

LITTLE GREEN MEN

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Friday, April 14th, 1972

A small, sad story was buried on page nine in the morning *San Francisco Chronicle*. It probably comprised less than twelve square inches of space including two photos, a headline (“Moon-Schott Search Continues”) and two short columns of type. The article was sandwiched between a couple of other small news items and ads for auto parts, fancy pens and a new retirement community.

The two Mid-Peninsula high school students had been missing for seven days. The accompanying photos were obviously lifted straight from their school yearbook: Julie Schott was the blonde on the left and Summer Moon was the Asian girl to the right. Both were cheerleaders and wore their hair long, straight, and parted in the middle. You could see just a hint of her braces through Julie’s smile, while Summer’s smile featured pursed lips, probably covering up similar orthodontia. There was only the briefest description of each. Julie was five feet two inches tall and Summer was five feet one inch. They each weighed 110 pounds. The article said that they were close friends.

Earlier reports had given a few more details. The pair had last been seen on Friday the seventh when they had taken Summer’s car on a trip up to the city. They were to have seen the doo-wop group Sha Na Na at Winterland, but it wasn’t known if they ever got that far. When questioned, none of the staff at the venue remembered seeing them, which was no surprise given the 5000 kids at that concert. Further complicating things was the fact that they weren’t reported missing until the following Sunday, as both had told their respective parents that they were planning on staying over at the other’s house.

Julie's bronze Pinto had been found in Pacifica on Monday the tenth. The vehicle had crashed through the guard railing at Devil's Slide and plummeted to the rocks and surf below. The best guess was that the accident happened late Friday night or early Saturday morning, but that wasn't a sure thing because no one had reported it until a road crew noticed the torn up guard rail. All that was left of the car was a burnt pancake, but the girls' bodies weren't in it. In fact, the article stated that there were no signs of the missing girls at all, implying that they were probably thrown out of the car and carried off by the surf, though the police weren't ruling out foul play. Although the search—at this point, a shift from rescue to recovery—was probably going to be called off in another day or so, the parents urged everyone to continue to keep a lookout for the girls.

I crumpled the paper in frustration before smoothing it out again and cutting the article out with a pair of dull scissors. I opened my bottom drawer, took out a folder optimistically labeled "Leads," put the article into the folder, tossed the lot back in and slammed the drawer shut.

"What was all that about?" asked Ramon, my ex-Navy buddy and sometimes business partner. The Navy breeds nicknames, and because he barely hit the sixty-inch minimum, he was tagged as "Thumbtack," shortened to "Tack." After his hitch as a radio op, he landed in The City and put his government training to use fixing hi-fis and TVs. His fame for electron taming spread enough to land him some interesting gigs working for rock bands, fixing amps and constructing intricate light shows. But I suppose he got bored easily and liked to change things up. So now he spent most of his time in front of a CRT adding ones and zeros. Previously, his desk had been crammed with circuit boards and components. Now, it was all covered in thick,

spiral bound copies of programming documentation, two CRTs, three off white metal boxes, a noisy dot matrix printer and a couple of typewriter keyboards with coiled umbilicals.

We made an odd pair. He was a short Hispanic cat with long hair that was usually tied in a ponytail. He would try on various facial hair experiments: a mustache one week and a goatee the next. I'm a little over six feet tall, and back then I was usually clean-shaven, though after I had received my discharge from the Navy, I had let my hair grow into a large Afro.

I looked over to my left and saw his face bathed in a sickly green glow.

"What was all that about? The missing kids, that's what," I answered.

"Anything new?"

"Nada. I wish reporters would do their job. Sure they haven't been found, but how about some answers to the obvious questions? Was there evidence in the car? Blood? Skid marks on the road? Either the cops aren't giving out any info or the reporters are just phoning it in." I stared through the hole I had just made in the paper and could make out most of the page eleven headline: "Cockroaches Found In Hospital Praised For Cleanliness." That made my head hurt a bit, so I decided to fire up a smoke. I was back to Camel straights after a month of a futile health kick smoking Marlboro Lights.

Ramon leaned back in his chair with a loud grunt. "Well, maybe this isn't a case for you, you know? Maybe you should take all this silence as a sign or something. You said it yourself. The parents won't talk to you--"

"That's their lawyers," I interjected.

"Same difference." He scratched his goatee and continued. "The parents' lawyers have advised them to stay away from you, the cops won't give you anything and the reporters won't return your calls. You keep pressing and you're going to come off as too needy."

“That’s because I am needy. I need bread.”

“The rent’s paid this month, isn’t it?”

I exhaled a couple of smoke rings because I could. “Yeah, but the reserves are getting low. I haven’t had a case in months. The other day, I called the office phone to make sure it was still working.” I flicked a long ash into the plastic top of my coffee cup.

“Hey, things are slow. They’ll pick up,” he said. “Enjoy the time off while you can.”

“Yeah, I know, you’re probably right. But it’s Burlingame, man. That’s a money tree that’s just begging to be shaken.” I put my paws out to pantomime grabbing a tree and shaking it but it looked like I was trying to strangle a baby giraffe. I gave up because I’m no Marcel Marceau, dig?

I heard some fumbling over to my left and the unmistakable sound of a pipe being fired up.

“Well, what’s the plan for today?” Tack asked in a high pitch voice, straining to get the words out and keep the smoke in. I got up and walked over to his desk, took the offered pipe and took in a fair sized toke.

“Well first, I thought I would--”

I was interrupted by a “shave and a hair cut” ring on the doorbell. We stared at each other.

“Expecting company?” I asked, passing the pipe back to Ramon.

“Not me. I’ve got my usual standing date with this,” he said, waving a dog-eared programming manual in the air. “Besides, you’re closer.”

“Yeah, okay, okay, I’ll get it.”

I got up and buzzed the person in. We heard the front gate slam shut followed by the

stampeding of elephantine footsteps on the stairs. When I poked my head out the entry I found myself staring down at an enormous character named Corky. Corky moved up the stairs like a force of nature. He started out large and only got larger, his Irish mug flushed and flooded as a peat bog after two solid weeks of rain. As the big lug two-stepped up the stairs, I involuntarily winced, taking a couple of seconds to scan my attic. Corky Glyynn, too many Y's and not enough wherefores. Damn it, I knew I owed him something but what? I decided to play nice and thrust out my mitt, not quite smiling but not hostile either. After all, I figured that the whole world consisted of my brothers and sisters, at least until they decided otherwise.

“Corky my man. What’s happening?” I called out, trying to start things off on as good a foot as possible.

He was still breathing hard and causing a minor quake with each footfall. Already I could smell his smoky, musky cloud and I was thinking here comes the whole goddamned Irish Army, kilts flapping, red beards and wild hair flowing in the wind, whiskey-scented saliva foaming at the corners of their mouths, their wild blue eyes staring straight ahead with a combination of fear and hatred, swearing under their collective breaths in brogues as thick and dark as Guinness, while echoing behind was the unholy noise of 1001 pipers trying vainly to play in tune.

Hmm, I thought to myself, this was some pretty good hash.

“What did you find out? Anything?” The effort left him out of breath and dripping with sweat. His sweat smelled like Jameson, no surprise since he drank, well, like an Irishman, I suppose, no offense.

“Well, I’m still--” I started to answer but the big goon grimaced and let loose with a roundhouse punch to my jaw that knocked me silly. I went stumbling back into the office and

over the green Naugahyde chairs I used for client parking. I supported myself on the arms of one of the chairs and flailed at the man with a couple of kicks. They didn't do much of anything except provide me with enough space to get upright. When I bounced up I glanced over to my left and could see Ramon diving for cover. "Friends like these," I thought to myself as Corky came at me again. I moved in and landed a couple of decent jabs to his not inconsiderable gut. It was probably useless and felt like I was hitting a pillow.

"What the hell?" I yelled at him. I had no idea what was going on.

"You bastard!" he screamed and he tried another hook. I was prepared this time and was able to move my head back far enough to miss most of the blow. I stepped in and peppered him with some more jabs and then tried an uppercut to his jaw but he saw it coming and moved to his side. We were both momentarily distracted by a thick assembly language manual flying past, missing us both. I tried getting in close and landed another punch to his face and he pivoted and jammed me in my neck with his elbow. I said something indelicate about his upbringing and he lunged at me, pinning me against my desk.

"Steal my money, will you?" he shouted. "You said you would find her!"

His gnarled hands encircled my neck and he began squeezing. I was flailing away and in desperation I grabbed my trick pistol, a chrome Colt Commander that was sitting on my desk and put it right up to his temple.

"I'm a lousy shot," I managed to squeak out, "but I don't think I can miss at this range. Let me go or your skull is going to be ventilated," I croaked.

Some kind of dim awareness dawned on him and he slowly released his grip. I got up, shook myself a couple of times and kept the gun pointed at him while I got behind my desk. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that Ramon had armed himself with another thick

programming handbook. I shook him off and looked over at Corky.

“Seriously, man, what the hell was all that about?” I asked, genuinely annoyed.

Mister Glyynn was still warily looking at me while he was rubbing his face. Part of me was proud of the damage I did, but the other part of me was sore and pissed as hell.

“I spent a lot of money on you the other night. You said, no, you promised that you would find her,” he finally said.

“Okay,” I drawled. “Can we talk about this? Are you going to be civil or am I going to have to ask you leave?”

He looked over at Ramon and then back at me. I was still holding the Colt.

“We can talk,” he said in a low voice.

“Fine,” I said. “Go ahead and take a seat.” I got the pack of Camels off my desk, shook one out and lit it with my chrome Colt Commander cigarette lighter.

“That’s not a gun?” Corky was incredulous.

“Sure, it’s a gun. Just repurposed is all,” I smiled and thrust out my mitt.

He rejected my shake, so I shrugged and sat down. From his vantage point, Corky couldn’t see the framed picture of my ex, Helen, holding a knife to my neck (a gag photo, honest). But my trick lighter and the switchblade I used as a bill spike were in plain view and they could usually either start or stop a conversation. To his right and my left was Ramon’s desk and the blackboard behind him had all kinds of hieroglyphs scribbled on it, a combination of wiring diagrams and flow charts, half erased and incomplete.

“You know Ramon?” I asked, still vamping and trying to remember what the hell I was supposed to have done for Corky. Tack nodded, with the pipe back in his mouth and surrounded in his own personal thick cloud of green tinted smoke.

“Yeah, sure.” He waved at Tack dismissively before turning back to me. “What gives?”

“Well, things have been pretty busy,” I lied, trying to get the struggling train back on the right track. I parked the back of my lap down onto my padded office chair and it let out a loud squeak. I didn’t have to look up. I could feel Ramon’s disapproving gaze. I had been promising to fix that noise for a couple of weeks. Well, maybe a couple of months. I took the time to neaten up my desk and then it hit me: I had run into him two nights earlier at Specs, a small bar on Columbus Street. We had an argument about martinis, specifically, which gin made the best ones. He was arguing Boodles and I was for Tanqueray, but all it did was get us righteously splattered, as a taste of one had to be chased with one of the other. Some time during the evening, he had let me know that he was heartbroken over the loss of his Molly, who had vamoosed a week or so earlier. Well, by this time, we had run up a sizeable tab, and due to my recent dry spell I couldn’t pay my half of it. In desperation, I convinced Corky to see fit to cover my end of the tab and in return, I would use my considerable detection skills toward the purpose of tracking down his missing Molly.

That was a few nights ago. My problem now was that I couldn’t remember if Molly was his wife, his girlfriend, or his dog.

I hooked my hands behind my head and leaned back. The chair complained again and I tried to remind myself to get some 3-In-One oil the next time I was in a hardware store. “I’m telling you man, vanishing into thin air is easier than you think. A person can hop a bus to Oakland, grab a Starlight down to L.A. or take an N out into the Sunset and disappear into the fog. Getting lost is an easy act for most men and women. Or dogs,” I added lamely.

He was still sitting on the other side of the desk, but he put his massive mitts down on it and leaned in, his voice loud and threatening. “Are you pulling my leg? You said, you promised

you could find my Molly. I know we were pretty well lit, but you promised--”

“I said I would take a look around. I didn't promise any miracles.” Well, that was a bit of a stretch, but I gambled that it was cool because I doubted if he remembered any more of the night's blather than I did. “Look,” I half-pleaded with my palms out, “You wanted me to make inquiries and I have.”

“So, you did find something?” He was eyeing me with those beady blue bloodshots.

“No.”

“You're giving up?” The eye of the storm had passed, and we were in for more heavy weather.

“Not at all. I have, uh, exhausted my funds on this. It's not cheap you know, running around all over this burg, asking questions.”

The look of distrust deepened across Corky's map. Those Irish orbs weren't smiling. “You're trying to play me for the money, is that it? So help me, if that's it...” The lug stood up and started to wind up his rage, dead set on uncoiling and pounding me into one big tartan-hued bruise.

“No, that's not it at all.” I slowly leaned back in my chair trying to minimize the noise but all it did was draw it out into a long, plaintive cry. Making a tent with my fingers, I tried to look reasonable, philosophical and honest all at the same time. “It takes dough to make bread and there are palms needing to be greased. Hear me out. I've got expenses, legitimate-like.”

Corky responded by shifting his eyes straight up, like he was trying to read the trademark on the inside of his skull. It took him a couple of tics to realize the answer wasn't printed there. I guess he gave up, or at least he allowed his face to go blank.

“Did you bring a photo of Molly?” I asked. “I would like to print up some pictures and

show them around, and I can do this for cheap, but I can't do this for free. You picked up the tab at Spec's and I'm grateful, but I need a little more coin to continue.”

It was one of those points where things could go north or south. I knew it, Corky knew it and Tack knew it. Thankfully, a distraction arrived. At precisely that moment, a local indigent named Luca took it upon himself to start faking his way through “My Bambino” on his abused and out of tune accordion. The sound wafted through the open window with the subtlety of an Acme anvil. We all cocked our ears in the direction of the bum’s butchery on the street below. It was so unbelievably awful that even Corky grinned and shook his head in disbelief. I made a mental note to buy Luca a nice bottle of red, some of that cheap chianti that he seemed to dig. Mister Glyynn continued, the edge gone, as good-natured mick sentiment replaced the rage, just like that. What a trip.

“Ah, hell, Wendell. Sure, you might be trying, but I can't afford to pay out much. I'm a city worker, not a banker. I've tried to find her on my own, but I haven't had any luck. And I don't mind telling you, it's eating me alive.” He leaned back down in his chair and reached into his coat pocket. He pulled out two things. One was a small photograph and the other was a silver flask. He studied the pic for a bit and took a long pull off the other. Then, he closed his eyes and passed them both towards me. “No offense?”

“None taken.” As much as I would have liked to land a right hook to his map, I figured the smart play was to check out the photo. Besides, I was curious as to the species for which I was supposed to be looking. The photo was small, black and white and maybe an inch and a half square, like the kind of picture you used to get out of one of those photo booths at Playland. I stared at the pic and inwardly groaned. Now, I needed that drink. “She's something, that Molly,” is all I could lamely offer before I reached for the booze.

It was just my luck. In the photo, Corky was smiling and wearing his Sunday sharkskin best, his wild hair greased back and his beefy right arm hung loosely around the shoulder of an attractive, zaftig redhead. She wasn't smiling and was squeezed into something minimal and black. Around her neck was a triple string of fake pearls, on her fingers were several gaudy rings and in her lap was a goddamn dog.

"Pretty nice," I told him because there wasn't anything else I could say. We bartered and argued for a bit longer, and it got a bit heated at times but nothing like the earlier skirmish. It was really *pro forma* haggling more than anything else. In the end, I had to promise to give Corky updates every few days and in return, I got the picture and a couple of not so crisp bills. We cemented the deal by killing off his flask and making small talk about the weather and the Giants prospects for the coming year. Thank God for the Padres, we all agreed, who led us not unto the cellar. I was bullish but Corky was a bear and Tack would chime in with statistics, because that was his take on the game. The Jints were my team, and as such, I had to believe that nothing was out of the realm of possibility. Besides, except for the Friars (and a statistical repeat of last season), there was only one way to go.

It was about an hour later that the big ape shuffled out of his chair and toward the door. While his face was still florid, he was calmer than when he came in, so if nothing else, I might have grafted a couple of minutes onto his life span and saved his ticker from exploding. Just before we reached the door, Tack asked to see the photo. I handed it to him and he pulled out a pair of glasses and studied it front to back for close to a minute. Then he flipped the specs up to the lid of his coconut, adjusted his gaze up to Corky and asked, completely straight-like, "Which one is Molly?"

There was a moment when the storm clouds came back and I was bracing for a return of

the 113th regiment before Corky broke into a hearty though somewhat phlegm accented belly laugh.

“Ha, ha, ha, that's a good one. A regular Jose Jimenez this one is, Jesus. Which one is Molly, hee, hee, hee,” and with that, the drunken lout let himself out. We could hear the guffaws of the baboon dragoon resonate down the stairs and echo out into the street where it commingled with a terrible dirge-like rendition of “Funiculi Funicula” played on accordion.

I didn't shut the door; I just stood in the doorway and shook my head. A minute went by and Luca started up another tune. This time, it might have been “Volare.” It was always tough to tell.

“I'm with Corky on this one, man. You're a regular Bill Dana, Mr. Martinez.”

Tack offered the friendship digit as a retort, lame by his standards, but I was trampling on his heritage, after all.

I mimicked the gesture in a half-hearted and non-committal response.

“Hey,” Tack interjected. “I was serious. Which is which?”

“What?”

“Corky's pic. What are you looking at? I mean who or what are you looking for?”

“Huh? Oh that. Beauty or beast? Search me. Arf,” I barked for punctuation.

“Search you? And you're going to find this Molly how? Tempt her with a girl's best friend or her master's voice?”

“Diamonds or dog biscuits, Nipper, it's all the same.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Nah, I gave up thinking. It causes wrinkles. I've decided that I'm going to be one smooth man when I turn one hundred. But the problem is pretty simple. Realistically, woman

and dog or dog and woman will be together. Find one and you find the other.”

“Do you have any idea what you're going to do?”

“Hah,” I grunted, “I honestly have no idea, man. First things first. I’ve got to get to the bank before it closes. Maybe we could grab a slice and a beer before that. I’m buying. You in?”

“I think we both know the answer to that one,” Tack smirked.

Having no other cases to distract me, I actually put in a couple of weeks working on Corky's problem. As far as I could tell, his ex didn't have a job or any place that she had to be on a regular basis. Corky had given me a list of what he thought were her known haunts and I had to visit them all. I was being lazy and systematic at the same time, just like the Navy taught me, starting my search close to home and widening in an ever-increasing search pattern. I started with bars and restaurants in North Beach and moved onto a couple of joints in Cow Hollow, a church in the Outer Mission, a green grocer in the Inner Sunset and finally checked out a couple of places way out in the Richmond. I was basically paying off a debt, so that meant that cabs were out of the question and all movement was courtesy of Muni and my own two feet. That made the job slower and a lot more like real work. Adding to my foul mood was that no one had yet recognized the woman, though a couple of folks said they might have seen the dog at some point.

I was dulled by a hangover or maybe it was a cold coming on. The weather was doing its part to make me feel miserable as well, when an impressive spring shower turned into a persistent cold drizzle. I was in a cozy little coffee house on Clement and I would have preferred loitering there for a couple of hours listening to the piped in classical music, sipping a cappuccino, uncrossing the puzzle in the morning fishwrap and checking out some lovely chicks who appeared to be both idle and unattached. Instead, I ordered a black coffee to go and was back to sloshing down the wet but still crowded sidewalk. I stopped in a hardware store that had no particular rhyme or reason to the storage and display of its assorted wares: coffee machines were next to drill bits and electrical extension cords were piled on top of packages of noodles.

Among the confusing, jumbled and mismatched items were a couple of cheap, fold-up umbrellas. I was finally able to find one that didn't look like it belonged in a tropical drink, paid for it and headed back out into the wet.

I didn't have any better luck in the two other coffee shops I had poked my head into. I was beginning to feel like I'd be better off at home nursing a six pack and crashing early but I hoofed it over to Geary, squeezed into a crowded 38 bus and headed west, away from the siren call of cheap booze and a warm bed. I got off around 39th Avenue and stopped into a place that was on the list, a Russian bakery called the Tiny Deli. The name didn't lie; there were two tables and six chairs crammed into a space that could reasonably accommodate two stools and a phone booth. Strange smells seemed to emanate from the walls, all at once greasy, fatty, sweet, savory and something I couldn't place. Maybe candied skunk deep-fried in 30 weight? The menu was written in both Cyrillic and something resembling English, and one of the specials was called Chocolate Salami, so there you go. The matron had a surly attitude and a five o'clock shadow and no amount of sweet-talking broke through her stern façade. I tried to show her the picture but she wasn't interested and repeatedly asked what I would like to eat. I think that's what she was saying because her accent was as thick and gooey as a hunk of marbled rye dunked in borscht.

In the end, I gave up and scanned the opposite side of the street. Call it a hunch because this wasn't on my list, but I jaywalked over to the south side of Geary and looked through the window of a small shop called Missy's Total Beauty Works. I was thinking that maybe Corky's ex would treat herself to a piroshki and a perm as part of a feel good routine. She would probably get the perm first and then stink up the little Russian deli with her chemically enhanced coiffure, but she could have just as easily loaded up on cake, cabbage and meat and then gone on

to stink up the beauty shop as well.

I was playing around with this in my works when a gorgeous young Asian chick looked at me through the other side of the glass. She looked to be in her early to mid-twenties, had high cheekbones, a small, upturned nose and lovely dark eyes. The sign on the door said they were closed. From the other side of the glass door, I tried to explain what I was doing as best I could, but she didn't get it. As sharp and as attractive looking as she was, maybe she just didn't understand the lingo. We both tried a fair amount of pantomime but that wasn't getting us any further.

I tried the door and it was open so I made my way through it and a tinkle from a small bell announced my entrance. I asked her if there was someone else I could speak to. I repeated this with various hand gestures to make it clearer and she finally told me (in a more precise sign language) to stay put and walked into the back. I looked around and was a bit puzzled by the absence of hair dryers, mirrors and the usual things one would find in a salon. All there seemed to be was a desk, a few chairs and a magazine rack. It seemed more like a doctor's office waiting room, right down to the stack of old magazines and books on a small side table. The young woman was gone for a while so I cooled my heels and leafed through the pile.

There were a couple of ancient *Life* magazines, a few recent copies of *Time* and a well-worn paperback copy of *From Stardust and Back: The Beginning and End of Our Interplanetary Journey* written by a Dr. Pace. The cover looked like a cross between a sci-fi novel and a civics textbook. It featured a flying saucer parked in front of the Capitol and couple of skinny aliens shaking hands with some smiling fat cats in suits, while in the background a group of children dressed in green robes beamed in joyful awe. The back cover had a blurb from a professed alien

expert named Enos Schreiber and a picture of a wide-eyed Dr. Pace, looking like a college professor who wore peanut butter on his long, gray hair and moonlighted as a mass murderer.

I thumbed through it a bit and as near as I could make out, Dr. P's thesis was that the earth was populated by advanced humanoids from somewhere in a distant galaxy. They had been keeping watch over our development and now that we had advanced to such a degree (TV's and atomic power), they were ready to welcome us into the neighborhood. Maybe so, I thought, but if I were an alien, the radioactivity in the atmosphere and reruns of *I Love Lucy* continually beamed into space would make me want to skip Earth altogether, if not plant it firmly in the crosshairs of my planet destroying death ray. I started a chapter on the importance of establishing interstellar consulates, when the young chick walked back in with an older copy of herself, though this woman's ponytail seemed to have gathered up some of her face with the hair, the effect being a weird kind of facelift where everything seemed stretched.

"Where's the dog?" the older one asked in a heavy accent before muttering something to herself in her native tongue. Mandarin was my guess based on a wasted semester down in Monterey at the Defense Language Institute, on the Navy's dime, I hasten to add.

"What?" I looked around and it started to make sense. It was a dog-grooming salon. "Oh, sorry, it, I mean, she's at home." So now, I was a dog owner.

"We're closed."

"Yeah, I saw the sign, but--"

"What do you want?" she demanded. She was showing a fair amount of distrust and the young woman was shyly staying behind her.

"Well, I want a couple of things. I might want to get, uh, Trixie a shampoo." Well, now that my fake dog had a name, I needed a breed. "She's a short-haired terrier mix. Doesn't really

need a haircut but I think she's due for getting her nails clipped. You can do that, right?" I tried to look as happy and as non-threatening as possible, just another dog loving customer.

"We don't have an opening until next week," she said, which seemed funny considering the lack of customers, both human and canine, but then again they were closed.

"That's cool," I drawled. "Do you have a card?"

She reached over to the counter and then handed me her card with one hand while the other supported her wrist. Very formal, and I felt like I should bow or something, but I just took the card, glanced at it and stashed it in my pocket.

"Thanks. I'll give you a call." I started to turn around and then tapped my skull, like I just remembered something. "Oh, yeah, maybe you can help me. I'm trying to find somebody, sort of a friend of a friend. Could you take a look at this?" I slowly took the photo out of my breast pocket. "Her name is Molly and she's been missing for a while. My friend has been looking all over for her. Have you seen her?" I tried on my sincere smile again.

The older woman squinted at the pic and turned back to me, giving me the small photo back. Her attitude had changed from distrust to something bordering on extreme distaste, and her facial muscles were locked into a deep scowl. "We haven't seen her," she snorted.

"All right, I dig," I said, but of course I didn't. I took out my wallet and fished out the most respectable looking card I had. It simply had my name and number on it. "But if you come across her, could you give me a call? I'd really appreciate it."

"Sure, I'll call you," she replied. Her gruff tone implied that by the time I heard back from her, aliens would be establishing a consulate in Washington, D.C.

"What about your friend?" I asked, nodding my head to the younger girl.

“Wenling won’t call you. She can’t talk. You leave us alone now, okay?” There was more than a little bit of a bite in her bark so I did the better part of valor thing, smiled at the fine chick who couldn’t talk and gave her boss a two fingered salute. I said I’d call her about the appointment for Trixie. I headed back outside accompanied by a tinkle from the small bell, which gave my exit a bit of comic punctuation and I resisted an urge to do a little Clem Kadiddlehopper hop.

Once outside, I had to open my umbrella again and fight it a little as the wind had picked up and it was trying to turn the thing inside out. I started to walk away and turned back, looking up toward a window in the flat above the shop. I think I saw a small dog being scooped off the back of a couch by somebody. But because of the curtains and my line of sight, I couldn’t be sure if it was the dog from Corky’s picture or not. It looked like it could have been, but then again I might just have been trying to convince myself that it was. If the weather would have been better I might have considered a stakeout, but because of the cold and the rain, I headed down the block to the next bus stop, wondering if I could just tell Corky that Molly was likely here and wash my hands of the whole damn thing.

When I arrived at the stop, I got a bit distracted. Half a block down from me was a three-storey building that had been painted a shade of green that was almost fluorescent. The ground floor storefront had its windows blacked out, but there was a large display of a white and red yin-yang symbol with what looked like a flying saucer crashing through the middle. Above the symbol were two large letters, IF, and below were the words Interplanetary Family following the curve of the symbol. “WELCOME VISITORS” was stenciled on the door and below that was a smaller handwritten sign that said “NO SOLICITORS.” I shook my head. I mean like make up your mind, dig? Of course, this was the same outfit that the book in the dog salon talked about

and I was pretty sure that every small business within several square blocks had similar books and pamphlets, all left behind by the fervent followers of Dr. Pace.

There was a woman standing in front of the door without an umbrella or overcoat and she was getting drenched. She looked pretty good from where I stood, other than being completely soaked and maybe a bit deranged. I toyed with the idea of talking to her to pass the time before the next 38 arrived. There wasn't any bus on the horizon, so I did my usual bus conjuring trick of a firing up a cancer stick. It was never known to fail and sure enough, as soon as I had finished my complex little dance of holding the umbrella handle under one arm, taking out my pack of Camels and my Zippo with my free hand, shaking out a lone cigarette, firing it up with the lighter and putting everything back where it belonged, a 38X appeared from below the hill, a couple of stops away. I looked up at the Muni signpost and verified that this was an express stop. I was about to flick the almost new butt into the gutter when I was distracted by a pounding sound.

The wet chick was taking out her frustration on the front door of the green building, but they weren't welcoming this visitor. Maybe she was a solicitor? It was one of those situations where I had stared a little too long and then I was stuck. She saw me and called out something that I couldn't quite understand. If I was smart, I would have ignored her and got on the bus, but it was taking its own sweet time. I felt obliged to join her and see what all the fuss was about. I hoofed it over to her and offered a shared umbrella.

"Hi," I said offering my spare paw. "Name's Wendell, Wendell Pike. And you are?"

She looked at me with eyes that didn't seem to match; I mean one was blue and the other a dark green. There was a touch of crazy in them as well. Her hair was cut fairly short, almost a page cut but it was hard to tell because the rain had matted it against her head. Her clothes were

soaked as well, a clinging tan blouse that the rain had made almost transparent and a soaked tight pair of jeans with a pretty severe flair. She was wearing boots with platform heels that made our heights almost equal. Her eyes locked with mine and she tried on something resembling a smile. It was labored and insincere. I smiled back. Like, two can play this game.

“Deanna Foxberg. Tell me mister--”

“Wendell. Wendell Pike.”

“Mister Pike. Can you spare a smoke?”

“Sure. Do you mind?” I asked, motioning toward the umbrella. She got the hint and grabbed it with a thin, manicured hand. I noticed her nails were all painted a shade somewhere south of magenta and her right pinky featured an extra long claw. The diamond on her ring finger would probably go a long way toward paying off the National Debt. Crazy, rich and married. Great. I had hit the trifecta. Meanwhile, I heard the sound of the bus lumbering past, not even slowing down, and kicking up a ton of water with a loud splash. I wondered how long it would be before the next one showed up. I handed her a Camel and gave her my butt to spark it. She handed mine back and took a large hit.

“You got a beef with them?” I asked pointing toward the storefront.

“I’ve been trying to talk to them for a couple of days. At first they were polite, but now they won’t even open the door.” She looked like she wanted to say something else but she left it at that.

“This is the crowd that’s into aliens and the like, right?” It was just something to say.

“Aliens don’t exist.” She was firm in her response and I didn't have anything to add but I had to wait for the next bus, so I continued yapping.

“Sure, probably not. So are you selling something? The sign says no solicitors.”

“That’s absurd. What would I be selling?” she indignantly asked.

“Search me.” I looked down the block, vainly scanning for a 38.

After a beat, she added, “It’s complicated.”

“I’ll bet.” The rain continued to fall and the wind had picked up again. “Care to talk about it?”

She thought for a while and let out a large puff of smoke before flicking the weed onto the sidewalk where it died with an audible hiss. “Not right now. I need them to open up. I know someone is in there. I saw their bus leave a bit ago but somebody must have stayed behind.”

Another 38 appeared on the horizon. I figured I wasn’t getting anywhere with this chick so I found one of my business cards that was patterned after a Monopoly Chance card. It featured a large question mark on one side and my contact information on the other. I handed it to her and told her that if she wanted to talk, she could call that number or swing by for a chat. I told her she could keep the umbrella but she didn’t even say thanks. I hailed the bus, tossed my butt and waived goodbye to the crazy, wet chick who was now back to pounding on the door.

Carvin Montrose Esq. was a lawyer I knew. He was probably in his late forties though he would only admit to being “just” over thirty. Vain as a peacock, that man was. He had his suits custom made to conceal his rather generous avoirdupois. The jackets were cut very long and were often triple vented. His ties often reached his crotch and I would guess that his shirts featured a size nineteen neck. Carvin was balding and he owned a large collection of rugs, all of them blonde and moderately long, flowing down his neck and mixing with his own curly, died locks. The airs he put on were as fake as the jewelry he wore: thick chains and bogus Rolexes.

He told stories of growing up poor in the mean streets of Baltimore but that was likely more malarkey. The man liked to talk and he had found the perfect profession that allowed him the opportunity to bill by the word. To hear him rap about himself, often in the third person, you would get the impression that he was a combination of Clarence Darrow and Atticus Finch, fighting the good fight for the underprivileged and underserved, but that was all a bunch of nonsense as well. In truth, he was pretty low-rent, not really an ambulance chaser, but maybe one rung above that. He primarily did a lot of divorce work and usually resorted to means that weren't quite above board if not downright illegal. Of course, the good counselor needed somebody to actually get his hands dirty and for these tasks, I was lucky enough to be awarded a prime spot on his Rolodex. I turned down his jobs more often than I accepted them, but there were times like this one when I didn't have any choice. But that didn't mean I liked it.

Montrose was representing some old rich broad. Her hubby had made a killing in real estate and retired early. Even though he was listed on the corporate mastheads of a couple of companies, the husband rarely poked his head into any boardrooms. He seemed content to wile

away most of his time at the Pacific-Union Club drinking lunch or playing golf in the Presidio. Not surprisingly, somewhere along the line the marriage had gone kaput. It was mundane and predictable; they both had put on a few pounds as people do when they age, and the couple's familiarity and lack of imagination bred boredom, if not contempt. When ardor waned, hubby went looking for greener—which is to say younger—pastures. The wife suspected, as wives often do, and hired Carvin at his not inconsiderable hourly wage.

“You understand the discretion required for this engagement?” he asked. This was a couple of weeks earlier. We were having a couple of pops at Vesuvio, another local bar. It felt dark and anonymous sitting in an upstairs corner table. Montrose had an office, but meetings with what he called subcontractors were usually held in any number of bars and restaurants on an *ad hoc* basis. He didn't want someone like me to be seen hanging around his office. I suppose it was a combination of paranoia and not wanting to let his high-priced marks see how the sausage was being made.

“Yeah, I got it.” I took a sip of Anchor and wrote down a couple of more things in my notebook.

“A great deal of money is at stake.”

“Money is always at stake.” I sparked a Camel and offered him one, which he refused. I knew he would. He liked to smoke some weird brand of imported cigarettes and he once told me how he hated picking tobacco out of his teeth. “Speaking of which,” I continued as nonchalant as possible, “that would be six for the job.”

“That's a bit on the high side,” he frowned.

“Can't be helped. This is on top of expenses. I need a decent camera and Tack has to get a gizmo together. We also need transportation.” I gave a halfhearted swat at a pesky fly that had latched onto my pint.

“Five plus expenses,” he countered, bringing his stubby index finger down on the table for emphasis.

“Five fifty. Jeez, do you do this with you clients as well?”

He pursed his lips in what passed for a smile. “Most of my clients aren't in a position to bargain.”

“Remind me to never need your services.”

“That's simple. Remain single.” His laugh was oddly high-pitched. I would almost call it girlish but that would be an insult to girls everywhere. Still smiling, he reached into a well-beaten leather pouch at his side and removed a hefty envelope.

“You'll find half of it in there. The rest will be remitted when the task is completed,” he smirked. “As usual.”

I took a moment to scan the inside of the envelope. Two seventy-five. I should have held out for more. “Okay, let me run through this with you one more time.” I pocketed the loot, finished my beer and tried to get the attention of the waitress but she was either on break or downstairs.

Once I had agreed to the job, I had to spend a couple of days on a straight tail job. It wasn't difficult as the portly, bald and bespectacled man (I'll call him Mr. X) was a model of consistency; every Tuesday and Thursday around noon, he would leave his Forest View home and head out in his duffer drag, ready to hit the links. But instead, he'd drive across town, park

near the Palace of Fine Arts and meet up with his young paramour in the dark bar of a nearby steak restaurant. She would have a glass of chardonnay and he would down a couple of Manhattans and then it would be off to her apartment in the Marina. Despite my reputation, I do have a bit of couth, so I'll let you insert your own birdie and hole in one jokes here.

The lithesome blonde with the feathered haircut didn't seem to have to work. The easy guess was that X was paying the bills. This was a bit of a problem, because we needed to get inside her pad. I moved the tail from the cheating hubby and spent two weeks following the blonde. Luckily, she was about as predictable as the old man. She liked to sleep late, often ate lunch at the same small cafe and got her hair and nails done at a salon on Lombard.

Occasionally, she would go shopping with a couple of friends. On this day, she had met up with two chicks I recognized from a previous spree. I got back into the cab I had hired for the day and tailed her to the City of Paris department store in Union Square. I got out, found an unoccupied phone booth and dialed the office, letting Tack know that it was time to get on with his part of the gig. All of her previous trips of this sort lasted at least a couple of hours, so there was no real rush. I had already bribed the landlord so Tack would have a key.

Tack had built a listening bug out of spare parts from Zack Electronics on Market. The mic was silver dollar sized and was connected to a small battery-operated circuit board. The whole thing was contained in an old transistor radio case and could easily fit behind a bed stand, where it could pick up and transmit murmured sweet nothings to a receiver up to a block away. After planting the device, Tack would open the curtains a bit and then hightail it out of there.

The dirty work didn't end there. For gigs like this, I was able to rent a decent Canon F1 with an FD300 f/2.8 lens from a buddy named Cy who did freelance for both the morning and

evening dreadfuls. Usually, I had to throw in an extra photo of the couple engaged in the act as a sort of *bakshish*. Like I said, dirty work.

But for some reason, the shopping spree ended almost as soon as it started. The mid-afternoon sky was a deep blue and a stiff onshore breeze was making the tourists shiver in their shorts and thin tee shirts. I was chewing on a tasteless hot dog purchased from a cart and was caught off guard when the trio exited the store. They flagged down a Yellow and headed down Post Street. I went back to the phone booth to try the office again, but a humorless hipster was reciting poetry to the party on the other end and judging by the thick sheaf of handwritten papers he carried, it was going to be a long call. I tossed the rest of the dog onto the sidewalk where it was attacked by a flock of pigeons. Some older woman in a smart suit looked at me with disdain and said something like, “It only encourages them, you know,” and huffed off. I forgot about the phone call, as Tack was likely already on his way to her apartment. I figured that the best bet would be to try to head off the trio and somehow warn him.

I got back into the cab and gave the hack the address in the Marina. The cab driver responded with an accented “*Da*, sure thing,” as he deftly pulled an illegal turn and we headed west on Geary.

“You’re not going to follow them?” I asked.

“Nah, they’re tearing up Stockton. New sewer lines or something. They’ve got a good five minute head start, but it will be quicker taking Franklin,” he responded, deftly cruising through a very stale yellow.

Gill Nyet was my cab driver. He came over to this country to take part in the Olympics. He was an alternate on the Soviet shooting team and wound up defecting. According to how he told it, a woman was involved, a low level American operative. What started out as a fling for

him and a case for her lasted a surprisingly long time, long enough to for him to get married, become a citizen and then get divorced. The American experience in a nutshell, I suppose. Gill was smarter than he looked, which I realize is a backhanded compliment but there's no other way to say it. Some of it might have been his partial understanding of the lingo and some of it was the way he failed to close his mouth for hours on end. I had been using him for tail jobs and as a bit of additional muscle for a couple of years. Plus, he could still shoot a pistol with deadly accuracy, as opposed to my meager to nonexistent gunnery skills. He always seemed to wear the same threadbare, ill-fitting sweater. I think it used to be yellow. His hair was greasy and usually unkempt, unless he was going out on dates—which is what he called it when he visited hookers—in which case it was parted on the side and plastered down with some additional oil. Gill had told me his real name at one point, but it was something multisyllabic and ended in *vich*. Too hard to remember and besides, in our circle, the nicknames stuck better.

Gill made excellent time, running those yellows, while fumbling with the radio and keeping up a stream of mostly one-way conversation.

“I was watching TV the other night,” he started, “and they were talking about this guy who used to play water *polio*. He was really good at it too. But once he took a deep dive in the ocean and came up too fast, so he got the bends, like his blood ran out of gas. It got bad enough that he had to go to the hospital where they put him into a *hyperbolic* chamber.”

“Don't worry,” I absently responded. “It's worse than it sounds.”

“Maybe,” he continued, now driving with his knees while trying to open his thermos. He leaned back to look at me. “I had to spend some time in the hospital once, not back home but here in this country. I hated it. They were playing Christmas songs by Perry *Coma* and it wasn't

even Thanksgiving. Ugh. Where was I?" Gill asked this before taking a healthy slug of whatever foul smelling liquid was in his thermos. It wasn't coffee.

"Gill?"

"What?"

"Watch where you're going!"

We had almost sideswiped a double-parked beer truck and still the yellow lights beckoned.

"It's okay. I know what I'm doing. I do this for a living. Do I tell you how to detect things?"

"Yeah, you do, and pretty often too, Gill!" I replied in a panicked yell.

"I saw him," he responded, completely nonplussed. "Stupid jaywalkers." Even though the nearly clipped pedestrian was a distant memory, Gill leaned out his window and looked back at the guy. "Hey idiot!" he yelled. "Yeah, you! Watch where you're going!" He was paying more attention to where he had been than where we were headed.

Thankfully, we caught a red light at Van Ness. I relaxed and fumbled for a cigarette. "Gill," I asked casually, "how many accidents do you get into?"

"A day or a year? I kid. I've only had two since I moved to this country. Not my fault either. Once when a corn truck hit me."

"A what?" I shook my head and looked at my watch. I had to admit that we were making pretty good time. "Never mind. Just get us there in one piece, okay?"

"I tell you," he harrumphed, "that's my job."

The traffic on Franklin was light and Gill settled into a rhythm, easily synching with the flow of the lights. We took a chance and parked in a spot that was really too small and we were

blocking one of the driveways. But since we were going to remain in the hack, that didn't seem to be a problem, or at least it was one that we could deal with when the time came. It was tricky because we needed to be close enough for radio reception from Tack's bug and I preferred taking shots from the car if possible. I looked around for Tack and didn't see him anywhere.

"What do you think?" asked Gill.

"Search me. Maybe he got in and out?" There was a small briefcase next to me on the backseat. I swung it around, opened it and looked at the guts of the homemade receiver.

"You know how to work that thing?" From his expression, I don't think Gill trusted me with the gadget.

"Sure," I said, "We went through this last night." Which was technically true, but if I'm being completely honest, my mind might have drifted a little during the evening's training session. The on-off switch was easy because it was even labeled. There were two pots without knobs and one of them controlled the volume and one the frequency, but I wasn't supposed to move the frequency pot. During the training, Tack had called it finicky and said he had put in the wrong value resistors, while I nodded dumbly in response, as the Afghan Blonde we had smoked had already fried my resistors. I found the small patch cord and connected a portable cassette recorder to a plug on the circuit board and pressed record and pause. There was a bit of feedback and I turned the volume down a bit on the tape machine.

"There they are," said the hack, pointing at the arriving Yellow. I looked up and squinted a little as the sun was right in my eyes. The chick got out of the cab, made some noises to her friends and the driver and then headed into her apartment.

Gill turned around in his seat to face me. "What do you suppose the problem was?"

“Search me,” I answered. “I don’t like it though. It’s unscheduled and spontaneous and that’s not the way she usually works.”

“Where’s Ramon?”

“Don’t know that either.” I turned my head around and tried to see if he was anywhere around. That’s when I heard a sound out of the cassette deck. It was very faint, but unmistakable.

The whispered voice said: “Fish.” It was Tack calling out my nickname.

“Oh, man,” I groaned. “This sucks.”

“What does?” asked the hack.

“I think we’ve got another problem.”

“Ramon?”

“Yeah.” Going off script like this was starting to worry me.

Tack’s voice continued in a terse whisper. “Fish, I’m stuck in here. Don’t know if you can hear me.”

“Gill, can you honk the horn?” I asked.

The cabbie complied with three short blasts and we waited.

“You’re here. Cool,” came the disembodied voice through the speaker. “Got to keep this short. She’s in the next room, screaming at somebody on the phone. I’m stuck here. Going to have to wait until there’s a good time to split. Crap, here she comes. Over.”

Gill responded by turning around in his seat and we both focused on Tack’s receiver. We could hear footsteps on a wooden floor and some mumbling punctuated by some high-pitched expletives. Then, we waited. It seemed like ages but it was less than an hour before Mr. X appeared, walking quickly and occasionally peering over his shoulder, a bottle of champagne in

one hand and a sprig of roses in the other. He must have parked in his usual spot, so even on an off day he was holding to his routine. I turned my attention from the gizmos to the camera, and the big lens gave me some great shots of the man and his gifts. He tried to let himself in with a key, but the chain on the front door was engaged. His sweet calls to his paramour were met with a loud string of more expletives. Mister X looked around, obviously embarrassed, and tried to offer a modulated apology of sorts while thrusting the flowers into the partially open door. There was silence for a bit and then a twisted and crumpled heap that used to be a dozen roses went flying out the door.

X persisted, not really getting what had happened. The chick continued yelling and this time we could make out the words “Master Charge” and “declined” and “humiliated.” The old man got close to the door and tried to coo some more conciliatory noises her way but she wasn't having any of it. Finally, he said something that clicked with her, and the door was closed long enough for the chain to be removed and then opened. I got off another shot of X's back and the blonde framed by the doorway, before he slinked in and the door slammed shut. We didn't really need the listening bug because the loud argument could be heard throughout the neighborhood. A few times there were silences and two of these breaks were punctuated with the unmistakable sound of broken dishes.

Eventually, the pauses got longer and objects and insults were no longer being hurled. We heard footsteps and maybe the pop of a champagne cork. There was soft pleading from Mr. X, glasses being clinked and the conversation level turned soft and intimate. I turned up the tape player only to hear a loud, booming noise. I had to turn down the cassette, as the needle had pegged. The next sounds were the ones we had been waiting for. I didn't have a shot from the

car, so I stopped the cassette, put in a fresh one, hit record and then headed out of the cab with the Canon.

I tried to look as inconspicuous as possible, but I could feel eyes from half of the neighborhood pointed at my back. Even in the shadows, I still had some pretty good light, but I had changed to a 50mm lens as a precaution, plus I was going to move in on the targets. I was able to get through an unlocked wooden gate to the back of the house and found something to stand on, a wobbly old metal garbage can. It was a bit difficult to get up on it and then to stay on it as the bottom wasn't plumb and it rocked back and forth.

Tack had done a great job on the set up as the curtains had been parted. The now mostly nude couple was writhing around on the bed doing what adults and adulterers have done since the beginning of time. The sound of the shutter sounded like a thunderclap to me and I winced after each shot. I thought that the first few pics might be a bit obscured but the next couple of them were perfect. I had what I needed but got greedy and leaned in for one more shot when my precarious perch started to give way. I rocked back and forth, flailing my arms in a desperate attempt to regain equilibrium, before I went flying backwards and crash-landed with a loud bang accompanied by the screech of a cat. I managed to protect the camera, but I felt like I did something to my tailbone. A nude Mr. X ran to the window and started cursing. There was further ado as the chick joined him and then let out a high-pitched scream. I got a couple of good shots while lying on my back and then hopped up as best I could, giving them a small wave while snapping one last shot.

I limped back to the cab with as much speed as I could muster. I let myself in, telling Gill to get ready to split. The front door opened and Tack ran down the steps, clutching the listening device in his hand. The door stayed open and first Mr. X, wearing a women's robe, and

then the blonde, draped in a towel, ran out, stopping at the stoop, both of them screaming bloody murder. I moved the electronic stuff to the floor and opened the door as Gill floored it. Tack leaped into the moving hack and slammed the door shut as a wine glass shattered on the rear bumper. I managed to get another shot, but this is where I could have used the longer lens. Tack and I looked at each and laughed nervously.

“You were in there the whole time?” I asked.

“Yeah, I was trying to place the mic under the bed and when I heard her come in, I stayed there, figured it was as good a hiding place as any. When they heard you crash land, they both ran to the window and I took that moment to split. Unfortunately, they heard me and that’s when they really started screaming and throwing things. I almost got taken out by a champagne bottle. Hey, don’t laugh. Those things are heavy.”

“Wow. Well, not the cleanest operation ever. I don’t know how that impacts things with Montrose, but I think I got a couple of good shots and we’ve got some good audio as well. Gill?”

“Yeah, Wendell. What now?” he asked, slowing down to the speed limit.

“Find a liquor store. I’m in the mood for some Johnny.” I fired up a Camel and noticed that I had a bruise and a cut on my hand. The adrenaline was masking things, but I was going to be a little sore in a few hours. I looked at my watch and saw that it was still early. “No, scratch that. Let’s take Divis over to Pine.” I looked over to Tack. “Can you wait a bit before heading back?”

“I’m cool with that.”

“Gill?” I asked.

“No problem. You paid for my whole shift. There’s still a couple of hours left.”

“All right then, head out to the Richmond, around 40th and Geary. I need to pay off a debt.”

We drove out to towards Lands End, stopping once to fill up on chips, beer and a pint. After I had paid for the provisions, I dropped a dime into a phone mounted on the outside of the small store and called the lawyer's number. His secretary was expecting my call and put me right through. Carvin didn't have time to talk, so I gave him the *Reader's Digest* version. I could almost see him wince through the phone line but I couldn't do anything about it. I told him I would develop the pics in a day or so and if he could swing on by the office later in the week, we could take care of things. He said he didn't have his schedule handy and would call me tomorrow and I said that was fine.

Parking was easier out in the hinterlands and I put the big lens back on the camera while Gill downed Fritos and Tack cracked open a Coors tall. Then, we waited.

"What's that?" asked Gill pointing toward the big green building.

"What? That? That is the home to the Interplanetary Family." The building looked almost black in the late afternoon light. I checked my aperture settings and hoped I could hold the camera still enough.

"The green people? Man, they're everywhere," said Tack.

"Yeah," Gill added, "I see them downtown, panhandling mainly. What's their trip?"

"Something to do with aliens," I answered. "I read a little bit about them. They think creatures from another planet are coming to visit us. They call that building their consulate." I focused the camera on the building. I couldn't really waste film but I had a four shots left so I took an arty pic of the building and the big bus that was parked to the side. The bus had been painted a bright green and featured yellow lightning bolts and small silver saucers crudely

scrawled on the side. I cracked open the pint and offered it around but didn't get any takers. I took a hit, put the cap back on and stowed it in my coat pocket. I got out of the cab and took a few tentative steps and the soreness in my coccyx was already present. I walked down to the end of the block and found myself opposite Missy's Total Beauty Works. I waited for the traffic to subside and then walked across the street. I made it to the median strip and paused for a bit. That's when I smiled and put the camera up to my eye, focused and snapped two more shots. A full-figured redhead saw me taking her picture and flipped me off, then decided to do something about it.

"What are you taking pictures of?" she demanded in a loud brogue so thick as to be barely intelligible.

Busted, I smiled and waved, figuring I might be able to lie my way out of it. But the air went out of that balloon pretty quickly.

"I heard about you. Yan said you were looking for me. Said that bastard sent you!"

I hadn't moved and she headed toward me, crossing her side of the street and making obscene gestures to any cars that dared to not slow down. Finally she was standing directly in front of me on the slim median. She thrust one of her ringed fingers at me. "That bastard put you up to it?"

"Which bastard would that be?" I asked all innocent-like.

"Corky, that lying drunk-ass bastard."

"Look, I was taking pics of that building," which was only partially true and she knew it.

"You were bothering Yan a while back. She told me somebody like you was looking for me. I figure it had to be that Corky Glynn."

Bothering seemed a pretty strong way of putting it, but I let it slide. “Oh, Corky,” I said, like I just remembered. “Sure, I know Corky. He told me his sad story. Said he was looking for you. Said he couldn’t live without you. Bought me a couple of beers and I said I would see what I could do.”

“Corky said that? What a bunch of bullshit.” She got right in my map. “That bastard is full of it. Can’t live without me, sure. I was nothing to him, just another piece of tail. The only thing he cared about was that goddamn dog.”

“Look, miss,” I started. “Corky was pretty disconsolate and said all kinds of stuff. He misses you.”

“As what?” she demanded. “A punching bag? Sure, that bastard was a bit of fun as long as he was relatively sober. But get a few drinks into him and he turns mean as the devil.” She pulled her collar down revealing a couple of dark scars on her neck. “These are the ones I can show you. There are others,” she confided, as her green eyes seemed to turn into a dark shade of gray.

“Molly, Corky just wants--”

“What?” She was incredulous. “What’s that you just called me?” she demanded.

“Molly?” was my weak response.

“Ha!” She thought that was funny and started laughing. It was pretty weird, both of us on this little planted strip, me still on my guard and her laughing hysterically. It slowly dawned on me and I asked the right question for once.

“Molly’s the dog, right?”

“She sure as hell was,” she answered, still chuckling. “I’m Nora.”

“Hi, Nora. My name’s Wendell. The goddamned dog. I should have known.” I sat down on the strip and got the bottle out and took a small sip. I looked up to her and reached my hand up. She grabbed the bottle and took an even larger hit, looked at me like she was trying to figure out if I was all right and finally took a chance, sitting down on the strip next to me. She took another sip and suddenly there wasn’t much left of the pint. She offered it to me and I waved it off.

“Look, I’m not going to say a word about you. I believe what you said; I’ve seen him get upset so I’m not surprised. But can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, you can ask. I don’t have to answer, right?”

What was left of the setting sun was shining right in my eyes, so I had to squint while looking at her. I started a small chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“I’m still thinking about the dog. Of course it was the dog.” I shook my head and then asked her what I needed to know. “You said Molly was the dog. Was. Did something happen to her. Do you still have her?”

“Molly? No. I kept her for a while. Long story short? When Corky and I broke up, well, when I ran away from him, I needed a place to stay. I knew Yan from church, Saint Thomas over on Balboa. She runs that dog salon with her niece. Yan knew I needed help, so she let me stay there. I help out where I can. I was going to give her the dog but I figured it was only a matter of time before Corky found out where she was, and I didn’t want any trouble. So in the end, I gave her to them.” She pointed toward the I.F. building and finished the pint.

“Molly is with those Greenies?”

“Greenies? That’s what you call them?”

“The Interplanetary Family?”

“Huh, that sounds even worse. Yeah, I heard that they have a farm or a ranch or something up in Marin. They invited me to stay up there, but there’s something odd about them. I mean, aside from believing in alien beings from outer space. They’re all blissed out. Happiness like that isn’t normal. It gives me the creeps.” She shuddered as a bit of punctuation. “But as for Molly, I figured she would like it there. She could run around a little, chase things, you know, behave like a dog. Not like around here. I always had to keep her on a leash.”

I nodded my head and shook out a cig, offering the pack to her but she declined. I sparked it and took a long drag.

“So, that’s that,” I said, more to myself than her.

“Are you satisfied now? Is there anything else you need?”

“No, I’m good.”

“What about the pictures you took?”

“I doubt if they came out very well, but I promise I’ll never show them to Corky. I’ll tell him you split town. I’ll tell him the Greenies have got Molly and he can do whatever he wants after that. I may punch him in the mouth again as well. It sounds like I owe him that much.” I got up and gave her a hand. “Thanks, Nora. Sorry to have bugged you.”

“That’s okay,” she said, and then added a little sheepishly, “thanks for the drink as well.” She turned to leave and then stopped and a small grin played on her face. “There’s a bar on 42nd called O’Rourke’s.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She left everything else unsaid and strode across Geary, flipping off vehicles in her wake. I gingerly got up, noticed I had one more shot in the Canon and looked at the building

and the bus. The hood of the bus was open and some beefy cat with a wrench in his hand appeared to be talking to a small group of kids who were unloading things. In this light and with this lens, I knew the shot would be awful, but I took it anyway before jaywalking across Geary.

The cab smelled of weed, so I needed to catch up. After a couple of hits, I snuffed the joint out on the outside of the cab.

“Are we done now?” Gill asked.

“Yup, let’s head back to the office.” I got my wallet out and gave Comrade Nyet two not-so-crisp twenties. “Tack, I’ll get you the rest when Carvin remits, okay?”

“Sure, no problem, man. You hungry?”

“I could eat. Maybe hit up Sam Wo?”

“I’m in. Gill?” asked Tack.

“I’m okay,” replied the hack in a lazy singsong. He was obviously pretty stoned. “I’m fine, I’m fine. I’m like the cat in the canary mine, *da*?”

“What a trip,” I said to no one in particular.

“What?” asked Tack.

“A couple of weeks ago I had never heard of these Greenies. Now, everybody wants to talk about them.”

“It’s just a coincidence,” said Tack.

“Yeah, well, I don’t like coincidences,” I countered. “They make me nervous.”

Originally, the office space was the reception area for a dentist. There were two other rooms that he used for the tooth carpentry and now we used one of them as a storage space. The other one I used as a place to store overflow when there were multiple clients at the same time. Rarely happened, but it had come in handy. Because it had a sink and only a couple of small windows, I used it as a darkroom as well. I had developed the two rolls I had shot on Monday and, as I feared, the pics I took in the avenues were rubbish, but I did wind up with some decent photos of the philanderer and philanderee. I made multiple prints of one shot in particular, as it would help pay for the camera rental and give Mr. Montrose the ammo he needed. I had talked to the lawyer and he said he could come by in the early afternoon. Having nothing else on, I said that was fine. I cleaned up the space a little and opened all the windows to give it a good airing out as it reeked of Thai Stick and photographic chemicals: vinegar (from the stop bath) and sulfur (from the fixer). Tack was behind his desk, boning up on some computer language for a class he was thinking of taking. All in all, it looked like a peaceful morning. I sat at my desk looking at the box score from yesterday's 7-1 loss in Montreal and sipping my coffee when the doorbell rang. I looked at the wall clock (a Hamm's Beer clock that featured an apparatus that made a nature scene scroll from day to night) and it was only after ten, much too early for Carvin. I leaned out the window and caught a glimpse of the visitor and said swore under my breath.

"Who's that?" asked Tack.

"Crazy lady I told you about. The one in the rain?"

“Don’t remember, but then you do run into your share of crazy chicks. I think it’s your particular musk.”

“Yeah, must be,” I absently replied, opening the door and buzzing the woman in. She moved up the stairs very deliberately, one foot directly in front of the other with sort of an exaggerated shimmy. I planted her in one of the two green Naugahyde chairs on the other side of the desk and parked myself in my chair, which of course let out a sorrowful scream.

She didn’t react to the sound and just stared straight at me with those mismatched eyes of hers and then reached into her tiny, gold colored purse and carefully put my card on the desk before glancing over at Tack.

I swung my arm out to my left. “Ramon, meet Deanna Foxberg. Deanna, Ramon.” Tack looked up and gave a brief wave before diving back into the land of ones and zeros. I turned back to Deanna. “Don’t worry about Ramon. He’s okay.” She considered this for a few ticks and then leaned back in her chair. Unlike when I first met her, she looked perfectly sane, if a bit fidgety.

“You remembered my name?”

“It’s something I can do,” I modestly answered.

She considered this for a bit and then looked intently at me. “I think my husband has been kidnapped by those aliens,” she said.

She was dressed in a cream-colored skirt that showed a fair amount of leg and a matching jacket that looked like it was a size too small or maybe parts of her were a size or two too large. The white halter top that tied off around her neck displayed plenty of cleavage and it was clear that she eschewed a certain undergarment, which according to Madison Avenue would have made her liberated. Her legs weren’t crossed; they were bunched together and splayed out

to one side. It might have been demure but it didn't look very comfortable. The designer purse in her lap looked like it could hold a business card, a pack of cigarettes, and a lighter with maybe enough room left over for a stick of gum, though that would be pushing it. Her hair, cut boyishly, was a dark shade of brown with blonde highlights, an obvious dye job but it looked okay from where I sat. Oversized wire rim aviators with clear lenses were perched on her impossibly thin nose, a snout that had cost somebody (I guessed daddy or hubby) a fair amount to fix. And judging by the slightest hint of stray white powder nestled on her philtrum, it was still costing somebody a fair amount of bread. Aside from the hefty rock on her ring finger, she had a gold anklet and wore a loose chain around her neck with a gold *ankh* hanging off it, almost hidden in her cleavage. Her freshly manicured, thin fingers with modest-sized off pink nails (except for the extra long pinky nail) were playing with a pack of menthol 100's.

"You mean like abducted?" I asked. "I'm not saying that I do or don't believe in aliens, but I do think that this whole probing thing is a little overdone, and possibly an excuse for drunken, well, misadventures," I joked while firing up a Camel and making a show of inhaling deeply.

"Don't be absurd," she answered with a bit of haughty derision. "Of course aliens don't exist."

"Of course, we agreed on that last time," I responded. She sat there with her arms crossed, like that settled that, dig? I scratched my nose with my thumb and the smoke was drifting into my eyes. I winced a little and continued. "Well, now, you say that your husband was abducted--"

"Kidnapped," she interjected.

"Kidnapped, right."

She had finally stopped playing with the pack and had decided to spark one of her long, thin cigs with an elaborate jeweled device. After inhaling, she exhaled a puff of smoke out of the side of her mouth and took a look around the office. She was doing her best to avoid wrinkling her nose (if it was capable of wrinkling anymore). It was clear that she found the space more than a bit beneath her but she decided to ignore her surroundings and pressed on.

“You saw me in front of the Interplanetary Family’s building?”

“Sure, but they call it a consulate. It’s funny, because I never gave them a second thought, but since that day, I’ve seen them all over the place. Goddamn ubiquitous, if you’ll excuse my French.”

It was true, and it didn’t matter which neighborhood in town you were in, you couldn’t swing a dead cat without hitting a blissed out I.F. member asking for spare change. It was hard to miss them because they were usually dressed head to foot in lime green outfits and wore interesting headgear (silver crash helmets with wire antennae or tin foil pyramids) and lots of jewelry, the latter usually featuring a prismatic, rainbow motif. Still, I pretty much ignored them. This being The City, there was no shortage of folks with much weirder beliefs and costumes to match. People called them Greenies, but I had also heard them referred to as little green men, even though at least half were young women.

“I’m guessing you don’t have any concrete proof,” I said to her, “or the cops would have been all over it. What makes you think that the Interplanetary Family is responsible for your husband’s disappearance?”

“Frank has always been fascinated by anything to do with outer space. We even have a large telescope that takes up half of our back balcony. It did cause a bit of an issue with our

neighbors, as they weren't fully convinced that Frank's pursuits were more, well, heavenly than earthly."

That rang a distant bell somewhere in the dim recesses and I wanted to remember it so I grabbed my little black notebook and made a quick note in shorthand. The notebook had been sitting on top of the pile of prints, and there at the top of the pile was a picture of Mr. X and his pretty young thing in *flagrante delicto*. When I finished writing, I looked up to see that Deanna had picked up the photo and was studying it.

"Can I have that back?" I asked. "It's a private matter." I reached for the photo but she still held on to it.

"A photographer, hmm?" She made a show of staring at the photo from different angles before handing it back and then started to go through the pile. "Oh, these are very interesting. I didn't know you took these kinds of photos, but I suppose a private investigator must, sometimes." She tried on a half smile and leaned in, showing quite a lot of skin and continued in a soft voice. "I've been told I'm very photogenic," she said, raising one eyebrow before handing me the pic and slinking back into her chair. I grabbed all the photos, shuffled them and crammed them into the desk's middle drawer.

"Let's forget about these, huh? It's confidential."

"Doesn't speak much to your confidentiality, does it?" she asked.

"It's a two-way street, dig?" I took a deep breath and tried to focus. "Your husband, you mentioned that he's into all things celestial," I said, trying to get back on point.

She paused deliberately for a beat and the smile was gone. "Yes, Frank's been bitten by the astronomy bug. For a while, he was talking about building a full fledged observatory on our Marin property."

“How about you? Are you into astronomy?” I asked.

She considered this for a moment, wrinkling her brow a millimeter or so. “Not particularly. It’s boring, Mr. Pike. Boring and, I don’t know, fussy.”

“So his hobby was a bit of an annoyance?” I asked, not sure it had anything to do with anything, but I always liked to see if a couple were pulling in the same direction.

“Well, yes, but people with time on their hands can develop bad habits. Frank is an investment banker and only needs to go into the office a couple of days a week. I don’t think he even has to do that. He could probably do it all over the phone, but I think it helps to keep working, don’t you agree?”

“I don’t know about that,” I truthfully responded. “I’ve got to work, habits or not.” She didn’t even shrug, so I pressed on. “So what takes up your time?”

“My time?”

“Sure. You said Frank works a little and gazes up at the sky. What do you do, Deanna?”

The question surprised her, but she slowly answered. “A number of things I suppose. There are always things to do around the house, supervising the staff, planning parties and the like. A lot of my time is taken up with volunteer work.”

“That’s nice,” I said, somewhat surprised. “Where do you volunteer?”

“Primarily for a group called Leg Up. It’s a non-profit funded by individual and corporate donations. Its mission is to rehabilitate people who are down on their luck and aren’t looking for a handout but a helping hand. We’re facilitators. We help with the transition back to a normal, productive life.” It sounded like she was reading it off the back of a pamphlet.

“Is that like the Salvation Army?” I asked.

“I suppose,” she answered, though for a moment it seemed like she had no idea what the Salvation Army was and for which country they fought.

“Is your husband involved as well?” I asked while sparking up another cigarette with the fake gun.

“No,” she shook her head and waved her weed about for emphasis. “I mean, he sits on the board and joins me in the events we host, but that’s about it. No, as I said, his passion was staring for hours through an eyepiece. At least, it was until he started spending time with that doctor and his flock. They have a working ranch on a few acres. It’s almost directly across from our place, the Marin property I was talking about. Our little country home has been undergoing repairs and it’s taking a lot longer than we anticipated.”

“These things usually do,” I responded, trying to sound like I knew what I was talking about.

“Well, you need something like that for weekend getaways. It’s nice to get out of town, you know?”

“Sure, I dig,” I responded, though I personally hate to leave town. Bars play country music, liquor stores are too far apart, you have to drive everywhere, young, bored, racist crackers lurk around in their pickups looking for trouble and the sidewalks roll up way too early. I also prefer woman who have been citified. But that’s just me.

“Well, as I mentioned, that farm, compound, whatever, is so close that we’re practically neighbors. Though we’re far enough away so that we aren’t bothered by the noise.”

“Noise?” I asked, brushing an ash toward the tray and missing.

“Yes. They have all kinds of events. There can be one hundred of them up there at a time. You know, kids. For the displaced youth, it’s all about rock bands, dodgeball and

spaghetti feeds. These things didn't attract Frank much, but there were, I don't know, highbrow events, lectures on astrophysics and the like. I suppose they still hold these things. He told me about a couple of them, but it seemed like silly science fiction stuff: teleportation, time travel, other dimensions, that sort of thing."

I decided to poke at her a bit. "I don't know anything about those lectures, but I've heard rumors about orgies up on their ranch. You're saying that your husband wouldn't be tempted by willing young women?"

"Tempted?" She shrugged. "I suppose. He is a man, after all. But I think those stories are exaggerated. According to something Frank once told me, it's really quite orderly. It's a practice called serial monogamy: they pair up for a while and then change partners. It's all supposed to be very natural and part of our inbred, what do they call it? Map, yes. They say it's all part of the human race's reality map."

"So you think Frank was playing around?"

She looked me in the eyes with something resembling honesty, though with her I couldn't be sure. "Look, Mr. Pike. I'm not going to kid you. Our marriage isn't perfect. We've had our ups and downs and we've both strayed from time to time. But we always come back to each other and we always have the decency to let the other one know what's going on."

"Sort of like an open marriage?" I asked.

"No, that's not how I would describe it."

"Serial monogamy?" I couldn't resist, dig?

"Certainly not," she replied, genuinely miffed. "It's just that we're both adults. We're not about to try to live up to an impossible ideal. But we care about each other, we really do."

“Cool, I dig.” I didn’t really know what to say so I repeated it. “I dig.” I started to fumble with my pack of Camels. “Have you talked to them?”

“I’ve tried. It’s not just difficult. It’s damn near impossible. You saw me banging on their door, but they never answered. I’ve tried to get the police to check, but they say that there haven’t been any complaints against them and there’s nothing illegal about believing in aliens.”

“Maybe they’re paranoid about newcomers? Except for them,” I said, pointing to the heavens. She didn’t even crack a smile at my little joke and continued.

“I also went by their property in Inverness, but I only made it as far as the small shack out front. The two guards there were polite but firm and wouldn’t let me past the front gate. So in the end, I got nowhere.” She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. It seemed calculated, but then just about everything about her seemed that way.

“You filed a missing person’s report?”

She briefly hesitated. “Yes, I went to the police about a week ago.”

“Why did you wait so long to report it?” I asked.

She leaned forward and tapped her cigarette into the ashtray. “It’s as I told you; we’re adults and allowed to have our own lives. Sometimes, Frank takes small trips and can be gone for a few days at a time. He has a portable telescope. It’s pretty big refractor model but it fits into the back of his Volvo.” She continued with an exasperated pout. “I’ve already given the police the particulars: model, color, license plate number, what he was likely wearing and the model number of the telescope. It’s a Goto 6cm Alt-Azimuth refractor in case you’re interested. I bought it for him as a birthday present.” I would almost say that her eyes glazed over, but that’s not right so I’ll just say that her map shifted into a relaxed, out-of-focus look. “Now isn’t

that funny. I can't remember the license plate but I can remember the model number of that damn telescope."

I scanned her face for some kind of emotion, but I might as well have been thumbing through the phone book. It was a little weird. I mean, she just had her hubby abducted or kidnapped or whatever, and she might have been asking for directions to the wharf. Those strange eyes kept the world at bay, and she wouldn't let any outside stimulus change *her* reality map.

"All right," I said, trying to get back on track, "you haven't received any ransom letters or calls?"

"No, nothing."

"What about money?"

"What about it?" she asked blankly.

"Any money problems?"

"No." She almost smiled.

"Really?"

"We're quite well off. Frank's investments will allow for generations of Foxbergs to live very comfortably."

"But you don't have any kids, right?"

"No. We have considered it, but it doesn't feel like the right time. There's plenty of time for all that family planning."

"You mentioned the Volvo and the telescope. I need a bit more information and I could get that info from the cops, no problem," I lied, "but it might be faster if you could get that to me as well?" The truth was that I was never quite sure how the cops would take my meddling.

Usually they didn't like it, so it was best for me to get what I could from the source and bother The Man only when I had to.

"I suppose so," she answered, a little annoyed that my magical powers of investigation hadn't already divined this information.

"You can have somebody courier it to me along with any pictures of him you might have. I'd also like to know his height, weight, hair and eye color, what he was likely to be wearing and a description of any distinguishing marks, you know, birthmarks, moles, scars, tattoos, that sort of thing."

"Frank didn't have any moles, scars, tattoos or anything else. I don't think he has ever had a pimple or even a cavity." She almost smiled. "As far as I know, he's never been to a dentist."

"Sure, sure," I said, smoothing things out. "But I can't assume anything. You might be surprised how often I see respectable..." I started with air quotes but stopped myself, leaving my hands hanging in mid-air. "...Folks with weird tattoos, jewelry and odd hobbies. I know a funeral director who plays electric guitar and a Classics professor who shaved his head and likes to jump out of airplanes."

"I'll bet you know many colorful people," she said with a strong emphasis on "colorful," hoping to put me in my place.

My smile lacked any mirth whatsoever. "Comes with the territory, all part of the job." I waited a beat before continuing. "Speaking of which, why are you looking to hire me? Don't you trust our local police?"

"I trust them just fine, but I only have so much patience. It's been over a week and they haven't gotten anywhere. I don't think they're taking the case all that seriously."

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“Because it seems that they’ve spent more time investigating *me* than Frank’s disappearance.”

“They’re just playing the percentages. Of course, you aren’t seeing everything they’re doing out in the field and they aren’t necessarily going to report everything to you. A lot of the game is striking out. Very few leads turn into results. Most are just dead ends.”

“I still don’t like it. I suppose I could tolerate if it seemed like they knew what they were doing. But every time I call them, I get routed to somebody else and I have to start almost at the beginning. My patience is limited,” she almost spit out in an exasperated tone.

I was a bit taken aback at the sudden outburst. I leaned back in my chair, accompanied by the squeak and a low groan this time, and put a hand on the back of my neck in an attempt to massage the growing knot. “Missing persons is like that,” I said after waiting a bit. I shook another Camel out of the pack with my free hand, leaned in and sparked it with the trick lighter. Only after it was lit did I realize that I was chain smoking. I put out the smoke carefully.

“What really gets me,” she continued in an appropriately riled tone, “is that I’ve told them several times to look into the Interplanetary Family but they refuse to, or they treat my requests with more than a little bit of a patronizing attitude. It might just be rumors, but I’ve heard that Doctor Pace has made some sizable contributions to a few politicians, including the mayor. Maybe that’s why they’re dragging their feet. I asked around and heard that while you might be, uh, eccentric, you are at least competent. I can’t wait around for the police. I need someone else working on this.”

“That’s fine, but I’ll tell you straight off that cops are at their best working missing person cases. They have resources I don’t have. They can let loose a battalion of foot soldiers

knocking on doors and looking through documents and they've got cats who do nothing but scientific stuff."

"Scientific stuff? You mean like fingerprints?" she asked.

"Fingerprints, handwriting analysis, ballistic testing and all that jazz. But having said that, I can operate with a bit more latitude than The Man. Call it wiggle room."

"Wiggle room, you say?" I could almost see a glint in those weird orbs, but I wasn't sure if it was amusement or something else. "That sounds about right." She paused and sucked on the extra long pinky fingernail. "So will you do it? Will you look into the Interplanetary Family?"

"Sure, among other places," I said.

"Other places?"

I simply nodded my head. After that it was pretty cut and dried. I reached into the bottom drawer, carefully rifled through the hanging folders and took out one of my standard contracts (number 4, the one that was geared toward higher-end clients and featured a lot of blank spots, call it even more wiggle room). She didn't balk at the fee, five hundred a week plus expenses, two week minimum. I asked for half up front and she didn't blink, just reached into her little purse and pulled out a single folded check. She unfolded it and filled it out slowly and deliberately in an almost schoolgirl cursive. I took the check and handed her the finished contract. She read through it quickly and signed and dated it with the same penmanship. I tore off the bottom copy, handed it to her and told her I would be in touch.

With a slight roll of her eyes, she said yes, that's why she was paying me. She got up and shook my hand, nodded in Tack's direction and then walked out of the office. I had to admit that she had a nice walk. Looking over toward Tack, I asked what he thought of her.

“Seems spoiled, maybe a bit of a bitch. I would tell you to keep her at arms length, but I’ve seen your arms get awfully short, if you catch my drift. So be careful.”

“I think she knows more than she’s saying, but then I tend to see the worst in humanity, don’t you know.”

“Only too well,” Tack said as he was refilling his brass pipe with some more brown weed. “You know, I haven’t seen anything about her hubby’s disappearance in the *Chron*.”

“Yeah, me neither, but I guess that’s an advantage of having bread. You can keep stuff like that out of the press.” I put the check back on the desk and ambled over to Tack. He fired up the pipe, took a long toke and passed it over to me. When my lungs were full, I handed it back.

“What’s the plan?” Tack asked in a high pitch voice, straining to get the words out and keep the smoke in.

“Well, first, I thought I would--” but I was interrupted by a ‘shave and a hair cut’ ring on the doorbell. We stared at each other.

“Whoa,” moaned Tack while exhaling. “Déjà vu, man.

“Goddamn it, it’s probably Corky.”

And of course it was. Not much had changed. He still stormed up the steps and his eyes were still bloodshot. It even looked like he was wearing the same threadbare tweed jacket. This time, he wasn't drinking out of a discreet hip flask but a half-full fifth of Ten High.

"You've been ignoring me!" he blurted out before even reaching the landing. I was tempted to simply agree with him and have it out right there, especially because I had the higher ground and any punch I landed would have more effect. But instead, I smiled.

"Nothing of the sort, my brother. I've been busy making money. But I have found out some information, so come on in."

He gave me a dirty look and squeezed through, depositing himself one of the green chairs. I closed the door and ambled over to my spot. I'll admit I wasn't in any hurry. After I was parked and sparked, I leaned back and let the chair do its thing.

"So did you find her?" he asked anxiously.

"No, but I've got a pretty good idea where she is."

"Where's that?" he demanded.

"Marin County. Inverness, I think. You know about the Greenies?" I asked.

"What? No, what's that?"

"Not what, who. You've seen those young kids around town who wear green outfits? They're a group called the Interplanetary Family."

Corky shook his head and cracked open the bottle. "Nuh-uh," he mumbled before taking a pretty good-sized slug of the cheap whiskey. "International Family? What's that all about? A bunch of UN types babbling to each other in Esperanto?"

“Not international, interplanetary. Like in space, dig?” I pointed my finger skyward for emphasis and repeated myself. “Outer space. They’ve got a farm or a commune or something up north.” I omitted anything about their pad in the city, because I didn’t want this goon anywhere near his ex.

“Inverness, huh? Is this on the level? You're not trying to con me again, are you?”
There was plenty of ire in those bloodshot baby blues.

“No jive, man. I don’t have the address right now, but if you give me a ring in a couple of days I should be able to get it to you. I don’t have a short, so I’m not about to head up there.”

“So that’s it then?” He took a long swig off the bottle, wiped the mouth of it with his smelly jacket and offered it to me.

I looked at the clock and declined. “I'm working, man, but thanks.”

“Suit yourself,” he shrugged. He took another hit. At this pace he was going to be uncontrollable in no time.

“Like I said, I’m on the clock. What’s today, Wednesday? Call on Friday. I’ll have the address by then.”

“How’d you find this out?”

“I talked to various people. I asked a lot of questions. It’s what I do.”

“Nora?” he asked. His eyes showed a bit of pain mixed with anger.

“Nah, I couldn’t find her. All of this was through a friend of a friend, but I think the information is solid. From what I can tell, Nora is long gone.”

“Long gone, you say?” His squinted his eyes in a vain effort to focus.

“I told you, man. Marin County. Greenies. Call me Friday.” I was getting more than a little exasperated.

It went on like this for at least another half an hour and within that time, Corky's bottle got lighter and his mood got darker. He was convinced I was lying to him and several times even threatened me. I finally had to physically help him out of the chair and point him toward the stairs. Thankfully, gravity did the rest and he stumbled down to the street level before shouting something unintelligible, but it was accompanied by the friendship digit so there wasn't any need for translating. If I hadn't thrown him out, he would have wound up sleeping in my chair and that was the last thing I needed.

I had another hit of Tack's weed and then spent a bit of time going over my bill to Montrose. When I was satisfied that the columns added up, I put that into an envelope and made a few calls. One was to arrange to return the camera and one was to a cop I knew. The cop worked Missing Persons and even though they usually didn't get the cases handed to them until after thirty days, I figured it was worth a stab to find out anything about Frank Foxberg. The call took longer than I thought and was unproductive to boot. I turned my attention to the ashtray, fishing out several salvageable roaches. I had to wait around for the lawyer and Tack had to go to the library, so I asked him to pick up a sandwich from Panelli's on his way back.

Carvin Montrose arrived sharply at three, dressed in a bright suit that was either yellow or lime-green depending on the light. His tie and breast pocket hanky were neon orange and his magenta socks featured clocks on them. I was just finishing my ham and provolone so the timing was perfect.

"The circus in town?" I asked, once I had gotten him seated. This provoked a soft snort from Tack.

"What? Oh, you mean the suit. Yes, I'll concede that it's over the top, but I had a court date this morning. We were a bit short on facts, so I livened things up a bit."

“Did it work?”

“We got a reduced sentence, which, under the circumstances was about all I could hope for, so I suppose you could say that the answer is yes.” He reached into his suit coat and got out a pack of his exotic brown cigarettes. I took the occasion to join him and fired up both weeds with my lighter. Then, I reached into the drawer and pulled out the photos, giving him a couple off the top. He studied them for a bit and smiled.

“You missed your calling, Wendell. These are pretty good. Yes, indeed, they’ll do just fine.”

“If I’m being honest, it wasn’t the cleanest operation. They made us,” I admitted a bit sheepishly.

“Yes, so you said, but I wouldn’t worry if I were you. The husband's counsel will make some noise, but that’s part of the process. In my opinion, the divorce is now a forgone conclusion. All that’s left is to figure out how much my client gets, which will not be an insubstantial amount.”

“That means you're set for a nice payday.”

“That’s the way it works.”

“Speaking of which...” With that, I handed him the list of expenses. He got a set of thin reading glasses out of his inside breast pocket and read through it. He questioned a couple of smaller items and we argued about one of the larger ones, but it was civil. He was a barrister after all, and arguing was as natural to him as breathing. When we finally agreed on a figure, I made the necessary changes to the bill and we both signed and initialed it. He reached into his battered leather bag and pulled out an envelope and started counting the bills before putting the pile on the desktop. I picked it up and started counting for myself.

“It’s all there,” Montrose said, slightly offended.

“Yeah, well I don’t like surprises.” After confirming the amount, I gave him a few more photos and the negatives. “There’s some junk on there,” I said pointing to the negatives.

“Hmm, yes. As long as I’m not paying for them.”

“You’re not. We went through that already.”

“Indeed we did. I’d love to stay and chat, but I’ve got one more meeting downtown. Pleasure doing business with you, Wendell. I’ll let myself out.”

And with that, the lawyer got up, nodded toward Tack, turned around and left, softly shutting the door behind him.

“Well, it’s too late for the bank. That’ll have to wait until tomorrow.” I counted out Tack’s share and handed it to him plus a couple bucks for the sandwich and coke. I went back to my desk, gathered up the contracts, money and photos and moved them into the office safe, keeping a fresh twenty for the evening’s activities.

The next stop was a small joint on Howard Street called the M&M Tavern. It was close to the Chronicle building and was thus a favorite watering hole of the ink-stained wretches. I got there before five and it was already filling up. Cy the photographer was already there, sipping a manhattan. He was wearing a jean jacket and his dark hair spilled over his collar. A black eye patch, a gold earring and a bushy black mustache completed the modern pirate look. I parked myself on the stool next to him and handed over the camera bag and an envelope.

“You didn’t get this from me,” I said.

He slung the bag over his shoulder, took a peep in the envelope and grinned. “Far out, man. What are you drinking?”

I said I could use a scotch up and Cy barked the order to Al, a thin, balding man in a white shirt and paisley tie who was behind the stick. Cy had spent almost two years in Vietnam as a photojournalist. It left him bitter and burned out and minus one eye, hence his nickname, Cy, short for Cyclops. I bought a few rounds and Cy's tongue got looser.

“What do you know about Deanna Foxberg?” I asked. I think I was on my fourth drink, but I was in danger of losing track.

“Deanna Foxberg? She’s a mess.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“Ever hear of the term ‘hypergamy?’” Cy asked.

“Can’t say that I have,” I truthfully answered.

“It means marrying up.”

“She doesn’t come from money?”

“Hell no. Sure, she makes it seem like she descended from the womb with a fistful of blue chip stock certificates and a Cal degree in her hand, but she’s really a small town girl who has maybe logged a couple of semesters in a mid-west community college.”

“How do you know this?”

“Ever hear about a nonprofit called Leg Up?”

“That’s her charity, right? Help for the hopeless or something like that.” I might have been slurring my words a bit.

“I had to cover one of their little soirees one time. It was a pretty big shindig with catered food and drink featuring Russian caviar, Omaha prime rib, Maine lobster, and imported French wines. They also had some top name entertainment, though I can’t remember who was the

headliner. Tony Bennett? Nah, but somebody like him and maybe that insult comic? I'm not so good with names anymore," he sighed.

"Doesn't matter," I said.

"Guess not, just bugs me is all." He sipped his drink and continued. "It always struck me that spending money was a funny way to raise money. But like the man said, the rich are different. Anyway, I wound up talking to this old bird and she was full of fun facts, all of them unprintable and most of them highly libelous. She had dirt on everybody," he said, drawing out the word. "She knew about Deanna's roots, said her and her husband, what's his name..."

"Frank," I answered.

"Right, Frank. Where was I? Oh, yeah, the two of them are at each other's throats all the time, sleep in separate bedrooms and apparently can't stand each other. The only time they're seen together is at events like that Leg Up party." He took a moment to wipe his mustache dry with his jacket sleeve.

"That's interesting, and not the picture she paints."

"You've talked to her?"

"Couple of times," I admitted. "She says everything is groovy, no marital or money problems."

"She would say that."

"But Frank's got money, right?"

"Sure, some, but it's all inherited. According to my source, anyway."

"What have you heard?" I prodded.

"Stop me if you've heard all this before. Frank Foxberg's dad founded a large machining operation and managed to make some very lucrative deals during the Second World War. Some

of these deals were above board and some were maybe not so much. The company used to be called Foxberg Heavy Industries but they changed it to FFox Inc. Don't ask me why they changed it or why they added an extra F, they just did and there just is."

"Damn, I'm impressed. You're like a walking *Who's Who*," I said in admiration.

"A drinker's Who's Who, you mean, but I can't take the credit. This was all from that old biddy at the Leg Up party. So sure, Frank and Deanna own a house in the Marina and property up in Marin, but I was told that there are substantial loans against both. Frank is an only child, a trust fund baby. He calls himself an investment banker and maybe he is. His dad was killed a few years back in a helicopter crash. I don't know about his mother. She seems to be out of the picture. So anyway, our little Frankie became the head honcho at FFox Inc., but I don't think he's been doing a very good job steering the ship. Their stock prices have been taking a severe hit. In short, all of the couple's money is either tied up in FFox Inc. or in bad investments."

"Bad investments?" I asked. "Like what?"

"There's a sketchy pyramid-direct marketing scheme that's got something to do with fancy soap, a yacht timeshare and some mid-west oil wells that never produced anything but mud. I think you can best describe their situation as cash poor."

We worked on our drinks for a while. I was going to call it, but then I decided to ask about the Interplanetary Family.

Cy looked at me, narrowing his gaze with his solitary eye. "Ah, the Greenies. Yeah, there's definitely something funky going on with those cats."

"What do you mean?"

“I’ve heard that their leader used to be a cab driver in Sardinia. Claims he was visited by aliens and saw the light. Now he’s making some pretty decent cake with this outer space scam. He’s got his little army of freaks panhandling, sure, but I’ve heard rumors about kidnappings and some of the more, uh, comely members of his tribe turning tricks. Pretty sure there are drugs involved too, but they get away with it. I think they must have paid off the right folks. Must be nice.”

“What?” I asked.

“Having money,” he answered.

“Yeah. Speaking of which...” I counted out the rest of my change and figured I had enough for another round; I would just have to take the bus home instead of a cab. “Hey Al,” I called out and made a circular motion with my hand.

I was plenty pissed off. I had been diligently trying to track down Frank for a week, but no one had any idea where he could have gone and no one had seen or heard anything suspicious. He had just disappeared. Poof. The cops had a broadcast out for the Volvo, a bright red P1800, but so far that hadn't yielded anything. He hadn't been near any of his usual haunts and yes, I had even checked out the I.F. building out in the Richmond. Unlike Deanna, I was able to get inside. There was a small reception area in a gray room with multi-colored murals painted on the walls. These featured a map of the solar system, exploding stars and ringed planets. The small corner table held a coffee urn, stale donuts and of course copies of Dr. Pace's books and pamphlets.

The receptionist was an attractive brunette with straight, long hair and a small mole under her left ear. She was good looking and very polite and I would have almost asked her out except the conversation kept coming back around to the outer space thing. It was as if there was a short circuit in her brain that played everything back in an endless loop. So in the end, we had a fine time chatting about flying saucers and the like, but I didn't find out anything about Frank. I asked about the spaghetti feeds and she got up and handed me a flyer. They usually filled up the bus on Friday mornings and came back on Monday afternoons, but I got the impression that the schedule was flexible. I didn't want to get stuck there for a weekend so I was probably going to have to rent or borrow some wheels and head up to Marin, despite my antipathy toward leaving town.

All of that was annoying, but part of the job. No, what really got to me was a notice from my bank saying that the check from Deanna Foxberg had bounced higher than a Super Ball on

the moon. Naturally, I tried calling her. There was no message machine. It just rang. I tried multiple times and the response was the same. Tack guessed that her phone was probably unplugged, which only got me more upset. Truthfully, I can't say that the kited check was a complete surprise after my conversation with Cy, but that didn't make it okay.

After the visit to the I.F. building, I had made it back to the office and saw the bank notice. I suppose I started yelling things and then started to pound down a few of beers from the office fridge. Well, maybe more than a few. That didn't calm me down. It just made it worse. Tack wanted me gone and I couldn't blame him. He strongly suggested that I needed to get out and I agreed, figuring that I would pay Mrs. Foxberg a visit.

I was too pissed and didn't want to take the bus, so I hailed a Luxor and headed over to the Marina. When I got to the address, I found a fairly imposing two-storey hacienda style detached home with large plate glass windows. It was completely dark. I tried the doorbell a couple of times but there was no noise and no response. As the hack headed off, I looked around to see if there was anybody I could talk to. There was one older lady with a jet black dye job who was walking toward me. She was wearing a tracksuit and was attached to a poodle.

"Evening, ma'am," I said in what I hoped was a friendly, non-threatening tone of voice.

"Good evening," she responded with more than a little unease. I got it: Wrong color for this neighborhood makes the natives restless. She started walking away in small, almost mincing steps.

"Excuse me," I called out to her.

"Yes," she responded, ready to let out a scream if need be.

"Have you seen the Foxbergs lately?" I asked.

"What?"

“I said, have you seen the Foxbergs lately?” I repeated, figuring she was near deaf.

“And you are?” she asked, still wary.

“Sorry, ma’am. My name is Wendell. I work with the police.” I can’t say I work for the police but I can’t just say I’m a P.I. either. As a rule, people don’t trust us. The old lady got a little closer and eyed me. It probably didn’t help that I smelled like a brewery.

“Police, huh?”

I left it at that. “And you are?” I asked.

“Michelle Fredricks. Shelly. You’re here about the complaints?” She had taken another couple of steps toward me as the little black poodle did its best to wrap the leash around her legs.

“Yes, ma’am. Yes, I am,” I lied. It was hard being non-threatening because I had to almost shout to be heard. She yelled back, so I suppose it was weird for both of us.

“But that was so long ago. Why are you here now?”

I couldn’t think of anything to say so I just said, “I’m just following up. I want to make sure that,” and it was really a stretch, “things were handled correctly.”

“Oh,” she said with a small wry smile. “Internal Affairs, huh?”

“I can’t really say, ma’am,” I responded, because like, I really couldn’t, dig?

“That was months ago. It was back around Christmas time,” she scowled.

“These things take time,” I responded, trying to sound like it weighed heavily on me.

“It’s terrible, really. It started off as a couple of small lights aimed at their balcony, and then it escalated. We, all the neighbors, must have called you hundreds of times. The Foxbergs and the Milners were behaving horribly.”

“The Milners,” I asked. “M-I-L-N--”

“The next door neighbors. Spell it like it sounds,” she said. “It practically escalated into a war between those two.

“Escalated you say?” I asked in my public service voice.

“Practically into World War Three. You know Mr. Foxberg likes his astrology?” she asked. I guessed and hoped she meant astronomy.

“Sure,” I replied. “He’s a regular Kepler.” She blankly stared at me. “You know, like Carl Sagan?”

“Oh, right, I saw him on Carson. He’s an astrologist too.”

I ignored her malapropism, if that’s what it was. “What was the beef between the Milners and Mr. Foxberg?”

Any distrust toward me vanished. She was in her element now and into full gossip mode. “The Milners like to, well, entertain. Well, that’s what they call it, but they aren’t the sort of parties respectable folk would attend.”

I got my small notebook out in an effort to add a little probity to our conversation because I feared it was about to careen into salacious territory. “You mean like wife-swapping?” I asked in as much of a conspiratorial tone as the volume would allow.

“That and more.” She ignored the pooch desperately pulling her leash and leaned in. “I’ve seen lots of young floozies showing up without chaperones. There’s music, lots of drinking and probably drugs going on.” Her attitude toward me suddenly changed. “I’ve called you about this several times.”

“Those calls don’t get routed to me,” I truthfully replied.

“Well, I don’t see why not,” she responded.

“Let’s just say that it’s complicated.” Like I’ll say, dig? “Look, you’ve got these parties going on...”

“Not my parties!”

“Sorry, poor choice of words. The Foxbergs--”

“No, no, no! The Milners had the parties,” she said in a tone that implied I was an idiot.

“Sure, right. The Milners have these parties going on. So what was the problem?”

“Well, it started with the floodlights.”

“Floodlights?” I asked.

“They didn’t like the telescope,” she said, as if explaining it to a three year old.

“I dig, I mean, I understand. But from what I hear, Frank, I mean Mr. Foxberg, wasn’t concerned with that sort of stuff. He really likes looking at the sky.”

She narrowed her eyes as the poofy hound started whining. “Maybe so, but he’s still a man. All men have urges.”

I couldn’t argue with her there, but I decided to continue. “Well, sure, but what I meant is that Mr. Foxberg has an attractive wife and I can’t see why he would use his telescope for, you know, peeping.”

“Sure, she might be attractive, but she’s a...” She leaned in and almost whispered, “witch.” In her normal voice, she continued, “Besides, she has her own friends.”

First I had heard of this. “Friends?”

“Male friends.”

“Really?” So much for serial monogamy.

“I’m not going to say anything more about her, except I wouldn’t be surprised if she attended some of those parties. If you catch my drift.” She tried to cross her arms but the

leashed beast prevented it, so she made do with displaying a smug, sanctimonious expression on her map.

I started to try to follow up on this but she took a breath and continued on about the parties.

“So as I was saying, there are usually a lot of scantily clad young women wearing bikinis or less playing in the backyard.”

“You’ve seen this?” I asked.

“Heavens, no! But I’ve heard about this through a very reliable source.”

I didn’t bother asking about the source, as I figured she would consider that a fellow gossip would fall under the same privacy rules as doctors, lawyers and their respective clients.

“So what do you think started this?” I prodded, a little anxious to get the conversation started again and not at all sure where it was going.

“Huh? Oh, well, Milner, Lawrence, the husband, claimed that he saw Mr. Foxberg using his telescope to spy into the backyard. They got into an argument right out there.” She pointed to the street in front of the Milner home to the accompaniment of a few high-pitched whelps as she was practically strangling her dog. “Mister Milner and Mr. Foxberg were yelling at each other. The whole neighborhood could hear it. Mister Foxberg said that he was a scientist and that he only wanted to look at the stars. That’s when Mr. Milner called him something I wouldn’t repeat and said he would make sure he would never see the blankety-blank stars again.”

“He said that?”

“Words to that effect. I was out walking Tweejee so I heard a lot of it. Most of it, except when they got quiet. I talked it over with a neighbor and that’s when we first called you. We thought there was going to be some kind of violence.”

The three of us, including little Tweejee the poodle, didn't move, enjoying the peace for a moment.

"Was there?"

"What?"

"Was there?" I repeated, back to near yelling.

"No, but the next day, no, it was two days. Was it?" She waived her hand dismissively. "Well, one or two days. What does it matter? Anyway, it started with the Milners shining one bright light onto the Foxbergs' balcony. The Foxbergs responded by putting some speakers outside and started broadcasting the radio in the Milners' direction. A couple of days later, the Milners got out a few more lights and shined them on other parts of the Foxbergs' house. Then, the Foxbergs got a couple of those speaker things like what the rock and roll groups use. They started playing Christmas carols nonstop and way too loud. In retaliation, this huge truck showed up and a handful of teamsters unloaded these big lights and generators.

"That's when you," she again referred to the police, "showed up and said that they had to shut the lights and the music down at ten o'clock at night. But then the light trucks went away and the music stopped. I'm not sure it was resolved, I think it was just a, whatchamacallit."

"A stalemate?" I hopefully asked.

"Sure, one of those. I think the Milners are on vacation now, but I'm not sure it won't start up again sometime soon. You'll make sure it doesn't?"

I said I would try.

"Well, try harder," she yelled, as she turned around and started to walk away. "If that starts up again, none of us will be able to get any sleep around here."

With that, she dragged little Tweejee away, clucking and occasionally looking back at me with suspicion. I shook my head and took a bus back toward home, but decided to stop off at Noah's Liquors. Noah was a chunky Korean cat who wouldn't let me run a tab like the previous owner's son used to, but he was an okay guy. I picked up a pack of smokes, a small container of half and half and a couple of Coors talls. I planned on listening to some early Miles and head off to darkland.

When I got home, there was a message on my machine from somebody at Marin General. An accident victim was a patient there and he had one of my cards in his possession. They couldn't find any next of kin so they wanted me to get in touch as soon as possible. I swore and pounded my fist on the small phone table. It had been a nasty day and this was the perfect way to end it. I popped open the first beer and debated whether to call or not. I finally decided that his situation wasn't likely to change and I wasn't in any shape to deal with it so I put it on hold. I could call them in the morning, so I went back to listening to *Blue in Green*, smoking, and sipping cold beer.

I called Marin General on Friday morning and suffered through the usual bureaucratic nonsense. The first half dozen or so people I talked with were mind-numbingly polite but couldn't tell me anything. They just continued to fire the same questions at me. I kept trying to tell them that I didn't have the patient's name and that they had called me. That got me nowhere. Finally, I got through to somebody who seemed to have half a brain, a nurse named Gina, and she was able to cut through the red tape and gave me the news. Corky Glyynn had been admitted late Thursday evening, the victim of a car accident on Highway 1, south of Point Reyes Station.

He was in pretty bad shape and was currently hooked up to machines that were keeping him alive. The thin contents of his wallet had produced his driver's license, a City College registration card, a punched out sandwich card from Rossi's, my card and of course, the picture of Corky, Nora and Molly. Gina wanted to know if Corky had any next of kin locally and if I knew anything about his insurance situation. I truthfully answered that I didn't know the answer to either question. I really didn't know that much about the man other than he liked to drink and had a nasty temper. Oh, yeah, he was also crazy about a dog, but that wasn't any help at all. Gina gave me her direct extension and Corky's room number and I said I might head up there.

Of course, I didn't have a car and didn't really want to rent one. In fact, almost nobody I knew drove. We all just walked, took a cab or rode Muni. A nice thing about this town is that it's pretty small and fairly easy to get around. Of course, I could hire Gill out for the day, but that was more bread than I wanted to spend. This left me the option of borrowing a bike from my pal Anagram Fats, so I put a call into him, got his machine and left a message. I spent the

rest of the morning trying to track down Deanna, who for all I knew had joined her missing hubby.

I left a message for Lawrence Milner, figuring it wouldn't hurt to lob a few questions his way. That old bird had said that he was out of town, but I'm not sure how accurate she was, even though I was able to confirm the story about the crazy sound and light feud between the Milners and the Foxbergs from someone down at the North Beach station.

It was late afternoon before Anagram called and the conversation was long, drawn out and elliptical. He could let me have his BSA for the weekend if I could get him some hash. I said I would see what I could do and asked him how Saturday morning looked. He said that would be fine as long as it was after ten. After hanging up, I thought a bit more about Corky and decided to head out to the Richmond.

O'Rourke's Bar was a small neighborhood joint. There were some regulars nursing their drinks and a young couple playing darts. The jukebox was dark which was fine by me. I won't say I was mistreated, more like mistrusted. I ordered a black and tan and brought up the Willie Mays trade with the man behind the stick, saying that it was downright weird seeing a picture of him wearing a Mets uniform. The bartender was a barrel-chested blonde named Eoin and he turned out to be a loyal fan with a lot of opinions, so we settled into an easy flow as we commiserated on a terrible start to the season.

He had actually been one of the 2800 hearty souls attending the previous night's game, an 8-5 loss to the Reds. By the time I bought a second drink for Eoin and myself, the regulars had returned to chatting with each other or simply went back to staring into their drinks. One of them was engaged in tearing the labels off his beers and he had quite the pile of wet paper in front of him. Maybe that's how he kept track of how much he had consumed. I asked Eoin

about Nora and he said she had started working there a couple of weeks earlier. Her shift was due to start in a bit if I wanted to hang around. I suppose it's a bit of a cliché, but the dim joint lit up a bit when Nora entered the room. She seemed to know everybody and had a greeting for each.

She was taken aback a bit when she saw me, but hailed me by saying, "So it's you, is it?" I admitted that it was. She gave Eoin a hug and put on an apron, ready to serve the workers who were filling the place up, getting started on their lost weekends. The juke was plugged in and the first of many sorrowful Irish ballads blared out of hidden speakers. Conversations with Nora were in short bursts as the orders came in thick and fast. She wondered what I was doing and I said I was having a drink. She smiled and I had a few more. I had originally intended to just have a couple and try to get some information about Corky's family, but the more I drank and the more she smiled, the more my mission got a bit clouded. I did succeed in getting a number for Corky's cousin Aiden and as a nice bonus, I got on a friendlier basis with Nora. On the negative side of the ledger, I spent a lot of money and drank one too many pints.

I was a bit hung over the next morning when I got to Anagram's pad in the Haight. Anagram Fats was a big man, not just fat (though he certainly was) but outsized. His hands were huge, which was a distinct asset when playing keyboards, which he did with both prodigious skill and force. When I first met him, he was strictly and fiercely an acoustic piano player specializing in hard bop. But electricity and drugs had rewired him, so he had changed out the piano for a Fender Rhodes with a Moog synthesizer perched on top of it and his music became louder, freer and more linear. Anagram's Afro and goatee had gotten tinged with gray and he wore thick, black-rimmed glasses that made him look studious, that is, until he started laughing, and then his mouth would open up into a huge grin and his eyes would sparkle behind those

serious lenses. He usually wore robes or dashikis for both political and practical reasons. He had a truck he used to ferry his gear from gig to gig but he loved to ride his motorcycle. Yes, with his mass and sartorial style, Anagram cut quite the figure, driving his matte black 600cc BSA side valve single with a box sidecar and fake diplomatic plates. Borrowing the machine wasn't straightforward because dealing with Mr. Fats was a complicated ritual. First, we had to sample the hash that I had brought as barter, and then he had to play me some music he had just recorded. The tunes (that's what he called them, though there was nothing tuneful about them) were as long as they were spacey. I begged off his lunch invite, as I had to get moving, but he insisted that I try an Asian pear. Then, he had to show me his latest gizmo. It was called a ring modulator and its sole function seemed to be to make everything plugged into it sound like a strangled goose in heat. All this took up more time so it was probably one or two before I got on the road.

My plan had been to drive up to Marin General and check in on Corky. I filled up and checked the oil level and tire pressures at a Texaco station on Lombard and bought a road map, which I stowed in one of the bike's saddlebags. The BSA ran a bit rough at first, but by the time I hit the Golden Gate Bridge, the engine started to sing. The sunlight was filtered through thick fog that covered all but the tops of the span's international orange towers, and the salty air mixed with burnt Castrol from the bike created a heady brew that smelled like freedom. I was glad I wore a leather jacket and gloves because the air was chilly. I had learned to ride while in the Navy and I always dug the rush of a brisk trip on two (or in this case, three) wheels. I was followed for a bit by a CHP, which made me a little paranoid and I had to slow down to the posted limit until the cruiser turned off at the top of the Waldo Grade. As the freeway descended

and the fog burned off, the sun began to warm my face back up and the wind blew my hair into a thousand knots. I unzipped the jacket and enjoyed the rest of the ride without incident.

Gina wasn't working, but the hospital staff was efficient and polite. I gave them the number I had for Corky's cousin and a male nurse threaded me through a maze of beds and curtains and into a room where the brutal Irish bastard lay motionless. A large bandage covered his head and there were the muted sounds of various machines working to keep him alive. I didn't really have anything to say or do at this point and was about to leave, when a compact man in a rumpled off the rack suit and stained regimental entered the room. He had closely clipped hair and a permanent sneer. I made him as a cop, probably from the traffic division.

"Friend of yours?" he asked. "What can you tell me about him?"

"A friend? Nah, an acquaintance is more like it," I responded. "Can't tell you much. Didn't really know him all that well."

The suit thought about this for a bit before continuing. "Your friend, or acquaintance is in pretty bad shape. I talked to the doctor and the odds aren't very good."

"Yeah, I heard as much. A nurse gave me the rundown."

"He was drunk, you know. Maybe on drugs?"

"Don't know about any drugs. Seems out of character. Drunk? That I can believe. I didn't even know he owned a car."

"Yeah, a compact Plymouth two door. He was going pretty fast, too fast for the conditions. There was heavy fog last night and the visibility couldn't have been very good plus the road was pretty slick. He wrapped the car around a telephone pole." The cop looked at me for a reaction but I played it cool. "He might have passed out or lost control, but there weren't any skid marks."

“Does that mean anything?” I asked. “If it was wet enough, there might not be any. He could have been hydroplaning.”

“Sure. You know about that sort of stuff?”

“It’s possible that I might have spun a tire or two in my youth.”

“I’ll bet. We’re taking a look at the car and the scene, but I’m not telling you any secrets when I say that this case will be closed pretty quickly. I mean to say that it’s pretty cut and dried from where I stand.”

“Which way was he going?” I asked.

“What? Oh, southbound. Look here Mister...”

“Pike.”

“Okay, Mister Pike. Do you have a number where you can be reached? I don't expect any complications but I may have some questions later.”

“And you are?” I asked.

“Barnes. Traffic Company. It's my job to investigate this,” he said, pointing toward Corky. We exchanged cards and stared at them in an awkward silence as the machines beeped, breathed and whirred in the background. “You’re a P.I.”

I avoided the urge to say, yeah, good job Mr. Investigator. It’s written right there on the card. Instead, I just answered, “Yup. Actually that’s why I’m here.”

The cop nodded toward Corky. “Divorce? Money problems?”

“No,” I responded looking at the supine body in front of me. “He wanted me to find his dog.”

The sneer got larger. “His dog?”

I shrugged. “It's a living.”

I bought a BLT and a cup of coffee in the hospital cafeteria and thought about my next move. It was getting later than I would have liked but I was already on the north side of the bay anyway, so I wolfed down the chow and got back on the BSA. It was already two o'clock and the ride up to Inverness would take a couple of hours unless I really floored it, but after seeing the condition Corky was in, I decided to be a bit more circumspect and stuck to the limit. Besides, a sidecar really changes the way a bike handles.

As I fell into a riding groove, I allowed my mind to drift a bit. My guess was that Corky decided to try to find Molly on his own, though that didn't make any sense to me. I supposed it was at least partially my fault that he was in the condition he was in but then I'm not the one who told him to head up there. For the most part, my conscience was clear.

My plan was to drive up to the Foxberg home and poke around a bit. Maybe I could catch a whiff of Frank or Deanna. If I had any time left, I would swing by the I.F. compound and maybe talk my way into a spaghetti dinner and see what developed. I had studied the map and it looked as though the Foxbergs' pad and the Greenie farm were directly adjacent to each other, about a mile apart if you stuck to the roads.

I did get lost and had to double back and ask for directions from somebody at the Inverness Yacht Club. They didn't hide their distaste and distrust but grudgingly gave me directions to the Foxbergs. When I asked about the Greenies, they rolled their eyes but patiently explained how to get there as well. They asked why I wanted to know about the "space people" and I answered that I was looking for somebody and left it at that.

The roads were one lane only and not very well maintained. I found the gate for the Foxberg's pad and it was unlocked, which surprised me until I remembered that Deanna had said

that they were having work done on the property. Contractors would need access. I had to get off the bike and open the gate, drive through it and close it again. The driveway was a rutted dirt road that snaked through dense vegetation and the bumps wreaked havoc with the bike's shocks.

There were a couple of buildings set on the sprawling property that was otherwise covered in tall grass and weeds. Oaks and firs dotted the landscape as well as a bunch of yellow and purple plants, but I had no idea what they were. The surrounding hills were still green. In a few months, all of this would be baked a dull brown. The main house was a single storey stucco, ranch style, painted a light ecru with brick accents and a tile roof. There was a carport that looked to be in the process of being converted to a garage and a smaller house out back. I tried the big house first and of course all the doors were locked. Knocking didn't have any effect at all so I spent some time looking in all the usual places for a key but I struck out there as well. I tried all the windows. I peered through them and couldn't make out any kind of activity so I hiked over to the smaller building and got lucky. There was a key that had been placed over the door jamb so I put it to use and let myself in.

There was a distinct odor that I couldn't place, both sweet and acrid. A small field mouse dashed across the floor and there was a slight buzzing coming from somewhere. There was dust everywhere, and after I opened a curtain, airborne particles hung in the air, highlighted by the sun. When I got to the small kitchenette, I found the source for the odor and the noise. There were unwashed dishes in the sink, a pile of orange peels on the counter and three or four large flies were buzzing around the rotting food. It looked like someone had been here within the last week or two. There was a single unmade bed in the next room and a couch and small color TV in the front room with a *TV Guide* and an empty bottle of merlot on an adjacent tray. The *TV Guide* had been placed open and face down. I picked it up and saw it was opened to Tuesday the

ninth. Whoever was here may or may not have been watching *Hawaii Five-O*, *The Bold Ones* or *Marcus Welby*, not that any of that helped. It was impossible for me to tell if it was Deanna, Frank or maybe even one of the workers. I searched through all the drawers and couldn't find anything. I looked around the outside for a bit but that was useless as well. I would have liked to have checked out the larger house but I left my lock picking tools in the office safe and I didn't want to break a window. It was already past five, so I had a few hours of sunlight and I wasn't wild about riding around those roads in the dark so I decided to try my luck at the I.F. compound.

“Compound” was a pretty good word for it. It seemed to be completely fenced in and even had a guard shack at the front gate. But instead of a uniformed guard, a young hippie type who reeked of patchouli oil and wore a faded green striped robe manned the post. Jimmy Castor’s “Troglodyte” blared from a small transistor radio: “Sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me.”

“Can you turn it down a little?”

“What?” he asked, clearly confused.

“The music.” I pointed my thumb down.

“Oh, right.” He fumbled with the radio dial and the music was replaced by loud static. This seemed to surprise him. He stared at the device for another few seconds before he tuned the dial back to the soul station. Now the music was even louder. With further concentration, he finally found the volume knob and turned it down.

“That’s better,” I said.

“What is?”

“Never mind.”

“You’re late,” he said.

“Couldn’t be helped,” I responded because I couldn’t think of any other answer. “So, dinner’s over?”

“No, I thought you were here for the dodgeball.”

“Sure, I was,” I lied.

“The games finished a while back.”

I was starting to think that my friend here had been hit in the head a few too many times playing the game, but I kept the polite grin on my face. “Gee, sorry to have missed it. I rode all the way from The City. Sure am hungry.”

“There’s usually a spaghetti feed after the games. You could see if they’re still serving. The cafeteria is in the big blue building; head straight and then bear right. It’s on the left. Can’t miss it.” His eyes clouded a bit and he amended his statement. “Unless you make a wrong turn or something. So I mean, I suppose it’s possible to miss it.”

“I’m sure I’ll be OK. What’s your name?”

“Baxter.”

“Hi Baxter, I’m Wendell.” We shook hands in an abbreviated soul-shake.

“That’s a good name, man, I like it. Wen-Dell!” He shoved a clipboard at me and picked up a Polaroid camera. “Sorry, dude, but I’ve got to ask you sign in,” he said. I scanned the sheet for any names I could recognize but didn’t find any, so I printed my name and wrote in the date and time. When I looked up Baxter had a goofy look on his face and said, “Cheese, brother,” before snapping a pic.

The gravel drive wound through the brush. It was probably a hundred yards before the big blue building came into focus. The bus and a huge, dark green Chrysler were parked in front of it. There were a few kids standing around throwing a Frisbee so I parked the bike behind the green sedan and walked up to them. They weren’t as mentally thick as Baxter, but they did have an odd, faraway look in their eyes. Of course, they were dressed head to toe in something that looked like green pajamas. This seemed to be the garment of choice around the compound, assuming that any of these folks had any choice in the manner.

I entered the building and found a huge open space that had a bunch of picnic tables. There were maybe seventy-five people sitting, talking and eating and the noise level was almost

deafening. Not all were wearing green, but there were at least three Greenies at each table. I guessed that they might be the handlers for the non-green guests. The non-Greenies were mostly young and looked like runaways, though there were a few older hippies mixed in.

While I was checking out the scene, a young and very athletic brunette slinked up next to me. She was decked out in the familiar pajamas, but they had been modified into shorts and the top was cropped which exposed a lot of her midriff. Her face had been painted with a small Jupiter-like planet on one cheek and a gold star on the other. She wore large, star-shaped earrings and a prismatic pendant that looked like the remnant of a collision between a Mack truck and a Catholic Church hung around her neck.

“Hi, I’m Tina,” she beamed, thrusting her hand out.

“Hi, Tina. I’m Wendell. How are you doing?”

“I’m blessed, Wendell. Each and every day.”

“That’s great,” I said, although I had my doubts.

“You’re new here. I didn’t see you come in with others,” she purred.

“Yeah, sorry I’m late. I had to work. Baxter said you might still be serving dinner?”

“Sure,” she smiled. She took my hand and led me to a long table that had standard cafeteria-style serving trays. There was still a bit of spaghetti and meatballs in one of them. A couple of large baskets contained rolls and there were small pats of butter on ice. Tina handed me a paper plate and a plastic fork and told me to dig in, so I did. There was a large urn that had some awful smelling coffee and one that had what looked to be Tang. I stuck with the coffee because I knew I would feel tired once I had eaten.

I had my hands full, so Tina threaded her arm through mine and steered me toward a table that had more Greenies than guests. I put my plate and mug down on the table and sat

down on the bench, while Tina yawned and stretched, causing her cropped top to reveal even more of her pale skin. Call me cynical, but it came across as calculated, like she was nothing more than a recruiting tool. But that didn't mean I didn't appreciate the view.

Once we were seated, everybody at the table said their names and where they were from. The spaghetti was soggy and salty but I was hungry so I ate it without complaint. There seemed to be a hierarchy for the Greenies at the table, consisting of a leader and a couple of lieutenants, there to keep the focus of the conversation on the Interplanetary Family.

“Well, Wendell, what do you think about space?” asked Ron. He seemed to be the leader of the table, a bespectacled twenty-something dressed in the standard uniform. He wore his long dark hair gathered in a ponytail and his acne scarred face featured large muttonchops. Unlike a lot of the other Greenies, his stare was more focused and his speech more clipped.

“I don't know.” I looked over at Tina and then back at Ron. “There's a lot of it, that's one thing I know.” This got a laugh from the table and even elicited a smile from Ron.

“You're right there. You know that it's vast. There's really no other word for it. We humans can barely comprehend just how big it is.”

“Yeah, you can feel pretty insignificant in comparison,” I said to keep things on track.

“Well, yes and no. I don't want to give away the subject of tonight's little talk, but the answer is that we're both insignificant and incredibly, profoundly significant. We'd have to be, to be contacted by our friends.”

“Yeah, I read something about that by Dr. Pace,” and this caused the Greenies to laugh again. “Did I say something wrong?”

Tina put her hand on my arm and looked at me earnestly. “It's not ‘passé.’ It's pronounced ‘pa-chay.’ It's Italian for peace.”

“Ah, yeah, makes sense. Sorry.”

“No problem,” chuckled Ron. A bell rang in the distance and he checked his watch.

“Better hurry, Wendell. Tonight’s talk will start in fifteen minutes. We’ve got to leave now if we want good seats.”

I had a suspicion that I would prefer a bad seat. I felt that it was like going to a comedy club or a magic show; you don’t want to be in the front row. But I merely answered by nodding my head and scarfing down one more forkful of limp noodles and then chasing it with the horrible, burned coffee.

Tina put her hand on my arm again. She was apparently a very touchy-feely person. “You’re so lucky, Wendell, hearing Dr. Pace for the first time.” She sighed and stretched again before whispering in my ear. “Prepare to have your mind *blown*.”

We all trundled outside and walked on a narrow, twisty path for a long time. I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were just walking in circles, but with all the heavy growth around it was impossible to tell. After five minutes, the path opened up and we found ourselves in a large clearing. Straight ahead was a huge, black geodesic dome.

A dude with black bangs covering his forehead greeted us at the door, his tight green t-shirt straining to contain his muscles. He thrust out his mitt and squeezed my hand like he was trying to get juice out of it, looked me straight in the eye and said his name was Victor. I noticed a large scar snaking up his arm; he must have had some serious surgery done at some point.

I was going to have a hard time remembering all the names, because every time a new Greenie appeared, they had to know my name and they had to tell me theirs. The dome was called “the theater.” There was a stage dead center and four large, moveable spotlights stationed at the perimeter. Tina and Ron were disappointed that we couldn’t get any closer than four rows

from the stage. I was relieved, though I guessed at some point all of us greenhorn Greenies would have to stand up and give a short song and dance to the assembled throng.

The dome filled up to capacity and I discovered another interesting fact about the Greenies: They didn't bathe very often. Everyone nervously chattered away and you could feel the anticipation coursing through the dome. Another bell sounded. This time it was very loud and the whole place went dark. Then, the ceiling was covered in small pricks of light, maybe phosphorus paint, and it gave the theater the feel of a planetarium. A few in the crowd clapped and somebody to our left said "Whoa" in a loud, drawn-out drawl. A spotlight shone on the stage and it illuminated Victor who sat on the edge with a microphone in his hand. I looked around and it seemed that everybody's eyes were luminous, with pupils the size of dinner plates. I started to suspect that there was something other than coffee and Tang in our coffee and Tang.

Victor introduced himself and gave a pretty bland greeting. He wasn't much in the public speaking department. Finally, after his tepid welcoming speech, he said he was proud to introduce the great Doctor Pace. On cue, the sound of a rocket engine circled the dome. The entire crowd raucously applauded, whistled and stamped their feet. Another spotlight appeared at the back of the house and there he was, dressed in a green robe made out of some kind of shiny fabric. His long gray hair seemed to be illuminated but I could not figure out how. We stood as one as the doctor took his time walking through the sea of wide-eyed, smelly and mostly green-clad humanity. He finally climbed a set of stairs and reached the lectern where he stopped, smiled, and held up his hands in an effort to end the applause, but it had no effect. The throng continued their wild display of affection for what felt like a good five minutes. Finally, on some unseen cue, everybody stopped and took their seats.

I was surprised by the doctor's reedy tenor voice and his thick Italian accent. I wasn't surprised by the subject matter.

"Today," he opened, "today we are on the brink of self-annihilation. Today, we might all go up in some mighty radioactive cloud of smoke. We're killing members of our family here on Earth every day. We're killing them in Vietnam, in Italy, in Mexico, Ceylon, Eritrea and in Bangladesh. We used to have to kill with our bare hands and our teeth. Then, we progressed. Hah! We progressed to bones, spears, atlatls, bows and arrows, swords, muskets, gas, tanks, napalm and bombs. Now, we've gotten to the point where we can cause death to rain down like so much thunder and lightning without the victims even knowing who or what was responsible for their demise. Some would call this progress, but I think that this is exactly the opposite of progress."

"Right on!" shouted somebody in the back of the dome and the doctor continued.

"Is this the path you want to take? Are we creatures only capable of this remote control murder?"

The throng responded with some scattered shouts of "No!"

"I can't hear you. Do you want your brothers and sisters dead? Do you want that to be our legacy?"

A much stronger cry of denial answered back.

"I said do you want to wipe out all life on this planet?"

In unison, the crowd responded with a loud "No!"

"That's right! We're better than that. The future of our species should be spent promoting life, not death! We should be welcoming and accommodating to all." He thrust an accusing finger toward the back of the dome and continued in an almost conspiratorial whisper.

“But there are men, very powerful men, and they know the score.” Someone actually booed behind me. “They know we have been visited in the past and we will be visited again in the future.” He shook his head. “These men would rather destroy everything they cannot understand. They fear change. Do *you* fear change? Or do you want to try to understand this change?”

This confused the crowd, so the response was a mix of yeses and nos.

For a moment, I think his mic went out and we couldn’t hear what he was saying, but it didn’t matter. When the mic kicked back in, everybody clapped and he continued on as if nothing had happened. Aural effects punctuated his speech, sometimes bells and sometimes impossibly low horns and once it was a shimmering sound that seemed to emanate from a foot above our heads. There were lighting effects as well, strobes, spots of different colors and even a black light trick that seemed to make the doctor’s head separate from his body.

He spent the first third of his spiel knocking us down and telling us where we were falling short in our duties as human beings. The second third was spent building us back up and telling us about the untold potential lying untapped within each of us. Then the third act was filled with all his outer space nonsense. The earth was essentially a large nursery. Our space ancestors apparently put us here many millennia ago and it was finally time to take our first baby steps toward rejoining our space kin. The Interplanetary Family was building consulates and landing sites throughout the globe and it was only a matter of time—perhaps within this very year—before these beings swooped down and delivered us from all our destructive tendencies.

Pace called this “the Visitation” and referenced it more than a few times. At one point, Dr. Pace pleaded for us to help raise funds or donate to the cause so we could build these consulates. There was a payoff; our space brothers and sisters would recognize us as being the

enlightened ones and choose us to lead mankind in the exciting and important work that lay ahead. We would be the first students and in turn would become the Earth's teachers.

Sometimes it was hard to keep track of what the doctor was saying, especially when Tina would grab my knee or spontaneously hug me. I do remember him saying that our visitors would know us by the color green, which is a sacred color for them, but he didn't say how he knew this. Despite all the elaborate sound and lighting effects, there was no air conditioning and we all became drenched in sweat. Eventually, Dr. Pace wrapped up his speech and welcomed us all into his family, not the family of man but the Interplanetary Family.

Everyone stood and applauded. Tina had her arm wrapped around my waist and shouted in my ear.

"Isn't it wonderful?"

"It's pretty special," I answered, trying to think about the doctor's speech and not the soft flesh that was pressing against me. The spotlight followed Dr. Pace who, flanked by the muscle guy, left the stage and walked down the aisle closest to where Ron, Julia and I were seated.

When he passed us he reached out his hand to me. I took it and asked if Frank Foxberg was around. He looked at me funny so I repeated it. Pace said something to Victor before someone else grabbed his hand and his attention.

It took a while for us all to filter out of the lone exit. While I stood in this line, Victor lightly grabbed my arm and told me we were taking another exit. I told Tina and Ron I'd meet them outside and allowed myself to be steered toward a hidden door in the back of the theater.

The air outside was still warm and there was a scent of jasmine in the air, but I couldn't tell if that was from a bush or if it was incense burning somewhere. Victor pointed to a couple of open doors built into the ground; it looked like a Midwestern storm cellar. I opened the doors,

climbed down the steep stairs and found two green-clad pneumatic blondes perched on stools on either side of a closed door. I knocked and was told to enter.

Doctor Pace sat in front of a mirror. He was spreading cream on his face, removing his makeup.

“Welcome to our family, Wendell.”

I admit that I was thrown off for a moment. “You know who I am?” I asked.

“Of course. You’re Wendell Pike, a private investigator from San Francisco.”

“That’s right,” I responded. “I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. It’s unfortunate, but we need to keep track of visitors. We have to separate the wheat from the chaff, or assets from liabilities. Have a seat. Oh, and help yourself to a drink over there.” He motioned toward a side table that was set up with a bottle of Chivas, an ice bucket and a seltzer bottle. I made a small drink and sat on a leather chair and took a look around. It was more spartan than I would have expected, consisting of a few tables and chairs, some boxes and an old roll top desk.

“What do you think?” the doctor asked.

“The lack of clutter is something. Looks like an old bomb shelter,” I replied.

“That’s exactly what it was. Came with the property. Indeed, it was one of its main selling points for the foundation and myself. We need isolation and I need safety. There are those that would harm the good doctor, yes? You met Victor. He takes care of most of our security concerns.”

“Security concerns?” I asked.

The doctor frowned. It seemed that he was trying to make up his mind whether or not I could be trusted. “We’ve had a few instances of late...no, I don’t think you would be all that

interested.” He got up from his chair and walked over to the side table and made a stiff drink – it was almost all whiskey with just a splash of soda. He plopped down on the couch in front of me, reached into his robe and pulled out a pack of Kents.

“Mind if I join you?” I asked. I had been dying for a smoke.

“Your funeral,” he smirked. I fired up a Camel and he nodded toward an ashtray on the small table. I picked it up and placed it on my knee.

“That was some performance back there,” I said. “The sound effects, the lighting. It was all pretty well coordinated.”

“I’m more interested in what you thought of the content, not the performance.”

“The content, huh? Well, I’ve got to admit that I’m somewhat of a skeptic.”

Doctor Pace leaned forward. “So you believe that we are truly unique and alone in the universe? You don’t think that there are beings from other galaxies?”

“I don’t know that I believe or disbelieve in any of that,” I lied. “I have never seen a UFO or Bigfoot, or the Loch Ness Monster. All of them may or may not be real. But I’ll own that there’s a lot of stuff going on that I don’t understand. Can I ask you question?” He motioned for me to proceed. “How many people do you have up here?”

“It’s fluid. They come and go. We’ve had as many as one hundred and as few as thirty. Some are needed to work on the farm, some perform outreach and some are involved in procurement.”

I nodded. “And they’re all here voluntarily?”

“Of course.” He squinted and looked at me. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason. So when you say procurement, you mean your panhandlers? Lately, they seem to be everywhere.”

He took a moment to respond. “They’re not all mendicants and no, they really aren’t everywhere. We try to concentrate on a few areas: Downtown, the wharf and North Beach. All of this,” he waived his hand around for emphasis, “takes money.”

“So if you have fifty kids on the street and they each raise ten bucks, that’s 500 a day. Not bad.”

“Sure, but I doubt we have that many on the street. It’s probably closer to fifteen. Also, some are better at raising funds than others. Then, there are expenses like food, rent, maintenance and a few salaries.”

“What kind of outreach do they perform?”

“Distributing pamphlets and books, one on one talks in some of the homeless youth shelters and lectures in local high schools and colleges.”

“And this farm?”

“The hope is to sell our produce and for the farm to be self-sustaining, but that’s taking longer than we anticipated.”

We continued smoking for a bit and Pace seemed to change his tack.

“You’re looking for Frank Foxberg?”

I was surprised by the abrupt change of direction but I went with it. “Yeah. Someone I know is looking for him. He hasn’t been seen in a while. They knew he liked to spend time up here.”

He sighed deeply. “When did I last see Frank?” he asked himself. “Let’s see, it might have been one week, two weeks? Something like that.”

That fit with the timeframe established by the *TV Guide* back in the Foxbergs’ small house but it was anything but conclusive. “Did he say he was going anywhere?”

“Hmm? Well, Frank liked to come and go as he pleased. A bit of a wanderer, I suppose.” He arched an eyebrow and looked at me. “This isn’t a prison, Mr. Pike.”

“Okay,” was all I could say.

“Yes, there was a bit of nomad in Frank. He liked to drive around, find a campsite and set up his telescope. I understand he had pressures at home.”

“What pressures are you talking about?”

“The routine angst of modern life, Mr. Pike. The job, the endless pursuit of money, marriage issues, you name it. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“He had marriage issues?”

“Everybody has marriage issues. Some are aware of them and some not so much.”

“What about Deanna? That’s his wife. She said she tried to talk to you, but couldn’t get through.”

Doctor Pace smiled. “I’m a busy man.”

“I’ll bet.”

“And while we welcome most everyone into our family, we try to keep the negativity at a minimum.”

“Deanna is negative?”

The doctor only shrugged.

“But Frank, he’s a member of the Interplanetary Family. I was told he was, I don’t know, part of your inner circle.”

“I don’t want to disappoint you Mr. Pike, but there’s no hidden cabal, no inner circle. I spend more time with some than others, but then that’s more job related than anything else. They are all my family.”

“Sure, I dig,” I said though of course I didn’t. I reached in and pulled out one of the Monopoly style business cards with my name and number printed on it. “Could you do me a favor? If you see him, can you give him this? I promise you that I don’t mean any harm; I just want to talk to him, okay?”

Doctor Pace took the card, looked at it for a bit and nestled it inside the cellophane of his cigarette pack. Then, he looked at his fancy watch, which looked like it was made of solid gold. I took his gesture as a sign that the audience was over.

“I’ll show myself out, okay? Peace,” I said, flashing a V with my fingers.

“Mister Pike.” Pace rose from the couch and reached out. His handshake was limp and his palms clammy. “Will you think about it? Will you think about joining the Family?”

“Join up?” After several years in the Navy, enlisting in anything was off my list but I offered up a non-committal, “I just might. I’ll think about it, doctor.”

“We could use someone like you for outreach into your, your community.”

I looked at him sideways. “You mean North Beach?” It was my turn to smirk.

When I left the blondes entered. Muscles wasn’t anywhere in sight so I climbed the stairs and found myself outside again. I followed a small path that surrounded the dome and wound up back at the entrance. Tina was waiting for me but Ron was nowhere in sight.

There was noise and activity everywhere. Maybe it was from the speech or maybe there really was something in the coffee and Tang, but everybody seemed high as a kite as they hugged each other and ran off at the mouth in excited and nonsensical sentence fragments. A bonfire was newly lit and a rock band played something sounding like an Indian raga. Shrieks of delight and laughter erupted, clothes were shed and some serious rutting took place all over the grounds. Serial monogamy, my ass.

It was just before dawn when I woke up. Tina was lying next to me and her pale skin looked almost blue in the early morning light. I pecked her cheek, got my clothes back on and tried to retrace my steps. Apparently, there was more than one path leading to the big blue building and it took me a couple of tries to find the right one. It was straighter and more direct than I remembered. I was a bit surprised to see a couple of people walking around the grounds. Maybe they were still wired from whatever drug was still coursing through their bodies or they were just excited by the doctor's lecture and were ready to welcome our new alien friends.

I was suffering from a severe case of cotton mouth when I stumbled across a couple of young women wearing green tank tops and shorts and sitting on a low retaining wall. I went up to them and asked if they had any water. The young Asian girl with a bob cut smiled and let me have a sip from a Bobby Sherman thermos she carried in a large purse. It wasn't water and it wasn't Tang; it was slightly sweetened, lukewarm green tea.

"Thanks. I needed that." Then, remembering the standard protocol, I thrust out my hand. "Hi, I'm Wendell."

"Hi, Wendell," one of them answered. "I'm Yeoreum and this is Sandy. Is this your first time here?"

"Yeah, I didn't know what to expect, but it was pretty wild."

"Doctor Pace is pretty inspiring, isn't he?"

"I guess that's one way of putting it," I answered, thinking about Tina.

"What's your thing, Wendell?"

“What’s my thing?” I repeated. I thought for a bit. “I guess I do a little bit of everything. I’m kind of a puzzle solver, trying to put things in the right place. I try to help out folks, especially those who have gotten a raw deal.” I’ll own that this was a terrible description of my job, but I didn’t want to say I was a P.I. because that could bring the conversation to a halt.

Yeoreum tried to digest what I said while she chewed on her thumbnail. Finally, she exclaimed, “You’re like Hong Gil Dong!”

“Who’s he?”

“He was a famous Korean. Sort of like Robin Hood.”

“I see. You’re Korean?”

“Yeah. I mean, I was born there but I’ve lived in this country for most of my life. Listening to Dr. Pace’s lectures has made me want to reconnect with my roots. I want to find out how I can help my people. I think that’s important, don’t you?”

I made an agreeable noise and she continued.

“Someday, I hope to help build an Interplanetary Family consulate in Seoul. That would be really cool.”

“Sure. Are there other Koreans here?”

“Not yet, but I’m sure there will be others soon. Every week, there are more and more. It’s amazing the way we get people from all over the world.”

The one named Sandy giggled, nudged her friend and said, “What about that dude from the other day?”

“Right!” shrieked Yeoreum. “A day or so ago, we had a really funny visitor.” She started laughing so hard that it was difficult for her to continue. Finally, the fit subsided and she continued. “He spoke with a funny accent, like he was British or something. He was looking

for, get this, he was looking for his *dog*.” She started laughing again. “I’m sorry,” she apologized with a slight bow of her head. “I’m not being mean. Maybe he’ll come back when he finds his dog. I’m sure he could help us. There’s so little time and so much work to be done.”

“So little time?” I asked, handing her back the thermos.

“You heard the doctor. The Visitation could happen as early as this year. We need to be ready.” She looked so young and so earnest and just as loony as the rest of the nut cases.

“That sounds groovy, good luck with of that.” I did a little half bow and continued. “By the way, I’m looking for a friend of mine,” I mentioned. “Tall, thin, about six-three, blonde hair and a bit older, like me.”

“I don’t know,” said a slightly confused Yeoreum.

“What about Stan?” prompted Sandy.

“Who?” asked Yeoreum.

“Stan from L.A. You know, that tall guy. He was always hanging around Jules. I think he liked her.”

“Oh, him.” Yeoreum turned to Sandy. “But he’s not blonde. He’s not that old either. I haven’t seen him around for a while. He was kind of gross.”

“No, it’s not Stan. His name is Frank,” I said.

Both of the girls looked at me with blank stares.

“Sorry,” said Yeoreum. “Can’t help you.”

“No big deal. I’m sure I’ll run into him. Thanks for the tea.” I did a small bow toward the girls.

“Sure, no problem. I hope to see you back here? We need your help.”

“Sure thing, this is all...a gas. A real gas. Take care.”

With that, I headed back in what I hoped was the right direction. I made one more wrong turn before I caught sight of the cafeteria and I finally found my way back to the bike. There was a small crowd standing around admiring it, including Victor, the muscle guy in the tight green t-shirt. I wondered if any of these crazies ever got any sleep.

“Your motor bike?” Victor asked in his thick, indeterminate accent. He looked at the back of the BSA. “A consulate plate? Which country?” he asked.

“Ruritania,” I said, because that was the first thing that entered my mind. “You like bikes?”

“Yeah, but I like Harleys, you know. Like *Easy Rider*.” He flicked his head to the side to move his hair out of his eyes.

“Choppers are cool,” I nodded in agreement. I shook out a Camel and offered him one and then sparked both of them. “You’re Victor, right?”

“Yes. And you’re Wendell.”

“That’s right.” Apparently word got around and there was some kind of file on me. “The bike? Yeah, not really mine. I’m borrowing it.”

“Where are you from, Wendell?” he asked, exhaling perfect smoke rings.

“The City,” I answered.

“That’s what I thought. So you borrowed this bike to ride up here? You know we drive a bus up from Geary Street?”

“Yeah, I know, but the timing was wrong. Work, you know?” He grunted and we smoked and enjoyed the silence for a bit. I asked in a lower tone of voice, “How long have you been with Dr. Pace?”

He furrowed his brow and then flung his head back again. “A couple of years.”

“Cool. Say, I asked the doctor this too, but have you seen a dude named Frank Foxberg around? Tall, blonde dude, into astronomy. I was told he might be up here. He drives a sporty little Volvo?” I added as innocently as I could.

He squinted a bit and looked at me guardedly. “Why? Is he a friend of yours?”

“Friend of a friend. I heard that he likes to spend time up here.”

“I don’t know anybody by that name and there are lots of tall, blonde dudes here.” I couldn’t be sure but something was off.

“I’ve got to say that the doctor said some powerful stuff back there. Some of it made a lot of sense,” I lied. “I had a great time and I’ll try to get back as soon as I can, work permitting. Maybe I can bring a friend next time and get here in time for dodgeball. I missed it today, but it sounded like a lot of fun. Oh, and thanks for the grub.”

“You’re leaving?”

“I’d love to stay but I’ve got to work tomorrow.” I looked at my watch. “Damn, I guess I mean today, huh? Yeah, I know it sucks to work on Sunday, but someone has to open the shop.” I didn’t specify what kind of shop I was supposed to be opening. “If that’s all right,” I hastened to add.

“Sure, that’s okay. You’re free to leave at any time,” he said in a way that somehow managed to convey the entirely opposite meaning.

“Cool. Thanks again. Catch you later.” I ground out the butt into the dirt, got my gloves out of one of the saddlebags and got back on the bike. The BSA started up on the second kick and I managed to get it pointed in the right direction and headed down the gravel. I gave a wave

to the person in the guard shack, but it wasn't my loopy pal Baxter. It was a Greenie with a cold, hard stare. He didn't wave back.

The sun was coming up and I was beat. I thought about parking over at the Foxbergs' pad and catching some z's on that single bed, but I decided that I would feel better with a shower and some eggs, so I headed down Sir Francis Drake toward Highway 1. I'll admit I was going somewhere north of fifty when I reached a sharp left turn. I downshifted and hit the brakes, but instead of slowing, I heard something snap and then there was nothing but play in the brake handle. I downshifted again in a frantic effort to rub off some speed, but with the added weight of the sidecar, I was still going too fast to make the turn. In one instant, I was on the road and then for a moment I was actually airborne. The unstressed engine revved even higher before the BSA tore into a large green bush. The early morning sunlight played through the thick vegetation with an almost stroboscopic effect. Branches and twigs stabbed at me, and I kept bouncing until the front wheel bit into some soft mud. The bike slammed to a halt, flipping me over the handlebars in the process. I landed flat on my back in a small, wet ditch, my fall only partially broken by some ferns and other small plants.

The bike cut out and made a ticking noise as something in the engine cooled. Other than that, everything was dead quiet. I stayed on my back for a while because I really didn't want to see how badly I was hurt. Eventually, I got up and saw a nasty gash on my left leg and my right thigh was one mass of throbbing, dull pain. I felt around and other than a few small cuts and bruises, I seemed to be okay. The bike was scratched and the front forks looked bent. The sidecar had a huge dent on the side. Part of me wanted to leave the bike there and try my luck hitching, but it wasn't my ride, so I had to try to get it out of the woods. This wasn't easy; I

probably spent the better part of an hour in a laborious effort to get the bike back on the road. I looked back and saw that I had missed a large tree by less than a foot.

The bike wouldn't start, so I had to push it all the way to Point Reyes Station, but it was tough going because the misalignment of the front end kept pulling the bike to the left. What should have been a thirty minute walk turned into a something over an hour. I was passed by a couple of cars. None of them stopped.

There was only one gas station in town. They had just opened for the day and the attendant, Dave, let me park the bike there while I cleaned up a bit. The drug store in town was closed, but a small grocery was open and they had some alcohol and bandages. I found a phone booth and was lucky enough to reach Fats. He was grouchy but then I had awakened him. I gave him a brief description of the accident and told him where I was. He said he'd get the truck up there as soon as could. Fats asked about the bike and I described the damage. He almost hung up before he asked how I was doing. I said I'd live and I'd see about getting some food. I struck out there. The only café wasn't open until eleven, so I limped back to the store and bought a banana and a carton of milk.

Back at the gas station, I borrowed a couple of rags and set to work cleaning up the bike a bit. At that time of the morning, the station wasn't busy, so Dave spent his free time hovering around and asking me what happened. I told him and he clucked a bit and then traced the brake cable with his hand and looked at me, telling me that was my problem. He pointed out where the brake cable had snapped in half. He said it was weird in that it looked like a pretty clean break, almost as if it was cut. I considered that for a bit and figured I was lucky I wasn't going faster when it happened.

Fats showed up a few hours later. He apologized for taking so long but the traffic had been bad most of the way. He said I looked awful and I said I felt awful. Thankfully, he had brought a bottle of scotch and a six pack. I was lightheaded after having a couple of hits off the scotch and chugging a beer. Then, we both surveyed the damage and got the bike loaded and tied down onto the bed of his ancient Chevy Apache with the help from the attendant. I tipped Dave five bucks and he said good luck.

We didn't speak much on the way back, but I told Fats that I'd pay to get the bike fixed. He had a repair place in mind, so I said that was fine and I offered to help him unload it, but he declined my offer and drove me right to my door, leaving the rest of the bottle with me. Once inside, I cleaned up the cut and dressed the wound. In addition to the other aches, my shoulder was starting to bark at me. I finished the scotch and found a roach and took a couple of hits. Despite my self-medication and fatigue, I had a hard time falling asleep. I kept wondering why the Interplanetary Family's security was so heavy handed. What the hell were they spooked about?

It was around eleven when I woke up. Even after a hot shower, I didn't feel any better. My shoulder and thigh still throbbed and the cut on my leg gave me a sharp pain. It was also itching like crazy. I cleaned it again. I didn't need stitches. I would just have to change the dressing a few times before it started healing. When I checked out my face in the mirror, a very tired man stared back at me, his face covered in cuts and scratches. I would have liked to just hang out, smoke weed and listen to records but I convinced myself that I had stuff to do.

I got dressed and limped down the hill. The sun was out and there was a slight onshore breeze making things smell clean. I stopped off at Trieste and picked up a large coffee and a square apricot pastry. I dropped a quarter in the familiar yellow box, picked up a *Chronicle* and gingerly made my way to the office.

"What the hell happened to you?" asked Tack. He was generally concerned.

"Bike accident," I said.

"Really? You look terrible."

"That's good, because I feel terrible. I was riding Fats' trike and took a corner too fast."

"That's not like you."

"Ah, the sidecar makes it handle funny." For some reason, I didn't want to say anything about the brakes. "Any messages?"

"Yeah, Montrose called."

"What did he want?"

"Not sure. He didn't say. He just asked you to give him a call. Said you had the number."

I figured that the call to Montrose could wait. I took a couple of bites of the pastry, gulped down half of the coffee, fired up a smoke and called the hospital, but there hadn't been any change in Corky's condition. Then, I fished out the traffic cop's card and gave him a call. He picked up on the third ring.

"Traffic."

"Detective Barnes?"

"Yeah?"

"This is Wendell Pike. We spoke the other day at Marin General?"

"Oh yeah, the P.I. To what do I owe the distinct pleasure?" He was pouring on the sarcasm awfully thick.

"I was just curious how your investigation was going."

"I told you that it's pretty straight ahead. It's all going fine and should be wrapped up by the end of the week." He paused for a bit and continued. "But you already knew that. So, why the call?"

"Look, I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job, okay?"

"I hear a 'but' coming. Out with it. I don't have all day."

"Well, I've got two things. One is a question and one is a hunch."

"A what?" He covered the mouthpiece and I could hear a couple of muffled expletives before he took his hand away and said, "What's your hunch? You know I don't have time for amateurs screwing things up."

"No, I totally dig that, man. It's just a feeling."

"What feeling?"

"It's just that, well, did you check the brake line on Corky's Plymouth?"

“And why would I?”

“No reason except for this weird feeling.”

“Weird feeling, huh? You’re a psychic now? I thought you just spent your time looking for dogs.”

“Yeah, well, I thought about it and it’s been bugging me all weekend. Again, I’m not trying to do your job or give you more work than you already have--”

“Yet,” he interrupted, “here you are, giving me more work than I already have.”

“I’d just feel more comfortable if you could have somebody check it.”

“Okay, Amazing Kreskin, I’m not making any promises but I’ll see what we can do.”

From his tone, I could tell he was just humoring me. “Well, aside from your hunch, you said you had a question?”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “Did you find a dog in or around the car?”

“Give me a break. I don’t have time for this crap. What’s with you, anyway? Do you get paid big money if you find this dog? Is it wearing a diamond collar?”

And with that, he hung up without saying goodbye.

I gingerly put the phone back on the switchhook.

“What was that about brakes?” asked Tack.

“Nothing,” I lied. “Like I said, just a hunch.” I opened the Sporting Green section and read about Sunday’s double dip with the Braves. The Giants lost the first game 6-4 in 10 innings and won the nightcap 2 to 1, improving the Jints overall record to a dismal 11 and 25. They’d be lucky to win 70 games at this pace. This didn’t help my mood. I put the paper down and glanced again at the front page. In between articles about Nixon and Kissinger visiting the Soviet Union, a man attacking the Pietà with a hammer, and Ceylon becoming Sri Lanka, there

was something about a train accident near Travis Air Force Base. A car on the tracks was struck by a freight train. Three men, two of them enlisted airmen, were confirmed killed but two other men were reported as missing. The way the story was written made it seem like the man's friends just took off and left him there. Police and military personnel were actively searching for them but the article didn't have any descriptions. There was a picture of the wrecked car. I couldn't see much. It was just a tangled, twisted heap of metal, but when I looked closely, I could make out the "Beam Me Up Scotty!" sticker on the rear bumper. I went through the rest of the paper but I didn't see anything about Corky's wreck.

I spun my wheels for the rest of the day. Tack had some business to attend to so I was by myself, trying to put the last few days in perspective. The more I thought about things, the fouler my mood got until I was finally righteously pissed. I tried calling Deanna again but she didn't, wouldn't or couldn't pick up. I finally called the lawyer back. He wanted to know if I had the recording of Mr. X's fling and that reminded me of the cassettes. I said I could swing by his office and he said no, just to drop them in the mail.

I made a trip to the post office and then stopped by Golden Boy for a slice and picked up a couple of Coors from the liquor store. Noah wasn't working, which was too bad because I wanted him to translate something for me. I limped back to the office and tried to be productive. Among other things, I tried to draw a map of the I.F. compound. It was incomplete, but I wanted to get it down before I forgot some of the details. At some point, I dozed off.

It was dark out when the phone woke me up. The Hamm's Beer clocked showed 10:37. I was still sitting in my chair and it groaned in sympathy with my torn up body. Everything hurt and I was having trouble focusing. I finally managed to pick up the phone and a frantic Deanna Foxberg was on the other end.

“Where have you been?” she demanded in a shrill voice.

“That’s rich. Where I have been? Where have you been? You say you want to hire me, kite a check and disappear, and now you want to know where I’ve been. Jesus lady, you take the cake.”

“I, I need some help.” She modulated her voice down to a whisper. “I’m in trouble and I need some help, some money.”

“What? Wait, can’t it wait until morning and then you can go to the bank like normal people do?” I was breaking out of my fog and becoming increasingly upset all over again.

“No, it, it can't wait. Please!” she wailed.

My brain was screaming at me to hang up, but I continued the conversation. I didn't trust her, but she sounded desperate. “Are you alone? Where are you?”

“Yes,” she whispered, “I’m alone. Well, no, not really.”

“Which is it?”

“I’m with somebody. I’m, we’re in the Western Addition. It’s a large pink building off Hayes.”

“The Pink Palace? That's a dangerous place at this time of night. What the hell are you doing in the Pink Palace?” I demanded.

“It’s complicated. Look, I need you to come here and I need money.”

“Is this a set up? Are you looking to get me rolled?”

“I need a hundred dollars,” she blurted out.

“What? That’s not how it works! You pay me, not the other way around. And you haven't paid me, remember?”

“I’ll pay you. It's just that, there's some cash flow problems.”

“Right. I’m hanging up now...”

“Listen, Mr. Pike, Wendell, if you don’t come here soon, something very bad is going to happen.”

“And that’s going to be my fault? You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Please. I’m in trouble. You’ll get your money, I promise. I’ll pay you more than we agreed. I’ll pay you an extra five hundred,” she pleaded.

“When? I’m not taking a check again. It’s got to be cash.”

“Sure, I can do that, but it will have to wait until the first of the month.”

I sighed. “Give me the address and apartment number. I’ll have to get to get a cab.”

I wrote down the address and told her it could be an hour. She wanted me there quicker but I told her these things take time and I would get there as soon as I could. I slammed the phone down and let loose a loud string of expletives. Then, I called City Cab dispatch to see if Gill was working. He was and was in the area. I told the dispatcher that I’d be in front of the Savoy Tivoli in five minutes.

I got some bills out of the safe, drank some water from the sink, splashed a little on my face, grabbed my smokes, lighter, jacket and keys and headed gingerly down the stairs.

About ten minutes later, I was in Gill’s cab and we were headed west on Broadway.

“What’s the rush?” he asked

“I have to help out a crazy woman,” I responded.

“Aren’t they all?”

“What? No, but this one really is. And I’m crazy for going to try to help her.”

“All right, you’re both crazy? Is that like wrongs and rights? Do two crazies make one sane?”

“I don't think it works that way, Gill.”

“She's in the Pink Palace? It's probably drugs, right?” he asked.

“I don't know, man. She said things would get bad if I didn't show up. I'm trying to keep things from blowing up.”

“Oh, you're like Sparky the bear, right? Preventing forest fires?”

“That's Smoky.”

“What's smoking?”

“Never mind.”

The Yerba Buena Plaza Annex was an eleven-storey tower of public housing in Hayes Valley. That was its official name, but because of the squalor and the faded pink paint job it was always referred to as the Pink Palace. Standing outside on the street, you could see the top of City Hall's dome, but that might as well have been a world away. The Palace was nasty. At any given time, a third of the apartments might have been empty. The building was heavily vandalized. Some shattered windows were covered in plywood and some were simply left uncovered. Young gangs roamed around it looking to rob unwary tourists of cash and cameras. Drugs were sold openly in defiance of the overworked and understaffed police force. People got hurt here. We parked on the street and Gill wanted to know if I needed backup. I told him to stay put, but if I wasn't back in fifteen minutes to come looking for me. He understood that this meant to bring his gun.

The elevators weren't working so I had to take the stairwell. It smelled of urine and worse and there were bottles, cans, boxes and bags of trash scattered about. James Brown blared from somebody's stereo. He told me I had to do it on the good foot while a dog barked non-stop

in a clumsy counterpoint. There were lots of dogs in the projects. They kept the cops and repo men at bay. I got to the third floor and looked for 304. The door was ajar and when I gently pushed it open, I saw a tall, bearded, young black cat wearing a Giants jersey. He was straining to control a large barking German Shepherd with a short rope lease. I walked into the apartment holding my hands up as non-threateningly as possible. I looked over to my right and saw Deanna Foxberg dressed in jeans and windbreaker. She had a small purse under one arm and was holding a .38 in the other, aiming it at the young man.

“Is that him?” asked the man.

Deanna gave a quick glance in my direction. “Yes, that's him.”

“Hi, my name's Wendell,” I stated as calmly as I could. “And you are?”

“Bigfoot.” He pounded his chest twice for emphasis and repeated himself. “I'm Bigfoot.”

And here I was thinking I didn't believe in Bigfoot. Well I was nowhere near Scotland so Nessie was out, but maybe I'd see some UFOs before the night was through.

“Okay, Bigfoot it is. Deanna, Bigfoot, would one of you care to tell me what's going on?”

“This bitch ripped me off,” Bigfoot snarled.

“Did you rip off Bigfoot, Deanna?” I asked.

“No, not intentionally.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Yeah, right!” agreed Bigfoot. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I told him, I told Mr. Bigfoot...”

“Ain't no Mr. Bigfoot, I told you it's just Bigfoot.”

Deanna looked over at me with barely controlled panic in those crazy eyes. “I told him that I would get him the money, that he would have to trust me but I would get the money to him.”

The Shepherd kept up its loud, monotonous monologue. Somebody down the hall screamed, “Shut that damn dog up or I’ll come over there and shut him up for good!”

“Bigfoot, did Ms. Foxberg here engage in a transaction?” I had a pretty good idea of what had gone down and I didn’t like it.

“She bought a hundred bucks worth and then said she couldn’t pay me.” He leered at me. “I suggested we could take it in trade. You hear what I’m saying?”

Deanna interrupted him. “I said I would pay you, it just had to be a little later.”

The dog continued to bark.

“Shut that goddamned dog up!” screamed the voice from down the hall.

I could hear a siren in the distance and it was getting louder. “One hundred dollars, is that right, Bigfoot?”

“It was one hundred. Now, it’s closer to two hundred.”

“What, you’re charging interest now?” I asked. I had lost my calm voice and was getting as shrill as everybody else.

“Interest? Do I look like a bank to you?” asked Bigfoot. “Ain’t no interest. This bitch shot my TV!”

“What?”

“Yeah, she pulls that thing out and points it at me. I told her to put it down and she pointed at my TV and shot it. She killed my TV. It exploded. Look!”

The TV screen had a hole in it and there were shards of glass on the floor around it. I guessed it was a twenty-inch black and white. “Look, Bigfoot, that TV isn’t worth a hundred bucks. Fifty, max.”

“What are you talking about, man? That’s a fine TV.”

“Sure, but we’re talking replacement, not improvement. Fifty bucks, one-fifty total. Besides, I don’t have two bills. If one-fifty won’t work, then I’m afraid I’ll have to split and let you two work it out on your own.”

“No!” They both shouted in unison.

“Shut that damn dog *up*!” screamed the neighbor. “Don’t make me come and do it! Don’t make me!”

The dog kept barking.

I had put five twenties in one sock and had some tens in my wallet and a few more bills in my other shoe. I retrieved the bills, counted them out and put them on top of a yellow and chrome dinette table. “It’s all there. Count it if you want. We’ll wait.”

So he did, three separate times. When he was finally satisfied he looked at me straight in the eye. I didn’t flinch. “We good,” he said.

“You hear that, Deanna? It’s all good. We’re going to leave now, OK Bigfoot?”

“Yeah, get the hell out of my house.”

I checked the hallway and it was clear. Deanna took that moment to fire another round into the TV.

“Whoops,” she said in a detached, bemused tone.

“She crazy!” shouted Bigfoot. “Get her the hell out of here!”

We exited the apartment and the door slammed shut.

When we got to the stairs, I grabbed her arm and got in her face.

“What the hell?” I hissed.

She had a grin on her damn face. “I figured we’d already paid for it. It was fun, did you see the look...”

“What do you mean we paid for it? I paid for it and if that’s your kind of fun, stay away, I mean far away from me.” The barking continued and the man down the hall continued his threats. When we got to the ground floor, we were met by Gill. The siren had gotten very loud and I could see the reflections of the cherries a block away. I hustled us all into the hack and we waited while a black and white sped past us. I was shaking a little bit and I felt a tightness in my chest. I tried taking a couple of large breaths.

“Everything okay?” Gill asked, looking at me funny.

“Sure, Gill, everything’s cool.” I fumbled for a smoke and sparked it. I didn’t offer one to Deanna. When I looked over at her she smiled.

“Thanks for--”

“Shut up. I don’t want to hear it.”

The mood in the cab was bleak. Gill tried to keep some conversation going, but I wasn’t in the mood. Then he started whistling something that sounded like Swanee River until he caught my glare in the rear view mirror. Deanna wanted to be dropped off at a bar in the Marina but I said I needed to talk to her first. Parking was impossible on Union Street at that time of night so the hack pulled into a red zone.

“Gill?” I asked.

“Yeah?”

“Can you give us a few moments?”

“Huh?”

“Like a little privacy?”

“Oh, yeah, sure. I could use some coffee. I’ll leave the keys with you in case a cop wants you to move.”

He tossed them to me and split. Now, it was just the two of us in the back seat. I looked at Deanna and shook my head. “What the hell was going on back there?”

“Well, the truth is that I’ve dealt with Mr. Bigfoot a few times, but I always went there with someone else. He’s given my friends credit, so I thought there wouldn’t be any problem if I asked for it.”

“Unbelievable.”

“I took along the gun for protection.”

“Where did you get it?”

“We own a couple of them and Frank made me learn how to fire it. For protection.”

“Protection? Like back there in Bigfoot’s pad? Where does this end? I don’t do this shit for fun. You have to pay me what I’m owed. That’s over a grand right now plus what I just paid out.”

“I can pay you. You know I’ve got the money. Well, I will have the money on the first.”

“The one-fifty and what you already owe me.”

“Of course.”

“Plus Gill’s fee.”

“Sure, I guess. But what about Frank? Have you got anywhere with that?”

“No, but not for lack of effort, believe me. I was able to get into the Greenie compound up in Inverness.”

“You did? Were you able to talk to them? What did they say?”

“I talked to a few, including Dr. Pace, but he said he hadn’t seen him for a while.” I thought about something else. “Do you like merlot?” I asked.

“What?”

“Simple question. Yes or no?”

“No, not particularly. I prefer chardonnay. Frank likes reds. Why?”

“When I was up there, I checked out your spread as well, and it looked like somebody had been there within the last couple of weeks.”

“Do you think it was Frank?”

“Probably. But he hasn’t been there in a bit.”

She started to say something and then thought better of it. I stared out the window. The adrenaline was wearing off and I was back to feeling sore. I needed a drink. When I turned back to her, I saw that she had taken a small vial out her purse and scooped up some powder with her long pinky nail. She carefully brought it up her nose and inhaled with a loud snort. Her pupils dilated and she tried on a small grin.

“Care for a little tootski?” she asked.

“You didn’t sleep with her did you?” Tack asked with a wicked grin.

“What? No. Hell, no! Last thing in the world I need. That woman is stone cold crazy.”

We were sitting in the office. I had gotten in late and had a huge headache in addition to my other pains. Deanna had called again and swore that she could pay me. I just had to wait a week or so. I said the right things during the pauses and by the time I hung up, I was still working for her and she was going to double my fee.

Carvin called and I asked him if he had received the tapes and he said no, but that was not why he called. He said I might expect a visit from the police regarding my sloppy surveillance, but I shouldn't be too worried. Although taking photos of the couple could technically result in a type 1 felony charge, he didn't expect it to amount to anything, not even a Peeping Tom type misdemeanor.

“They won’t press charges,” Carvin insisted.

“Easy for you to say.”

“Trust me. I’m a lawyer.”

“Now there’s a phrase that doesn’t exactly inspire trust.”

I could almost hear him shrug over the phone. “Maybe. But I’m good at what I do. All of this is just a legal ploy. They’re trying to prevent the pictures from being entered as evidence. But I’m confident that this will never go to trial. We caught Mr. X with his pants down, literally.” He allowed himself a small chuckle. “They’re just making noise. It will blow over. *De minimis non curat lex*,” quoted the counselor.

I asked what that meant and he said something like the law doesn't concern itself with trifles. This was his way of consoling me, dig?

“Yeah, but it’s still what they call a *rompicoglioni* around here,” I responded. He didn't ask for a translation.

I had gotten a call from Lawrence Milner in the morning. I said I was looking into Frank Foxberg’s whereabouts. I was surprised when he said he had a lunch appointment at two at the U.S. Café so he could spare a few minutes around one. He arrived a few minutes late by the Hamm’s Beer wall clock, but I never completely relied on it. It had come out of a closed down saloon and I suspected it was used to running on bar time.

Milner showed up wearing a tan leisure suit. The brown shirt with pink polka dots featured huge pointed collars and apparently he didn’t believe in buttons, preferring to show off his fine crop of chest hair and a large gold chain that suspended a small spoon. He had several large rings on his stubby, hairy fingers, a Fu Manchu mustache and wore his light brown hair in a tight perm. I introduced him to Tack and he walked over to Tack’s desk and thrust out his hand.

“Hi, Ramon, is it? Call me Larry. Everybody does. Computers, huh?” He looked over at me. “Must be a smart cookie. Am I right?”

“Yeah, Ramon has his moments,” I agreed. Larry continued to walk around the room, picking things up and examining them. Finally, I got him planted in one of the chairs and I sparked both of our weeds with the pistol lighter. Larry’s eyes lit up like a little kid and he examined the thing from all angles.

“You’re looking for that creep Foxberg. I looked into *you*. People say you’re all right.” He nodded his head.

“Have you seen him around?”

“Not in a while.” He thought for a bit. “A month or more? But then, I’ve been out of town for a few weeks. The missus and I went to Cabo. Ever been? I tell you it was a stone gas, man.”

“So I’ve heard, but I’ve never been there. Look, I don’t want to take up too much of your time, but what’s your beef with Frank?”

“Let me see, how shall I put this?” He looked down for a bit, picking at a piece of lint that may or may not have been on his pressed pant leg. Then he looked up and smiled. “My wife and I like to party, Wendell. We’ve got friends in the entertainment industry with similar tastes, if you know what I mean.”

I guessed the adult entertainment industry but kept it to myself and motioned for him to go on.

“I’ve worked hard all my life and I feel I deserve to have a little fun. Maybe once a month we’ll have a few couples drop by, soak in the hot tub, dance and drink a little.” He winked and rubbed his nose, which I guessed meant coke and sex, but again I just smiled.

“What about Deanna?” I asked.

“No problems there,” he laughed. “Deanna’s a wonderful gal, classy you know? Yeah, she’ll often drop by when the hubby isn’t around. But that Foxberg, he’s different. He never seems comfortable around us and he doesn’t like Deanna going over to our house.”

“He said that?” I asked.

“No, but she did. She also said that Frank didn’t know how to have fun.”

“But she does?”

“And how, brother!” He chuckled and started to say something but then stopped. “Nah, I shouldn’t say anything about that.”

“About what?” I prodded.

“It’s...never mind.” He looked me up and down and thought for a bit. “Wendell, let me ask you a personal question if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Wendell,” he said slowly, “have you ever thought about swinging?”

Even though I had gotten all the hints, it still threw me for a bit of a loop. “Swing? Um, it’s cool and all that, but not really my thing.”

Larry considered this for a bit. “Too bad. The missus will be disappointed.”

I did a half shrug and continued. “Tell her I’m sorry, I guess.” I cleared my throat and sensed Tack’s amusement. He had a wide grin on his map and was trying to hide it by burrowing into a large stack of green bar print out. I let it slide and decided to continue. “What was the problem with Frank?”

“Problems, plural. Let me tell you, at first he seemed okay. We even did a little business together. But over time, Foxberg got weirder and weirder.”

“How so?”

Larry thought about this for a bit before continuing. “I don’t know, just crazy, you know. Paranoid. He didn’t like to go out during the day and was convinced he was being followed. He started arguing with his wife. We could hear them at all hours. He was also accusing me of all kinds of things, including being a federal agent if you can believe that.” He laughed and rubbed his large pinky ring. “On top of that, Foxberg told me that he didn’t like our parties, said they attracted too much attention. I tried to tell him that we were all adults and what we did didn’t harm anybody. He didn’t see it like that. Then, there was that darned telescope. Say, do you have anything to drink?”

I looked at the clock and shrugged. "There might be a couple of cold ones in the fridge," I offered.

"A beer would be great. I'm still kind of on vacation. Don't have to go back to work until next week, though I'll probably pop into one or two of my stores out of boredom."

I got a couple of Coors tallies out of the small office fridge.

"Ramon?" I held up a beer but he shook his head.

"Nah, I'm trying to make sense of this stuff," he said. "It's not compiling and I can't find the error. I must have a comma in the wrong place or something."

My chair did its thing when I sat back down.

"You should try some WD-40 on that. Fix it right up," said a helpful Larry.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll try it. What is it that you do for a living?"

"Auto parts. Started with one small store in Dublin and now I've got five of them throughout the Bay Area."

"Dublin Auto Mart? That's you?"

"Yup." He proudly smiled and took a sip of the beer. "Wow. That hits the spot, thanks."

"What about the war?"

"The what?"

"Sorry, I heard it described that way. The light and sound spectacular."

"Oh, that." He furrowed his brow. "One night we were having a little soiree and I looked up and what do you think I saw?"

"Frank and his telescope?" I guessed.

"Bingo. It was pointed down toward our backyard. Some of our guests were okay with a little voyeur action, but it hacked off the missus. I told you about my friends in the entertainment

industry, right? Well, through them, I was able to borrow a few Fresnels, those lights they use in theaters, and I aimed them right at Foxberg's damn telescope. He yelled at me and I told him to mind his own you-know-what business. I turned the spots off after a couple of days, figured I'd made my point. The next month, we we're having our usual shindig and suddenly Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" was blaring out of some large speakers on Foxberg's balcony, I mean, it had to be over one hundred decibels. At first, we all laughed a little, but the Christmas carols continued at the same volume for four straight hours. This turned the party into a real bummer and everyone left early, except one young lady who I think has unresolved daddy issues and a Santa fetish. Where was I? Oh, yeah, so I lost it and screamed at him in front of everybody. That's when he threatened to kill me."

"Really? Did you threaten him back?"

"You bet your sweet behind. I told him if he kept playing those carols, I'd fix him for good. The next day, I rented one of those huge searchlights and aimed it right at him. He started up the Christmas songs again, only this time even louder. Finally, the cops threatened us both so we had to make nice in front of them. But I swear, as I was shaking his hand, I wanted to kill that SOB. Pardon my French." He paused and took a longer hit off the beer. "Sorry, thinking about all that still gets me riled up."

"What did Deanna think about all that?"

He broke into a wide, open grin. "Now, that's what I'm saying. She thought the whole thing was a scream. She said that Foxberg was a stick in the mud, didn't know how to have fun and party like we did."

"What about now?"

"Hmm?"

“Things back to normal?”

“You bet. Maybe better than ever. Say, what time is it?”

I looked at the clock. “About a quarter to.”

“Already? Jeez, I’ve got to run.” He got up and shook my hand. “Hey, I know what you said, but if you change your mind.” He reached into his pocket and took out a card. “Give me a call sometime. Trish and I would love to see you. Hey, that goes for you too, Ramon!”

We both said we’d consider it and I let him out. He took the stairs two at a time. After hearing the front gate slam, I got up and emptied the rest of his beer in the sink.

“Sounds like the guy you’re looking for is a paranoid schizo,” Tack said.

“Makes sense since his wife is nuts. What did you think of Larry?”

“Auto parts? Seems like he specializes in lube jobs.”

It was a quiet afternoon, the peace interrupted only by occasional car horns coming from frustrated motorists on Grant and the tapping of Tack’s fingers on his computer keyboard. But something had been nagging me since I had gotten back from my trip to Marin. I had cleaned up my desk and found a few things that belonged in the safe, so I opened it up and moved things around a bit. The photos in there were getting bent, so I took them out and straightened them. I looked through them again, not for prurient reasons but to admire and criticize my work.

The pics of Mr. X and his mistress were actually good enough to look staged. I allowed myself a small smile. Sometimes, I did pretty good work. Then, I got to those shots of the I.F. building in the Richmond. They were horrible and out of focus. There just wasn’t enough light and even though I tried to compensate with a slow shutter speed, I had moved the camera while

snapping. But one of the shots was interesting, even if it was a terrible photo. I sat cross-legged on the floor staring at it for a good ten minutes before Tack's voice jarred me out of my reverie.

“What are you looking at?”

I jumped a little because he was standing right next to me. “Huh? Oh, I'm looking at a pic I took a while back. Tell me, what do you see?”

“The crazy outer space family building on Geary. I was there, remember?”

“Yeah, sure. But what do you see?” I asked again.

“A bunch of Greenies. I see some guy working on their bus and others taking stuff off the bus or loading it on. All of which looks like it was shot underwater by Ray Charles.”

I tapped the photo a couple of times. “I know this guy. His name is Victor. He works for Dr. Pace. I got a very bad vibe the last time I talked to him. What do you think of this?” I pointed to two dark blurs. One had an odd highlight around the mouth, or at least where the blur's mouth would be.

“Looks like a blob. I can't make heads or tails of it.”

“Yeah, I wish I would have taken a better shot. But I think this highlight here,” I pointed again, “is a reflection off her mouth.”

“Why would a mouth, oh, yeah. Braces.”

“Got it in one, brother.”

Tack thought about it for almost a minute. “I don't know. I think you might just be doing a good job of convincing yourself. You've got a pretty good imagination.”

“Sure, I suppose that I might be making the picture fit my idea rather than the other way around.”

“But you really think that's one of those missing girls? Did they ever find them?”

“To the best of my knowledge, no, they never did and yeah, I think it’s possible. It’s also possible that I actually talked to one of them. That reminds me, there’s somebody who might be able to help me in that regard. I’m going to pick up some beer and a pack of smokes. Want anything?”

“I could use a beer, I suppose. Something dark?”

“Sure thing. I’ll be right back.” I shoved the photos back into the safe without worrying if they got bent or not. I closed the safe, grabbed my sunglasses and keys and headed down the stairs.

Noah’s Liquors was a small corner store with a couple of coolers filled with beer and shelves behind the counter filled with bottles of booze, most of it cheap. The rest of the store was jammed with all matter of chips, jerky, nuts and candy. Packs of cigarettes were displayed in a rack behind the cash register. There was a hand-lettered sign on the wall saying, “Our credit manager is Helen Waite. If you want credit, go to Helen Waite.”

I got lucky because Noah was working and he was the cat I needed to see. I waited until he had rung up a couple of customers and then I put a six pack on the counter and asked for a pack of Camels. Noah started adding it up on a pocket calculator. He always did this rather than rely on the cash register. Once he was satisfied with the result, he would enter the total into the beat up NCR. Don’t know why, but I suspected he was skimming. But then, I thought he owned the joint, so why would he skim? Maybe it was a tax thing? Didn’t matter, I thought. This was none of my business.

“Hey, Noah, can you help me out?” I asked.

He stopped mid calculation, adjusted his thick glasses and looked up. “What do you need?”

“I met someone the other day. She told me her name, but I forget it now.”

“How am I supposed to know what her name was?”

“Huh, oh, right. Well, she was Korean.”

“Millions of us Koreans in this world, and we all have names,” he said with a wry grin.

“Yeah, no, I get it. No this chick was Korean and she said her name was Yorm or something. I wasn’t paying close attention due to, well, a couple of things.”

“Yorm doesn’t mean anything.” He thought for a bit and then smiled. “Was it Yeoreum?” he asked.

“Yeoreum,” I tried to pronounce it, but Noah just laughed.

“No, Yeoreum. Like *gaeul*, *gyeoul*, *bom*, *yeoreum*.”

I looked at him with a blank expression. “What?”

“The seasons, Wendell. Fall, winter, spring, summer. Yeoreum is Korean for summer.”

“I’ll be damned.” I smiled. “I’ll be damned.”

When I was back in the office, I went through my optimistic “Leads” file and reread everything on the Moon-Schott case. I looked at the pictures and tried to compare them with the blurry images from the camera and the equally blurry images from my brain. I didn’t see the two of them together, the haircut was wrong and the braces were missing, but the coincidence in the name tugged at me. I reminded myself that they had never found the bodies, but they had found the wrecked car and it was doubtful that anyone could survive a wreck like that. It took me a while to find the hotline number and when I called it, I just got a recording asking me to leave a message after the beep, but there was no beep.

Next, I called information and asked for the Burlingame Police Department. I spent a lot of time on hold. Finally, someone picked up and answered in a deep, gruff voice.

“Burlingame Police Department. This is Sergeant Davis speaking. How can I help you?”

“Hi, Sergeant. My name is Wendell Pike. I'm calling from San Francisco. I have a question for you. Have they found those girls yet? You know, the ones who disappeared a while back. Their car was found in Pacifica?”

“The Schott and Moon girls?”

“That's them.”

“No, that case is still open. Do you have something for us?”

“Yeah, I tried to call the hotline but I don't think their machine is working.”

“Right, it's been a while and the number of tips has died down. I think that line is only manned on Mondays and Fridays. So you've got some information?”

“Maybe.”

And I proceeded to tell him about the Interplanetary Family and a possible sighting of Summer up in Inverness. I hadn't seen the other one, Julie, but I reasoned they might be together. The cop was skeptical and I didn't blame him. He was polite until I asked about the reward money. I had read they were offering up to five grand for information. His tone changed for the worse after that. But the reward was still being offered if the information led to them being found. I gave him my number and told him to call me with any questions. He said someone would call. When I hung up, I cracked open a beer and lit a smoke.

“You see, Tack, this is how to work a case. Get information to the right folks and make them do the heavy lifting.”

“You're not going to try to bring her back yourself?” he asked.

“Hell, no, I’ll leave that to the cops. I don’t need the headache.”

“But aren’t you afraid of losing the reward?”

“I’m a trusting sort, my friend.”

“My ass,” he replied.

I got two other calls that afternoon. One was from the Burlingame P.D. with the missing persons cop assigned to the case. I told him pretty much everything that I told the sergeant. The other call was from someone named Pearl who was a friend of the Moon family. She said they went to the same church. The Moons had left Korea for the U.S. in 1960 after the April 19 Revolution. And while they had picked up enough English to get by, they were much more comfortable speaking in their native tongue. So Pearl, who like Summer had lived here for most of her life, had been dealing with the press, police and various people who had called in leads.

I ran through what I knew, cautioned her that it might not be Summer and told her that there were some differences. The girl I had found had a short haircut and no braces. Pearl put the phone down and started talking to someone in another language. I guessed that it was the mother and the language was Korean. Pearl got back on the phone and said that Summer had her braces removed just before she disappeared, but the family didn’t have any recent pictures of her without them. She said that Mrs. Moon wasn’t sure, but she thought she remembered something about Julie being a little jealous of Summer. Julie was supposed to have worn the tooth hardware for another six months.

I got a big reaction from Pearl when I mentioned that the girl I saw was calling herself Yeoreum. She actually gasped and put the phone down again for some more private conversation. When she got back on, we wound up our chat. She thanked me and I told her to call if she had any questions.

My mood was considerably better when I hung up. The prospect of receiving a fat check will do that. Even though it was a Tuesday, I felt a mini-celebration was in order, so Tack and I headed out for some noodles, whiskey and the search for a little companionship. But by the second round, my mood had soured because I hadn't really got anywhere close to tracking down Frank or figuring out what he was doing with those Greenies. Was Milner right? Was Frank a paranoid-schizophrenic? It didn't fit in with what Deanna had said. For that matter, I wasn't even sure why she had hired me to find him. One thing for sure, I was getting sick of all the lies.

It was the Friday before Memorial Day and it seemed that Deanna had performed another disappearing act. This routine was getting old. I had a phone conversation with Carvin to see if I could sue her for what she owed me. Of course, she was only liable for the amount on the contract, so her verbal agreement to pay me double was pretty useless. He mentioned that he knew the Foxbergs' lawyer. They were both grads of Hastings Law School and members of the same club. Montrose offered to have an informal chat with him. I didn't really want to sue.

I had wasted some time going to FFox Inc.'s corporate headquarters located on the eighteenth floor of a newer high-rise on Battery Street. This was on the edge of the city's financial district and featured the usual monuments to money and power, a mix of brick structures, squat, staid, concrete and marble buildings, and gleaming metal and glass towers. The drone from the Embarcadero Freeway served as an aural backdrop and the wind coming off the bay howled through the artificial caverns with a pronounced Venturi effect.

The speed of the elevator contrasted with the amount of time I had to spend in the reception area where I was left cooling my heels for almost an hour. I did get through to the secretary to the CFO, one Blaine Waters. Blaine was about what you'd expect from the profession and the name, a dull man in a gray suit. In our allotted fifteen minutes, a lot of words flowed out of his mouth but he didn't say any one thing of substance. Even if he knew everything about Frank and Deanna's salaries, stock options and real estate holdings, they remained secret. I swung by the Foxbergs' bank, Bay Area Savings and Loan, and managed to talk to a loan officer named Patty. While she was sympathetic, there really wasn't anything she could do. I tried to make a dinner date but she clearly wasn't into that either.

When I got back to the office, Tack was in the process of leaving.

“Hey, man, where are you off to now?” I asked.

“Friend of a friend runs the computer lab at S.F. State. I’ve got a couple of questions.”

“Don't forget your passport,” I quipped, because State is way out in the fog belt and a world away from North Beach.

Tack started to leave and then turned around. “Oh, yeah, I almost forgot. Eye Chart called.”

“Great. Did he leave a message?”

“No, just said to give him a ring.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

“Yeah, later.”

Eye Chart was a homicide inspector for the SFPD. His name was Brad Zyzck, hence the nickname. We weren't exactly friends but it would be silly to call him an enemy. We mainly tried to stay out of each other's way, but there was some crazy cosmic string that kept binding us together. I think we were both aware of this and that drove us a little crazy. Besides, the inspector liked order and to him, I was a one man chaos machine upsetting apple carts at a sub-atomic level. Zyzck had a buzz cut, a cop mustache, was probably forty pounds overweight and he looked permanently beat. It didn't help that he always looked like he slept in his suit. From the hours he regularly pulled and the number of times he wound up in the doghouse at home, he probably did. The one thing we did have in common was that we both liked to drink.

So the fat cop wanted to talk to me. Getting a call from Eye Chart was sort of like getting a buzz from the Grim Reaper's cousin. It was never good news. I fired up a cig and dialed the number for the North Beach station and got bounced around until I got somebody who

said they would take a message. I sipped a beer, smoked and waited. He called about an hour later, said they had a situation over near Dog Patch but he could swing by sometime after five. I asked what it was about and he said it could wait. I couldn't do anything but agree and said I'd get a bottle. He didn't argue. I headed to Noah's and picked up some Johnny and some more smokes. When I got back to the office I cleaned up. I wanted to make sure there weren't any stray roaches or paraphernalia lying around. After the cleaning, I could see my reflection in the desk ashtray. One couldn't be too careful, dig?

According to the Hamm's clock, it was about a quarter past six when the doorbell rang. I looked out the window and saw the fat cop leaning against the buzzer. He was huffing by the time he got to the top of the stairs. His face was a bit flush and his tie was undone. I invited him to sit down and he acknowledged that this was a good idea. Then, he got right to it.

"Somebody said that you're working for Deanna Foxberg?" he asked. His smirk was annoying.

"She's a weird chick, man."

"That's something coming from you."

"Yeah, well, I mean it. She, well her husband really, is worth a bit of money but she keeps pleading poverty."

"I take it you haven't been paid."

I shrugged and said what seemed to be the catch phrase of late. "It's complicated."

"I'll bet." The fat cop grabbed the trick lighter off my desk and fired up a smoke.

"So tell me, what's up? Why the visit?" I asked.

"What about that drink you promised?"

"Sure, hold on."

I went over to the sink and produced two relatively clean glasses that I had gotten from some gas station giveaway. They had cartoon figures on them at one point, but most of the paint had long since faded. I handed him one and kept the other. Zyzck looked at his glass and sniffed it.

“It’s clean,” I said, only a little offended. I reached down and picked up the fresh fifth, cracked it open and poured a couple of healthy slugs. We raised our glasses and emptied them and I refilled them with a slightly less generous amount.

“We found a car today on 22nd near Potrero Point.”

“Congrats,” I grinned, but there wasn’t any warmth there. I put two and two together and even though I knew the answer, I didn’t like it. “Wouldn’t happen to be a Volvo, would it? P1800?”

If Zyzck was upset, he didn’t show it. “Sure, you knew that.”

“Guessed, actually. Why else would you be coming by?”

He grunted in response.

“Any sign of the owner?” I asked.

“Sure, but let’s back up a bit.” He motioned for me to refill his glass and I downed the rest of mine and poured another couple of large shots. “The car was hard to identify because it had been torched.”

“Torchd?”

“Oh, I suppose it could have spontaneously combusted,” was his sarcastic reply, “or hit by lightning, or had a fuel leak and the driver smoked.”

“All right, I get it. When was it reported?” I asked.

“This morning. It’s pretty remote there, especially at night.”

“Just docks and stuff, right?”

“Yep. No one reported it until early this morning, around six, and it was still smoking then. Figure whatever happened took place around four a.m. The fire department was called and they found a body in it. The body was smoking as well.”

“You’re saying it was Frank?”

“Probably. Problem is that it’s a real crispy critter, Pike. I doubt if we can even pull prints. It looks like we’ll have to rely on dental records.”

“That may be a little problematic, man.”

“Why?”

“I’m remembering something that Deanna, Mrs. Foxberg, once said in passing. She said Frank was in excellent shape, he’d never been sick and had never even been to a dentist.”

“You’re telling me this to cheer me up?”

“Figured you might want to know, is all. Sure, it’s likely him. When’s the autopsy?”

“Don’t know. They’re backed up right now but the late Mr. Foxberg had some influential friends.”

“Yeah, I think he plays, well, used to play squash with the city attorney,” I said.

“Sure, that sounds about right. What the hell is squash anyway?” He emptied his glass again. I poured him another shot and decided that no good would come from trying to match him drink for drink.

“I think it’s kind of like handball with racquets. Might’ve seen a match on *Wide World of Sports*, sandwiched between log rolling and wrist wrestling.”

“Yeah, wrist wrestling, they do that up in Petaluma. I’ve got a cousin who competes every year.”

“She any good?” I asked.

The fat cop responded with the friendship digit and a shake of his head. “Always a Goddamned comedian. Jesus.” We both sipped our scotch and I stubbed out my Camel in the pristine ashtray.

“Can you let me know when the autopsy results are out?”

“I guess there's no harm in that. Don't know what you're expecting to find. Did you ever talk to this Foxberg guy?”

“No, I've never even seen him, just pictures. Tall, thin, blonde dude.”

“Do you have his wife's contact info?” Zyzek got out a small pad and a pencil while I looked for her address and number.

I wrote her address and phone number down on a scrap of paper and handed it to him. “Here's what I've have. Maybe you'll have better luck than I've had trying to track her down.”

“Elusive?” the fat cop asked.

“Crazy,” I responded, accompanied with the circular index finger motion next to my head.

We polished off most of the bottle and argued. We started off with music. He said Sinatra's “My Way” was a high water mark in popular music while I thought it was bland pop. Then, we shifted gears. He was pro-Nixon and thought the man had done great, historic things with China and now he was doing great, historic things in the Soviet Union working on the SALT treaty with Brezhnev. Eye Chart even thought that mining Haiphong's harbor was a bold move that might turn the tide of the war. Of course, I considered Tricky Dick to be evil and possibly the worst president we'd ever had or probably ever would have.

When things got really heated, we took a break and shifted to talking about the Giants, always safe ground. This wasn't to say that we agreed on what Charlie Fox or the front office needed to do to get out of their current doldrums, and if our baseball arguments were less personal they were no less passionate. We didn't shake hands when he left, but then we never did.

Once he was gone, I started to get bummed out. It was looking like I might never see a red cent from Deanna. I tried calling her number but it just rang. I had no idea if she knew her husband was probably dead or if she really cared. The phone rang and I picked it up. It was Gina calling from Marin General. She apologized for calling so late. Corky had been removed from the machines a few hours earlier and, as she put it, gently passed. So that was that.

I thanked her for calling and gently replaced the phone on the switchhook. This news just made my attitude worse. I can't say I liked the lug but it still saddened me. I thought about talking a cab out to O'Rourke's but then thought better of it as I was already pretty lit. Besides, hacks hated to drive all the way out there and I didn't want to get stranded and have to rely on Muni at this time of night. I figured that I could call the bar sometime over the weekend, talk to Eoin or Nora and leave it at that. The best thing would be to head home and make sense of everything in the morning. I put the cups into the sink, slipped on my jacket and was ready to flip off the lights when the doorbell rang. I looked out the window, saw Deanna and shook my head.

I buzzed her in and she took her time climbing the stairs and entered the office with a bit of a sway. She all but collapsed into one of the green chairs and by the expression on her face; it looked like she had been out on a long bender. She was wrapped up in a gray trench coat, but once she shed that, she revealed a blue suit jacket that didn't look to have anything underneath it,

a matching miniskirt and a pair of black thigh-high boots. Instead of her tiny purse, she carried a fairly large leather number, also in black. I closed the window, got another glass and poured the rest of the Johnny into it and handed it to her. She didn't say thanks. She just downed it in one gulp.

"You can be a hard person to get a hold of," I said, trying to sound less upset than I was.

"I've been staying with friends. I haven't been home in a while."

"I figured. The police are looking for you, you know."

"Why would they be looking for me? They should be looking for Frank."

"They think they found him," I said. Part of me didn't want to spill the beans and part of me didn't give a damn.

"Really?" She looked up at me and tried to focus. "Where is he?"

I didn't know what else to say, so I told her about the Volvo and the fact that the cops thought the victim was Frank. She didn't come unglued, but then I really didn't know what kind of reaction to expect from her. I offered her a smoke and she refused and spent some time rummaging through her bag. She finally found a crumpled pack of the skinny cigarettes she liked and as she leaned in I lit her cig and then fired up one of mine and we both smoked away, unsure of what to say next.

"Are they sure it's him?" she asked haltingly.

"Like I said, they think so. They'll probably want you to I.D. him. It might be tough, given his condition."

"I can't do that," she replied. "Not tonight."

"It can wait, but it's one of those things that's better not to put off."

"Like ripping off a bandage?"

“I didn’t say that.” I looked at her again and she really was a mess. “Do you want me to go with you?”

“I don’t know.” And then she was emphatic. “No.”

I got out my notebook, wrote down Zyzek’s name and the number for the North Beach station, tore the page out and handed it to her. “You can call this guy. He’s a bit of an ass, but he’s a straight shooter. He can fill you in. You’ll need to get down to the coroner’s office on Bryant Street, but again, he can give you the details.”

Her eyes were darting around in their sockets, but she wasn’t focusing on anything. “I need to talk to several people. I need to talk to our lawyer and our banker.”

“Might be tough, what with the holiday and all.”

“What holiday?”

“Memorial Day weekend. You know, big sales, parades, the Indy 500 and everyone going away for the long weekend. Things will be shut down until Tuesday. Nobody’s working except store clerks and cops.”

“Damn it. It will probably be impossible to get in touch with anybody.”

I agreed. “Can I ask you something?”

“What?” She had that deer in the headlights look, almost feral.

“Why did you come by here tonight?”

“Oh, that. I came here to give you some money.” She rummaged through the bag again and dug out a wad of bills. She didn’t count them out; she just placed them on the desk. I did a rough count and came up with a couple of hundred. “I know it’s not everything, but I figure it’s what I owe you for the other night.”

“Fair enough,” I said. I wanted to say a few other things, but I figured she was in bad enough shape. “You got enough for a cab home?”

“What? What time is it?”

“Almost ten, give or take.”

“Do you have any more scotch?”

“Fresh out. Noah’s closes at ten. I could make a quick run. Will you be OK here?” She nodded. “Cool. Stay put. I’ll be right back.” I grabbed my wallet and keys, pocketed the notebook and headed down the stairs.

Noah was in a chatty mood and wanted to know if I had talked to Yeoreum yet. I told him I was a little busy and he gave me a sly grin and said he understood. He didn’t of course, but I wasn’t going to waste my time. But as it turned out, I could have wasted his and mine because when I got back to the office, Deanna was sound asleep in the chair. Those chairs are comfortable enough, but I picked her up and moved her to the office couch and covered her with her trench coat. This posed a bit of a dilemma, because I couldn’t just leave her there and head off to my pad, so I had to stay in the office. At least, I had the booze to keep me company and I told myself that maybe she only needed a quick nap, but I knew that was a lie. She was out cold.

A few days later, I was in the North Beach station sitting down on the customer side of a desk, smoking a Camel and trying to act relaxed. Zyzck was on the other side, wearing a yellow short-sleeved shirt that was thin enough so you could see his t-shirt underneath, and his red tie with silver handcuffs on it was already half undone. The desk was parked in a small office in the back of the building. The office was lousy with paper; it had procreated like rabbits. With the door open, you could hear the chaos of a declining civilization: phones and typewriters in the bullpen, the sounds of shrill electronic keening and the percussion of fingers pounding keys in a vain effort to document the chaos and complaints of the city and county of San Francisco in duplicate, triplicate and quadruplicate. The closed door didn't make it quite soundproof, but it was reasonably effective.

On the wall to my left were three diplomas from what could charitably be called business classes on supervision, time management and hostage negotiations and a commendation from Hizzoner the Mayor for a real act of heroism. Zyzck had pulled a kid from the undertow at Ocean Beach, and whenever I got really upset at the dude, I had to remind myself of this selfless act.

There were a couple of framed pictures on the credenza behind him. One was a shot of the man and his wife that was probably taken ten years and a combined one hundred pounds ago, and one was him standing next to and dwarfed by the white belly of a huge halibut hanging on an elevated hook. A blackboard on the far wall had some names and arrows scribbled on it. The blinds behind him were open and I could see the backyards of a couple of homes through the slats.

“That’s what I’m saying,” continued the fat cop. “Maybe you could get her to cooperate a little?”

Eye Chart was upset because his sure thing was becoming less sure by the minute. He had almost thrown the manila file containing the coroner’s report at me. I took a quick look through it. The cause of death was a single gunshot wound to the heart. Based on ballistics, the murder weapon was thought to be a .38. The victim didn’t have any significant traces of ash or soot in his lungs, meaning that he was torched post mortem.

“So he was shot by a .38?”

“Yeah, and guess what? Missus Foxberg is the registered owner of a .38 Special.” I didn’t say anything but I tried to look surprised. “We didn’t find one in the car. We asked the wife about it, but of course she told us that she didn’t know where it was.”

“You don’t believe her?”

He spit out an expletive in response.

“Inspector, I can try to talk to her, but I’ve got no influence there, believe me. She does her own thing.”

“Is she still your client?”

“I don’t know. I think so, but it’s hard to tell with her.”

“That woman is a real piece of work and she’s being a royal pain in the keister. Did you hear what she did yesterday?” he almost shouted.

“No, I haven’t talked to her since...” I stopped and thought a bit. “Last Friday, no, make that Saturday morning. I told her you had found Frank and that she needed to contact the police. I gave her your number.”

“Well she never called. We had to track her down. She was staying at her neighbors’ house.”

“The Milners?” I asked.

“Sounds about right.” He double-checked his little note pad and I used the pause to go through the coroner’s report again before I gently placed it back on Eye Chart’s desk. “So she takes her own sweet time getting down to the morgue and fair enough, I get it. That’s no easy thing. It was late yesterday when her and her lawyer finally got down to Bryant Street. But here’s the kicker: She refused to I.D. the body.”

“She refused?” I asked, genuinely surprised.

“No, not refused. She said she didn’t think it was her husband. Didn’t think, what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“She would know, right?” I asked, genuinely confused.

“Pike, given the condition of the vic, I don’t think his own mom could recognize him. But there were a couple of pieces of jewelry found on and with the body, a watch and a wedding ring. She confirmed that both of these belonged to her husband, but she still refused to accept that the body we found belonged to him.”

“Does she have an alibi?”

“Says she was at her neighbors’ house.”

“What do they say?”

“They confirmed it. You see, we’re getting nowhere with this.”

“What about fingerprints or dental records?”

He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger. “So far, we’ve got the middle of a donut. We’re looking for dental records but we can’t find out who his dentist was or if he even

had one. You said that the wife claimed he never had any work done, but he could have had a filling or something done before he knew her. There doesn't appear to be any family that we can ask. It's pretty much the wife and some business associates."

I thought about this for a bit. "Yeah, his father died a few years back in a helicopter crash. I looked it up. The copter hit a power line around Altamont Pass. Dense fog was blamed. His mother is still alive, physically that is, but apparently she's lost her marbles. She's in a private nursing home in Daly City, all but comatose. Hasn't said a word in years."

"That's probably no help, but if you can get us the address of that nursing home?"

"Sure, no problem. I'll call you when I get back to the office. What about other physical evidence?"

"We're going through the car for prints but it's tough going. We'll see what the lab rats can do."

"I guess I'll try to talk to Deanna, but like I said, she does what she wants to do. Maybe I can find out why she doesn't think it's him. Assuming I can get in touch with her at all."

"At this stage, anything would be a help. We're still operating on the belief that it's him, but the investigation is almost back to square one right now. Speaking of which, where were you on Friday the 26th between two and five in the morning?"

"At home in bed."

"Can anyone corroborate that?"

"Sadly, no."

Eye Chart made a grunting sound that was his way of laughing. He declined my offer to spring for lunch. "Some of us have to work," was the way he put it.

I grabbed a carton of black bean noodles and a coke from a small hole in the wall called Eight Immortals and headed back to the office. I put in a call to Deanna, but that was as useless as ever. I fumbled around and found Larry Milner's card and left a message for him with his answering service. It took a while longer, but I managed to track down the name of the nursing home where Frank Foxberg's mother had been deposited. I called Zyzck and gave him the info. As usual, he didn't thank me. He just said "okay" and hung up.

I was trying to figure out what to do next. Both Tack and I were going to a small wake for Corky. It originally was going to be held at Mr. Bing's in North Beach, but Nora called and told me that it had gotten moved to O'Rourke's and that it started around six. The plan was to pop in the bar, have a few drinks and get out while it was still early. That didn't really leave enough time to head out to the Marina and back, so I figured I would try looking for Deanna the following day.

Carvin Montrose interrupted my planning. He called to let me know that I was off the hook, as he had predicted. The divorce was proceeding along, acrimonious to be sure, but Mr. X wasn't contesting the evidence. I thanked him for the update and hung up and then immediately picked up the phone to dial out, but there was someone else on the line.

"Hello?" came the voice.

"Hi," I answered. "This is Wendell. And you are?"

"That was weird. It didn't even ring."

"Happens sometimes. What can I do for you?" I asked.

"My name is O'Brien. I work missing persons in San Mateo County."

"This about Summer Moon?"

"Yeah, my boss wanted me to give you an update."

“Cool. Where are you with the case?”

“We’ve found her. I mean we've got her. Apparently, your tip was a big help, so we’d like to say thanks.”

I couldn’t contain my surprise. “Really, just like that?”

“Hmm? Yeah, she was in that crazy farm or commune or whatever you want to call it. We worked with the Marin P.D. and the county sheriff’s office.”

“Like a raid?” I asked.

“Exactly. It got a little bit out of control for a while. They were pretty hostile and she didn’t want to go with us. Claimed she was there on her own free will and was over eighteen.”

“What did you do? Drag her out of there?”

“I can’t say.”

“You can’t or won’t?” I asked but he didn’t, couldn’t or wouldn’t answer. “Fair enough,” I continued. “When was this?”

“Monday.”

“Damn, that’s fast work. On Memorial Day, no less. I’m impressed,” I said.

“We figured they wouldn’t expect anything like that on a holiday. There were a number of people there and they tried to shield her. They threw a few things like rocks at us but that was about it. We didn’t discharge any weapons, but we may have fired off a canister of CS.” Officer O'Brien cleared his throat and changed his tone. “I’m telling you all this because I was told to. But don’t pass this along to anyone. We don’t want this getting into the press just yet.”

“Sure, I dig, I can keep it to myself. Where is she? Is she back at home?”

“I can't tell you that, but she’s safe for now. She's in a facility in the North Bay under a doctor's care. Also, the family has hired what they call a deprogrammer.”

“I’ve heard about those guys. How about the family? How are they doing?”

“They’re relieved and happy to have her back, but they’re concerned because of how she’s acting. It’s not quite the reunion they had in mind. I’m guessing it will take some time before she’s back to normal.”

“I’ll bet. What about her friend Julie? Was she up there as well?”

“We looked, but we didn’t find Ms. Schott. Of course, we couldn’t look everywhere. That girl Summer wouldn’t tell us anything. We want to try to head back up there, but we’ve got to be careful. It’s going to take some more planning. Things were pretty intense this go-round and we don’t want it to escalate.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” I agreed. “One more thing. About the reward money?”

“Sorry, I don’t have anything to do with that. You can try calling into the hotline.”

“Sure, I’ll do that.” I thanked the officer and told him to pass along my thanks to his boss. When I hung up I felt a little better and a little closer to that five grand reward money.

Tack was running a bit late so by the time we wound up getting to O’Rourke’s, it was already packed and everybody had a huge head start on us. Eoin and Nora were both working behind the bar. I gave Nora our order, a couple of whiskey chasers, and we split up and proceeded to try to chat up the crowd. A couple of very drunk Irishmen got in my face, but I couldn’t understand a word that they said – I didn’t know if that was due to their accents or the fact that they were both righteously plowed, so I just smiled and nodded. I asked Nora how she was doing, but she just smiled a bittersweet smile and shrugged before the jukebox cranked up again. I looked around for Tack and saw that he had found a tall Irish lass and was engaged in some close conversation.

After an hour and a half, the smoke and the volume started to get to me, so I gave up my barstool and headed outside to get some fresh air. I was enjoying a smoke and the peace and quiet that the avenues offered. The fog had started to roll in along with a stiff wind. I zipped up my jacket and decided to take a little walk.

The Greenies consulate was only a couple blocks uphill. I wasn't sure if it was simple paranoia or caution, but I found myself walking faster than normal and looking around nervously the whole way. I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was tailing me. Even though I was in pretty good shape, I was a bit winded when I reached Geary. I hunched over, hands on my knees and took a look at the dark building. I did have a small flashlight on me as well as a couple of pieces of piano wire I sometimes used to pick locks, so I guess you could say that this visit wasn't as spur of the moment as it might have seemed. I didn't know what to expect, but I figured I was due a look inside.

The front door was locked, no surprise there. And even though the traffic was minimal at that time of night, I didn't feel safe working on the lock out in the open. I took a look at the back entrance, where I had seen the parked bus on one of my earlier visits. There was a metal fence and it was locked, but it was only five feet high and I was able to climb over it with only minimal damage to my paws.

There were no lights on in the building but I didn't know if that was a good or a bad sign. I tried the back door and it was shut tight. The lock was a Schlage and was harder to crack than I initially expected, but there didn't seem to be a deadbolt. Every now and then, a car would head up or down 40th and when they passed by, headlights briefly lit up the area, casting large shadows around me. It was stupid, I know, but I felt like every one of them could be a cop or

worse. I finally got the door open and turned on the flashlight. I looked up toward the heavens, inhaled, and figured I may as well trust in blind luck.

The first floor was as I remembered it except everything had been cleaned out. There were still a few pamphlets scattered about but the phone, the mimeograph machine and the coffee urn had been removed and the space murals on the walls had been defaced with spray paint. I picked up one of the stray flyers lying on the floor and pointed my flashlight at it. It was an invitation to the farm for an event called “the Visitation.” There were crude drawings of flying saucers and smiling aliens on the margins. The text promised the landing of a real space ship and said all were welcome. I knew that was a lie.

I pocketed the flyer and kept looking through the ground floor. Other than a large, industrial sized kitchen that still had some pots and pans, I didn’t find anything. There was a stairwell to my right, so I decided to move on to the next floor. The hallway was partially blocked by a huge, metal filing cabinet. I had to squeeze through the space to get past it. I opened the drawers but didn’t find anything inside so I continued down the hall. It led to a series of doors, like a dormitory or an SRO hotel. The doors featured latching safety hasps but the padlocks had been removed. All of these were on the outside, so they could have been intended to keep people locked in the rooms. I entered the first one on my left and saw what looked like a prison cell. There was one metal bed with no mattress and a bucket in the corner. I looked at a couple of the other rooms on the floor and they were all similar. I walked back down the hall and saw more flyers scattered about, along with a length of phone cord and the filing cabinet. I sighed and started to make my way up to the next floor.

The look was similar, but there were some differences. The rooms were larger, the doors didn’t have any locks, there were no buckets and the bedsprings were larger. There were also

remnants of a plush red fabric on some of the walls. There was nothing else to see, just a bunch of empty rooms.

I made my way back down to the second floor when I heard a noise. It was slight creak of a door to the left of me. I shut off my flashlight and turned toward the sound and was greeted by something hitting my shoulder. I hunched over and then dove toward the floor, as another blow from what I guessed was a piece of metal pipe barely missed me. I rolled onto my back and turned on my flashlight to try to I.D. or blind my assailant. The man was wearing a ski mask so I only saw his eyes, and they looked at me with a mix of contempt and hatred.

He tried to wrap a piece of phone cord around my neck but I hit him on the side of the head with my flashlight and kneed him in the groin at the same time. This got him off me and I rolled away as he let out a guttural noise, looked around, spat to his left and ran down the hall. I followed him back into the hallway and tried to grab his arm, but he grunted and pushed the large cabinet toward me before taking off down the stairs. Even though it was empty, the cabinet was still heavy and it crashed to the floor with a loud metallic thud, missing me but blocking my exit. I struggled trying to move it but it felt like it weighed a ton.

I finally climbed over it but caught my ankle on a sharp metal corner. My legs were already a mess. Standing was harder than it should have been, as the dark gloom had robbed me of any reference and I felt a vertiginous nausea rise through my stomach. Shaking the fuzziness out of my dome, I tried to turn on my flashlight but it was broken, so I had to move by memory and feel as I followed my aggressor.

I was halfway down the stairs when I stopped and looked around. It was quiet for a moment. I thought that I was probably too late and my assailant was history. I took a deep breath through my nose and smelled something like rotten eggs. My brain was trying to process

this when the front door opened and I could see a figure silhouetted by a streetlight, his shadow projecting on the bare floor. The figure turned and looked toward me. I went to the railing and the word mercaptan came to mind about the same instant that I saw him toss something small and glowing into the building. It was a lit cigarette. I barely had time to swear before the whole place erupted into one large fireball.

The explosion blew me completely off the stairs and I landed on the floor with a painful crash. Yellow and crimson flames surrounded me. I started choking and made the choice to stop breathing for as long as I could. My gut said to follow my attacker and hope that the door was open. A couple of large burning pieces of wood fell from the ceiling, barely missing me. Some kind of instinct took over and I made my way through the blaze on my hands and knees.

When I got to the front door, I found that it was stuck shut. I was light-headed from the lack of air and my lungs felt like they were going to explode. I screamed and pulled on the doorknob as hard as I could. It finally flew open. The intensity of the fire increased and a pressure wave threw me out onto the sidewalk.

Even though I was confused and in pain, I slowly got upright and started to stagger down the block. Things felt surreal, as it was preternaturally quiet. There was a secondary explosion in the building. I could see it but it sounded like it was a half mile away. I snapped my fingers in both ears and was a little scared because I could barely hear. I hoped it was temporary. I looked down Geary and saw a late model land yacht, maybe a green or black Imperial, tearing down the street heading east. I glanced back at the flaming building and knew that I had to get away before someone made me. I tried to be calm and stayed in the shadows as much as possible. I couldn't run. A fast limping gait was as good as I could muster.

I was out of breath and coughing when I got back to the bar. The juke was back on and the music spilled out into the otherwise calm night. I was relieved that my hearing, at least in one ear, seemed to be coming back. I wiped away some sweat from my forehead and got out my pack of smokes. My hand was shaking when I fired it up and I let loose a mild curse. I finally started to relax but tensed up when I felt a hand on my arm.

“So what, the noise getting to you,” Nora asked with a mischievous grin. Then she looked at me and the grin turned to a look of shock. “What the hell have you been up to?”

“No good,” I grunted.

“I can see that. So where have you been, Mr. Pike?” she asked in her native lilt. Her voice carried more than a little bit of a scolding tone.

“Nowhere. I took a walk down the block.” It might have been my imagination, but I thought I could hear sirens in the distance.

“What happened there?” she asked, looking at my leg.

“Ah, old wound, I thought I had taken care of it, but I must have done something--”

She interrupted while looking at her watch. “Give me a second.” She ran inside and a couple of minutes later came back out wearing a thick wool coat. She had the bar first aid kit and insisted on cleaning me up a little and dressing the wound. I sat on a brick-lined flowerbed and Nora rolled up my pant leg and rubbed the gash with alcohol before putting a couple of large band-aids on the cut. When she was done, she lit a cigarette with a butane lighter and got serious.

“You smell like smoke.”

“There was some smoke, yeah.” I winced and tried to rotate my shoulder, looking toward the horizon for evidence of smoke and flames. She followed my gaze and then looked back at me.

“Did you set something on fire?” she asked.

“What? No, I didn’t set anything on fire. But, I suppose I could use an alibi.”

“An alibi you’re wanting, is it?”

“Yeah. Something like I was here the whole time.”

She thought about that for a bit. “Well, I couldn’t be sure, I suppose. I’ve been working and it’s been pretty busy. I can say I didn’t see you leave. Don’t know what else I can say.”

“That’s plenty. If it gets too involved, it gets hard to remember. Keep it simple. That’s fine.”

“Sure,” she said in a doubtful tone.

“It’s cool. Don’t worry. I doubt it will ever come up.”

She shook her head. “I really don’t know what to make of you, Mr. Pike.”

I had no answer, so I just shrugged.

“I’ve got to get back to my shift,” she finally said. “We’ll be wanting to start the memorial.”

“Right. I don’t think I’ll stay that long. Besides, I didn’t know Corky all that well. I don’t think I would have much to say.” As she started to walk away, I grabbed her arm and pulled her toward me.

“What?” she asked.

“Thanks,” I said. I started to say something else but somebody came outside saying Eoin was looking for her.

She nodded and headed back in, the sound of the Irish Rovers blasting out from the bar. I sighed and fired up another smoke. The sirens were getting louder and when I turned my head toward Geary, I could see thick, dark plumes of smoke rising against the gray fog. I decided I needed to find a mirror to check out the damage and clean up some. When I entered the bar, the music had stopped. Eoin cut his way through the crowd and got up on a postage stamp sized stage and started speaking into a feedback prone microphone. He adjusted the mixer and then started talking about our dear, departed Corky. The bartender started with some funny doggerel and then got serious, talking about our short time on Earth and all that sort of stuff. There was a longish line for the restroom so it took me a few minutes to get my face and hands washed.

There seemed to be a new cut on my forehead, but other than that, my map was okay. Of course, there were no paper towels so I had to wipe my hands on my pants. Once back in the bar, I looked around for Tack and found him engaged with the same Irish chick in a dark corner. They had moved from verbal to nonverbal communication, from words to an exchange of tongues.

Nora had shed her coat and was back to being busy behind the stick as one by one, people started getting up on stage and telling their personal stories about the late Corky Glyynn, each story probably less true and certainly more preposterous than the previous. I finally had enough and waved to Eoin and tried to get Nora's attention, but she was busy talking to a couple of cats wearing soccer jerseys.

As I left the bar, a 31 was making its way down Balboa. It wasn't an express, but I didn't care. The air had a faint tinge of smoke and there were a couple of more sirens wailing in the distance as I climbed onto the bus and deposited my quarter, asking the driver for a transfer. I rode the 31 down to Third Street. I got off on Market and probably went through three cigarettes

waiting for a 15 or a 30 to take me back to North Beach. I had most of a six pack waiting for me in the fridge at home, and maybe even a couple of slices of cold pizza that might not have gone bad yet. I needed something to change my mood. It was getting black.

Instrumental jazz-funk was playing in the background. The bright sun reflected off the surface of the huge hot tub and a hint of something burning filled the air. I was at the Milners' home looking for Deanna, which lately had seemed to turn into something of a hobby because God knows I wasn't getting paid for it. She was still ducking my calls so I tried going to her home and when there wasn't a response, I figured I would see if she was staying at her neighbors' pad. The houses were right next to each other and only a thick hedge separated their backyards. It took a while for him to answer the doorbell, but Larry Milner let me in with exaggerated warmth.

"Like one?" asked Larry, waving a large cigar in his hand. He was dressed only in a pair of tight fitting Speedos, showing off an okay physique and exposing more hair than anyone this side of Sasquatch. I smiled when I thought that he could almost count as my second Bigfoot sighting. "Yeah, technically it's contraband, but then what isn't these days, am I right? I've got a friend who knows somebody in customs and he can get shipments of anything from anywhere." He lowered his voice. "And I mean anything."

I was overdressed, wearing a pair of slacks with a conservative flair and a tan turtleneck. Everyone around me was dressed for a hot tub party, and it almost seemed like a contest to see who could walk around wearing the least and still be technically clothed. Larry snipped the end of the Cubana and handed it to me, sparking it with a gold lighter.

"What do you think? Pretty awesome, right?"

"This is one fine cigar, Larry. Thanks."

“It’s nothing, pal. I told you, what’s the point of living if you can’t have a little fun?” He actually slapped me on the back and I winced because my shoulder was still sore. “Hey, Trish? Somebody’s here that I want you to meet.”

I remembered that Trish was Larry’s wife, though I had never met her. We said our greetings and she made a point of looking at me from my toes on up in one exaggerated take.

She smiled. “I like what I see. How about you?” Thankfully, she didn’t wait for a response. “You’re Larry’s friend Wendell? He’s talked a lot about you.”

“Is that right?” was all I could muster as a response. Trish had long blonde hair with black roots, was rail thin, burnt to a dark brown and had impossibly large sculpted breasts that were barely contained by two tiny triangles of black fabric. Another small triangle covered her crotch and she was wearing four inches of heel. It was a marvel that she could stand upright.

“Can you stay for the party?” she asked.

“Actually, uh, no. Sorry, I’ve got to work.”

“Well, maybe,” she said with a seductive grin, “you could combine business with pleasure.” Somebody called her name and she apologized but said she had to take care of the refreshments. She turned around and walked away and I swear I could almost hear a lewd trombone slide followed by tom-toms.

“What do you think?” asked Larry. It seemed to be his catch phrase.

“You’re a very lucky man,” I answered.

“Lucky, maybe, but all of this doesn’t come cheap, am I right?”

“I suppose not.”

Larry went around introducing me to his friends. I’m guessing these were the ones in the entertainment industry and I’m a bit ashamed to admit I actually recognized a couple of them

from their movie roles. It wasn't yet three and I was already on my third drink. One of the rules of a Milner party seemed to be that one couldn't walk around with anything less than full glass of booze. Today it was Sangria, which I knew would wind up giving me a righteous headache.

Larry rambled on about everything, from the auto parts business, which apparently was a very good business because of the insane mark up, to politics. He was socially very liberal but tended to distrust the government so he skewed more toward being a Libertarian. He didn't want the government in his bedroom and I couldn't say that I blamed him.

At one point, Larry left me with a smooth, muscular Chinese hulk who was introduced as Hung Wai Lo. Wai Lo had actually made the move from actor to director and his chief concern was escaping the adult film ghetto, as he called it. He had big plans for the industry and his main goal was to create works of art, movies with actors who could act, real production values and decent plots instead of just hackneyed action scenes. It was high time that adult movies entered the mainstream, he opined.

Of course, I knew about *Deep Throat* and *Behind the Green Door*, but I made the mistake of asking for an example of a film he was working on and he proceeded to run down a bizarre scenario that didn't make any sense until I finally realized I was listening to a pornographic take on the plot from *The Wizard of Oz*. Wai Lo started to ask me what I thought of his idea when I excused myself. Standing at the far end of the yard was the woman I was trying to track down.

Deanna was wearing a somewhat conservative white bikini and a full-length wrap made out of some kind of blue see-through material. Her hair was cut even shorter and had been freshly died blonde. Her shades were dark enough to prevent anyone from seeing where she was looking or what she was thinking.

"I'll say it again," I started. "You're a hard one to track down."

“I needed, no, I need time to sort through things,” she said.

“Yeah, I know. It’s complicated,” I said with as much sarcasm as I could muster.

“Listen, is there some place we can talk?”

At that point, Larry’s wife Trish interrupted us. She was carrying a sixteen-inch oval mirror and piled on this mirror was Mount Blanc made entirely out of cocaine.

“Anyone in the mood for a little pause that refreshes?” Trish asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“Thanks, Trish. You’re a dear,” purred Deanna before grabbing a straw off the mirror and placing it at the summit of the mountain. She took a healthy snort from each nostril and wiped her nose with the back of her index finger.

“Wendell?” asked Trish.

I’ve never been that big on blow, but I was tired and sore from the previous couple of weeks and the Sangria was starting to slow me down, so I took a couple of modest hits and thanked her.

“Plenty more where this came from,” said Trish the temptress.

“Thanks, Trish. That hits the spot.” And boy did it. The sun was brighter, the air warmer and everyone looked spectacular. It was hard but I had to remind myself that I had work to do. There was a small cabana next to the tub, so I lightly grabbed Deanna’s elbow and led her to it. Once inside, I started asking questions. Maybe it was the drug, but I didn’t feel up to beating around the bush.

“I talked to that inspector I told you about. He said you didn’t think it was Frank.”

She still hadn’t taken off her specs, so it was impossible to tell if she was acting or reacting. “That’s right. I told them that.”

“How come? A feeling?”

“Something like that. When you live with somebody, sometimes you just know.”

“What about the watch and the ring?” I asked.

“The ring was just a gold ring, nothing special there. And yes, it was Frank’s Rolex. I recognized the inscription on the back. It was a gift from his father. But, he didn’t always wear it. I know that he found it uncomfortable. It would be like him to leave it in the car.”

“A pricey item like that?”

She simply nodded her head.

“Fair enough, I suppose.” I put the cigar and my drink down on a glass tabletop. “Have you any reason, I mean like a tangible reason to think he’s still alive and out there somewhere?”

“No.” Damn those shades. I had no way to judge if she was lying or not.

“Do you miss him?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“Just a question.”

“I hired you to find him, didn’t I?”

“You like answering questions with questions?”

“I don’t see how this has any bearing on anything. I told them, just as I told you, that I don’t think Frank was the one on that table. I still think my husband is alive, is that a crime?”

“I don’t suppose it is.” I thought I needed to change up my questioning. “What about the will?” I asked.

“What? What about it?” Even with her shades on, I could tell that I had struck a nerve.

“I’m wondering if there are any special considerations in the will. It seems to me that if Frank is dead, you stand to inherit a tidy sum.”

The nostrils in her sculpted nose flared as much as they were able, maybe a millimeter.

“Let me simplify it for you. Our money, and it is our money, is tied up in investments, property and the business. Estate planning has to take in consideration things like individual and corporate taxes and a host of other concerns. But the bottom line is that none of this matters. I want Frank found and I want him found alive.”

“Okay, I’ll continue looking. But I need to get paid. It’s already the second and I’ve got bills like everybody else, dig?”

She put her arms around me and leaned in, her face inches from mine. “Is money really that important to you?” she whispered.

I was conflicted, and no doubt still under the influence of the near-naked bodies outside, the coke running through my brain, and her smell, a heady mixture of scotch, cigarettes, perfume and tanning oil. I moved her shades to the top of her head, grabbed her face with both hands and planted a kiss before pulling back and looking into those crazy eyes.

“Money is very important to me.” I said.

She tried on a half-smile and nodded. “That’s the way it is?” she asked in a low voice.

“Yup. I told you, I don’t do this for free.” I put her shades back down and stood up, breaking the mood.

She cocked her head to one side. If she was disappointed, she didn’t let it show. “I’ll get the money by Monday, okay?”

I felt like a sap, but I said that would be fine. As soon as we exited the cabana, Deanna went looking for Trish. I could see couples had already paired off and started to engage in light foreplay. Larry came up to me, wrapped his hairy arm around me and asked if I was going to stick around for the real fun. I’m only human, but as tempted as I was, I declined, saying I had to

pay the bills. I started to leave and almost fell into the embrace of Trish. She squeezed her body into mine and grabbed my ass. I threw my head back in a reaction to this and randomly focused on her neighbor's balcony. There it was: The afternoon sun was reflecting off the lens of a large refractor telescope. It wasn't pointed toward the sky.

Once back at the office, I checked the message machine and made a few calls. Fats's bike was ready to be picked up and the damage was fifty-eight bucks. The repair shop was on McAllister and they were open on Saturdays so I said I would be by the next day. I called Fats to let him know and to say that I still needed to borrow it. Even though he was a bit leery given my recent accident, he was cool with it, but then that's Fats. He did tell me to be careful.

Next, I called Montrose. I had some questions about estates, wills, and the like. We talked for a while and I started to get bored. It was like being in business school or something. I perked up when revealed that he had heard something interesting.

"Around two months ago," the lawyer intoned, "Frank Foxberg completely redid his will."

I was nonplussed. "I've heard that people with real money do this all the time to dodge taxes and the like," I countered.

"Yes," agreed the barrister, "I would agree that this is often true, but Frank Foxberg changed his will to give most of his money and property to a single entity."

"Not his wife?" I asked.

"Apparently, he changed it *from* his wife."

"He can do this?" It seemed a little funky.

"Sure, he can do that. Of course, it could and probably will be challenged."

“By the wife?”

“Sure. But would you like to hear who the new beneficiary is?”

“The Greenies,” I said.

“What?”

“The Interplanetary Family.”

“Ah, yes, very good.” Montrose paused for a moment and continued. “This so-called Interplanetary Family is apparently registered as a non-profit foundation.”

“Yeah, I talked to somebody who told me the same thing. Wait, you’re telling me that, among other things, the I.F. is a tax scam?” I asked.

“No, this is all perfectly legal.”

“That’s what’s wrong with this country,” I said.

“You want to talk about tax codes? Have you got four or five hours to spare?” he asked.

I begged off, saying that it was all very interesting and thanked him. Before I hung up, he practically had me swear on a stack of bibles that I wouldn’t let anyone know where I got this information, but I told him not to worry and rang off.

A call came in from Pearl. She said that the Moon family wanted to thank me in person and I said that would be fine. She also said that Summer still wasn’t willing to talk to anybody but Dr. Pace or Hong Gil Dong. I laughed, and told Pearl that Summer had called me that and told me that Hong Gil Dong was a kind of a Korean Robin Hood. Pearl said that was partially correct, but he had some mystical properties as well. I said I could try to talk to Summer and I that I would like to find out some info about her friend Julie. She gave me an address in San Rafael and I said I could probably get there by late Saturday morning. She thanked me again and hung up.

The last call I made was to Eye Chart. We went through the usual insults and he finally wanted to know why I called.

“I’m just wondering out loud,” I said.

“You’re just wondering. I don’t buy it,” he snapped back.

“No, it’s true. I was wondering if Frank made any changes to his insurance policy? Or maybe he took out a new policy or two?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Just that,” I answered.

“Now you want us to do your job for you?”

“Hey, it’s easier for you to find out this kind of stuff.”

“And you’re basing this on what?”

“Nothing. Look, you get pissed at me when I won’t tell you things and you get pissed at me when I do. Usually I don’t pass on my hunches until I’m pretty sure,” I said.

“Christ, you and your goddamned hunches make me crazy. You should leave this work to professionals. Just wondering, my ass.” The fat cop let loose a short expletive and hung up.

I was beat and decided the best thing would be to go home early, so I headed to Rossi’s and picked up some meat sauce and a bottle of red. It was Friday night, so *Mission Impossible* was on the tube. If I could stay awake long enough, I figured I could see how real professionals handled things.

I woke up early on Saturday and it was one of those postcard days, bright sun, blue sky and only a slight breeze. I put on pair of jeans, boots and my leather jacket because I had to pick up Fats's BSA. I had a pastry, a cup of coffee and an espresso at Trieste and then flagged down a cab on Columbus. The bike was ready so I paid the bill in cash and listened to what they had fixed. The mechanic who worked on it wasn't in, but he had left a few notes. I was supposed to be careful and not go above fifty because he didn't replace the forks. He just straightened them out. The brake cable had been replaced and tested and the big dent on the sidecar had been pounded out. The smaller dents and scratches were still there, just not quite as noticeable.

It was after ten when I hit the road. At first, I was concerned over a loud thud whenever I negotiated a turn or hit a bump in the road, so I briefly pulled over on Scott and looked around for something loose. It turned out to be a huge box wrench that the shop had left in the sidecar. It wasn't hurting anything, so I left it there and continued heading up to Marin and yes, driving a bit over fifty. The bike seemed to be okay. It didn't pull to the right or left any more than usual for a trike so I relaxed and enjoyed the weather and the ride.

I got off on the right exit in San Rafael, but of course I made a wrong turn so it was probably close to eleven when I pulled into a parking lot in what looked like an industrial park. Aside from the building number there wasn't any signage. It was as nondescript as could be. There was a uniform at the front door and I had to show my I.D. and let him know the party I was visiting. He made a call from the front desk and after a minute or two I had filled out a sign in sheet, was issued a temporary badge and was escorted to the elevator. It stopped on the third floor and when I got out I was astonished. It looked like the cleanest hospital imaginable. There

was a reception desk there as well, but instead of a burly cop, there was a burly nurse behind it. I was given a pair of paper booties to fit over my boots. That took me a few tries, as either the booties were too small or my feet were too big.

“Wendell?” The voice was a pleasant contralto with just a hint of an accent.

“Yep. And you are?”

“I’m Pearl.” She smiled, bowed slightly and extended one hand with the other loosely wrapped around her wrist. It all seemed very mannered and formal, but I went along with it. Pearl was maybe all of five feet tall and had a round, moonlike face which matched her round, moonlike body. “Thank you so much for coming and thanks for your help in finding Summer. If you will follow me, please?”

I was led down the hall to a corner suite. There was a sort of reception room with a table and a few chairs and then behind it, another room. An elderly couple sprang up from their seats and proceeded to bow toward me. I didn’t know the proper protocol, but I figured I was safe in returning the gesture.

Pearl led things off. “Mister Pike,” she intoned, “I’d like to present you to Mr. and Mrs. Moon.” We repeated the bowing thing and then Mr. Moon, a gaunt man with thick glasses, a receding hairline and prominent jowls, stepped forward. He was wearing a pair of loose black slacks and an argyle sweater with a large hole in one of the elbows.

“Mister Pike,” he started in a heavy accent, “we can’t thank you enough for helping to give our daughter back to us.”

“Well, from what I understand, the police deserve most of the credit,” I said with as much modesty as I could muster.

“Yes, but they would not have known where to look.”

We spent a few minutes talking and bowing and I finally I asked if I could see Summer. Pearl led me to the next room.

Shoehorned into the room were a bed, two chairs and a bedside table. There was an I.V. bag filled with a clear liquid on a stand and a tube ran from the bag to Summer's arm. She didn't look great. Her face looked as white as the linen on her pillow. She was wearing a light blue hospital gown and had thick fabric belts restraining her wrists.

Pearl said hello to her and held a plastic cup with a straw in front of Summer's face but the captive girl just turned her head away. Pearl said she would be in the next room before she split. I sat down on one of the chairs and looked at her.

"Hey, Yeoreum," I half whispered. She turned her head and looked at me. It seemed like she was having trouble focusing.

"Hong Gil Dong," she said with a faint smile.

"That's right. How are you doing? Can I get you anything?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said in a scratchy voice, "You can get me the hell out of here."

"I don't think I can do that right now."

Her eyes narrowed. "Did you tell them where I was?"

"Me? Nope, wasn't me," I lied. "Maybe it was somebody else. What about Julie?"

"Julie? No, it couldn't have been her," she said shaking her head.

"Was Julie up there with you?"

"Up there?"

"Yeah, the Interplanetary Family farm. Was she there too?"

“Julie left,” she croaked. I picked up the cup with the straw and this time she took a drink and coughed a few times before continuing. “She gave me a note. She said she had to tell me something.”

“What? What was Julie supposed to tell you?” I asked. I was trying to keep my voice and behavior as measured and nonchalant as I could.

“I don’t know. We were supposed to meet up in our little spot. There’s a small pond close to the edge of the property. It’s shaded and set off from everything. We used to meet there sometimes. She wanted to tell me something important...” Her voice trailed off.

“She was supposed to meet you there? When was this?”

It was obvious that the sedative was slowing her down. “When did I see you?”

“That was a Saturday almost a couple of weeks ago.”

“Hmm,” she nodded. “Maybe it was a week or so before that? I wasn’t worried; she had been making the bus trips to The City and staying at the consulate, sometimes for a week or so. But she always came back.”

“Did she go there with Victor?” I asked as evenly as I could.

“Yeah, Victor drives the bus. Sometimes, they didn’t take the bus. Sometimes they went in the whale.”

“The whale?” I asked.

“Yeah, the big green car. Everybody drives the whale.” She tried on a smile that didn’t quite take. “She likes Victor.”

“Where did she meet him?”

“Victor? At school. The Family had a seminar there. Why are you asking these questions? Are you going to look for Jules?”

“I can try,” I said.

“She probably came back and we just missed each other, right?”

“Sure, that’s possible.”

“Or maybe she’s in a room like this?”

“I don’t think so. The police haven’t found her.”

“Oh,” she sighed. “Gil Dong?”

“Yes, Yeoreum?”

“I need to go back up there. I need to make sure Julie’s okay and I need to be there when it happens.”

“When what happens? The Visitation?” I asked.

“Hmm. You know.” She tried on a wan smile. “That makes sense. Yeah, the Visitation. This might be the single most important event ever and I need to be there.”

“I’ll talk to your parents.”

“No, they won’t understand. They don’t understand.”

“Well, no promises, but I’ll see what I can do.” I wasn’t sure if she believed me or not, but I felt that I had to say something. She started to say something and then she drifted into something resembling sleep. I squeezed her hand and left the room.

Summer’s parents sprang up again and this time, Mr. Moon bowed his head and thrust his right hand forward with his left hand loosely supporting his wrist.

“Please, thank you,” he said.

I shook his hand and did a dipped my head slightly.

Pearl looked me apologetically. “We’ll try to get the reward money to you as soon as we can. It won’t be as much as the newspapers said, but that amount was supposed to be shared with the Schotts. They aren’t paying anything.”

“I guess that's their right. I didn't find Julie,” I said.

“Still, we feel bad that we can’t pay you what we said.”

“No, that’s cool. I get it.”

“Can we send you a check?” she asked.

“Sure, that would be fine. You've got my address, right?”

Pearl nodded. There was a bit of an awkward silence as we all stared at the white linoleum.

I looked at the three of them and smiled. “All right then, I’ve got to run. Good luck, and if it’s not too much trouble, can you give me a little update on her progress? I’d really appreciate that. Thanks.” We all bowed again and I left the room and headed for the elevator.

The bridge traffic on the way back was stop and go. I finally got into North Beach around three and parked the BSA in a storage space-garage that I shared with a neighbor and then hiked back to the office. Tack was in, along with a friend of his and they both were excitedly going over lines of code. I told them not to mind me so they didn’t.

I found a roach in my top desk drawer maybe got two hits out of it. You could say that I was lost in thought, but mainly I was bummed out thinking about Summer rejecting her parents and giving up on everything. I supposed she didn’t know any better. She was just a young kid seduced by freedom, drugs and the promise of a big, life-altering event preached by a crazy or calculated leader. On one hand, I wanted to shake some sense into the girl and make her see the Interplanetary Family as the scam it no doubt was. But on the other hand, who was I to tell her

how to live her life? Then, I remembered the hole in Mr. Moon's sweater and felt as far from being the Korean Robin Hood as I possibly could.

Nothing happened for a few days. Sure, I put in some calls and visited a couple of people but it felt like I wasn't making any progress. I had just finished off some roast pork and fried rice and was sipping a lukewarm cup of Graffeo dark roast while perusing the fishwrap. McGovern had won the California Primary so he was all but a shoe-in for the nomination. On the baseball front, it was another loss to the Red Birds, so for the season they had lost more than twice as many games as they had won. Barring divine intervention, it didn't look good. The phone rang and I absently picked it up.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"That's how you pick up the phone?" It was the fat cop and he had a lot of nerve giving me etiquette lessons but I let it slide.

"What's up?"

"I heard they found one of those missing girls. You had something to do with that, right?"

"A little. I told them where she was. I saw her when I was up at the Greenie farm."

"Those nut jobs? They've got a farm?"

"Yeah. I think the plan is to have a self-sustaining commune up there. It's in Inverness."

He considered that for a bit. "Hmm, good job I guess. Anyway, I'm glad that you let the police do their job in getting her out of there, but I'm thinking that this had more to do with the distance involved than any renewed sense of moral and civic duty."

I laughed. This was Eye Chart giving me a compliment. I didn't press the issue and asked what the other thing was he wanted to talk about.

“Insurance. How the hell did you know that Frank Foxberg took out additional insurance policies?”

“Policies? Like more than one?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. How did you know?”

“I didn’t. Like I said it was a hunch.”

The fat cop spat out his favorite expletive, a concise synonym for copulating. “You and your damn hunches.”

“Do you want to hear another one?”

“We’re just talking, right? If it doesn’t cost anything, I’m all ears.”

“The beneficiary is the Interplanetary Family Foundation.”

There was a pause on the phone and then he started shouting. “Where did you find this out? I’m sensing something so goddamned illegal--”

“No, honest, it was just a guess. He’s been hanging with that crowd.”

“He has?”

“He was.”

“You know what I think?” asked the fat cop.

“Thankfully, no.”

“I think that this makes the wife a lot more interesting.”

“Is that so?” I asked, thinking the same thing.

“Sure. Most husbands will take out policies with the missus as the beneficiary. If I croak, my Linda gets around twenty-five grand, double that if I’m on duty when it happens. Sometimes, I’m surprised she’s not pushing me into the line of fire. But Foxberg names those kooks as the recipients. That’s a bit of a slap in the face, don’t you think?”

“Maybe. I question the timing as well.”

“Meaning what?”

“Well, before he gets killed or goes missing, take your pick, he takes out a couple of insurance policies. Seems fishy as hell to me.”

“Yeah, that’s obvious.” There was a pause before he continued. “Maybe that’s why she doesn’t want to I.D. him?”

“I guess that’s possible,” I conceded.

“So, swami, got any other hunches?”

“How about this. Check and see if he made any changes to his will in the last couple of months.”

“This is another hunch?” the inspector asked.

“Of course. Tell me how I could get that kind of information?”

“Legally? No way. But I know you, Pike, I know you.”

“Look, take it or leave it. I think it warrants looking at.”

“Sure, it warrants it. I thought Mrs. Foxberg was your client. I thought you protected your clients?”

“When I get paid, yeah.”

“Still, huh? That’s some job you’ve got. Well you want to know something else? This International--”

“Interplanetary.”

“Right. Interplanetary Bozos. They used to rent out a building here in town.”

“Sure,” I warily replied. “They call it the consulate. Way out on Geary.”

“Have you been there?”

“I went by there once. Talked to somebody about our salvation coming from the stars or some such nonsense.”

“You haven’t been by recently, right?”

“Recently? Not really, no. Why?”

“They moved out, lease expired on the first. No sooner do they move out than it blows up.”

“Blows up?”

“Yeah. At first the owner thought it was a gas leak and they blamed PG&E. But the fire investigation team found that a gas oven was left on. This is all off the record and unofficial, you understand.”

“Sure. Was anybody inside?” I asked.

“No, it was empty at the time. It will take weeks to get any kind of official report. Of course, they can’t tell if the pilot light was on or not, but it seems a bit suspicious, no?”

“I guess.” I paused for a bit. “Do you think I go around blowing up buildings now?”

“Pike, I don’t know what I think.”

“Damn right,” I said before hanging up.

I figured that it was a fair trade, I found out about the insurance policies and the cops would find out about the will. Things were getting a bit clearer, but we had a ways to go yet. The timing of the consulate fire was disturbing, coupled with the whole Visitation thing. It seemed like they were getting ready to do something dramatic or apocalyptic and I was two or three moves behind them. Where did Frank Foxberg fit into all of this? And when the hell was I going to get paid?

Tack and his computer friend, I think her name was Debra, were heading over to Specs for a couple of rounds and asked me if I wanted to join them. I said I had some things to do and would try to get there a bit later. Tack grinned, because he knew this was my way of saying no and giving him a little space to maneuver. Once they were gone, I took out a piece of paper and tried to make sense of everything.

The phone rang and I had half a mind to let the machine take it, but I picked it up. Nora was on the other end and she sounded off. I asked her what was wrong. She said she was fine, but she was with her friend Yan. Yan was concerned about something and she wouldn't tell her what it was. I asked if it was something like an extortion shakedown, but Nora said no, it was something personal. I asked her to put her friend on the line, but she said that Yan didn't want to talk about it over the phone so I told her to tell her friend to swing on by. I gave her my address and she thanked me and said she had to get back to work. I told her I would buy her a drink the next time I saw her.

I was getting close to buttoning up the office when the doorbell rang. It's funny, but the ring seemed somehow tentative, just one very short, weak ring. I leaned out the window and recognized the woman from the dog grooming joint, so I buzzed her in. She was dressed in black slacks, a tan jacket, and a sweatshirt that had "Alcatraz Swim Team" printed on it. She was clearly out of her element and looked around the office like it was another planet. I planted her in one of the green chairs and asked if she would like a drink, but she shook her head.

"My name is Yan."

"Hi Yan. We met at your salon, remember? Nora said you might come by. I'm Wendell."

“Nora said that you’re a detective? You work for the police?” she asked in a heavy Mandarin accent.

“I work *with* the police,” I countered. “How are you and your friend?”

“My friend?”

“The one who doesn't speak,” I said somewhat apologetically.

“You mean Wenling,” she said. “That’s why I’m here. Lots of people make the mistake of thinking she’s simple because she can’t speak, but she’s plenty smart. She graduated from college with a business degree.”

“If I remember right, she seemed pretty sharp. She’s also very pretty,” I admitted.

“Ah,” Yan said. She repeated herself and said something I didn’t catch. “Ah, I’m, I’m not really sure.”

“What?” I asked. “Nora said you had a problem.”

“No problem. Everything is fine.” Yan got up and started to walk away.

“Yan?” I called out. “Is there a problem with Wenling? Is she missing?”

She turned toward me. “How did you...”

“How did I know?” I interrupted. “I know because it’s what I do. Look, Yan, have a seat. Relax.”

“I don’t have a lot of money,” she apologized.

“That makes two of us,” I responded. When she didn’t say anything I continued. “It’s a joke, just a small joke. Look, don’t worry about money right now. I work on a sliding scale.” Yeah, like sliding off a damn cliff. I was owed a lot of bread. But Yan looked lost and I felt I had to help her.

“Let’s start with the basics,” I said. “What’s her full name? Her age? Any family or friends? Any hobbies?” I got out my small notebook and started taking down the information. Halfway through, she asked for the drink I had offered. We had a bit of leftover scotch in the office so I poured a small shot into one of the cartoon glasses and handed it to her. She eventually loosened up and I got the info I needed.

Wenling was Wenling Chang and she had been living with Yan since she was twelve. She didn’t have any family that Yan knew of. She was 26 years old, had indeed gotten a degree from State and had no real hobbies, though she like to go out to the movies. She could hear just fine, but her voice box was damaged when she was a kid. She worked at Yan’s salon and didn’t have many friends, and though she got along with Nora, she would often have to be dragged to church.

The last time Yan saw Wenling was last Friday, when they had closed up the shop. She had called the cops, but didn’t get anywhere with them. I could see her being intimidated by them, that’s for sure. I told her I would see what I could do and she thanked me. She asked about money, but I waived her off. We could take care of that if I found her. I won’t say she left the office with a bounce in her step, but maybe she was in a bit better spirits now that her burden was shared.

Of course, this was one more damn thing to consider, and it didn’t seem to have anything to do with my main job, which was still trying to find the elusive and maybe not dead Frank Foxberg. Plus, there didn’t seem to be that much money in it for me. But there was one little thing, another damn coincidence that nagged at me, and that was the dog grooming shop’s proximity to the now burned down consulate.

The morning *Chron* had it plastered on the front page. A young couple had been out for a romantic little boat ride on Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park when their paddleboat hit something. They were horrified to find that it wasn't a branch but a human arm, detached from its body and floating on the water. Cops were called to the scene and divers were dispatched. In time, the remains of a young woman were found. The cops were saying all the usual things, but I knew. I called Eye Chart and left a message. It was in the early evening when he finally called back.

"What the hell do you want?" he barked. See what I mean about etiquette?

"The fishwrap had a front page story. Said you found a body?"

"Yeah, feel sorry for the poor kids who found her. They were pretty badly shaken. You know Stow Lake?"

"I've been there once, maybe. Kind of cheesy."

"Yeah. Well, you know where there's that stone bridge? It looks like she had been dropped from it."

"Doesn't make a lot of sense. The water's not that deep. How long had she been there?"

"Couple of weeks, maybe more. All this is preliminary and off the record."

"Of course. The paper made it seem like there was a lot of decomp."

He muttered his favorite expletive and continued. "Damn reporters. Sure, there was some, along with some significant wounds, but we can't tell yet what was peri and what was post."

"Was she shot?"

“Not sure yet. Preliminary investigation makes it look like she was strangled with something like a thin rope and weighted down with some rocks.”

I took a deep breath and tried to be as casual as possible. “Caucasian? Blonde hair?”

“If you’re asking if it was that Schott kid, I’d have to say that the odds are pretty damn good. I’m not sure about fingerprints, but they’ll be able to get dental records because of the braces.”

“She was murdered.”

“No shit, Sherlock. It’s a hell of a way to commit suicide. Got any hunches about that?”

“Right now? I’ve got nothing, man.”

“Huh,” was as much as I got from him before he rang off.

The moment I hung up, the phone rang again. I picked it up expecting more bile from the fat cop, but instead it was another voice I recognized.

“Mister Pike? This is Pearl.”

Her voice caught me off guard. “Oh, yeah. Hi, Pearl. What’s up?”

“Have you heard anything?” There was anxiety in her voice.

“No,” I cautiously drawled. “About what? Why, what’s wrong?”

“She’s gone,” she said.

“Who? Summer?”

“Yes, Summer’s gone.”

“How the hell, excuse me, but how is that possible? When I saw her, there was plenty of muscle on her floor and at the entrance, plus she was strapped down in her bed. How could she just leave?”

“We don’t know. Someone must have done something, loosened her restraints and helped her out. We think it happened last night.”

“And you’re just calling me now?”

“Sorry, but we’ve been dealing with the security company and the police.”

“What about the deprogrammer?” I asked.

“What? Oh, you mean the man who was supposed to help her return to normal?”

“Sure, that guy,” I answered. I had another thought. “Did that guy have an accent?”

“What?”

“You know, like a European accent?”

“I only met him once. I don’t remember the accent. He was a big man, not fat, just big. Why?”

“No real reason,” I lied. I tried to be comforting. “Look here, she probably couldn’t have gotten too far and we all have a pretty good idea of where she was heading.”

“That place?”

“Yeah.”

“Why does she want to go there? What does she see in those people?” Pearl was having a tough time understanding and I wasn’t sure I could help her. I didn’t get it either. She asked if there was anything I could do. I couldn’t think of anything off the top of my head, but I told her that I would try to think of something. I rang off, saying she and the Moons shouldn’t worry too much and that she should call me if she had any news.

To be honest, all my reassurances were little more than hot air. I was worried. I knew that the cops were looking for Summer, but I doubted that they could extract her from the compound as easily as the last time around. It was just a hunch, but I felt that this time, the

Greenies would be ready with some serious resistance. If Summer were up there, it would be hard enough to get through the front gate, let alone get her back out. I was thinking about this when the doorbell rang and this time there was nothing tentative about it. Like it was just one protracted buzz, dig? I looked out the window and let loose a few choice words before buzzing her in.

Deanna was a mess and could barely make it up the stairs. She was dressed in a pair of jeans and a dark blouse and had her large shades on but they failed to completely cover up a large bruise around one eye. Once I got her seated, she fumbled through her bag and found a small vial of coke. She shook some out onto her long pinky and snorted it.

“I’d offer you some, but I’m running low. Sorry. Unless you want to drive me to Mr. Bigfoot’s?”

“It’s just Bigfoot.”

“What?”

“Bigfoot, not Mr. Big, never mind.” I thrust a finger into her face. “Look, I’m not going back there.”

She considered this and sneered. “You’re as bad as the rest of them. I thought you knew how to have fun.”

“Forget fun. Where’s my money?”

She shook her head. “The same old thing. You’re like a broken record. You’ll get paid. It’s just that there’s some cash flow problems right now.”

“You signed a binding contract and you owe me money. It’s been five weeks already and I’m due close to three grand.”

“You’ll get your goddamn money!” she yelled at me.

Her outburst momentarily threw me for a loop. We sat glowering at each other for a minute before I decided to change the subject. “What happened to your eye?”

“Hmm? This? I bumped into something.” Then she started to softly laugh, though I couldn't see what was so funny.

She was high and drunk and damned if I was going to let her crash here again. “Maybe we could go out and discuss this over a drink?”

She looked over her dark shades. “You don't have anything here?”

“Sorry, fresh out.”

She looked around the office a bit. “What a shithole,” she declared.

I'm not saying that was the last straw, but it certainly motivated me. I grabbed my jacket and keys and started to guide her out of the chair as gently as I could.

“Whoa. Where are you going?” she slurred.

“Not me, you. Out. You're going out.”

“I don't want to.”

“Tough.”

“I don't want, hey, be careful. Hey, don't be so rough, I can take a hint.” She looked me right in the face, at least I thought she did but with those shades on, it was hard to tell. We stared at each other in an uncomfortable silence.

“Did you kill Frank?” I finally asked.

“What? Don't be absurd.”

“The cops think you're a suspect.”

“They're idiots. I didn't kill Frank. I didn't kill him because he's still alive. That's one of the reasons I came here, to tell you that.” She folded back into the green Naugahyde.

“What? You think Frank is alive or you know Frank is alive?”

She thought about this for a bit. “I think I know that Frank is alive.” She laughed again and it wasn’t a pleasant sound, mostly coming out her nose. But then again, there wasn’t much left of her nasal cavity.

“How? Have you seen him?”

“His clothes are missing. Not all of them, but a lot of them. I think he took a couple of suitcases as well.”

“When did you notice this?”

“Earlier today.”

“Do you know where he’s headed?”

“How would I? No, that’s your job,” she said. “It’s a simple task.”

“Sure, but it’s not so simple, because Frank, assuming he’s alive, doesn’t want to be found.”

She started to say something but stopped.

I held up my hands. “Then how about this? Before Frank splits, he’s liable to check in on his mother one last time.”

“His mother? Where?”

“The nursing home in Daly City.”

She thought about this and nodded her head although it wasn’t really nodding. It reminded me of those toys you saw in the back windows of cars, the dogs with the heads that roll around.

“Look,” I said. “Where are you staying?”

“I don’t know. I’m not going home.”

“Why?”

“I don't feel safe there. Not tonight.”

“How about the Milners’ house?”

She gave an exaggerated shake of her head. “No. I can't go there.” Then she said in a singsong voice, “It's complicated.”

I winced. “I'll bet. Do you think Frank wants to hurt you?”

She considered this. “Maybe or maybe one of his weird friends does.” I started to pick up the phone. “What are you doing?”

“Calling Larry.”

She reached across the desk and pressed down on the switchhook. “I told you, no. The Milners and I have had a bit of a, well, disagreement.” She took off her glasses and looked at me with something approaching honesty, though with her I couldn't be sure. “I came here because I don't have any other place to go. That's the truth. Pathetic, isn't it?”

I thought about it for a bit. “Can you walk?”

“What?”

“You can't stay here, so we need to take a walk. It's a couple of blocks uphill, but there's a very comfortable chair with your name on it.” I hated myself more than a little for caving so quickly.

“A chair? Why not a bed?” she asked without any emotion at all.

“It's complicated,” I snapped.

“Suit yourself.” She pried herself up from the chair and started to zigzag her way to the door. I caught her arm, turned off the light and helped her down the stairs. It was still light out

but the fog had rolled in. She shivered and I gave her my jacket and pointed her in the right direction. It wasn't easy going and toward the end I was damn near carrying her.

When we got to my pad, I set her down in my favorite chair. It's overstuffed and wraps you in its soft warmth. It feels like a cocoon. But she was having none of it. She got up and wandered around. She wanted to look at things and she wanted a drink. I figured a drink might help us both a little so I poured about three fingers worth into a couple of glasses. Hers was gone in one gulp so I refilled it while I sipped mine. I tried to get more out of her but she wouldn't say anything that made any sense.

Eventually, I got her into the chair and she shut down. I cleaned up a bit, put a call into Larry but I just got his service. I left a message for him to call me in the morning. Then I crawled off to bed. I was only a little surprised when halfway through the night, I woke up to find I had company in it, aggressive company at that.

The next morning was uncomfortable, or at least it was for me. Deanna acted as if we had exchanged notes on the teachings of Kierkegaard the night before. There wasn't the usual intimacy between a couple. Instead, it was like something that had happened in the distant past. The fridge and cupboard were bare, so I made a pot of Graffeo and we polished it off while smoking. I asked a few more questions and she danced around them. After an hour or so of this, we both said that we had places to be. Apparently, whatever had her spooked was now okay. Maybe a werewolf or some other nocturnal beast was hounding her, though my guess was that it was an unpaid dealer.

Once we got out of the flat, I pointed her toward Columbus so she could get a cab and I hoofed it over to the office.

As distracted as I was, I still had an idea of what I needed to do. First, I had to head up to Inverness. I figured I would check out the compound, see just how tight the security was and then I'd ride over to the Foxbergs' country house. Deanna had given me the key to the larger house so I would be able to see if Frank was there or had been there recently. I would wait for nightfall and then head into the Greenies' compound. I wasn't positive that Summer would be there, but it made the most sense. I didn't really have a plan to get her out of there. I would have to figure that out on the fly. It would probably be around nine o'clock before it got dark so I would have most of the day to kill. I stopped off at Rossi's and picked up a couple of rolls and some deli items. Back at the office, I made a pot of coffee and poured that into a thermos and then I filled up an old canteen with water. I rounded up some bandages, a couple of packs of

smokes and a new flashlight, stuffing everything into a small knapsack. I checked the message machine but nobody had called since the previous evening.

It was close to eleven when I finally got on the road. I took it easy and passed the small gas station in Point Reyes Station around two. I parked up the road from the compound entrance and hoofed it, staying close to the edge of the road to remain under the cover of the trees and bushes. I got close enough to get a good look and I didn't see any police, but there were several men dressed in green who were visible near the entrance shack. I didn't like my odds; at least two of them were carrying rifles. So much for Plan A. I couldn't just walk through the front door.

I hiked back to the BSA and was upset because it didn't want to start. It took seven kicks, each one more desperate than the last and I was starting to think I might have flooded it. It finally sputtered to life and I headed in the right direction. Once I got close to the Foxbergs' property, I cut the power, opened the gate and coasted down their driveway. The carport-garage was covered with a large tarp tied down with ropes. I untied the knots and used the tarp to wrap up the bike and I threw the rope under the bike. Using the key Deanna had given me, I entered the big house.

It was much nicer than the small one I had been in. There were two bedrooms and a huge shower that could fit a couple of people with ease. The living room had a large combination TV and stereo. The records were an odd combination of easy listening and soul. I guessed that it reflected a basic incompatibility between the Foxbergs. The bedroom was surprisingly cramped. There was barely room for the king size bed and a small nightstand. In the hallway were a couple of closets that were mainly filled with clothes. There was a small room that looked like it was used as an office or a study and it contained several bookshelves that were crammed with

titles ranging from *Modern Investment Strategies* to *Theoretical Propulsion Systems*. I looked through the books but nothing jumped out so I went back to the kitchen. The refrigerator had some canned sodas and condiments, but nothing else.

I went back outside and checked the small house. Somebody had been in there since my last visit. The dishes had been washed and the garbage had been taken out. I thumbed through a recent *TV Guide* that looked like it had never been opened. I found some dark hairs in the bathroom and some plastic gloves in a plastic trash bin. Poking around through the trash I found a box of hair dye. So somebody, I'm guessing Frank, had changed his appearance.

I didn't find anything else, so I locked the door and put the key back above the sill. There was a ladder near the carport so I climbed it and got on the roof. I wished I had a pair of binoculars and then remembered who owned this place. Sure enough, in the office closet in the big house was a large telescope with a blue Goto Tokyo serial number tag. I hefted it up the ladder and perched it on the roof.

The compound filled most of the valley below the Foxbergs' property and from my vantage point, I could see the small pond that Summer talked about, as well as some fields filled with lettuce, squash and tomato plants. I could also see the theater and some other smaller buildings. There were a few Greenies out and about, but much less activity than I expected. I didn't know if that was a good or a bad thing. It was possible that they were being kept in the cafeteria or the dormitory. Maybe they were playing dodgeball inside one of the buildings. Or maybe the joint was on lockdown after the recent police action.

I went back inside and used the mustard and mayo from the fridge and the bread and cold cuts from Rossi's to build a couple of sandwiches. I looked around and found a hat and then went back outside and up on the roof. It was actually pleasant as I ate my lunch and alternated

between staring through the eyepiece and looking around the Foxberg property for visitors. It started to cool off in the afternoon and fingers of fog rose over the hills to the west. There still wasn't much going on.

I went back into the house and tried the phone. I was able to reach the office and check the machine, but no one had left any messages. Out of boredom, I finally parked myself on a burgundy leather couch and watched some TV. The reception wasn't great, and my choice was limited to a bad black and white monster movie, some snow, and the Portland Open PBA Championship. I piled up some cans and things in front of both the main and back doors, so any intruder would make a racket, and I settled back and watched some bowling with the volume almost off.

Somehow I managed to doze off for a bit and woke up to a drama featuring firemen. I checked my watch and it was almost nine. I splashed some water on my face, drank a cup of lukewarm coffee out of the thermos and looked outside. It was getting dark, so I bundled up and got back on the roof. There were very few lights on in the compound and it was hard to see anything. The cooler it got, the more all my aches and pains started barking.

Two guards were roaming around the perimeter of the compound and both appeared to be armed. Their patrol pattern seemed more random than anything else and while they never got close to the Foxbergs' property, it was a sobering reminder that it wasn't going to be easy. It was probably an hour later that I saw some more activity. The theater was dramatically lit up and there was a line of Greenies snaking all the way back from the cafeteria. I waited until they were all inside and I didn't see any sign of the guards, so I figured it was as good a time as any to make a move. I stuffed the canteen into my knapsack and climbed down the ladder and trudged through the weeds. There was a barbed wire fence separating the properties. The fence post was

half rotted away and the wire supports were in pretty bad shape, so I was able to squeeze through without adding to my existing cuts and bruises.

I was in the compound, roughly 800 yards from the theater. I was trespassing and those guards would have a good excuse to take a pot shot at me at the first opportunity that presented itself. This section of the property was downhill and steep. I slipped a couple of times when the soft ground gave way. By the time I reached the pond, it leveled off some, but there was heavy vegetation which made walking difficult. I looked for signs of Summer or Julie but I couldn't see anything. I wasn't allowing myself to use my flashlight; I didn't want to give away my position. This was fine in theory, but stomping around in the dark was difficult. I tripped over a log once and got stung by nettles or blackberry bushes a couple of times.

I checked my watch and it was almost eleven o'clock. I took cover behind some bushes and allowed myself a smoke, being careful to cup the end. The moon was maybe three quarters full but it wasn't very bright because of a fairly heavy cloud cover. There was action going on in the theater. Bright strobe flashes went off around it and loud thunder boomed from within. I decided to try to get closer, giving up my cover. I was almost next to the building when the roof split open like an observatory and red and green lasers bounced off smoke or fog that was pouring out of the building.

The wind kicked up and there was a loud thumping noise. I looked up and saw powerful multicolored lights slowly pulsing and the noise got louder, accompanied by a high-pitched whine. The lights began to sequence faster and faster until they produced a strobe-like effect and what looked like some kind of craft descended until it was almost touching the roof of the theater. The wind felt like a small hurricane and it was blowing smoke, fog, dirt, and paper

everywhere. More loud horns blared from within the building, the lasers continued and a man dressed in a shiny green robe and a face that looked like a bug was lifted into the craft.

I guessed this the big moment, the Visitation. But something was clearly wrong. I expected there to be rapturous applause but instead, there were only a few cries that sounded more terrified than awestruck. The fog continued to rise from the building and then sink to the surrounding ground. Then the lights abruptly shut off and the vehicle quickly darted away, buzzing the compound before heading off to the west. The clouds shifted and the entire scene was illuminated by the dull silver moonlight.

The wind and noise had abated and a few people started to stagger from the building. They were in convulsions, coughing and trying to breathe. More started leaving, though some only managed a couple of steps before collapsing. In the pale light, it looked like something out of a cheap B-movie. I ran in closer, no longer worried about being spotted by the guards and turned my flashlight onto faces, desperately looking for anyone I could recognize.

A couple of them were actually foaming at the mouth and at this point I got very concerned, not just for the Greenies but for myself. I had taken a short course on poisons while in the Navy and now found myself wishing I had paid better attention. I saw someone who might have been Tina but it was hard to tell. She wasn't moving.

I got to the entrance of the theater and saw a lot of bodies, but most of them were either dead still or spastically shaking. The lasers continued to shoot off into the night sky and a tape loop of a low horn-like sound was being blasted through large speakers inside the dome. I kept shining the flashlight on peoples' maps. Sometimes I got a reaction but most of the time I didn't.

My gut told me to run, but I stayed put; I owed that much to the Moons. I started to lean into the entrance of the dome when someone grabbed my waist and pulled me away. I pried

them off my back and was almost ready to throw a punch but instead, I shined the light into the face of Yan's niece, Wenling. I grabbed her shoulders and asked her if she knew who I was and if she was okay and she answered by shaking her head to mean yes. I pointed to the theater and asked her what had happened in there, but this time she just shook her head from side to side.

I grabbed her hand and was about to head back to the Foxbergs' home when I thought I heard a faint voice calling out for Hong Gil Dong. I moved as fast as I could toward the voice, but this was made more difficult with Wenling pulling me in the opposite direction. She might have been mute, but she got her point across. She was freaked out and wanted nothing more than to leave. I assured her that I wanted to split as well and finally got her to let up a bit.

I pointed the flashlight toward where the voice had come from. I was fairly certain it was Summer, though the bad news was that she looked awful and was wracked with convulsive retching. Occasionally, someone would try to run up towards us only to fall in a heap, sometimes coughing and sometimes scarily silent.

I got my canteen out, took a swig, handed it to Wenling and then poured it into Summer's mouth. She coughed and sputtered but kept it down. I took off my jacket and wrapped it around the young girl as best I could. I knew I shouldn't come in contact with her skin, but it couldn't be helped. I also knew we had to head for higher ground, but of course it was anybody's guess if this plague was airborne or something somebody put in the Tang.

The low horn sound continued as we made our way to the back of the dome and I looked at the open cellar doors. I told Wenling to stay put. She shook her head but I was adamant and bolted downstairs into the shelter. I don't know what I was expecting to find, but I had to look.

There was the old roll top desk. I threw a chair at it and broke the cheap lock. Then I glanced at my watch and started rifling through the drawers. I didn't find much so I checked out

a couple of the boxes. Some papers looked interesting so I stuffed them into my sack. There wasn't a sign of the doctor anywhere, but I had a pretty good idea where he was. I found the bottle of Chivas, sniffed it and took a big slug, hoping that it wasn't spiked. The booze warmed me up and dusted out the cobwebs. Taking one last look around, I ran out of the shelter.

When I got back up the steps, Wenling was looking at me reproachfully. She didn't appreciate my detour.

It was tougher getting out of the compound than it was getting in. It was all uphill and a lot steeper than I remembered and I was dragging a couple of bodies along. In addition to all that, I wasn't completely sure of my bearings. I hadn't thought to leave a light on and it was hard to tell where the Foxbergs' house might be. I couldn't see anything in the darkness and was silently cursing my horrible sense of direction when I stepped in something wet. This must be the pond, I thought. OK, now we were getting somewhere.

I closed my eyes and tried to picture where it was located and when I opened my eyes I had a pretty good idea which way to go. By this time, Summer was little more than dead weight and I had to get her on my back. I found the fence and held the strands of barbed wire far enough apart to allow Wenling to get through, but it was a lot harder getting Summer past this obstacle. In the end, Wenling was able to knock one of the fence posts down with a few well-placed kicks and with the sick girl on my back I was able to step over the fallen wires.

When we got to the house, I fumbled with the key. I was starting to shake uncontrollably and what should have taken ten seconds took the better part of a minute. Once I got the door open, I kicked all the pots and pans away and led us all inside. Then, I commanded Wenling to get Summer into the shower. I told her to try to get her clothes off, but that she shouldn't touch them. She shot me a look that said, "How the hell do I do that, Einstein?" I nodded and said to

do what she had to do, but to just be careful. I heard the shower start up and I went to the phone in the study. It was dead. I looked around to see if I had pulled it out of the socket, but no dice. It was some kind of line outage I convinced myself, because I didn't want to think of the other possibility.

I got to the sink and ran some water, trying to clean myself up as best I could. I found some men's clothes in one of the closets. The pants and shirt were a little tight and I probably looked like an idiot, but I couldn't trust my own threads. There were some women's jeans and sweatshirts in a cherry wood armoire. All of them would be too big for the girls, but they would have to do.

I knocked on the bathroom door and handed them over to Wenling and allowed them to get dressed. After a couple of minutes, she opened the door and I and saw Summer in the harsh light. She looked terrible, like a broken doll in the oversized clothes. By her labored and aperiodic breathing, I wasn't sure how long she would last. Wenling helped me get her outside and I pulled the tarp off the bike and got it pointed in the right direction. Wenling pointed toward the sky as if to say what was that thing back there? I started to say something when I was jumped from behind.

I was able to throw the goon off me. I couldn't see very well in the dark, but I was able to pick out the black bangs and the long scar on his bare arm. He got up and swung a wild right hook that missed me by a mile. I peppered him with some body blows and tried to land an uppercut, but he dodged it and hit me with a jab to my nose. I shook my head and leaned in, getting in a decent shot to his jaw, but I don't know if it did any damage to him and it felt like I might have broken a bone in my hand. He found a piece of wood and started swinging it around over his head. His first attempt missed me completely, but the second one knocked me back into

the sidecar. I reached in and fumbled around as he ran toward me. I was getting anxious, because I couldn't find what I was looking for.

He swung at me again and I dodged it as it crashed against the sidecar with a loud metallic sound. I finally got my hands on the huge wrench and my first swing went right for his knee; it connected with a satisfying thud and crack. It wasn't enough to bring him down however, as he rammed the wood into my chest.

The blow almost knocked me over and I was gasping for breath. I could taste the combination of sweat and blood in mouth. My chest, nose, and right hand were throbbing. I lunged at him again with the wrench but he managed to parry the move with the wood and then he swung it down hard on my hand. It knocked the wrench clean out. The tool went flying backwards and I heard it land behind me on the soft dirt. He was breathing hard and limping, but he was also smiling which pissed me off. I tried using the tarp to cover him but that was a bad idea; it didn't do anything but make him more upset. I looked around for something else to hit him with and he landed a solid blow to my left kidney.

We were both hobbled now and he was swinging the stick like Dave Kingman at the plate, no discipline and going for the fences. I looked around and found a brick from the construction pile. I picked it up and ran toward the man. He swung and I flailed at him. The wood struck my back and the brick landed against his jaw. We were both stunned, but got up to continue the fight.

I shook my head and he spat out blood that looked black in the light as it dribbled down his mouth and stained his green t-shirt. I found a hammer, so now it was his stick against my tool. He had the advantage in reach but I could maneuver a little quicker. I heard a rustling noise behind me and hoped that I was guessing right. We warily circled each other and it was

my turn to smile, as Wenling appeared behind him. Victor flicked his head back to move the hair out of his eyes and started to wind up for a killer blow right as the mute chick swung the wrench as hard as she could and it landed on the right temporal bone of the thug's skull. He fell face first into the dirt, out like a light.

I ran over and embraced Wenling. "Whoa, girl, that was awesome!"

She smiled but looked concerned. I'm sure I didn't look very well but I lied and told her I was okay. I had her look after Summer while I tied Victor up with the rope from under the bike and wrapped him up in the blue tarp. Then, I got the girls loaded into the sidecar and started up the drive.

I swung by the front entrance of the compound, hoping to see some cops but there wasn't anybody. I took a risk, zooming toward the shack, figuring that maybe their phone worked and I could call for help, but I had to abandon the idea when I heard a rifle shot whiz over my head. I turned and saw a guard running toward us. Luckily, the light was bad and he was still some distance away so his aim was poor, but I wasn't going to wait around for him to get closer. Another shot was fired and it hit the ground a few feet in front of me.

Outgunned, I spun the bike around and took off toward Point Reyes Station. I was speeding most of the way, but thankfully the brakes were working just fine. I pulled into the gas station. It was closed but there was the phone booth. I got the operator and asked for the police. She asked if it was an emergency and I could only answer, "Goddamn right it is."

The bored cop who answered was convinced I was on drugs, and I was getting very upset, having to say the same things over and over. Finally, he said they would send an ambulance over and maybe a squad car or two to the compound. I exploded and said some

pretty choice words before hanging up. Then, I placed a collect call to another number that I knew.

“What the hell?” the fat cop asked. Like I said, that’s no way to answer a phone, but in his defense, it was his home number and it was late on a Saturday night.

“I need some help,” I pleaded.

“Pike? Where are you? Do you know what time it is?”

“I’m in Point Reyes. I was up at the compound and something very bad happened. A bunch of the Greenies up there look like they’ve been poisoned. I’ve got two with me and hopefully we’re all headed to some hospital.”

“Point Reyes? Why are the hell are you calling me? That’s pretty goddamned far out of my territory.”

“I need your help! You’ve got to talk to somebody with some juice. I tried to explain things to some local desk jockey and he thought I was calling from a party.” I lowered my voice. “It’s bad, man, like a mass killing or suicide or something. We need to get a bunch of ambulances up there with some kind of poison protocol. I think it’s gas or something.”

“Wait, you think it might be airborne?”

“It looked like it but it was really hard to tell. It’s nasty, whatever it is.” I swallowed hard. My lungs started to feel congested and I resisted the urge to start hacking. “Whoever goes up there has got to be careful because there’s at least one armed guard at the entrance. He took a couple of shots at me.” I coughed a couple of times and looked over to the bike. “Okay, that’s the first thing. The second thing is you’ve got to get somebody up to the Foxbergs’ property.” In between a coughing fit, I gave him the directions.

“Why, what’s there?”

“Not what, who. I was attacked there, and I think you can tie this cat into one of your murders.”

“The hell you say?”

“Yeah. His name is Victor. I don’t have a last name. He’s Dr. Pace’s muscle. Powerful guy, black hair, six one or so, large scar on his right arm.” I had to take a short break when I started violently coughing. I finally was able to continue. “I’ve got him gift wrapped in a blue tarp.”

“A what?”

“You heard me. I think I hear the ambulance. I don’t know where they’re taking us, so it may be a bit before we can talk. Rattle whatever cages you have to. We’ve got to help those people and you’ve got to get your hands on this Victor cat.”

He said he would see what he could do and rang off. I took the papers out of my knapsack, folded them up and limped back to the bike, stashing them in one of the saddlebags. Feeling dead tired and sore all over, I hugged Wenling.

“How does she look?” I asked.

She just shook her head.

“You did good back there.” I allowed myself a small grin. “Real good.”

She signed something that I took to mean thank you. I held on to her tightly as the sirens got louder and a wave of fatigue overpowered me. I think I briefly talked to somebody when we were in the ambulance but I must have passed out because I don’t remember much else.

I woke up in a hospital bed. I had a cast on my right hand, something on my nose and a half mile of bandages wrapped around my chest. When I tried to sit up, the pain was so intense that I almost blacked out. I looked around the room and saw that I had warranted a private room, which was impressive, but probably more than I could afford. I expected to see someone in a white coat in front of me but instead, there was a black cat with a shaved head wearing a blue uniform and a dour expression.

“He lives,” the man said.

“Yeah, if you call this living.” I grunted. “Who the hell are you?” I asked.

“You can call me Captain Williams.”

I tried to focus on his nametag. “So, captain, are you a doctor?”

“No, I’m with the Air Force.”

“What’s a flyboy doing here?” I asked.

“I’m not a pilot. I’m a weapons specialist.”

“It was gas?”

“Don’t be jumping to conclusions.”

“Hah,” I laughed bitterly. “Fairfield, am I right?”

“What?”

“The train wreck. I thought there was something off about that.”

“Don’t believe everything you read. And don’t read too much into everything you see.”

“Well, there’s a non-denial denial. That wasn’t just a train wreck; somebody stole something from that train. Am I getting warm?”

“It doesn’t work like that, Mr. Pike.”

“I’ll bet it doesn’t. Did you send some of your people up to the compound?”

“The farm in Inverness?”

I nodded.

“I can’t tell you that. And you,” he pointed at me for emphasis, “can’t tell anybody that as well.”

“It’s like that, huh?”

“Sure, but relax, Mr. Pike. You’re not under suspicion for anything.”

“The words are nice but the tone says otherwise.”

“I’m saying that you don’t have to make things difficult.”

“I’m not trying to make things difficult. I am trying to understand what the hell happened. What about my friends?” I asked.

“Which friends are those?”

“The two girls, I mean the woman and the girl I was with.”

“They’re both alive.”

“Can you give me a little more info than that?”

“Not really. I told you, I’m not a doctor,” he answered. I’m telling you, this Captain Williams was a regular laugh riot.

“You’re Air Force, probably based out of Travis. You say that you’re a weapons specialist. Most folks would think guns, bombs or something like that. But you know, I spent a little bit of time in the military as well.”

“Naval Intelligence, according to your jacket.”

“Of course, you would have that information.” I shook my head and then looked Captain Williams right in the eye. “Something got stolen off the train. Let me guess, somebody parked their car on the tracks. The train arrives. This is a freight train traveling around fifty and it takes a while to stop. The car is shredded. The immediate focus is on a possible fatality in the car and security gets a bit, I don't know, lax. A couple of men with guns take out two guards on the train and drive away with the loot. If you're here that means it was something like, oh, let me guess, VX?”

The Captain smiled. “You watch too many movies, Mr. Pike. It wasn't VX.”

“I just witnessed what looked like the aftermath of a weapon being deployed. You say it wasn't VX, so was it something like it?”

The captain took his time; working his tongue on the inside of his cheek. “Mister Pike, you should know that the U.S. military does not have a chemical weapons program. While you're spinning a nice little yarn, it's nothing more than that, a nice story.”

“Where am I? A military hospital? Travis?”

“No. You're in Marin General Hospital. The wing has been cordoned off. For public safety and other concerns.”

“Like publicity?”

“There is that,” he conceded.

“Oh, man,” I complained. “This is going to cost me plenty.”

“It doesn't have to cost you anything, unless you make things difficult for us.”

I thought about it for a bit. “You're telling me that all this is covered?”

“It could be. How are you feeling? Are you up to answering some questions?”

“I could try. I need some water. Actually I need a drink. And a smoke.”

“I’ll see about the water. The drink and the smoke will have to wait.”

I don’t know how long the debrief took. Captain Williams was a suspicious man and I got the impression he thought I had something to do with the party on the farm. I told him what I needed to and left out what he didn’t need to know. After a while it got to be a real drag, because he was one of those cats that would ask the same question a dozen different ways to try to trip you up. Eventually, he got up and thanked me and handed me a one page form in triplicate.

“If you could fill that out, sign it and date it? You can keep the bottom copy.”

I did see a doctor. I was able to get upright and walk down the hall and back. It hurt like hell, but I refused the drugs they offered. I wanted to remain as clear-headed as possible. I breathed a sigh of relief when he told me that Wenling was due to be discharged. That was good news. I had been really impressed with her grace under fire and to tell you the truth, I had taken a real shine to her. Summer wasn’t doing as well; she was still in the ICU. If she did manage to recover, it was going to be a long, hard road. I asked to use a phone and called Tack. He wondered where I’d been.

“Didn’t you see the news?” I asked. “The compound.” I lowered my voice and looked around for Captain Williams. “The gas?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Never mind. Can you do me a favor? Get me some clothes, a pint and a pack of smokes? I’m in Marin General Hospital, some kind of fancy wing but they should be able to track me down. You need to call Fats and tell him the bike is parked at that same garage in Point Reyes. He’ll know where that is. Tell him that this time the bike is fine and I’m a mess. Also, if you could let Eye Chart know where I am and ask him about Victor.”

“Who’s Victor?”

“A little present I left for him.”

“You’re being awfully cryptic,” he said.

“Things are weird, my friend, really weird.”

I had to study the form that the captain had handed me. It was a nondisclosure agreement, in exchange for the Air Force paying all my bills. I couldn’t say anything about any of this for fifty years. I didn’t think I would last that long. I started to sign it, and then thought better of it and left to track down Captain Williams.

I found him talking to another doctor and asked if we could talk. There weren’t any spare rooms, so he led me over to the stairwell and we had to whisper. I bargained for him to cover Wenling and Summer’s bills as well as mine. I doubted if Summer knew what had hit her and as for Wenling, well, she wouldn’t be talking about any of this. He didn’t like it but he went along with it, writing the amendment in long hand and we both signed the form and initialed the changes.

I looked in on Summer. I couldn’t go into the room. I just looked in through a wire-reinforced window in the door. She was in a clear oxygen tent and had a bunch of tubes hooked up to her. I couldn’t find the doctor, but a nurse saw me and said that they didn’t know who she was and they couldn’t call anybody. I swore, apologized and told her I’d find them a number to call.

Wenling was much better and I got a smile and a hug when I walked through the door. I groaned and she looked at my face and backed off, looking concerned. We sat down at a table in a small break room. She had a notepad with her and filled me in on what she was doing up at the compound. Wenling lived close to the consulate and had been curious about those people. She

saw them packing up for a trip up to the farm and there turned out to be a Greenie who knew a bit of ASL. He said she could come with them on the bus, stay overnight and be back by Sunday. To her, it looked like fun weekend trip up in the country. That was before the consulate was shut down. Once it was, all the bus rides stopped and she was stuck up there.

She didn't trust them, thought they were all crazy and tried to get out, but after the raid to extract Summer, security got tighter and tighter. I asked her about the Visitation, but she drew a blank. She saw one of Doctor Pace's performances and felt she was probably drugged and decided to hide rather than go to the next one. That may have saved her life.

Her aunt was freaked out and was coming up on the bus. I told Wenling we could work something out to get her and her aunt a ride back to the city.

"Not in the sidecar!" she wrote. I laughed and even though my ribs hurt, I kept laughing.

Tack came up with Gill. The hack was asking about the "Goonies" and I didn't bother to correct him. Tack asked what happened and I said I couldn't tell him and showed him the NDA. I talked my way out of the hospital since the only things wrong with me were broken bones, bruises, cuts and a slight fever. They didn't like it and I had to sign a couple of more forms.

Yan had come up on a Golden Gate Transit bus with some clothes and things for Wenling. When Yan saw her, she screamed at her in Mandarin and Wenling looked contrite and occasionally signed something in response. Yan thanked me and asked what she owed me but I told her it was okay and despite her protests, I convinced her that a cab ride would be better for Wenling than a bus ride. She wanted to pay, but Gill said no, this was on him, which was actually a lie. I was footing the bill but I didn't argue the point.

The ride back was subdued and it didn't help that Yan placed herself in the back seat between Wenling and myself. Once we got to the bridge, I rolled down the window and stuck my head out. It was instantly cooler and I felt more comfortable. I said it was nice to be home and everyone agreed.

Gill dropped Yan and Wenling off first and then drove us to the office. Tack went down to Noah's to pick up some booze and smokes and I picked up the phone and ordered a pizza. Before things got too out of hand, I gave Pearl a call and told her that Summer had been in an accident and she was now back at Marin General. I told her to prepare the parents because she was in pretty bad shape, but the doctor said she was going to pull through. She thanked me and I told her to keep me informed on how Summer was doing. A little later, I got a call from Eye Chart, so I invited him to show up. What the hell, we both had some questions for each other.

Tack and Zyzck were more than curious, but I needed a slice, a drink and a smoke before I was ready to answer their questions. After the second shot of scotch, I started to feel a bit more human. I would have liked a bit of weed, but obviously had to forgo that due to the cop's presence. Finally I decided to tell them what had happened.

"This," I said holding up a piece of paper, "is a form from the United States Air Force. It basically says I can't say anything about what happened. The dude was mean looking and I don't take any of this lightly. But you two deserve to know. I'm only going to say this stuff once, and if any of it gets out, I'll deny having said anything, dig?"

"Sure, sure," said the fat cop stuffing another slice in his mouth. For someone who initially said he wasn't hungry, he had eaten more than his share.

“Look,” I said. “A lot of this is conjecture, and I’ve got no clue as to the motive, but somehow, the plug had to be pulled on the Interplanetary Family. It could be that they were involved in some shady things and the Feds were on to them. So they had to get rid of any evidence. They torched the consulate, the building they rented on Geary. Then, they decided to take everybody on the farm to a higher plane of existence. At first, I thought they all drank poison. It wouldn’t have been the first time that their drinks were spiked. But then I saw the fog. What do you know about VX gas?”

After a pause, Tack answered. “Not much. Wasn’t that the stuff that killed all those sheep in Utah a few years back?”

“Yeah, that was the stuff. Well, I don’t know if this was VX, but it was some kind of aerosol agent and it was likely stolen from the military. About a month ago, a car was hit by a train near Fairfield. I think that was when the stuff was taken. I don’t know how much they got away with and I don’t know how much they used up at the compound. For a delivery system, I think it was somehow added into one or two fog machines or maybe the machines were just used to mask it. This gas filled their theater and got into the lungs of a lot of folks who were on site. I don’t know how many there were, but the cat who ran the joint said somewhere between thirty to a hundred were up at the farm at any given time.”

“Where are they now? In the same hospital you were in?” asked Tack.

“No idea, but it looks like the military has taken things over and it may not be possible to find that out. I don’t know how many died. Some did for sure, but maybe some others lived. Not everybody was in the theater when it happened. I don’t know how powerful this stuff was. Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Holy crap! That’s all true?” The fat cop was beside himself.

“What? I didn’t say a thing.” I answered.

“What? You just said...oh right.” He finally got it.

“What about Victor?” I asked.

“Yeah. County sheriff picked him up. When they found him, he was just coming to. He started screaming that he was innocent, that he was attacked by a mad man. Luckily, my message got through so they held him. He’s due to be transferred to county. You think he killed Julie Schott?”

“That was her body they found in the park, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, we got a positive ID. It was her,” the inspector said.

“Well, then, I do. I think she saw something. Oh, and by the way, I’d stay away from the poison gas angle. You’re likely to run smack dab into those military types and get nowhere.”

“That’s out of my jurisdiction anyway.”

“Well, in any case, your best bet would be to stick him with the Schott murder. I think Julie either knew what Victor planned to do with the gas, or she saw somebody, maybe Victor or somebody else, kill a fellow Greenie. That would be your John Doe.”

“My John Doe?” the inspector asked.

“Hear me out, we’ll get there. Anyway, Julie wanted to tell her friend Summer about what happened, but she never got the chance. Summer told me that Julie was soft on Victor so it was probably easy for him to persuade her to go back to the city with him. Then, he killed her, dumping her remains in Stow Lake.”

“Why Stow Lake?”

“Don’t know, maybe they had been there before. The park is pretty quiet at night. There would be much less traffic than say leaving her at Ocean Beach. But that’s why you need to find

Victor's car. It's a dark green Imperial. I think a '68." I wrote the description of the car and the plate number on a scrap piece of paper and handed it to Zyzck. "Those cars have large trunks. If you can find the car, I think you'll find evidence for two separate murders."

"Julie Schott and my John Doe? You don't think that the body down at the morgue is Frank Foxberg?"

"Yeah, I'm with the crazy lady on this one. I think he's still alive."

"Where?" asked a wide-eyed Tack.

I shrugged. "Beats me." I fired up a smoke and immediately started hacking. It felt like needles stabbing me in the chest but subsided after a minute or so, and I poured some more scotch into a glass before turning back to the inspector.

Both Tack and Eye Chart looked concerned. "You okay?" asked Tack.

"I'll live." I took a slug of booze and looked at the inspector. "Have you had any conversations recently with Mrs. Foxberg?" I asked.

"No, she's been MIA."

"Well, find her and you'll find Frank."

"They're together?"

"Don't know. Call it another hunch."

The fat cop let out his favorite, short expletive.

It had been exactly a week since I was discharged from the hospital. The broken finger didn't hurt. It was more of an annoyance when trying to do little things like getting smokes out of the pack and other things I won't talk about regarding personal hygiene. The ribs were still a problem. Getting up in the morning took forever and I couldn't cough or laugh without intense pain. It wasn't too bad once I got upright and as long as I moved slowly. Fats was able to pick up his bike and I apologized all over again, but he said it was cool. I said I would pay to get it painted and I'd get some weed over to him next time I saw him. He found the papers I had stashed on the bike and put them in an envelope and mailed them to the office.

I was sitting in my office chair looking at the slim harvest of documents I had liberated from Dr. Pace's shelter. I didn't have much time when I grabbed them, so it was a pretty random collection of papers and forms. There were a few that detailed bank transactions. One of them in particular was interesting. It showed that the I.F. had closed its main business account. There was a letter attached that said they were moving funds into a new project. I wasn't sure what this meant. It looked like they were pulling the plug but the timing didn't make sense. I was surprised to see almost twenty grand in this account. Who knew that there was that kind of bread in outer space futures?

There was a pink form that had been roughly torn in half. It looked like the bottom copy of some military document. I called the operator and got the main number for Travis Air Force Base. I wasn't trying to talk to Captain Williams because I knew that he would stonewall me. I figured that my best bet was to try getting info from somebody further down the food chain. I got transferred all over the place but that was okay, because my improvised rap got better with

each new person I contacted. I finally got through to somebody who seemed bored enough to talk to me.

“Corporal Hughes, Supply and Requisitions.”

“Corporal Hughes? This is Captain Marx from Shaw,” I said, hoping my generic southern accent would pass muster. “I’m looking at your DD Form 1348-7 shipment and receipt document dated May 25.”

“Is there a problem?” I could hear him opening a file cabinet and shuffling through some paper.

“You list a variance of two percent on canisters, but I can’t make out the reason for the variance.”

“Just a second, you said the 25th? Hold on, I’ve, yeah, I’ve got it right here. Thirty-six out of thirty-eight canisters. Form 1335 should have been attached.”

“No,” I replied. “We never received Form 1335.”

“Hmm, that’s weird. You said you from Shaw? That doesn't make any sense at all. The shipment was going to Eglin. How the hell did it wind up in South Carolina? This was supposed to get to the AAC in Florida.”

“I don’t know. We’re trying to figure that out ourselves.”

“Look, there should be the 1335 showing the damage to the freight car that was carrying the TRANAa3 canisters.”

“This copy is a little hard to read. Could you spell that out for me?” I asked.

“Tango, romeo, alpha, november, alpha, lower case alpha and the number three,” the corporal said. “Two of the canisters were stolen. It’s all right there on the form. I can send you the form by telefax. There’s still an open investigation on this so I’ll need your--”

I hung up before he could finish. So I had a name for the stuff: TRANAa3. The next step was calling my friend Cy because he seemed to always know about these kinds of things. He hadn't heard of it but said he knew somebody who might and he would get back to me.

About an hour or so later, he called back and filled me in on what he had found out. TRANAa3 stood for Tactical Rapid Acting Nerve Agent aerosol number 3. The gas was designed to incapacitate combatants and then quickly disperse and become harmless in a short period of time. It was supposed to be a non-lethal knockout gas, but in testing it was found to be unstable, so any remaining canisters were to be destroyed. He wanted to know why I was asking about this stuff but I begged off, telling him that I owed him a round or two and to keep this conversation between us. I asked Cy if I could talk directly to his expert and he said he couldn't promise anything but he would see what he could do.

Next, I tried calling Deanna a couple of times and got nowhere. I was beyond tired of this routine. I just wanted to get paid. I looked at my watch and saw that it was time to get out of the office and follow my hunch.

An hour or so later, I was sitting in Gill's cab in a parking lot in Daly City. Saint Agatha's Convalescent Home was a single story building configured as one large L. There were two entrances. One was in the front and it was the cheerier of the two, featuring large windows, potted plants and a nice sign with doves or seagulls painted on it. The back had a loading dock and one large ramp. My guess was that the patients walked in the front door and were wheeled out of the back, if you catch my drift.

We had the radio on and were listening to the Giants playing the Cubs at Wrigley. It was knotted up at six after four innings. I had sprung for some donuts and coffee from a shop across the street on Westlake called Lucky Donut. The plain donut I had eaten was anything but lucky

as far as my stomach was concerned and even though the coffee tasted like someone had melted a crayon, mixed it with dishwater and then burned the whole thing, I was still drinking it because I was trying to stay awake. My hunch wasn't working out very well, as this was the third day in a row I had tried this stakeout and nothing had happened. Aside from paying Gill to sit in his cab and my getting on a first name basis with the donut shop employees, I was striking out. Gill was in the middle of a long, senseless rap about a friend's dog named Akita Khrushchev and I had tuned him out, staring absently out the window when I saw him.

He looked different from his pictures. His hair had been dyed and he had a fake beard but it was Frank all right. I started to get out of the cab to ask him a couple of questions when the crazy lady appeared. She was shouting at him and he started shouting back. The shouting stopped when her gun discharged. I looked around and found I wasn't alone. There were four cops getting out of a couple of unmarked cars. Cops and donuts; I smiled and shook my head.

"You bastard!" Deanna screamed. "That's my money too! You can't just give it away!"

"Calm down. Let's talk about this."

"Calm down?" She fired off another shot. This one bagged one of the doves on the sign.

One of the cops had a megaphone and he shouted through it. "Both of you, put your hands up and drop your weapons."

"No!" screamed Deanna.

Frank had turned a bit toward the officers. "Help me out here. She's crazy."

"I'm what?" she shouted. This was followed by two more shots that took out the building's front windows. A small crowd had formed behind us and the cops told us to get back.

Gill got out of the hack and sidled up next to me. "I can't decide if she's a lousy shot or she's just playing with him."

“God knows,” I answered, seeing my four grand float away.

“Drop your weapon now!” screamed the cop with the megaphone.

“Tell him,” she screamed while still keeping a bead on Frank. “Tell him he’s got my money and he’s just giving it away. He has to give me what’s mine!”

“I think he can hear you, ma’am,” said the cop through the bullhorn. “Just do us a favor and drop the weapon. We can all head back to the station and iron this out.”

It may have been the mention of heading to the police station that did it, but Frank decided it would be a good idea to take off. He started running away when Deanna screamed for him to stop. He did and slowly turned around to face her. He started to say something we couldn’t hear and the crazed Mrs. Foxberg answered by putting a bullet into his right thigh. I looked back at the cops.

“I counted five shots,” I said to nobody in particular. “I’d go in and get her but I’m a little banged up.”

All four of the cops ignored me and slowly made their way to the scene with their guns drawn. One of them cuffed Deanna and three of them were seeing to Frank. A police radio was crackling in the background and one of the uniforms ran back to his patrol car and got on the horn, while the one who had put Deanna in cuffs muscled her back to his cruiser, telling us to stay back. When she got close enough, I shouted out to her.

“Did you have to shoot him in the leg?”

I’m not even sure if she recognized me when she looked at me with those crazy, mismatched eyes. “I wasn’t aiming for his leg,” she shouted back.

Gill shook his head and looked over at me. “Show’s over, man. What’s next? Head to a bar?”

I looked back toward Frank and the cops; they seemed to have things under control. I could hear an approaching siren and turned back to the hack. "I could use a drink right now, but nah. Let's stick around a bit and see where they take him."

"You want to follow the ambulance?"

"Yeah."

"You've got some kind of plan?"

"Not really. Maybe I'll think of something," I said with a slight grin.

Gill replied by saying something in Russian under his breath and I didn't ask for a translation. The meat wagon arrived and they got Frank loaded and headed south on Mission. We tucked behind and followed, keeping to the limit. It took less than ten minutes to reach Mary's Help Hospital. Gill swung into a red zone and we watched them take the stretcher out of the back of the ambulance and into the building. A cruiser pulled up to the entrance and screeched to a halt. Then, a patrolman jumped out and followed the two techs wheeling Frank through the automatic doors.

"What now?" asked Gill.

"Give me a couple of minutes, okay?"

I got out of the cab and walked into the hospital. I looked around and found a cop talking to somebody at the front desk.

"I'm checking on that guy they just brought in?" I asked.

"What? Who the hell are you?" asked the annoyed cop.

I started to put out my paw, but the splint on my finger made it awkward. "Sorry, work injury. My name's Wendell. I know the guy," I said, trying to keep things simple.

The cop ignored my hand. "You know who? You mean the gunshot vic?"

“Yeah, that's the one. How's he doing?”

“He was conscious. I'm no doctor, but based on the amount of blood, the shot probably missed his femoral. He'll be in surgery for a while. Do you want to make a statement?”

“Sure, I could, but I didn't see anything, only the aftermath,” I lied.

“This guy got a name? We couldn't find any I.D. on him.”

It went on for another few minutes. I had to give the cop a lot of info. He didn't want me to leave, but I said I had to get back to work and gave him one of my cards with just my name and number. It took about fifteen minutes before I was able to get back into Gill's cab.

“What's the scoop?” he asked.

“I don't think there's anything we can do now. We'll have to wait until he's in recovery. Let's head back to the office. What's your evening like?”

“I don't know. You want to come back later?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

He gave me an exaggerated frown and pointed us north.

It was around ten in the evening when we got back to Mary's Help. I brought along Tack, because his size tended to give him something approaching invisibility, whereas I tended to leave an impression. I could run interference or provide a distraction if needed, while he could slip in and out of the room without raising much suspicion. That was the plan, anyway. The bored large black woman working the reception desk was studying a folded page of the *Chron*, trying to solve the Daily Jumble. Her name tag said “Flo” and she wasn't the same receptionist from the afternoon, so I went right up to her. I started to ask about Frank but hesitated for a bit.

“Can I help you?” she asked without looking up from her puzzle.

“Hi, Flo, yeah, I’m looking, is that the Jumble?” I asked distracted.

“Hmm. I’ve got all the words, but I can't solve the phrase,” she said in a nice lilt.

“Mind if I take a look? I’m more of a crossword person, but I do the other puzzles sometimes.”

“Sure, I've spent too much time on it already,” she said, handing over the paper.

The drawing was a couple of birds looking at each other while perched on a telephone wire. I looked at the circled letters on the four clues and figured it out. “Do you want me to tell you the answer?” I asked.

“You figured it out already? That was fast. Sure.”

“Wire we here?” I said.

“Why are--”

“Not why are. Wire.” I pointed at the drawing. “See, it's a telephone wire.”

“Wire we here? That's funny.” She had a good laugh and with the ice broken, proceeded to give me details on Frank.

He had been moved from recovery to a private room on the fifth floor. I got the floor number but it was past visiting hours so I wasn’t allowed up there. I smiled and said that was fine. I looked around for Tack and found him wearing a white lab coat that was a couple of sizes too big and he was holding a door open. When I walked into the room he handed me a spare coat along with a clipboard.

“Where did you find these?” I asked.

“Laundry basket down the hall. What do you think? Do I look like a doctor?”

“I don’t know. Clothes make the man, I suppose,” was my noncommittal response.

He looked out and declared the coast was clear, so we walked down the hall like we belonged and got in the elevator. When we got the fifth floor, Ramon got out and headed in one direction and I headed in the other. It didn't take long to see that the numbers were going the wrong way, so I turned around and walked toward Tack. He was pouring on the charm, talking to an attractive blonde sitting behind a desk.

"Ah, Doctor Fine," he said, greeting me.

"Doctor Howard. Have you seen the patient yet?" I ad-libbed.

"No, not yet. Let me take care of it and then we can grab a bite."

"Sure thing. I can wait."

"It should only take a minute. You can talk to Rose while I check on him," he said, entering Frank's private room.

I looked at the blonde nurse's nametag. "Hi Rose. Where do you know Doctor Howard from?"

She scrunched up her face in confusion. "Actually I just met him. I haven't seen you around either."

"Oh, sorry. Doctor Fine," I said, putting down my clipboard and thrusting out my left hand. "Doctor Larry Fine," I continued, hoping she wasn't a Three Stooges fan. "I'm on loan from Saint Mary's vascular surgery department, mainly supervising because of this," I said raising my right hand with the broken finger. "Slipped on a wet floor," I lied. I looked at my watch and hoped that Tack would hurry it up because I had next to no medical knowledge and the nurse was looking more than a little suspicious. Rose started to ask me something else when Tack walked out of the room and headed toward us.

“Seems to be doing just fine. Hey, Rose, we’re heading for the cafeteria. Do you want us to bring you back anything?”

She shook her head.

“No? Well, then, see you around?” He flashed a grin at her and we both started toward the elevator.

“Doctor?” the nurse called out.

“What?” I asked as both Tack and I turned around.

“Your clipboard?”

“I gave an embarrassed chuckle and jogged back to her station. “It’s been a long day Rose. I’m a bit out of sorts.” I picked up the clipboard and gave her a wave with it and hightailed back to the elevator. Once the doors closed, we both breathed a sigh of relief and took off our jackets. On the ground floor, I walked back to the front desk and asked Flo about the cafeteria hours while Tack stashed the coats and clipboard. It turned out that it was closed for the evening. I said that was too bad and I would be back in the morning and then walked out the building with Tack a good ten feet behind me. We didn’t say anything until we were back in the relative safety of Gill’s City Cab.

I looked over at Tack. “Any luck?” I asked.

“Yeah, they had his things in a bag underneath his bed. No wallet, but there was a hotel room key. The tab said it was from the Cleveland Arms. You know it?”

“Never heard of it. Gill?”

“Yeah, it’s a fleabag on Ellis,” he said.

“Got a room number?” I asked.

“Sure,” Tack replied, “It’s 302. I left the key there. Should I have taken it?”

“Nah, it’s more work but probably better this way,” I said, talking in a deep breath.

“Well, Gill, you know the way. What are we waiting for?”

Even with the light traffic it was almost midnight when we got there. The Cleveland Arms was a five-storey brick structure on Ellis near Jones in the middle of the Tenderloin, a sketchy neighborhood full of bums, drunks, transients and others who had ran out of luck. The door was locked so I spent some time trying to figure out if I should ring the bell and what lie I could tell the desk clerk. Thankfully, a very drunk cat stumbled toward the door and spent a good minute trying to work the lock. I offered to help but he was insistent that he didn’t need any, while he tried to force the key in upside down. He started getting upset and yelling how “the bastards” had changed the lock on him. It took a while but I finally convinced him to let me try and I got the door open with no trouble.

He looked at me with unfocused bloodshot eyes and said, “Sure, they’ll let *you* in.”

I shrugged in response and Tack and I followed him into the building. The ancient rug smelled of a half a dozen different things, none of them nice. It was also sticky. I looked around and there was one beefy dude wearing a dark suit and reading the *Examiner* in one of the lobby chairs. I didn’t like it but I hoped that whatever he was reading held his interest. The drunk waved to a young, fat kid wearing a Shakey’s Pizza Parlor tee shirt working the front desk who didn’t try to hide his boredom and primarily chewed gum, scratched his curly red hair and picked at his acne strewn face.

Tack provided the distraction by going up to the clerk and saying that the cigarette machine in the lobby had stolen his money. The kid rolled his eyes and sighed and told Tack to follow him. As soon as they left, I got behind the desk and searched around for the key rack. I

found it and got lucky because there was a spare key for Frank's room. I grabbed it and took to the stairs, climbing up to the third floor.

There was a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the knob. I knocked a couple of times and pressed my ear to the door but I didn't hear anything so I let myself in. The room was as clean as it could be, considering the age of the hotel. The lumpy bed looked like it hadn't been slept in recently. I rummaged through a small closet and found two suitcases. One of them was locked but it was easy enough to pick, even with my bum finger. I looked at the haul and gave out a low whistle. I wished I had brought along a camera, but instead I had to spend a lot of time writing everything down in my small notebook. When I was finished, I put everything back, wiped any prints I might have left, and cracked the door open a bit.

Despite a nagging feeling that I was being watched, I left the room, climbed down the stairs and left the key on the desk. The kid didn't even look up from his dog-eared copy of *Playboy* and the suit wasn't in the lobby. I left the building and tried to casually walk back to the cab when somebody grabbed me and thrust my face against the wall.

"Don't try anything funny," somebody with a clipped baritone hissed into my ear.

"Hey, what the hell?" I asked, barely able to speak.

"What were you doing in there?" asked a woman. I tried to turn around but this was met with more resistance. Someone kicked me, forcing me to spread my legs. This was followed by a comprehensive pat down.

"Wallet's in the back pocket," I offered. They grabbed that along with my notebook, flashlight, and pencil. "Who the hell are you guys?"

"We'll ask the questions," the woman said. They finally loosened their grip and allowed me to turn around.

I was looking at two suits, the big white cat with a crew cut who had been reading the newspaper in the lobby and a tall black woman sporting a conservative Afro and wearing a dark pantsuit. She had her gun drawn and aimed at my chest.

“Feds?” I asked.

“What did we just tell you?” asked the woman with more than a little bit of malice.

“Hey, I’m minding my business and you guys--”

“Minding your business?” interrupted the man. “More like breaking and entering. We can take you back to the front desk and see if they want to press charges.”

“Sure, you could do that. But, can you lighten up just a little? You’ve got my wallet. You can see that I’m licensed.”

“Right,” said the man while looking at my wallet contents. “A private investigator,” he said with the intonation of someone who’d encountered a broken sewer pipe or soiled diaper.

“This says your name is Wendell Pike?”

“Yeah, that’s what it says because that’s who I am.”

“Well then, Mr. Pike, perhaps you would like to explain what were you doing up there,” the woman suggested.

“I’ve been working for the wife of this guy--”

“An affair?” she asked.

“What? No, it’s not like that at all. He disappeared and she wanted me to find him,” I said, rubbing my jaw. “Mind if I have a smoke?”

“Knock yourself out,” answered the woman.

I sparked a slightly bent Camel and looked at the two. The way they carried themselves and their clothes screamed FBI. I saw the hint of sugar on the man's suit coat, so I guessed a stakeout. "You're Feds, right? Looking for Frank Foxberg?"

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Don't do anything stupid," she said, lowering her gun.

"I'm cool," I responded with more empty bravado than anything else. The two Feds huddled and talked something over. I took the time to straighten out my smoke and look for Gill's cab but it didn't seem to be around. Finally, the two turned toward me and the man handed my stuff back while the woman put her gun into a shoulder holster.

"I'm Agent Jones and this is Agent Morris," said the woman. "What do you know about Frank Foxberg?"

"Right now, he's in the hospital. His wife just shot him."

"His wife what?" asked Agent Jones.

"Yeah, I know, it's pretty weird, but she's a little crazy. No, make that a lot crazy."

"Which hospital?"

"That would be Mary's Help in Daly City."

"So if you've already found him, what were you doing in his hotel room?"

"Trying to tie up some loose ends. Why are *you* looking for Frank?"

Agent Morris started to say something but his partner shook her head. "I'm sorry, we can't talk about an ongoing investigation."

"Sure, I dig." I wanted to go someplace warm but instead they grilled me for more than an hour. Then they roused the clerk and he searched around for the key and we all wound up back in Frank's hotel room. The clerk was wide-eyed. This was a lot more exciting than

explaining how to use the cigarette machine. The two agents were methodical but were unable to open the suitcases. I felt tired and didn't feel any need to hide my yawn.

It was after two when they finally let me leave with all the usual admonitions. I told them I didn't like leaving town anyway which Agent Jones thought was funny. I gave them one of my cards and she said she might have some more questions, so I told her to drop by my office.

Once outside, I glanced down Ellis and saw a City Cab with smoke coming from the passenger window. I walked up to it, rapped on the door and Tack let me in.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"How much did you see?" I asked.

"I saw that you got made and I couldn't think of a way to warn you. The woman was staked out on the third floor and I couldn't get past her. They were cops, right?"

"Feds. How did it go? About as well as could be expected. It took a while to convince them that I'm not an enemy of the people."

Gill yawned. "Sorry. Are we done?"

"Yeah, I think we've done everything we can for tonight. Who's up for a drink?" I looked at my watch, groaned and tried to remember if I had any scotch left over.

"Did you find anything in the room?" asked Tack.

"Just the usual," I answered. "Suitcases, some clothes and two books of traveler's checks."

"Anything else?"

"Sure." I couldn't help myself and broke into a grin. "Stanton Mallot's drivers license and a plane ticket."

"Who's Stanton Mallot?" Tack asked.

“I think he’s Eye Chart’s crispy critter,” I answered, pleased with myself.

It was almost noon by the time I had dragged myself into the office. I called Zyzek and told him to give me a ring when he had the time. A few hours later he called me back.

“Jesus, Pike. What now?” he huffed with his usual lack of tact.

“Couple of things. One, I found Frank Foxberg.”

“He’s alive?” the inspector asked.

“Sure, but a little worse for wear. He’s in a hospital in Daly City.”

“Which one? Mary’s Help?”

“Yup. That’s one thing. The other is that I’ve got a tip for you.”

“Another hunch?”

“More than that. Last night, I was checking out a hotel in town, the Cleveland Arms. It’s between--”

“I know where it is,” he interrupted. “What the hell were you doing in that piss pot?”

“Frank Foxberg is, well, he was staying there.”

“Is that so? What would someone with his money be doing in a dump like that? Slumming? And again, why should I care? What does this get me?”

“It gets you the name of your John Doe.”

“You mean the body that was found in Foxberg’s car?”

“Yeah, that one. It’s Stanton or Stan Mallot, brown hair, green eyes, twenty-three years old, six three, one ninety, Calabasas address. Frank was using his name and his license. They’re a similar build.”

“And you know this how?”

“Something one of the girls up at the Greenie farm said. I asked if they had seen Frank, gave them a description and they said it sounded like Stan.”

“The Cleveland Arms Hotel. You’re telling me to go there?”

“Not really. I ran into a couple of Feds while I was there. They were looking for Frank as well.”

“Why?”

“They wouldn’t tell me. But they confiscated everything in the room.”

“What was that name again?”

“Stan or Stanton Mallot,” I said and then spelled it for him. Calabasas. You should check with missing per--”

“Sure, maybe I’ll do that after I pay Mr. Foxberg a visit. You got a room number for Foxberg?” he asked.

“No,” I lied. “You can check in with someone at the front desk.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” he responded and hung up.

I needed to clear my head so I went for a little walk and wound up at Mario’s Bohemian Cigar Store and had a couple cups of java. Then, I got a little hungry so I stopped at a small hole in the wall called the Dowager of China and had a plate of chow fun. The waitress and cook had a great laugh watching me with my broken finger trying to use chopsticks on the slippery noodles. With a bit of effort, they found a fork that was almost clean and I had a bit more success.

When I got back to the office, there was a message from Pearl. I called the number and got the front desk of the hospital and then get bounced around for a while until Gina came on and asked why I was calling. I asked her if she was the only person around there that did any work

and told her that Pearl had called and it must have had something to do with the Moon kid. She put me on hold and then I heard Pearl's contralto.

"Yes, Summer was taken off the ventilator last night," she said, relieved. "She's awake and alert. She can't talk yet and she's still very weak, but she recognized her mom and dad and seemed genuinely glad to see them. She doesn't seem to remember anything about her ordeal. The doctor said sometimes patients block things out when they've undergone, uh..."

"Trauma," I said.

"Yes, trauma. The memory loss might be short term or might be longer term. It's impossible to tell."

"Well, the good news is that she's on the way back."

"We owe you so much, Mr. Pike."

I wanted to say something about the reward money, but for some reason I couldn't bring it up. "Just make sure she doesn't go running off again."

"I don't think she will."

The doorbell interrupted my chain of thought.

"You never know. Listen, Pearl, I have to run. Somebody's at the door. Keep me updated on her condition from time to time, will you?"

"I will. Thank you again."

"Oh, and when you think the time is right, tell Summer that Hong Gil Dong said that things are going to be okay"

"I'll tell her," she said with a slight chuckle. "You're a funny man, Mr. Pike."

"It's a funny world, Pearl. The Moons are going to be alright?"

“They're tough. They've been through a lot. We'll all be okay. We can talk later, all right?”

“Sure, take it easy.”

The doorbell started up again so I hung up and buzzed the person in. Agent Jones slowly trod up the stairs. She looked like she hadn't gotten any sleep and was still wearing the same dark suit from the previous night. I ushered her into one of the green chairs and plopped down into my chair, which let out its usual complaint.

“Where's your partner?” I asked.

“Agent Morris is busy.”

“I'll bet. I'd offer you a drink, but I'm guessing you're still on duty.”

“Yes, well, I have a few more questions for you. What do you know about the Interplanetary Family?”

“Again with this? I don't know, they're a bunch of loonies living on a farm in Marin. They have panhandlers all over the city, but I haven't seen any in a few days. Look, I've told you everything I can.” I dug through the drawers and found the paper I was looking for. “Check it out. I'm not supposed to talk about this stuff.”

“You can talk to me. We're working with the Air Force. That document is supposed to prevent you from talking to the press.”

“I'm just supposed to believe you? Should I call the Air Force?” I started to pick up the phone but she didn't move an inch. Either she was a good actor or she was telling the truth.

“OK,” I said, hanging up and leaning back in my chair, spilling ashes on my shirt. “I'll tell you everything I know, which isn't all that much, but I need some information from you.”

“Why?” she asked, like she just wanted to know.

“Because somebody I was looking for, somebody I tried to help, and somebody I never even knew all wound up dead. Somebody else I found is recovering from serious injuries. As for me, my finger is broken, I’ve got three cracked ribs, my shoulder hurts, I’ve got bruises and cuts all over, and I’m sick and tired of being some kind of pinball. I’m still haunted by the fact that when Dr. Pace went sailing off into the unknown, he left behind some confused and loyal idiots to die. I want to know why.”

She shrugged and considered this. “The Bureau has been following the Interplanetary Family for some time now. There have been numerous complaints lodged against them and not all of those ‘confused and loyal idiots’ were there on their own volition.”

“Kidnapping? Prostitution?”

“Again, I can’t say.”

“What about drugs? I think they spiked the drinks up on the farm.”

“We were following up on reports of the manufacture, sale and distribution of schedule one drugs.”

“Schedule one, huh? Acid?”

She just shrugged in response.

“But what about the gas? What about the TRANAa3?”

The mention of the name of the gas threw her for a bit, but she quickly regained her composure. “We are working with the Air Force on the theft of training supplies.”

“Training supplies? I saw folks dying up there.”

She considered this for a moment. “There were almost seventy people at the location. Eight died, seven from asphyxiation and one from a self-inflicted bullet wound. The rest are

doing just fine physically and have either been returned to their homes or are in facilities equipped to handle their unique form of mental distress.”

“What? I saw that gas and those people--”

“Never mind what you saw. Now, can you tell me about your dealings with the man who calls himself Doctor Pace?”

Our conversation went on for another hour and a half. For every ten facts I gave her, I got a half of a hint of something I wanted. When she left, she gave me her card and left me with the impression that I should be grateful that she wasn’t putting me in a facility equipped to handle my mental distress. I swore a blue streak, thrust Captain Williams’ document back into the drawer and gathered my things. I wanted to get very, very drunk. I started to button up the office when I got a phone call. It was Cy the photographer.

“Hey, Wendell, what’s new?”

I thought about that question for a bit before answering. “Nothing much,” I lied. “How about you?”

“Can’t complain. Hey, man, remember when you said you wanted to talk to my gas expert?”

“Sure, I remember. Why?”

“What are you doing?”

“Right now? Thinking about having a scotch on the rocks. Where are you?”

“Vesuvio. We’re upstairs having a couple of drinks. Figured you might want to join the party.”

“That’s cool, I’m just heading out now. See you in a few.”

Cy and his friend Eugene looked like they had been planted at their table for a few hours. I bought a round and settled in a chair. Cy was to my right, dressed in a pair of chinos and a faded jean jacket. Eugene looked to be in his thirties and wore a blue short-sleeved button down shirt and his round prematurely bald head and thick horn rimmed glasses gave him an owlsh look. He was sitting directly in front of me with his back to an open window. Behind him, I could see the traffic on Columbus and the lights from a couple of Broadway strip joints. They looked inviting. Once the drinks arrived, I started it off.

“Hey Cy, no offense, but could you leave us alone for a few minutes?” I asked.

“What, I can’t hear about this stuff?”

“Honestly? I think you’re better off not knowing.”

He stroked his thick, black mustache and considered this for a moment. “Cool, I’ll go get some air.” He got up and lumbered down the stairs. I waited for him to leave and looked around to make sure nobody else was listening.

“Are you with the Air Force?” I asked.

“I’m on leave from Travis. I’m a trainer.”

“Cool.” I considered this for a bit before continuing. “Cy says you know about something called TRANAa3?”

“Maybe. What do you want to know about it?” he asked nervously.

“I’ve heard it’s relatively harmless.”

He took a sip off his pint of Anchor Steam and nodded. “Well, yes and no.”

“What does that mean?”

“When we first heard about the stuff, we thought it was great. It was advertised as a way to pacify a large number of combatants with little to no side effects. It would just put them to

sleep. Certain people had ideas that this wouldn't just be used in combat. It could be used domestically."

"Domestically? Like riot control?"

"Sure, I guess. Some of us were, naturally enough, against the idea, but those sort of discussions are above my pay grade."

"You mentioned side effects? Like what?" I asked.

"I don't know, headaches, nausea, that sort of thing. We actually tested it last year and found that it was a bit difficult to control. If it was deployed in an open space everything worked. The gas would sink to the ground or dissipate. But in some cases, the gas didn't disperse. That caused a few problems."

"Problems? Like what?"

"Some of our test subjects expired." He took another sip of his beer and looked around again, clearly paranoid.

"That's one hell of a side effect." I said.

"That wasn't supposed to happen."

"I'll bet. How long does this stuff stick around on clothes?"

"A day or two."

"What about the theft of two canisters?" I asked.

"You know about that?" he responded, glancing furtively to either side.

I just nodded. I caught the waitress' attention and motioned for another round.

"I didn't have anything to do with that." He leaned in and brought his voice down to a whisper. "It turned out that it was a private in the supply depot, he had some problems with a bravo whiskey who--"

“A what?” I interrupted.

“Barrack whore, you know, the ladies who frequent...”

“Yeah, I get it. Up at Bremerton we used to call them Bremelos.”

“Really? Well, anyway, this woman was putting the screws to him, threatening to talk to his wife if he didn’t cough up a grand. He was drowning his sorrows in an off base bar when he met someone who talked about some kind of party, and thought it would be a scream to have everybody conked out. Some money changed hands and this private gave out information about the train the canisters were going to be on. We were shipping them somewhere to have them destroyed.”

“Then they staged that car wreck to stop the train.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“Really? That above your pay grade as well?” I asked.

The bald cat shrugged in response.

“That seems like a lot of work just to acquire a party favor or two.”

“Well, it’s not like you can walk into a drug store and buy the stuff.”

“Do you know who those cats were? The ones having the party?”

He vigorously shook his head. “I don’t know anything about them. This is just stuff I heard.”

I thought about this for a bit and then put a twenty down on the table. “Thanks, man.”

“Remember, you didn’t hear any of this from me.” he hissed.

“It’s cool. We never talked.” I got up and walked downstairs. Cy was chatting up the bartender so I gave him a wave and headed for home, thinking about how some crazy party stunt turned into mass murder.

It was about a week later. I had tried calling and writing the Foxbergs because Deanna still owed me over three grand. I had heard that she was out on bail but I couldn't track her down, which of course was no real surprise. Frank was out of the hospital and said to be convalescing at home. I had tried to reach him as well but he had a secretary running interference.

I started to call Montrose for a bit of advice about the crazy lady's outstanding bill when the doorbell rang. I didn't bother to open the curtains and just buzzed them in. The fat cop huffed up the stairs looking as wound up as I'd ever seen him. He was carrying a bottle of scotch and was biting down on an unlit cigarette. He went right for one of the green chairs and flopped into it. I went over to the sink and got a couple of glasses.

"Bastards!" he shouted. "Do you know what those bastards did?" he asked.

"Which bastards did what?"

"I'm being shut out, that's what. For the first time in my entire goddamn career, I'm being told to let the whole thing slide."

"What the hell are you talking about? Slow down and start at the beginning," I said.

"Well, for starters, you were right about that green Imperial. A park ranger found it stashed in Tomales Bay State Park and called it in. Inside the trunk we found some traces that match Julie Schott's blood type, AB negative. That's pretty rare."

"Fast work, man. I'm impressed."

"Yeah? Well, save it. The car is registered to the Interplanetary Family Foundation and there are a million prints on the door handles, steering wheel, radio, you name it. It would take

us a month just to pull and separate all the prints. But then, there's the problem of exemplars. We don't have anything to compare them to. All those Greenies have vanished into thin air. They're not at the farm, they're not at Marin General and they're not in lock up. Goddammit."

"I was told that some of them died and the rest were sent home or to facilities."

"Who told you that?"

"FBI."

"FBI, huh?" He bit down on his still unlit cigarette. "When you say facilities, you mean like the funny farm?" he asked.

"Sure, I guess. What about Victor?"

"I'm getting to that. I personally went to pick up Victor, whose real name happens to be Vittorio Bianchi. This was starting to look like a sure thing, but when I got to the Marin County lockup, some Fed took me aside and started talking about *their* investigation. Basically, he told me to get lost." He spat out his favorite word and took the glasses and filled them. I grabbed one and returned to my chair. It let out a long plaintive cry.

"For chrissake Pike, can't you fix that goddamned chair?"

"Sorry. So they've got your guy in custody and they're refusing to release him to you?"

"They're holding him on murder, conspiracy to commit murder, theft of federal property, and a dozen other charges. I was told that when they're through they *might* let me question him. Bullshit."

"That's similar to the brick wall I ran into. The county sheriff, the FBI. I told you about that Air Force cat. This could be a big embarrassment for some people. We're not supposed to be making chemical weapons, let alone allow them to get stolen and used."

“Huh. Anyway, when I got set to leave, I saw that Fed talking to somebody and I’ll be damned if it wasn’t that spaceman.”

“Dr. Pace?”

“Whatever he calls himself.”

“I’m guessing you couldn’t talk to him either?”

“Yeah, you guessed right. I talked to a desk sergeant and he told me, off the record, that they caught him at SFO. He had booked a Pan Am flight to India. Said he was headed for Maldives. Where the hell is that?”

“It’s a few islands south of Ceylon, uh, Sri Lanka now. The important thing is that I don’t think we’ve got an extradition treaty with them.”

I tried to get a Camel out of the pack. The inspector saw me fumbling.

“Give me that,” he said. He shook out a smoke and put the pack back down on the desk. “What’s this?” he asked, picking up a small pamphlet the pack was sitting on. “American Sign Language for beginners?”

“Got to start somewhere.”

“I don’t get you,” he said, lighting both our smokes with his Zippo.

“That makes two of us.” I inhaled the smoke and coughed a few times but nothing too violent. “Oh, right, Deanna, I mean Mrs. Foxberg is out on bail?”

Zyzck started laughing. “Another one for the loony bin. The way I heard it is she tried to castrate her old man.”

I laughed along with him despite the pain. “I don’t know if that really was her intent, but I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“What was her husband doing there?”

“His mother is in that convalescent home. He wanted to see her one last time before he left town for good. I figured that out but so did his wife.” I left out the part where I gave her the idea, though I had a nagging suspicion that she had might have tailed me.

“Why did she shoot him?” the inspector asked.

“Remember the changes to his will?”

“Oh, it was about money?” asked the fat cop as he filled our glasses again.

“Sure, I guess. She was spending it like it was going out of style and was starting to hang with some questionable types. She was also getting heavy into coke. Frank was getting tired of his job, his investments were going south and I’m guessing that his crazy wife asked for a divorce, say, something along the lines of mental cruelty. This probably sent him off the deep end. He didn’t want to be paying alimony on top of everything else. He started hanging with the Greenies and figured out a plan, changed his will, took out insurance policies and named the Interplanetary Family as beneficiary. Maybe he worked out a split with Dr. Pace, the spaceman you were talking about.

“That seems pretty damn convoluted. If Foxberg was so upset at his wife, why didn’t he just kill her?”

“Yeah,” I grinned, “that would have saved us all a lot of trouble. But it wasn’t just problems with Deanna. He wanted a new life. He wanted to disappear and start over. But just disappearing wasn’t enough. He needed a body, so the will and insurance monies would be paid out. That’s where Victor or Vittorio comes in. They found somebody who’s roughly the same age and build as Frank.”

“Stan Mallot,” the inspector mused. “Yeah, we worked with the Calabasas PD. He was a drifter, no real family that they could find, no dental records or prints on file anywhere. The best we can say at this point is that it was probably him.”

“I’d bet money on it. Frank rented out a room at the Cleveland Arms, paid cash and used Stan’s I.D. and then headed back to the compound. Then, either Victor or Frank shot Stan, they stuck him in Victor’s trunk and eventually took their separate cars into the city. They had to get the body out of Victor’s trunk, into the Volvo and then spark it. Once that was done, they drove back to the farm.” I stopped and took a large hit of whiskey, leaving my glass almost empty.

Zyzck didn't say anything. He just gave me a circular “continue” motion with his free hand.

“Okay. Frank was going to lay low either at the hotel room or at his Marin pad and once things cooled down, he could pick up his stuff and split. He was headed to Dallas but I have no idea what his plan was after that. Maybe Mexico?”

“What about the Schott girl? Where does she fit into this?”

“My guess is that Julie saw some of this, maybe the shooting, so it likely happened up at the farm. I’m pretty sure she was going to tell her friend what had happened and Victor couldn’t allow that. He was the one who staged the girls’ wreck in Pacifica, so he knew Julie and Summer at least that long. He also sabotaged a...friend’s car and a motorcycle I was riding, so I suppose we can surmise that he has a mechanical aptitude, but that’s neither here nor there. Anyway, Julie was a liability.” I handed my glass to the fat cop. He filled it up again and poured a large shot into his own glass. I offered to light his cancer stick but he waved me off.

“Sounds like Julie remains an open case and we’re back to Frank,” Zyzck said.

“Have you had a chance to talk to him?” I asked.

“I’ve talked to his lawyers. He’s not admitting anything. His lawyers say that we can’t arrest someone for taking unannounced vacations or for changing his will.”

“What about insurance fraud?” I asked.

“Not likely.”

“What about the stuff I found at the Cleveland Arms?”

“They say he’s never been there and that he’s never heard of Stan Mallot.”

“But there were clothes in those suitcases.”

“Yeah, well, according to your friends at the FBI, they were all clean. No prints, hair, tags or anything else that points to Foxberg. The hotel clerk is some dumb kid who doesn’t remember anything about the guest except he was tall and thin. The guest signed in as Stan Mallot on May the twenty third and paid for two months in cash.”

“The Twenty third? Isn’t that about when you found Frank’s Volvo flambé?”

“A couple of days before. Of course, neither the staff nor any guests we’ve been able to track down had ever seen the man. A goddamn ghost.”

“But the fact remains that a dead Stan Mallot was found in his car. Isn’t that worth investigating?”

“You would think, wouldn’t you,” said the inspector, his voice dripping in sarcasm. “But Foxberg, or rather his lawyer, says the car was stolen.”

“Did he report it?”

“What do you think? He says he was staying at a roadside motel up in Ukiah. He has a receipt and the gal at the front desk remembers him. He arrived sometime after ten and supposedly woke up around seven-thirty or so and noticed his car was missing. He stayed up there for three days and was picked up by a friend.”

“What the hell was he doing up there?”

“He says he was looking at a meteor shower.”

“For three days?” I asked.

The inspector shrugged. “He says he needed to get away from the coast because of the fog.”

“And all this time he doesn’t report it missing?”

“He said he meant to, but never got around to it. He’s lawyers are stating that Stan Mallot stole the car and was killed in a drug deal that went sideways.”

“Drug deal? Where are they getting that?”

“Don’t ask me, but that’s their line.”

“How far is it from Ukiah to the city?” I asked, clueless as ever when it came to geography.

“Around 130 miles, give or take. Say three hours, maybe? Depends on the traffic.”

“Six hours total? That’s pushing it, but definitely doable. Leave after midnight, meet up with Victor, take care of business and get a ride back. It’s tight, but it works.”

Zyzck scowled. “Sure, it works for you and me, but it gives him an alibi, and anything involving our pal Vittorio is pure conjecture at this point. Take him out of the equation and explain how Foxberg got to San Francisco and back from Ukiah.” He poured another couple of shots and sighed.

“What about ballistics? Can’t your lab rats compare the bullets fired from Deanna’s gun with the one found in Stan?”

“What, you think we didn’t look at that? They checked. They’re the same brand of slugs, but the lands and grooves don’t match.”

“Deanna once told me that they owned more than one gun,” I said.

“Yeah, and again his law firm was nice enough to provide us with a list. Four weapons, Pike, and the only .38 was the one his wife used. Even though I think it’s fishy as all get out, the D.A. doesn’t think there’s enough probable cause to get a warrant. Hell, from where they left the car, whoever plugged Mr. Mallot could have just tossed the gun into the bay. They were right there.”

“What about divers or dredging?”

“You’re dreaming. We don’t have that kind of budget. Plus, they could just as easily have thrown it into Tomales Bay, Bolinas Lagoon or off the Golden Gate Bridge. There’s a lot of water out there.”

I considered the problem. “I had a couple of pretty intense run-ins with that Victor cat.”

“You did?”

“Yup. He was a physical type, liked to fight with his hands, tools or maybe lumber.”

“Tools or lumber?” He shook his head. “Ah, never mind. So what?”

“He never fired a gun at me. Not once. I like him for Julie’s murder, but Stan? I think Frank was involved and probably fired the shot that killed his would be doppelganger or at least it was his gun. But yeah, without Victor and without a weapon, I think you’re screwed,” I agreed.

“Royally,” Zyzck spit out.

“Deanna will get some kind of sentence, right?”

“That’s another thing. Hubby won’t press charges. Goddamn, the Foxbergs have some juice in this town. You know what a wobbler is, Pike?”

“It means it can go either way, right?”

“Yep, negligent discharge of a firearm can be a felony or misdemeanor depending on intent.”

“And influence.”

“Exactly. She’ll be charged with a misdemeanor and will likely get off with probation. Maybe she’ll have to get a little counseling as well.”

I rolled my eyes. “God knows she could use it.”

The inspector squinted at me. “Look, I know you can’t talk about any of this, but tell me, as a guess, why did they gas the whole compound?”

“As a guess? Okay. I saw some papers from Dr. Pace’s office. It looks like he was getting ready to split, clearing out the foundation’s bank accounts or moving them somewhere else, probably an off-shore account.”

“I can’t imagine that there would be much money in that account from panhandling.”

“Sure, but according to the FBI agent I talked to, there were other sources of income: Prostitution, drug dealing, maybe other things. I’d bet that Frank Foxberg threw in some of his own money. That’s probably why the Feds were so interested in him.”

“The doctor was there when the gas was released, right?”

“I think he was in their theater, probably preaching about the Visitation.”

“How did he get out of there?”

“He ascended up from the theater into a UFO,” I answered.

“What?” boomed the fat cop.

“Well, he made sure it looked like it. Pretty colored lights and all, but I’m reasonably sure it was a Bell Jet Ranger.”

“A helicopter?”

“Yup,” I answered. “He rode out on a rope ladder or a basket. It probably would have been pretty convincing to the doped up Greenies.”

“Doped up?”

“They spiked the drinks with something, I’m guessing acid or some similar hallucinogen.”

The fat cop pointed his still unlit cigarette at me. “You’re saying that Doctor Spaceman didn’t have anything to do with the gas or the murders? I don’t buy that for a minute,” he said.

“I don’t think he had anything to do with the murders of Stan and Julie. The Greenies killed by the gas? I put that on him. I think he was wearing a gas mask when he made his dramatic exit, so that would suggest he knew what was going on. The gas itself was supposed to be non-lethal. The plan was to make it look like aliens abducted him. His hopped-up followers would get what he had promised, the great Visitation, and afterwards they would all conk out and the doctor would be long gone by the time they woke up. It would create a heck of a myth.” I took a healthy slug of scotch.

“Sure, but you said the gas was non-lethal. How did those people die?”

“Incompetence. They screwed up. The gas wasn’t supposed to be used in enclosed spaces. It was also described to me as being unstable. The canisters were stolen from a train. It was on route to the Air Armament Center in Eglin, Florida where they were all supposed to be destroyed.”

“That’s a hell of a story.”

I threw up my hands. “Sure, but in the end it doesn’t really matter, because you can’t prove it and I can’t talk about it.”

“That’s the worst,” complained Zyzek. “This is the only the second time in my life that I’ve had a murderer slip through my hands like that. It’s not a good feeling.”

I raised my glass. “For once, we agree.”

On top of everything else, I hadn’t found Corky's dog.

Of course, I couldn't let it alone. I'm not exaggerating when I say that I had actually lost sleep over it. It was like leaving off the ending cadence of "Shave and a Hair Cut" or leaving a crossword puzzle unfinished. I hired Gill to drive Tack and me up to Inverness, partly because I had the nagging suspicion that Anagram's trike was bad luck, but mainly because I couldn't convince Tack to ride that far in the sidecar. I told them that I had left some things up at the Foxbergs' country home, which was true, but I was following up on another hunch I had.

We drove by the entrance to the Greenie compound and found that and the front gate had been closed shut with a hefty chain and padlock along with a sign that said "No Trespassing." I spent a few minutes poking around while keeping alert in the off chance that any Feds or military types would return.

In the end, I couldn't see anything so we headed over to the Foxbergs' property, where I flashed my P.I. license at two construction workers. They didn't understand a lick of English and my comprehension of Spanish was rudimentary at best. It took a lot of tries and some rigorous hand signals before I heard a loud "ahem" behind me. I looked back and saw Tack standing there with his arms akimbo and shaking his head.

"What?" I asked.

"What we have here," he said in a passable Southern accent, "is a failure to communicate."

I shook my head and laughed. I'd forgotten all about him. "Hey, Ramon can you tell them I'm just here to pick up a couple of things?"

"Sure thing, amigo," he said, laying the accent on real thick.

He calmed them down and they went back to their saws, hammers and drills while I put on some plastic gloves and entered the main house. Everything was just as I left it, so I gathered up the clothes in a couple of large plastic bags and threw them into Gill's trunk. The ladder was right where I had left it so I climbed up and retrieved the telescope off the roof. When I was up there, I looked toward the Greenies' compound and couldn't see any action going on so, I guessed a little more trespassing would be okay. With the help of Tack's translation efforts, we were able to borrow a couple of garden tools that were stashed in the carport.

Gill said he didn't see what was so great about the outdoors and wanted to remain in the cab, so it was just the two of us who headed toward the Greenie farm. The fence post was still on the ground and it was easy to step over the barbed wire. It was tricky to make it down the steep hill and I fell once and skinned up my left hand though Tack didn't seem to have any trouble with it. He was like a mountain goat, but maybe that's because of his lower center of gravity. When it leveled off, I looked around for a bit and got my bearings.

"There it is," I said.

"There what is?" asked Tack, swatting at some insect.

"The pond," I answered. After walking for another seventy feet or so, I found a large rock, sat down and started stripping down to my skivvies.

"You want me to wade in that?" His disgust was clear.

"You can stick to the perimeter. I'm going on."

"Okay. What are we looking for?"

"Something shiny."

"That's specific," Tack responded with no little sarcasm.

I waded into the pond. It wasn't very large, maybe forty-five feet and I guessed that it couldn't be more than three feet deep. There were reeds on the shore and some kind of scum on the surface along with a few lily pads and what looked like lotus flowers. The water was brackish and the bed was soft mud. It was hard work moving the rake through the slop and it didn't help that my right index finger was still in a splint. My haul was limited to a few rocks, bottles, cans, an old boot and a bicycle inner tube. The sun beat down on my back and flies and bees were buzzing around, anxious to land on my face, arms and shoulders. I tried to convince myself that I had gotten somewhat used to the smell but that was a lie. It was both oddly sweet and pungently raw. There didn't seem to be any fish in the pond, just a couple of frogs and one large snake.

I was momentarily distracted by a couple of mating dragonflies and turned to point them out to Tack when I felt some resistance on the rake and reached in with my left hand. I wanted to say something clever like "Eureka" but instead I just said, "I'll be damned."

"What?" cried out Tack. "Did you find something?"

"Yeah. Do me a favor, would you? There's a plastic bag in my coat pocket."

I waded back to the shore and presented my find. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"That a .38?"

"Yup." I tried to rinse it off in the pond water. It was rusted and covered with crud so I just deposited it into the colorful polka dotted Wonder Bread plastic bag. "Let's go back. I need to clean up a bit. I don't think Gill will let me in his cab looking like this."

Tack winced. "You don't smell so good either."

The workers looked at me funny when we got back to the Foxbergs, and I can't blame them. Tack chatted up the workers while I went back into the big house and took a shower.

Cleaned up, I straightened things as best as I could and headed back outside, leaving the key in the lock.

Once back in North Beach, I stopped off at Noah's and bought a bottle of Johnny and a fresh pack of cigarettes before heading back to the office. Gill planted his hack into a yellow zone and helped carry the bags up into the office. I went to the safe and paid him for the day. He thanked me and said he had to get back home.

Once I had got settled I called Zyzck.

"What?" he barked.

"You busy?"

"Swamped. Why?"

"I just wanted to know if you had a few minutes."

"Nope. I'm stuck in the office and I'm going to be here all afternoon. Goddamn paperwork."

"Well, I suppose I could swing by."

"Why? What's so damn important?"

"I've got a present for you."

"A present? What kind of bullshit is that?"

"I found something and I think you might be interested."

"Found something, huh? What?"

"I think it might be the gun used to kill Stan Mallot."

"What the hell?" he shouted. "This on the level?"

"Sure. It's a guess, but I think it will match the slug you found."

"Where the hell did you find this?"

“On the Greenie farm.”

“I’ll be damned,” exclaimed the fat cop.

“That’s what I thought you’d say.”

It was short walk to the North Beach station. I waited at the front desk for a good ten minutes before the fat cop appeared in a wrinkled, brown, cheap polyester suit with his tie mostly undone. I handed the Wonder Bread bag over to him and apologized for the content’s condition. Zyzck opened the bag and took a look inside. I said that I while I tried to be careful, I might have left some prints on it but maybe there were some others on it that his guys could run. Plus, the registration number hadn’t been filed off, so they could try to trace it that way. Zyzck closed the bag and didn’t say anything for a bit.

“Ballistics will take a look at this,” he finally said. “You really think this is the weapon that killed that Stan character and you say you found this on that spaceman’s farm?”

“Yeah, it’s a guess, but I think it’s the gun. I found it in a pond on the farm. This is the pond that Summer talked about, so there’s that. Instead of just chucking it in the weeds, it made sense to toss it in the pond. Of course, it could just be an old gun.”

“Assuming it’s the gun, what next? Any guesses?”

“Sure. I think it belongs to Frank Foxberg. I think it was purchased along with Deanna’s gun, sort of a ‘his and hers’ set. You guys have the means to check that stuff out. I don’t.”

“Huh.”

He looked at the bag again and walked off. I started to leave when he called out my name. I turned around and looked at him.

“What?” I asked.

He raised the bag up and shook it. “Thanks,” he barked before heading back to his office.

“I’ll be damned,” I said to myself.

As it turned out, that gun caused some people some very big problems. It was registered to Frank Foxberg. There weren't any prints on it, but test bullets fired from it were a positive match to the slug found in Stan Mallot. After denying everything for a bit, Frank pivoted and started to put all the blame on Victor Bianchi. Everything was Victor’s idea: The plan to fake his death was Victor’s, Victor selected the victim, Victor pulled the trigger, Victor set the car on fire and it was Victor who killed that young girl.

It wasn’t a very convincing performance, but it was enough to get Zyzck into San Quentin, where the Feds were holding Mr. Bianchi who, not surprisingly, had an entirely different recollection of the events. He said that Frank was the one who plugged Stan, offered his car and even doused the corpse in gasoline. He said he didn’t know anything about Julie Schott, but the inspector was finally able to get a set of Victor’s fingerprints. The prints matched those in the trunk of the green Imperial. This meant that Vittorio was looking at additional charges for the deaths of Stanton Mallot and Julie Schott, while Frank Foxberg was indicted on one count of conspiracy to commit murder for the death of Stanton Mallot. Zyzck later told me it was one of his best days as a cop.

Somebody leaked the story to a *Chron* reporter. It wasn’t me, honest. As I later told Zyzck and Agent Jones, I didn’t have anything to gain by that, though I'm not sure they believed me. Anyway, on the front page of the morning dreadful was the huge headline: “SEX, MURDER, ALIENS.” Below that in smaller type was the subheadline: “Scion's Ties to Sex and Murder Cult.” There were pictures of Frank being led into 850 Bryant and the accompanying

text told salacious details of life on the Interplanetary Family farm and Frank Foxberg's plot to fake his own death, which resulted in the death of Stanton Mallot.

Victor had been charged with the murder of Julie Schott along with a host of other state and federal crimes. Victor didn't rate a picture, but there was a bad photo of Dr. Pace that looked like it was lifted off the jacket of one of his books. Apparently, the doctor had previously served time on several banking and fraud related charges in Nebraska, as well as his native Italy. The laundry list of charges against him pretty much ensured that he would be joining Victor in the big house, if not on death row.

Curiously, there was nothing about the gas, the victims, or the surviving members of the Interplanetary Family. But there was a pretty good picture of Deanna wearing some slinky, low cut gown. The sidebar story portrayed her as a beautiful, upright society woman who was the driving force behind the well-known charity Leg Up and an innocent victim in this whole sordid affair. I got a good laugh out of that part.

I finished up the article in the Sporting Green about the previous night's game in Montreal. The good guys had gone on an uncharacteristic hitting spree, downing the Expos 12-1. I was thinking that maybe Marichal had turned things around. That was the good news. The bad news that with the season exactly half over, their record stood at an abysmal 33-48. Still, a win is a win. Tack offered me his pipe, but I begged off. He caught me looking at my watch and then at the roses that were perched on the side of my desk.

"Forgot about your big Friday night date with Wenling."

"Stop calling it that."

"Well, it took you long enough to convince her."

"Convincing her took five seconds. Convincing her aunt, well, let's just say I'm still working on it."

"That's why you bought the flowers," he said.

"Couldn't hurt," I admitted, rubbing my index finger. It was out of the splint, but I was still having trouble straightening it out.

Earlier in the day, I had received a couple of letters. One was from the Foxbergs' attorney. It was written in tortured legalese but it basically said that even though Deanna had signed my contract, said contract was invalid as she was under extreme duress, likely under the influence, and wasn't mentally competent at the time. Due to these and other factors, the Foxberg Trust was declaring my claim of \$3,852.25 to be without merit and would not remit that or any other amount. I had already talked about this with Montrose and we were going ahead with a suit. In the end, I'd probably be lucky to see a quarter of what I was owed. Carvin went

on about the principal of the thing, but I didn't care about that. I needed the money. Hell, I should have gotten hazardous duty pay just for dealing with that crazy chick.

The other letter was from the Moons. I'm guessing Pearl wrote it for them but it was a lovely letter, full of honest charm and profuse thanks for returning their daughter to them. Summer was doing better. She was out of the hospital, although she still had to undergo daily therapy. They were hoping she would be healthy enough to start classes at a community college in the Fall. They apologized again that they couldn't pay me the full reward money, but they hoped that the amount would be enough. The enclosed check was drawn against a Presbyterian church account in San Mateo and was for \$1,727.32, not \$2,500, but close enough.

"You know what, Tack? This sums things up in a nutshell."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"On one hand, we've got people with lots of bread refusing to honor a written contract and on the other hand, we've got people who probably can't afford it honoring a promise."

"You're surprised?"

"No, not really, though I've got half a mind to call up somebody at the *Chron* and give them a few stories about the real Mrs. Foxberg. That might spice up the gossip columns a bit."

Tack shook his head. "I think you should just let Montrose handle it."

"Yeah, I know, the smart thing would be to lay low and keep my mouth shut, at least for the time being. But one of these days, I'll tell somebody about all of this and--"

The doorbell interrupted me.

"Expecting somebody?" asked Tack.

I shrugged. "Not me." I put the check into the office safe, went to the door and buzzed the mystery guest in. Slowly walking up the stairs was a short kid, maybe somewhere between

seventeen and twenty. He had long curly hair, bad skin, a nascent mustache and was dressed in a white shirt, ill-fitting black jeans, and red and white sneakers. An old leather briefcase was cradled in his arms. I planted him in one of the green chairs and sparked a Camel.

“Mr. Pike?” he half squeaked.

“Sure, that's me. And you are?”

“My name is Lukas Ness. You can call me Luke.”

“Hi, Luke. I’m Wendell and this is Ramon. What can I do for you?”

“Somebody told me you could help me out.”

“Somebody did, huh? This somebody have a name?”

“I’d, I’d rather not disclose it.”

“That’s cool. So what is it that you or this somebody might need?”

“Well, this probably sounds funny, but I’m into tracking paranormal events.” Tack either sneezed or snorted. I couldn’t be sure which.

“Paranormal events?” I asked.

“Look, I know lots, well, most people think that it’s all baloney, but there are things out there that we can’t rationally explain.”

“You mean like UFOs?” I asked.

“Exactly,” he said, nodding his head.

“Who did you say you're working for?” I asked.

“I didn’t.” The kid stared at me straight in the eyes with the fervent look of a true believer. “I’m actually working on my own, but there are a hundred like me, maybe even a thousand. We’re all individually looking for the truth. The real truth, not the lies they want us to

believe.” He leaned forward in his chair and continued in an excited whisper. “I’ve got a source who says you witnessed an actual landing!”

“Landing? You mean like a visitation? Aliens?”

“Yes, sir. My source says you were there and saw the whole thing go down.”

I took a deep drag off the smoke and leaned back in my chair, for once enjoying its howl.

“I hate to tell you this Luke, but your source is wrong. Sorry.”

He eyed me suspiciously. “I’m too late.”

“What?”

“They’ve gotten to you.”

“What? No. No! Who’s gotten to me?”

“The government.”

“The government?”

“Along with the military in collaboration with the CIA and a group of powerful industrialists.”

“Really? That’s a hell of a lot of people. Why would they do this?”

“To prevent widespread panic. They think we’re not ready. They think that people would freak out if they knew the truth. Look at this.” He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a mimeographed newsletter. It featured a blurry photo and a rough map of the I.F. compound.

I quickly scanned it and handed it back to the kid. “I don’t get it. It’s a farm or it was a farm. It looks like it’s seen better days.”

“It’s not just a farm. It’s a shrine. Don’t you get it?” He pounded his finger on the paper for emphasis. “This is where a spacecraft landing actually occurred. The powers that be have

tried to prevent the truth from escaping, but it has. It always will. Little by little, the word is getting out. People from all over the world will come here to visit this place. They will want to see and experience this for themselves.”

“What’s to experience, some weeds and a few old buildings?” I shook my head. “Look, kid, I’d like to help you, really I would. It’s not that I haven’t seen some crazy shit in my time. Hell, I once saw Bigfoot stare down somebody with a gun. But I’m sorry. You’ve got the wrong man. I didn’t see any spaceship landing, I don’t believe in UFOs and I don’t believe in little green men.”

A car on Grant honked its horn in the “shave and haircut” rhythm and both Tack and I rapped our knuckles in unison on the “two bits” ending.

“Sorry, that’s my cue. I’ve got to split.” I picked up my smokes, pocketed the ASL pamphlet and grabbed the roses. “Tack, can you let Mr. Ness out?”

“Sure thing. Have fun.”

“Thanks man, that’s the plan.”

Gill was waiting in the cab. He looked at me in my tan suit and snorted.

“You look like you’re dressed for a funeral,” he said.

“It’s called a date, Gill.”

“Sure, I know all about that.”

“No, not like, ‘Hey, mister, how about a date?’ Jesus.”

The hack shrugged. “So how’s it going with the Lou Gehrig thing?” he asked.

“What?” I asked.

“You know, the hand talking?”

“It’s ASL, not ALS, you idiot. How’s it going? It’s tough, but I’m getting better at it,” I responded. I opened the pamphlet and started practicing a few phrases.

“You know,” the hack continued, “if you think about it, that’s kind of my ideal.”

“What is?” I asked absently.

“A girlfriend who doesn’t talk.”

He started laughing and in response I gave him a universal form of sign language that even he could understand and told him that my ideal was a cab driver who kept his goddamned mouth shut. He got the message and turned on the radio.

We drove on, listening to Sammy Davis Jr. singing “The Candy Man.” We were headed west, away from North Beach and all of my familiar haunts. By the time we hit the avenues, the wind had picked up, the air had nasty bite to it and the fog was so thick that Gill had to turn on the wipers. I leaned back in the seat and grinned. It was typical summer weather in my town and despite the chill, I was in a pretty good mood.