jobs were blue-collar types and they didn't want anything to do with what they perceived as hippies, whatever their hue. I mean they served me, sure, and let me use the facilities, but they didn't say much, and much of what they did say was muttered under their breath. Just as well—the last thing I needed to do was sit around and get plastered. So I paid my tab, put the booze and the batteries where they belonged, thanked the man behind the stick and split.

Once outside, I opened the umbrella and sloshed my way back to the pad. There were a couple of earth moving machines parked on the street and pallets of terracotta pipes stacked on the sidewalk along with temporary no parking signs so the construction was still going on. The rain hadn't let up, so both the torn-up street and sidewalks had turned to mud soup. The heavy smell of eucalyptus gave a green cast to the darkness. I did my best to avoid the mess, though I stepped into at least one fair sized puddle. Once I

reached the front of the pad I looked around and couldn't see anybody out walking. But it was pretty dark by now and only a fool would be trudging through this slop. Like yours truly, dig? And while I hadn't heard anything I just sensed somebody was out there following me. But again, that was probably just my paranoia. All of the flats in the building were dark so I guessed that nobody was home. The flashlight went halfway into my pocket and I threaded the base of the umbrella through my arm. It was awkward, but I needed both hands free. I tried ringing the doorbell— didn't want any surprises, dig—but I couldn't hear any buzzer. I put the first key into the top deadbolt, but it didn't fit. Figured. The second key fit, but the deadbolt was unlocked, so I put the first key into the door lock and twisted while pushing down on the handle. The door started to let out a creak, so I instinctively lifted the door a bit and moved it slowly. I looked around again and went in. I closed the umbrella and left it in the downstairs landing. My tennies had a fair amount of mud on them and I didn't want to leave any trace that I had been there (like the last time, dig), so I reached into my coat pocket took out the two plastic bags, and put one over each shoe. The bags were just big enough to do the trick and I could keep them on by tying the handles in a loose knot. If I ignored the pink color, I'd say they worked out pretty well. Then I got out the flashlight and fired it up. Out of habit, I climbed the stairs slowly and kept close to the wall. When I got to the top of the stairs I stopped.

The smell was still there, faint-like, but it was the same funky leftovers from earlier— smelled like death, mold and joss. I remembered the bronze and red colors from my last visit, but now it was all black, gray and blue. The air felt cool and slightly damp. The flashlight went dark so I had to bang it with my hand a couple of times to get it to work. Starting in the front room and keeping the light low, I started to do what I

hoped was a systematic sweep. I didn't really know what I was looking for but a brain worm was nagging me, telling me that the cops had missed something. I went through the books on the shelf; sometimes people put notes, pictures and what-not in books, but there was nothing in these. I did the same routine with the records and had the same kind of luck. When I was satisfied that the front room didn't offer any additional hints, I went down the hall to the next room, passing the poster for Morte Aeterna. I briefly flashed the light on the poster and recognized the drummer who right about now was probably getting a cocktail of vitamins, Dexedrine and who knows what else shot into his behind. I shook my head and moved on. The second room, the room where the first chick was found, was a mess. Nobody had done much cleaning up. The flag sheet was gone, but there were still large spots of dried blood on the floor and on the bare mattress. I fished between the wall and the mattress and at last found something the cops had missed, a small diary. I looked at a couple of pages, but there wasn't much in it at first glance. The handwriting was obviously feminine, probably a young chick's writing as well—it looked like school cursive but with added touches of hearts and flowers in the margins. I shook it open and got lucky again when a small color Polaroid fell out of the book. I bent down and shined the light on it. On closer inspection, it was really a half of a Polaroid. Originally it would have been a picture of a couple but all that was left was the half with the chick in it. She was young, and I guessed she was Karen Bloomfeld because the hair and age looked about right—but she looked, well, alive. Vibrant even. Whoever and whatever was in the other half was removed for some reason or another and all that was left was some dude's hand on her shoulder. It could have been anybody. I had to smile because it was something, dig? I looked around for the other half, but I couldn't find it or

anything else. I didn't have a pocket big enough so I shoved the pic and the book down my pants. It was awkward but it left my hands free. I moved on to the kitchen and started looking through the cupboards and checking around their cookware (which didn't consist of much, just a couple of frying pans and small pots) when I stopped. I wasn't sure, but I thought I recognized the sound 'cause I've made it a couple of times in my checkered past. It was the muffled sound of a glass pane being broken. Then I heard the door being opened, followed by the same squeak as when I opened it. I absently put a pot down on the strainer near the sink and backed off into the small utility room where they had found Suzanne, killed the flashlight, crouched down and waited. I risked a quick look around the door jam and saw a beam of light coming up the stairs followed by the outline of a very large dude making his way down the hall. He was moving quickly and he looked like he knew where he was going. He got to the bedroom, stopped for a moment and looked both behind him and in front of him. The flashlight illuminated the floor for a bit; then the beam of light was pointed straight ahead. It was like he sensed me, but couldn't make up his mind if I was a real presence or some ghost, a leftover from his or this flat's past. I was glad that I had put on my improvised pink booties, cause otherwise he might have seen some wet footprints from my Chuck Taylors, though I don't know if he saw the umbrella or not. Sometimes you notice things like that, sometimes you don't. Eventually he seemed to relax a bit and turned right into the bedroom.

There was a loud ripping noise but then it stopped. In the silence I was sure that the sound of my breathing was reverberating down the hall. After a minute the noise started up again. It was pretty loud, sounded like somebody was doing some work with a crowbar. Well, if I had half a brain, I would have just sat tight, considered my luck in

finding something, and called myself ahead of the game. But I needed to find out more. Times like this I wished I carried a gun, but then I reminded myself that a gun only works if you know how to use it, and I was a lousy shot. Treading lightly on my tennies, I slowly made my way toward the bedroom. I peered through the doorway and saw the large figure crouched on the floor concentrating the light on a small section of the floor and prying up slats with what looked like a switchblade. I waited until he was done with the demolition and watched while he reached into the flooring and pulled out a small brown paper bag. I couldn't see what was in it, money or drugs would be a good guess, but that would be all it was, a guess. I started to head back to my utility room hiding place when the pot I placed on the strainer succumbed to gravity and fell into the sink making a noise that might as well have been amplified by a thousand watt Sunn amp.

I turned around and saw him come running out of the bedroom, a large blur wearing a dark watch cap and nylon jacket. He made a lunge for me and I responded by jumping back and shining my flashlight in his face in an effort to startle him. It worked for about a second and then he lunged again, his right hand clutching the bag close to his body and the knife in his left hand. He must have had some military or other kind of training because he knew what he was doing; his movements were economical and his thrusts were only accompanied by soft grunts. I had to do something, so despite being somewhat off balance, I managed a decent hook to his jaw but it hardly fazed him. He countered with some kind of judo move with his right leg, but I was able to dodge it and his foot crashed into the small kitchen table sending a couple of plates, glasses, and salt and pepper shakers flying. I kept the flashlight on in my left hand trained on him keeping him in the spotlight sort of, though with every offensive and defensive move the light

moved throughout the kitchen in random waves. With two quick steps I advanced and landed another couple of jabs and then sprang back against a small countertop, knocking over a fair sized plant. Slowly waving the knife back and forth and still clutching the bag with his right hand, he got down into a half crouch and I could only think of a coiled watch spring. He made a series of quick lunges toward me. I was able to avoid the first few, but on maybe his fourth thrust, the knife caught my sleeve and when I glanced down I saw some dark stuff leaking out, so he must have hit something, hopefully not a major vessel. He moved toward me again and I parried as best I could, though my fists weren't much of a match against his knife. When he made his next lunge toward me I timed it pretty good and jumped to my right. As he passed by I got close enough to hit him as hard as I could on the side of his face with the flashlight. It went out and I figured it was pretty useless so I tossed it down the hall. He was stunned a bit, but then he backed up against the sink, picked up a frying pan and started weaving it over his head in some kind of rodeo motion. The small diary had slipped down further in my pants and it made movements a little awkward. I took a second to adjust it when he sped up the motion and let the pan fly toward me. I was a little slow to respond, but I managed to duck and it glanced off my forehead and crashed through a small window. He jumped at me again and started a series of kicks aimed at my groin, and even though the diary had slipped down there and offered some protection, the kicks still hurt. One of the kicks was aimed a little higher and it connected right to my solar plexus, knocking me flat on my back and leaving me gasping for air. The dude looked down at me for a couple of seconds deciding what to do and then used this small advantage to split, running full tilt down the hall. Of course, because it was dark, he didn't see the flashlight that was lying at the top

of the stairway and with a series of very loud bangs, he crashed down the stairs landing with a dull thud. Even though I was still having trouble breathing, I forced myself up and headed down the hallway, wheezing and grabbing the wall for support. Looking down from the top of the stairs, I could see him slowly get up, gather his package again and open the door. I followed down the stairs as fast as I could, picking up my umbrella before heading outside. Brandishing the umbrella like a weapon, I went down the outside steps and looked around through the darkness, trying to see where the cat had disappeared. Suddenly he was behind me with one arm around my neck. I responded by trying to beat his head to a pulp with the umbrella, but all that did was bend the umbrella into some crazy postmodern art piece. I spun around and got a knee to his gut—it wasn't much, more of a glancing blow, but it did slow him down. Then I hit him again with a right hook that landed flush on his nose. It stunned him and knocked the bag out of his hands, the contents scattering over the small front yard. When he saw this, his eyes went all dinner plate wide like. He backed off a bit still waving the blade back and forth and started collecting the stuff, jamming it into his pockets. I stood with my back to the landing trying to catch my breath. Though it was impossible to ID all of it in the darkness, it looked like a bunch of small bits and pieces. I thought I saw a ring or two, chocolate bars, syringe, pictures, and maybe a couple of clear plastic bags with some dark stuff in one and white stuff in the other. He surveyed the area as best he could and satisfied that he had collected it all, he suddenly surged forth to plunge his switchblade into one of my kidneys. But that's when I felt a strong tug that threw me off balance. I rolled to the ground in time to see another person get stabbed in the stomach. Then the

dude with the knife pulled it out, looked at it and both of us and with a pronounced limp, ran down the street through the fog and rain, and disappeared into the gray-black night.

I thought about chasing him, but even with his limp he had a pretty good head start, so I cursed and headed over to the other cat. I was a couple of feet away when I recognized him. He was hard to miss with his Wyatt Earp mustache, jean jacket, and especially those bright white skin tight pants (though they were now stained with mud and blood).

“Mr. Amerika!” I exclaimed through gasps for air. “My man, what the hell are you doing here?”

He coughed a couple of times and let out a strained, “I just happened to be in the neighborhood...”

“Bullshit. This ain't no coincidence.” I looked down at my right wrist. There was a fair amount of blood coming out of the side of it but it wasn't gushing out in spurts. It was just a lazy flow. I flexed my fingers and they still worked, so the diagnosis from Dr. Pike was that the cat with the blade had missed my tendons and the radial artery. I figured that I just needed a few stitches and a band-aid or two. When I looked over at Mr. A, my diagnosis wasn't as bright. “You OK?” As soon as I asked I knew the answer.

“Nah, I'm...I'm not feelin' too hot, I'm...I think I need to get to the hospital.”

“Can you walk?”

“Not sure. I'd like to rest for a bit.”

“Not a good idea.” I reached down and got my arm under his. He was surprisingly heavy and with a bit of effort we were both more or less upright. “K, let's see if we can get to Haight. We can get a cop or a cab from there.”

“No cops. No...no cops.”

“OK, but no cab is gonna want you bleedin' all over the upholstery. You know who that was?”

“You don't?” Bruce rasped. There was a lot of strain in his voice and I didn't know if he would make it to Haight let alone a hospital. I got him over to a streetlight and had him hold on to it. A light-colored VW bus was heading down the street. I got into the middle of the street and started shouting and waving my arms. It came to a stop and I talked to the couple in it. The dude was driving and he wanted nothing to do with the scene, but his lady friend seemed to think it was good karma to play Good Samaritan. So karma (and ten bucks from my wallet) won out in the end and the couple transported Bruce and me up to U.C. Med on Parnassus. I moved some cushions out of the way and appropriated a tie-dyed sheet that I handed to Bruce, telling him to push it against the wound.

The engine noise was loud in the back of the bus and we had to put our heads close together to talk in hoarse whispers. I had to ask the question again. “Who was that?”

He thought a bit before answering. “That was a man named Roland Sabacan.” He spelled the name out. “Filipino cat. He's a very, very bad dude.”

“What does he do?”

“Strongman, mainly. As you saw, his preferred,” he coughed a few more times.

“His weapon of choice is a blade.”

“Who does he work for?” Bruce didn't answer and I was having a hard time telling if it was because he didn't want to say anything or he couldn't. I shook him a bit.

“Hey man, who does he work for?”

“It's a bit complicated.” He made a noise that was something between a laugh and a cough. Something dark was trickling out of his mouth, and there was a leak in his mid-section, a steady flow that spread into the sheet he was holding against his body and in the darkness it had a weird monochromatic look, almost black. It was getting all over me as well and it was hot and sticky. “Are you still looking for that chick, what's her name? Julie? No, that's not right, Julia, that's it. You're still looking for Julia, right?”

The streetlights were providing a slow strobe effect bathing Bruce's map with a dull gray cast and the V Dub's small flat four was straining to get up the hill. “What? No, I told you, I'm...I was fired. I'm off that case.”

“Well, you should find the girl. Find...the...girl.”

“Man, we've been through that. I've got another gig now.”

Bruce looked at me confused. “Then what were you doing at the pad back there?”

“What?”

The chick in the front looked back to us. “Are you two OK back there? Whoa, that's a lot of blood. Honey,” she said to the dude driving the bus, “I think these guys are pretty messed up.”

“Look,” I shouted over the noise of the engine, “We're OK, just get us there, I'll throw in an extra ten to cover cleaning up the back. I think we made a bit of a mess back here.”

“That's OK, but we could use the bread...”

I reached into my wallet and grabbed a ten spot. It was looking awfully lonely in there, only a five and a couple of ones keeping each other company. As I handed the bill to her the bus came to an abrupt stop.

“Here you go,” said the dude. “Good luck.” The chick got out and opened the door from the outside and I grabbed Bruce and carried him through the emergency entrance as the bus sped away. He reached into his pocket and palmed something into my hand and he tried to say something to me but I couldn't make heads or tails of it. Something about Dennis? Help out Dennis? I tried to get him to repeat it but he closed his eyes and his body went all slack-like. I started to plant him in a chair and get up to the front desk, but the amount of fluid the cat was leaking did a better job of getting their attention. A trio of orderlies moved pretty quickly getting Bruce on a stretcher and disappeared through a double door off to the side while I spent time filling out some paper work the best I could (I realized I didn't know anything about Mr. Amerika except his name and God knows if that was real or not). Then I was led to a small room where an intern looked at my wrist, said I would live, handed me a towel and told me to keep pressure on the cut. It was another hour before I got seven stitches and a large bandage wrapped around my wrist. They wanted to look at a large bump on my forehead but I told them I was fine, that was just from an unrelated cooking accident. Another nurse came by and wanted me to file a police report, but I said no, then they wanted more information about Bruce and myself and I had to sign some kind of waiver, I wasn't sure what it was but I was itching to split from the joint so I just signed it. I was finally able to get to a phone booth and called Veterans Cab company. I got lucky there, as Henri, the French dispatcher said they had somebody close by. Turned out it was my buddy Gill

Nyet, a large, hairy Russian immigrant who drove a Yellow hack. He was dropping off a fare on Cole, so he was in the neighborhood. Gill could talk a blue streak when he was in his cups, but usually he was pretty taciturn. Tonight he took one look at my condition and with a low whistle drove me home in silence.

Traffic was light at this time of night and the rain had turned back into heavy fog. Fatigue was setting in big time. All I wanted was a drink, a smoke, a shower and to crash in about that order. I told Gill to drop me off on Grant, but he insisted on going up to the top of Vallejo. I got out, leaned through his open window, and handed him everything that was left in my wallet. Then I thanked him and offered to buy a couple of rounds next time. He said sure, gave me a soul shake before he started the hack up, and slowly backed down the hill. I took a look out toward the East Bay and felt an involuntary shudder go through me before I started walking up the steps to my flat. I didn't get very far when I heard someone shout out my name. I turned around and in seconds two uniforms were on me, shoving me against the railing. One of them started cuffing me and one of them spun me around.

“What the hell?” I asked. “Careful, that wrist is messed up...” but they snapped the cuff tight enough to dig into the wound. I let out a yelp and they walked me over to a dark unmarked Fury tossed me in the back seat, and then we headed down a couple of blocks to the North Beach Station. A couple of times I asked what they were doing and both times they said I knew why they were there, which confused me. They double-parked outside the station and led me out of the car and into the building to the accompaniment of some torrid saxophone riffs spilling out of Keystone Korner a block or so down the street. Two other cops processed me and took my belongings (including a

small diary and three sets of keys) and put them in a manila envelope. I was able to make one call to the office that rang over to our service. Finally the cuffs were removed and I was thrown into a holding tank with no explanation, no Miranda, no nothing. All I could do was curl up in a corner of the cell and crash.

I don't know what time it was, but it felt early and I was being shaken awake. I looked up and saw a fresh-faced cadet who snapped on a pair of cuffs with my hands in front this time and dragged me into a small room where he parked me behind a metal table and told me to wait. I didn't have much choice so I did. It was maybe another hour or so before the familiar form of Inspector Brad Zyzck squeezed his way into the room and sat down opposite me. He looked like he had slept in his clothes; his white short-sleeved shirt, red and blue regimental, and brown Haggar Sansabelt slacks could all have used a pressing. He sparked up a butt and passed it over to me, then lit one for himself. It was a Kent with that stupid plastic filter and I hated the way they tasted, but I needed it. Hey, choosey beggars and all that, dig? He had a Styrofoam cup of coffee in one hand and a file folder in his other. He put them both down and looked at me.

“What the fuck did you get yourself into this time?”

“Good morning to you too, inspector. What's all this? No charges, no rights being read, I'm just hijacked off to a cell. What is this, the CCCP?”

“You know why you're here.”

“Why does everybody keep sayin' that? What am I supposed to know?” I paused for a bit and tried on a calm, reasoned voice. “Is this about Bruce Amerika?”

“What?” Like the inspector was genuinely surprised.

“Yeah, Bruce Amerika, he spells it with a 'k'. The two of us got mugged last night.”

He looked up toward the ceiling in disbelief. “A mugging? That's your story?”

“It ain't a story, it's the gospel, dude. Well, truthfully, not a mugging, but we were like attacked.”

He shook his head. “I don't have time for your bullshit. This isn't about some imaginary mugging. You're being held in connection with the death of Stacii Willits.” He spelled out her name for emphasis.

“What? Stacii...” then it hit me. “Stacii the dancer? She's dead? When? How? Like where?” And then again, 'cause I was having trouble processing this, “What?”

“Yesterday, some time between two and three in the afternoon, we don't have the official time yet. Apparently she was squatting in a tenement building in Dog Patch. One of her neighbors said he heard noises, could have been a scream. He waited a bit and found her door open. She was on the couch and had been stabbed multiple times.”

“Whoa dude. Stacii's dead?”

“That's what I'm telling you.”

I don't know if it was the shock, lack of sleep, or my general mental and physical shape, but although my brain was trying to engage, the clutch was busted. “Whoa, Stacii...wait a sec...you think, you think I had something to do with that?”

“Right now you're being held as a material witness.” And with that, he read me my rights as my head was spinning and tears were starting to form. “I need a statement from you,” he said as he handed me a yellow legal pad and a pen.

“Inspector dude, you're like barkin' up the wrong tree.”

“You think so? How does it look, this woman being found dead from multiple stab wounds and you show up at your apartment covered in blood with a lame alibi.

Some people have seen the two of you together. It doesn't take an Einstein to do the math on this one."

I shook my head. "No, no this is all wrong..."

"Says you."

"Yeah, says me."

"OK." That fat cop leaned back in his chair and sighed, and then he got his pen and a small note pad from his shirt pocket. "OK, so let's hear your version. When was the last time you saw her?"

"Last time? Well if you don't count this last Wednesday..."

"Two days ago?"

"Yeah," I calculated backwards out loud, "Friday, Thursday. Yeah, that's right, Wednesday."

"What happened Wednesday? Did the two of you argue?"

"What? No. Stacii dances...danced at the Adam and Eve club. I was in Specs and there's a stairway that leads to the club. If the door is open you get a pretty good view of the stage and the show. The door was open and I got a pretty good view."

"Did you two talk?"

"No man, we didn't even make eye contact. I just saw her dancin' on stage before somebody shut the door."

"And that's it?"

"Sure, I was there with another chick. You can ask around."

"Does this woman have a name?"

“Sure, I mean I'd rather you didn't drag her into this but I don't have nothin' to hide. She was pretty drunk, I don't know how much she'll remember, but...”

“OK, enough already. What's her name?”

“Dawn. Dawn Pancetti.”

The big man did a classic double take. “Dawn as in the sister of Julia, the woman you're trying to find?”

“Yeah, but I'm not tryin' to find her anymore. I'm off that gig, didn't I tell you? Maybe not, sorry, I'm a bit out of it.”

“So if you're not working that case, what were you doing with Miss Pancetti?”

“Me and Dawn were havin' a couple of drinks. It was all innocent like.”

“Like a date?”

“Sure, but pretty low key.”

He let out a noise that was close to a harrumph, shook his head and then tried to get things back on track. “OK then, when was the last time you were together with Miss Willits?”

“Stacii? Let me think...Anagram's Party was the 23rd. We got together after the party and spent a few days together. Man this is weird, I'm not used to bein' on this side of it. I mean grief and all that...whoa dude, it's all too much.”

“You haven't seen her since?”

“No, it was...it was casual like.”

“You're sticking to that?”

“What? OK, it doesn't look good. I can see that. Lookit, I could make like a clam and wait for my lawyer. But let me tell you, any case you have against me is

circumstantial at best, dig? In fact I can hear a certain ex-lawyer's voice in my head tellin' me to shut up. But listen, Inspector man. I would like to think that there's a certain...professional respect here. You know me, you know that I...I'm not capable of somethin' like that, plus I've got no good reason to...Look, we had a good time together. I didn't and I couldn't have had anything to do with Stacii's...death. It's just a bummer, man, a humongous bummer.”

“So can you account for your whereabouts yesterday?”

“I can try. Look,” I pleaded holdin' my hands up, “are these really necessary?”

He grunted and leaned over the small table and put the key into the lock. Once free, I started messaging my wrist. “What happened there?” he asked.

“Stab wound, glancing blow really. The cat I was with got the worst of it. Can I get a cup of coffee and a couple of smokes? I'll tell you where I was yesterday. But I do have one question?”

“Sure, fire away.”

“What happened to BenWa?”

“Who's BenWa?”

“That's her snake.”

“We didn't...,” he started leafing through some typewritten forms, “we don't have any record of a snake. What kind of snake are we talking about?”

“Boa. It's pretty big; she uses it in her act. Used it, used it I mean. If you find it, I can offer to take care of it for a while. He needs a home.”

“Sure, if we find the snake we'll let you know,” he said with as little irony as he could.

So Zyzck made good on the smokes and coffee and as my head cleared I started to tell him about my Thursday, leaving nothing of any substance out of the narrative except that I found half of a photo there and that I knew the name of my assailant. I was about halfway done when ‘Tack arrived with a lawyer buddy named Hector Gonzalves. They made an odd pair, both Latinos, but Hector was maybe six foot two with a lot of meat on his bones. He always dressed in fancy suits and used cologne. Lots of cologne. This time he was in a shiny black outfit with white piping, a blood-red shirt, and a cream colored tie. He smelled like watermelon and sage. ‘Tack, on the other hand, was wearing a blue work shirt and jeans, and both were covered with grease sports. Hector wanted me to shut up, but I told him I had nothing to hide and I just wanted to get out of there. The lawyer shot Ramón a look to which he responded by shrugging. So I continued and once I was through Zyzck asked a bunch more questions and I answered them as best I could. He stepped out for a bit and Hector, Ramón and myself sat and burned our weeds in silence, turning the air in the small room into a thick, white, choking smoke with fruity overtones.

Eventually the inspector came back in and said that some of my story checked out, but that they weren't going to get a statement from Mr. Amerika, because he didn't make it through the night. He wanted to know more about Bruce, but I truthfully said that the dude was a cipher—sure, I knew he was maybe a little light in the loafers, but I had no idea what he wanted from me. It was a bummer he was gone too, especially because he probably saved me from a similar fate. So then the cop made more noise about Bruce and how they were going to have to look into that. He was pretty upset 'cause he had started the day with one closed case and by mid-morning I had opened that

one back up and thrown in a second for good measure. He wasn't completely convinced about my account—I mean I didn't have the names of the hippies who drove us to UC Med and no one saw or heard the attack—but one of the doctors had gotten a story from Bruce that pretty much corroborated mine. Plus, I added, I was the one who had brought him to the hospital. That had to count for something, right?

But of course, there was something else that was gnawing away at his gut. If my story was factual-like, then we had somebody running around stabbing people: me, Bruce, maybe Stacii and stretching it only a little farther, Karen Broomfeld. So the sure thing that was the case against Blair Poundstone now had an element of doubt introduced. Troubling for the man and, in a way, a break for me. But with the deaths of Bruce and Stacii I wasn't in a mood to celebrate.

Zyzck said they were going to check out the pad and the front yard to see if they could find if my assailant had missed any of the bag's contents, and maybe to check for prints and see if there were any bags lying under any other floorboards.

I was released around noon with the usual admonishment to stay in town. I didn't have a problem with that. I mean, like where else would I go? I had to hand over my shirt for blood tests and they wanted to keep the diary, but with a bit of an additional wait, I was able to get Xeroxes of some of the pages. I had never retrieved the torn Polaroid from my pants and they never found it, so I figured I could look it over some more and maybe see if there were any other clues. Of course, when I got out on Stockton the sun was shining bright against an azure sky, which seemed to me like some kind of irony, cause it was like the polar opposite of how I felt. I'm saying I was sad, sore, smelly, greasy and run down. Like beat, dig? Shirtless but wearing my overcoat, I said

thanks and goodbye to ‘Tack and Hector and hoofed it on home. Once there I took a long shower, took a couple of hits off a pipe, drank a half can of beer, and hit the sack. It was a heavy sleep; I think I was out for close to twenty hours. Totally lost the day.

I woke up early and needed to get to work. I had breakfast at the US Café and then grabbed a cup and a pound of ground coffee from Graffeo before heading to the office. The place smelled funky, so I spent a little time cleaning things up, opening the windows, emptying the ash trays and getting rid of Chinese take-out cartons and beer cans. Once the place was somewhat clean and aired out, I sparked a butt and called Dan Baker. I started off apologizing for the delay in getting back to him and told him about the damage to the pad and that there was a police report on file. He was pretty upset and said some words. I didn't blame him: he gave me the keys and now he had a broken window and floor damage. I wasn't making any friends the last couple of days, that's for sure. I tried to tell him that it would be pointless for me to bust the window when I had the key and he finally got that, but he wasn't sure about the floor damage. I think he thought that the reason I went back there was to get something that I knew about — Zyzck had the same thought so I guessed it could look that way. I offered to pay for the floor and told him he'd have the keys by the afternoon, sooner if he wanted to come by the office. He said he might do that so I gave him the address and phone number (even though he probably had it written down on at least three forms). By the time he had rung off we were on more or less civil terms. Insurance would cover the damage and the place had to be cleaned up before it could be rented out anyway.

I just pressed down on the switch hook and dialed Veterans Cab and rapped a bit with Henri, the French dispatcher. We knew each other casually through a mutual friend. Business must have been slow, so Henri babbled on for a while (and 'cause his accent was as thick as camembert, I maybe got every third word out of his mouth) before I was

able to get him to leave a message for Gill — Gill didn't have a phone so this was the only way you could get to him. Henri said he'd pass it along and I said *merci*.

Next I called Nogales, but I only got a ranch hand who barely spoke English. I left my name and number and told him to have Velma - Mrs. Poundstone - give a buzz *por favor*.

No sooner had I hung up than the phone started ringing. I picked it up on the third and found myself talking to Dawn Pancetti. She sounded sleepy and wanted to know if I was free that evening. I told her I had a couple of things to do, but I would call her later. We traded some small talk and I hung up with an *arrivederci*. That chick confused me, that's for sure.

The phone book was next, but of course I doubted that Roland Sabacan would have a listed number or that Bruce had spelled it right. Nothing there. Two Sabacans listed — one was a Maria and the other an L. Sure it could be a relative but that was a reach. So after trying a couple of alternative spellings I gave up. I called another number, that of a person who was a heavy-duty criminal, who to my knowledge had never spent one day in jail. Don't know about the statute of limitations on some of the stuff, so I'll leave it at that. Not a nice person to deal with, one who specialized in blackmail and had an extensive list of contacts who found out all kinds of information. Information that had caused a few broken marriages, a couple of failed businesses, and a suicide — at least these were the things I knew about. This information had also made been sold for a lot of bread and now this individual enjoyed a bit of social standing. That's another thing about this burg, dig? After a while, no one cares where the money

came from. We had (and still have) a fair number of polite members of society who started in questionable or all-out illegal activities (to say nothing about those who built up their fortunes on the backs of the oppressed, but now I'm sounding like Roddy).

Anyway, I had done this person a couple of small favors once, and we sort of got along, so I figured I was owed at least one. And with an extensive network, this person might be able to find out where my assailant hung out faster than I could. I hadn't given Sabacan's name to the cops because things were personal at this stage, all the more so if he had something to do with Stacii's death. I wanted to track him down, I wanted to hurt him and I wanted to ask some questions. This time, I told myself, I would take some precautions. I didn't reach the person I wanted to talk to, but I was able to leave a message to contact me at soon as possible.

I spent the next couple of hours going through the Xeroxes of a young chick's journal. A lot of it was pretty useless, happy about something, sad about something, heard a song she liked, stuff about the weather and other like ramblings. However, inserted into all this fluff were tables with letters and numbers. Like a bit from one page looked something like this (though keep in mind that the handwriting was schoolgirl cursive and there were drawings, curlicues and whatnot all over the page):

BB	T	20	B	3	
N-LD	T	50	W	-10	
F	T	10	H	5	
R	T		B	-10	*
MS	T	25	B	6	
BD	W	50	W	3	
J	W	25	S	2	
K!	W		H	8	*

While I was busting me brain on this puzzle, ‘Tack came in looking sharp in a dark blue shirt and slacks so I figured it was either laundry day or he had a date, and it turned out I was right on both counts — he was coming back from a date and he was out of clean clothes. Neither of us was in a particularly talkative mood so after exchanging a few sentences, he spent some time scribbling wiring schematics on the blackboard while I stayed with the diary. Eventually, he got stumped, bored, curious or all three so I handed him a couple of pages. We both stared at the copies — they weren't very clear and the handwriting made it hard to decipher as well. Sometime into this the buzzer rang. I looked over at ‘Tack and he raised his shoulders an inch or so. I got up and looked out the window, saw a familiar form standing on the sidewalk, and buzzed the visitor in. Then I opened the office door and left it open. There were some heavy steps on the stairs and by the time Zyzck got to the top he was somewhat out of breath, with his regimental loosened enough to almost qualify as a scarf.

“Inspector — man, long time no see.” I walked back to the desk and sparked up a Pall Mall.

“Yeah,” Zyzck wheezed, “fuck you too. Mind if I come in?”

“You got a warrant?”

“What? Why? You got something to hide?”

I waited a beat and figured it was OK, like no roaches in the ashtray or anything, but I did see some movement from ‘Tack out of the corner of my eye, probably hiding his pipe in the pile of electrical flotsam and jetsam. “Suit yourself, man. I believe you know Ramón?” I waived my hand toward ‘Tack and he responded with a slight bow.

“Always the comics. Jeez, don't you take anything serious?”

“Life is weird, man. Dig it.”

“Sure, I dig.” Again with the quotes around dig.

“I don't see any back up, so I'm guessin' a social visit. So like park yourself.

What brings you here?” I grabbed the Styrofoam cup and took a sip of cold java while he looked around at the décor and grunted his way into one of the office chairs before firing up a Kent with his beat up Zippo. He leaned forward, using the weed to point and punctuate.

“Couple of things. First off, we checked out your story. We have a couple of witnesses and we found the couple with the bus.”

“Whoa, like that was fast. Good work, congrats to the men in blue, man.”

“Yeah, well we both got lucky. Turns out the woman in apartment 4 heard some noises and saw the skirmish on the front lawn.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“I thought she wasn't in. Her lights were out.”

“Well she was. In I mean. She was pretty frightened by the whole thing.”

“But she didn't call the cops?”

“I guess she figured it wasn't worth the trouble. Or maybe she was used to it. I don't know, she says all kinds of stuff occurred at all hours at that place — talked Sergeant Glynn's ear off. Anyway, her story more or less jibes with yours. Then there's the hippie couple with the bus. They were at a Laundromat on Page and the manager of the place saw them washing some sheets, at first he thought they were dying the sheets in

his machines, which set him off, and then he realized that it wasn't dye but blood. That's when he called it in. We had our man in the neighborhood so he was able to get there before the hippies left. They didn't want to talk at first but we applied a bit of pressure.” He put up his beefy paws in defense. “Friendly pressure, no torture or anything so don't jump to conclusions. Anyway they told us what they knew. Again, matching more or less what you said.”

I gave him a palms up gesture. “Like I was sayin' all along.”

He made a low-throat noise and continued. “Alright then, so you're off the hook for the murder in Dogpatch.” He screwed his map up in a look of sincerity and continued awkwardly. “Look, I'm sorry for your loss.”

“Yeah, well, thanks I guess. Has anybody been contacted, I mean like family or somethin'? I'd like to find out if there's anything scheduled, any service or somethin'.”

“Not that I know of, but I can ask.” There was an awkward silence so the three of us fired up weeds at the same time. It was pretty funny really, but nobody was laughing. “By the way,” he continued, “we didn't find anything in the front yard or in the flat. Short of pulling up every floorboard in the place, we can say it's clean.”

“I was hopin' that he missed somethin'. The cat who cut me, not the cop.”

“Apparently not.”

“Did you find out anything more about Mr. Amerika?”

“A few things, none of them all that interesting. He was pretty much an under the radar type, except he was in our system. A couple of priors for solicitation — once in Golden Gate Park near the old windmill on the north west side — it's a known place for homosexuals to, um, get together. The other time was in Buena Vista Park, that time he

solicited an undercover officer. So other than a predilection for outdoor man-on-man sex, we've got nothing.”

“Well, that only means that he was pretty careful. Except for the sex thing of course,” I added hastily.

“Is there something you're not telling me? You like him for something? If you're holding out on me, so help me...”

“Take it easy, man. Truthfully all I know about him is he was in the import/export business — somethin' about redwood burls. That and he had a friend who was killed in Nam. Do I think he is — well, was — involved in somethin' else? Sure, like I'm suspicious, but beyond that, I got like nada, dude.”

Zyzck looked at me warily but eased off. “So OK, what are you two up to?”

“Workin' on the diary, or at least what we've got of it.”

“Let me see. What do you think?”

I handed him a page that hadn't been marked up with my chicken scratch. “Dig, this is guesswork, but most of the prose is no help, just touchy-feely stuff. But there are these sections that appear every now and then. We think it might be a logbook, looked like someone — maybe the chick, Karen, kept a record of her tricks, wrote 'em all down.”

“Not really junky behavior,” commented the inspector.

“Yeah, no, you're right. The only thing we can think of is that she was pretty young and hadn't been doin' it for that long. Or here's one I like, Ramón not so much: maybe this was for leverage.”

“Leverage, you mean like blackmail?”

“Maybe. Again, we disagree on this.”

“Well,” chimed in ‘Tack, “it's all hypothetical. We don't know anything about the chick, right?”

“Sure, but even so, why don't you think it's about blackmail?” asked the inspector.

“The flowers, hearts, rainbows, and unicorns in the margins. Blackmailers are nasty people, man,” responded Ramón.

“Whatever,” I continued. “Maybe not blackmail, but maybe some form of protection. Naïve, yeah, but there you go.”

Zyzck chewed on that one a bit. “Something like this could piss off the wrong guy.”

“Sure, sure, but the question is, how much? Enough to off somebody?”

“People have been known to kill for less.” The inspector man didn't like where this was leading. “So,” he went on, like he was figuring this out for the first time, “what you have here is a possible motive.”

“And not for that kid you've got locked up. If you factor in this—”

“This is conjecture, pure speculation,” interjected the cop. “You said yourself you were guessing.”

“I know,” I answered. “I know. But this, coupled with Stacii's murder throws a fair amount of reasonable doubt into the mix. Hate to break it to you man, but your sure thing is lookin' less sure by the minute.”

The fat cop grumbled and muttered something unprintable.

“You can say that again,” responded ‘Tack *sotto voce* like.

“Do you live to make my life miserable?” asked the cop, like he just wanted to know.

“After last night, well the other night, I could ask you the same.”

The big man shook his head. “Amateurs. You guys get my goat.”

“Look,” I said, “I’m just doin’ a job. You guys, the pros, you’ve got resources.

You can go over minutia. We amateurs have to rely on instinct, brains, and luck.”

“You two...,” Zyzck thought about it for a bit and realized that it wasn’t worth it, so he just shook his head and repeated himself. “You two.”

“Yes sir, man.”

“Forget it. Got any coffee?”

“Sure,” said Ramón, “we’ve got some decent beans.” He went over to the sink and filled up the kettle with water and stuck it on the hot plate and balanced the drip filter over the office thermos. “It’ll take a bit.”

The inspector played with the knot of his tie while he stared at a Xerox. “So, what’s your take on this logbook thing, what do you think the different columns mean?”

“Don’t know, maybe initials, dollar amounts, act performed...”

“You mean like...,” the cop was trying to frame the question, but I headed him off.

“I mean there are some common terms that hookers use for certain jobs.” I started to go over them with the inspector, but he threw up his hands and stopped me. He had worked vice in the past; he’d been around the block a few times.

“What about the asterisks? Maybe that’s sort of like an exclamation mark?”

“Nuh-uh,” replied ‘Tack, spooning dark grounds from the bag into the filter.

“Why not?” asked Zyzck.

“‘Cause,” ‘Tack replied, “She uses exclamation marks in her journal entries. Lots of them. I, well we, think it's for something else.”

“Like what?”

“Don't know,” I answered. “Maybe somethin' extra done, maybe somethin' particularly good or bad, maybe somethin' else altogether.”

Soon the coffee was ready and we all had refills and Ramón erased his schematics and transcribed a page onto the board. We had a little skull session and put down our guesses. Eventually, Zyzck looked at his watch and said he had to get back to work which was a bit of an insult but I was OK with it, ‘Tack not so much. I looked over to him and gave him a slight nod which he correctly interpreted as “keep your trap shut” so he did. In the brief silence that followed I asked about Blair.

“The kid? I don't know. I still don't think he's completely innocent, I think he knows something. But yeah, I've already talked to the D.A. this morning. We think we've got him on two drug charges and we're going to hold him on those. The homicide charges might be dropped — don't start celebrating yet, but the M.E. found similarities in the stab wounds between our young hooker here,” gesturing with the photocopy in his hand, “and your dancer. Different weapons but the way the stab wounds line up is...similar. Also the bruising on his sister's neck doesn't match the kid's — his hands are smaller. Whoever did that was a larger man. You can't pin that one on us; that was the coroner team's fuck up. Long story short, there was a screw up in the MLC where they got confused over a postmortem artifact, and that plus the blood transfer covered up the ante-mortem bruising. Once they cleaned everything up and looked at it closer, they caught the error,” he sighed, like breathing and talking at the same time was hard, dig?

“That's as much as I can give out right now. Check in with me in the next day or so. Nothing's going to happen overnight.” He got his big frame upright and looked over at ‘Tack. “Thanks for the coffee, Ramón.” He looked back at me and said he would let himself out and I nodded. No handshake, but civil like, he turned and headed out the door and down the stairs.

“Sometimes,” Ramón said, “I would like to cold cock that S.O.B.”

“What?”

“Thanks for the coffee, Ramón.”

“Aw, you're too thin skinned. That's just him bein' nice and polite-like. Look, I'm no fan of the heat, but I'll give him that he can be reasonable. 'Sides, 'cept for the drug charges, it looks like things are movin' in the right direction for young Mr. Poundstone.”

“He's got a pretty good lawyer, right?”

“Huh? Yeah, no they hired Edwin Cornwall. Humorless, kind of bookish, no flair, but I think that's probably what appealed to them. He's expensive and has a pretty good record. Likely he can get the drug charges reduced or thrown out altogether. I mean the cops were tryin' so hard to fit the murder raps on him that they probably cut some corners. But like that's all out of our hands at this point.”

“Oh, and hey man, I meant to say that...I'm sorry about Stacii. That's a drag, man.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “a colossal drag. I still need to find out about her family, I'd...I'd like to talk to them.” I looked at the pile of Xeroxes and started to arrange them in order when the phone rang. It was Velma, and the reception wasn't very good, but I gave her the news and told her to have Mr. Cornwall give me a call. She was concerned

about the drug charges, but I told her I couldn't do anything about that — that's what lawyers were for. With a slight crack in her voice, she thanked me and said they would be back in Frisco early next week. I said that was fine, told her not to call it Frisco and to call me when they got in. We both said overlapping goodbyes and I hung up.

“Well, that's that, right?” asked Ramón.

“Pretty much.” I picked up the ring of keys off the desk, the one that Bruce had given me in the hospital, and started absently twirling them on my index finger.

“That means you total the expenses, submit your invoices and close this one up, right.”

“If I was smart, yes.”

“But...you're not smart.”

“Not really. Not with this case. I mean like I didn't get anything done but get a couple of people killed.”

“I don't see how you got anybody killed. Why was Mr. Amerika there? And you don't think you had anything to do with Stacii...,” he left it unsaid. “I mean what could you have done differently?”

“I don't know, man. Mr. Amerika is anybody's guess, but I think he was shadowin' me for a while. I think he was into somethin' and wanted out. He seemed tired, no, not tired, like the word would be *weary*. He was also scared of somethin' or someone.” I stopped the twirling and closed the keys into my fist. Like the die was cast, hear what I'm saying? “I'm gonna take a look at his pad this afternoon and with luck, his business establishment a little later. I think I can handle the pad alone, but I could use some help tonight.”

“You're not on the clock on this one, right?” asked ‘Tack, but of course he already knew the answer.

“Yup, this is on my dime.”

“I'd ask why, but I guess it's the Quixote thing.”

“Well, it's more than windmills. It's people. For whatever reason, Bruce Amerika saved my behind. I figure I owe him something. Plus, he was tied into all of this. I may be wrong, but I think it's worthwhile to take a look into his affairs. You in?”

“For tonight? Yeah, but I think you need more backup than just me, judging by the other night's shindig.”

“You're right. I figure I should have had protection when I checked out that pad in the Haight. I've got a call into Gill. He's pretty solid and a good shot.”

“Hey,” said ‘Tack, “at least you’re learning.”

“Yeah, heck of a price though.” I thought about Bruce and Stacii and what I could have done differently. Didn't matter though, what's done is done and all that.

“OK, so Mr. Amerika is on the menu for today and tonight. Set him aside for the moment. What about Stacii? Why her?”

“I think Stacii's murder was a message or a botched frame job.”

“Framing you?”

“Well, the cops were there awfully quick. Zyzck couldn't or wouldn't say anything about a tip, but it's ten to one that somebody dropped a dime on me and made it way too easy for the man to connect the dots. So like it or not, I have to live with both of those deaths, and aside from bein' a stone cold bumner, it really pisses me off.”

“Well, do you know anything else? Something you've been keeping from the fuzz?”

“I might know his name.”

“Whose name? The murderer?”

“Yeah, dude named Roland Sabacan.”

“Why didn't you tell the cops?”

“Well, the info came from Bruce Amerika, and he's no longer around. I don't know why he would throw the name at me. It may be somethin' else.”

“But you've said yourself that that's what the cops are good for — you know, an army of flatfoots to make phone calls, knock on doors, stake out locations, and all that stuff.”

“Sure, sure, there's that, and I may have to turn it over at some point. But if this Sabacan cat killed Stacii, then I've got a bit of a score to settle. Mr. Amerika knew somethin' about him. I've got a hunch that they had done business together before.”

“What kind of business?”

“Well, Bruce was in the import/export business, so I'm guessin' import. What kind of name is Sabacan?”

“Sabacan? You said he was Asian?”

“Well, I never got a great look at his map, but yeah, I think so.”

“I knew a Filipino cat named Felix Sabacan, he was a Petty Officer when I was in training. Don't know if it's a common name or not.”

“There were a couple Sabacans in the phone book when I was lookin' for him, but of course I don't know if they're relatives or not. Didn't expect him to be listed and he wasn't.”

“You could call and ask?”

“Nah, I don't want to risk them tellin' him that someone's lookin' for him. Don't worry, I'm workin' on another way to find him.”

The buzzer rang again and I looked out to see Dan Baker on the sidewalk. I pocketed the keys, rolled my eyes, and buzzed him in. I went over to the office door, opened it and remained standing by it, giving him a standard handshake and steering him toward one of the chairs.

“Mr. Baker, Dan. Come on in and sit. You wanna cup of coffee?”

“Sure. Cream and two sugars?”

“Sorry, ixnay on the eamcray. I think I've got a couple of sugar packets somewhere...”

“That's OK, I'll just take it black.”

I got him a clean mug, poured the last of the contents of the thermos into it, set it down in front of him and went over to my side of the desk. He had reached into his briefcase and took out a couple of papers. He passed them over and I read through them.

“So this is just sayin' that I'm on the hook for anything that the insurance doesn't cover, right?”

“Pretty much.” He shook his head to one side to move his blond bangs away from his forehead. “Practically, it means you may be responsible for the deductible...”

“Which is?”

“One hundred.”

“What the heck, it's an expense. I'll need a copy of this.”

“I've got one right here.”

“Of course you do.” So I signed and initialed both copies and handed over his keys, the tag of which had a fair sized stain. “Sorry 'bout the bloodstain. It was unavoidable-like.”

He looked at the ring with distaste. “OK. Do you want to tell me what went on? Can you tell me?”

“Not much to tell. I went in there. Then somebody broke in and popped up some floor boards, grabbed a bag, fought me, killed another cat and split.”

He thought about that as he sipped his coffee. Finally he responded with “That's some business you're in.”

“Yeah, well it's not usually so...active.” He started to put the papers and the keys back into his case when I noticed his ring. “Hey, Dan.”

He stopped and looked up. “Yes?”

“Can I ask you somethin'? About your ring?”

“What, this? He self-consciously played with it with his other hand.

“Yeah. School ring?”

“Yes. Cal, class of 66.”

“You always wear it?”

“What? Yeah, I guess so. I rarely take it off. I'm kind of proud of graduating from Cal and it's a way for Alums to recognize each other. Shows we've got something in common.”

“Yeah, I can dig that. Do they sell replacements?”

“What?”

“I mean if you were to lose it.”

“I've never lost it.”

“But if you were to...”

“Well, then yes, I suppose I could buy another. Why?”

“No reason. I like the look,” I lied. “Figure I might want to buy somethin' like it. Not a class ring. I wouldn't want to pretend I graduated from Cal or Stanford or anything like that. I mean I imagine they sell just plain rings as well.”

“I suppose so.” He was both confused and offended at the same time.

“Forget it. Look, give me a buzz when you get the bill from the insurance company. I'll take care of it.” I got up and he got the cue. We shook and he thanked me before leaving. Once I heard the outer door slam and he was out on the street I got the half-Polaroid from under the Xerox pile and stared at it.

“What's that?” asked Ramón.

“That's a class ring. Only it's on the right pinky. Thought I had somethin' there.”

“Something on what? The murderer?”

“Not **the** murderer or maybe even not **a** murderer. ‘Course I could be 180 degrees off on this one. But maybe it's a way to get Blair off his drug charges.”

“How so?”

“Lookit, we both know that kid could barely function, and sure he may have scored a joint or two, but I think he relied on his sister for all of that. Maybe some others were involved. That's why I need to talk to Kimi.”

“Well he's at Dr. Feelgood's.”

“Yeah, that's somewhere else I need to go. Too much to do, especially for a case that's over. For all intents and purposes,” I added. For the umpteenth time I went back to the picture trying to get something out of it. Frustrated, I threw it back down on the desk.

“Mind if I take a look?”

“Sure, knock yourself out.” I carried the picture back over to ‘Tack and then gathered up the coffee cups, emptied them in the small sink and washed them and the thermos.

“I like your initiative.”

“What?”

“The cleaning.”

“Yeah, well I was expectin' company. Still am.”

“Still, the place looked somewhat presentable this morning. I mean it's all relative but I think you've shamed me into tackling a bit of my mess later on. Fall cleaning and all that...Hah!”

“Hah what?”

“Some detective you are.”

“You're sayin' I missed somethin'?”

“Maybe. Take a look.”

I hastily dried off my hands and hurried over to his desk.

“What am I lookin' for?”

“Just look at it.” So I did. Like I mentioned it was a half of a color Polaroid. The whole photo would have featured Karen, the dead redhead chick and presumably some

friend, lover, trick or somebody, but he was on the right half which was now gone. The only trace of him was a hand on her right shoulder and it featured a pinky ring, too small to tell but it could have been a class ring. Problem was that it was his right hand. “I’m not getting it.”

“Some detective. You’re looking at the chick and the hand. Check out the background.”

That’s when I saw it. There was a poster in the background. It was a poster for The Doors, but again, it was half a poster with the band members I didn’t recognize, maybe the drummer and guitar player. At the top were two letters, an R and an S. Backwards, but in a recognizable font. “OK, I dig. How did I miss that? This was taken lookin’ into a mirror, maybe the dude had the Polaroid in his lap or somethin’.”

“Finally.”

“Meaning that is his left hand. Mr. Baker is back to being a person of interest. Señor Nomar, I believe you earned yourself a drink.”

“I’ll settle for lunch.”

“The two are not mutually exclusive.” I was feelin’ pretty good. It wasn’t enough to bring up to Zyzck and he would be really upset when he found out I had been holding out on him, but it was nevertheless a solid clue toward what I couldn’t say. I started to get my coat when the phone rang. I took it and immediately felt a chill. They were polite as usual and agreed to meet me, not at the office but in Washington Square in fifteen minutes, park bench on the southeast corner near Stockton. I said OK and rung off.

“Lunch will have to wait, Ramón. I’ve got to meet somebody.”

“Does this somebody have a name?”

“Yeah, trouble. Shouldn't take too long. How about we meet at Dante's for a slice or two in an hour.”

“Cool. I can start cleaning up this mess.”

I got five twenties from the office safe and stuffed a small scrap of paper and three of the bills into a small envelope then grabbed my coat, shades, smokes, my keys and headed out. It was a short walk to the small triangular park nestled between Columbus, Union, Stockton and Filbert. There were some cats playing Frisbee near the statue of Ben Franklin, some others were passing along a bottle of Red Mountain under the cypress trees, and there were a pair of couples getting friendly and frisky under the poplars. Across the park, a guitar and a few bongos were being enthusiastically tortured, and somewhere there was a radio on with the voices of Russ and Lon doing play-by-play. That reminded me that the good guys were on the road right now in Houston. I shook my head — baseball in domes, a sure sign of the coming apocalypse. The twin spires of Saints Peter and Paul (666 Filbert Street) were casting long fall shadows and there were a few fast moving puffs of clouds in the light blue sky; a stiff off shore breeze was starting to kick up.

She was seated on one of the benches near Stockton, had the entire bench to herself. I guessed that the beef planted in the two closest benches were her employees, and they both looked to be packing judging by the serious bulges in their coats. She had to be careful; there were a lot of people who would be happy to see her hurt or worse. Still, she preferred to conduct a fair amount of business outdoors. Which only made sense considering how much her business relied on bugs and other recording devices.

She refused to be hoisted by her own petard, dig? I looked around and sat down on the bench, looking straight ahead.

I'll call her Cynthia Viperidea. This wasn't her real name, but like I said, statute of limitations and all that. I wasn't in her inner circle and had no desire to be in it, so I called her by her last name, which seemed old-fashioned and somehow appealed to her. She could put up a pleasant enough façade, but I had learned the hard way that it was a bit of a trick. She was ruthless in her pursuit of information and money. There were rumors about people who had crossed her disappearing in some way, never to be found. These unfortunates were supposedly killed and dismembered in a butcher shop in Chinatown and then dumped into the bay like so much chum. I didn't know if any of this was based in reality and I wasn't about to ask or poke around. Let's just say I know some of the things she had done for sure, so I wouldn't put a couple of murders past her, dig?

She was dressed in a black dress, not exactly a mini but cut plenty above the knee, and the top was fastened around her neck like a halter showing off the taut and tanned skin on her arms and back. She wore thigh-high black boots and dark nylons with some kind of pattern on them. I started to think of spider webs, but then I realized how that seemed. The mind can play funny tricks on you, that's for sure. As always, she wore large dark glasses, the right lens mostly covering up a nasty scar that underlined her eye socket. Sure, when outside she liked to cover it up, but once inside in a more intimate setting, she was almost proud of it.

“Hello, Wendell,” she purred in a nice contralto, with almost no trace of her native Shanghai accent, even nailing the l's in my name. “It's nice to see you,” she said without looking at me.

“Miss Viperidea, hope things are well with you.”

She laughed, it was a bit off-putting, but it was genuine. “Your formality always amuses.”

“I aim to please.”

“Forgive me, but I am on a bit of tight schedule.” She turned half looked at me, lowering her shades a degree and smiled. “No rest for the wicked.” The wind was blowing her long, straight black hair into her face. She made a couple of efforts to move the hair back where it belonged before giving up.

“OK then, straight to business, fine. I need two things, the whereabouts of one cat and info about another.”

“I presume you've tried more conventional methods for locating this person.”

“A couple, but I need a little help. 'Sides, sometimes my methods lack subtlety.”

She laughed again. “Quite a way to put it.”

“Well, like we all have our strengths and weaknesses, dig? It helps to be aware of them.”

“Yes, I will agree with you there.”

“Do you want me to tell you the names or give them to one of your employees?” I asked with a vague gesture toward one of the adjacent benches.

“Do you have the names written down?”

“I've got a small scrap of paper with their names, yeah. The first one is a Filipino cat named Sabacan.” I spelled it out for her. “I need to know where he's hidin'.”

“I don't usually ask, and while I trade in information, there are some things I don't need or want to know. But I'm curious, why this man?”

“Do you know him? He ever work for you?”

She shrugged her shoulders in response.

“OK,” I continued, “I think he's murdered a couple of chicks.”

She chewed on that for a bit. “Why not let the police do their job? That's what they are there for, correct?”

“Sure, sure, but one of them was like a friend of mine.”

“So it's personal. That's a dangerous thing, revenge.”

In the distance, a dog made an acrobatic catch of a Frisbee and people started applauding. I could also hear that something exciting was going on in the ballgame; I couldn't focus on the details, just Lon's enthusiasm. A few large crows soared between the spires of the church, black stains against the bright blue of the sky and the alabaster-like purity of the building. They reminded me of something but I couldn't remember what. I shook my head in an effort to clear it. “Yeah, I know,” I finally answered. “It's not somethin' I'm particularly proud of.”

“Do you plan to kill him?”

“Nah, not that I wouldn't want to see him gone, but that's not me.”

“Peace and love and all that,” she said hint of irony.

“Sure, you nailed it.”

She glanced over towards the large white church and brushed the hair from her face. “And the other man?”

“Hah. He is, or he was a piece of work.”

“I take it he's no longer extant.”

“What? Oh, yeah, no. He died a few days ago,” I responded, leaving out the details.

“What do you need to know about him?”

“He was involved in some stuff, some of which had him worried and some of which involved this Sabacan cat. I think so anyway. I'd like to know what this stuff was.”

“I know you don't like to talk about your work anymore than I do, but is this about the missing heiress?”

“Missing heir...No, no I'm not lookin' for her anymore.”

She paused for a bit, biting her lower lip. “You should you know. You should still be looking for her.”

“You know somethin'?”

She arched one shoulder. “No, not really. Call it intuition, for lack of a better word.”

“Like a gut feeling?”

“You could say that, yes.”

“Well, I'm fired from that gig and I'm just tryin' to tie up some loose ends on another one. Tell you the truth though, it gets old.”

“What does?”

“I'm not proud of strikin' out. Sure, I can dig that it happens, strike out every six and a half at bats out of ten and you're in the hall. But it's not the same in my line of work. People talk, rumors spread, and the next thing you know, my phone stops ringin'. I gotta have bread, you know? The other thing is that I'm tired of people tellin' me to find

her, no offense. But right now, I need to finish up some work for another client. And find this Sabacan cat.”

She let that play through her skull for a bit. “OK, if that's how it is.”

“That's how it is.”

“So how soon do you need this information?”

“Sooner the better. I think the cat is still out there but he might blow town or come after me. I'm givin' myself a couple of days to find him before I turn it over to the man.”

“I'm embarrassed that we have to talk about payment, but again, I'm pressed for time and don't have the luxury for the preferred social graces.” For the first time, she looked directly at me. A large cloud blocked the sun and we were suddenly in the shade. Even with her large shades covering half of her face she looked both beautiful and scary. Then she smiled again, and as if on cue, the cloud moved on and all was sunshine and blue skies again. Weird, man. “Because of our...history, I really don't feel comfortable charging you my usual rates for this. Your requests seem simply enough, and assuming I can fulfill them it would still leave me in your debt.”

“Thanks, Miss Viperidae, but I can offer a little bit of money. For expenses-like.”

She didn't waste her time arguing the point. “Very well. See that man over there?” She slightly nodded her head toward the bench to her left. “Give that man the names. I trust you can do that without drawing too much attention to yourself?”

“I can manage fine.”

“Very well. Good luck Wendell. We'll be in touch.”

“Thanks again.” I got up and ambled over toward Stockton. The dude on the other bench got up and started walking toward me, both of us looking distracted like, causing us to bump into each other. We said our apologies, dusted ourselves off and split in opposite directions; no worse for wear except I was lighter by an envelope with a scrap of paper with two names on it. And, of course, sixty bucks. I didn't look back and I doubted that she was looking at me. Weird way of doing business, but what are you gonna do?

I hoofed it over to Green and into the small pizzeria. Calling it a hole in the wall would be generous, and a slight to holes everywhere. What it lacked in cleanliness it made up for in a lack of variety. The place hadn't just acquired a fine level of grease and dirt; it had several strata of filth, like a geologist's dream, dig? You couldn't order a pie. You just had to take what Geno, the owner, had decided to cook that day. Usually the coke machine was broken or he was out of soda juice, like today the only flavor available was Fresca. The Hamm's beer clock didn't keep time anymore, but it featured a cool diorama involving suds and a lake, the land of sky blue waters and all that. There was a trick to it, so it looked like the light was moving, but actually, the scene was on a rolling piece of plastic. It was a bit hypnotizing. But as much as it might make you want a cold one, it was moot; Geno had lost his liquor license ages ago. So you're expecting me to say that the pies were like slices of heaven and you put up with all the negatives because of the quality of the pizzas. Nah, truth be told the food wasn't that great. But it was cheap, really cheap. You could have a couple of slices and a coke (or whatever soda was available) for a buck and a half. There was just a single glass counter where you could see the various pies available. It was after the lunch rush now, so the pickings were slim.

I ordered a Fresca and waited for ‘Tack. He puffed in a little out of breath and gave me a couple of messages. We chewed the food and the fat, setting up the plan for the evening's activities. Ramón said that Gill had called back and he was in. We could expect him to swing by the office around eight. My plan was to have him drive us to China Basin where Bruce Amerika's warehouse was. He could offer protection in the warehouse and he could function as a rear guard, protecting our flank. ‘Tack had to get back to Zack's to get some more diodes or something and I had a small errand of my own. I decided to do this one in broad daylight, figured it was safer. I was thinking it might be good to have protection for this one as well, but I flipped a coin and lost, so I was tackling the job solo.

I caught a Yellow Cab on Columbus and gave the hack a Polk Street address in the 2300 block. I had looked it up and it appeared to be Bruce's last known residence, so I was just hoping that it really was his last. And that nobody had beaten me to it. There was a French Laundry joint on the ground floor and a couple of flats above it. The building had been recently painted a robin's egg blue with gingerbread moldings accented in white. Looked nice and fit in with the upscale end of Polk. I paid the hack and looked around before going up to the metal gate, discreetly putting on a pair of latex gloves and leaning on the buzzer. Nothing. I tried again and then fumbled around with the key ring and guessed on the key. First try and I was in. There were two doors next to each other, each with large glass panes. Through the glass in one of the doors I could see a small dog come running down the stairs, so I said a silent prayer but the man upstairs doesn't listen to me. Apparently Bruce had a dog and it was a tiny black and tan Yorkshire Terrier. So it was yap, yap, yap time. I steeled myself for the noise, then managed the lock and let myself in, resisting the urge to leave it open and have the critter run out into the street.

Walking up the stairs was hard as the little beastie was constantly underfoot, not biting but just circling around me and letting loose with his painfully shrill barks. When I got to the top of the stairs, I stopped and waited. The miniature pooch stopped with me, shut up for a moment and cocked its head to the side, looking at me to make the next move.

I headed straight for the kitchen where I found a water bowl and a food bowl, both empty. I filled the water bowl from the sink and then looked around for some dog chow. There was a large bag under the sink and a couple of cans in cupboard above and to the left of it. I poured a fair amount of the dry stuff into the bowl, and once I found a can opener, topped it off with some of the canned stuff. The Yorkie dug into it like it hadn't eaten in days, which was probably the case. I scratched it behind its ear and looked the ID tag attached to its collar. Of course, the dog was named Dennis. I petted him a couple of times, saying his name in what I hoped was a soothing voice and stood back up. He was staying put for now, so with that taken care of, I was able to take a look around. First stop was the living room.

The bad news was that somebody had gotten there before me. Drawers had been opened and emptied, some framed pictures had been removed and cast aside and those still on the wall were left hanging uneven. There were even some pillows and cushions that had been cut into with a knife leaving white cotton stuffing all over the place.

The furnishings were, how should I put this? A bit over the top would be an understatement. It was all overdone; Rococo would be the word, I suppose. Every stick had some carved curly cue and there were lots of small decorative pillows. The walls had been painted ecru with a brush stroke that mimicked a stone texture. The accent color was pistachio and the carpet was thick and white, at least where Dennis hadn't had recent

accidents. There was also a lot of what might be called erotic art on the walls: photos and paintings as well as a few small statuettes on some shelves and on the mantle above the fireplace. Almost all of this art featured nude men, some of them in various states of excitement, if you catch my drift.

I didn't want to linger, so I moved on from the living room to the bedroom. I found more of the same here, though the color scheme was reversed. Even though it was obvious that someone had already done so, I checked the drawers and bed stand, but aside from some prescription sleeping pills and aspirin I didn't find anything of consequence. The second bedroom had been converted into an office, and it was full of small, I don't know, *objets d'art*, an odd jumble of oriental stuff and more of the same that was in the living room. There was a massive Edwardian desk in the center of the room and along with a ton of paper, its surface held an electric typewriter, a pencil sharpener, and a couple of framed pictures. One of these was Bruce holding Dennis (a pink bow on the top of his head) and one was some muscle-bound guy in olive drab pants with his shirt off, a buzzed haircut, and a grim smile. Hard to tell, but judging by the flora it looked like it could have been taken in the Far East. I guessed it was Bruce's friend in Nam. I went through some of the pile but there wasn't much, just invoices and a couple of typed letters. They ranged from inquiries about the availability of general and specific items (some named, some with just lot numbers), to specific shipping instructions on particular items. He didn't sign any of them; he just always used his initials.

The desk drawers had been removed and their contents had been scattered all over the floor. I found some personal letters in one pile. I won't go into detail here, but they

put a name to the character in his Vietnam narrative and possibly the same name on the shirtless cat in the framed pic on the desk. The third drawer down was where I hit some pay dirt. Like with all the other drawers, the previous guest had already taken it out and shaken its contents into a pile. I sorted through the pile and couldn't find anything. It was very possible I was too late and had been beaten to the punch. I sat down in the high-backed black leather chair and absently opened and closed the drawer a couple of times. On a hunch I pulled it all the way out, parked it in my lap and studied it a bit. OK, I was guessing some, but to me the weight was wrong; it was heavier than I felt it should be. So I knocked around the inside of it for a bit and discovered a probable false bottom. Digging through the pile on top of the desk yielded a letter opener and I used it to pry the board loose. Bingo, out came a manila envelope that contained a multi-page document and a couple of keys. The document looked like a draft for a will. It was typed, but certain things were either crossed out or added in pen and pencil. It started with the usual “sound mind and body” bit, and then rambled on about the meaning of existence interspersed with a few personal triumphs and disappointments. After a couple of pages of this self-examining, philosophical and psychological mumbo-jumbo, the document did describe certain bank accounts and what looked like a code for a combination lock along with instructions for the final disbursement of his holdings. Well I'm no accountant, but it seemed like the only tangible things he could leave behind would be Dennis, some of the art — and I had no idea on the value of any of **that** stuff — and whatever was in his warehouse. Everything else was on the red side of the ledger; I'm saying that Mr. Amerika had lived his life heavily in debt and trapped in tapped-out city.

I spent another half hour going through things and then put everything together more or less like I found it (which was more or less chaos-like, dig?). Dennis had returned and was doing his circling 'round the legs routine, but at least he had stopped yapping. I gathered what I had found into a small paper bag and got ready to split. Dig, my final act was kind of like charity; I figured I owed it to the cat. I put a piece of paper into the typewriter and composed a short note. I took a small thumbtack off the wall and carried it, the bag, and the note down the stairs. Dennis followed me and had started yapping again. I pried the curtain on the door a little to the side and was reasonably confident that there wasn't anybody lurking close by. Once outside, I left the key in the door and posted my little note with the thumbtack on the door opposite. I opened the metal gate and kept it open with my foot while I removed my gloves. Then I kicked the gate open and split, walking up Polk and looking for a cab. And in case you're curious, the note wasn't much, it just said:

“I'll be away for a bit so if you don't mind, could you please look after Dennis?”

I signed it: B.A.

I got lucky and found a cab within a couple of minutes, so I headed back to the office where I burned the phone lines some more. I got a hold of Fats, and he was cool with me borrowing his BSA. I looked at the office Simplex clock and decided it would be better to grab the bike tomorrow. Then I put Coltrane on the office turntable and tried to put what I knew together with what I didn't. I guess I can describe it like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, some pieces fit, some had to be rotated to fit and some just sat

in a pile making a vague pattern. Some of the parts of the picture were obvious, but other parts were odd, seemingly tangential. I also sorted through my haul from Bruce's pad.

The phone ringing brought me back to earth. It was Dawn and she wanted to know about tonight. I said that it might be late, and that tomorrow might be better. She said to call her anyway, no matter how late. I said sure and rang off.

‘Tack came back with a bag full of electrical parts and a borrowed walkie-talkie set. He figured we might be able to use it for our little party. I agreed that it might prove useful. He grinned and started rummaging about for some D cells.

Gill was late, but that was just Gill. His concept of time was vague at best. In fact, getting Gill to commit to anything at all was a bit like nailing Jell-O to a wall. His real name was Gill Volkov, but because of his background and the way things operated in our circle he had to have a nick, so he hung it on himself one drunken night when somebody asked him to do something like move his cab and he must have said “no” thirty times in succession. So natch, we stopped calling him Volkov and started calling him Nyet. He tried to stop us for a while but eventually we wore him down.

Anyway, it was close to nine when we heard his “shave and a hair cut” horn honk. ‘Tack looked at me shaking his head while I just shrugged and we both grabbed our things. Before splitting, I made sure to leave the lights on and stacked a few records on the turntable, turned up the amp and opened the window a bit. It was chilly out; the fog had moved back in making everything cold, windy, and brittle. I climbed into the front and Ramón took the back seat. I shoved a watch cap over my head, not so much for the warmth but to contain my fro. Figured I made a less recognizable silhouette that way. I asked Gill if he was carrying and he opened the glove box, allowing me to see his .38. All the gun he needed, he once said. He actually practiced out on a range in South City and the story goes that he was an alternate for the Russian Biathlon Team for the Olympic games in Squaw Valley back in 1960. He actually traveled there with the team. His friend and countryman Aleksandr Privalov won a bronze but Gill never got to compete and thus had too much free time. He spent this time getting friendly with the people who ran the Olympic Village, so friendly in fact that when it was time to go, he didn't want to leave. So he decided to defect. He was “debriefed” for a month or so in

Sacramento before he drifted to the City. He claims he had a tail for a number for years and bought the .38 for protection but he had only fired it once in anger, and that was when a fare tried to rob him in the Western Addition a few years back. He offered me a slug from a small flask, but I said no, I had to think straight. He shrugged and said it was my funeral. Nice choice of words, man.

Things were quiet on Berry Street. The area was mostly warehouses and a couple of bars that catered to longshoreman types. Bouncer's had its lights on, but there were only a few professional alcoholics working on their drinks accompanied by a couple of bored hookers. Not exactly an advertisement for the high-life. As much as I could use a shot of something to steady my nerves, I resisted, better to be revved up and ready for the worse. The fog swirled in the air, the wind was howling and it carried a strong smell of the ocean: salt air and rotting fish. Gill parked the hack about a half block away and we all put on our gloves. Even though I could reasonably lie and say the keys were given to me (instead of stolen from his apartment), this was full on B & E, no technicalities about it. Once more I asked if everybody was in and both of them responded in the affirmative. I carried a large canvas bag wadded up into a loose ball and Gill and Ramón carried the walkie-talkies. We walked to the building and I checked the number. It was a five-story building, painted in a non-descript gray that melted in to the dark and fog. The front door had a small buzzer/intercom setup and the door looked to be one solid piece of metal. I fumbled some with the keys before getting the front door open. It wasn't exactly high rent. There was a puddle of standing water on the cement floor and the whole place had a faint odor of raw sewage and mold. Avoiding the puddle, I went over to the lobby directory, one of those black felt things with white plastic letters. Despite the glass case,

maybe half of the letters were missing. Mr. Amerika's business, The Golden Trading Group, LLC (or T o den Trad ng ro p L C), was located in suite 420. That meant the fourth floor, and it looked like the stairwell door was locked from the outside, but I had a key that fit it so we could avoid the freight elevator. As a precaution, Gill came with us; once we had scoped it out he was to get back to his hack and play lookout. This sparked a bit of a discussion, not to say an argument, on the best way to cover our behinds. Gill wanted to stay up on the fourth floor where he figured he could offer the maximum protection if we needed him. I said we needed somebody to warn us in time for us to get out cleanly. That's where the walkie-talkie came into play. If there was any action, we would let him know and he would do likewise if it looked like anybody wanted to pay a visit.

There were four companies on the fourth floor and Bruce's company was the farthest from the elevator, down a dark hallway. The door was wooden with glass insets, the glass kind of wavy-like and impregnated with chicken wire. The name of the firm was painted over one of these insets: The Golden Trading Group, LLC with Bruce Amerika, President, written underneath it. We all had flashlights with us and after trying the door and finding it locked, I pocketed mine and had 'Tack shine his on the door. After a couple of tries I got the right key into the lock and pushed the door open, which set off a small, cheerful little bell that scared the daylights out of all of us.

I guesstimated the space was maybe 2,500 to 3,000 square feet. On the far side from the door were a series of large windows that were last cleaned during the Truman administration. The floor was cement and the brick-red paint was chipped in some places, bubbled in others. I counted ten rows of shelving that appeared to be jammed

with stuff and there was barely enough room between the shelves for a person to fit. There also was a fine layer of dirt and dust on every horizontal surface, which surprised me given Bruce's general level of fastidiousness. First we checked the perimeter and didn't find anything or anybody. After maybe five minutes we figured we were alone, so we relaxed a bit and I told Gill to head downstairs. 'Tack and Gill decided on the walkie-talkie frequency and tested it a couple of times. Well, it worked if you were in shouting range, but the Roosky would have to give us a call when he was downstairs. I gave him the key to the stairwell and told him to be careful. He grunted and said he wasn't the one who had to be careful. 'Tack intervened and said we all had to be careful and that ended that.

While 'Tack and I started snooping around, Gill took off downstairs. His voice came through the small speaker on 'Tack's set so it looked like range and the concrete wouldn't be a problem. Cool. Ramón responded, asking if he copied and Nyet said *Da*. I told 'Tack to tell Gill to come back up. It was a couple of minutes before we heard the small tinkle of the door. Both of us froze, but of course it was just the Russian. He reported that the stairwell door on this floor was unlocked (which I already knew, having tested it earlier) and the door on the ground floor was locked from the outside but could be opened from the inside — probably a fire code thing he mused. That meant anybody coming in would have to take the elevator, so I told him to take it back down so we could time it. Of course, if we had visitors who had keys to the stairway we would be in trouble, but if someone took the elevator that would give us time to get out and it was loud enough to serve as an adequate warning. Worse case scenario would be Gill following them up or disrupting things downstairs. I told him to use his noodle and make

the right choice. He grunted in the affirmative and headed to the elevator. Even from inside the warehouse we could hear the noise of the motor and some loud clacks as it descended to the ground floor. I counted as I stepped into the hallway. It was about forty seconds before the motor stopped and there was one final clang. Gill pulled the gate open and whispered that he was out of the elevator into the walkie-talkie. The sound of Gill's voice coming out of Ramón's device was pretty loud and spilled out of the warehouse and echoed down the hall. I gave Gill enough time to get out of the elevator and then went back to 'Tack and told him to tell Nyet to close the gate. I had spent a minute debating with myself about leaving the elevator on the ground floor or leaving it on the fourth floor and if I should leave it with the gate up or down. If I left it up, that would mean that all anyone would be able to do would be to call the elevator but it wouldn't budge. I nixed that idea, because that would force them to try to break into the stairwell, and I wanted to keep that route open as an escape. Best bet would be to leave it on the fourth floor with the gate down. That would give us almost a minute and a half to collect our booty and split. I pushed the button and called the elevator up to my floor. Once the elevator was in place with the gate down, I stepped back into The Golden Trading Company, LLC warehouse.

I asked 'Tack if he had found anything interesting and he answered that it depended on the definition of the word interesting. I let that go. We didn't want to risk turning on the lights, so we kept our flashlights on and avoided the windows. The place seemed disorganized, but maybe we didn't know the logic behind the clutter. There was a small office that was partitioned over in a corner and it held a coffee pot, water cooler and two desks with phones. The desks had stacks of paper on them, so sorting through

that would take some time — time we didn't really have. I decided to concentrate my efforts there while I had Ramón look through all the junk.

And junk is a pretty good word to describe the collection of mainly ersatz oriental crap that was jammed into standard warehouse shelving. Aside from redwood burls (and I thought Bruce was kidding me about them) there were masks, lacquer boxes, wooden, stone and jade-carved statues of Buddhas, birds, turtles, old men with long beards in traditional costumes as well as young men and women wearing their traditional costumes or, in some cases, no costume at all. There were calendars in a couple of different languages for a couple of years past, present and future, boxes of chopsticks, fireworks of all kinds, pots and pans, tea sets and rice bowls, cartons of cigarettes and various musical instruments including kotos, pipas, erhus, flutes, ukuleles, and guitars. I told Ramón we were looking for guitars. He asked why and I said that there was something I found in Bruce's flat that mentioned guitars. When 'Tack found the guitars I asked if he could get at them, and he said he needed a ladder, so he poked around to look for one.

Meanwhile, I had finished going through the stuff on top of the desks. One of them looked like it belonged to a secretary; there were framed pics of a happy Filipino family next to the phone. The other desk only had one photo on it and that was of some white cat dressed in military drag, I couldn't be sure but it looked to be the same cat who was in the framed pic on Bruce's desk at home. I opened my canvas bag and dropped the photo in there. I finally had to turn on the small desk lamp; I figured it was worth the risk if I kept the gooseneck bent down far enough. I looked through a stack of invoices on the desk and grabbed a few that I thought could prove interesting. Then I went through the drawers of each desk. There wasn't anything in the secretary's desk aside from small

boxes of pens, pencils, rubber bands, staples, paperclips, carbon paper and note pads.

The first drawer in Bruce's desk was full of the same office supplies. The second drawer yielded more as it had a large checkbook and an accounting ledger. These went straight into the bag. I tried the third drawer and it was locked. I checked the key ring and there was one more small brass key. It fit and I twisted it.

I had to say it aloud, albeit in a hoarse whisper. "You know, Ramón, it's always the third drawer."

"What did you find?" asked Tack, sounding slightly out of breath.

"Not sure, but it looks like a junkie's kit." It was a soft leather bag, sort of like a travel kit but instead of a razor and brush, there was a hypodermic, spoon, two matchbooks and a piece of rubber tubing. Didn't surprise me, but I couldn't help feeling disappointed. Also it meant that there was one more smack addict in the mix. Ramón called out to say he'd gotten a few of the guitars down from the shelves. Unlike a lot of the items, these guitars were in boxes and were apparently made in the Philippines; at least that's what it said on the boxes. Tack read my mind and asked if we could at least chance opening up a couple. I said sure, and walked over to the ladder and grabbed a few boxes as he handed them down. I chose one at random and looked at it. The box was closed with shipping tape so I used one of Bruce's keys to cut it away. There was some foam packing material inside and a small guitar, it looked about a three-quarter scale. It was loosely strung which surprised me and the sound hole was full of paper. The Manila Times it turned out. But there was something else in there as well, a fair-sized plastic packet. The plastic was brown. You couldn't see through it, but judging by the weight and consistency we had hit the jackpot on the first try. We packed the whole thing back

up — we needed the box and hopefully there was something there that we could match to one of the invoices or something in the books. Ramón got back up on the ladder and I handed him the other boxes — no need to take more than we could carry.

Next, we needed to find the safe; there had to be one around someplace. This was actually pretty clever as it was hiding in plain sight, disguised as an electrical panel cover on the wall behind the Bruce's desk. I had to stand on his chair to reach it. I opened it up and instead of breakers there was a combination lock and a handle.

Tack sounded a bit annoyed. “What made you look there?”

“It's too high, not up to code. I think six foot seven is the limit.”

“You know electrical code now?”

“I must have seen it somewhere, or I guess I've been hanging around with you too long.”

“Got that right,” he responded. “Now how do you get it open?”

“I think I've got the combination.”

“Where did you get...? Never mind, I really don't need to know.”

I reached into my pocket and took out the slip of paper I had gotten from Bruce's pad. It took me a couple of tries, but I nailed it on the third. I shone my flashlight into the box and saw what I expected. I opened up one to be sure, but I had seen this routine before.

“What you got?” asked Ramón, climbing down the ladder.

“I believe it's a separate set of books.”

“So now you're an accountant as well?”

“Yeah, well later maybe.” I stuffed the two leather-bound books into my bag, which was getting pretty full. Let's do one more sweep and then—”

That's when ‘Tack's walkie-talkie chirped to life. “Guys,” Gill's electronic voice intoned, “I'm not sure, but a station wagon pulled up in front of the building. A couple of guys got out: medium height and build. Ski masks and gloves. I don't think they're here to work late.”

‘Tack walked over to me and handed me the device. “Did they come into the building?” I asked in a whisper and I turned down the volume even further.

“Nyet, they were, what's the word? Lurking.”

“Lurking?”

“You know, checking things out. Is that the wrong word?”

“Nah, it's right. Where are they now?”

“I don't know. I don't see them anywhere.”

“Copy that. Gill,” I barked in as loud a voice as I dared, “are you sure you don't see anybody else in the wagon or covering the main door to this place?”

“Nyet, just the two. The wagon is empty.”

“OK, if things change, let us know, OK? Otherwise, let's keep chatter to a minimum, dig?”

“Sure, I dig. I dig well,” responded the Russian.

Ramón looked at me. “Now what?”

“We make things dark, gather everything up and wait a bit for the elevator. If we don't hear anything in a couple of minutes, we split.”

After handing the walkie-talkie back over to ‘Tack, I shut the safe and closed the fake access panel. We shut off our flashlights and I turned off the lone lamp. I grabbed my bag while ‘Tack slung the radio device over his shoulder and walked over to where he had left the guitar, about halfway between the windows and the two desks. He stuffed the box under his arm and even though it wasn't a full-sized guitar it still looked a bit oversized and uncomfortable in comparison with ‘Tack’s stature, but he wasn't complaining. Still, the elevator remained quiet.

I confess that I didn't really know what to do. I really wanted to risk going down the stairs and taking off, assuming that Gill's info was correct. I strained my ears, hoping to hear the elevator start up, but either way we had to get out of there. That's when we saw two beams of light shining into the room from the outside, one of them almost landing on me. I made it over to the far side of the warehouse and hid behind one of the shelves. I turned around, bumped into someone and almost lost it, but it was only Ramón looking at me with a combination of fear and anger.

“The fire escape,” he whispered.

I nodded and motioned that we should stay put. One of the windows was open; that was something I forgot to check. We were on the other side of the large room and hopefully they were interested in the side with the office and guitars. They weren't trying to be quiet but instead were talking in like a regular conversational volume.

“You check out the product, and I'll check his desk,” said one of them. I wasn't sure. I thought I recognized the voice, but I wasn't placing it.

“There's already a ladder there, do you think somebody got here before us?”
asked the other voice. I recognized that voice, but then I had talked to him earlier that day.

“Anything's possible. Do you see the guitars up there?”

“Maybe.” I heard the sound of somebody climbing the ladder and then the sound of boxes hitting the cement floor. Despite the packing material and the fact that the guitars were loosely strung, they still made a guitar-like noise when they hit. There were nine boxes total, and after the last one hit we could hear the sound of the boxes being torn open. These two were working quickly; I'll give them that.

“Find anything?” asked the second cat.

“Not much, a couple of our invoices. But I think you're right, somebody has beat us to it.”

“Who?”

“Maybe that P.I. He and Mr. Amerika were getting close; maybe Bruce spilled a few things. Did you find the product?”

“Nine kilos worth.”

“Supposed to be ten.”

I looked over at Tack clutching the guitar box. That would be number ten.

“Maybe the same somebody grabbed the box.”

“Who?”

“You tell me.”

“I think it went into Mr. Amerika's arm if you ask me.”

“Highly possible, but we didn't find it in his apartment, so I don't know where else he would stash it.”

“Maybe at that last party?”

“I doubt it. I mean sure, anything's possible, but Roland couldn't find it. I think it's more likely in his safe.”

“Do you see it?”

“No, it's here somewhere, but we don't have time. Better destroy the evidence. Squirt the shelves.”

“Sure thing.”

I couldn't place the sound but the second guy was doing something on or to the shelves. It sounded liquid. I looked over and couldn't find ‘Tack, he had pulled one of his disappearing acts. The next sound I recognized. It was a match being struck. The small flame illuminated the back wall and then I heard a whoosh. They were torching the joint! Ramón came back from his self-appointed recon mission with quick, quiet steps. The first guy said something to the second one in a low voice and the second one laughed. They started back for the fire escape. I kept saying to myself for them to hurry, to get gone before the flames got to our side. That's when Nyet blew it for us by pushing the talk button on his walkie-talkie. Even with the noise of the fire, it was plenty loud.

“What was that?” asked the second voice.

“Sounded like it came from over there,” said the first. “You get that stuff down with you, I'll be there in a second.” Then he said in a louder voice, “Come out and drop your weapons or I'll shoot.” To emphasize his point, he squeezed the trigger and let a shot fly out in our general direction. I grabbed the walkie-talkie and whispered “May

Day!” What the heck, our position was compromised anyway. I looked over at ‘Tack and then behind him I saw some boxes I had recognized earlier. I can’t read Chinese, but I know a few words and even recognize a couple of characters. I could make out that the boxes contained fireworks, and while they were useless as a weapon, they might serve as a decent diversion. I tore into the box and ‘Tack opened another one. I gave a sign for ‘Tack to stay put until I was ready. The fire was now getting closer and so were the footsteps of the first man. Great way to die, I figured, shot, cooked or both.

The footsteps were about one shelf away and I figured it was time. Just as I lit the fuse, we heard the little tinkle of the bell on the door. It was Gill, huffing and out of breath. He saw the fire and said something in Russian. The man with the gun heard it as well, and risked running into the open, in a better position to get off a shot. I ran to the edge of the row and heaved the box toward him with Ramón following suit behind me. The noise of the boxes landing distracted the man for a second, and then maybe 1,000 firecrackers, M80's and Roman Candles started to explode. For a few brief seconds the flames, smoke and explosions turned the warehouse into the pit of hell — insanely hot, with air that was getting hard to breathe, and all kinds of bangs, whooshes, and zings ringing out. I had to duck when a Roman Candle flew by my head and at about the same time the man fired four more shots toward us, three were way off but one was close enough to graze my right shoulder, leaving my arm kind of numb. I let out the strongest expletive I knew, but the diversion had worked and this had allowed Gill to get one shot off, which was all he needed. His shot hit the man cleanly on the left wrist, causing the gun to go flying and the man to let out a scream before running for the open window and heading out the fire escape.

“You guys OK?” shouted the big Russian. “Should I follow him?”

“What? No. Guys, we gotta get out of here. Ramón, grab the guitar and Gill, hold the door open. Let's split.”

‘Tack picked up the guitar and I slung my bag over my barking shoulder, Santa Claus style. We were just able to make it out of the warehouse but when Gill opened the door, the air pressure caused the flames to explode through the door so we all hunched down, held our breath and ran down the hall and down the stairs. When we got to the ground floor we were all winded, coughing, and gasping for air. Gill checked the fire door and said the coast was clear. Once back in the lobby he cracked open the big metal door, checked the outside, and left saying he would get his hack. We nervously waited in the lobby for thirty tense seconds, half expecting the cat with the gun to come back and half expecting the ceiling to collapse. I started to worry more about the latter when the fire alarm kicked in. This place would be toast in a couple of minutes. With a small complaint from the tires, Gill slammed the cab right up to the entrance. I opened the metal door and ‘Tack and myself jumped into the open back door.

“That's them up there.” He pointed to the car they were using, a late model wagon. They had about a block head start. I slammed the door shut and was shoved back into the seat as Gill floored the loud pedal and with a high-pitched squeal we were off in pursuit.

We started to gain some ground as we followed them down Berry and then they made a left onto Third. Something changed, maybe they spotted us, or maybe they were trying to make it through the lights, but the wagon started to put some distance between us. It was a tough tail as they were going close to fifty and we were hitting nothing but

stale yellows. Gill tried to get closer as we followed them up Third but right before they got to Market the light changed to red. They ignored the light and blew right through the busy intersection. Suddenly the cab skidded to a stop with a shrill complaint from the tires, thrusting us all forward.

“Gill, we've got to follow them — it's late enough, run the light!”

But naturally, he responded, “Nyet! Cops always get the second guy going through a red light, and while I don't know or care what Ramón has in his box or what you have in your bag, I can guess that you wouldn't want anybody searching through that stuff, am I right?”

I had to agree and for punctuation, at that very moment a black and white turned off Market and leisurely continued up Geary. When the light changed we headed up Geary as well but we had lost the wagon by then and besides, we got stuck in the post theater crowd.

I rolled down my window and sparked a cigarette, letting loose with one short expletive.

“They made us, right?” asked Tack as he massaged a small burn on his hand.

“I don't know,” I responded, my head halfway out the window, “but running through the light would suggest it, dig?” Like it was obvious.

“Do you think they knew who we were?”

“Depends. I don't think he could see me any better than I could see him, so I would say probably not. Unless he got a good look at you — no offense, but you kind of stick out.”

“None taken. I don't think he saw me. ‘Tack looked over at me and pointed at my shoulder. “Hey.”

I looked at my shoulder and saw a small divot in my pea coat and blood was leaking out. I had forgotten all about it. “Hey Gill, got a rag?”

He handed me a handkerchief that wasn't very clean, but it had to do.

“Any idea who they were?” asked Gill.

“One of them, yeah, I think so. Not sure about the other cat though, the one with the heater.” I let my left index finger explore the hole and winced.

“Do you need a doctor?”

“Nah-uh. I think it just grazed me. I mean it's sore, sure, but it didn't go in. A glancing blow. I'll heal just fine.”

“One of them was that real estate guy, right?” asked ‘Tack.

“Property Management you mean. You recognized his voice, too. Well sure, maybe, but we didn't get a good look at them. It wasn't that Sabacan cat, that's for sure.”

Gill looked somewhat apologetic. “I feel bad, Wendell. I'm sorry for the noise. I was trying to move the radio and I must have hit the button. That could have been very bad. I'm also sorry we weren't able to follow them.”

“Not your fault, Nyet,” I responded. “The noise happened. We're here, in pretty much one piece. And that was one heck of a shot too. You've been practicing.”

Gill made a noise that was intended to sound humble.

“As for the light,” I continued, “you don't have nothin' to apologize for. You made the right choice. It was dumb luck, that's all. A half-minute one way and the light's green, a half-minute the other way and they get pulled over by the patrol car, or you're

right, maybe we get pulled over. We got what we needed and we're more or less in one piece. I'd call that a success and once we get out of this traffic we should find an open liquor store and head back to the office."

The adrenalin was wearing off and I was feeling run down. I felt like I could really use something, some weed or a shot of something to wake up a bit. Then we had to safely stow our bounty because it was likely our office or my pad was going to be the next joint to get broken into. Of course, I had to sort through, organize, and categorize all the stuff we had collected.

"I don't know about you," I continued, "but I need two things right now."

"Sure, a drink," said 'Tack. We can all use one, but what's the other thing?

"A box of band-aids."

So we found an open liquor store and picked up a pint of Jack and two six packs of Coors talls. For some reason the only band-aids the small store carried featured Flintstones cartoon characters. I would probably need four of these small stickers to cover the wound, but it was better than bleeding all over the place. Gill circled around the office for a couple of tries but the closest parking spot he could see was about three blocks away, so he let us out and started off looking for a spot, while me and 'Tack carried our stuff up the stairs. Ramón plopped down on the office couch and I parked the bottom of my lap on my chair, letting a huge sigh escape in the process. I checked the Simplex and it was a little past midnight. I cracked open one of the beers and passed it over to 'Tack and then opened one for myself. We just sat there drinking in silence for a bit. A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. I moved the curtains aside and looked down

to see Gill standing amongst the normal Saturday night revelers coming in and out of the Sniv. I sighed again and got up to buzz him in.

So the three of us sat around and tried to put everything in perspective, what we saw, heard and learned. At some point ‘Tack got out his pipe and we passed around some Moroccan Blonde. I got the office first aid kit out and tried to clean out the wound as best I could. It was bigger than I thought at first but still manageable without stitches. I put a couple of fresh band-aids on the hole and rotated my shoulder a few times.

“How's it feel?” asked Ramón.

“I'll live. It stings, and it's gonna hurt like heck tomorrow, but that's OK, I don't need any help. It'll scab up just fine.”

“Any of this,” Gill gestured toward my bag and the guitar box in the middle of the room, “stuff any help?”

“I think so,” I responded. “It'll take a few days to sort it all out.”

“What were those guys doing there?” asked Gill.

“Same as us, right?” Ramón said. “Looking for stuff...,”but he stopped as I was shaking my head.

“No, we were looking for stuff. They were doing two things: making off with the smack and cleaning up loose ends. There's stuff in there,” I said pointing to the pile that now looked kind of pitiful after the evening's efforts, “that connects them to Bruce, and they don't want that.”

“Connects them how?” Gill wanted to know.

“I’m workin’ on it,” I said. “I got some ideas, but they’re incomplete-like. Give me a bit. You heard them in there; they already suspect that I was there before them. I need to talk to Zyzck first thing in the morning.”

“Why do you want to bring the man into this?” asked an annoyed ‘Tack.

“Hah,” I laughed. “They can’t know about this stuff, not right now. No, the two things I need are a bit of protection and a solid alibi for tonight.”

“Why?” ‘Tack wanted to know.

“Here’s what I expect: that whole building is rubble about right now. One of those guys is going to try to pin it on me, the same kind of frame job that they tried with Stacii.”

“OK, so you were here the whole time, right?”

“Ramón, as alibis go, it’s a rotten one, but it will have to do. Let’s just say we were having a small celebration for getting one Blair Poundstone off his murder charges. Zyzck won’t like it, having you guys being my alibi; it’ll just rub him the wrong way. He also won’t like the coincidence of it being Bruce Amerika’s business that went up in smoke.” I shook out a Pall Mall and fired it up with my Zippo.

“That’s why you did that routine with the lights and the turntable before we split,” like Ramón was just getting it.

“It’s lame, but at least no one can say for sure that nobody was home,” I admitted.

“What’s with the protection thing?” asked Gill.

“I’m thinkin’ somebody will try to break into the office or my home if they haven’t already done so. So I just want somebody to keep an eye out, that’s all.”

“Isn’t that a little risky?”

“Yeah, Ramón, it is. But I can't be here and home all the time. All this stuff needs to go somewhere else. I need to go someplace else. One of a couple of things can happen right now. Those clowns can break in here and swipe this stuff—”

“Or torch this place,” interjected Gill.

“Maybe, sure. But I don't think so. I think they break in or have the cops do it for them.” I was starting to get a headache.

“I'm not following you, but I'm pretty messed up right now.” ‘Tack did look pretty beat.

“They call in, saying they saw me at the warehouse before the blaze started. The cops get a warrant and search the place, find evidence that I was in the warehouse and then I'm put away on an arson charge or worse.”

“Like a drug charge for this guitar full of smack,” said Ramón.

“Yup, if that's what's really in it,” I answered with a yawn.

“Still, doesn't some of this stuff implicate them? They wouldn't want the man going over this stuff, right?”

“Good point, Ramón. But it depends on what they think we might have and how well they covered their tracks, dig? Besides, the cops won't know what they're lookin' for. I do. Well, at least I've got an idea what I'm lookin' for. I think it's likely that we'll be burgled in the next couple of days so the best thing we can do is get this stuff out of here — Gill can you hang on to it for a bit?”

“Sure,” the Russian answered with a shrug. “No problems.”

“The other thing,” I continued, “is we need to get any contraband out of this office, and I'll probably have to do the same thing with my pad. We can't have even one single roach here or we'll be busted.”

So we spent the next few minutes checking all the usual hiding places and gathered it all up. It was maybe a half a lid of Gold, a couple of Thai sticks, a few indeterminate roaches, and a few hits of Orange Sunshine. Most of it went into a small box, which went into the bag, with ‘Tack holding onto enough to get through the next couple of days. I got to the safe and took out four more twenties — it was getting light in there, no question. Gill took his cut without hesitation while ‘Tack protested a bit but in the end they were both paid. This expense, like the one for Lady Viperidea, would have to be entered under miscellaneous if it was going to be entered anywhere at all. I never believed in keeping two sets of books, just too darn hard to keep straight. I could always blame losses on my various habits.

It was around three a.m. when we closed up. Gill left first and got his cab. I checked for anybody who might be running surveillance and the coast seemed clear so we threw the bag and the guitar box in his trunk. While Gill drove away, ‘Tack said he was too tired to move so he was going to crash on the couch. I took two out of the three remaining beers and hiked up to my pad. I poked around and found what I hoped was all my stash and hid it in a special spot. I could remove the light fixture and stow stuff above the ceiling and with the light back in place, you couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. The pad had been searched and even broken into before, and they never found that spot, so I was reasonably confident the contraband was safe. I set my alarm for 7:30

a.m., finished one of the beers and started into the second before falling onto the bed and into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I wasn't feeling too hot when the alarm jerked me out of Darkland. I wanted to stay in bed and do what normal people do on a Sunday morning: check out the box scores in the Sporting Green, uncross the puzzles, and check out the pink section while leisurely working my way into the real world. But as I rolled over on my right side my shoulder started barking, so I dragged myself up and started a kettle of water on the stove. There was nothing in the fridge so I figured I could get something at Charlie's on Columbus. Charlie's did so-so Cantonese during the weekdays but also did a passable American breakfast on the weekend. I took a quick shower, put a real dressing on my wound — it looked ugly but was scabbing up OK. I got dressed in a pair of bellbottoms, tennies and a maroon sweatshirt, made enough coffee for two cups, filled a mug and sat at my kitchen table looking out the window at my partially obstructed view of the East Bay. The thick fog from the previous evening seemed to be burning off, so it looked like it was going to be a nice day, not too surprising since our Indian Summer was usually the best weather of the year. I had a quick refill and then gathered my keys, shades, and thoughts and started to head down the steps, but I almost tripped over a baseball bat. I had no clue what it was doing there or who left it. Weird, man. I thought about leaving it there, but then I decided I'd keep it for a bit and see who asked for it. So I hiked up the stairs with bat. I tried to take a couple of swings but my shoulder wouldn't let me do anything but bunt. I opened the front door and left the bat in the alcove, then walked back down the stairs and hoofed it down to Columbus.

The streets were pretty empty at this time of the morning. Charlie's was about half full with some Chinese workers and locals. I recognized a few, waved, and

continued to the counter. I ordered eggs over, toast, hash browns and bacon. There was the front section of the Chron that somebody had left on the counter, so I poured through it but didn't find any mention of the previous night's warehouse fire — not that I expected to see it; it would be Monday before there would be any mention of it, if at all. The food arrived and I attacked it, not surprising in that I hadn't had any real food since the couple of slices the previous afternoon. I paid my bill and headed over to the Caffè Trieste where I had to wait in line but eventually got a couple of pastries and Cappuccinos to go. Then I continued up Grant to the office.

Tack was still there when I arrived, looking like he slept on the couch, but he was up already so my arrival didn't wake him. He gladly accepted the coffee and cannoli and asked me a couple of questions but I wasn't in an expansive mood so he eventually got it and let me be.

The first call I made was to Dawn. I didn't know if she would be up or not, but she picked up on the second ring, so I guess she was an early riser. I apologized for not calling earlier, explaining that it was sort of a boys' night that got a bit out of hand. She had tried to call, but it rang over to the service. She was a bit, I don't know, petulant, I suppose, but eventually she relaxed and the conversation became less forced. I wound up asking if she was free for lunch and she said yes. She mentioned the Cliff House, which was all the way across town, but I said OK and we bartered back and forth a bit on the time and finally decided on between one thirty and two. When I rang off, I tried to call the restaurant and make reservations for one forty-five (just call me Solomon; I cut that baby neatly in two), but they weren't open yet and the phone continued to ring so I hung up.

Next I called the service and aside from Dawn's message there was only one call from Edwin Cornwall. He wanted to discuss Blair's case with me. I figured that could wait until Monday so I shelved it and called into the North Beach station. I didn't get Zyzck, didn't expect to, but I was able to leave a message for him. It was too early for Fat's, so I spent some time doing my expenses and figuring out the Poundstone's bill. The thing that was bothering me was that I had to spend some time with The Golden Trading Group's books, which meant I needed to get over to Gill's pad in the Sunset.

It was almost 11:00, which was about when I might expect Fats to be up and about. I called and he picked up, his voice gruff and deep. Cherri was out visiting her folks in Sacramento, so Fats had spent a late night working on some chord voicings. He asked if I had ever heard of Olivier Messiaen and I said no. He said he had some cool stuff to play for me. I reminded him of the BSA and also asked when Cherri was coming back — he thought it would be around Tuesday or Wednesday. I said I would be by to pick up the bike in a bit and he said he didn't have anywhere to go until the evening.

Tack had a few more questions about my paranoia, which I answered as best I could. Truthfully, in the light of day it did seem a bit much. I gathered my stuff and caught a 15 down to Market and then waited for Muni to show up. I gave up and got a Yellow and gave him Fat's address. I silently cursed when I looked out the back window and saw three 71's lining up behind me.

Doing business with Fats was always a little slow. First, we had to have some coffee, then some weed, then he played me some Messiaen, but he had seemed to forget about the voicings and was now playing me some wild transcribed bird calls instead. He asked about lunch but I said I had a date and maybe we could do dinner. I thought about

having Gill bring the stuff over to Fats' and working in his living room for a bit, and that was cool with Fats what with Cherri being out of town and all, but the problem was that I was bound to get high if I tried to work there. I wasn't so sure how conducive a hit or two of acid would be to the accounting task at hand. So I left it open-ended and we eventually went into the garage he shared with a couple of neighbors and I attempted to fire up his ride.

The bike was a BSA Super Rocket and its British heritage was reflected in a large pool of oil underneath the engine. Fats was sanguine about it. The engine leaked oil and it was necessary to check it often and not to park on somebody's fancy driveway. He checked the tank and said there was enough to get to a station, but it needed “petrol” (this said in a very bad British accent). It took a bit to start up and the idle was rough, but with a couple of adjustments it sounded OK.

“Hey, Fish. One more thing...” Fats wanted to know, shouting over the din of the engine.

“What's that man?” I shouted back.

“Do you actually know how to ride?”

“Hah. I had one of the best teachers.”

“Who? Jim Redmond?” asked Anagram, showing off his surprising knowledge of Bike Grand Prix racing.

“Nuh-uh. I was taught by the U.S. Goment.”

Fats laughed, but it was true. I had to ride a bike to check out supplies for the Manta when we were docked. I never really had any lessons; what happened was some petty officer couldn't be bothered with a trip and asked me if I knew how to ride. Well,

that meant off the sardine can and out into the world, so I lied and said sure. The first trip was pretty embarrassing; I don't think I ever got it out of first gear. But I carried on and it soon became part of my regular duties. I loved it, because if there was ever anything that was the opposite of a sub, a bike was it. Alone, outside and quick instead of cramped together with too many cats inside (like way inside dig, and no way to get out until it was on the surface). Sure, the Manta was fast enough for a boat but docking always seemed glacial-like. The muscle memory kicked in as soon as I got on the Super Rocket and headed out for a spin. The brakes were a bit soft and the clutch had a weird hesitation, but otherwise it rode pretty good, especially considering that it had been used to transport Fats' not inconsiderable mass. I stopped at an Enco station on Divisadero and put a tiger in my tank. I also inflated the rear tire and checked the oil. I topped off the oil and headed out to clear my head.

It was warm enough outside and I wound up riding all the way to the ocean and took the Great Highway, enjoying the cool salty air on my face. When I got close to Playland the traffic slowed down so I had to deal with stop and go all the way up the hill to the Cliff House. I found a spot to park the bike, semi-legal but it was a Sunday so I didn't think there would be a problem.

I was a bit early, but then so was Dawn; she was waiting outside looking through a coin-operated telescope.

“See anything interesting?” I asked.

“What?” She turned to me and did that annoying thing where her computer tried to register outside stimuli. “Oh, Wendell, you're early.” We engaged in an awkward hug and separated.

“You still have some time left,” I said, motioning toward the telescope.

“That's OK, I was watching some seals — I think that's what they are — they seem to be lounging on that big rock there.” She pointed out toward the Seal Rocks. Somewhere in the distance, a couple of seagulls made their plaintive cries.

“They're protected you know.”

“What?”

“The seals, or actually, in this case sea lions.”

“Well they should be.”

“I guess so.” I lightly grabbed her elbow and started to steer her toward the entrance. Since we hadn't made reservations, there was a bit of a backup before we could get seated, which was an excuse to head to the bar. Dawn wanted a Ramos fizz and of course that put the bartender in a surly mood. I countered with an order for an Anchor Steam, hoping that would offset the amount of work needed to concoct Dawn's drink. Like I had to know, so I asked. “A Ramos fizz?”

“Sure. Done right, they taste terrific.”

“I guess. Not my style though and for sure you didn't make his day,” I said, pointing toward the bartender who was probably wondering where he put the orange water, or maybe he was looking for an egg.

“I don't understand.”

“Well it's pretty labor intensive and the bar's pretty busy right now.”

She shrugged and replied with an air of insouciance. “I really don't see what the big deal is. He does get paid to make drinks, right?”

“Sure, sure. Forget I brought it up.”

“What?”

“Never mind. So,” I brightly continued trying to change the subject as quickly as possible, “what's happenin'?”

“Well, I wanted to see you again, but I also wanted to know if you were able to find out anything about that picture I gave you.”

“Oh yeah, that, right.”

“You haven't done anything?” My pint arrived and I could hear the blender working on her drink.

I considered my answer. “I've got a lead on the guy in the photo. It's going to be a bit of a problem gettin' anything out of him.”

“Is he...dead?”

“What? No, no, he's,” I tried to frame it properly, “in a facility.”

“Jail?”

“Man, would you let me finish?” The bartender dropped off her fizz and told us the damage. I got my wallet out and paid for the drinks and left what I hoped was enough of a tip to compensate for the work, though he didn't seem to notice so maybe it was my thin skin. “He's checked himself into, voluntarily I might add, a kind of sanatorium.”

“The funny farm?”

“No, he's trying to dry out — drugs and alcohol. They sequester these people like nuns, and I still haven't figured out how to get to him.”

“But you will, right?”

“I mean to, yes. But keep in mind this is very unofficial, off the record type stuff. I'm not supposed to be sniffing around Julia's case. I told you.”

“Yes, you told me. Oh, speaking of which...”

At that point the hostess came in and said our table was ready. We were seated next to a large expanse of glass, which sounds wonderful what with a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean and all, but the sun was at a point where there was a fair amount of glare and it was hard to concentrate with it right in my eyes. The waitress was able to lower the shades a bit which helped, but it was still annoying. We studied the menu for a couple of minutes and Dawn decided on the chowder and a small salad, but of course she had to know how large the chowder bowl was and just how small the salad was. I ordered a burger and fries; which caused Dawn to crinkle her nose in displeasure. I ignored it, because I knew it would tend toward a “meat is murder” discussion and I could do without that. Hey, I'm an omnivore by thousands of years of evolution and I'm not going to argue with success.

“So what's the news?”

“Huh?” Again with the punch card routine and her eyes doing the flickering thing.

“We were talking about the case,” I said in as loud a voice as I dared. You said 'speaking of which...’“

“Speaking of which...,” her eyes went far away for a moment and stayed that way for a full half minute. A busboy came by and dropped some French bread and a plate filled with small packets of butter. “Oh, yeah,” she said, “I forgot to tell you: Sam's back in town.”

“Your brother Sam?”

“To whom else would I be referring?”

“I thought he was in the brig down in San Diego.”

“He was, but they worked out some kind of discharge. I think there was a lack of evidence or they couldn't get their witnesses to testify. Or maybe it was something else, some kind of legal legerdemain. I'm not altogether sure how these things work.” She had finished her fizz and started trying to get the attention of the waitress. When she did, she ordered a glass of chardonnay. The waitress wanted to know if we wanted to split a bottle, but I said I would stick with Steam.

The rest of the meal proceeded without incident except for a small argument over the bill—she insisted on picking it up, which I was liberated enough to be cool with but she wanted to leave a seven percent tip. That rubbed me the wrong way and I had to tell her so. I finally threw a couple of bills down on the table which put it closer to a twenty percent tip and that was scandalously high in her estimation and really it wasn't like the service was that great but I had painted myself into a corner and had to stay in it. It really wasn't that big of a deal and we both got over it by the time we got outside. I offered her a ride home but she had driven, which was too bad because she said that a bike ride sounded like fun. Aside from a playful goodbye buss, it was all kind of formal. I had to get back to work and she had some recital she had to go to so that was that. I said I'd be in touch and she smiled and waved and walked down the hill to her car. I stayed behind to make a few calls. The phone was located in the hallway next to the bathrooms and no one was using it so I burned through a few dimes. Zyzck had called into the service so I tried him again and said I'd be in Monday morning.

Then I called Henri and asked him to speak to Gill. I gave him the number of the phone and waited. A couple of minutes later Gill called wanting to know what was up. I

asked him if he had moved the stuff we got from the warehouse into his pad. He had, and was cool with me using his place to sort through the stuff. He was set to start his shift soon, but he said he could leave the key under the mat. So the plan was to head over to Gill's — he lived in the outer Sunset so it wasn't that far away. I wasn't looking forward to this; it was a lot of dry work and I had to stay straight. As I walked up the hill toward the bike thoughts of Dawn kept trying to intrude. I was trying to figure her out. She was attractive enough, sure, but there were some annoying things about her, her sense of entitlement being one. I depend on service people, heck **I'm** a service person, so I don't like seeing bartenders and waitresses stiffed. And yeah, I know the argument that rich people get rich and stay that way by being cheap but I don't buy it. By the time I got to the bike I realized it wasn't worth the trouble. She was who she was, and I could dig her or not. Just like that, problem solved.

OK, maybe it was more paranoia, but I wasn't all that sure that I wasn't being watched. It was a feeling that I had a couple of times during the day, once at the gas station and again at the bar. Couldn't really see anybody out of the ordinary but that's what would make it a good tail. Once on the bike, I took the most circuitous route I could think of to get to Gill's pad on 42nd Ave. This took me up through the Richmond and across the park and then back down on Lincoln. I made one stop at a five and dime to pick up a notebook, pencils and sharpener. I stuffed the bag under my sweatshirt and drove the remaining couple of blocks to his place. He lived in the lower flat in a non-descript weathered building. The fog, wind and salt had stripped a lot of the paint off the building. I think it used to be a sort of cream color with darker trim, but now the

building, like many of the buildings surrounding it, was slowly fading into the gray, organically decomposing into the fog.

Gill hadn't left yet and he showed me a place to stow the bike behind a hedge on the side of the building. I was still paranoid and Gill, who had been chased around a bit in his time, understood. He let me into his home; it was small and surprisingly neat. The living room had a large TV/Hi Fi Console, a bookshelf and a couple of pictures on the wall, nothing that stood out. The kitchen was in the back, and between it and the living room was a tiny dining room that barely contained a small table and a couple of chairs. Gill cleared off a space for me and then went into his bedroom. He came out with the guitar box and the bag and plunked them both down on the floor next to me. He said I could work there, then checked his watch and said he'd be back around three in the morning. I thanked him and started to focus on the bag. After he left, I found the radio and put it on a classical station for background wallpaper.

It was tough going through some of the stuff, especially the more personal items. A lot of it was useless but that's what happens when you troll with a large net; you get your share of junk. It took about an hour to go through all this and categorize it — even the stuff that didn't seem relevant because like you never know, dig? When it came to his personal life, Bruce was an ongoing train wreck, but when it came to his business correspondence he was a careful cat. He never used names, always initials. I tried to cross-reference my notebook as best I could but it was a bit of a mess and would have to be re-typed when I got back to the office. All of that took me a couple of hours. I took a break and walked out and down the street. I found a liquor store and bought some more smokes, a coke, and a couple of beers and then headed back for the heavy lifting. I laid

the two sets of books down on the table and tried to match dates as best I could. Then I went through what I guessed was the real one (the one I found in the warehouse safe) and looked for some numbers or something that would correspond to the guitar box. After three tries I changed up and started to go through the fake ledger, and that's where I found it along with nine other similar lot or item numbers. Then I went back and checked the same date on the real book and saw that there was a lump sum, but the dollar amount was way different. So what we had was a purchase invoice number for 10 guitars from a business in the Philippines for a hundred and fifty bucks (plus a myriad of smaller taxes and fees totaling \$179.32) and a (possible) corresponding entry for 50,000 bucks. I had to blink a few times, then got up and walked around the apartment a bit. Then I went back to the first ledger and looked for something similar to the guitar purchase. Three months earlier, there was another purchase for 10 guitars for roughly the same amount (\$182.13) and another debit entry for \$50,000.00 on the same date in the real register. I traced this as best I could and found a credit for \$140,000.00 and some of the same initials I had seen before. My notebook was filling up with dates and dollar amounts and my head was spinning. It was just before three by the kitchen clock when Gill came back. He said I could crash on the couch, which seemed like a good idea to me. He wanted to know if I made any progress and I said a little and that we were both in the wrong business. He laughed and cracked open the beer that I offered. So we both sipped our beers and I talked a little bit about what I had found, more to try to get it straight in my own mind than anything else. Gill said he had to get up early and headed off to bed and I made for the couch. It was an uneasy sleep, what with my head full of figures and trying to piece everything together. It was around five a.m. when I sat bolt upright and

let out a noise. I gathered my notebook and pencils, stuffed them under my sweatshirt, and slipped out of Gill's pad. It was clear out; you could actually see the stars — a rare thing in this neck of the woods. I hopped on the BSA and pushed it out to the street before I compression-started it and headed back to North Beach. I needed a shower and some coffee.

I felt pretty ragged. I had made it home, stuffed the bike into my neighbor's garage (I had a couple of things in storage there and I paid him a few bucks a month so it was cool — but as a precaution I wrote a quick note and stuffed it between the gas tank and the seat). I also found a piece of cardboard and put it on the floor under the bike, because soon enough there would be a pool of dead dino juice underneath the engine. I showered and changed and then headed straight to the office, putting the coffee on and opening the windows. It was eight am sharp when the inspector called. He wanted to come by and I said sure. I waited until 8:30 and then called Edwin Cornwall to see if he was free for lunch to discuss Blair Poundstone. His secretary said he was in court in the afternoon, but she would check with him and call me back. I tried calling Dr. Feelgood, but his office wasn't open and the phone rang over to a service. I lamely offered a wrong number excuse and hung up. Then it was back to my notebook and an attempt to make the numbers sing, but what had seemed clear at five a.m. was now vague and jumbled. I poured a cup of java from the thermos and scanned the office for any contraband we may have missed, but it was clean.

The doorbell rang around a quarter to nine. I looked out the window and saw the fat cop leaning against the door jam. I buzzed him in and opened the door. He looked like he had slept in his clothes, and his hair would have been a mess if there were more of it and if the hair that was there was more than a quarter-inch long.

“Inspector, have a seat. Need coffee?” I asked, standing near the sink.

“Huh? Yeah, sure. Black,” he responded, taking in the office with his usual air of distaste.

“You doing OK? You look beat,” I said for something to say.

“You don't look so hot yourself.”

“Yeah, well it's been busy.” I parked the bottom of my lap onto my chair and Zyzck sank into the Naugahyde of his seat.

“You called me, but I wanted to ask you something first,” he said shaking a Kent from a crumpled pack.

I shook out a Pall Mall and fired up my Zippo and then leaned over the desk and lit his weed first. I sparked mine and fell back into the chair.

“Ask away,” I said, arms thrown out for emphasis. Nothing to hide here.

Zyzck squinted at me. “You got pretty chummy with that Amerika character.”

“Chummy? I wouldn't call it that. I only met him a couple of times. What's the deal? I thought we'd been through all of this,” I said with only a hint of indignation.

“Sure. But something interesting happened this weekend and I thought you might know about it.”

“Like what, man?” I knew what was coming and hoped I could get the lies straight.

“Mr. Amerika, damn, I feel so stupid saying that. Anyway, *that* guy was an importer, right?” he asked pointing his cigarette for emphasis.

“Yeah, import/export from what I understand. He mentioned he sold redwood burls to Asian markets. Salad bowls and coffee tables I think. I don't know what else.”

“He had a warehouse with this stuff?” Zyzck asked, like he just wanted to know.

“Sure, I mean, yeah, I guess he'd have to.” I tried on a quizzical look. “Where are we going here?”

“Where were you Saturday night?”

“Last Saturday? Like two nights ago? I was here, man.”

“All night?”

“Pretty much. I might've stepped out to the liquor store, in fact I'm sure I stepped out to buy some beers, but yeah.”

The inspector sighed, like he knew the lies were coming. “Can anybody vouch for your whereabouts?”

“Well, yeah. Ramón and another buddy were here. We were having a small celebration.”

“Celebrating what?”

“End of the case, check coming in, the usual. It wasn't much. We had some beers and a few laughs.”

“Was this all night?”

“Pretty much. I mean Ramón was already here, but Gill — Gill Volkov — that's the other cat, he was here by maybe eight or nine.”

“What time did this shindig break up?” He hadn't even bothered to get out his notebook and write any of this down so either he was pretty much satisfied or he didn't believe a word of it. Or somewhere in between I suppose.

“I don't know, it was pretty late, maybe three?”

“Hmm,” was all that escaped his mouth.

“So where is this all going? What happened Saturday night?”

“Mr. Ameri...the man's warehouse burned down. You wouldn't know anything about that would you?”

“Nah, that's news to me. I guess redwood would burn pretty well.”

“Well he had a bunch of other stuff in there. Lots of, I don't know, knickknacks, things made out of dried wood, statues and things. He even had a bunch of fireworks.”

“Really? Anybody hurt?”

“As far as we can tell, no. But there's a lot of rubble to sift through.” He leaned forward and knocked an ash into the tray on my desk. “What about the afternoon?”

“Saturday afternoon?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, let's see. I was here for a while, went out to the park for a bit, had some bad pizza and took care of an errand.” I didn't know how much he knew, but I was starting to suspect I'd been made entering Bruce's pad.

“Was this errand on Polk Street?” he asked.

“Yeah, it was. I had to feed a dog, somebody asked me to take care of it.”

“Mr. Am...”

“Yeah,” I interrupted him. “He gave me the keys and asked me to look after Dennis,” I said. “Dennis, that's his, well, was his pup, a Yorkshire Terrier. I'm not a fan of small dogs, but different strokes, you dig?”

“You admit to Breaking and Entering...”

“B and E? The man gave me the keys to his pad, and you knew that 'cause when your guys brought me in they emptied my pockets and the keys were there. I'm pretty sure I told you at the time that they were his keys.”

“I don't remember that.”

“Look, I had three sets of keys on me. One was for my pad and office, one was for that flat in the Haight, and one was for Bruce's pad. Somebody has to have that written down on my arrest report. Anyway, yeah I went in there...and this kinda dovetails into what I wanted to see you about.”

“I'm listening,” Zyzck responded, getting another Kent out of the pack. This time I let him light it himself.

“Well, first of all, I went there to feed the dog, and a good thing too because it was ravenous-like. Second, I left the keys in the door and note for the neighbors...”

“That **was** you?” he asked incredulously.

“Sure, white lie, figured what was the harm. I'm not the ASPCA, you know? No room in my life for a pooch, and I wouldn't want a small one around anyway. I figured somebody had to take care of it.

“The neighbors called us, said the joint was trashed.”

“Tossed. The joint had been tossed, and not by me. Somebody was looking for something and they tore the place apart.”

“That wasn't you?”

“Heck no. First off, why do I toss his pad and secondly, I wouldn't leave it like that. I know you and a lot of other folks think I lack subtlety, but I have an ounce of common sense once in a while.”

“But that's a crime scene, and you were invading that scene, contaminating it, you name it.” He was generally upset and had started to wave his ciggie around for emphasis.

“What crime scene? He and I got attacked in the Haight.”

“Sure and then his warehouse burns down the same evening you admit to breaking in to his flat?”

“I told you, I had his keys. What's with the B and E stuff? I had his consent, and I know how that looks and that I can't prove it except maybe somebody saw him hand me his keys. Why would I take them from him?”

“You're saying you didn't take a look around?”

“I never said that. I was there and yeah, I did take a look around. I was curious.”

“Curious.”

“Yeah, dig why me? Why did he start to latch onto me?”

“How long did you know him?”

“Like I keep sayin', I didn't know him at all. Maybe a week ago I got word from Edsel over at Sam Wo's sayin' that Mr. A wanted to buy me a drink. We, Bruce and I, rapped for a bit, but it was like disjointed stuff, all over the map. Some of it was about Julia Pancetti, but I had to tell him that I'm off that case.”

“But you're still seeing her sister?”

“That's different. Personal-like and off limits, OK? Anyway, gettin' back to Bruce, the next time I saw him was in the Haight.”

“You think he wanted to hire you?” he asked.

“Maybe, I dunno. I don't know if he knew, you know? I think he was dirty, like that's no surprise, show me somebody in the import biz that ain't. I think he had upset some players and was lookin' for help. I think, and again, I got nothin' to back this up, but I think he wanted out of whatever he was involved in. But like, that's it.”

“That's a lot of thinking,” Zyzek said with more than a touch of sarcasm. “Did you find anything there?”

“Nah, like I said it been gone over pretty thorough like.”

He sat smoking and smoldering. He didn't like it. He didn't like my alibi for Saturday night. He didn't like the coincidence of me being in Bruce's pad the same day. Heck, he didn't like the fact that Bruce and I seemed to be joined at the hip. But there wasn't much he could do about it and that just made it worse.

“I gotta be honest with you, Pike. I'm having a tough time trying to believe you.”

“I dig man, but lookit, it's like I said—I called you, remember? See, the problem is that there was somethin' going on with Bruce A. I think his, I don't know, business associates? Yeah, dig, his business associates are upset and looking for something.”

“Something? Money?” he asked.

“Maybe, but I'm thinkin' more along the lines of product.”

“Product? You think drugs?”

“Like I said, the dude was into import/export. It would make sense. But here's the thing: these cats are either looking for somethin' or they're tryin' to tie up loose ends. You think I'm somehow involved with Mr. Amerika, right? Well so do they. Let me tell you why I called you.” I shook a Pall Mall out of the pack and started tamping it on the desk for emphasis. “Somebody has been tailin' me. They're good whoever they are 'cause I haven't spotted them, but I know they're out there. That's not just me being paranoid. I fully expect them to toss this place and my pad.”

“We could save them the trouble.”

“Lookit, if you want to search the office or my pad you're welcome to it. I can save you the trouble and tell you that you won't find anything.”

“Be careful what you wish...”

“Funny, man. But what about it—could you get a uniform out there for a day or so?”

“You want protection?”

“I don't want another tail, but I think I want, nah, I need eyes on my pad and this office. I think there's some nasty cats out there who want to eliminate problems, and I'm startin' to think I'm one of their problems.”

“Do you know who these...business associates are?”

“Nope. I mean like I've got some wild ideas, but nothin' to really back them up.”

“You could share some of these ideas. I'm listening.”

“I mean to, honest. Once I've got somethin' other than some crazy guesses.”

The inspector took a sip of coffee and spilled some on his loosely tied regimental. He absent-mindedly stroked the spot a few times and gave up. “So this is on the level?”

“Yeah. Look, you know I like to work with a bit of...latitude, right?”

“Hah,” exclaimed Zyzck, “latitude, that's rich.”

“Well, call it what you want. I wouldn't be asking if I didn't think it was necessary.”

He thought for a while and then looked at me. “OK, I'll bite, why only a day or two?” he asked.

“I think they need to work quickly and I think I may be able to figure out a thing or two by then.”

“Hah,” the fat cop interjected, “you **are** holding out on me.”

“Again, like it's guesswork, conjecture, dig? 'Sides, you can go through Mr. A's bank statements, his tax returns, canvas known associates. I don't have that luxury, but I know a couple of people. I can make inquiries with people who won't talk to the man. Also, I don't mind tellin' you that I take this, this harassment, Bruce and Staci's deaths, all of this, personal-like.”

“We don't need a loose cannon out there messing things up.”

“Messing what up? What kind of investigation do you have? Twice you've come after me, and both times it stunk, it smelled like there had to be some weak-assed kind of anonymous tip. Somebody is messin' with both of us inspector.” I had worked myself up a bit and fired up the cig to calm down.

“Say you're telling the truth. I'm not sure I buy all — heck, any — of this, but let's just say for the sake of argument that it's not a steaming pile of horse manure. Where do you plan to go with all of this? I'm not gonna sit here and let you act out some kind of revenge.”

“No, trust me on this. I'm not just upset, I'm plenty pissed off, but I'm not gonna go crazy on you. You know me; you've worked with me for a few years now. I'm a peacenik; I'm not about to go on some rampage. I do want to know what's happening and I intend to find out. This isn't a job somebody is payin' me for, this is personal and as I private citizen, I've got a right to know, dig?”

“Sure, I get you. So you're saying if you uncover anything you'll let us know?”

“I’ll let you know. I’m not saying I’m a Boy Scout, but I don’t trash pads, set warehouses on fire or kill people, that’s not my style and I would think that you would know that already.”

He let all this play through his dome and we both sat and smoked in silence. Finally he pushed himself up with a grunt and started for the door. When he got to it, he turned toward me. “I’ll see what I can do. We don’t have spare officers standing around waiting for the chance to baby-sit. But I’ll see what I can do. Let me say this, though: if you plan to pull any kind of stunt without letting me know and I find out I’m gonna come down on you. Hard.”

“Cool,” I said, but it was anything but. Then I flashed him the peace sign and he returned it with the friendship digit as he turned around and lumbered out of door and down the stairs.

So it was back to my notebook and looking for patterns from my notes. It was funny...I dropped an ash on it and brushed it off, knocking a couple of other pieces of paper off the desk. One of the sheets glided underneath my desk, so I had to get down on my knees to retrieve it. Then the phone rang and I bumped my head on the way up so I was in a foul mood when I picked up the phone. It was Edwin Cornwall’s secretary and she was sorry but today was completely booked. He would be in North Beach with a client on Tuesday morning, however, and could meet with me after that. I said that was fine and gave her the address and she said it would probably be around 11:00 a.m. and that he didn’t have a lot of spare time. I thanked her and rang off. I then started to call Velma Poundstone when I looked at the paper in my hand. It was a photocopy of Karen Broomfeld’s journal and I was looking at the initials and did a classic double take. Both

Karen and Bruce liked to use initials; both of them probably thought they were being clever. Some of those initials overlapped, but to make that work, I would have to reverse the order of the initials from Karen's journal. Yeah, that was forcing it a bit, but it worked in the way that bad bookkeeping worked and it fit in with what I already knew. I was plotting that out when the doorbell rang. I got up and looked out the window but all I could see was somebody walking away from the building at a pretty fast clip. My first instinct was to ignore it, but then I thought different and picked up my keys and made it downstairs. When I opened up the front door, there was a small package on the doorstep. I looked around and didn't see anything; they had vanished into a storefront I guessed. I hadn't got a good enough look at them so it was useless trying to track them down. Can't win 'em all. I shrugged, picked it up the package and took it back to the office.

I listened to it and it wasn't ticking. I shook it a couple of times and it just sounded like paper. When I opened it, I guessed that it was from Lady Viper. There was nothing that said it was from her, but that's like the way she operated. There were a few three-by-five cards with typewritten info on them. First was a brief apology, but the person I had inquired about (Roland Sabacan but this wasn't stated) had disappeared, and the organization couldn't find him anywhere. The supposition was that he had flown the coop, maybe out of the States altogether. The other was some stuff about Bruce Amerika some of which I already knew and some of which dovetailed with what I already knew.

I sat there staring at my desk—which was covered in pages from Karen's Xeroxed journal, a bunch of three-by-five cards and my notebook—and I had myself a smoke. I was interrupted by the phone: it was Velma wanting to meet with me, so I said sure and then thought that she might as well make it to the meeting with her lawyer so I gave her

the time and rung off. Then I called Dawn, but she wasn't in, so I told Jeeves to have her call me. I could picture his nose wrinkling in distaste but he took down the info and said he would give her the message. I was debating on how to handle the next call when I heard the door open. It was 'Tack carrying a large plastic garbage bag.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey, Wendell. Things OK?” he asked looking around.

“Yeah, I already had my skull session with Zyzck. What's in the bag?”

“Traffic lights. The cat who's selling them actually has a few more. The housing's are pretty heavy so I could only take a couple with me. Figure I can sequence them somehow.”

“This still tied into that drum strobe thing?”

“Yeah, I think I've got the strobe effect nailed, I mean I've got the envelope generator set nice and short, but then I thought that it might be cool to have some slower changes and these babies might do the trick. I've actually been at their pad and have been working on the light rig. It's pretty cool.” He walked over to his side of the office and dropped his bag.

“So that party got postponed, right?”

“Yeah, they're waiting until Kimi checks out of the clinic.”

“Any idea when that might be?”

“No idea. It's voluntary—theoretically, he can split whenever he wants, though I'm sure the doc has some control over it as well.”

“You free for the next hour or so?” I asked, gathering up the paper on my desk.

“Sure.” The little guy thought for a moment and warily looked at me. “I mean, it depends.”

“It depends?”

“Sure, what do you have in mind?”

“Let's see if we can pay Kimi a visit. You can give him a progress report on the electronic hoo doo you've created and I can ask him a couple of other questions.”

“I don't think they like visitors there.”

“I'm sure they don't. But like that's a bridge we can cross when we get there, dig?”

“Sure, I dig.”

I went over to the safe and put the papers in there and took a couple of twenties out. I was thinking that I could really use that check from Velma. “Oh, and Ramón. One other thing.”

“What's that, man?”

“I think I'm bein' tailed and I asked Zyzck to have somebody watch this office and my pad. So be careful. You holdin' anything?”

“Just a roach, maybe a half a joint of Gold.”

“Well what do say we destroy the evidence, just to be on the safe side?”

“Sure.”

So we finished off the roach and things were a little brighter. We left the windows open and I got my coat, keys, sunglasses and smokes and I started to lock up when the phone rang. It was Dawn, so I had to spend a couple of minutes making pleasant noises. When all that was over, I asked if she had been in contact with her

brother. She said she hadn't, but that he was staying at a hotel in the Mission. Pretty low rent, but then I guessed that things were still tense between father and son so I let that slide. I asked her if it was possible that she could bring him to the office for a chat. She sounded tentative and unsure, but she said she would try. I said that was fine and that I was going to be out for a bit but she could leave a message with the service. Then it was back to more personal stuff before I was able to ring off.

“So that was that Dawn chick, right?” Ramón asked.

“Yup.” I started toward the door with him in tow.

“How are things going between you two?”

“I'm not really sure. Things are a little weird right now, and I'm afraid it's gonna get weirder.”

‘Tack let out a soft whistle. “Sounds complicated,” he said, drawing out 'complicated' with a couple of extra syllables. I started fumbling for my keys but he stepped in and put his in the deadbolt and turned toward me. “Me, I like my chicks simple. Not stupid, just simple, dig?”

“Yeah, well somehow I seem attracted to neurotics.”

“Imagine that,” said ‘Tack as he closed the door, turned the lock, pocketed his keys and we headed downstairs.

We took the BSA over to Sutter and Divis. Nice thing about having a bike is that you don't have to circle around forever trying to find parking. I don't think ‘Tack enjoyed the ride, but I found it exhilarating, but then again I was pretty stoned. We got to the receptionist's desk and I stayed behind and let Ramón do the talking. He spun a pretty

good rap about needing some approval and payment for all the work he had been doing on the light rig for PT&T. She was stonewalling and he was laying on the electrical-speak pretty thick. One of the orderlies had left a laundry cart half way through a door and I took that as my opening and disappeared through the open door, grabbing a white coat from the cart. It was quiet; there was only the sound of my footsteps on yellowing and cracked linoleum. I was expecting something a bit more, I don't know, prison-like but it really was nothing more than a converted flat. The doors had numbers on them and there were probably locked, at least from the inside. Sort of like a roach motel, you could check in but you couldn't check out. I tried the nearest door and confirmed it. There weren't any windows in the doors, so I had to guess. I guessed wrong three times, two empty rooms and one enormous sleeping woman but no Kimi. The last door worked and I saw a longhaired blond man sitting at a desk with his back to me. I let myself in, crumpled a piece of paper from my pocket and jammed it into the strike hole to defeat the latch. Then I quietly closed the door behind me.

“Kimi, is that you?” I asked in what I hope was a quiet and calm voice. The Fin turned around and looked at me blankly.

“Who are you?” he asked in a halting, heavily accented voice. His eyes were far away and it was obvious he was under some heavy sedation. The way he was moving from side to side and shuffling his feet even when seated had me guessing Thorazine, but like I'm no doctor.

“My name is Wendell. We don't have much time, but I have some questions I need answered.”

“Wendell?”

“Yeah, you know Ramón, the light guy? He's a friend of mine. He's talking to the receptionist right now.” My eyes moved from the drummer to the windows and I saw the bars on the outside. I shifted my attention back to Kimi. “I'm helping out some people and I need to ask you a couple of questions.”

“You a cop? I don't...I don't want to talk to any cops.”

“Not a cop, Kimi. I'm a friend.” I wanted to ask about Karen Broomfeld, but when I opened my mouth I surprised myself. “You remember Julia? Julia Pancetti?”

I fumbled around a bit, checking my pockets until I found the pic that Dawn had given me. I passed it over to the drummer and he stared at it in silence. It took him a while—clearly his neural pathways were compromised—but there was some brief flicker of life in his eyes. “Sure,” he said. “Julia.” He smiled and continued to hold on to the photo. I let him, figured it might help.

“I want to talk to you about the pad in the Haight. Where you met Julia. How did you meet her?”

Again he paused for a bit. I was getting antsy because I knew we didn't have much time. Kimi asked for some water and I poured some from a plastic pitcher into a plastic cup. He wrinkled his face like he was in real pain and started talking in his slow and halting style.

“I don't know...I guess...I guess it was Rex who turned me on to that flat. Rex has a couple of different jobs, man. Like dealing with the label and agents are the main gigs, but he also helps with entertainment, if you know what I mean.”

“Tail and drugs?” I asked with a conspiratorial wink.

The Finn smiled sheepishly and started scratching behind his ear. “There were a couple of different pads in the Haight...there were always chicks, pretty things, not like whores, you know? They were young; they were enthusiastic. Julia wasn't really one of them; she kind of drifted in and out of the scene. Most of the time it was a real gas, man. I mean sure there were some times where it got a little weird. Most of the cats that hung out there were cool, but there were a couple of straights that could be a real bring down. They would get into arguments, money and stuff like that. I know it sounds...weird, but Julia and I started dating; I mean I guess that's what you could call it. Rex didn't like it. He said that these guys — I think he meant those straight cats — they didn't want me fooling around with her. I didn't get it and we got into a couple of fights over it, I mean her. By fights, I guess I mean arguments mainly, but it got pretty intense, man. He said there were plenty of chicks and I shouldn't focus on just one, that I should enjoy the variety. But it was different with her...I mean we went to restaurants, we went to Playland—”

At this point the door burst open and there was some real commotion. A very large white cat dressed all in white wanted to know who I was and what I was doing there. I told the bad humor man that I was just talking to Kimi and I didn't know there was a problem and then ‘Tack and the secretary showed up and there was all kind of shouting. They were threatening to call the cops and I responded that they should go ahead, that I was sure that they would be interested in checking out this medical facility and ensuring that no laws were being broken, and that led to more shouting. Eventually ‘Tack and I were escorted down the hall and out the door with a new group of threats being thrown at us. I put up my hands, flashed the peace sign, and we split.

“Well, that was a waste,” said Ramón. “Sorry I couldn't hold her off. I think there was some light on her desk that showed that the door was open. Once she saw that I couldn't do any more.”

“Not a problem, dude. It woulda been nice to have some more time, but what are you gonna do?”

“Did he say anything?”

“A little. How well do you know his manager?”

“Wrenford? I know him some, why?”

“I need to talk to him. Can you get him to the office?”

“I can try. When do you need him?”

“This afternoon if possible. Things are becoming clearer, Ramón.”

“Great. What do we do now?”

“Find a phone, give this cat Wrenford a buzz, and then get some lunch. I'm feelin' like a burrito.”

“Funny, you don't look like one...”

So because I had the bike, we were able to head into the Mission and we feasted on two giant food logs — *carnitas* for ‘Tack and veggie for me. Ramón was able to get in touch with Wrenford who wasn't wild about the idea, but he finally agreed to meet us in a couple of hours. The food tasted good: I was unsure if this was because I had the munchies or that some actual progress was being made.

Later, back at the office, I had that feeling of being watched again. I wasn't sure if it was the cops or somebody else, but I had asked for the former so I couldn't complain much. I cracked open a beer and Ramón started working on his traffic lights (he had

persuaded me to make an extra stop so he could pick up a couple of more). I had made a stop of my own at the record shop on Grant and picked up a recording of Gould playing the French Suites. ‘Tack didn’t mind. He was more open to different styles than me so we waited for Rex. It was a little after four when the doorbell rang and by this time we had moved from Bach to Tatum. I looked out the window and didn’t recognize the cat but figured it must be Kimi’s manager. I buzzed him in and waited by the door.

“You Rex?” I asked.

“Yeah, what’s this about then?” he responded in something of what I guessed was an Estuary accent.

Rex Wrenford was a short man, in pretty good shape. His brown hair spilled over his collar and he had a neatly trimmed beard. He was wearing tight blue jeans tucked into brown leather boots that might have elevated him to five seven. His green paisley shirt was mostly unbuttoned and accented with a purple scarf loosely tied around his neck. His eyes were almost hidden behind small, round shades tinted a dark blue.

“Got some questions and you would be the man to answer them.” I could see the flash of something, (fear? defiance?) behind the shades so I raised my hands and tried on a smile. “Look, you know Ramón, right? We’ve known each other for a long time and I think he can vouch for me. I’m unofficial and I don’t care about a lot of things. I mean what I’m sayin’ is that I’m not a cop and I can look the other way, dig? So would you like a beer?”

He said sure and seemed to ease up a bit and started trading small talk with ‘Tack while I got a couple of Coors out of the small refrigerator. We got everything settled and

I parked myself into the green chair while he sank into the Naugahyde. I sparked a Pall Mall and he spent some time rolling some Bugler into a wheat straw Zig Zag.

“I asked you here because I'm tryin' to help out a kid. He was under a couple of murder charges but he beat those. Now they're tryin' to pin some drug charges on him. It could mean serious time and this kid...he doesn't have the constitution for jail, dig?”

“OK, you're some kind of protector of the innocent?”

“No,” I laughed. “No, I'm getting paid for this. But the kid is innocent, I know that.”

“So where do I come in?”

“Look, you're Kimi Ingstrøm's manager, right?”

“Sure you know that.” He took a healthy slug of beer and looked at me. Not upset, mind you, just confused.

“You deal with the record label, PR folks, and agents, right? You also...how do I put this...provide other comforts for Kimi.”

He started to get up in righteous indignation.

“That's libelous, man, I don't have to take this.”

“Sit down, dude. No, it's not libel, if anything it's slander, but I dig, it's just a distinction. Again, I'm not after you or Kimi. I'm not gonna drag you into anything, but I need some information.”

He looked over at Ramón. “This on the level, man?”

Ramón looked up from his soldering and fixed a stare at Rex. “Absolutely. He's got bigger fish to fry.”

The manager wasn't totally convinced but he looked back at me. "This is all off the record, you're not recording it or anything? There's no cops hidden anywhere? No listening bugs or anything?"

"Nope. This is just a private conversation and your name — yours and Kimi's — won't come up in any way unless..."

He sprang up in his seat like he was ready to launch. "Unless what?"

"Unless we find that you had somethin' to do...and I mean directly-like, with people getting murdered or if you were sellin' or givin' drugs to my client. I'm not talkin' 'bout weed, OK? Cops think this kid dealt smack, and if you were the ones supplying it, then I guess I'd have to say something."

"You think I'm dealing smack?"

"I didn't say that, did I? I said I wouldn't let any of this leave this office unless you **were** involved in the murder or..."

"What murders are you talking about?"

"Mainly Karen Broomfeld and Suzanne Poundstone. My client is Suzanne's brother, Blair."

"I don't know anything about that."

"Then we're cool?"

"Huh, yeah, I guess so. Sure." He sank back into the chair. "What was your question?"

"You helped out Kimi from time to time. Let's call it procurement, yes?"

"OK. OK. Well..." and here he stretched in his chair and smiled with more than a hint of bravado, "...sure. Sometimes I help him out. He's an artist; he needs to

concentrate on his art. So if I can find him some tail or some bud or something else, I do it, don't I?"

"So what about that pad in the Haight?"

"Which one?"

I gave him the address. "There were a couple of murdered chicks there."

"I told you I didn't have anything to do with them."

"OK, let's say I believe you. About the pad?"

"What about it." He paused for a moment, scratching his ankle. "Say, for the sake of argument like, say that I know about it." He leaned back and smiled again, though I couldn't be sure what was behind it.

"So how did you find out about that pad?"

"There's this cat, Filipino dude. He did security for us on the last tour."

"Roland Sabacan?"

"Sure, sure, sounds right. You know him?"

"We've met."

"Well, like I said, big dude, did security for us. Had a mean streak and wasn't all that reliable, so he was only on the payroll for maybe a half a year. But he had some people he knew that had a couple of flats, mostly in the Haight. They moved it around from place to place. The unofficial name was the Pluto Palace, 'cause it was far out, man. They found young chicks..."

"Runaways?" I interrupted.

“I dunno — maybe runaways, maybe not but I never asked. They weren't pros you know, and they seemed to dig the scene mostly. The guys running the party had access to one flat for maybe a month and then it would shift to another one.”

“How'd they let you know?”

“Jungle telegraph, man. Word just came down, didn't it?” He made a rain motion with his hand and smiled. “It just...came down. They also had access to...you know...shit.”

“Meaning drugs?”

“Sure, drugs, man. When it started off it was all pot and acid and everything was real cool, man, but then there started to be a lot more of the stronger stuff — smack and speed. The scene got weird; that's why I wanted to get Kimi out of there.”

“Do you know where Roland is now?”

“That cat? Nah, I lost track of him...what, maybe a month or so ago. He was looking for a gig, but we didn't have a tour set up, so that was that, wasn't it?” He seemed on the level, but I wasn't sure I bought it.

“Did you ever meet Roland's friends?”

“Not friends really. I mean they were always uneasy around each other. There were some arguments, man, heavy stuff.” He shook his head a few times and continued. Couple of square looking cats. One was like real estate maybe? The other was a lawyer — he was a nasty cat, man. Kimi said he treated the girls rough, said that's what he liked but the girls hated him.”

“You know their names?”

“I’m sure they said it once or twice, but I don’t remember. One was like Doug or Dan, the other one had a weird name. I mean I would recognize it if someone said it, but other than that...”

“Maybe it was Dan and the other was...Chas?”

“Hah! Yeah that was it. Fussy cat. Chas, what kind of a name is that?”

“So did you know any of the girls?”

“Not really. I mean, sure I took advantage of the situation didn’t I? Who wouldn’t, but nah, they mainly drifted in and out and didn’t stay long.”

“What about Karen? A redhead?”

“Nah, the only redhead I remember was that one that Kimi was stuck on for a while. Julie something.”

“Julia.”

“Sure, yeah. Julia.”

“What happened between her and Kimi?”

“I think she must have broken it off. Do you have another one of these?” he asked, holding the beer aloft.

“Sure thing.” I got a couple out of the fridge. I shot Ramón a look but he shook his head. I handed the can to Rex and made it back to my chair. The pull tab broke off on his can so I started to hunt for my church key but he had a small one on his key chain. I opened mine, started another cigarette and continued. “So why do you think she was the one who broke it off?”

“Cause Kimi was devastated. I mean that chick ripped his heart out, dig? She just took off, didn’t say a word. Nobody knew where she went. It’s funny, me talking to

you, 'cause at one point Kimi was dead set on hiring a P.I. to find her. But I'm telling you, this thing pushed him over the edge — he started hitting it pretty hard.”

“Smack?”

He nodded his head. “I tried to get him into a legit sanatorium down south in Camarillo, but he wigged out and said he had to get back to the City. So I took him to Dr. Feelgood. I'm not wild about that cat, but like I had to do something, didn't I? Look, Kimi — he's not just my meal ticket. He's a friend, dig? I care about him. I care a lot.” He pounded his breast a couple of times for emphasis.

The conversation went on for another hour and a couple of more beers but that was the extent of useful information. I didn't mention that we had been to see Kimi. He said that he was due to get out in a week or so. There was the party that had been postponed once, and that was definitely back on. There were going to be some label people and some media folks. Rex ended the conversation inviting me to the party. I said that was cool and that Ramón would keep me informed and started to see him out, but then he got sidetracked into a discussion about payment for ‘Tack's work on the lights. Rex wanted to barter by offering him a pound of Columbian weed and ‘Tack wanted cash. It didn't get ugly or anything; they were just on different wavelengths. They compromised on cash and weed with Rex promising to deliver within the week. He left a joint with ‘Tack, saying that this was the stuff he was going to get so of course we had to smoke it right then. After all this I finally got him moving back toward the door.

“Look, man,” drawled Rex, a little drunk from just three (or maybe it was four, I lost count) Coors tall. “We might want to hire you to find her, find this Julie. I think

Kimi can live with being dumped, but I think he wants to know why. More than that, I think he wants to know that she's OK, you dig?"

"I dig. I've got a lot on my plate right now, but I tell you what. If I find out anything, I'll let you know, OK?"

"Sure. Thanks, man."

So he drifted down the stairs and I shut the door.

"What do you think?" asked 'Tack.

"Interesting. Don't know if I buy all of it. He's like too innocent, ya know? Also weird how he kept sayin' Julie instead of Julia. A little too neat. He might know something else about Roland, but he wasn't about to say anything. Anyways, I think we're in the home stretch man, there's one more cat I need to talk to." But then the phone rang. It was Dawn and it was hard to get anything out of her. She was flustered, fumbling for words and she was calling from a pay phone so there was a lot of background noise. I told her to slow down and repeat it. She did and I answered with a strong expletive. "OK," I told her, "stay put. I'll be there as soon as I can." I hung up the phone and got my keys, coat, and watch cap.

"Who was that?"

"That was Dawn."

"What's going on?" asked Ramón, surprised at my activity.

"She thinks something is up with her brother."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, she says she can't reach him and she's worried. Could be somethin', could be nothin'," I answered over my shoulder. "Back to the Mission, man."

“Be careful.”

“Yeah. Later dude.”

“Later.”

I bounded down the stairs and fired up the A10. Dawn was across town and it would take a bit to get there. I didn't care about a tail this time; I just had to get there. Part of the reason was to offer some support for her, but I was also thinking that there was a possibility that they had gotten to Sam before I could talk to him. For sure they were cleaning up loose ends, so I didn't have much time left. Of course it could very well be that Dawn was overreacting and this was one more wild goose chase, but what are you gonna do?

Traffic was driving me crazy and it seemed like I hit every red light going down Valencia. I finally got to 25th Street and parked the BSA in front of a dilapidated flop house. The joint was called The Majestic Arms Hotel and I'd like to have some of the drugs they must have ingested when they came up with that handle. I don't think there was ever a period when it was majestic. It looked like it had been built as a shabby SRO in the thirties and had progressively gone downhill into its current state: a place for hookers, winos, and section 8's to call home for a week at a time. Dawn came running up to me and embraced me. She was shaking and I had to peel her off.

“Hey there,” I said, looking at her with my hands cupping her face. “What's going on?”

“Well, we were supposed to meet yesterday and he never showed up. I called him last night and this morning, but the front desk says they haven't seen him. I had them

knock on his door, but he didn't answer. I wanted to get them to open up and look, but they refused, said the rent has been paid and there's no reason to..." she started to come a bit unglued, so we hugged again.

"Look, there might not be any problem at all," I said in a low voice.

"But you can get him to open the door, right?" she asked.

"Sure, I can try. Let's go."

I'm not sure how to describe the smell; I'll stick with musk, old newspapers, onions, and a faint whiff of urine. The desk jockey wore an ancient blue pullover and was missing a tooth. I put him at maybe fifty and a lot of those years were pretty hard. He had a puffy Irish face, thin red hair, and a nose the size of Gibraltar. He was busy reading the Racing Form and was working on some Red Man, spitting brown juice into a small Styrofoam cup.

After ignoring us for a full minute, he looked up with an air of complete distaste. "We don't rent to couples like you," he said before going back to his reading.

That was it; I wasn't going to let this slide. I got right up to his face and grabbed his collar.

"There seems to be a misunderstanding," I told him through clenched teeth. "We don't want to rent a room in this dump. We wouldn't stay here if you paid us. No, I want you to do a couple of things. One, I want you to apologize to the lady," I nodded toward Dawn. "The second thing is she needs to see her brother, so I want you to open up his room and let her in."

"I can't do that," he sputtered, gasping for breath and trying not to swallow his chaw.

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to, or we get the police involved.”

“You’re bluffing,” he managed to get out.

“Try me,” I said with a menacing smile. It was a stalemate for another half minute before he said OK and I loosened my grip. This was a mistake as it allowed him to reach under the counter and pull out a sawed off shotgun. But I was stronger and faster than the old drunk and after fifteen seconds or so I managed to wrestle it away from him. I cracked it open and emptied it; letting the two shells hit the brown carpet with a couple of dull, muted thuds.

“What do you want from me?” he asked in a whine.

“I told you,” I said, still holding the weapon. “I want you to do two things: you’re going to apologize to the lady and then you’re going to let us in the room.”

He shook his head up and down. “Give me back the gun.”

“When we’re done.”

He was like a petulant little kid. “OK, I’m sorry,” he spat out angrily, “satisfied?”

“And...”

“What’s the room number?”

“205,” said Dawn.

“Haven’t seen him coming or going for days.” He turned around and got a key off the rack. “Follow me,” he said with an air of resignation.

We walked up the ancient stairs, the carpet stained by every fluid imaginable. The second floor had a dark hallway, a payphone, and six doors. He led us to a door at the back, on the left hand side. He knocked twice, tried the door and then announced that

he was coming in. He put the key into the lock and opened the door and let out an expletive.

Sam was on his back on the floor, shirtless, a needle still in his arm, and his belt loose around his bicep. There was vomit on the floor and covering his mouth and neck. His eyes were wide open and his face was white, almost blue. Dawn ran to him and got down on her knees, holding his head in her hands. She was shaking but she wasn't crying. If I had to guess at an emotion, I'd say she was angry more than anything else. I checked for a pulse but I knew it was useless, as rigor had set in along with a particularly nasty odor. I couldn't be sure, but there might have been tooth marks from a small rodent on one arm.

"Stay here," I told both of them, "I got to make a call." So I hotfooted it over to the payphone and called Zyzck, figured it was time to get him here. He happened to be in, so after a bit I heard his voice.

"What the fuck you want?"

Normally I would have used that opening for a discussion on the proper etiquette of answering the phone, but I wasn't in the mood for playing.

"This is Pike. I'm in the Mission, in a fleabag called The Majestic Arms. Twenty fifth and Valencia. We need you to get somebody out here."

"Why do I think there's a body involved?"

"There is, but like it's not what you think." I lowered my voice a bit. "It's Sam Pancetti, Dawn's brother. It looks like an overdose, or maybe he choked on his own vomit. Anyway, he's been dead for a while. Dawn's in there. I'll tell her to leave things alone."

“Have you touched anything, re-arranged the scene?”

“No, what do you think...? Never mind. Just get somebody here. The smell is starting to get to me.”

I managed to pull Dawn away and we all went back downstairs. Color had started to return to her face. I handed the desk clerk back his shotgun and put the two shells on his desk. He wasn't happy. Now he would have to deal with the cops and that put him into an even fouler mood. We didn't say anything, we just waited. It was about forty-five minutes before a black and white double-parked on Valencia and a young cop walked into the hotel. I took him upstairs and showed him the scene, gave him the details omitting the scuffle with the clerk. He wasn't very impressed and I couldn't blame him. It just looked like another dead junkie and they were a dime a dozen in a dump like this. He didn't know the Pancettis, so money or not, he wasn't going to put a lot of effort into it. His walkie-talkie sparked to life and he gave a couple of code numbers into the mouthpiece. He looked around the pad with a combination of distaste and disinterest and then we walked back down stairs. He asked the clerk a few questions and then said the M.E. would be there in around a half an hour. Dawn said she would stay. I asked her if she needed anything, but she said no, she would call the family. She said I should take off and we could talk later. I offered to stay, but she said that would be awkward and I couldn't argue, so I gave her a quick hug and headed out. As I left the building, I almost bumped into somebody and that somebody turned out to be Zyzck. He swore and then told me to stay put so I sparked up a cigarette, leaned against the wall, and waited.

He was gone about ten minutes and when he came out of the building he had a deep scowl ironed onto his map. “What's it with you and bodies?” he asked.

“Beats me. Part of the gig, I suppose. I'm not sayin' I'm thrilled about it.”

“So somehow, I'm getting the impression you're not surprised.”

“I'm not,” I replied. “I think we need to talk.”

“You think? What's this, more guess-work?”

“Yes and no. I know a few more things than I knew this morning. It's been a busy day.”

“You...plan on staying here?” he asked. He was a bit uncomfortable because he knew there was something between me and Dawn and he hated the personal stuff.

“Nah, it would be...awkward. I mean I got fired by her dad...plus there's his lawyer. Let's go somewhere.”

“You pick the place.”

“Well, you're on duty, but I could use a drink.”

So we found ourselves in Clooney's Pub, sitting at the massive horseshoe shaped bar. It was getting close to happy hour, so the bleached-blond woman bartender (can't really call her a chick 'cause she was of a certain age) gave us happy hour pricing. Zyzck was on duty so he had to stick to Coke, but I got a pint of Guinness and a shot of whiskey. The shot went down nicely, tickling the back of my throat and instantly warming me up. I hadn't realized that I was cold, or maybe I was just numb. I started to relax — bars have that effect on me. Everything is cooler, darker and the outside only intrudes when somebody walks in or out of the door and even then it's fuzzy and a little unreal. We both sparked our smokes and I started to tell what I knew.

“OK, man, not all of this is confirmed-like. Some of it remains conjecture. Most of it I can back up, but that's a little tricky too, 'cause some of the back-up was acquired through extra-legal activity.”

The fat cop ran his hand through the stubble on top of his head and swore.

“Yeah,” I continued, “I know. But like that's the way it is. Here's what I know: it starts with Mr. Amerika. You know he was,” and I made a waffling hand gesture and let it stand. “Turns out he had a boyfriend who was a Sergeant in Nam near the DMZ by the name of Arnold Hershman. He made a deal with some local growers — you know it's called the Golden Triangle, right? Lots of poppy fields. So he starts sending out a little bit of smack through the Army's own mail system, but it's less than ideal, definitely risky, and he can only send a little bit at a time. Well, somehow or another, he works out something with Mr. A. and they start importing at a pretty major level. They needed a runner to get the product down to a shipping point and that's where Sam Pancetti enters the picture. He was a Lance Corporal at the time and somehow got all buddy buddy with Arnie. You can read into that what you want. There are rumors that the reason Sam was in Nam to begin with was because he had molested his sister, but I think that's bunk.”

“I got two questions,” he asked looking at his watch. He got the bartender's attention and ordered a scotch neat and another shot for me. “Hey,” he said, pointing to his watch, “it's after five. I'm off.”

“Fine with me. You got questions, ask away.”

“Which sister are we talking about?”

“That would be Julia.”

“The missing one.”

“Yup.”

“My other question,” he was interrupted when the drinks appeared in front of us.

“Does this shaggy dog story really have a point?”

“Oh, I think you'll find it has several.”

He reached into his wallet and put a ten down on the plank. “OK, as long as I'm amused, I'm buying.”

“Cool, thanks Inspector, man.” I raised my shot glass and put the liquid where it belonged. I fired up another Pall Mall and left the pack on the table. Zyzek shook one out without asking and I didn't say anything.

“So what's this with Sam and Julia?”

“Well, I think she **was** molested, but not by Sam. I think he took the blame for that because he was being blackmailed. I think that Sam...”

“Was a little light in the loafers?” interrupted the cop.

“Sure. Like that's one way of puttin' it. And somebody finds this out, the same somebody, I'm guessing, who actually did the molesting, assuming she actually was. No charges were ever pressed, so it stayed within the family. The only three who would really know for sure are the ones involved and one is planted in The Majestic Arms, one is keeping their distance and not talking, and the other vanished.”

“But it could have been the kid—Sam?”

“Sure, it could have been, but like I said, I don't think he was wired that way. I think he protests just enough to look guilty.”

“Well, help me out here, how did they know she had been...you know.”

“Good question. Supposedly she had gone out for drinks with her brother, got very drunk, and woke up violated. She freaked out, packed her things and left. Her only communication after that was a rambling letter to her mom, and all she said in that was she didn't feel safe at home and that she had been attacked — her words — and she was going to leave until she thought it would be safe. Not very specific, but Giuseppe and Maria — mom and dad — read between the lines and blamed Sam. Sam didn't remember anything from that evening and was essentially kicked out of the house. So because of this, he winds up almost 8,000 miles away dodging snipers' bullets for his sins. And he doesn't make any friends, puts on this super macho persona, and generally pisses off everybody he comes into contact with. Except a certain Sergeant, who can see the act for what it is, and lo and behold we have a couple of kindred spirits in the middle of nowhere.”

“And he's around all that heroin...”

“Sure, but I don't think he was using at first. See, he got himself into a position where he was responsible for transfer of materiel from a couple of different staging areas, one of which was Subic Bay. These shipments went both ways, ammo, food, medicine you name it coming in, trash, busted parts and personal effects including body bags going out. That's when things started to come together. They got the product out of the Triangle and into the Philippines.”

“And Mr. Import/Export arranges the shipping from there.”

“Yup. So he orders a dozen trinkets, Buddha statuettes, cheap guitars etc. and they are filled with the product. He gets them through customs and sells him to his contacts here. There's a lot of money to be made, but like in every other business it costs

money to make money. I mean the stuff is dirt-cheap in Nam, figure twelve bucks a kilo to the farmer. But the second buy is around five large, so figure ten kilos at a time and he's out 50-k plus expenses. Plus like any venture, the personnel costs a lot and there are bribes and baksheesh all along the way. So he has to take on business partners to fund the project and they get greedy, they want to up the numbers. Here was his biggest mistake: his business partners were amateurs, so they couldn't move it fast enough and this meant that they had a backlog of product and not enough bread to cover the shipments. His partners weren't paying the promised money; they had their own agenda it turns out. All this put Bruce heavy into debt and I'm guessing these weren't bank loans if you get my drift. So he gets hit with a double whammy: he realized how much things had spiraled outta control and then at around the same time he gets a letter from a friend saying that Arnold Hershman was killed in a firefight near the Cambodian border. This messes with his mind. He's in over his head and he wants out. Plus he's lost both his boyfriend and his supplier. So I think that's when Mr. Amerika started using."

"He was a junkie too?" asked Zyzck.

I responded with a shrug.

"So what happens to the kid, what's his name?"

"Sam?"

"Yeah, Sam."

"Sam looses it as well, he's probably hooked by now and he gets righteously stoned and drunk and winds up fragging his C.O. Allegedly, dig? This puts him back stateside, and of all things he threatens his sister. Somehow or another, after all this, he gets off with a dishonorable discharge and shows up back in the City."

“But not back to papa?”

“Nah, like I said, there's some bad blood there. The Panccetti clan is pretty messed up, let me tell you.”

“That,” said Zyzck, firing up another smoke and waving for a refill, “is some story. He goes through all that and winds up dead in a dump. Some life.”

“Yeah, but that's only part of the story.”

“What's the other part?”

“The money men — there's at least two of them that I know of. Both went to Cal; I think that's where they met. One is named Dan Baker - his dad, Orin Baker, is one of the owners of Willins and Baker, which is a property management company here in town. He's loaded, or at least his Dad is. Anyway, by all reports, Dan doesn't hurt for bread.” I sensed the inspector's attention drifting. “Hey man, this is important.”

“OK, property management. We know about that flat in the Haight.”

“Inspector, you know **some** about that flat in the Haight. Look, he had access to apartments and flats as they became available. And the turnover in the Haight has been pretty high. It takes a couple of weeks to a month for them to get cleaned up, right? So he has access to vacant flats, like plural, dig? All of these in a desirable part of town.”

“Desirable to who?”

“Pretty young things.”

“Runaways?” He was getting interested again.

“Sure, sure. Why not? They basically have a few ingredients already. They got the pads, the drugs, and the chicks. So they basically start up this floating party.”

“And the young kids?”

“The dudes get as much sex and drugs as they can afford. The chicks fare a little bit worse. Nah,” I took a sip of the thick black beer, “they got it a lot worse. It must have looked like fun at first, a non-stop party and all that, but then they got hooked and because of that had to start hooking, dig?”

“So we're back to that flat in the Haight.”

“Yup. Karen Broomfeld and Suzanne Poundstone. Karen was hooking, we can see that in her journal. We can even guess some about who she was doin' — remember the initials? Suzanne I think was caught in the middle. I'd like to think her — and maybe Blair, I don't know — saw somethin'. And that's where it gets into conjecture.”

“You can back up everything so far?”

“Pretty much.” Another Guinness and another shot appeared in front of me. I was surprised, but Zyzck looked annoyed.

“What,” he exclaimed. “It's still interesting.”

“OK.” I took a sip of the shot this time and let it work with my taste buds.

“We've got two more characters to discuss. One is a cat named Roland Sabacan.”

“What kind of a name is...”

“Sabacan is Filipino. I think he had some connection to that side of the import racket. He's a bit of a jack-of-all-trades. He's done some roadying for rock bands, been a bouncer at nightclubs, bodyguard, you name it. He's also a bad dude, strong man with a quick temper and his weapon of choice would be a knife.”

“You're naming the killer of those two girls? Damn,” he slammed his fist on the bar, “you were holding out on me, you S.O.B.” This got the attention of pretty much everybody in the bar.

“Hey, calm down,” I said in a low voice. “I didn't know if that was the right name, but I'm pretty sure of it now. Honest,” I added. “I don't know about the two chicks in the flat, but I know for sure he offed Mr. Amerika. He was the organization — if you can call it that — the organization's muscle.”

“You think he killed your friend?”

“Stacii? Yeah, probably. See, I've been a thorn in their side for a while. I've been asking questions they don't want answered. That's why I was fired from the gig of finding Julia Pancetti, I mean sure, I wasn't makin' great progress, but they didn't like me goin' into the...family dynamic. Killing Stacii was personal, for sure those guys wanted to send a message and maybe they felt that they could make a frame job work.”

“So we start looking for this Saba...”

“Sabacan,” I spelled it out. “Yeah, you've got the resources, I don't. Also you need to look at some bank accounts. Dan Baker would be one; the other is the Pancettis' lawyer, Chas Niscemi.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Like I said, there's the Cal connection, I think that's where they met. Frat boys throwing Keggers and then they graduate to smack and hookers. I think Niscemi's probably doing some money laundering, I mean it's gotta come from somewhere. You're gonna need a good accountant to look at his finances and that's gonna be tough, because he thinks he's pretty smart.”

“Is this party still going on?”

“Nah, not right now. It's all shut down. It got out of hand and now they're trying to clean up loose ends.”

“Like killing Mr. Amerika?”

“You know, I don't think that was anything but an overzealous employee. This cat Sabacan went to the flat to clean it out. They knew that Karen had kept more than a journal—she kept trinkets and pictures along with that journal.”

“But,” and the fat cop was squinting at me, “killing Bruce helped them out, yes?”

“Yes and no. Sure, the only singin' Mr. A is gonna be doin' is with a heavenly choir.”

“Assuming they let his kind into heaven.”

“I'd like to think they do. But anyway, they don't know how much Bruce told me, and they wanted his last shipment, and they wanted his books destroyed.”

“They were the ones who tossed his place.”

“Yeah, and they were the ones who set the warehouse on fire.”

“You seem damn sure of that.”

“It makes sense.”

“But, without the books, all of this is a little hard to prove.”

“Well, like here's the thing. I have some of Mr. A's stuff, like the books. Also some letters and the like.”

“You stole this stuff? Are you an idiot?” His voice started rising again.

“Assuming you have any of this, how is it admissible in court?”

“You have to trust me on this. Bruce wanted me to have this stuff. He wanted to come clean. That's why he gave me his keys. That's why he tracked me down in the first place.”

“Sez you. A lawyer would have a field day with this stuff.”

“Sure, but think about this: they've got at least nine kilos of pure smack and they've got to unload it or put it on ice somewhere.”

“Nine kilos, how do you know this?”

“Because I've got the tenth kilo.”

“What?” Now the fat cop was becoming unglued.

“I told you I've got Mr. A's books. I also have a cheap, imported Filipino guitar. There's a bag of smack in it, my guess would be a kilo's worth.”

“You've got a kilo of heroin on you?”

“Look, what, not on me no. It's in a safe place. The guy who has it doesn't know what he's got, dig?”

“You are something,” he said shaking his head before he turned it up a notch. OK, a couple of notches. “What the fuck were you planning to do with this stuff?”

“Turn it over.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It's evidence and it correlates with the books.”

“When were you planning on turning this over?”

“When I figured it was safe.”

“I'm not following you.”

I caught the bartender's eye and made a circling motion and then leaned in. “Say Mr. A was a loose end. Say his warehouse was a loose end. Say Sam was a loose end. Guess who that leaves?”

“You think they'll go after you?”

“I think it's likely. That's why I have this plan...”

“Oh no, no you don't. I don't need to get involved in any of your half-assed schemes. If we're doing anything, we're doing it the right way, and by we I am most definitely **not** including you. Dig?” he said, laying on the irony three feet thick.

“Hey, hear me out.”

“Why? Why should I?”

“Because it's better than anything you've got. It's a plan, man.”

“Harrumph,” is what I think he said.

“Look it, I get word to them that I've got what I got and I offer a deal.”

“What kind of deal?”

“Well, I could just ask for them to leave me alone in exchange for the goods, but they wouldn't buy it. So I'll talk in language that they understand. That kilo is worth anywhere from fifteen grand to hundreds of thousands, depending on how many times it's cut. But they don't have that kind of bread, so I figure I'll ask for ten large for everything, —the books, the smack and my silence.”

“You think they'll take the offer?”

“Oh, they'll take it all right. But they won't honor their side of the bargain. I think they would take the opportunity to clean up the remaining loose end.” The drinks arrived and I reached into my wallet and paid for them. We spent a couple of minutes in silence thinking about it. Well, silence isn't quite right, we weren't talking, but the juke was spitting out “Wheel of Fortune” by Kay Starr, only the record had a skip in it so it kept repeating the part where she sings “Turning, Turning, Turning, Turning....” Finally somebody gave the machine a solid slap and the song ended with the sound of the needle

going across the grooves accompanied by light applause from some of the barflies. The next song was some Irish folk thing I didn't recognize.

"I'm thinking," mused the cop, "that there's got to be a better way to play this. Can't we just pick them up on something?"

"Absolutely, and that would be my first choice because...well, I'm selfish and I don't want to risk getting killed, dig? By all means, put a tail on them and see if they make a stupid move and lead you to their stash. But failing that, we have to catch them in the act and we have to get them to implicate themselves. This won't be easy, because like I said, they think they're smarter than the average bear."

"Well, I can get a couple of men on it, but it's a little hard to tail the both of them. Our resources are spread pretty thin."

"Yeah, I dig. I think Baker is the one you want to tail. He'd be the one to be doin' the heavy lifting. Niscemi is the brains; he's going to be plotting the next move. Thing is, if they're smart, I mean really smart, then they've already got the stuff stashed and they'll sit on it until they think it's safe. So that's where it gets back to me."

"You're going to take the lawyer?" The fat cop wasn't as dumb as he looked.

"Yeah. Figure it can play a couple of ways. It could force their hand and get them to move, or at least check on their loot. Then you would have one of them and you could put the squeeze on him. Heck, the deal might look good to them, ten grand and they're home free and maybe they can trust me."

The inspector grunted and shook his head.

"Yeah, I know, I can dream right? OK, at that point I play the bait and try to get the deal to go down in a place where I can have like the appropriate backup."

“Do you want to go through with this?”

“Not really, no. Like I say, I can hope for a stupid move by one of them but I don't think it's likely.”

“What about evidence — the drugs and the books?”

“They're safe, but we could pick them up now if you'd like. I'd just as soon get that stuff off my hands, dig?

Zyzck checked his watch and shook his head. “Nah, not now. Right now I'm officially late for dinner. Call me tomorrow; let's see if we can get this better coordinated. I also want to go on record saying it's a terrible idea.”

“I second the motion, man.”

“You OK to drive?” asked the cop.

“Sure,” I lied. “You?”

“No problem,” he slurred.

He hit the bathroom while I settled up and then stepped outside. It was dark out so I guess we had been in there for a while. I sparked up a smoke and buttoned up my coat because it was pretty cold and there was a fierce wind. I figured it was just as well; the weather would sober me up pretty quickly on the bike. The fat cop came out of the bar, started to walk toward me, and then changed his mind and walked straight toward his unmarked Fury. I flashed him a peace sign and hoofed it over to the bike. It took a few kicks to get started, but it finally coughed to life belching blue smoke. Realizing that I was pretty hammered, I took it slow on the way back to North Beach. I parked the BSA near the office and stopped off at the cheese steak joint and then headed over to Wing Fat's for a sixer and lumbered into the office. ‘Tack was out so I had the place to myself.

I put on the Bach platter, chewed on the sandwich and sipped the beer, trying to figure out the day's events. I wasn't completely comfortable doing business with Zyzck, but I needed the cops to find Sabacan and I needed backup for taking on the two ex-frat boys. The message service had a call from Dawn but she said it wasn't urgent. Part of me didn't want to move but the other part figured it made more sense to crash at home rather than on the couch, so I gathered up the Cheese Steak remains (I was already beginning to regret the purchase) and put the leftover four cans into the fridge. I took the trash out and then moved all the papers on my desk into the safe. I turned off the Hi Fi and the lights and locked up. It was still pretty early, maybe before nine, but I was feeling pretty much used up. I got on the bike and rode it up the hill, parked it in the garage, and went back upstairs. I had looked around for a tail and didn't see anybody. Frankly, I didn't care.

But when I got to the apartment, I got that funny feeling. I was extra careful opening the door and I saw that there was a light on in the living room. I didn't remember leaving it on. I grabbed the baseball bat near the door and walked as quietly as I could toward the back of the flat, figured I would come into the living room through the back entrance. It didn't matter. He was waiting for me.

“Good evening, Mr. Pike.” It was hard to see him because the lamp was right in my eyes, but I recognized the voice well enough.

“Mr. Baker, what the hell are you doing in my pad?”

“We need to talk,” he said in a voice that was level, almost monotone, but there was an edge to it.

“Fine, but like I've got regular, well scratch that, I've got like irregular office hours, but dig, I've got an office. How did you get in here?”

“Back door.”

“I keep the back door locked,” I said, still trying to get used to the light. He was sitting in my overstuffed, comfortable, but somewhat ratty chair with the reading lamp next to it, but he had one hand on a small handgun, guessing a .38, and one hand on the gooseneck of the lamp, keeping the spotlight on me.

He shrugged.

“There are usually ways around locks. Something someone in your profession would know only too well.”

I made my way to my couch, really more of a loveseat, that was against the far wall and sat down, still clutching the bat. I didn't like the set up, but I had one small advantage over the property manager. This was an old Victorian that survived the quake. One minor nuisance living there was the paucity of electrical outlets. So behind all the furniture were a number of extension cords leading to the one or maybe two outlets in each room. Sure he had the gun, but like I knew where the light was plugged in, which was right near the edge of the couch. I moved closer to that edge, just to get comfortable like and leaned the bat against the outer edge, still keeping my left hand in a loose grip on the knob.

“OK, Mr. Baker, Dan. The floor is like yours, man. Rap away.”

“We,” then he corrected himself, “I think you're holding out on us. I think you have some things that don't belong to you.”

“Like what?”

“Don't play smart,” he said with a brief wave of the gun.

“I'm serious. What are you looking for?”

“You knew Bruce Amerika? We,” he didn't correct himself this time, “think he told you some things.”

“Lookit, I didn't know the cat that all that well. Sure, he told me some things, but like he had an overactive imagination. I didn't know where the reality ended and the fantasy began.”

“We don't want to make this difficult, but I have to impress on you that we aren't playing games. You were in The Golden Trading Group warehouse before it caught fire.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I don't know where you're getting that. You sayin' I torched his warehouse, 'cause that's crazy, man.”

“That's not what I said. I said you were there. We saw you and your small friend. He was carrying something. Something that belongs to us.”

So Ramón had been made after all. “Let me get this straight, you think you saw my buddy Ramón in that warehouse? What would he be doing there?”

“He wasn't alone. You were there, too.”

“That,” I said with as much bravado as I could muster, “is just a guess on your part. But like I'm not in a mood to argue. Say I was there, maybe not when you think you saw me but maybe some other time. Maybe I have a few trinkets that belonged to Bruce.”

Baker shook his head to move the comma of blond hair off his forehead.

“Trinkets, huh? Well, what say,” and here he pointed the .38 directly at me, “you get these trinkets and hand them over.”

“OK,” I raised my right hand like I was being a paragon of honesty, “let's assume that these trinkets exist and I'm not admitting that they do. Hypothetical like, dig? If I had anything like that, I wouldn't keep it here.”

“Then we can make a trip to your office...”

“Not there either.” I briefly looked up at the ceiling and then back at the man with the gun. “If I had something like that, it would be on ice right now, but if something happened to me, that ice would thaw and they would fall straight into the hands of the man. At least that's what I might do, hear what I'm sayin'?”

Dan Baker bit his lip; he was thinking. Like I said, he wasn't the brains of the operation. “This on the level?”

“What, our little conversation, our little *Gedankenexperiment*? I'm not sure, man. But if it was on the level and if I did have somethin' like that I would think that it would take a little bit of bread to convince me to let you have it. Again, hypothetically speaking.”

Dan creased his forehead in thought. This wasn't part of the plan and he was having trouble deviating. “How much bread are we talking about,” he finally asked.

“Well, I'm not a drug dealer or an accountant, but I'm guessing that something like this would be worth around ten large.”

He let out a derisive snort and waived his gun around in what he hoped was a menacing fashion. “You seem to be forgetting I have the upper hand.”

“So you shoot me and the cops get the haul. Makes that ten grand look like a good deal, yes?” I was hoping my fake confidence was working, but I was starting to

grow some real heavy doubts. Dan Baker thought for a moment and leveled his gun toward me.

“I don't need the baggage, and I'm pretty sure we can deal with any fallout.”

Well it was a long shot, but I took it. I swung the bat right into the wall outlet and scored a direct hit, sending the room into darkness. Almost simultaneously, I dived to the ground and the property manager's shot rang high. Still clutching the bat I got up in a crouch and dived toward the man with the gun, but he had moved. He let another bullet loose but it was a literal shot in the dark. Still, it gave me an idea where he was and I bounced up and swung for the fences. The bat hit him with enough force to knock the gun out of his hand. He made a noise and then decided to split the way he came. He was knocking stuff off the walls and leveled the bookcase in the hall, which temporarily stopped me from following him. At the same time somebody started knocking loudly on the front door. I climbed over the bookshelf and spilled books and got to the kitchen in time to see Dan Baker bound down the stairs. I swore loudly and made my way to the front door. It was a couple of cops, like too little too late, but I turned on the hall light and let them in. They were confused, but I told them the guy was getting away so one of the cops took off down the stairs to look for Baker while the other wanted my statement. I gave him the Reader's Digest version, leaving out most of the good stuff. It took me a bit to get the lights back on in the living room because the plug on the extension cord was bent pretty badly and it took a bit to get the prongs back into shape to where they would fit in the receptacle. Once the lights came on, the uniform found the gun, asked me about it, and I told him it belonged to the other guy, the mugger, burglar or whoever my visitor was. I was being pretty vague and outright lied when I said I didn't know who he was.

I'm not sure that the cop was buying everything, but I didn't really care. The other cop came back up the stairs shaking his head so I repeated my brief statement and told them I would talk to Zyzck in the morning. After about forty-five minutes of pointless jawing they finally left and I put the bookshelf back up and stuffed the books back into it in no particular order. Then I opened the fridge and got a beer out, found the church key on the kitchen table and cracked it open, drinking it straight out of the bottle. I fired up a weed and took a look at the damage to the back door. My visitor had knocked two glass panes out of the door and was able to reach in and access both the knob and the deadbolt. Time to get a major security upgrade I figured, but that could wait. I didn't know if the cat would come back or not. I was guessing he was done for the night and I hoped I was right. I plopped down into my big overstuffed chair and cradled the bat in my arms. Any sleep I got was fitful at best and it was around six a.m. when I decided that if I wasn't going to sleep I might as well get an early start. So I showered, changed, and headed out to get some coffee and something to eat before getting to the office.

I was still groggy after a breakfast of greasy chow fun, so I headed to the office and crashed on the couch. I actually caught around an hour of sleep, but the ol' Ameche woke me up around eight and I picked it up after the sixth or so ring.

“You know who this is?” asked the voice on the other end. It was muffled, like he was speaking through a cloth towel or something, but I had a pretty good idea.

“Yeah, dude. What can I do for you?”

“My...associate made a rather clumsy play last night. I assure you that he acted entirely on his own. When I heard about it, I was...morti...disappointed.”

“And?” I asked.

“Simply put, I would like to apologize.”

“OK, clumsy is a word, sure.” I was waking up pretty quickly now. “But like I'm not buyin' the sorry act. So let me repeat myself, what do you want from me?”

“Well, you have something, some things really, that we would like to obtain. My associate said you mentioned a figure, but I have to confess that it was a little on the high side.”

“That's funny, 'cause like I would argue that it was actually on the low side, and in the light of a brand new day, I would think my offer was off by about half. Also, the circumstances have changed a bit.”

“What do you mean by that? What circumstances?” The voice was becoming less muffled, like more treble and less bass. Also more annoyed, dig?

“Like I don't appreciate being played. I value my privacy and my space. That was invaded last night, and I don't mind tellin' you that it was a real bummer. Also I would guess that my neighbor was pretty hacked off by the commotion so there's that and

possible trouble with the landlord. All of this trouble was because you sent an amateur who refused to negotiate.”

“But I assure you...”

“I heard, I know. He was acting alone, I dig. But adding to all of this is the simple fact that the cops have a partial understanding of what actually has been going on.”

“What have you told them?” By this time the fear wasn't disguised, it was palpable.

“Not much, this and that. Sure they're slow and you're some kind of genius, but they **will** start piecing things together. Without real evidence, probably all they can do is make your life — lives — uncomfortable. But the stuff I have could change the balance, big time. So here's what I want: Fifteen grand. You pay up I give up, simple as that. Like I told your friend, I have a fail safe in place, so that if anything were to happen to me, all of this stuff gets turned over.”

The line was quiet for a bit. “How can we know that you really have anything at all? How can we trust you?” he finally asked.

“Trust? It's a two-way street, and I haven't seen anything on your part to like engender anything remotely close to trust. On the other hand, what do I have? I admit that it's not much. I've got a guitar; I believe it's from the Philippines, still in the box. A few letters, invoices, things like that. Some bookkeeping stuff from The Golden Trading Group. Half a Polaroid of Karen Broomfeld. The cops already have her journal.”

“Her what?”

“Come on now, don't be disingenuous,” I said in an almost scolding tone, drawing the word out like it was made of taffy.

“I don't know if we can...come up with fifteen. Seven would be a stretch.”

“Look dude, I'm done negotiating. I've got a couple of meetings today, but give me a buzz or leave a message with my service. I'm sure you can be discreet. I'm not going to put a time-table on this, but trust me when I say that you would be well advised to act with alacrity, dig?” I'll admit to some vanity and yeah, I was laying it on pretty thick with the fancy words, but I didn't like the dude and his air of superiority. The more pins I could push into his bubble, the better, hear what I'm saying?

“We could meet...”

I cut him off. “We're not meeting anywhere until you've got the bread. Then and only then do we meet and then it's gonna be at a place of my choosing, dig? This isn't a negotiation anymore. Call me when you've got the money, not before. Like I said, I've got work to do. Pax, man,” and I hung up. OK, I didn't know if making them more desperate was a good idea, but I thought the pressure might help. Just meant I would have to keep on my toes, that's all. At least that's what I told myself, and I had a pretty good idea that it was a big fat lie, but there you go.

I got a couple of bills out of the safe. It was looking a little sad in there, a lot of pieces of paper and very little of it green. ‘Tack came by looking for something and I let him know about Sam and my little talks with Zyzck and Dan Baker. Finally, I let him in on my morning phone call. Ramón broke out his small pipe and filled it with some hash. In between holding the smoke in our lungs and coughing a lot he managed to get out that he thought my plan stunk. Getting slightly high and dispassionate-like, I had to agree.

The phone rang and it was the secretary for Edwin Cornwall confirming our appointment for 1:30 at my office. I told her that worked for me and hung up. The phone rang again and this time it was Velma saying that her lawyer had said we were meeting at 1:30 and I said yes, looking forward to seeing her, etc. I also asked if Fred was coming, but she said no, he was staying in Nogales. We discussed a few things relating to the bill I had for her before ringing off. Finally, I called and left a message for Zyzck. I wanted to update him and work out a plan when the deal went down.

Maybe it was the hash, or maybe I had the jitters, but it took me three tries to get my final invoice together for the Poundstones. I kept making stupid typing errors, leaving the caps lock on and stuff like that. I still had to use a bit of correction tape on the final copy and the carbon, but it was close enough. I had pretty much kept Velma in the loop, but clients can get weird when the bill comes due. Some just accept it, some accept it and then call back later saying they're not going to pay for this or that, and some glance at it, scoff, and tell you what they're willing to pay you. Then it gets a bit ugly. I usually make sure to have annotations on my bills both for the client and to jog my own memory. Like I can remember it all, sure, but sometimes it takes a little kick-start to nail down a \$4.85 taxi bill. The more sure I am, the fewer arguments. Says here anyway...

I had finished that task and put it into a pristine manila envelope when the phone rang again. It was Zyzck and he sounded like he had a pretty bad hangover. Turned out I wasn't the only one who didn't spend the previous night in his bed, dig? Whatever, I'm no marriage counselor, so I was reduced to making the proper sympathetic noises. Once he was done with his complaining I brought him up to speed. Of course, this started an argument; he wanted to go after Baker and apply pressure. I admitted that I had thought

of that, but preferred to try to lull Baker and his partner into a false sense of security. The fat cop called that bullshit, but I had to remind him that it was my behind on the line here. We talked about how to handle the exchange and he suggested some places and I threw out a few as well. I asked about Sabacan, but he didn't have anything on him. Finally, he rang off saying he had work to do and I told him I'd keep him in the loop. The call ended abruptly, so much so that I almost called his office again, but that would have been weird, man, so I left it the way it was.

The next call was to Dawn. She was out but Jeeves took down my info, asking twice how to spell Pike. Nice to see that things hadn't changed between us, still lots of love, hear what I'm saying? After that, it was puttering around the office doing small tasks, cleaning up, and yawning a lot.

Velma showed up a little early. She was dressed in an off-white sleeveless dress accented with a fairly wide tan belt. It had a high collar and was cut well below the knees and she wore tan hose and sensible tan shoes with almost no heel. Her shoes and handbag were tan as well. She was wearing less make-up than she wore in her last visit though her hair was still plastered into a solid helmet by buckets of hairspray. I had to hand it to her for holding it together, but I guess that's what she did. Her insides might have been doing the Watusi, but her façade was rock solid. Any grief she was feeling was left unsaid. I don't know if that's healthy or not, but we all handle these things differently. Her way was to never mention Suzanne and to focus on Blair. We made small talk for a bit and then I handed her the bill. She actually took her time and read through the whole thing. Twice. She complained about a couple of expenses, the aforementioned \$4.85 taxi ride and the flashlight purchase but other than that she was

cool with it and wrote out a check then and there for the full amount. Edwin Cornwall's secretary called and apologized saying that something had come up and he had to cancel but he could see Mrs. Poundstone later at his office and I was welcome to come by as well. I said I would pass this along to Velma as she was in my office. This threw the secretary for a loop; all she could do was repeat what she had already said. I said OK and hung up. I told Velma about the change in plans and she said she had the address. She asked if I would be there and I said I'd try to make it, but again, her lawyer would be better equipped to handle the current charges against Blair. I was trying to make some effort in getting them reduced, but I couldn't promise anything. She said thank you, we shook hands, and I let her out.

Dawn called back a little later and we made plans for an early diner at Joe's grill. I managed to get a few more errands done and even made it to the bank before 3:00 so I was able to deposit the Poundstones' check and withdraw a few more bills for expenses. I was starting to yawn again so I stopped at Mario's and got a double espresso, coffee and a raspberry pastry. I settled down with the Chron to leisurely peruse the box scores and work on the crossword puzzle. The Jints had dropped both ends of a double dip to the Reds, making it a three-game losing streak. I wasn't having much better luck with the puzzle; I was stuck on 13 down: *India's floating lake*. Six letters, pretty sure it started with an L and positive that it ended in a K (17 across clue: *America's Rubber City* had to be Akron) but beyond that I was stuck. I made a mental note to look at a map or encyclopedia when I had the time. I hiked back up the hill and got the BSA out of the garage and rode over to Edwin Cornwall's office, making it with minutes to spare.

There's not much to say about the meeting. Edwin was a pretty humorless, straight dude. He favored dark, conservative suits, wore thick turtle shell horn rims, and had his hair trimmed weekly. He did tend to wear somewhat loud bow ties; I think he was trying to get that to be his "thing." Don't know if it was working or not. He was droning on about a possible illegal search and seizure angle and thought he might be able to get Blair off of everything but a holding charge on a half of a joint they found on him. That was still going to be problematic, and Blair could still be facing some serious jail time. I didn't have much to add, and could only vaguely say what I was planning. In the end Edwin thanked me for my work so far, which was unexpected, but it made Velma look at me a little differently. My opinion of the counselor went up a bit as well.

It was around 7:30 when I got to Joe's. The joint was all dark wood, white tablecloths, and despite it being two-thirds full, pretty quiet. Quiet enough so the pianist had his left foot permanently planted on the soft pedal as he tinkled through standards in the upper register of a well-worn baby grand. I looked around and saw that Dawn was already there. I ordered a scotch over from the bar and then headed over to her table. She was dressed in a simple blue skirt, black boots, a cream-colored halter and a gray jacket. It was cold enough to where she was keeping the jacket on. Her hair was tied into a knot at the back of her head. She wasn't wearing much makeup and there were bluish bags under her eyes. She looked beat, but I couldn't blame her.

"Hey there," I said, bussing her cheek. "Been here long?"

"No, maybe five minutes or so." It was a bit of lie, or she was inhaling her wine. There were two glasses in front of her; one was empty and one was half-full. The ashtray

had two thin menthols in it as well, one extinguished and one burning. She looked up at me with a bit of a smile. “You already have a drink?” she asked.

“I thought maybe you had a head start, so I needed some catching up,” I cracked. Then I leaned in a bit closer and changed the tone. “So like, how are you doing? How's the family?”

“I'm...I'm OK I think. Kind of numb, really. I mean Sam and I were never close, but still, he's my brother, you know?”

“Sure, I get it,” I said to make some comforting noise.

“Mom is beside herself. We had to get her some pills from our doctor before she could sleep last night. Dad isn't saying much, but I think he blames himself. He doesn't believe this is an accident, but the police aren't putting much effort into it. So I guess he's directing his...anger toward them.”

“I can see what I can do, but from their perspective, it doesn't look like much more than it is. No offense, but sometimes things are what they are. There's not a conspiracy behind everything.”

She blinked her eyes a couple of times and got a long thin cigarette out of a pack of Virginia Slims. I fired it up with my Zippo and got a Pall Mall out for myself.

“I hear what you're saying, but what gets me is that he was trying to get in touch with me. He called me first, letting me know where he was. I should have...should have gone to him sooner.”

“Hey,” I grabbed her chin and lifted it up a little so we were eye to eye. “You couldn't have known and you couldn't have done anything. Like I dig, these things can cause you to blame yourself, but you have to let that go.” I stopped to peel a piece of

tobacco from my tongue before continuing. “Easier said than done, I know. Believe me I know.” I looked around and caught the waiter's eye. “Do you know what you want?” I asked.

“What? What do you mean?”

“For dinner. Have you thought about what you want to eat?”

“Maybe a salad? I'm not that hungry.”

“You sure? Gotta eat.”

“I really don't feel all that hungry, I just wanted...I don't know.” She looked at me for help. “Companionship?” she asked.

“OK, that's fine and I'm here for you. But we have to go on, dig? I know the tendency is to want to shut down but the best thing you — we — can do is to go on living.” My little pep talk fell on deaf ears so I went ahead and ordered a salad for her and the Sea Bass for me along with a bottle of Chardonnay.

“I mean with Julie and now Sam, it's really...hard, you know?”

“I know. Sucks to be alive sometimes.”

The rest of the meal had both of us yawning. She barely picked at her salad, but I made short work of the fish. We both did a good job with the wine. We were pretty looped and got on the A10 for a bracing ride. The original plan was for me to take her home but she said something to change my mind, so we rode back to North Beach, up to my place. She held on tight and sometimes a little low, low enough so it was hard for me to concentrate on the driving, dig? It was cold inside my pad because I hadn't fixed the two broken panes. She asked what happened and I lied and said some kids playing baseball busted them. She nodded like that made sense. She asked if I took away their

bat and I said sure, forgetting for a moment where it was. The only warm room was the bedroom so we retreated to there and got on with doing what the living do.

When I woke up she had already gone, no note, no nothing. I looked at the clock and it was ten, so I must have slept pretty heavily. I looked around and made sure that the door was still locked and then spent a few more minutes finding some cardboard and tape and covered the broken panes. I also stepped on a piece of glass and got it stuck in my foot, so that was another ten minutes spent getting it out. I took a shower and put a band-aid on my foot. My shoulder was healing OK, so that was something on the positive side. Still in my robe, I called and left a message for Dawn. She was out according to Jeeves, so I asked him to have her give me a call. He just said he would, no playing around with my name or number, so I guess the mood had even gotten to him. I got dressed and walked down to the office, heavily favoring my left foot.

Ramón was there so we smoked a pinner and I helped out with his light rig. It was starting to take over the office. According to 'Tack, it was modular so it could be taken apart and transported fairly easily. I wondered if all this would get through the door and the genius' response was that he thought it would but judging by the way he said it I don't think he had considered it before. It was in four main sections. Each section contained a series of strobes, traffic, Fresnels and Christmas lights as well as movable searchlights. These were synced together with a series of pulleys that ran on one large washing machine motor and a few smaller windshield wiper motors, the later running on a car battery. But 'Tack was thinking of seeing how long one of them would last plugged into 120 volts—he knew that it would blow, but before then it would move pretty quick, right? Ideally, he would use a buck transformer but he hadn't been able to salvage one. He spent some time showing me how the modules all fit together along with a couple of

projection screens and a large bed sheet. There were also a couple of overhead projectors he had in storage—these were used with the standard oil/food coloring/plastic sheet routine—as well as a couple of 8mm film projectors. He had amassed a large amount of random film stock and this was spliced together into ten-minute segments. Anyway, we had to spend a bit of time looking for bad bulbs, shoddy solder joints and the like. Took us up to almost two in the afternoon when we decided to go out for lunch.

The fog had rolled in and covered everything in a soft, diffusing gray. Of course, with the fog came the wind and the cold and we both had a laugh at a couple of tourists shivering in their t-shirts and Bermuda shorts. I sprang for lunch at the House of Dim Sum. I had never been there before and wanted to try it out. Turned out to be pricier than I expected (all those little treats add up quickly), but pretty good. Ramón had to head back to Zack's for some wire, switches and fuses, so I took my time wandering back to the office. Once there I grabbed a Coors out of the small fridge and called the service, but there weren't any messages. I didn't like it, but all I could do was wait.

It was maybe three beers later that the call came through. The guy was using the same voice-muffling trick as before.

“Mr. Pike. You know who this is,” like a statement, dig?

“Sure, dude, I wasn't expecting you to get the bread together that fast.”

“We haven't,” was all he said.

“OK, but I thought I clearly stated the plan...”

“And that plan,” he interrupted in a higher, distressed tone, “has changed.”

“How so?” but before I had finished the question, I had a pretty good idea of what had happened. I didn't like it.

“You're familiar with Occam's Razor?”

“That's like the law of economy?”

“Or parsimony, yes. I'm stretching the definition a bit, but the point is, I'm reducing our transaction to the simplest form. You have some things we want, we have something you want.”

“If you've hurt her—”

“She's fine. I won't say that she's been all that comfortable, but that's been a necessary evil, or a detail. You understand?”

I forced myself to calm down. I wanted to reach through the phone lines and pull out his slimy tongue, but instead I took a moment and then asked, “OK, what's the play?”

“First off,” he raised his voice a bit, as it sounded like a bus was passing by him. So he was on a payphone, outdoors and near a bus line. That didn't narrow it down much; it really could have been anywhere. “First off,” he repeated in the muffled tone again, “no cops. One word of this to them and she's history.”

“OK, fine, no cops.”

“You show up alone, with the goods, and I mean everything. If we're satisfied, we'll give you the location of the chick. You mentioned a fail safe in one of our previous chats, yes? Well, we have one as well. If we don't check in with a friend, your friend suffers. I don't have to be more explicit do I?”

“Nah, I dig.” I covered the phone and let loose with a choice expletive. “OK, it's your party—where and when?”

“It's 5:37 right now. How about 7:00 sharp.” Again a bus went by and he had to wait for it to pass. “You know where Lands End is?”

“Sure.”

“How about the memorial for the USS San Francisco? You can park there. Then get on the coastal trail and head northeast. You'll get to the Mile Rock Overlook. We meet there at 7:00. There might be some joggers out, but other than that we should have a bit of privacy.”

“I'll need a friend to bring the stuff.”

“As I said in the beginning, no cops.”

“He's not a cop, he's a hack.”

“A what?”

“A hack, you know a cabbie.”

“OK. But we are watching and if we see anything out of the ordinary, the deal is off and I hope...you can live with the consequences.” I swear there was almost a chuckle when he said it.

“You're not leaving me much time. I have to pick up the stuff and head across town in rush hour. Is there a number I can reach you?”

“No. This...none of this is negotiable. You're there at the prescribed place and time or the deal is off. I can't be responsible for what happens after that.” Again another bus went by and I couldn't hear what he said. Then he abruptly hung up.

It took me a bit to get myself together. I had to go through some denial, and then pounded my desk a few times in anger. Finally I sparked a smoke and picked up the phone. I had to contact Gill, but since he didn't own a phone I had to call Veterans Cab

and got Henri. I told him I needed to talk to Gill and that it was urgent. He said he would see what he could do and I should wait. It was about ten minutes and I was starting to lose it when Gill called. He was on a payphone near Clay. I gave him a brief outline. He said he'd stop at his pad, grab the bag and the guitar, and then pick me up. But I wasn't in the mood for more hanging around, so I said I would meet him at his place, then changed my mind and asked if he could meet me at Lands End near the USS San Francisco Memorial. He said he wasn't sure where the memorial was so I gave him the best directions I could from memory. He could tell by my tone of voice that I was in a hurry so he said fine, and asked how soon he needed to be there. I said immediately and he paused and then said something in Russian. I asked for a translation and he gave me one. It wasn't printable. We hung up and I grabbed my stuff and split.

The traffic was bad, but I was on a bike so I could weave a bit through the worst of it. Mainly I was dodging cars, Muni, and jay-walking pedestrians. Geary was a parking lot, so I tried getting over to Sacramento and had better luck but more stop signs. The further west I went, the thicker the fog got. By the time I got into the avenues it was pea soup, and the visibility was a little over a block. It had gotten colder as well; I was wearing my pea coat and had my fro stuffed into a watch cap but I didn't bring any gloves and my fingers felt frozen in place on the handle grips. I'll admit I ran a few stop signs and had a close call or two but I'll credit luck and the bike rather than the rider. I finally got to the parking lot and looked around for the blue and white hack, but despite Gill living just across the park, I beat him to it. I shut off the BSA and I know it sounds weird, but I was assaulted by the quiet and the lack of vibration. Everything was still, cold, and white, the fog at one point almost solid and then changing into delicate strands

wrapped around old cypress trees bent by a lifetime of wind. The place is called Lands End and it is as literal as it sounds, a spot where the landmass ends and the Pacific Ocean says OK, I'll take it from here. It's a park with some hiking trails and some great vistas, Point Bonita and the Marin Headlands to the north and to the west the Farallones, a small group of islands inhabited by birds and seals. On this evening, though, there was no view. I could hear the ocean's low frequency roar and the higher pitched crashes of waves and occasionally a seagull call or two offset by a fog horn. It smelled like the ocean, it sounded like the ocean, but I was in a white world with indefinite boundaries.

I got off the bike and walked around the parking lot, looking around for a tail. I couldn't see anybody or anything. I did see an interesting car in the lot. It was a late model Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser, a large boat of a wagon with a greenhouse on the top, hence the name. I was pretty sure this was the car that we tailed after the happening at Mr. Amerika's warehouse. I walked over to it and peered in the driver's side window, but I couldn't make out the registration on the steering column. I looked up and saw a Veterans Cab pull into the parking lot, so I straightened up and walked over to it. Gill grinned up at me.

"Sorry I'm a little late," he said sheepishly. "Traffic was pretty bad."

"That's cool. What time do you have?"

He pulled a pocket watch out of his pants and flipped the cover open. "Forty Five past by my clock."

"Not much time. Did you get the stuff?"

"The guitar box and the bag."

"Cool. You bring your gun?"

He leaned over and patted the glove compartment.

“Let me see it.”

“What,” he complained. “No way. You're a lousy shot.”

“Trust me, you'll get it right back.”

Gill reluctantly opened the glove box and handed over his .38. I tested it in my hand for weight and decided it would do. I looked around to make sure I wasn't being watched and then quickly walked back to the Olds. I checked one more time and then, grabbing the pistol by the snub barrel, brought the handle down quickly on the right taillight. It was louder than I would have liked, but I hoped that the fog muffled it enough to where the sound wouldn't travel that far. I also hoped that it was the right car, I mean like I said I was pretty sure, but like not a hundred percent, hear what I'm saying? After picking up the larger pieces and scattering the rest with my foot, I walked back to Gill and handed him the piece back.

“What was up with that?” he asked.

“Payback for my door. It's also a bit of insurance. Probably useless, but you never know.”

“You know that car?”

“I think I do. You don't recognize it?”

“Nope.”

“Doesn't it look like the short we tailed the other night?”

“Saturday night? I don't know. It was pretty dark.”

“Well, I think it's the same one.”

“Huh. Think, what's that mean?”

“It means I think...look we don't have time. Where's the stuff?”

He popped the trunk and shrugged. I went around to the back of the cab and looked through the bag. I quickly took out some of the items — I wasn't giving them everything. I left the dual set of books and some of the invoices in the bag. Hopefully that would be enough to satisfy them. I got the bag out of the trunk which was now filled with a bunch of random papers that the wind threatened to scatter, grabbed the guitar box and placed it under my arm, and shut the trunk with an assist from my foot. Gill was beside me and I could see that he had the .38 in the pocket of his tan windbreaker.

“What next?” he asked.

“That way,” I nodded. “Hit the trail and head northeast.”

“OK,” he said in a tone that lacked both trust and conviction.

The initial path was wide enough to drive on but it soon intersected the trail, which was big enough for hiking and maybe a bike. We walked quickly and wordlessly, though occasionally Gill would grunt. Then I saw them, about a hundred feet away. They appeared as almost spectral figures in the fog. The taller blond was dressed in his grayish-brown raincoat with his hands stuffed into the pockets and next to him was the lawyer dressed in a blue suit, a gray fedora and matching gloves and scarf. He had an unlit cigarette between his thin lips. Dan Baker looked worried, but Niscemi was impassive or at least was doing his best to look that way. I asked Gill what time it was and he said six fifty-eight so I stopped and we stared at each other for a little less than two minutes. I don't know why I did it, but he said seven sharp and I didn't want to appear over eager. Cool was what was needed. I'm not saying I wasn't nervous but there weren't butterflies or anything. This was it; I had to give myself up to the moment. I

wished for a little luck, but I didn't expect it. Hopefully this would be pretty straight ahead.

“Counselor,” I said when we approached.

“Mr. Pike. You know already know my associate?” he asked in his oily, self-possessed tone. He had a fairly large gun in his right hand; I guessed it was a .45 maybe. His left hand was heavily bandaged. In other circumstances I would have allowed myself a grin over that. After all, it was Gill's handy work.

“Sure, we've met.” I shook my head toward Gill who was to my left and a yard behind me. “This is a friend of mine. He has a name but like you don't need to know it. He's not a cop.”

“Well, I recognize the box.” He motioned with his head to his partner. Dan Baker walked over to me and I put the bag down and handed him the box. He walked back to the lawyer, tore open the box and stomped on the small guitar a couple of times. He extracted the small bag from the kindling and withdrew a knife from his coat pocket. Making a small slit in the bag, he pulled out the blade and brought it up to his mouth, carefully running his tongue against it. He waited a bit and then nodded at Niscemi.

“OK, what about the other stuff?” the lawyer asked, pointing to my bag with his gun.

“Not much I'm afraid, mainly odds and ends. Some invoices. The cops still have Karen Broomfeld's journal and a Polaroid of her,” I lied. “The picture isn't much, but it does have a hand with a class ring.” Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Dan Bankers fingers moving in his left pocket. Again, I wanted to smile but I couldn't break. “I don't think they could figure anything out by that alone. There's also a few letters,

personal stuff from Mr. Amerika. It's a bit random I'm afraid, but that's all I could get. There are copies," I lied, "so my failsafe is still in place. We get the girl and wait a discreet amount of time and they'll all be destroyed. My word."

"Bring it here," he said, pointing the gun toward the ground. Gill started to move, but I put out my left arm to stop him. I brought him the bag and put it at his feet. We were inches away now.

"OK, I fulfilled my part of the deal. Where's the chick?" I asked in a tone that I hoped disguised my tension. Breathe deep and play it cool I told myself; no one needs to get hurt.

"She's safe. For now," he added. "It's a warehouse on Newcomb Avenue. He removed the cigarette from his mouth with his bandaged hand. Twenty-One-Fifty-One."

"Twenty-One-Fifty-One, Newcomb Avenue. Door's open?"

"You shouldn't have any trouble getting in. But Mr. Pike?"

"Yeah?"

"I would hurry if I were you."

"I'm planning on it."

"No stops, you hear?"

"Got it dude. We're done here, right?"

"Yes, our business is concluded."

I looked over to my right and saw that Gill had removed the snub nose from his jacket. "Alright, man. We're walking back to the car and don't take it the wrong way, but like we're walking backwards. It's not that I don't trust you, no offense."

"None taken," the lawyer responded with a slight smirk.

“One more thing. If she's harmed in anyway I will come looking for you.”

“Mr. Pike, she may be a bit, how would you say,” again the grin, “roughed up. But nothing that a little time won't heal. That is, if you get there within the next half hour. After that, I can't guarantee anything.”

I swore under my breath, flashed the peace sign, and started walking backwards with Gill covering me. I could hear the blood rushing through my head and it was all I could do to not run straight at them and take them on. We got to a bend in the trail and the fog had closed in enough for us to risk turning around and running toward the parking lot. It wasn't that far but we were both out of breath when we got back to Gill's cab.

“Do you think you did the right thing,” the Russian asked.

“Don't know,” I panted. “Couldn't risk taking them on, we don't have enough time and I didn't like the odds. You know where Newcomb Avenue is?”

But Gill was already ahead of me, half in the car and his face buried in his Thomas Map.

“Butchertown. Nothing much there, warehouses and stuff I think. It should be east of 101, south of Army.”

“No man's land. Fastest way there?”

“Don't know. Maybe take Fulton over to Oak, then to 101, get off on Army and then head south on Bayshore.”

“OK, you've got the map, I'll follow.”

“What are you going to do about them?” he asked pointing toward the trail.

“I don't know, one thing at a time, OK.”

“Sure, I dig.” He started the short and started to back up. I got on the BSA, opened the tank and took a look. I figured I probably had enough to make it there. I didn't have the time to stop so I had to hope for the best. Babes and fools, dig? I followed Gill down to Point Lobos and then to 43th Avenue. Fulton was pretty clear of traffic and we got lucky with the lights on Oak. I'm always of two minds when getting on the freeway—sometimes it's quicker to take surface streets—but again we lucked out. The traffic was a little slow at first, but then it sped up close to the limit. The lights were against us on Bayshore and then we got a little lost looking for Newcomb. We finally were able to backtrack to Oakdale and find the warehouse.

I had Gill contact Henri. I gave him the license plate number and description of the Olds and told him to get it to Inspector Zyzck, and of course I had to repeat the spelling several times. I read out the fat cop's extension in the North Beach station and said if he wasn't available, somebody needed to locate that short. It took a bit, but finally the dispatcher got it and gave us a 10-4.

Butchertown was exactly the opposite of what the Chamber of Commerce would present as San Francisco. It sat on the southeast side of the city between Bayview and Dogpatch. It was basically filled with single- and double-story warehouses, lots of chain link fences — in a word, industrial. Twenty-One-Fifty-One Newcomb didn't have any sign or numbers on the front of the building, but the building across the street had Twenty- One-Fifty so it was probably the right building. It was pretty non-descript, with a rusted corrugated roof and metal siding. Single story, probably used for light manufacturing at one time, but it had been idle for years. Now the only signs of activity were the pigeon droppings that coated the roof and shattered windows, targets of bored

teenagers armed with rocks and bb guns. There was a front door but it was locked, as was the adjacent loading bay door. I banged on the loading dock door a couple of times and listened for a response but didn't hear anything.

“Fish, over here,” shouted Gill. He had found a break in the chain link.

“Cool. What time you got?”

He stopped to check his pocket watch. “Twenty seven past.”

“OK, we go in.” I looked around and didn't see any activity save for a couple of pigeons on a nearby telephone wire. The street was clear and the building across the street was dark. What little sun there was had sunk below the hills to the west and the entire area was bathed in dark gray shadows. A couple of streetlights were on and the sound of traffic from the two freeways that sandwiched the district sounded remarkably like the sound of the ocean. I shook my head and then squeezed through the open section of chain link. The footing was treacherous; there were pieces of rusted metal and shards of broken glass hidden beneath tall weeds. The only path was following along where the weeds had been trampled down, and this had happened pretty recently by the looks of it. This took us to the side of the building and a large metal door with no knob, just a sliding latch. With a little effort the latch moved and the door swung open on its own. I cursed under my breath for not bringing a flashlight. Once inside I called out Dawn's name and thought I might have heard a muffled response. I fired up my Zippo and Gill lit a match and I moved toward where I thought the sound was coming from. We had to walk slowly because there were sections where the flooring was dug out, creating small ponds in the building, and there were ancient tools, tackle, and chains scattered throughout. I called out for Dawn again and listened to my voice reverberate back to me followed by a

scattering sound. Gill swore in Russian when one of his matches burned his finger and the case of my Zippo was getting uncomfortably hot. I called again and heard a louder muffled cry. I increased my speed and started splashing through six inches of dark, viscous fluid, maybe a cross between motor oil, mold, and rainwater, or maybe it was a backed-up sewer judging by the smell of it. There were living things in here and I had to remind myself that they would mainly be bacteria, insects, pigeons, and rats. There was a small partitioned room off to my left and I tried the door. It was partially open but I couldn't squeeze through. I put my good shoulder into it and it gave with a low grunt and a high squeal. I waved my lighter and jumped back as maybe twenty rats scattered into the shadows.

Dawn was there, bound and lying on an old stained mattress. She was dressed the same as the previous night, still in the halter and skirt, but her coat was missing. Her eyes had an animalistic look to them, a crazy mix of pain and fear. Her hands were bound behind her back and her legs were tied together. Ropes fastened her to a couple of industrial sized eyelets screwed into the concrete wall. She was gagged with a dirty rag so the first thing I did was get that out of her mouth and slide it down to her neck.

“Dawn, are you OK?” I asked but she just shook her head and started crying, first quiet sobs and then gut wrenching howls. I don't know how long we were there lying on that filthy, smelly mattress, me clutching her bare back in a tight embrace and her shaking violently. Gill started to work on the ropes that were tied to the wall and it took him a bit but eventually she was free. I handed Gill my lighter and picked her up — she seemed so light it was scary — and we trudged out the door, through the water and toward freedom. Once outside I took advantage of the last of the light and was able to set

her down and got to work trying to remove the ropes around her wrists and ankles. Gill had his gun out and headed for his cab. The knots were tricky even for an old sailor like me. A combination of nerves and the chill in the air and my frozen fingers made my efforts clumsy but I eventually got her legs and arms free. We sat on the concrete stairs and smoked a couple of cigarettes. Gill came back with a blanket and his flask — this one was filled with Russian vodka. I draped the blanket around Dawn's shoulders and handed her the flask. She took a huge slug and then started coughing. I grabbed it back and took a slug myself and felt the first flush of warmth from the booze. Up close I could see that she had a rough time of it. There were multiple bruises on her arms, legs and neck and her left eye was swollen shut in a massive purple bruise. I handed the flask back to her and she took another couple of slugs.

“Can you walk?” I asked.

She shook her head. “OK, Gill, let's get her to the hospital,” I said, but she shook her head. “Look babe, you've gotta get checked out.”

“No,” she responded in a hoarse voice. “I'm not going to be...some kind of victim.”

“But you need to...”

“No. No hospital.”

“Well, how am I going to explain this to your parents?”

“I don't want to go home.”

I fired up another weed and shook my head. “You wanna stay at my pad? I don't have any...things.”

She took the Pall Mall out of my mouth and took a huge drag. “We can pick up some things.”

I didn't like it, but it wasn't the time to argue. “OK, you heard the lady, Gill. Back to North Beach.” I handed him a twenty. “Pick up what she needs and we'll play this by ear. I'll get there as fast as I can. You,” I said looking into her good eye, “are traveling by cab. I can't risk you on the back of the bike. Gill's OK. You'll be in safe hands, trust me. You can do that can't you?”

She nodded.

“Fine.” I stood up, stretched and looked around. “This place gives me the creeps. Let's get out of here.”

Even with stopping for gas and filling up the oil tank I still managed to beat Gill home. Rather than parking the bike, I stopped off at Rossi's and picked up some groceries and some booze. Carefully holding the bag in front of me on top of the gas tank, I slowly headed up the hill and stowed the BSA in the garage, putting a fresh piece of cardboard underneath — the old one was pretty much soaked through. I walked up the steep stairs and sat down on the top step. Digging into the bottom of the bag, I pulled out a bottle of Rainier, popped the top with a key and absently worked out the rebus, cap number 333 for those interested. It featured the word *Don't*, the letter *P* + a drawing of a necklace of flowers, the word *with*, a drawing of a welcome mat + a drawing of a corner of a chessboard. I said the words out loud as I worked it out: *Don't PLai with MatChess*. Cool, the brain still worked. Sort of. I sparked a Pall Mall and cursed because I was running low. I thought I still had a one more pack from the last carton I bought, but I

wasn't sure. I had drained the first bottle pretty fast so I cracked open the second one. This was cap number 345, and it had an old time traffic signal that said **GO** + a drawing of a wing and the letter *P* + two shoes. This one had me stumped. *GoWing Pshoes?* *PLoafers?* Not so clever after all. I stuck it into my pocket and sipped the beer and finished the cigarette, flinging it into the street where it exploded in a small display of sparks in the darkness. Gill finally showed up with Dawn and a couple of bags of stuff. She was able to walk up the stairs but she was a little unsteady so she had to lean against me. I let her in and parked her in the comfortable, overstuffed chair and then started to draw a bath. Gill came in with the bags and said I owed him \$3.87 but I got the last twenty out of my wallet and told him to keep the change. I also had him get the rest of the papers out of his trunk. I didn't know if the cops or one of Niscemi's cats was still watching me but I didn't really care. I offered the hack a beer but he refused saying he still had to make a living. I gave him a soul shake and a half hug and said I would get him some more bread when I had a chance. He said that was cool and flashed me the peace sign and split.

Dawn crawled into the bath under her own power and I asked if she was going to be OK. She nodded her head so I let her soak for a while. I put the groceries away and changed shoes — Gill and I had tracked in a lot of mud so the floor was a mess. Then I called Zyzck. He wasn't in, but I left a message for him to call me as soon as he could. The desk jockey asked if it was urgent and I responded that yeah, while it wasn't life threatening it was pretty urgent. They said they would get the message to him and I said OK. I got a clean towel and my robe and knocked on the bathroom door. I asked if she was all right and she said yes so I cracked open the door and gently tossed the robe and

towel into the bathroom. She had been messed with and I wanted to give her some space, dig?

She spent almost an hour in the tub, turning on the hot water a couple of times to keep it warm. She finally tentatively opened the door and came into the living room, her feet making a soft patting noise on the hard wood.

“Hey,” I said, because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

“Hey,” she responded, likely for the same reason.

“Would you like a drink? A smoke?”

She shook her head and sank into my comfortable chair. She went to sleep so fast it scared me; I thought it might be some kind of delayed passing out but her breathing was regular and soon she started to snore loudly. I chuckled despite myself, then turned up the heat and covered her with a blanket.

I might have dozed off on the couch when the phone woke me up. I cradled the base in my left hand and picked up the receiver with my right, moving it from the living room to the kitchen (which was as far as the cord would allow).

“Yeah, Pike here.”

“Wendell,” wheezed the fat cop, “what's so Goddamned urgent?” There were bar sounds behind him and I felt a pang of jealousy. Like that's where I really wanted to be.

“I had a change in plans.”

“Hah. I heard about your change of plans.”

“You heard? From where? Who?” I asked still groggy from my nap.

“We caught a break. You're not in the office — can you meet me somewhere?”

“Nah, I'm kind of babysitting. Long story. Can you get here, my pad?”

“I’m at Geno and Carlo’s right now. I can be there in ten minutes.”

“Cool. You know where it is?”

“Yeah, I’ve been there before.”

“One other thing. Can you pick up something?”

“What, I’m your butler now?” Again he said something unprintable and then repeated it to somebody who apparently wanted to use the phone.

“No, I could use some Johnny. And a stick of butter.”

“The Johnny I can see, but the butter?”

“For breakfast. I forgot the butter.”

Zyzck repeated the word again and then he said he would see what he could do.

It was closer to twenty minutes later when he showed up at the door with a fifth of Johnny and a stick of butter. I put the butter in the fridge and then said that it would be better if we could talk outside. He saw Dawn who looked dwarfed by my robe and the large chair. Even in the dark room you could see her bruises.

“What’s up with her?” the inspector asked.

“Let me get a couple of glasses. I’ll fill you in.”

So we parked ourselves outside on the top step, an ashtray between us and sipped the Red Label. I filled him in on the evening’s activities leaving out nothing. It felt good, almost like a confession, dig? For his part, Zyzck was pretty upset that I acted alone, but I **think** he understood that I didn’t have much choice as soon as he learned that Dawn was involved. He just was plenty upset that he hadn’t been in the loop, so I had to listen to him sputter and fume for a good five minutes. I knew better than to interrupt him so I let

him run out of steam on his own. When he finally calmed down, I asked about the break he mentioned and it turned out that his story was maybe even better than mine.

It seems a certain Olds sped through a very stale yellow on Geary. The wagon wasn't speeding, if anything it was a little below the limit and it just comfortably sailed through a borderline red light. This in itself was a dog bites man story and in most cases that's that. Even though there was a black and white a couple of car lengths behind them, the cops would probably have let it slide unless they were bored or thought something else was going on. But as it happens, this particular station wagon was missing a taillight, so the black and white flashed its cherries and started to pull them over. This led to a very brief chase where the Olds tried to out run the cruiser but it was no match. They got as far as the entrance to the park on 25th when the wagon skidded to a stop and two cats flew out of it, trying to disappear into the woods. It took a bit of time and a couple of extra units, but they found both of them hiding in the bushes. I interrupted and asked if they found the gun on them, Zyzek said no, so I guessed that Niscemi ditched it somewhere. Didn't really matter, I couldn't think of any crimes that may have been committed with it except for the shot that grazed my shoulder. Still, it would be one more piece of the puzzle...

So now the cops were holding the two of them on a couple of relatively minor traffic charges, resisting arrest and, pending the processing of the vehicle, some pretty heavy drug charges. The fat cop and I sat there drinking, smoking, talking, and arguing. The easy play at this point would be to pit the two against each other, bring up what we knew about their floating party and the two dead chicks. Also, I was pretty sure at least one of them had been using. I didn't know how heavily but an evening in lockup would

make it pretty clear. Bail was being set in the morning, but Niscemi being a lawyer and Dan Baker being pretty loaded would probably make that a formality. The only thing would be if the court could be convinced that they were a threat to flee, but that would be tricky. Paperwork could be “lost” and that might buy a couple of hours, but they would likely be back on the street by the next evening. Zyzck and I had differing opinions on the way it should be handled, and I was insistent that Baker was the weaker link and the pressure should be put on him. In the end we didn't come to a consensus, but we both knew it depended on how the two played it. I left for a bit to check on Dawn; she was still in a deep sleep. I picked her up and moved her to the bedroom, then searched around and found my last pack of Pall Malls and headed outside. I was starting to feel pretty drunk.

“What about the girl,” asked Zyzck.

“Not sure,” I responded, picking at piece of tobacco in my mouth. “It's her call. She didn't want to go to the hospital, says she's OK. She looks battered and she's tired, been through a lot. I don't know.”

“A statement from her, can I have one of those?” he drawled. I tossed him a couple of cancer sticks and fired up one of them with my Zippo, which was getting pretty low on fuel. “Like I say, a statement from her and we've got kidnapping charges making bail pretty hard to get.”

“I agree, but it's up to her. We'll see how she feels in the morning.”

“Was she...?” and Zyzck was too embarrassed to continue. “You know.”

“Don't think so, but honestly, I don't know. I'm getting to think that one of them, don't know which, likes to beat up women. I **think**,” I stopped to refill my glass, “that

that's how he gets off. Which puts the death of Suzanne Poundstone in a different light, you dig?"

"You think one of them is one of those sado pervs?"

"I think it's a possibility. Look, I'll talk to Dawn in the morning and see how she feels. We might not agree on much, but it would be a good thing to get her testimony. It's just that one of the few things she said is that she doesn't want to be viewed as a victim. I don't like it, but it's her choice."

We sat there for a while drinking and smoking in silence. I reached into my pocket and found the rebus. I flipped it over to Zyzck and asked him what it said. He studied it for a bit and then said, "GoWing PLaces."

"What?"

"GoWing PLaces. Going places, what's so Goddamned hard about that?"

"Nothin' I guess," I responded, a little crestfallen. Laces, dang, I didn't see that but of course it made perfect sense.

"Well, speaking of going places," Zyzck groaned as he stood up, "I'm due back, probably spend the night on the couch again. The misses, damn, she knows what it's like being married to a cop. Or you'd think she would know by now."

"I can't offer anything, man."

"Yeah, you just sleep with them and kick them out."

"Been the kicked more than the kicker."

"Still," he let the thought linger.

I started to gather up the glasses and ashtray leaving the inspector the rest of the Red Label. He cradled it and made his way down the stairs.

“Drive carefully,” I called out.

The fat cop responded with upturned arm and the friendship digit as he headed to his car.

Once in the apartment I put the glasses in the sink, brushed my teeth and collapsed into the comfortable chair, which still smelled like Dawn. I was out like a light.

I woke up pretty early, showered and then boiled some water and filled the coffee filter with Graffeo's finest. I put Miles on the turntable for some quiet background noise and poured the water over the beans. Then I got into the fridge and started assembling the necessary ingredients for breakfast. I was starting to hear her stir in the next room so I held off on the cooking. She finally poked her head around the kitchen doorway and said good morning. I asked her if she was hungry and she mumbled something vaguely positive or positively vague, so I put the bread in the toaster and started working on about the only thing I can cook half-way decently: omelets.

Dawn came to the table dressed in the same skirt as before and an oversized gray tourist sweatshirt that had "Alcatraz Swim Team" stenciled on the front, one of Gill's late night purchases no doubt. She looked a little better in that both eyes were open, but she still sported a pretty good shiner.

"How you feeling?"

"Better. Pretty much sore all over, but I feel better."

"Hungry?"

"I could eat," she said with a wan smile.

"Hold on then. Anything you don't like in your omelet?"

"Eggs," she said and then ducked her head. She was smiling, so that was a good sign.

"Well, that kind of misses the whole point, doesn't it? You good with onions and peppers?"

"Sure, whatever."

So I played short order cook and threw together a decent breakfast. Dawn surprised me by wolfing down everything. I made myself scrambled eggs with some sausage links and put it all where it belonged, stuffed the dishes in the sink and then fired up a couple of Pall Malls and offered her one. We sat drinking coffee and smoking and talking all morning — about all kinds of stuff, her family, music, school, the Navy, politics, you name it. It was close to ten when I decided to ask her the big question.

“Dawn, I want you to think hard about this. I know you said you don't want to be a victim and I get it, especially after everything you — and your family — have been through.”

“What is it, Wendell?”

I sighed and tried to fire up a smoke, but the Zippo was dead. I got up and sparked it from the kitchen stove and sat back down.

“First off, I had a long talk with a police inspector last night. We're kind of...I don't know, friends? Not really, but we get along OK considering our respective gigs. Anyway, we, well they, the cops I mean, they caught the two cats who did that to you.” She didn't say anything but then I didn't expect her to jump up in the air and say “Yippee!” I continued. “I know what you said last night and I respect it.”

“What did I say?” she asked. “I don't remember much of last night. The pain, that horrible place, the way the mattress smelled,... and then seeing you and coming here,... but most of that's a blur.”

“Well, I wanted to take you to the hospital last night, but you nixed it, saying you didn't want to be a victim. But I would still like you to get checked out.”

“I can make an appointment with the family doctor. I think it all looks worse than it really is.”

“Well, you might have some fractures or...other injuries. He could also get you something to take the edge off the pain, you know?”

“I'm alright, but I'll do it. For you,” she added. “I'll call him in a bit.”

“Groovy. There's one other thing. Would you be willing to testify? It would help put a couple of very bad men away for a long time. It might even sway a judge into denying them bail, which would be a good thing. I know it won't make up for what they did, but...”

“First off, I'm not sure I could be much help. It was pretty late — or early I guess — when they...took me. I wanted to get a cab, so I walked down to Columbus. It all happened too quickly, it was a blur. But I never got a good look at them. There were two of them, one taller than the other. They didn't talk much and were wearing ski masks and gloves. They had a...I don't know, maybe a pillow case? They had that over my head so I really didn't see much. Then they took me straight to that place and one of them...” she sighed and shook her head a few times in an effort to clear it.

“Did you recognize their voices?”

“No. Should I have?”

“Well, one of them was your family lawyer.”

She looked up and did her punch card routine with her eyes. “Chas? Really? That doesn't make a lot of sense—why would he...?”

“We have some theories. The thing is, he's in custody right now, but the nature of the charges that are going to be leveled against him means that there's like a strong

possibility that he'll make bail. So it's only a matter of time before both of them, Niscemi and his partner, hit the streets again. You testify, we get a kidnapping charge against him and there's no bail and a chance that he's put away for an even longer time.”

Dawn stared into her coffee cup for a while and then raised her head and looked me straight in the eye. “Wendell,” she said in a soft but strong voice, “don't take this the wrong way, OK? You don't know what it's like to have money, to be perceived as rich.”

“No, you're right about that, but what's that got to do—,” I started but she interrupted me.

“When Julia first went missing, the newspaper, the radio and TV reporters were all over us. Stories about the missing heiress were everywhere. I didn't have to go through all of that—I was abroad—but I saw what it did to my parents, my mom especially. Now with Sam's death it has started up again and if I come out with my story it will get crazy intense. Frankly, I don't know if I can take that kind of pressure, but if it were just me, I would try. But it's not just me—it's mom and dad and at this point, I'm all they've got left. I'm not going to...I can't contribute to the circus. Can you understand this?”

I started to sputter a bit and even though I was trying to keep things low key I heard my voice jump up almost an octave. “What about if they could guarantee your privacy? I've heard of cases where they keep the vic...the plaintiff's identity shielded from the press. Secret meetings with the D.A., sealed records, that sort of thing. These two are...they're pond scum and they deserve and need to be punished.” And sure, maybe I was thinking more of Stacii than Dawn, but Dawn had a choice. Stacii would never be able to testify. Ever.

But in response, she just shook her head. “I’m not going to do this. I’m sorry but you’ll have to find another way.” She yawned, stretched, and winced from the pain. Then she got a smoke out of the pack and lit it on the stove, one hand holding her wild red hair back from the flame. She got the cancer stick lit and shut down the flame and then turned toward me, leaning back against the stove. “You’re sure about Chas?” she asked.

I nodded my head. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

“I’ll let Dad know to fire Chas and break off all contact with him. I’ll tell him,” she paused and thought for a bit, eyes slightly flickering, “I’ll tell him something. But I’m not going to testify, and that’s final. We OK?”

She broke away eye contact and a silence hung in the air. “Sure, I dig,” I finally managed. “I don’t dig it, but I dig. I’ll talk to the cops.”

I let her use the phone for a bit. She called her parents and talked to her mom. She made up a story about falling off the back of a motorbike but said she was OK and made promises to see Doctor Armis. I guess he was the family doctor she talked about. Then her mom must have put her dad on the line and Dawn’s tone changed. After assuring him that she was all right, they started talking about other stuff, the funeral preparations for Sam and such. After she hung up, she called the doctor’s office and made an appointment — she used the same story about falling off a bike and wound up getting a lunchtime appointment squeezed in. I looked around my pad and found a pair of sunglasses some chick named Debby (a very brief fling—she was into some weird stuff and drank even more than I) had left maybe a year before. They were pretty big, modish, and I always thought they looked a bit ridiculous, but I handed them over to

Dawn. She smiled and asked if she looked that bad? I responded with an equivocal headshake. I offered to drive her but she said no, a cab would be more comfortable. Of course, it was embarrassing for the rich girl to have to ask for cab fare, but I said I didn't mind. I got a few bills from my bedroom and gave them to her. We briefly hugged and she smelled of eggs, coffee and soap: all yellow, brown and blue. Then she gathered up her things in a paper bag and walked out of the apartment. Standing at the top of the stairs I offered to go with her, but she shook her head and made her way down to the street. I followed her down to the bottom of the steps and then stopped, watching her head down Vallejo toward Columbus. My instinct wanted me to shadow her, but I had to look at the big picture. It was time to let it go. We have to move on, you know? For now Dan Baker and Niscemi were on ice, so she should be relatively safe. For now. I sat there wondering what was next. Part of me wanted to clean the pad, I mean really clean it, scour its soul clean. But the other part of me just wanted to smoke a bowl, so once I was back in the flat I got out a chair and retrieved my stash from its hiding place. After half a joint and some more coffee, I was ready to face the world. Once back outside I discovered that it was a beautiful day, warm with only the slightest breeze and the sun shining brightly in a deep blue sky. It seemed like everyone was walking around in a good mood; smiles and laughter were in the air. I figured that this was some kind of sign, so I tried on a grin and it took. I might have looked like a stoned lunatic, but I wore it all the way on my hike down to the office.

The smile lasted for a while. 'Tack was in and we shared a bowl of Moroccan something or other. It was pretty powerful stuff. He was still dealing with his light rack and a friend of his with a flat bed was going to come and pick up this stuff and deliver it

to PT&T's practice space. Just as well, it was starting to take over the place. I spent the time cleaning things up and filing. For a while, things were back to normal and there were even thoughts playing around in my dome about going out, hitting a few bars, and maybe even trying to chase down some rack of lamb.

But a couple of hours later, all this goodwill disappeared in a cartoon-ish cloud, with everything but the comic popping noise. I had been summoned to the office of the Assistant D.A. So after a lengthy wait on an uncomfortable hallway bench, I was ushered into a small office. Sure, it all started with everybody playing nice, but inside of fifteen minutes the three of us: myself, Inspector Zyzck and the assistant D.A. were engaged in a real free for all.

“What the fuck do you mean she won't testify?” the fat cop screamed, the veins in his neck bulging.

“It's like I was sayin' last night. She doesn't want any part of it. She doesn't want to be viewed as a victim, she doesn't want the news hounds all over her, and she doesn't want her parents bothered. They're already having to deal with some heavy stuff, dig? I tried to convince her, but she refuses. I can't make her,” I responded louder than I needed to.

“Bullshit!” Zyzck could be both crude and pithy.

“Look Wendell,” pleaded Scott Conrad, the Assistant D.A. Conrad was a career bureaucrat, on the short side, short black hair and thick glasses. His suit coat was off, his tie was loosened, and his sleeves were rolled up. Even though it wasn't that hot in the office, he had started to sweat heavily. He was trying to be the mediator, but his voice

had gotten louder and the tone sharper. “This isn't just her choice. Putting her personal safety aside, what about other people, future victims of these two?”

“Can't you get them on the drug charges?” I asked. “Sure, maybe they make bail or maybe you can convince the judge that they're a flight risk?”

“We're trying,” Scott responded before being interrupted by the inspector.

“Bullshit! It's all a bunch of bullshit!”

“Inspector,” the Assistant D.A. glared at Zyzck. “That's not helping. I said we're trying and we are. We take this very seriously. I don't have to tell you that on top of everything else, the Pancettis have contributed to a few mayoral campaigns and Giuseppe Pancetti has some clout in City Hall.”

“But we can't get him involved. She doesn't want it,” I responded.

“Look,” said the inspector in something like a low yell, “she has some civic duty here. Conrad's right, it's not just about her, you know?”

“Sure, I dig, but that's her point. It's not just about her. It's about her family and everything they've gone through, especially now. They haven't even put Sam into the ground and then this?” I retrieved a bent Pall Mall out of my pack, straightened it up and lit it with a large lighter shaped like a hand grenade from on top of Conrad's desk. “You said yourself, the Pancettis have clout. They are also pretty well known, and this would start a feeding frenzy with the papers. I told you, she doesn't want that.”

“We could have her statement sealed,” said the A.D.A.

“I told her that, too. No go.”

“Bullshit!” was the fat cop's response.

This went on for the better part of an hour and we didn't really get anywhere. At one point Zyzck was threatening to pull my license and Conrad was threatening to throw us both out on the street. By the time it was all over, we were no closer than we were at the start of the meeting, and all of our moods were considerably darker. We didn't shake hands, and the inspector and I shared a tense and wordless elevator ride. At the bottom I said later and Zyzck made a noise and we went our separate ways. The cop headed to his cruiser parked in the back and I went out one of the front doors, toward the bike parked on Van Ness.

I rode the BSA over to the Haight stopping once to fill up both the gas and oil tanks, and I dropped it off with Fats. He was playing his Frankenstein organ, rehearsing with a sax player and drummer so I stayed to listen for a while. I nodded my head like I was digging it, but the music sounded like the argument I had just left, a discordant mix of three separate agendas. At the first available break I said my goodbyes and thanked Anagram for the bike; it had been a big help. We shook hands in our complicated routine and then I hoofed it out to the street.

Standing on Haight Street, I had to admit to myself that I was a little lost. Only a few years ago, North Beach was the center of the universe, well, my universe. Then it suddenly shifted to the Haight. Sure, things were fun for a bit, free drugs and sex, everything silly, giddy and light, but over time things got stressed and the scene got weird. Now there were kids everywhere. Some had their faces painted and were blowing bubbles, obviously and obliviously stoned. But these kids were in the minority. Most of them were sadder to look at, folded up into themselves, leaning against buildings, or squatting on the sidewalk. Their hands and faces were dirty; the young dudes all had a

thin growth on their faces, and the long hair of the young chicks was thick and greasy, needing a good wash. But it was their eyes that got to me, they were all deep set and either unfocused in a barbiturate haze or pleading for the next fix. In a block and a half, I must have been hit up a dozen times by these kids looking for spare change or a way to get lost in a morphine haze. Sure a couple of them were dealing but most needed to cop. From the looks of it, it was a seller's market.

A little while later I found myself in the Persian Aub Zam Zam bar planted on a stool and sipping a martini. Bruno, the owner, didn't like serving hippies and didn't like serving anything other than gin martinis. He'd instantly make you, and if you didn't meet some template in his brain he would refuse to serve you and send you to the Gold Cane down the street. But we had met a few years before at a political function and I would spend a few bucks in his bar from time to time, so despite my hippie-ish façade, he would tolerate me and serve me without question.

I ordered another one and thought about where it had all gone wrong, this great social experiment, this freedom and peace and love. Bruno wasn't in a talkative mood and the jukebox was unplugged, so I just drank in silence along with three other afternoon barflies. I always get a little depressed after finishing cases and this one left a couple of bad tastes in my mouth, tastes that the Boodles couldn't chase away. First off, it didn't feel finished. There were still loose ends and they were gnawing at me, taunting me. Secondly, people I cared about got hurt or worse and much of it was my fault. On the plus side, Blair Poundstone could probably get on with his life; that had to count for something. Dan Baker and Niscemi were off the streets for a bit and even when they got out, the cops were on to them, so their destructive parties were closed down for good. On

the flip side, Stacii was gone and that was my fault—indirectly sure, but I was convinced that without me, she would still be dancing and digging her life off the grid. Even after all this time, I had no idea about Bruce Amerika, and why he had briefly latched on to me. My fault that he was gone, again indirectly, but without me he would still be...what? Pointing smack, enjoying homosexual smut and walking his dog? Well, it wasn't up to me to make any value judgments about what he might or might not be up to. The point is he would be still be living. Then there was Dawn. She got hurt or worse and there was nothing indirect about that at all. Without me she would be playing her piano and living a life of privilege, upset about Sam, sure, but blissfully unaware of life's underbelly. Or maybe she gets closer to Sam and he doesn't OD. I caught Bruno's attention and asked for one more. Usually he loosely enforced a two-martini limit on his customers, but the bar was pretty empty and maybe he saw something in the way I looked, so he poured one more and I bought him a brandy. I raised my glass and said, "To absent friends," to no one in particular. I finished the drink, left a tip and headed back out. Daylight was waning and the fog was coming in on a stiff breeze. I managed to get a cab and gave him the address for Spec's. I figured I might as well finish what I had started, which was to get as drunk as possible. I don't remember much about the night, but I think I accomplished my aim in an admirable fashion, hear what I'm saying?

So a couple of weeks had passed and things fell into a routine. I had seen a couple of potential clients but nothing had materialized, which was OK with me. The safe was full so I could afford a few weeks off. I split time between my pad, the office and numerous bars in and around North Beach. I was roughly hitting my average between scoring and striking out, so things were cool in that department. I made it to a couple of parties—one stuffy one where people were standing around holding civilized mixed drinks in one hand reading (and spontaneously making up) bad poetry, using their free hands to hold small books, scraps of paper, cigarettes, or just freely gesticulate. It was a few hours I would never get back and I struck out. I mean I thought I had something going on but poets are weird, man. She sort of led me on up to a point and then started with the far-off gazes and disconnected dramatic outbursts. It was all I could do to get out of there with my dignity and sanity, dig? Then there was a thing out in the Bayview that ‘Tack dragged me to. This featured a bunch of welders drinking PBR out of the can, some really loud and unspeakably bad rock band playing aimlessly and out of tune, and large — make that huge — metal sculptures, both free standing and hung from the rafters, that threatened to fall and crush you at every turn. I struck out there too, but most of the chicks were a bit on the thick side and were playing tough, being welders and all. It was cool, but not really my scene. I did make it to an art opening that was pretty trippy—lots of young things dressed only in paint, while the floor, walls, and ceiling of a large warehouse were covered in sheets and canvas. It was fun, and yeah, so what if I played along? Can't say much for the resulting art, but I dug the process, hear what I'm saying? Took a while to get the paint off various parts of my body though.

Things between Dawn and me were strained at best. She had retreated into the family pad and as far as I could tell, only made it out for Sam's funeral. She was right about the whole publicity/scandal thing, the idea that one of the heirs to the Pannetti fortune had overdosed in a Mission flop house brought out all kinds of journalistic low life and the papers were filled with all kinds of speculation, innuendo, and lies. Sam was a war hero who had hit the skids, and the Pannettis were either a grief-torn family who had exhausted all efforts to trying to help their son (the morning fishwrap) or an elitist clan who shut Sam out from the family and didn't lift a finger to help (the evening dreadful). The radio and TV stations all chimed in with similar trash, reporting the story and then going off with rants filled with wild speculation. Of course, a lot of the articles took the "star-crossed family" angle, which meant that plenty of stories and pictures of Julia surfaced again. There were even shots of Dawn from the funeral with stories about how she was now the sole heir to the Pannetti fortune. These stories had nothing to do with the Dawn I knew, but who knows, maybe she was slumming when I knew her and the stories might have been more accurate than I thought. I had to admit that I didn't know her that well. We had talked twice in a couple of weeks but it was short and strained both times. I think we both made the decision to lay off each other, but I couldn't be sure about her.

Zyzek had bugged me for a couple of more days trying to get Dawn to testify about her kidnapping, but he eventually gave up and I had heard through the grapevine that they had transferred him to work on another case so he couldn't be bothered with me or my loose ends. Like I said, these loose ends bugged me, but there wasn't much I could

do about them. It was time to turn the page, accept my victories and defeats, and move on.

‘Tack had kept in touch with Kimi’s manager and kept me up to date on what was going on with that scene. Kimi had gotten out of his rehab and apparently was doing well enough so that the whole PT&T party was back on (I should mention here that the band had changed their name from Pacific Telephone and Telegraph to just PT&T to avoid an impending lawsuit). They had decided to play the (long-postponed) party with a partially reformed Morte Aeterna as well. This made the happening a **very** big deal, so it was moved again, this time to a large building on the upper Haight that had been a transmission shop. Ramón was complaining a lot because everything had to be moved again, and while he admitted that it was a better space for the lights, the concrete was going to make the sound pretty bad. There were these crazy tickets that had been printed up and distributed, limited edition, shiny and impossible to read. The distribution list was pretty small, but once the party started it was going to be hard to keep people out. The label had hired security people and these were really no more than thugs—but somebody had to keep everybody in line, dig?

So it was Friday night and the rain was falling hard and steady. ‘Tack had gotten there early to set things up. I had a date set up but she canceled at the last minute. I was thinking of calling Dawn, but nixed it and decided to go solo and leave things up to chance. I was wearing my pea coat, a colorful orange paisley shirt, and a pair of tight blue bellbottoms. I debated a bit on a scarf, but I decided against it. I took a cab over to Haight and got there around nine. There was already a bit of a line snaking down the street but I went up to the door and was lucky enough to bump into Rex Wrenford, Kimi’s

manager, resplendent in a white tuxedo and a tie-dyed shirt. He must have been wearing lifts, because he was taller than I remembered. He recognized me, threw his arm around my shoulder, and escorted me past the security beef and into the building. He smelled like juniper and was already slurring his words. It was good to get out of the rain but it took me a bit to adjust to the absence of light and the presence of noise. There was a band playing, some sort of warm-up act and 'Tack hadn't started to do his thing. Even though it was still early, the place held a faint odor of weed. They were going to have a tough time with the cops and the fire marshal on this one. Rex still had his arm around me and was babbling on about how great it was to see Morte Aeterna back together again, about PT&T's new record, and a thousand other things.

We squeezed through the throng and reached a roped-off area. A large Samoan dude stood guard, so Rex went over to talk to him and then returned, lifting the rope. We both ducked under it and climbed up a set of wooden stairs. This led to what would have been the office when the building was a tranny shop, but now it held a bunch of old couches and tables. There were fewer people here: a couple of long haired kids were playing their unplugged electric guitars and Kimi was over in a corner with a bottle of vodka, hammering away on a Remo practice pad. 'Tack was over in the opposite corner engaged in conversation with a blonde in a tank top. The sound from the band was muffled, all low frequencies. Occasionally someone would come in or out of the room and the sound would explode into the space and then the door would shut and we could think and talk again. Rex thanked me for keeping himself and Kimi out of the news and away from the cops and led me over to a large pitcher of Kool Aid. He said I should have some, but not to be too greedy and drink too much, and he actually winked when he

said it. Somebody across the room called out Rex's name, so he patted me on the shoulder and left me. What the heck, I was thirsty so I poured some of the red liquid into a Dixie cup and shot it down quickly, almost gagging from the sugary sweetness, but then refilled it and made my way over to Ramón. I made short work of the refill and looked around for something to chase the aftertaste from the syrupy, sticky red stuff.

Ramón introduced me to Charlie; she was the young blonde chick in the tank top. She said “Oh wow” a lot and her eyes were plenty dilated. ‘Tack was pretty stoned as well, but was kind enough to share a bowl of hash and that put me in a pretty mellow state. He offered to show us the lighting controls so we made our way down the stairs and into the din. He got us past the guard and over to the left side of the stage. There was a large soundboard and one cat was working the knobs while another one was on his back with a flashlight looking for a short somewhere and swearing. ‘Tack excused himself for a bit and lent a hand. I asked Charlie a few questions and didn't get much back that I could grok. She started free-associating about the rain, the music, humanity and a bunch of other stuff. ‘Tack returned and led us over to his custom light board. He pointed out everything and shouted out what each knob or lever did. When he was done, Charlie looked at me and then ‘Tack with a blank expression and then smiled and said, “Oh wow!”

The sound suddenly ended to sporadic applause and then some record started playing and there was a flurry of activity as band members rushed to get their gear on and off stage. Kimi's drums were set up toward the front of the stage, so I guessed he was still doing the drummer front man thing. I stayed near ‘Tack, Charlie, and the light board, trying to keep out of everybody's way. The record was still playing, but it was

augmented by drum hits, horn players warming up with scales and patterns, and occasional feedback and buzzing when instruments were plugged in or unplugged. Ramón fired up the light board and started to play with a few dials. The next drum hit produced a large flash in the darkness and the little genius smiled. He turned toward me and gave me a thumbs up. There was some frantic discussion going on with the cats behind the soundboard and then the whole backstage area began to swell with people. I looked out toward the audience and saw that it had filled out as well. Somebody passed a joint around; I took a large hit and held it in before passing it on. When I exhaled I suddenly started to feel the acid kick in. I found time passing in irregular chunks, sometimes things were moving quickly and sometimes things weren't moving at all. I had been staring off in space for a while. 'Tack asked me if I was all right and all I could do to respond was giggle.

The music started with a funereal organ solo, lights low and somber. Kimi started to sing over the organ, but I couldn't understand a word he was saying. The bass kicked in and then, while still singing, the Finnish drummer started to play a double time feel over the slow bass and keyboard figure and the horns started to play, joining in along Kimi's tempo so there was this tension building up. Then two guitars started to play a long harmonized line. It was all pretty intricate and, for rock stuff, kind of interesting. Of course I was pretty stoned. Finally the bass and organ started playing faster and Kimi was whipping the whole band and the audience into a wild dervish of improvised sound and movement. Ramón was keeping the lights going and was talking to somebody on a walkie-talkie and they were changing the projections on the back screen. I decided that I needed to see this from another perspective, so I left my jacket with 'Tack and Charlie,

got my hand stamped and left the stage area into the writhing throng. A low cloud of cannabis smoke hung in the air and it smelled like pot, patchouli oil, and sweat. People were making all kinds of impromptu movements and for a few moments it actually looked choreographed, before the synchronized movements dissolved into a Brownian blur. Behind the stage were several projections—a pulsating light that I guessed was the standard overhead projector oil and food dye thing and ‘Tack’s stock film footage, which ranged from a couple of seconds of “Andalusian Dog” (the part where the chick gets her eye sliced was repeated in a loop) to promotional footage for the new Chevy Nova, featuring smiling chicks and dudes on a beach somewhere, having fun, though because of the repetition and looping their smiles took on a manic, crazy intensity. Flashes were going off on stage and in the audience and then, during one slower passage, the whole space took on a blue-green hue and fish were moving throughout the crowd. Even though I knew this was all some kind of light trick, it did start to look and feel real. People were now leaning against each other and moving slower, some were mouthing the words to the song but again, I couldn’t understand anything that came out of the drummer’s mouth. The tempo picked up and we were all in a moving Georgia O’Keeffe painting, a vibrating pulsing, sexual flower with an intense red-orange center. Super bright beams of colored light reflected off of hard surfaces and small incandescent moths started dancing above us before they dissolved into thousands of bits of coruscating light. My heart rate was increasing and my shirt felt constricting on my body, so I unbuttoned it and pulled the tails free from my pants. I started dancing with a couple of young chicks and the blonde chubby one pulled her top off and we began moving closer and closer. Fake fog spilled off the stage and rolled into the audience and for a moment things stopped,

everything was dark, and, except for a loud 60 cycle hum, quiet. Then Kimi started his drum solo, the strobe timed with his drum hits. It started slow, each hit and flash of light landing like a right cross to my brain and then he got faster and faster. Finally the band kicked in and it was almost more input than my brain could handle as lights and sounds, I don't know, they *merged* and I started to understand the relationship between sound and light waves in a deep and intuitive way. There was a brief period where it seemed like my entire consciousness was contained in a large green balloon, and while my body moved to the music in an almost autonomous fashion, my brain, soul, and mind floated above the crowd. I could almost swear I could see over the entire space. There were more balloons and I guessed - no I *knew* that they contained the consciousness of other beings, leaving their bodies to revel in pure movement while relishing the bird's eye view. More balloons in many shades and colors: red, yellow, blue, orange, purple, green, silver, gold, white, black, chartreuse, fuchsia, teal, and brown began floating above us, sometimes falling on the dancers who responded by batting them toward the ceiling. The balloons were joined by bubbles filled with blue-gray smoke and first the bubbles started popping, leaving more smoke in the air and then the balloons started popping, each one releasing a soul to play in the clouds and mix with the minds of others. We were truly becoming one being. Then suddenly, the music stopped and the lights went dark. The moment was like death, and all of our minds remerged with out bodies. I found that I was in a tight embrace with the two chicks. Our hands were everywhere and we blissfully smiled at each other in the darkness. People started applauding so I guessed the set was over. We introduced ourselves—Coral was the blonde topless one and Juliann

was a skinny brunette. They wanted to get some air, and I said I would join them, but I remembered that my smokes were in my coat, so I had to make it over to the light board.

‘Tack was still there and was all but merged with Charlie. They both had stupid grins on their faces and I’m sure my map looked just as screwy.

“Far out show, Ramón,” I gushed. “The lights were...outtasight. How did you do some of those things?”

“Lots of light, sure,” he said modestly, “but we did a couple of ceiling drops. Balloons, glitter, that sort of thing. Different surfaces have different reflective/refractive properties. We had a couple of glitches, but overall, I think it all went pretty well.”

I was all but oblivious to the whirlwind of activity around us. The bands were changing their equipment again, Kimi's drums were moved upstage and some large props were placed in various places.

I started to notice the activity and asked, “So PT&T are done? Seemed like a short set.”

Ramón laughed and looked at his watch. “Sure, almost two hours, I suppose that's pretty short.”

Charlie responded with a slurred, “Two hours? Oh wow!”

“Dude,” I said, “that flew by.”

“What did you think of the band?” asked ‘Tack.

“Not really my bag, but interesting, man. I think I might sort of get this stuff. Not sure how it would sound straight though. I think it benefits from an...enhanced state.” I started to look around for my jacket.

“Speaking of which...,” and Ramón reached into his pocket and came out with a small plastic case. “I think it's about time for a little pick me up.” He got a small piece of blotter from the case and dissected it into thirds with an X-Acto. We each put a third on to our tongues and smiled.

“Hey Ramón, is there anything to drink? Aside from Kool Aid?” I giggled.

“There's some drinks upstairs.” He checked his watch again and looked out onto the stage. He shouted over to one of the light guys, “Hey Bill, I'm gonna head upstairs for a few. Need anything?”

“Couple of brews would be righteous, man,” Bill responded.

“No problem, dude. Be back in fifteen.”

A record started up, and I recognized the tune but couldn't place it. The crowd had thinned out a bit. I guessed they were cooling off outside. That reminded me of Juliann and Coral, but I had a severe case of cottonmouth and needed to take care of that. We got through the security at the stairwell with no problem; the guard recognized us and let us through without asking to look at our hand stamps. It was pretty crowded upstairs, with a lot of band members and would-be groupies and other chicks and cats who were just hangers on, wanting to be where the action was. The Kool Aid was still there, but I was looking for a beer and found a bunch of cans of Hamms in a large plastic garbage bag. There was a donation box so I put a couple of bucks in it and stuffed my pockets with cold ones. For some reason a bunch of people started hanging around me so I spent a minute or so opening beers for them, tossing the pull tabs into the garbage can. Finally Tack found a couch that was unoccupied, so Ramón, Charlie and I plopped down on it and I was able to drink and fire up a Pall Mall. The buzz of conversation was very loud,

but it was hard to pick out anything but bits and pieces. Everyone in the crowded room might have been speaking Korean for all I knew. Or Martian.

‘Tack leaned over Charlie and almost shouted in my ear, “I don’t know if you’ll dig Morte Aeterna, man. It’s pretty dark stuff.”

“You said that, yeah. What’s the deal with the stuff on stage, the props and stuff?” I asked, becoming conscious of Charlie’s hand on my leg.

“They do this...well you’ll see it. It’s pretty silly in my opinion, but then I’m not into the whole evil, devil thing. Give me sweetness and life any day.”

“I think...,” started Charlie, but then she shut up and stared straight ahead.

A man dressed in a long black robe and sporting a head as bald as a cue ball walked by. He smiled and nodded at Ramón.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“Anton something or other. He’s like the head of the First Church of Satan.”

“Really? He looked like the cat who used to play the organ out at the Lost Weekend,” I responded.

“Wouldn’t know about that. I don’t get out into the avenues much.”

“Me neither, but there was this chick...,” I started to say but then drifted off trying to remember her name, her face, her body, her smells. All I could come up with was that she owned an orange tabby. Ramón continued talking.

“The dude—,” he started.

“Which dude?” I asked.

“The one we were talking about? Hello?”

“Oh, yeah right. Bald dude. Organ player, maybe.” I was fascinated that I could actually see the blood flowing through my hand.

“I don't know about the organ thing. He's a Satanist. He tends to hang around these shows. Looking for recruits would be my cynical guess.”

I snapped out of it for a bit. “You think Julia Pancetti could have been one of those recruits?” I asked.

“Why her again?” Tack asked in an annoyed tone.

“I dunno. Stoned I guess. I remember you saying somethin' about her and this crowd,” I said, as Charlie's hand began to slowly move up my leg.

“Yeah, maybe. I mean she was together with Kimi, but he doesn't really go for this stuff.” He leaned in further and whispered in my ear, “None of them buy any of this crap. It's all show.”

“Huh,” was as good as I could manage for a response.

The door was opened and the sound of the record and the hum of a larger crowd spilled into the room. “Five minutes, guys,” shouted somebody with a clipboard.

“My cue. Got to get the lights ready. This will be pretty easy; they just want things dark with a couple of spots with red gels and a follow spot. The trick is staying alert for the one or two cues they insist on.” Ramón got up to leave dragging Charlie with him.

“Don't forget the brews for the sound guys,” I shouted after him.

“Oh yeah, right. Thanks. You coming?” he asked.

“In a bit. I'm kind of set right now.” And I was content to sink into this comfortable couch and let things be. I wasn't hallucinating, but I was seeing some severe

tracers and persistence of light. Movement, any movement, caused blurring, but it also seemed like it wasn't just trailing light but leading light, like I was seeing where people and things were going to be before they got there. Pretty trippy, man. I thought I'd like to try this at the track, and then I started laughing about being this high at Bay Meadows. A couple of people were looking at me, a big 'fro'd black dude laughing at nothing. I didn't care, no reason to be paranoid here. Or was there? There was also a problem with the color tuning in my map, things were moving toward the faster end of the visible spectrum, I mean everything had a blue-purple tint. I looked around and realized I was almost alone in the room; everybody had spilled out onto the dance floor, the backstage area, or on the stairway. I cracked open another beer and got a Pall Mall from my crumpled pack. I straightened the weed and fired it up. At almost the same time there was a bright flash from the stage area, a surprised cry from the crowd, and then the band started. To my ear it sound like brown sledge, the band churning out a slow, thick dirge. I got up and looked out the door. The crowd wasn't dancing; they were just swaying from side to side and pushing toward the stage. 'Tack was right about the band liking things dark, which was funny because of the band's name. No subtlety here, man. There seemed to be a lot of black lights on stage and the effect radiated out into the crowd. The singer didn't play an instrument, but he was doing all kinds of things with the mic stand. On stage right, a young, bikini-clad chick was being whipped by a large, leather clad dude. From my angle and distance, it was hard to tell how much of an act this was. The song ended and the audience cheered but the band almost immediately launched into another one, just as lugubrious and gooey as the previous. A bright red spot appeared stage left illuminating a guillotine and another woman was led to it. The spot went dead

and the stage was black. It slowly came up and the chick's head was poking out of the contraption. The music stopped for a moment, then the singer gave a cue and let out a long blood-curdling scream as the blade went down. The lights went out again but you could see a head rolling on the stage floor. I looked into the crowd and the others on the stairs and all I saw was the same blank look, which was spookier than the actions on stage. I won't say it was a bad trip, but I wasn't digging this stuff at all. I didn't feel like hanging out upstairs so I threaded my way through the throng and showed my hand stamp to the bouncer. He let me pass with a distracted wave so I was backstage again. I was going to talk to Ramón but he had his hands full with Charlie and the light board so I decided to leave him alone. There was a smaller crowd in the wings and I made my way to the back of the space. I saw the green light of an emergency exit sign so I made my way over to it and emptied my pack of Pall Malls (I had seven left and put them in my coat pocket), crumpled the pack, opened the door, and stuffed the pack into the door's striking plate, preventing it from locking. I tried it a few times and was satisfied that my impromptu fix defeated the mechanism, so I felt comfortable enough to shut the door. The sound was very muffled and I welcomed the quiet, cold and solitude. The rain had continued to fall in a steady stream. I reached into my pocket and found my last beer, so I cracked it open, lit a smoke, and leaned against the building, staying more or less dry under the eave. I didn't know how long the band would play, but I didn't feel like hanging out. I looked at my surroundings. It was just a fenced off storage area filled with an old dumpster and a couple of large oil drums, one of them full of black liquid and rainwater, and the reflected light from a nearby street light made rainbow patterns in the drum and on the ground. I finished the beer and looked around for an exit, but the fence

was too high to climb, so I would have to go back the way I came. I stubbed out the smoke and tried the door. It started to open and then I felt some resistance. The shrill music spilled out the door for a brief second, then the door slammed shut and the sound was all low frequencies and the vocals muted. I pulled on the door again and it swung open, the music blasting my face with an almost physical force. It took me a moment, but I realized that I was looking at one of the bouncers. I started to show him my hand stamp and tell him that I had just gone out for some fresh air, but then my spine got tingly and I recognized the bouncer. It was Roland Sabacan.

“You,” I said in complete, stoned surprise. In response he just snarled and pushed on the door, causing me to lose my balance and stumble to the ground. He stepped out the door and it swung shut leaving the two of us alone in the fenced off concrete area as the rain pelted us. I sprang up and got into what I hoped was a defensive pose as the large Filipino reached into his pocket with his left hand and came up with something shiny. He made a stabbing motion and I managed to evade it and land a pretty solid left hook. It connected with the side of his head and stunned him for a moment. It also sent waves of pain from my left hand to my brain. I shook the hand a few times but didn't have the luxury of rubbing it as Sabacan made another parry. I timed it badly, but I was able to grab his left hand, deflect the motion of the blade, and kick him in the back, which sent him to the ground. He jumped up and grunted. The rain was getting heavier and clouds of vapor exited both our mouths. He was moving in a side-to-side motion and then led with the knife in his left, surprising me by kicking out my legs from under me. I hit the concrete hard and barely had enough time to roll behind one of the oil drums as he stabbed toward where I had been a moment before. The sound of the band was muffled;

the main noises were the rain hitting the ground, the trees and the roof, and our labored breathing. In the distance a siren was going off and a couple of dogs responded by barking. I got up and we did a little dance moving around the oil drum. He stabbed a few times and I lobbed a few punches his way but neither of us connected. He lunged again and I caught his left wrist and started to pound it against the rusted steel drum, hoping I could get him to drop the knife. It didn't work; he grabbed my hair with his right hand and pushed my head into the barrel, trying to drown me in the oil/water mixture. My face was close to the black liquid with rainbow highlights, and the smell was an indescribable industrial mix. It felt like my head was in the barrel for a full minute, but it was probably closer to five or ten seconds. It took all my strength but I managed to pull my head up. I let go of his hand and gave the oil drum a heavy push. The effort was enough to tip drum over. It spilled its black goo all over Sabacan and the concrete. He let out an animal yell and started to lunge at me, but the oil made the surface slippery so all he could do was trip over the barrel. I took that moment to turn and open the door. I made a tactical error in that I started to remove the crumpled pack from the strike plate. My plan was to lock him outside but that small delay gave him enough time to spring up and grab onto the door. We both pulled as hard as we could but he was stronger than me and managed to wrest it open at the exact time as Morte Aeterna finished their set with an A Minor stinger. The crowd applauded and yelled in appreciation as the band members started to walk offstage. I tried to get lost in the crowd, but Sabacan was right behind me and the crowd parted at the site of this bald lunatic covered in a dark, smelly, viscous glop. He let out another yell and I looked around for an exit. The only clear space was the stage, so I ran out onto the dark space

and looked around for a weapon. The closest thing was a Fender P bass that was still plugged into an upholstered Kustom cabinet. I had one shot so as he lunged at me for the last time, I put everything I had into it and swung the bass guitar as hard as I could. It landed with a dull thud and a really loud noise as the amp was still on. But it did its job as the big guy was down on the ground and not moving.

‘Tack was the first to show up and soon a small crowd was hanging around. He helped me tie up the dude with some instrument cables. I told him that he should let Rex know I messed up some of this gear and he said he would. Some of the confused throng was wondering if this was just part of the act, a few tried to intervene and broker a truce between me and my fallen prey with empty words of peace and love, some chick started to beat me over the head with her purse (luckily, it was mostly empty), and another cat who looked like Walter Cronkite with long hair wanted me to tell him what was happening. It was a bit of blur, but eventually I told the peace and love contingent to leave me alone with a simple expletive, got a hold of the purse and sent that chick on her way, and told the Cronkite clone that it was none of his business. Eventually people got bored and left us alone and that was fine by me. ‘Tack was annoyed—he didn't say anything but it was clear that I had screwed up his trip. He wasn't ready to deal with the reality in front of him, but I'm not sure I was either.

It was maybe an hour later, close to three o'clock or so and there were five of us (the Samoan bouncer, ‘Tack, Charlie, Roland Sabacan and myself) in the upstairs area along with a few party stragglers, a couple of friendly couples, passed out dudes, and kids with zombie eyes who were just walking around. The beer was gone and everybody else had gone home. Sabacan was still tied up and though conscious he remained clammed

up. I had tried to get him to talk but he wasn't saying anything. He just glared at me. Ramón had gone out and found a pay phone, so the cops were going to show up any minute, which was another reason that the place had emptied out. I was feeling OK except my left hand was swollen and throbbing. At first, when the cops got there they ranted on and on about drugs. I guess the smell of pot was still pretty strong. Once we were able to redirect their energy they wanted statements and it seemed like they quickly became bored and wanted to treat it like a run of the mill fight, give us both a stern talking to, and send us separate ways. But I was insistent that they contact Zyzck and take us to a station in separate cars and deposit us in different cells. One of them finally shrugged, said it was my funeral, cuffed me and they took us outside and into two black and whites. It was a short drive to the Park Police Station on Waller; they booked us both as drunk and disorderly and put me in the drunk tank and Sabacan in a solitary cell. There were a few cats in the tank but nobody felt like talking; mostly it was just bums sleeping it off and staying dry. I couldn't sleep but I was coming down a bit and started yawning.

It was late in the morning. It seemed like they were processing people first in, first out, so it took a while to get to me. They wanted to let us both out. Again, I was getting pretty worked up and told them I wanted to file an assault charge. But I didn't have any witnesses, whereas a whole crowd of people saw me attack Sabacan with a bass guitar. They were leaning toward letting him go and keeping me locked up. I asked about Zyzck again, and they said that they had called his office, but it was a Saturday and they were pretty sure he had better things to do. 'Tack had shown up with Hector and they were making noises on the other side of the bars, but it wasn't doing much good. I was in cuffs, sitting in an uncomfortable wooden chair in a small office as this brain-dead flat foot hunted and pecked on an ancient Underwood. I looked up through the open door and saw them escorting Sabacan, sans cuffs, down the hall and started shouting that they couldn't let him just walk. It was maybe thirty seconds later when a familiar face poked through the doorway and said something both blasphemous and anatomically impossible.

Ignoring the greeting, I started in. "Inspector, you've got to stop them!" I shouted. "They're letting him get away!"

"Good morning, asshole. Who are you talking about?" asked the fat cop.

"Sabacan. Roland Sabacan. He's the cat who killed Amerika and maybe Stacii and the others," I responded in a fast staccato.

"The guy I just passed in the hall?"

I just nodded.

"Shit," was all he said as he got his round self down the hall. Like I said before, for a big guy he could move pretty good.

Long story short, we got lucky. They were handing the big Filipino a manila envelope with his keys and belt but were keeping his knife and this started a small argument. Turns out this little set-to delayed him just long enough for Zyzck to catch up to him. So instead of being turned lose, he was moved to another room down the hall just like the one I was in. From my seat I couldn't hear anything except an occasional loud expletive from the inspector. The dumb clerk resumed his typing as if nothing had happened. He asked a few questions and I kept the answers short and sweet, and even then I couldn't be sure what my answers looked like after being distilled through his thick skull and with his lack of typing chops. I was dying to know what was going on in the next room. By the Simplex on the wall, it was twenty-seven minutes later when Zyzck entered, looked at the clerk, and told him to get the cuffs off me, get the hell out of the room, and close the door. The uniformed cop leaned over the desk and asked for my hands. I asked why and he said something like, "to remove the cuffs, dumbshit." Then he asked Zyzck if he was sure, but the fat cop just glared at him so the flat foot hotfooted it out of the small room, closing the thick door with a loud slam.

"Nice guy. Friend of yours?" I asked.

Zyzck grunted. "Your suspect's not talking," he started.

"Figured as much. Doesn't seem like the talkative type. The only thing I've ever heard out of him were mostly kung fu noises," I said.

"You sure about him being the guy who stabbed Mr. A?" he asked, pointing toward the door.

“Dead sure,” I said, rubbing my wrists. My left hand was also pretty swollen. Not sure but I might have had broken something in there.

“You alright?”

“Hand's a little sore. I hit him hard but his jaw was pretty tough. Can I get some water?” I asked, jerking my head toward the water cooler in the corner.

“Help yourself. So tell me what happened last night.” He got out his little cop notebook and after I got hydrated I spilled, omitting details like the weed and acid. He about busted a gut when I told him about the oilcan and again when I got to the part where I bashed Sabacan with the guitar. “Baseball bats and guitars. Most guys pack heat, but yeah, I know, you're a lousy shot and all that. Hah.” He shook his head a few times and fired up a smoke and offered me one. I tore the plastic dingus off the Kent and leaned in and got it lit, coughing a few times after inhaling. “We can hold him on a manslaughter charge against Mr. A,” he continued, “but you'll have to testify.”

“I'm cool with that,” I said and I was. “What about Stacii and the others?”

“We'll have to see where that fits in. There's evidence that was collected, so we'll have to see if any of it points to him. He likely was wearing gloves, but if not we may get lucky with a print or two. I know they found a couple partials that didn't belong to you or the girl.”

“Well, then the next step is getting him connected to Baker and Niscemi,” I said.

“Can you connect them?”

“Yeah, but it's pretty tenuous-like—paperwork with initials. Mr. A didn't like using full names, for obvious reasons. But Mr. A, Dan Baker, Niscemi, and Sabacan were all in the drug and hooker game together. A neighbor talked about someone who

matches his description as being involved—at least tangentially—with the floating party scene. It's pretty clear that Sabacan was working for them when he went back to the flat to get that stash from under the floorboards, but again, since we don't have what he found that's pretty useless in court. Then there's the shipping of the smack, there might be a family member of his involved, but that's pure speculation. I think that's where they first came in contact with him, maybe through their connection in Subic City or Olongapo. Obviously I want to see him pay for what he did to Bruce and Stacii, but I'm also thinkin' that he's the blunt tool we use to wedge between the two. I tell you, the weak link is Dan Baker; you've got to work on him. Sabacan is going to continue to make like a clam..."

"The only words he said to me are that he wants his lawyer," interrupted the cop.

"Well there you go. Not a surprise. But we need to get him to talk, especially about the other two."

"I'll talk to the front desk and get you out of here. You get any sleep last night?" he asked.

"Nah, I was pretty wound up," I yawned.

The cop looked at me sideways. "Arresting officer says he thought you were stoned on something."

"He said that?" I asked.

"I didn't talk to him. It's in the report."

"Well, I had a few beers and there was some stuff people were smokin'. I may have got a contact high?" I lied.

"Huh," was all the fat cop could say. He knew it was a lie, but I hadn't been holding when they brought me in so nothing could be proven one way or the other.

So it was maybe another hour later and once again I was stepping out of a police station a free man. This routine was starting to get old, that's for sure. 'Tack got me into the back of Hector's light blue Cadillac and asked if I was hungry. I realized that I was and said so. Despite it being chilly out, I had to roll down the window because the inside of the Caddy had an overpowering odor of prunes, pine needles and wet dog. Two of the aromas came from the lawyer's cologne, so maybe the prune fragrance was from some kind of air freshener. Hector was in a hurry and he drove like it, wrestling the big boat through traffic like Parnelli Jones. He apologized saying he had to get to a nephew's birthday party, so he dropped us off at Zim's at Kearny and Columbus and zoomed away leaving a nice cloud of white smoke in his wake.

First things first, I got change from the cashier and found the cigarette machine near the bathrooms. I put in the coins, pulled the handle, and received a brand new shiny red pack of Pall Malls for my effort. I tore open the pack, shook one out, fired up the weed and walked back into the dining room where I saw 'Tack waving at me from a corner booth. I joined him, sank into the orange plastic cushion, and checked out the menu. I decided on a Zimburger with fries and a chocolate milkshake while 'Tack opted for a Denver Omelet and hash browns. Our orders got there pretty quick so we didn't talk much, being more concerned with putting the food where it belonged. Only after we had both finished and were smoking cigarettes and drinking bad coffee out of small brown mugs did we start to recap the previous evening. I apologized for wrecking his date with Charlie, but he said I did no such thing; the action actually got her going a bit. Takes all kinds. Once he found out which station they were taking me to he abandoned me for the

evening. He said he was sorry, but he'd figured they weren't going to do much before morning anyway, so he and Charlie headed to her pad in the Sunset. He sheepishly grinned and said he didn't get much sleep.

I yawned. "I didn't catch a wink. I was coming down all right, but I got in the tank too late to claim a bench so I had to park myself on the floor. The concrete was cold, man, plus it smelled bad in there."

"Yeah, well, the weather gets bad and winos look to get thrown in and dry out, pun not intended," he opined.

"Got that right, man."

"So you're sure that was the same cat who..."

I didn't let him finish the sentence. "Yeah, like I told Zyzek, it was him. I registered a complaint but the man has to act quickly if they want to continue holdin' him."

"I thought that he had taken off, you know poof?" asked Ramón.

"Me too. Everything, all the information I had was that he had split, maybe back to his homeland."

"So why did he come back?"

"Good question. Money? He had some contacts with the Morte Aeterna crowd, worked as security for them at one point. Maybe he didn't expect to run into me." I caught the attention of the waitress and held up my mug. "Maybe he never left and we just missed him. He doesn't say much and I imagine he can blend in pretty well in the right neighborhood."

“So what's next? I thought you were finished with all of this,” ‘Tack said, fishing for another smoke out of the pack I had left on the table.

“Not sure. I think it's up to the law now. They've got the three of them. I tried to plant an idea in Zyzck's skull, but I'm not sure it took.” I yawned again and ‘Tack yawned in response. “What the heck, I've done what I can for now, so it's like wait and see.”

We hiked up to the office, stopping to get a six-pack of Coors tall and another pack of Pall Malls. Once back in the office I opened the window for a bit, but it was still a little chilly so I closed it again. I called the service and got a couple of messages none of which were important. ‘Tack got out his pipe and we smoked a bowl and wasted some time drinking and rapping and yawning. It was late afternoon when I couldn't stay awake anymore and decided to get back to my pad. I think ‘Tack was going to crash on the office couch, because I saw him glance at it a couple of times. We were both shot. I took my time walking up the hill, looking for cops or bad guys who might spring out and attack me, but the only person I ran into was the little blond kid who sometimes lived next door — I think it was a shared custody thing. He wearing a first baseman's mitt and was looking for his baseball bat so I told him to wait, retrieved it from where I left it inside my pad, and handed it over. He said thanks and ran down the stairs, probably headed for the North Beach Playground. A future Dimaggio, maybe. I sighed, maybe thinking about my youth playing ball. Simpler times for sure. I went back in my pad, made sure everything was locked up and hit the sack. I fell into a quick, deep, dark sleep.

The phone was ringing. I ignored it but it kept ringing. I didn't want to get up. I wanted to lie in bed and maybe catch a few more winks. I looked at the clock on the stand and it said five after ten. I yawned and stretched and then the phone rang again. I let out a mild expletive, got myself upright, padded into the living room and picked up the phone.

It was 'Tack. He told me that Zyzck was trying to get in touch with me and said it was important but not urgent. I asked what the hell that meant and Ramón just repeated it. I said OK and hung up. I was sure Ramón would have a word with me about my phone manners, but I wasn't awake yet. I found my smokes but I couldn't find my Zippo so I used the stovetop to fire up the weed. After a couple of hits my mind cleared and I dialed the North Beach station and went through the usual rigmarole, finally leaving my name and number and hanging up. I started to make coffee and looked in the fridge for something to eat. Not much in there, and the leftover pepperoni slice might have been a week or two old. I tossed it in the garbage and smiled, one domestic chore down: I had cleaned the refrigerator. So I was working on another smoke and sipping hot, black Graffeo when the phone rang.

After a few digs about my office hours and me reminding him that it was Sunday after all, a day of rest and all that, the inspector asked if I had eaten and I said no, but I could meet him somewhere. He suggested Zim's but I said I was still burping up a Zimburger, and what about Charlie's. He said he didn't care so I told him I could be there in twenty minutes.

We both arrived at the small diner at about the same time. There weren't any open booths so we parked ourselves at the counter. A middle-aged Chinese busboy in a sweat-stained t-shirt, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, slapped two mugs of coffee on the counter, handed us a couple of menus, and then went back to mopping up a table in the back.

“Great ambiance,” cracked the cop.

“Sure, but you're not payin' for that,” I responded.

“Food any good?”

“Yeah, if you stick to the basics. There's some Chinese porridge thing that I would stay away from, but they make a decent stack.”

The busboy came back and took our order. I guessed they were short staffed. When he split we fired up our cigs and I asked the obvious.

“So what's so important you have to drag me out of church on a fine Sunday morning?”

“You and church, now that's funny,” he said.

“I take offense at that. I'm a very spiritual cat,” I responded.

“Voodoo doesn't count.”

“Funny, man, funny. Seriously dude, what's up?”

“Baker cracked.”

“What? How?”

“Well, funny thing. You know that the lawyer, Ni...,” he stopped and started snapping his finger, trying to remember his name.

“Niscemi,” I offered.

“Yeah, right. Niscemi. What kind of name is that anyway?”

“Italian? I think I read somewhere that there's a town over there called that.”

“Huh, that so? Where was I? Oh yeah, so this guy Niscemi made bail. We argued with the judge but in the end we lost. It was set at five hundred grand for each of them. So Niscemi comes up with the fifty-k but the other guy, Baker, he wasn't able to make it. Seems that Baker's dad went ballistic and apparently cut off all funds to his son and all but demanded that he spend some time in the slammer, to see the error of his ways.”

“Now that's good parenting,” was about all I could add.

“Yeah, well, we don't know what else his kid has done. Maybe dad was hoping his son would be scared straight. I've seen it work like that before. Of course, I've also seen it have the opposite effect, so who knows.” He continued, holding his hands around the mug like he was cold. “Anyway, Niscemi's been running around trying to raise bread. I'm guessing a lot of it was tied up in their business investment.”

“The smack.”

“Yeah. He has seen Baker a couple of times, but he hasn't been able to help him out much. The guess here is that he's basically been telling him to keep his trap shut and that he'll do what he can to get him out of there and maybe smuggling in some contraband. In the meantime, Baker's dealing with a court-appointed attorney—you know the type, overworked, underpaid, and overwhelmed. And let's just say that life behind bars hasn't sat too well with Mr. Dan Baker. He's a handsome young man and that can create its own problems in lock up if you catch my drift. More than that he

apparently wasn't just selling horse. He had built up something of a habit and the jail time wasn't helping."

"Withdrawals?" I asked. "Man, I've heard that's brutal."

"We had a guy in lock up one time...." Zyzck's eyes went far away for a moment and then he shook his head. "It wasn't very pretty. Like to hear some hippie write a song about that and get it out to the kids, you know?"

"Sure, but we're not going to get into a beef about drugs, OK? We can both agree that heroin is pretty bad stuff."

"Again with the distinction. Go ahead and continue with your gateway drugs. It all leads to the same place."

"Heck, liquor and cigarettes, there's your gateways," I countered. I was a bit pissed that we were heading in a familiar argumentative loop. "Back to Mr. Baker, OK?"

"OK. I'm just saying—," he started.

"And I hear what you're saying," I interrupted.

"What?" He shook his head again. "OK. So where was I?" he asked.

"Baker and his habit," I said, trying to get him back on track.

"Right, yeah. So his life had turned into one big nightmare and at some point yesterday, he asked for a pencil and paper and wrote out a nice long confession. Then he manages to shoot himself full of something, probably smack but we're not sure yet—they found a burnt spoon in his cell and matches on his person, but he must have managed to flush the needle down the toilet or he hid it or had it removed by somebody. They say that they're trying to find out where it came from, maybe something was smuggled in or maybe it was something he got from another prisoner. I'm not optimistic on that end.

People on the inside tend to close ranks pretty damn fast. The cons inside are pretty resourceful. For the right price, they can make all kinds of things available and they can make things disappear just as fast. To tell you the truth, I wouldn't even trust the guards—they're low paid and a lot of 'em are dirty. I'm not proud of that fact; it's just the way it is. Anyway a guard found him when they checked his cell in the morning. He was unconscious, but he was still alive. I think his condition could best be described as comatose.”

I answered by letting out a low whistle. “Dude...,” was all I could muster.

“He's been transferred from the prison infirmary to St. Mary's,” Zyzck continued, “or he was when I last checked. They're supposed to let me know when he wakes up but I haven't heard anything.” The busboy interrupted him by placing two large plates of pancakes, sausage, and eggs in front of us. Of course we had to switch the plates, 'cause Eye Chart had ordered the over easy and I had ordered the scrambled. We continued the conversation with mouths full of food.

“So what's his confession say?” I asked.

“I haven't seen it; somebody read it to me over the phone. He tries to shoulder most of the blame, says he brought his lawyer friend into it. No mention of the girls or Sabacan, but there's a lot of guilt. It seemed genuine,” he said in a tone that held a certain amount of doubt.

“So you think he tried to off himself?” I asked in a non-committal tone.

The fat cop glared at me. A dribble of syrup started to escape from the corner of his mouth. “If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck—,” he started.

“Sure man, I dig, but I'm just sayin'....”

“Saying what?” he asked, upset that I was interrupting his breakfast.

“On the one hand, maybe it's simple. Maybe he starts to hate his life and writes out his confession and tries to snuff the candle. People have and for much less compelling reasons.”

“But?” asked the inspector, using his fork in a motion like he was trying to reel in a fish.

“But,” I continued, “it could also be that he starts to feel bad and confesses to somebody else, an inmate, his public defender or his lawyer buddy. Somebody doesn't want him to crack, so they supply a hot shot and a hand-written confession.”

“You think his confession isn't legit? Damn,” he threw down his fork in disgust. “You ever hear of Occam's razor? Why do you always have to make things so fucking complicated?”

“Sure, and there's the anti-razor by William Chatton, or there's this medical cat who said something like a patient can have as many diseases as he wants.” I could see Zyzck's eyes glaze over. “Sometimes the simplest answer isn't the only one is all I'm saying.”

“You like his lawyer friend for this?”

“I do,” I said, pointing with my fork for emphasis. “But that's gonna be tough to prove one way or the other.”

“Sure. Right now, we're sticking to the obvious. We've got a confession and an attempted suicide, probably driven by guilt.”

“That doesn't really help us all that much, does it?”

“Well, yes and no.” Zyzek put down his fork and slapped one hand into the other. “It means we've got him nailed on the dealing charges and can use his confession to go after the lawyer.”

“Yeah,” I countered, “but that's slim pickings compared to what we need. These guys did some heinous things and all we've got are some lousy drug charges...”

“Those are some pretty heavy drug charges,” the inspector interjected. “Dealing large quantities of heroin, that'll put 'em away for a while.”

“Sure, but they should be put away for good. You know the score—it's not just dealing, it's prostitution, kidnapping and murder. Besides, any half-decent lawyer can claim the confession was written under duress or that he wasn't fully cognizant of what he was doing due to his mental and physical state.” I wanted to say more but instead I wrapped a sausage link in a piece of toast and bit into butter and salty goodness. We both chewed in silence for a bit. “Does Niscemi know about this?”

The fat cop let loose an expletive. He had spilled something on his tie and was using a paper napkin dipped in water to try to remove the stain, but it looked like he was just making it bigger. “Huh?” he asked.

“Does Niscemi know about Baker's confession and his current condition?” I repeated.

“Not sure.” He stopped working on the tie for a moment and looked over at me. “There's the Jungle Telegraph in the jail, news like that spreads pretty quickly but he hasn't been there since Friday so I don't think so.”

“Right,” I said. “It's Sunday so Baker probably hadn't seen his lawyer before he...”

“Nope, I checked. Baker had two visitors on Friday, his lawyer was there late morning for about twenty minutes or so and Niscemi was there around two for maybe a half an hour. Guards were present at both meetings,” said Zyzck.

“Let's say for the sake of argument that Baker didn't write the confession.” I started.

“Don't know where that gets us. It's a confession. It's a pretty damned important piece of evidence.”

“Sure, but what if we introduce something else?” I was smiling despite myself. I took a swig of coffee and thought a bit. “You play much poker?” I asked.

Zyzck was sharp enough to get the hint. “You really think that would work? You've been watching too much television. Nobody would fall for that.”

“Hear me out, man. You talk to Niscemi and say you've got Baker's confession, and start reading it to him. Starts out the same but then we make some changes to the script. Implicate the lawyer and Sabacan. If Niscemi had anything to do with this, this second confession might throw him for a loop. He tends to plot things out with some intricacy, but he doesn't improvise well. He might say or do something. Do you have to give the lawyer the confession? Does he have to see it?”

“Eventually sure. But Nis...”

“Niscemi,” I offered.

“Whatever. He's sharp enough not to fall for a trick like that,” he said going back to finish the last scrap of pancake.

“Maybe he is, but we play Sabacan against him. We can use the basis of Baker's confession and elaborate a little. Look at it this way, what have we got to lose?” I had finished my meal and started working on a cigarette.

“And you want us to do the same with Sabacan, right?” Zyzck asked.

“Sure, and make darn sure that the two know we're taking to each of them. They've put up a pretty good front up until now but maybe we can force the issue.”

“Nah, I don't like it.”

“Come on man. It'll work.”

“Says you.”

“Can you at least get some handwriting analysis done on the confession?”

“It's a waste of resources. Why do you want to look this gift horse in the mouth?”

The inspector was pretty worked up.

“I'm not buying it. I'm not buying it and I don't like it when cats get away with stuff. That's one of the reasons I do what I do.”

The fat cop shook his head. “We're calling in Nis...”

“Niscemi.”

“Yeah. Why can't I remember his name? Nish-em-ee. Huh. We'll have to call him in, and the earliest would be Monday. I'd like to get him down to the HOJ on Bryant. It would make it easier since that's where we're holding Sabacan,” offered the inspector.

“You've got the ‘cone of silence’ over Baker?” I asked.

“What's that?” he asked.

“Forget it,” I said apologetically. “I just mean that you need to have a pretty good lockdown on Baker.”

“Stop telling me how to do my job. Yeah, well, we've got that covered. I've got some people watching that nobody goes in and out of his room. Except doctors and nurses and we've got ID's on all of them.”

“I was just sayin' that if Niscemi or anybody else finds out and tries something funny, you should be prepared.”

“I've been doing this for a while.” It was obvious that Zyzek regretted this little tête-à-tête.

“So am I invited when you talk to Sabacan and Niscemi?”

“I don't want you talking to them. I may be able to let you watch but I don't want you distracting them. We've got a room with one of those two-way mirrors and an intercom. But I have to clear stuff like that with upstairs.”

“Can I at least write the confession? I know the case better than anybody,” I said with no modesty.

“Knock yourself out. I just don't think it's worth it.”

“You'll give me a call once we've got the date and time confirmed?” I asked.

“I guess. I'm not saying I'm going to go through with any of this. My boss doesn't like playing games. Hell, I don't like playing games. Right now we've got as close to a sure thing as possible. I don't want to fuck this up,” he responded, as if my great idea wasn't so great after all. The inspector got his cheaters out of his breast pocket and went over the bill, reached into his pants pocket, and paid his half with a dollar and a bunch of loose change. Giving me a lazy salute he sauntered out of the diner. I got out

my wallet and put down my half plus the tip, paid the restroom a quick visit, and then headed to the office.

I knew that at best I was going to be observing only, but I had to think about the right way to approach this. Like I told him, I knew more details than the cops and I needed to make sure that Baker's "confession" (and I'm putting the quotes here because it was going to be like very heavily embellished, dig?) rang true. Once back at the office I checked with the service and got a couple of messages from Zyzck that were old and useless and one from Dawn. I called her and got Jeeves. He was back to his old haughty self so I guess things were back to normal. She was out but he said he would tell her I called. I almost lost it when he asked for my number, but I took a deep breath and gave it to him straight, discretion being the better part of valor and all. Then I went to the safe and got all the files on Baker and Niscemi and started writing stuff down on a yellow legal pad. It was only when I had to turn on the lights that I realized that I had been at it for around seven hours straight. The ashtray was full and there was a thick cloud of gray smoke hanging in the air. I got up and stretched and checked the office clock. I had a lot of pages of notes on the yellow pad, but I had to distill it to something shorter. Taking no chances, I put everything in the safe and headed downstairs for some take out and beer. I brought the two bags back up to the office and got the yellow pad from the safe and started to work on a final version. It took three beers and five tries but by around nine I finally had something that looked pretty good. I started to lock everything back in the safe when the doorbell rang. I looked out and saw a familiar form on the sidewalk. I opened the window and called down to stay put, that I would be down in a second. I put the three remaining beers in the small fridge, gathered my stuff, and shut down the office.

I took the stairs at a brisk pace, opened up the door, and looked straight into the green eyes of Dawn Pancetti.

She was dressed in a tan overcoat and a blue patterned scarf struggled to contain her mop of red hair. She wasn't wearing much makeup and her forehead featured small creases. She looked like she hadn't had much sleep lately. We engaged in an awkward embrace.

“Do you want to grab a drink?” I asked.

“No, no, I...I just want to talk. Can we go upstairs? It won't take too long,” she said. I didn't like her tone but said OK and opened the door and led her up the stairs. I was thinking of setting her on the couch, but she went for one of the Naugahyde office chairs. Rather than sit in my usual chair I went for the chair next to her and sank into the plastic fabric. It was quiet for a few moments; I guessed she was figuring how to say whatever it was she needed to get out. Finally she broke the ice.

“Forgive me coming on short notice,” she started.

“It's cool. I wasn't going anywhere in particular. It's good to see you,” I said.

“Yes.” She cleared her throat. “As I said, this shouldn't take too long. I wanted, I want to tell you two things. First off, I have decided to file a charge against those two.”

“What made you...”

She held up her hand to stop me. “I've thought about this a lot, and talked to a few people I trust. The worst of it is over, Sam's funeral and everything. I just don't think I can...submerge this anymore. Then there's what you said about what else they may have done and may yet do. So there's that.” She paused for a moment, reached into her bag, and pulled out a pack of Virginia Slims. I got my recently filled Zippo out and

sparked it. She leaned over and got the skinny weed lit, then darted her head back.

“Well, that's only part of it. I saw him the other day,” she said in a shaky voice.

“Who?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“Chas,” she spit out.

“Where? What was he...?”

“He was driving past the house. It was yesterday, no Friday morning. I was just going out to get the paper and I saw him. He was in the back of a cab.”

“You're sure it was him?” I asked.

She nodded her head a few times. “I don't know what he was doing, but it brought everything back. I mean, I had managed to view it like a hazy dream or something that happened to someone else. But seeing him again brought it into a sharp focus. It frightened me, Wendell. I'm not sure...I'm not sure what he's capable of.”

“We can call the cops right now if you would like,” I said, starting to get up and reach for the phone.

“No, that's alright. I have, well Dad has a few connections. I have an appointment with the D.A. and a judge tomorrow.”

“You need me to go along?” I asked.

“No, I mean they'll want to talk to you, I guess, but I'd prefer to go in by myself.”

She paused and bit her lip. “I thought it would be a little easier,” she said almost to herself.

“What? Can I help?”

“No. No, and there's no easy way for me to say this. Wendell, I appreciate everything, and I'll always owe you for what you did. It's a struggle because you're all

mixed up in my life the past month or so and I don't know what I would have done without you. I can't say I didn't have any feelings for you. I did. I do. But try to understand, my priorities have, they've had to shift. Do you understand?" she asked, tearing up ever so slightly.

Like I've said before, it's not the first time I've been dumped. "It's not like this came out of the blue," I said. "We've got different lives is all, like we're the product of random orbits: attracted, intersected and now are repelling. Entropy, I get it. I don't have to like it, but I get it. I also know that my gig, my profession can put people in harms way. It's an occupational hazard I guess. So is that it?" I asked.

"I think so, yes," she responded. She stood up and put out her hand. I gave it a shake and leaned in and planted a small kiss on her cheek. I started to lead her out but she stopped me. "Don't bother, I can let myself out."

"OK, but let me know if you need anything, OK?" I called behind her. She slowly spun around and gave me a wan smile and the peace sign. I responded in kind as she turned around and walked out the door. Then, just like that, she was gone, vanished and all that was left was a hint of a jasmine scent as the gray smoky haze lazily filled in the vacuum left by her absence. I remembered that there were three Coors left in the fridge and figured I may as well finish them off. So I sat there, numb, sipping beer out of yellow cans, and I tried once again to make sense of the world.

I got home late and didn't sleep very well, so when I woke up for the 30th time I decided to make it stick. A shower and some coffee helped some and I decided to take a stroll before heading to the office. It was around seven a.m. and there was the usual Monday morning hustle and bustle going on, people heading for work, street cleaning trucks passing by, and the sardines blankly staring out of a packed 15. I wasn't going anywhere really. I suppose I could say I was trying to clear my head but that wouldn't be quite right either. Dawn's double bombshell had thrown me for a bigger loop than I would have thought. I mean I liked her and all, but I hadn't seen it as anything other than what it was, a brief fling. Still, it bothered me and I wasn't quite sure why. I wound up stopping at a small storefront dim sum place; I never knew what it was called because there wasn't a lick of English on the outside, inside, or on the menu behind the counter. I stood in line and pointed at a couple of buns and we negotiated the amount. I walked out into the thick pedestrian traffic of Stockton and looked at the cages of live chickens and the old Chinese men and women who started out small and were now even smaller, crushed by eighty years of struggle and gravity. I walked back down to Columbus and stopped at Mario's for a quick shot of espresso and a coffee to go and then picked up a Chron from a street vendor. Soon enough I was back in the office and all I could smell was stale cigarette smoke; all traces of Dawn's perfume were history.

I called the service and there weren't any messages. So I ate my buns, drank my coffee, and read the paper, taking a little extra time to uncross the puzzle and pour over the box score from yesterday's game against the bums. Eight to one is a fine score when you're on the winning side, but I never liked blowouts. Runs are precious things and

wasting them on a rout usually means you'll need the runs later on and they won't be there. Silly superstition, yeah, I dig, but it just always seems like it works out that way. Atlanta was three games up thanks to a sweep of the woeful Padres, but they only had two more games left, the Jints had three left and Cincy was barking at their heels being only one behind. So the National League West title was possible, but I wasn't optimistic. The vibe just wasn't right.

I did a few more chores and hung around waiting for the call from Zyzck. He finally called sometime after 11:00 and it was a bummer, man. First off, Dan Baker had passed sometime the previous evening, so there went our wedge. Secondly, Dawn Pancetti had met with the D.A. and pressed charges against Baker and Niscemi. This meant that I couldn't even observe the interview between the inspector and the lawyer. I was now a material witness in the kidnapping case and as such, they (I mean like everybody: the cops, the D.A., the Prosecuting Attorney, and probably the cleaning lady) didn't want me anywhere near the case. They didn't want me corrupting it (the inspector's words). I was a bit out of sorts and said a few things and the fat cop responded in kind. Finally, I asked if I could at least drop by my fake confession, but that was a no go as well.

I cast a baleful glance toward the safe and thought about all the time I had spent working on the confession and how it had turned into a complete waste of time. I still thought it was a good idea. I mean I figured, heck, I *knew* that it would freak out the lawyer and trip him up. We had to get him out of his comfort zone, force him to make a rash decision. Well, OK, if they wanted me shut out, they could shut me out. Of their building. I did manage to weasel out a couple of facts from the inspector, the main one

being that they weren't going to see Niscemi until Wednesday around 10 in the morning. After I hung up I swore and then pounded the desk in frustration. Not one of my better moments, I'll admit. A few minutes later a call came in from Scott Conrad, the Assistant D.A., and he wanted a statement from me regarding Dawn's kidnapping charges. I said I could go in or type up a statement. He said a statement would be fine for now and he could send somebody by to pick it up. I said I could probably have something by that afternoon, but he said the next day would be fine and hung up without saying goodbye. I ignored the snub and got some fresh paper and carbon out of my lower desk drawer and started pounding away on the alphabet piano. I took me a couple of hours to get it right and when I was done I put the original in an envelope and the carbon into the safe. The safe was getting crowded so I spent the next hour separating everything into neat piles and then picked out the stuff that I was finished with and put that into a large manila envelope and looked at the clock. It was before three and I figured I barely had enough time to get this stuff into my safe deposit box at SF Savings on Columbus so I hightailed it out and was able to get there before it closed. Despite having a large box, it was getting pretty full, so I figured I would either have to rent another one or go through it all and winnow it down, but I didn't have the time or energy for that. That little bit of activity changed my mood a bit for the better. Or maybe it seemed like I had at least gotten something done, dig? I decided that it was late enough to grab a drink so I headed down to Wing Fat's and picked up a six-pack. I started working on it before I even got back to the office. Once back inside, I put a Trane disk on the turntable and started to work on getting lost.

The problem as I saw it was that I was being used. I was the pinball and lately somebody else was the one controlling the flippers. The cops, Dawn, Niscemi, and even, for a brief time, Bruce Amerika, all had their turn at swatting me into the bumpers. Three beers into my funk I decided that I was sick of being used and if I had to force the issue, then so be it. Time to go on the offensive, and that meant that I had to have a talk with the sleazy lawyer. I tried calling his office, but a perky young chick said that he was on “administrative leave” and asked if I wanted to talk to one of the other partners. I declined. Next, I got out the phone book and looked up his number and tried that, but all I got was a busy signal, so I guessed that his phone was unplugged. I knew where he lived; out on Commonwealth Street in what I guess could be called Laurel Heights. I had been there and his office on a few occasions playing trash man, something that comes with the profession and about which I'm not very proud. Anyway, his pad was a brown-shingled two-story detached joint with a large brick fireplace in the front and a steep driveway leading to a two-car garage. I could stake him out in front of his pad, but I would need a short to do that, or I would have to hire out a cab. Nobody was paying for this so it wasn't like I could expense a hack for a couple of days—that would be a lot of bread. I could use the services of Lady V but again it was a matter of coin and at some point I would owe her a favor and I didn't like the sound of that. I weighed various pros and cons and finally decided on a compromise. I would have to rent a hack, but only for a couple of hours. The phone rang, but it was a prank call, giggling kids asking if my refrigerator was running. I said I couldn't check because I was too busy trying to get Prince Albert out of his can. They didn't get it and hung up laughing and snorting. I took this as a sign from above or below and shut down the office. There was a bitter wind

blowing when I hit Grant Avenue, and while there was still a bit of vestigial blue in the sky, the rest was turning gray and black. Fine with me, suited my mood, hear what I'm saying? I was going to keep walking but the siren-like call of mother booze was singing the top 40 hit of my soul, so I stopped at Wing Fat's again. I picked up another six-pack and paid down my tab to something a little more manageable. Wing wasn't hassling me; I just liked to keep it under twenty bucks. I think I got it down to thirteen and change and that still left me with a ten in my pocket. After that I headed home, sank into my comfortable chair, and let things percolate in my dome.

So here I was in the front seat of Gill's hack parked in front of a bail bond joint, its storefront looking as inviting as a discount graveyard. We weren't here for any bail action; we were only here because there was a parking space. I had run over to Dharma 2 and picked up a couple of sandwiches to go, so we were chewing on them and talking about baseball. Gill wasn't really a fan but he followed it, more to have something to say when a fare would ask the inevitable questions about the last game. This led to a discussion of baseball and organized sports in general. He was against professional sports, thought it sullied and distorted the purity of the game as soon as you started paying athletes. He thought that the Olympics represented the ideal, but of course he would say that given his background. The only exception was the sport of kings, because that was all about money. I agreed with him about the ponies but thought he was way off on everything else. Of course I was a Giants fan and was still smarting over yet another second-place finish.

The trunk of the hack was filled with plastic garbage bags full of trash, most of it paper. We had been at it since before dawn and Gill was starting to get cranky because he had been working all night and instead of being face down on a pillow, he was carting me around on more dubious errands. Earlier I had him playing garbage truck and now we were ready for a straight tail job. I'm not proud of certain aspects of my job and I hesitate to even bring this up because it reinforces stereotypes, but yeah, like I said earlier, I had taken to going through the trash at Niscemi's home and business. I hadn't

got much from the haul: the business stuff was mainly invoices and some rough drafts of legal briefs from the other partners. The stuff from his home consisted of cancelled checks and old newspapers all laced with a strong aroma of coffee grounds and banana peels. Other than that he liked red meat and cheap Chianti and none of that helped me one bit. So later on I planned to go through the papers from the latest collection and see if there was anything worthwhile, but I had to admit that I could get better odds on a long shot at Bay Meadows.

Zyzck was trying his best to avoid me. I had called him a couple of times and only talked to him once. He said he would call me when he had any progress to report and hung up so I didn't know where they were with Sabacan or the lawyer. I had gotten Llanna to do some checking for me and she said that Niscemi was due in for a chat with the D.A. in the morning, so I used that time to rummage through his trash again and then to head over to Bryant for a low-key stake out. I wasn't sure he'd even be allowed out once Dawn's charges were added to the existing drug charges, but he was a lawyer after all and I'm sure he had a couple of tricks up his sleeves. So again, it might have been a fool's errand, but I had a hunch he would be walking and I wanted to follow him. It was around 11:30 when Gill spotted Niscemi and his lawyer walking down the steps of the massive gray courthouse. I didn't bring binoculars, but we could see them shaking hands and going their separate ways. Niscemi waved down a Yellow cab and climbed in. Gill had trouble starting his hack and was getting flustered but it coughed to life on the third try. I didn't tell him what to do; he just swung across a break in the traffic and followed the Yellow at a safe distance.

At Fourth Street the Yellow made a right and we followed all the way down to Third and across Mission Creek. We headed south on Third for a bit and then he made a left on Twenty-Third and then a right onto Tennessee. We were back in Dogpatch, not more than a block or so away from Stacii's old pad. The street was lined with a bunch of non descript one-story warehouses. His cab stopped in front of one of them that had a faded sign. We couldn't read it as we stopped almost a full block away. Gill said he thought it was a self-storage place and I grunted as a response. It was a nice day out, a little windy but warm. The lawyer got out of the cab, leaned in and said something to the hack, and then headed into the building through an open door, straightening his fashionably wide tie as he went. I had Gill fire up his short and pull right behind the Yellow. I got out and sparked a weed, waiting for Niscemi to show. It was about 15 minutes by Gill's watch when he got out and started for the Yellow before blinking a few times and looking over at me.

"You," he said with as much bitterness as he could muster. Being the sick, twisted type, he could muster up a lot.

"Counselor," I responded with a sloppy salute.

"You know I could consider this harassment. I could...I could get a restraining order on you so fast—," he stammered.

"Harassment. Don't know much about that," I interrupted. "I figure we're just rappin'."

"I don't need to talk to your kind," he spat as he started back into the cab.

"You know," I said a little louder than I had to, "it's only a matter of time."

He turned toward me. I thought I could see a bulge under his tightly tailored jacket and I guessed that's why he had stopped off at this place. "What? The charges that your bitch filed? All pretty circumstantial. I don't think she could identify me as being involved. In fact I'm sure of it because I wasn't involved. I'm innocent, you hear? It all boils down to being your word against mine. Sure you can tell your little story, but that's all it is. I think I can...demonstrate to the court that you're a less than reliable witness. Face it, give me five, hell no, give me two minutes of testimony and I'll have a jury convinced you're nothing but a lying, drug-abusing alcoholic who is trying to horn in on the Pancettis' money. You might have delusions of being some kind of smart super cop, but that's all they are, delusions. Trust me, in the final analysis, I think this will be no more than a nuisance," he said with a smug, self-satisfied smirk. "For me. For you on the other hand—"

"So what happens," I asked, "when your friend Mr. Sabacan tires of being locked up?" I asked.

"Who?" asked Niscemi, as slimy a liar as I have ever seen.

"Your muscle. They — the cops — they can connect you to him."

He was still standing with his back to the cab, but he was playing with the door handle behind his back. "I honestly don't know who you are talking about. Are we done here?" he asked in a condescending tone.

"Suit yourself. Can I ask one more question?" Like I just wanted to know, dig?

"What?" And again, louder, "What?" He chuckled like he found the whole thing funny. Maybe he did, I don't know. Standing there with his back to the cab he placed his arms akimbo and resumed in a quieter tone, though no less harsh. "Sure, you can ask

anything. There's nothing, however, that compels me to answer. So go ahead, ask away." He smiled. I knew it was mostly empty bravado, but he was presenting the very picture of honesty.

"OK, it's like this: I figure you blackmailed Sam out of the country and then had the temerity," I couldn't help but smile at the word, "to accuse him of molesting his own sister. Something you know he didn't do."

"Why would I know that?" he asked, the smile no less wide though it was wearing thin.

"Because you were the one who did the molesting. When did it start? Was she still a teenager? Did you get a little too rough with her? I hear you like it rough," like I was just getting warmed up.

The lawyer stood there in his tailored suit and tinted aviators. The smile was gone now, replaced by cold hate. "Fuck you. Stay away from me or so help me, I'll break you."

"You weren't expecting Sam to come back alive were you? Did you give him one of your hotshots? The same one you gave Karen Broomfeld? The same one you gave to your friend Dan Baker?"

He repeated the expletive. "We're done here."

"Funny, I was just getting started. Let's start with Karen Broomfeld..."

"Who? I don't know anybody by that name," he interrupted.

"She was one of the hippie chicks killed by an OD. I also like you for the murder of Suzanne Poundstone, she was the other chick killed at your little floating party. I don't know if it was you or Sabacan that killed Stacii. You know Stacii? She lived about a

block from here. Nice chick, great attitude. Good dancer, loved life. Well she's gone now and somebody is going to have to pay the price.”

“You don't know what you're doing. Your incompetence would be almost funny, if it wasn't so...perverted.”

“Now that's funny coming from you. By the way, you know about the real confession, right?” I asked.

“What are you talking about?” His eyes were partially hidden by the tint of his specs, but I could see them turning cloudy.

“No, I don't suppose the cops would have told you about that, that's something they would want to save. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to spoil their little secret.” He hadn't made a move so I continued. My heart was racing and I wanted to have the words rush out of me but I purposely kept things at a slow, measured pace.

“Your partner Mr. Baker had a bit of a guilty conscience. I mean the two of you partied hardy you know, and pretty much did whatever you wanted. But that's changed. He spent some time in lockup. That affects some people you know. People spend a lot of time avoiding their past, only looking forward. Jail gives you a lot of time to dig into your skin, dig? It makes some people harder, sort of like a forge. Whereas with some people, say a cat like your partner, it makes them a little crazy. They start reflecting on where things went south, mistakes that were made and the like. You saw that. You saw he was getting ready to break.” I took a break and shook a Pall Mall out of a crumpled pack, straightened it out and fired it up.

“Are you done? I'd like to leave, I have things to do.” But he didn't move from where he stood. He was still trying on the steely reserve façade, but it was starting to crack.

“Done? Baby I'm just getting started. You went there last Friday smuggling in a bindle of heroin, a spoon, some matches, and a needle. Maybe the shit was laced with something or maybe it was just pure. Too pure, hear what I'm saying? You also included a nice, hand-written confession. I'm guessing you dangled that in front of him before lettin' him have the smack. That's the thing with junkies, they're pretty easy to manipulate. You must have felt pretty good after that, huh? Probably sat down and had a nice steak dinner, maybe with a bottle of Chianti. But you overlooked something. Your partner realized he was as good as dead, if not from the smack then by the hands of some con. People like Dan Baker don't last in prison. He was weak, counselor. So he wrote his own confession. The cops didn't let me see it, but I got the gist of it. He basically told the truth, or at least the truth as he saw it. It differs from the one you wrote or dictated in that it tells the story of kidnapping and pimping underage chicks, your attempt at creating a drug empire, and it implicates you and your friend Roland Sabacan in the deaths of several people. The cops are comparing the two documents, doing handwriting analysis and the like as we speak. Sorry to have to be the one to break it to you. Actually that's a lie, I'm happy to be the one to break it to you. It's over Niscemi.” I wasn't sure if what I was saying was getting through or not. I finished the cigarette and turned toward Gill. “Gill, let's leave him...”

It happened lightening fast so I wasn't sure what the exact sequence was. What I would like to believe happened was that Niscemi reached into a shoulder holster and

pulled out his Colt. Three shots rang out, though I only heard two. Niscemi's gun went flying backward and the lawyer crumpled and fell. I turned around and saw Gill standing there with his .38. I took a long look at Chas Niscemi, then walked over and bent down. I felt his neck for a pulse but there wasn't one. I opened the front door of the cab and saw the hack sitting there terrified.

“You OK?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I'm good, man.” The cabbie looked to be about thirty years old, his long hair tied into a neat ponytail. “I saw everything man—he threatened you, he shot first.” He was physically shaking. I offered him a cigarette but he refused.

“Call your dispatcher and tell him to get some cops here. You've got the address, right?”

“Sure thing man. You taking off? Don't take off, man.”

“Easy, dude. We're not going anywhere, at least until the man gets here.” I flashed him a peace sign. “Pax, man.” I pulled my head from the short and looked over at Gill. He hadn't moved.

“Gill, are you gonna be OK? The cops will be here any minute.”

But of course he was unfazed, though maybe upset at the prospect of losing more sleep. They were going to have to question both of us. “Me, bah, I'll be fine,” he said.

I looked around as I walked toward him. There might have been a siren in the distance but it was hard to tell if it was getting louder or not. A few people had emptied out of the one-story warehouses that lined the street. They were giving us a wide berth, staying close to their buildings in fear. I put my hands up and said something stupid, like,

“everything's OK here,” but I doubt if there was much conviction in my tone. The small crowd didn't respond one way or the other.

“Gill?” I asked. “I heard two shots. Were there two shots?”

“Nyet. Three,” he held up his fingers for emphasis.

“Three? I only heard two.”

“He fired at almost the same time as I did. I hit his hand with the first shot so his shot was wide to his right. I fired my second shot right after that,” he said.

“You didn't need to fire that second shot.” I was still trying to process things and might have been in a bit of shock.

“You don't like guns do you Wendell?” the Russian asked.

“What? Yeah, no, I don't know, I suppose not. Probably because I'm a lousy shot. Still, why the second shot?” I honestly didn't understand it. There was definitely a siren and it was getting louder.

“The thing was...,” he searched for the right word, “grain, in-grain...”

“Ingrained?” I offered.

“Da, ingrained from early on. If you fire a gun, you can't hesitate. It's fast and you don't have time to think, just react.”

There were multiple sirens now and I caught a glimpse between buildings of flashing cherry headed down Third. “I guess,” is about all I could come up with.

“Wendell?”

“Yeah Gill?”

“I head some of that stuff you said to him. Not all but some of it. It got pretty loud. That stuff you said? Is that true?” he asked.

“The stuff about the second confession? That was pure bull,” I confessed.

“But the rest?”

“I believe the rest was true. Apparently he,” I pointed at the lifeless form of Chas Niscemi, “believed enough of it to consider me a threat.”

“Good enough for me then,” responded Gill. He put his gun back in his pocket and got a flask out of his glove compartment, took a large hit, and handed it over to me. I took a slug and winced as it provided the esophageal burn. An ambulance and two black and whites were less than a block away. I shook my head and waited for the ensuing hassle. Despite everything that had just happened and me being slightly shell-shocked, I felt a bizarre sense of well-being. I looked in the direction of Stacii's old pad and finally said goodbye to her.

I'm not going to bore you with the details, but the questioning took a long time. I felt bad for Gill. They were really giving him the third degree, but he was doing OK. 'Tack had gotten Hector to represent us but based on the eyewitness account (the Yellow hack), I was out of there relatively quickly. The cops hadn't found the bullet from Niscemi's .45, but they did find the gun and could tell that it had been recently fired. The whole thing didn't smell right to them, but there wasn't much they could do. They leaned as much as they could on Gill, but he could deal just fine with pressure so in the end, they let him go as well. But they kept his .38 and gave him the standard spiel about not leaving town. He shrugged and said he wasn't going anywhere but home and to bed.

So it was a couple of days later and we were having a little get-together, me, 'Tack and Zyzck, drinking some fancy scotch that 'Tack said he had lying around. Well 'Tack and I were doing the drinking, Zyzck was on duty so he was refraining (though I could tell it was killing him, I mean I don't know anything about whiskey but apparently this was some legendary brand and the fat cop liked scotch). I had told pretty much everything that had happened and had gotten to the end of the story.

"So that was your big plan?" Ramón asked.

"Pretty much. I just wanted to get him riled up," I responded.

“Well, in that case, I guess it worked. You were lucky you had Gill there,” ‘Tack said.

“Sure,” said the fat cop. “Lucky.” He looked at me funny.

“What gives, inspector man?” Like I was confused by his attitude.

“You knew, didn't you?”

“What?” Knew what?” I asked.

“You **knew**. Goddamn it, you bastard, you knew.”

Ramón looked at me, puzzled. “What's with him, man?”

“Son of a bitch,” said Zyzck, shaking his head. “Don't you see, Ramón?”

“See what?”

“You friend here can play all innocent, but I'm not buying it for a second.” The inspector looked at me and shook his head again. “Sure, you don't like guns, you're a bad shot, blah, blah, blah. But you didn't have to have a gun because you took your Russian buddy along. Pretty much the same thing. So you,” his voice was getting louder, “deliberately provoked that lawyer, figuring that he had gotten a gun out of his storage locker and that sooner or later he was going to waive it around and that your friend would take care of things. You know you had me fooled. I used to think that you were a typical hippie, but no, you're one cold-blooded SOB. You may as well have pulled the trigger.”

“I'm not so sure I'm quite as brilliant as all that. Never could play chess very well.”

“Son of a bitch,” the cop repeated again.

“Really?” asked Ramón, like he was seeing another side of me as well.

“Look you two, you can believe what you want,” I responded. “Call it chance, call it calculated, I don't really care. The point is that two very bad cats won't be bothering anybody anymore. I call that a win in my book. My only regret is that Sabacan is still giving us the silent treatment. I would like to know the details, the real details.”

“I'd say you've caused enough damage for one case. You want to know something, Pike?” the inspector asked. He went on without waiting for me to answer. “The captain wanted me to pull your license and we were all set to do that, but the D.A. intervened. I think your friend the Pancetti girl was grateful about not having to testify on the kidnapping charge. Everything stays quiet and the newspapers will never know what they missed. Boy, they would have loved that, huh?”

“I suppose so. It's a good thing in the end. She needs to put that—and me—behind her.” I said to no one in particular.

So the conversation went on and got a little loud at a couple of points. Of course we talked about the Zodiac, because that was on everybody's mind back then, but we were all (especially Zyzck) glad that he stayed out of San Francisco. That way he was Benicia's problem, or Vallejo's problem, or Napa's problem. And sure at one point we got out the latest cryptogram and started to try to figure it out, but heck, that was darn near a parlor game in San Francisco. Needless to say, we didn't come close to cracking it and just wound up arguing some more. The fat cop left by three leaving ‘Tack and myself to fire up some weed and head out looking for tail.

It was a little over a week later. I was dressed conservatively, wearing a tan suit and a turtleneck. I chose the look on purpose as I wanted to engender a bit of trust with my companions. Dawn Pancetti looked like a movie star with her wild hair tamed by hairspray and a large hat with a funny kind of half veil. She was also wearing very large sunglasses, maybe the same pair that I had given her back in my pad. She was dressed conservatively, too. I mean, I'm sure it was some kind of designer number and it was cut well enough to display her assets, but it wouldn't raise any eyebrows in church. Her father was dressed in an ill-fitting black suit with a blue tie that he couldn't have picked out — it was a little too far out and wide for that.

We were in a small private hospital in Santa Rosa, a little over an hour north of the City. We were here because my going through Niscemi's trash had proved worthwhile in the end. I had noticed a couple of checks that were made out to a holding company, both for three hundred dollars and for two consecutive months. A friend who worked at Niscemi's bank looked at his account on microfiche and saw that similar checks were drawn against his account every month like clockwork. It took me a bit longer to deal with the holding company and they were less willing to work with me, but I kept at it. A combination of threats, bombast, pleas, and attempted bribes got me

nowhere, so I finally changed tactics and told the truth. Funny enough, that worked. The money trail ended at an unprepossessing small collection of detached single-story buildings on a landscaped acre and a half. You had to look close to see the bars on the windows and the chain link hidden by large hedges. The sign out front said simply “Shady Oaks.” I had done a bit of research and found that it was a small, privately funded sanatorium that specialized in burned out cases. Giuseppe and Dawn were sitting in a pair of uncomfortable wooden chairs while I lounged against a bookcase in the back of the room. The small sign on the desk said Dr. Sandra Wolfe and there were diplomas on the wall behind her along with paintings of horses. Dr. Wolfe was a large woman and I guess you could describe her as no-nonsense and maybe a little horsey herself. Her white uniform had been purchased a few years earlier as she had put on a few pounds and some of the buttons were straining. She smoked continuously and wheezed a little bit when she talked.

I had made the appointment, but she was still surprised by Giuseppe and Dawn, as she had never dealt with anyone but Chas Niscemi, and that was only on two occasions. It had gotten to be nothing more than routine processing of the checks. She stopped thinking about who was behind them—they just arrived. After an initial awkward period, she got wound up and spent a lot of time talking about reactions to various drugs, and current therapies including electro-shock. The patient had had them all, and none of them had any effect. The patient wasn't comatose, but she hadn't uttered a word since they brought her here. Dawn looked at me, still wearing those large shades.

“Wendell, have...have you seen her?” she asked. Her father was sitting bolt upright trying to press the crease out of both pant legs.

“Nope. This is as far as I could get. I talked to Dr. Wolfe here over the phone, gave her a description, and that and the time frame fits. I sent her a photo and she said it's pretty close, but there's been some...changes.” I looked over at the doctor.

“Anything else to add, Doc?”

“It's close, but the picture I was sent had her wearing make-up, and her hair was longer. We keep it, the hair I mean, short in cases like this. It's for health, maintenance, and safety reasons.” She was fumbling in her desk for something and came out with a file.

“Safety reasons?” asked Dawn.

“Patients have been known to strangle themselves with their own hair. Or it can get caught in things. These people, well the drugs can make them less aware of their surroundings. It's an unfortunate side effect.” She opened the file and started to read about the admission date and her condition when she was admitted. It wasn't pretty stuff; the patient was suicidal and bent on hurting herself with anything she could get her hands on. She had actually stabbed herself with a ball point pen, tried to break through a glass door, and had repeatedly beaten her head against a wall. The doctor droned on about various therapies and the like when Giuseppe interrupted.

“Enough! We want to see her. We want to see her now.” He even pounded on her desk for emphasis.

I looked at the doctor and shook my head toward the door. “Doc, can I have a word?”

“What?” she asked. “Oh, OK.” She looked at Giuseppe and Dawn. “If you'll excuse us a moment.”

I followed her out of her office and into the hallway. A fluorescent light bathed the hallway in a slightly yellowish light and some easy listening music spilled out from a transistor radio. We talked for a bit. I explained what I thought had gone down and she nodded. She understood the family's desire to see her but she had to consider the well being of the patient. This could be traumatic. It could also be another dead end, she might be somebody else altogether. Finally she agreed to have them see her and opened the door, inviting Giuseppe and Dawn to follow her. At the front desk she met with a massive black dude in a white coat and got some keys out of a locked cabinet.

She led us out into the bright sunshine. There was the sound of insects, the faint roar of traffic from the nearby highway and wind rustling the leaves of the oak trees. I was starting to regret my choice of the turtleneck; it was fine in the air conditioning of Dr. Wolfe's office, but it was brutal outside. I shed my jacket as we followed the doctor to a locked gate. The large orderly opened it and let us into a small walled-off patio. There were picnic tables set out and a few people sitting down at them, some doing activities like drawing and solitaire and some doing nothing at all, unless you call staring into space doing something. She was easy to pick out, dressed in white pajamas, sitting on a lawn chair and gently rocking back and forth. It was weird, she looked so different than I had imagined. In all the pictures she had looked somewhat glamorous, but now she looked, I don't know, washed out. Her green eyes were sunken and there was a scar on her forehead. Her hair was cut very short, almost a boys cut. Dawn let out a brief cry and Giuseppe said something in Italian. I stayed back; there was no reason for me to horn in on the reunion. I found some shade under one of the ancient trees and fired up a Pall Mall. There was an odd reflection that shone just over the patient's head; it shook

me a little bit until I saw that it was from a shiny pail that was catching the midday rays of a bright sun and reflecting them toward the head of the burnt out young woman creating an odd halo effect. Weird, man, weird.

Dawn, Giuseppe and Dr. Wolfe each said some things to the patient and Dawn even got down on her knees and tried to get the patient's attention, but the chick just shook her off and slowly rocked back and forth. There was no sign of recognition in her eyes but you could tell from Giuseppe and Dawn's reaction that it was **her**. They stayed there for maybe twenty minutes and then the doctor waved me over. I stubbed out my second or third smoke and walked over to them.

“What's the verdict?” I asked, though I pretty much knew already.

“It's her,” said Dawn. “It's Julia.”

“We think,” said a dazed Giuseppe. “I don't know, are there fingerprints? I want to make sure.”

Doctor Wolfe said that wouldn't be a problem and the huge orderly ushered us back through the gate. We went back into the office and the doctor and Dawn talked about a possible transfer, treatment options, Julia's history and other things. Giuseppe was numb; he looked like he'd been hit in the head with a two by four. Nurses kept interrupting the doctor and the phone kept ringing, so what should have taken ten minutes dragged on and on. It was about an hour into this that the bombshell was dropped completely out of the blue, I mean one minute the doc was droning on about insurance options and then she throws a wicked curveball and caught us all looking. Like strike three, dig? I had to ask her to repeat it and she did in the same wheezing, flat tone she had been using since we got there. When Julia had been admitted she was five months

pregnant. The pregnancy did go full term was how I think the doc put it. This news had Giuseppe wailing, so I got Dawn's attention and I had another conference outside the office.

“Your dad's pretty freaked out, but I think I know why,” I said. “And he's wrong.”

“What do you mean, wrong?” she asked. She had finally removed her shades and her eyes were red and puffy. This too wasn't the way I had always pictured it happening. It was all wrong, distorted and sad. But I had to correct the misconception, nip it in the bud so to speak.

“The kid, that wasn't Sam,” I said.

Her eyes narrowed in both surprise and suspicion. “How do you know?”

I struggled to figure out how to put it. “Sam was, how do I say this, incapable of the act.”

“Incapable how?” Her voice was getting a bit loud and strained.

I lowered my voice a bit, trying to avoid a scene. “Sam was, Sam...didn't like girls, you know?” was how I put it. Lame, I know, but I wanted to smooth out the rough edges as much as possible.

“You're sure of this? You have proof?” she asked.

“No proof, but it's a pretty good bet that the father was Niscemi or one of his pals. But it wasn't Sam, trust me on that. Besides, the time line...it just doesn't make any sense.” I said this with as much assurance as I could muster. I believed it sure, but just saying it out loud made me doubt it a little. “I realize that doesn't make the situation much better, but I think your dad has come to the wrong conclusion. I wouldn't begin to

know how to tell him..." I tried to continue but it was all just so many words and I wasn't sure she was listening.

By the time we went back into the room things had calmed down a bit. Dr. Wolfe was back to droning and wheezing and Giuseppe just sat in his chair with a stone-like visage. Apparently the baby was long gone, having been adopted, and those records were sealed. So in a way this was just like Geno, the little angel, the perfect kid all over again flitting in and out of the Pancettis' lives like a weightless, gossamer dream. It was all a bit unreal to me, so I can't imagine what it was like for Dawn and her dad.

The drive back to the city was quiet. We were in the back of the Pancettis' limo and despite the heat the a/c was off. Giuseppe had suddenly decided that he didn't like air conditioning, so we sweated and mumbled a few things. When we crossed the Golden Gate, the fog was already obscuring the towers with just a bit of the international orange peeking through the soft white. The traffic was stop and go all the way across the span. I briefly smiled because I was closer to home and the turtleneck wouldn't be a liability in the cool fall air, but just as quickly I put on a neutral expression. The smile was inappropriate and could have been misinterpreted as some kind of self-satisfaction at succeeding where the cops had failed. I was feeling anything but smug, believe me. Sad, sure, numb, maybe a little. They dropped me off on Columbus and Vallejo—I said I could walk from there and Dawn managed a quiet thank you and Giuseppe grabbed my mitt with both hands and said he would send a check. I said thanks and wished them luck and then the door closed and the limo crawled away, merging into a sea of red brake lights. I asked somebody for the time and they said it was six forty-five, so I figured a drink was in order. Maybe because I was feeling a bit sentimental, I headed over to Li Po

and had a shot, planning to leave an extra glass full but untouched in memory of Mr. Amerika. At least that was the idea, but I couldn't really let the Red Label go to waste. I'm sure Bruce would have understood; he was a businessman after all. It got later and then it got late. One thing led to another and I wound up going home with one of the waitresses from the bar, I think her name was Yan. We did what people sometimes do and when morning came she said she couldn't stay for breakfast. She had to get home and take care of her mother. We exchanged numbers and she gave me a cute wave as she trundled down the stairs in her heels.

So I was feeling better than I had in a while. I was starting to put some of the negativity behind me; things were on the good foot again. I treated myself to a so-so spinach omelet and bad coffee at Zim's and then headed over to the office, picking up the morning Chron on the way. I started doing the cleaning routine, collecting empties, cleaning the ashtrays etc. I found a fair-sized roach in one of them so I dug around for a pack of matches in my desk and made a crutch. Then I turned my attention to the sink and the coffee thermos. After sniffing the milk in the small fridge I guessed it would be OK for another day or so but there were a couple of takeout cartons with food that looked questionable so I emptied them into a big trash bag. I took the garbage out and burned the roach outside by the cans. There were some things that had spilled out from the chute to the can, so I cleaned up a little around there as well. Once back in the office, I started to get the papers on my desk organized. I thought I heard something downstairs so I hiked down and saw that the mail was waiting for me, sitting in a disorganized pile below the slot at the foot of the stairs.

I had just got back to my desk and was starting to sort it out when I got a call from Zyzck saying he was in the neighborhood and he could swing by. I said sure. There wasn't much in the mail, just some circular from Rossi's and some political thing from Supervisor Boas looking for my vote so he could continue his fight to establish fiscal prudence and a tight budget while "putting human needs and revenue producing

programs first.” Good luck with that, Mr. Boas, I thought, and here I had just made the trip down to the trash. There were three other items of note. One, Mr. Pancetti made good on sending me a check and it was a pretty hefty amount. I do love zeros behind numbers, the more the merrier, dig? Dawn had an accompanying note and it was a brief update on what they planned for Julia. There was some doctor on the East Coast who had produced some results in similar cases so she was going to head there with Julia and stick around Boston for a while. Right now that was it, but they may want me to find out about Julia's kid if I was interested. She said we could talk about this later. I had to admit that I was pretty ambivalent about searching for the kid. Sometimes it's best to let sleeping dogs lie and all that. There was also a generic “Greetings from San Francisco” postcard featuring a glossy shot of the bridge and an impossibly blue sky. On the back was typed simply, “a gift, which in no way alters our current ledger” and it was signed with a flourish: L.V. Now what the hell did that mean? I had to laugh at the third item. It seems Niscemi's firm had finally made good on the \$2,500 kill fee, better late than never I suppose. Talk about one hand not knowing what the other was doing. I was thinking I probably should send it back, but I hated to throw away money. I could figure it out later. I put the postcard and the two checks aside and the Rossi's and Boas adverts where they belonged, fired up a Pall Mall, and worked on the paper.

I usually started with the Sporting Green and then worked myself up to tackling the first page, but the headline caught my attention. The disturbing news was that a cab driver's murder the last Saturday had turned out to be the work of the Zodiac. So much for him being a problem for the 'burbs. Now he was in our burg, in our face. Of course there was another postcard sent to the paper and people were starting to freak out. The

article had a lot of background stuff that I already knew but also offered some details of the hack's murder. I was pretty heavy into this when the buzzer rang. Staying in my chair I turned around and I looked out the window. I saw Zyzck standing on the sidewalk looking disheveled as usual. I opened the window and told him to wait a sec and then got up and buzzed him.

The inspector showed up huffing from climbing the stairs and even though he was out of breath, he immediately started going on about how things were going utterly batshit around the station, all hands on deck and that sort of thing. It took him a while, but he finally got around to asking if we, meaning Ramón and I, would mind giving another crack at the cryptograms, saying it was our civic duty and such. I was pretty non-committal, I mean I don't like to do pro-bono work as a rule but said I'd see what we could do. He grunted which I took to mean thanks. I told him that I had found Julia Pancetti, to which he responded "No shit!" So we rapped about that for bit. While leaving, almost as an aside, he said that he forgot to tell me, but Roland Sabacan had gotten attacked while in lockup, cut up pretty good, mutilated really. The way the inspector put it was that Sabacan would be singing soprano from now on. It was being treated as a gang thing, something between the Filipino and the Chinese gangs in lockup. Then the fat cop checked his watch and said he had to split and I told him I would see what I could do regarding the cryptograms. He nodded and said he could let himself out.

So that was that. I looked at the big Simplex wall clock and figured it would be a good idea to deposit the checks into my bank account and take out some cash from the safe, day to day expenses, hear what I'm saying? I picked up the checks and then looked at the postcard from Lady V again. Some gift, I mean in someway I appreciated, it but in

other ways it gave me the creeps that someone like her had that kind of leverage and power. Assuming two and two equaled four and that the postcard and the inspector's news about Sabacan were related. I shook my head a few times and started to toss it in the bin with Supervisor Boas but then changed my mind, got up and put it into the safe. Sure, she said it didn't affect our ledger but these things can add up. I didn't want to get on her bad side or in her debt, that's for sure. Just as I finished closing the safe, 'Tack showed up with some recently purchased hash oil. We smoked, coughed, and rapped about the Zodiac some. I told him about Zyzck and Ramón laughed, saying that Eye Chart must be pretty desperate if he's asking us for help. Then we decided that it would be good to get some fresh air and then maybe eat some noodles and if it wasn't too late, maybe head down to the wharf and see if we could pick up a couple of tourists looking for some local color. At the very least we could grab a cocktail somewhere. I gathered my coat, shades, smokes, and keys and followed him down the stairs.

There was a wet chill traveling on a stiff breeze. The fog was starting to get lower and the sidewalk was full of people walking with purpose, their expressions pre-set to a neutral, blank look, though you could see their eyes darting about, wondering if the cat next to them liked to off people and write cryptograms. Funny, being a paranoid individual, I was sort of used to the feeling but it was odd to see it in my fellow citizens. Sure, evil is always out there but it felt like a different kind of evil. This had a random component; you could stay on the good foot and still be in its cross hairs. I might be stretching things somewhat, but to me it wasn't just the lone crazy that was causing this feeling. In a way he was almost symptomatic of the changes that had taken place in just a few short years, moving an entire generation from the Age of Aquarius to the Age of

Monsters. If you weren't paying attention (and who does these days?) it could have seemed to be almost as if a switch was thrown, one second sweetness and light and the next darkness and death. From pot to smack, from sweet sex to rape and murder. My mood was definitely taking a turn for the worse.

“Hey,” said ‘Tack, breaking me out of my reverie. “Check it out.”

“What?” I asked, trying to swim back to the surface.

“Eleven o'clock,” he said with a grin. “What do you think?” He didn't have to point. I looked up to see a couple of tall blondes walking into Mario's maybe a half a block away.

“I could drink a cup,” I responded with my own loopy smile. And just like that, for a moment at least, the darkness was pushed aside and happier possibilities abounded. Sure, you could argue that it was self-delusion and that while I pursued this rack of lamb (with a strong likelihood that I would fail in my self-appointed mission), somebody out there, make that out **here**, was being exploited, swindled, or murdered. I was turning a blind eye to this suffering. But dig this, my brothers and sisters, it's like my old friend Shelly's friend Susan's aunt Betty used to say, “We're not here for a long time, we're here for a good time.” May as well make hay while the sun shines, dig?

‘Tack stopped me with a hand to my chest (he had to reach up a lot to do this).

“Hey, Wendell, let me lead on this one. I'm feeling lucky.”

“Lead on, Ramón, let's hope that your luck rubs off on all of us. I call the tall one.”

“We'll see about that, man, we'll see...”

It was warmer inside Mario's Bohemian Cigar Store. There weren't any free tables, but there were a couple of counter spots right next to the blondes. They looked more than OK from this angle. I smiled while 'Tack asked if the seats were taken. They weren't and the chicks looked interested. I ordered a couple of espressos and fired up a Pall Mall. They had some kind of accent and of course Ramón nailed it as Danish, said some Dane greeting and then asked if they were stewardesses. They nodded enthusiastically and asked about us. To respond, 'Tack started telling a story about me finding a missing heiress. He told it pretty straight and elaborated just enough to make things sound more dangerous and interesting. And maybe a little mysterious. One thing led to another and soon enough we were laughing and making plans for dinner.

Self-denial? Turning a blind eye to the world's problems? Sure, guilty as charged, but while I was laughing and sizing up the evening's possibilities that sat next to me in the form of a tall pneumatic Viking chick, one eye wandered to the mirror in front of me and checked out a backwards view of life outside the windows. Umbrellas had sprouted like so many mushrooms and the wind was threatening to turn them all inside out. Indian Summer was coming to an end, dig? Winter couldn't be that far behind.