

PROLOGUE THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 9, 1979

Thirteen miles south of Tacoma, Washington, a dark blue armored truck rolled down Highway 5. Seattle-Security-Transport was lettered on the outside of the vehicle.

Juan Marquez sweated in the passenger seat. He dabbed his forehead with the sleeve of his uniform, patted the butt of his .38 Smith & Wesson and squinted to the driver, "Miguel, I'll be glad when this be over."

"Amigo, we're making big money; time and a half."

"Time and a half? Ha. We should be making a hundred dollars a minute." He shot a wary look over his shoulder to the rear of the armored truck and whispered, "That thing. That thing back there is cursed."

"Speak up, my friend." Miguel cupped his cauliflower ear. "You think that little fish can hear you? No one believes in voodoo, or mumbo jumbo crap no more."

"You don't know, man. You don't know — shit." Juan pulled a gold chain and crucifix from inside his uniform and squeezed it.

From nowhere, a Sheffield green M.G. barreled in front of the vehicle from the left lane. Miguel slammed the brakes. The tires screeched. In a cloud of black smoke, the Seattle Security-Transport did a perfect 360 across two

lanes of traffic just missing a cement truck and scaring the hell out of a Hell's Angel on a black Harley.

A rubber stench filled the inside of the cab as Miguel fought for control. He lost battle. The right side of the vehicle went airborne. "Hail Eiaine full of....." Juan prayed careening across the passenger seat into Miguel.

The armored truck slid sideways down the gravel shoulder seventy feet and finally found the highway again.

Then Juan blessed himself several times. Miguel eased off the accelerator, glared to the rear of the truck and turned to his partner with new respect. "Jesus Christi!"

"I'm telling you, man. That rock.... That thing back there... it's a devil. The "Flying Porpoise" is cursed. Anybody gets near that damned fish thing and their life turns to shit."

CHAPTER 1 FRIDAY SEPT 10, 1979

Works of art have never been on my top ten list of things to see, hear or touch. Though a piano concerto, a Monet or an opera caused the hairs on my arms to rise ... how was I to know that ROCK was going to tumble into the pecking order of my life and in fact become head pecker.

Besides, August was lousy. My wife wanted a divorce. 'A very amicable divorce,' our respective attorneys agreed. They were pleased to deal with two such intelligent people. When I finally saw the one-sidedness of our dissolution, I wasn't feeling amicable or intelligent. "Here, this pillow and ashtray are yours. Everything else in my house is mine." Bugs sneered.

Several years ago a few of her close friends began calling her "Bugs." Because of her two prominent front teeth, I thought. Actually, Bugs had been a very busy bunny. I should have been called "ostrich." My head had been buried in the sand while Bugs was hopping from warren to Warren, Ralph and Fred. We didn't kiss good-bye.

Several friends had helped me move into a new condo with an old friend, Jerry Lynch. During the divorce proceedings, Jerry suggested that we room together again. I was skeptical. I never saw Jerry's birth-certificate. Whether

he was really born here on earth --- or simply stops by for conjugal visits --- is still up for conjecture.

Jerry's place was in Walnut Creek, a bedroom community east of San Francisco, where he lived for several years with a variety of condomates, including a belly dancer, a cook for the state legislature and an attack-dog trainer named Landon something.

"A great group of roomies," Jerry bragged. "One was always dancing, one was always cooking and Landon always had a dust rag or vacuum in his hand. He made Felix Unger look like a slob." Then he said, "Peter, you'll love the place. You'll love the golf." Jerry hated golf, but he knew my weakness.

"Terrace Hills is one of the finest courses in Northern California. Great restaurant and bar. We won't have to drink and drive. Parties. Women. We'll have a ball. The 'Old Team,' back together."

Mired in the middle of a divorce, I had to go somewhere and Jerry's seemed to be a good somewhere to go. I was still hesitant. The 'Old Team' had been roommates back in the late sixties where we shared a rambling flat in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. It was my second home away from home. The first was the United States Marine Corps. A world of steel Quonset huts, planned meals, planned exercise, ironed uniforms, disinfected latrines,

hospital bed corners and most important --- order.

Our new flat became known as the 'Black Hole.' Anything that entered never came out.

In the Marine Corps, there were few requests for decorating suggestions. In the 'Black Hole,' Jerry and I had a field-day. Climbing the stairs you passed huge, autographed pictures of George, Paul, Ringo, and John. Jerry and I had forged every autograph.

"Jerry, thanks for everything, Mate," John Lennon.

"Tally ho! Peter," George Harrison.

"Loved that tea!" Paul Mac.

"Peter, golf is the sport of kings. But keep your bloody head on," Ringo.

Upstairs was worse. Every available space was plastered with posters.

Marilyn, Elvis, Janis, Jimi Hendricks, Bill Hayley and the Comets, Bogart, Jerry Lewis and Cagney. We built our own built in bar. We had a temperamental Motorola color TV and a Silver-tone stereo system. With all that, the 'Old Team' as Jerry liked to call us, hadn't made a big hit with the neighbors.

In a haven of hippies, we were a barber's delight. We didn't belong in the Haight-Ashbury. Jerry sold life insurance and wore button down, ivy-

league shirts, paisley ties and pin-striped suits. I just got my discharge from the Marine Corps, complete with a farewell scalping.

In a neighborhood of curios, we were the curiosities. While tourists took buses to come and stare at the hippies, our bare-footed neighbors brought new converts to come and stare at us. We were not loved by the love children. And the feeling was vice versa. It was hell coming home from an eight hour job search and being manhandled and panhandled by some pubescent teen, marinated in patchouli oil, oozing free love, in dire need of a bath.

I had no money to put in the panhandler's pan. The man handler and panhandler would get mad. I'd get mad. And Jerry loved stirring up the cauldron of hostility.

He had an old Brownie camera. The shutter hadn't shut in years. They'd even stopped making film for the damn thing. But the flash still flashed. Jerry would saunter down Ashbury, make a left turn on Haight Street, and Brownie at the ready, would click the flash at anyone, everyone, doing anything - everything - nothing.

"Just for the record. Just for the file." He'd smile into the glazed faces.

"Narc," they screamed as they chased him down Haight Street, up Waller and back down Ashbury.

Twice, I had to beat off a lynch mob of love children from the front door of the Black Hole.

I thought about this and other incidents before moving in a second time. But, I felt my life needed a change. A booster shot of excitement, so to speak. I couldn't have made a more asinine decision.

On Friday night, Jerry, four friends and three pickup trucks arrived at "Bug's" rabbit hutch, my former home, to help me move my stuff'. It was a nice thought. But I didn't need them or their trucks. Other than clothes, my possessions could have fit comfortably in the glove compartment of a Volkswagen bug.

"Cheer up, you're a free man, Peter," Jerry nudged, as we sat cramped in the cab of his Ford pickup. "Women of the world, lace up your boxing gloves. Stand at attention, shave your legs, dab on the eye shadow, slap on the blush, chins down, chests out." Jerry put his arm around my shoulder.

"Because coming out of this corner is Peter Tuelly. Five foot eleven. One hundred and seventy pounds of brown haired, brown eyed dynamite. Peter the letch is on the loose,"

I looked at Jerry out of the corner of my eye. Jerry is a master of the practical joke and, in a nice way, a ladies' man. To his more intimate friends, he is known as Angel Face. Since puberty, no matter what devious or dastardly deed he was up to, he always appeared innocent. He could blush on cue and with baby blue eyes and black curly hair; he got away with

everything. He looked that adorable: cute, cuddly and a paragon of virtue. At thirty-five, his face could still be used on a label for Gerber's Baby Food.

By the time we got to the condo, I felt better. Our condo was a clone of every other condo in the complex, except we had a tree. An acacia. The condo was two stories, light blue with black trim. Unimaginative builders understood the principal of D.N.A. long before brilliant scientists knew it existed.

We set up a poker table in the kitchen. I took a wistful look out the window at the seventeenth green of Terrace Hills Country Club. I felt good. We ordered four pizzas, and with a case of beer, the six of us sat down to a game of penny-ante poker. My first night of single life cost me \$63.50. Jerry won \$23.50, but he cheated. Even with my losses, I was feeling good; my friends were supportive, I had a new home, no one to answer to and no one to tell me what to do. Inwardly, I wondered if I was ready to sail this new wave of freedom. I shouldn't have bothered. I was at war and didn't know it.

Poised at sea were: Andrea Convee, Alan Muniz Jr., Francis Fural, Lieutenant Richard Hourigan of the San Francisco Police Department and Timothy Gallagher. Each commanders of their own submarine.

About the time my kings and nines were losing to Jerry's three deuces, Andrea Convee and Francis Fural launched their first torpedo.

Andrea Convee and Francis Fural stood at the south end of the Golden Gate Bridge. Andrea tucked long strands of poppy blond hair into the collar of a full length chinchilla coat and stared across at the toll plaza.

A dark blue armored truck, with Seattle - Security - Transport stenciled on the side, pulled up to a toll booth. Andrea watched as Miguel paid the toll and sped down Doyle Drive toward the Marina District.

Exactly six feet tall, Andrea grinned and looked down at Francis Fural. "I'm glad I got you that. You look very nice in a suit, Francis." Fural, a five foot ten, Neanderthal slab of meat and muscle, grunted. Andrea delivered her message carefully as she picked specks of lint off his grey Armani and adjusted his two hundred dollar tie. "Tell Mr. Muniz his father's statue has returned. Tell him to meet me tomorrow night at the art exhibit. Watch him closely, Francis. He owes us a lot of money.... Do you understand?" Fural rubbed his shaved and dented head. A gold tooth glistened. He snorted acknowledgement. Andrea waited until he was gone, then walked down the path to the east parking lot. She paused at the statue of Joseph Strauss, the designer and chief engineer of the Golden Gate Bridge. She glanced at the bronze plaque at the base of the statue and hissed, "Nice bridge."

Timothy Gallagher opened the door to his trailer, tucked a worn, leather copy of the bible underneath his arm, started down the steps, caught a toe on an exposed nail head and fell on his face.

"You're a clumsy son-of-a-bitch, Timothy."

"Boy's a damn fool, Hiram."

On his hands and knees, Gallagher whirled to his parent's voices. No one was there. A calico cat turned around twice, then plopped in a flower bed next to a Sun Stream trailer. Gallagher stood and dusted off bits of gravel from the palms of his hands. What have I gotten myself into? Hiram and Gladys are writhing in their graves, Gallagher thought.

"Born of the devil he was. Hair flaming red." Gladys' voice taunted.

"Freckles all over his body. Spots of Satan they are," joined Hiram. Images of his mother and father flooded his mind with guilt. Never Mom. Never Dad. Always Hiram. Always Gladys. And three hours of hallelujahs every Sunday morning in the Friends of Christ Baptist Church. And screeching preachers. And the baptisms in Brigham's creek outside of Clayton, Alabama. Sins. Damnation. And public confessions. And Hiram's whippings on the front porch, seven o'clock every Thursday evening.

"You're a sinner, Timothy. You're in league with the devil, boy."

Hiram's voice echoed in Gallagher's mind as he crossed the compound to a stand of rusting mail boxes. His flag was up.

Gallagher gulped in air. His heart raced as he seized the envelope and tore it open. Stapled to the wad of hundred dollar bills was a note:

**Final payment, for services
to be rendered - Stay by
your phone. Instructions
will follow.**

Gallagher feathered the money across his cheek and looked toward the heavens. Satan read my mind, Hiram. I'm hooked just like a catfish. I'm gonna get me a fine trailer. Get some nice things for the wife and Traci. I'm a sinner, Hiram. I'm going to hell, Gladys. But for once in my life I'm going to do something without falling on my ass. And for doing it, I'm gonna be rich. Hiram do you hear me? Gladys? Rich! I'm gonna be rich. Rich as sin.

CHAPTER 2 SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 11, 1979

I didn't hear about Timothy Gallagher's part in the whole thing until Wednesday or Thursday. And, frankly by then it was too late for me.

I awoke Saturday morning looking forward to a great weekend and a new life. Terrace Hills was sponsoring a golf tournament on Sunday and I had entered. I played the course many times and loved it. My Saturday was carefully planned. A warm-up round of golf to fine tune my game; a few cocktails, dinner, a little T.V., Jeopardy, then early to bed. A perfect plan. My plans should have included a swan dive into the bed of an active volcano.

I played the round of my life, a 79. The only other time I'd broken 80 was on a Pee Wee Golf course, but I'd kicked the ball through the Dragon's mouth on the 18th hole. A super 79! I was in the money. With my handicap, tomorrow, I could win the whole tournament. Tomorrow, in local circles, fame and fortune could be mine.

I didn't know that tomorrow in international circles, I would be a criminal! Wanted by the police and the F.B.I. On the lam. A felon.

I went home for an evening of rest and golf preparation. As it turned out, it wasn't a Zen evening.

I was scrubbing my trusty five iron with an S.O.S. pad when Jerry popped into the kitchen. He grabbed my club, did a few Zorro fencing moves and insisted we drive into the City (everyone around the bay calls San Francisco the City); I adamantly refused.

“We’ll be home by nine,” Jerry crossed his heart and hoped to die.

With proper rest, a guy that shot 79 could easily shoot 77. To this day, I don't know how I found myself riding across the Bay Bridge in Jerry's 1960, red Austin Healy convertible. Maybe I was just eager to talk to another golfer. Talking to Jerry about golf was the same as talking to a nun about birth control. Since neither enjoyed the experience, neither enjoyed the results.

Golfers love to describe each shot and dissect each round. Any sportsman's wife or lover knows this. Though it bores the hell out of them, successful wives and lovers have learned to feign attention and give the condescending nod of approval, while internally amazed that a grown man can spend an entire day hitting a little ball with a big stick into a little hole and then spend a whole evening describing his exploits.

We parked on Jackson Street, four blocks away from Harrington's, on the other side of the Golden Gateway Plaza. The Plaza was usually a morgue on Saturday nights. That night it was a mob scene, with tuxedos and evening dresses in abundance. Oh, how I wish I'd taken one moment to ask one person in the throng about the celebration.

Jerry snatched two glasses of champagne from the tray of a passing caterer and handed me one. "Shall we mingle?"

"We're underdressed," I said.

Jerry shot me a look. "Peter, you've changed. You've lost your spunk. Your sense of adventure. Live a little. Your next wife could be in that crowd waiting for you."

"No more women. No more wives. I'm seriously thinking of becoming a monk."

Jerry nudged me in the ribs. "Before you enlist..." He pointed to a statuesque blond in a full length mink coat --- Andrea Convee. In less than three days, she would be trying to kill me.

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Alan Muniz Jr., a short, pudgy man in his late forties glanced up between Andrea's breasts. "You'll have your money in three days, Andrea."

"That's good, Alan. Very good." Andrea grabbed Muniz's hand.

Muniz had a nose about the size of a healthy zucchini and an irritating habit of rubbing it whenever he got excited.

Muniz jammed his free hand into a pocket and nodded to a large debris box. "Timothy Gallagher will leave it right there. Everything is going to work out fine. I've spent more time on this than on some of my more famous recipes."

"But those days are history, aren't they Alan?" Andrea patted his head like he was a good little boy. "And any mistakes tonight could prove fatal."

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Jerry gave me a look of dismay. "What the hell does she see in that guy?"

"Big nose, big schlong," I said.

We dropped off our empty glasses and walked past a long hedge and down the steps of the Plaza toward Harrington's Bar and Grill. Harrington's has San Francisco written all over it. The same Irish family has owned it for three generations. They pour great drinks at reasonable prices and have a friendly staff and comfortable atmosphere.

Harrington's has two sections, an old side and a new side. The old side was built in the late twenties. Fern bar, it is not. An original mirrored back bar dominates one wall and caricatures of famous patrons and "regular" customers hang from ceiling to floor on the other walls. There is always someone there willing to play a game of cribbage, gin, liars dice or shuffle board. I've always preferred the old side.

Jerry pushed me through the doors of the new side. It's more modern, better lit, with a huge brick fireplace and living plants.

Warm, smoked-filled air and many familiar faces greeted me as Jerry ushered me in.

"Peter! It's Peter! Surprise! Surprise!" The whole group broke into a chorus of 'Happy Divorce to You.' Somehow, being greeted by your friends

with Happy Divorce to You, Happy Divorce to You (even as a surprise) doesn't have the warmth of the other "To - You" songs.

Even so, I really was surprised. Of course, my divorce had been quite a surprise too. Five years of marital 'bliss,' flushed. I couldn't decide on a farewell gift for "Bugs." It was a toss up between an adorable, cuddly pregnant cat or a bouquet of poison oak.

Jerry had gone to a lot of trouble to put the party together. McGuire and the guys from our poker game brought their ladies. They stood and gave me a toast.

Telly, one of my closest friends, an eccentric who owned the restaurant across the street from my office, threw me a kiss. Eiaine, my secretary, (with whom I enjoy a love-hate relationship) and several other friends from my office stood as a group and harmonized pretty well. Eiaine gave me the finger and a big smile. The smile was nice. And finally, there was Mia. Jerry and Mia Kerr co-managed the transportation department at Breefer Shipping. Even during my celibate married life, Mia had caused me several trips to the confessional on impure thoughts.

Mia is a camera nut and crazy about hats. Tonight her shining black hair poured out of a Tam O'Shanter. Her gray eyes flashed as she ducked in and out of the crowd, snapping pictures. A black and gray sheath made no attempt to hide a terrific figure. In a word, Mia is delicious. After months of

inactivity, there was a tingle in my Dockers. My eyes followed her through the group. So did some other eyes. Who could blame them? I felt wonderful. I knew this was going to be a memorable day. I should have checked my 'horroroscope'.

II

SUITE 2444

One block away, on the twenty-fourth floor of the Pyramid Building, a metallic bong announced the arrival of an elevator. Andrea Convee stepped through the doors onto the plush burgundy carpet, lit a cigarette and sauntered up the corridor to Suite 2444. She sucked in a long draught of smoke and rapped twice on the door. It opened immediately.

Except for a votive candle burning on a highly polished mahogany table, the suite was pitch black. From the darkness came the command.

"Snuff the cigarette and be seated, Miss Convee."

Andrea exhaled slowly, purposely blowing the smoke in the direction of the voice. "Yes, Mr. Cosette." She crushed the cigarette in a brass, lion claw ashtray, then stood defiantly behind a high back chair.

"Andrea, the money was lent under your advisement." A voice, with a hint of an Italian accent, called from her right.

"And the debt will be paid, Mr. Sinorae."

"And the profit? Where is the profit?" Ramone Cosette rasped from across the table.

"The profit will be substantial. And I predict---"

"Do not make predictions, Miss Conveen. And what about your little friend? Your Cyrano de Bergerac look-a-like, Alan Muniz Junior?"

"Mr. Muniz is well aware of his obligations."

"We have placed our trust in you, Andrea," Alberto Sinorae spoke evenly from within the shadows.

Andrea dug her thumbs into the back of the chair. "I have earned your trust."

"You," Cosette hissed, "have earned nothing."

Andrea bit her lower lip. "Mr. Cosette, I assure you---"

"Assure me of nothing." Cosette's thin, beautifully manicured fingers appeared on the table. On his fourth finger was a ring. A lion's claw. "I have objected to your presence since the onset. But..." his ring twisted toward the opposite ends of the table. "My objections have gone unheeded. I am the oldest. I understand that times have changed. In my era women were not--"

"I understand, Mr. Cosette."

"DO NOT ---" His forefinger tapped the mahogany table in rhythm with his words. "---interrupt me, Andrea. Your time is short. My words important.

You have brought new, profitable accounts to our enterprise. And beauty to our meetings. But," his forefinger ceased tapping. Bony, white and bloodless it extended, pointing to the other two men in room. "You and Mr. Muniz have incurred a debt with this circle. You have bantered--"

"The debt will be paid."

"Do not interrupt ME!" Cosette pushed his palms against the table and rose. "You have bantered of huge returns on our investment. You have promised---"

"The debt will be paid." Andrea leaned across the table. "In two days, we will possess the ‘Flying Porpoise’."

"That is the third time you have dared to interrupt me---" Cosette's ashen, wrinkled face broke out of the shadows. "The porpoise? The ‘Flying Porpoise’, Ms. Convee? This is your secret plan. You plan to steal that cursed rock?" He slammed his fist on the table and turned to his left. "Mr. Sinorae, tell her." Silence. Cosette inhaled deeply and turned to his right. "Mr. Glazunov, you have said...nothing." Silence.

"Very well, I will explain." Cosette tapped ring. "This circle neither needs nor deSires art. We deal in human---

"Waste." Andrea broke in. "Prostitutes, drugs, weaknesses. I know what this circle deals in. It is time to change."

"Change! Who the hell are you to decide! Who the hell do you think you are? You are nothing ... I..... Cosette gasped for breath. A terrible wheeze filled the room as he fell back into the darkness.

"Ramone?" Mikeal Glazunov cried. "Ramone?"

Only her eyes moved. Andrea Convey watched Mikeal Glazunov rush to the side of the stricken man. She squinted across the table. Die you old bastard. Let me watch you die.

"This meeting is adjourned," Glazunov said.

At the door, Andrea Convey turned. "In three days gentlemen my debt will be paid." Her mouth twisted with contempt. "And we will all be millions richer."

In the corridor, Andrea walked to the window and glared down at the Golden Gateway Plaza. "Screw you, Ramone Cosette." Andrea spit on the beige carpet.

III

Inside the Graure Art Exhibit, the crisp click of well driven nails echoed off the pale white walls. Two men pushed hand-trunks loaded with crates into a freight elevator. The remaining objects of art were being systematically checked off of a master list by the curator of the exhibit, William Medina.

Each was then crated, stamped and sealed by a mover under the supervision of the senior guard from the Donaldson Security Company, with whom Timothy Gallagher was employed.

Gallagher glanced at the freight elevator. Two more loads and they'll be done, Gallagher thought. A few more crates and the elevator will be full. I've got to get moving.

Gallagher turned and looked at 'his' crate, still stacked amid the other boxed remains of the Graure exhibit.

What's in the damn thing? He gnawed at the end of a toothpick in the corner of his mouth. He gnawed carefully. He had to. His teeth, as well as his red hair, were falling out at an alarming rate. What in god's name have I gotten myself into? I brought this on myself. Satan read my mind. And now I'm snagged like a possum in a trap. Never should have answered that phone. Gallagher's mind flipped back eleven days.

"Do you want to make fifteen grand?" The ominous voice had boomed.

Fifteen thousand dollars? I can pay off the bills. Get a set of dentures, a toupee... and some nice things for the wife and Traci. "Sure, who do you want me to kill?" Gallagher kidded.

But the man wasn't kidding.

The money arrived each morning in plain white envelopes. One thousand dollars a day for ten days. And this morning, five thousand dollars and the note.

**Final payment, for services
to be rendered - Stay by
your phone. Instructions
will follow.**

The phone rang at 11:07 A.M.

"Your crate will be specially marked," the voice bellowed from the depths of hell. Gallagher almost dropped the phone. "Look for a small x."

You've made a pact with the dark side, Gallagher thought. And now it's time to honor it.

Gallagher surveyed the showroom floor.

It's gotta be worth a lot of money, Gallagher reasoned, giving the x-marked crate a final glance. And whatever it is, it's sure to go down the elevator on the next load.

Looking furtively, Gallagher moved slowly across the showroom and nonchalantly backed into the freight elevator.

"You will see two small cables on the right hand side of the elevator door. Cut these and the elevator will be inoperable." The voice had rumbled.

Gallagher slipped the elongated needle-nose pliers from inside his uniform and snipped the first cable. "Perfect," he sighed. He grabbed the second cable and snipped. "Shit." A muffled explosion echoed through elevator. A powder-blue arc of electricity flashed across the darkness between the door and the wall. "Jesus, save my soul." The pliers turned molten in his hand. A bolt of pain shot up his arm. The pliers fell from his grasp and disappeared down the elevator shaft. Above, the ceiling light flashed on and off. What've I done?

Gallagher pulled the toothpick from the side of his mouth. The neon light blinked on and off. He jammed the unchewed end into the gap at the side of the button and snapped it in half. There was a burring sound. The elevator door smashed close against the wall. Oh, God. I'm trapped. The door flew open. Saved. The door snapped shut. The light blinked.

"I'm a sinner," Gallagher cried aloud. He tripped over a crate and fell to the floor. The light flashed. Move. Get out of here. "Dear Lord, help me." Gallagher braced his right leg firmly against the rear wall, rocked back and forth and he counted, "One...two...three..." The door flew open. He dove. "Oh, no." The door closed nipping at his left ankle. Gallagher somersaulted across the showroom floor and slid to a halt at the toe of a well-polished Italian loafer.

"What the hell's the matter?" Del Medina, owner of the well-polished Italian loafer, curator and decision-maker, demanded.

"I don't know," lied Timothy Gallagher, security guard and would-be thief. "I think...er... something's wrong with the elevator."

Medina twisted a perfectly trimmed white moustache. "No kidding? Another high school graduate."

"Yes, Sir." Gallagher rose to his feet and saluted.

Medina sighed to no one. You don't salute... forget it, look, er..."
Medina looked at Timothy Gallagher's name tag, "... Gallagher, we have one half hour to get the rest of this exhibit crated and loaded on the trucks. Call someone from Western Elevator and tell them we have an emergency. You there," Medina turned to a group of movers. "Get the dollies and hand-trucks over here. Start a chain. We'll take the rest of the exhibit out the front entrance."

"Once you've got the elevator immobilized, they'll have to use the outside exit." The voice had prophesied.

Gallagher commandeered a hand-truck and moved quickly through the maze of packing crates. He pushed the metal lip under the bottom crate of 'his' stack and pulled. The load slipped on. Easy, Gallagher laughed to himself, backing through the sliding glass doors out into the cool, salty air. A fog horn wailed from the bay behind him. Almost there.

"Our item will be in a very unique crate with two special clamps. Move them to either side and the bottom will drop out. Leave the item by the garbage bin at the side of the building. It should only take a second. Then join the others and go about your business. Look busy and remain calm," the voice warned.

Thirty feet to go. Down these steps and--- The load shifted. "No!" The hand-truck gathered momentum. Gallagher slipped backward down the stairs. "Too fast. Too fast."

His left heel caught in the pavement; he back-pedaled, his right foot slipped. The crates listed to the left. Gallagher pushed to the right. Gravity took over. The Leaning Tower of Pisa looked more stable. "Lord, in heaven."

Two huge hands appeared on the top box. "What the hell are you doing? Why the hell aren't you inside guarding the shit you're supposed to be guarding?"

Minute beads of sweat formed on Gallagher's forehead and upper lip as he watched the mover adjust the crates. "Mr. Medina said he wanted this stuff loaded as quickly as possible."

The mover pulled the hand-truck back with a snap of his wrist. The load stabilized. "This is a union job, Jerkoff!" He shoved the handle in Gallagher's stomach. Gallagher gasped for air. "Follow me, asswipe." The mover pushed

the crates through a gap in the hedge. "Damn scabs trying to take a union-man's work away."

Gallagher took a longing look at the debris box, then followed the man through the hedge and out to the steps leading down to Front Street. This isn't going well, Gallagher thought. What now? A few minutes and this thing will be in the truck. I've got....

"SINNER," Hiram's voice rang through his brain.

"HEATHEN," Gladys shrilled. "Boy's hell-bound for sure."

"What's your name?" The mover demanded.

"Huh?"

"Your name, dipshit?"

"Gallagher."

"Yeah. Gallagher you're the guard. Stay here and guard this crap, butt-head." The mover stormed through the hedge toward the showroom.

I've got a minute. Two maybe. Gallagher looked at the small hedge at the top of the stairs. Leave it there and they'll find it. If they don't...I'm dead. A steady stream of sweat dribbled from beneath a reddish sideburn.

Gallagher ran his tongue along the ragged edges of his teeth and removed the top crate. 'Here we go, almost there.' He stepped in front of the second crate, released the clamps and tried to push it forward. 'This thing must weigh three hundred pounds.' Using both arms he wrestled the crate

until only one edge sat balanced on the box below. He rested, inhaled deeply. Easy as... On its own, the bottom of the crate cracked open with a renting screech. 'What in God's name?' A two hundred and fifty pound piece of marble poured through the opening, down his leg, tearing his slacks, ripping tissue from his shin, landing with a crunch on his right foot and rolling to stop in the damp earth beneath the hedge. "Eiaine in Heaven!" Gallagher whispered. "What is it?" He ignored the pain in his foot and inched forward. "What the ...?" He pushed aside a branch. "All this for a rock?" He edged closer in disbelief. "Just a ..." Gallagher squinted and ran his fingers over the marble slab. "Oh, myyy GOD," he stammered. "It's the 'MUNIZ' thing. The Porpoise. Saints in heaven I've just stolen the 'Flying Porpoise!'

IV

At Harrington's Bar and Grill I couldn't buy a drink. Everyone bought them for me. Spirits were high and so was I. Just as I tried to maneuver closer to Mia, Jerry began clinking his glass with a fork. Everyone else joined in. My maneuver was aborted.

"Ladies and gentlemen, and I use both terms loosely." Jerry laughed, raising a tall scotch and water. "A toast to our guest of honor."

I was hip, hip and hurrahed. Mia snapped a picture. I flirted. Mia gave me that look. That you've got to be kidding, you're out of your mind look. When do women learn it? I've seen two year old girls give it to their fathers. Even orphans have been known to --- Jerry's voice interrupted my musings. The crowd went silent.

"Now, my fellow soon-to-be-millionaires. Before each of you I have placed one blank California Lotto Ticket. As your host, I call upon you to use your psychic powers to fill in the bubbles. Since there are...." He counted the heads at the table. "Eighteen of us, I will go around the table once requesting a number from each of you. Our last twelve numbers will be picked by the more cosmic members of our group."

The odds of winning the California State Lottery are about 13,000,000 to one. Hell, it's written on the ticket! You have the same chance of winning the Lottery as being pecked to death by a duckbilled platypus while hang gliding off Pikes Peak.

Jerry held up his Lotto Ticket like some T.V. evangelist. "Look into your souls." The rest of the bar quieted down. "I need a number, not a donation, just a number." He was on a roll.

In a clockwise direction we began shouting numbers. All of us, caught up in the game.

"Fourteen," McGuire shouted.

My secretary Eiaine had her eyes closed. She swiggled her nose. "I see a twenty-three."

Mia clasped her hands together, "two."

Telly, the pervert, looked at Mia's chest, "thirty-six."

I glared at Telly.

"Peter?" Jerry demanded.

"One," I said. "One is the loneliest number." I got a few sympathetic sighs, and then the game went on until everyone's card was filled.

"Save your tickets, tomorrow we join the Nouveau Riche," Jerry cried. "Drinks are on me." He left the table to a rousing cheer. "I've got to validate our tickets."

I made several attempts to get next to Mia. So did everyone else. They were all futile. So I had a drink. No one wanted to hear about my golf game, so I had another. I wasn't feeling rejected, but I did regret that none of the females seemed to want to take advantage of my new single status. By 11 p.m. I couldn't have take advantage of it either. Though, with a minimum amount of coaxing, I would have tried. I was bombed. It was lamp shade on the head time. I slurred a plea to Jerry.

"Jaerry, I go homem now have to. Goof tournament early morrow please." I mumbled. "Happ Divorce to me."

Someone force fed me coffee. I was still drunk, but now I was a wide awake drunk.

Two cups of coffee and one hour later, Jerry said, "Peter, it's a matter of pacing yourself." He shoved his hands in my arm pits, lifted me off a bar stool, steered me to the door of Harrington's and shoved me into the nightmare.

V

Regrettably, art has never been a major part of my life. An abyss in an otherwise perfect Catholic education. Jerry and I had our arms around each other's shoulders, musing in our drunken state that amongst the bevy of beauties we had just left none had had the good sense to invite either of us back to their nest.

"Saw you looking at Mia." Jerry proded.

I shrugged. The best indifferent shrug I know how to shrug. A good solid, man-to-man shrug. A who-cares shrug.

"You're right." Jerry said. "She is beautiful. I know what you mean."

How did he know what I mean? I didn't know what I mean. And damn it, it was a meaningless shrug.

"Perhaps there's hope." He dropped his arm around my shoulder.

"Maybe you're not such a bore after all. Now that you're single . . ."

"I did try to talk to her," I confessed. "She really is something."

"Plenty of time, good buddy." Jerry gave me a comforting pat on the shoulder. "Peter, you're like a fine used car but, this is only your first day out on the lot. Your single days have just begun."

I gave Jerry a hug. We jumped off the curb and the old team broke into song. "We've only just begun...to live."

An irate cab driver blasted her horn, swerved around us and flipped the bird.

"We do requests."

"Oldies but goodies," Jerry shouted.

We swayed from left to right up the steps to Golden Gateway Plaza.

"White lace and pony tails."

Jerry came to a full halt on a stair near the top. Through slowly sobering ears, I heard him gasp. "Look! It's beautiful." He raced up the steps and disappeared behind a shaggy hedge.

It was late. Very dark. I climbed the stairs and rounded the hedge. Very foggy. My eyes were blurry. So was my brain. Later, I blamed the fog.

Jerry dropped to his hands and knees. "Peter," He slurred. "It's perfect for our garden."

I blinked and squinted. "Perfect," I said, having no idea what he was slurring about.

"Look at this?" He karate chopped me in the back of my knee. I folded and crumbled to the ground. It's a normal reflex. The exact opposite of when the doctor smacks you below the knee with one of those triangular things - your leg kicks up - when someone chops you behind your knees you genuflect.

All I could see underneath the hedge was a big one-eyed rock.

"Give me a hand," Jerry insisted.

I started to help, then hesitated. "Jer, that looks like something."

"Yeah. A rock. Come on."

We grabbed it. It was heavy. I got a hold on the eye part and reached for the nose. But there wasn't a nose part where the nose should have been if the eye part was really an eye part. The rock was damp and slippery. Somehow we got it between our legs and waddled along the causeway doing a little side-step. We looked like two convicts on a chain-gang, carrying boulders for the rock pile. In retrospect a bad analogy. I puffed and almost lost my footing.

"Where's the muscle, Peter?" Jerry asked. Actually, he was doing pretty good with his end, whatever his end was. I grinned, lifted the rock higher and began the goose step. Jerry joined the march. It became a battle. A silent - hup - two - three - four. Hup - two - three... The rock dropped lower and lower in

our arms. We hopped for sixty yards. My back was in serious pain. Muscles I'd never used in my life were in open revolt. But I was damned if I'd quit first.

"Hup -two- three-four. Hup-two-three-four." I forced my legs higher, clicking the heels of my shoes in concert Gestapo style.

"Do you want to rest?" Jerry finally asked.

"Sure, if you're tired."

We set our rock on a redwood flower box, eye end up, though it looked like it could have gone either way. We both lit cigarettes. I was still trying to quit.

"This is stupid, Jer. Where are we going to put this thing?"

"In the garden, kinda underlooking the golf course."

"It's too heavy, leave it here. I'll buy you a birdbath or how about one of those pink flamingos."

Jerry gave me a look, then "Come on, heave ho Marine, less than a hundred yards to go. One lousy football field. A short par three. Then down the stairs. You can wait and I'll fetch `Del Rado.'"

Jerry had named his car after an old Cadillac hearse he owned in high school. Breefer Shipping loaned him a dented, green Dodge as his company car. But Jer had convinced the powers that be that a red 1960 Austin Healy

was more in keeping with the global image Breefer Shipping was trying to convey.

`DEL RADO' was another story. I was one of his closest friends and no one I know knew the significance or meaning of "Del Rado." Jerry named lots of things including his skateboard "Skitter." A thirty year old man with a skateboard is bad enough, but calling it by name? Not your real stable personality.

I should talk. There I was, stooped with my fingers interlocked, trying to lift up a two-ton, one-eyed rock.

"One, two, three." We made about thirty yards before plopping it down on a concrete bench gasping loudly.

"Jer, I can't do this anymore," I admitted. I smelled like the inside of a brewery. Vodka oozed through my pours. "Let's leave it here."

"Peter," Jerry turned both hands on his knee caps. "I hate to bring this up, but your contributions to the ol' condo have been pretty minimal. Landon would have loved this rock."

He caught me off guard. "I'll bite. Who's Landon?"

"I told you about Landon," he sighed. "Landon Rienwell used to be my roommate, the attack-dog trainer. He would have loved this rock in our garden. He would have helped me lift it and carry it back to my car and put it in the yard." Jerry looked at me disappointedly. "And he would have kept it

really clean. Landon was like that. It's hard to find good roommates anymore." Jerry looked directly at me. "I miss you, Landon," he said, lifting his eyes toward the heavens.

"Did he die?" I asked.

"Worse, he moved in with his veterinarian. Some guy named Malcolm. Poor me, lucky Malcolm. Boy, could he keep a place clean."

I gave up.

"One, two, three." It was up again but not for long. We dropped it on a plastic garbage can twenty yards later.

I hurt all over. So did the garbage can. It folded under our rock and collapsed with a plop. The rock listed on one edge, two feet above the ground. I raised my foot to kick it over and looked at Jerry. "It would be a lot easier to carry it in little pieces."

Jerry considered my motion for a second, and then I was overruled. "Nope. Like it just the way it is."

"HEY," a voice called out of the fog behind us.

The hairs on my arms and neck stood on end.

"What's going down?"

A Golden Gateway guard walked out of the wall behind us. There was no door there --- just a wall and a hedge.

Maybe he was putting out a fire, I thought. Even in the fog you could see a separate cloud of smoke clung to him.

He was a big man, black, all decked out in Golden Gateway Guard finery, a good looking uniform. Not Marine Corps Dress Blues --- but nice as guards' uniforms go, with dark grey slacks and a white jacket with gold and blue epaulets.

"Your fingers are on fire." I pointed to the butt he was squeezing between his thumb and forefinger. He grinned, sizzled the end of the roach with the spittle at the tip of his tongue and dropped it in a vest pocket. His eyes were warm, bright and glazed. He's absolutely stoned, I thought.

"You boys bought something at the exhibit?"

Bought? Who would spend money for a big one-eyed rock? He's ripped.

"Needed a paperweight," Jerry said.

"A door stopper," I added.

We were a cute team. Two drunken wise-guys giving a befuddled security guard a bad time.

"Big door," he smiled.

"Sure is," Jerry agreed patting the rock. "Heavy too."

"I shot 79 today," added Mr. Wit.

"YOU, shot a 79?" The guard said in disbelief. "I have trouble breaking one hundred."

A golfer at last.

"Name's Taylor. Walton Taylor, can I give you fellows a hand?"

"You bet," Jerry and I said at once.

Jerry conducted the effort. "On the count of three. One, two, three."

We grunted in unison, and then sidled across the Plaza to the stairway that led back down to Jackson Street. We were standing there trying to decide how to manage the steps when Taylor's beeper, beeped.

He put the receiver to his ear, "Yeah, I copy, area 23. Be right there."

Taylor turned, "If you boys wanna wait here.... This shouldn't take more than a few minutes. It's some poor homeless guy messing with the garbage." Jerry and I waved him off. Taylor sped off into the fog --- and into his own private war.

Stopped here 7 4 2018

VI

Walton Taylor walked quickly up the east stairs of Graure Hall, across the landing past the Romanesque columns and came to an abrupt halt at the top of the landing. Son-of-a-bitch, he thought, Dude's turned the whole damn debris box over. Must be starving. For a moment, Taylor kicked back, leaned against a column and watched the spectacle below him.

Twenty feet away Francis Fural rummaged and kicked his way through the remnants of the evening's party. Fural bent over, doggie style, and began flinging missiles of garbage between his legs. "Where the hell did asshole put the damn thing?" Fural mumbled in disgust. Ms. Convee's going to be pissed. Fural picked up a metal serving tray and ripped in half, but maybe I'll get to break one of Muniz's arms. Or rip off his fuckin' nose. Maybe both. He liked the idea. And ideas didn't come easy to Francis Fural. He grinned and returned to pawing through the debris.

Taylor slipped silently down the stairs. He stepped cautiously through the refuse and stopped ten feet behind the stooped figure. An empty bottle of champagne flew from between the man's legs. Taylor ducked.

"What are you doing there, buddy?"

Fural barely moved. He dipped his head and peered upside down between his legs. One solid gold tooth shone through his puffed lips. "None of yer god fuckin' business."

Man, that is one ugly dude, Taylor winced.

Two hundred and forty pounds of muscle rose slowly and turned toward Taylor.

Taylor gulped. God, this is one big, ugly dude. "The exhibit's over," Taylor managed.

"And?"

"Somebody has to clean up this mess." Taylor gestured to piles of garbage.

"So?" Fural took two quick steps forward.

It doesn't have a NECK! Taylor stepped backward. "What are you looking for?"

"My German shepherd." Fural spat and inched toward Taylor. "You like big dogs, BOY?" The gold tooth sparkled. Fural inched forward.

The slur 'BOY,' and how Fural spat it, triggered a lot of emotions in Walton Taylor. Not stupidity, emotions. Taylor reached for the belt on his uniform. Why don't they give us guns? Guns? Hell, I'd need a 3.5 rocket launcher to take out this sucker. Taylor grabbed his radio. "This is Walton Taylor, section 23. I need help."

"I'm going," Fural hissed, lumbering off into the thickening fog. "Here Fang. Here boy."

My God what was that thing? Taylor sat down with a sigh and lit another perfectly rolled joint. Shit.

I vaguely remember waiting for Taylor at the top of the stairs. Our rock was definitely a three-person rock. But Jerry got impatient. "Come on."

Together we eased the rock from step to step down to the sidewalk.

"I'll get Del Rado. Be right back."

I sat on the second-to-last stair with my arm around the rock. Weird looking eye, but a nice rock, I thought. Cold but nice. Looks a lot like George Washington: strong and serene. George. George is a great name. The rock was christened. The ultimate in pet rocks. Hell, this was a pet boulder. I looked at George; you might be the start of a whole new fad. Millions of dollars danced through my brain. If I sent a chisel with each boulder people could make baby rocks. I was not well.

Off to my right was the Magnolia Theater. It usually features foreign films and old cult favorites. Tonight was no exception. The Rocky Horror Picture Show was on the marquee. It's more of an event than a film. The audience boo's and hisses the villains and claps and raahs the heroes. Avid fans dress up in the costume of their favorite character. It's a real team effort. "Just like you and me, George." I patted the rock affectionately.

The film must have just ended. An odd group of people were exiting. Some of them took time to nod in our direction.

"Very nice work."

"Did you make that?"

"Really quite lovely, don't you think, William?" A mousy woman in black cape said, giving her white faced companion a sharp elbow in the ribs.

George was the recipient of the praise. I was oblivious. I must have looked like some wino clinging to a boulder for support. Though, I did give a courteous wave to everyone that made a comment.

Jerry pulled up, got out of the Healy and began soliciting members of the crowd for help with George. "Would you guys mind giving us a hand?" he asked two, young hard-bodies in Levis and tank-tops. They hesitated. Jerry pointed to me, and lied. "My friend has a bad back. Real bad."

"Mark and Les Collier," they said, shaking my hand and crushing my putting fingers in the process. They scooped up George with ease, (gave Jerry and me a look of utter contempt,) and set him in the back compartment of Jerry's Austin Healy for all the world to admire. Jerry and I hopped in the car. Les Collier moved away, but he had to kick sand in our face. As we pulled away from the curb, he shouted to his brother, "Weak sons-of-bitches. Oughta work out."

At a stop light, two blocks away, Jerry decided to stick two more bars into the window of my jail cell.

"A final final, that's what we need," Jerry proclaimed.

I hate the use of plural pronouns when they're only intended to satisfy one of the plurals. "We" did not need a final final. Jerry wanted one. I was sobering, but tired and sore. I tried to enter a plea.

"Jer, it's been a great night. You've got the rock. Home. Please. We've had enough. I've got a golf tournament tomorrow. I know you don't give a damn, but today I shot the best round of my life. No more drinks. Tomorrow--"

The light turned green. The car didn't move. Jerry fingered an imaginary violin. "You're boring. Dull. Peter." He pointed to the blinking neon lights, the traffic, the people and said, "There's a world of adventure out here. Can't you feel it? Hear it? Smell it?

I stared in disbelief. His eyes were clear. His speech perfect. "But you were slurring and we carried that damn ---," I pointed to George.

"I had one drink and that was two hours ago. Peter, it was your party. One of us had to drive."

I pulled out a white handkerchief and waived my surrender.

Twenty-five minutes later, we found a parking place right in front of `Bender's.'

"George looks good back there, eh Jer," I said, as we entered the bar.

"George?" Jerry gave me a puzzled glance.

"Yeah, the rock. George."

"You named a rock?"

"You named your skateboard."

"Yeah, well that's different."

I grabbed a stool between Bill St. John and Dave Forkel, two golfing pals, and ordered drinks for them and coffee for me. "Shot a 79 today." I bragged.

"What did you use, a cannon?" St. John asked.

"Right 79. What did you shoot on the second hole?" Forkel taunted.

Abbot and Costello laughed. I didn't. We settled into a few games of liar's dice. Jerry ushered several people outside to show them our rock. I had a second cup of coffee and was finally sober enough to exchange golf stories. People were playing the pinball machines, others throwing darts. One of three televisions was tuned into a hurling match live from Dublin. Tunes blared from the jukebox. I was winning money at liar's dice. Everyone was having a good time. And then Jerry decided to get us both killed.

Six stools away on my left, two fellows dressed in basic Yuppie were engaged in a quiet conversation.

Somehow over the din of the crowd, I heard one of them say, "I gotta get a car."

How Jerry, sitting three stools to my right, heard his comment is beyond me.

"A car, you need a car?" Jerry was up and moving. "Here we go," he whispered as he passed behind me.

"Are you going to help him, Peter?" St. John asked.

"What the hell," I shrugged. "Jerry's helpless without a straight-man."

Quiet titters and jeers went like waves up and down the bar, accompanied by murmurs of, "Jerry's going to do it. Jerry's going to do it."

Win Black, the bartender pulled a patron aside, "Watch this, Jerry is really a card."

Yeah, I thought, the Joker.

Jerry squeezed up to the fellow who had spoken, put his arm around him and patted his shoulder confidently.

"So, my friend, you need a car?"

"Uh huh. Why, you got a car for sale?"

"For sale? A gift, a steal, my friend," he said. Later, I realized steal was probably a poor choice of words, under the circumstances. "You need a car and we have just the car for you. Don't we, Peter?"

I folded my hands in prayer. "Don't sell the car, Jerry. We'll come up with rent money --- somehow." It wasn't much of a line. But I wasn't up for an Emmy.

"How much do you want for it?"

"How much!? What's your name, my friend?"

"Michael," he said, shooting his buddy on the next stool a quizzical look.

"Come on Mike take a look. If you like her, we'll talk price. Come on outside." Jerry headed out the door, with Michael and his friend in tow.

Everyone in audio range heaved a collective sigh, a hush fell over the bar; even the fellow playing the pins let his ball slip past the flipper with a quiet, "Shit." We scrambled through the revolving door.

The three of them stood on the sidewalk next to a vintage, blue, Bonneville Pontiac; Jerry kicked the tires, at the same time extolling the various virtues of the car. Somehow the door was unlocked. Somehow Peter got Michael inside.

"Sit back, get comfortable. How about that upholstery, huh? AM/FM radio, stereo tape deck. Isn't she a beaut? Hey Mike, let me go get the keys. Take her for a spin. Then we'll talk money." Jerry slammed the door. "Hear that `thunk,' real solid, eh?"

Jerry walked back into the bar, followed by his entourage, "Tall scotch and water, Win."

We sat facing the front door, drinks in hand, ready to toast Michael and his pal with the big Gotcha!

The front doors exploded inward, one of them smashed into the pinball machine. "TILT!"

Three of the biggest women I have ever seen had Michael by the nape of his jacket. His feet dangled in mid-air. They dropped him. Michael crumbled into a heap on the barroom floor. All breathing ceased. I couldn't find Michael's "buddy" in the crowd.

"Point him out, friend." One of the Amazons boomed looking down at Michael's limp body. Michael assumed the fetal position and stuck a thumb in his mouth. She ground a well polished toe into his rib cage. "Ugh."

Jerry did an Ichabod Crane; his entire head disappeared below the collar of his Ivy League shirt.

Hell, I'd shot a 79 today. I didn't need this. I left my stool and headed for the door. I got half-way past the Great Wall of China, when, "Point him out, friend." Daughter of Godzilla repeated. My feet stopped moving. My feet caught in a sand-trap of primeval emotion. I couldn't leave Jer. I couldn't.

"Him. He's the guy," Michael said from the floor. I turned and all I could see was Michael's extended finger and it was pointing at me. I never saw the punch.

I vaguely remember the ride home. Jerry apologized profusely. I pouted. Halfway across the Bay Bridge he asked me if I wanted him to jump. I pointed toward the railing. "Do it." He didn't. He promised to make me sole beneficiary of his will. I could drive Del Rado anytime I wanted. I could have

it. It was mine. I pouted. He offered me his first born child. He offered to take my place at any future circumcisions. Finally a generous gesture.

Circumcision is barbaric. Growing older, one grows especially fond of that particular appendage -- And one always wonders what it would have looked like in its natural state. It turns out that leaving the German War Helmet of love in its natural state makes the act more pleasurable for everyone involved. In fact, I would love to snip some off the skin of the one who snipped my flesh before I was old enough to protest my snipping.

In the Caldecott Tunnel, Jerry crossed his heart and hoped to die --- that he'd take up golf and give up skateboarding on 'Skitter.' I caved. I laughed. There are some things even I couldn't hold him to. Jerry caught my mood swing instantly. He turned on the radio and patted the steering wheel to the beat of Ray Charles classic 'I've Got a Woman.' Jer and I bellowed I don't got a woman until the song faded. Jer hummed on for a minute. Then a minute later he turned to me. "Peter, you have to admit. It was a classic. A classic! Those gals were great." Jerry was all systems go. I was all systems don't-push-your-luck. "You missed it. What a scene. They were going to kill me." He gave me an elbow. It hurt. "But I explained the whole thing. The one with the great rack thought it was a great joke. What a night! Just what you needed. Adventure. Excitement."

I gave Jerry a look. He down shifted skirting between battered a green minivan and a Grey Hound Bus. The bus driver hit the horn and the brakes. I didn't look back.

The glib tongue had survived again. Chances of winning the lottery were nil; but taking out a life insurance policy on Jerry was a sure bet. He looked healthy but, he wouldn't be around much longer.

Jerry pushed me awake when we arrived in front 'our' condo. I opened the door and headed across our lawn.

"Where are you going?"

I leaned against our tree. "To bed."

Jerry pointed to George in the back of the Healy. "You're just going to abandon our rock?"

I shoved my hand into my spine and winced. "Bad back, remember."

"Someone may steal it."

"Not without a crane."

Jerry looked to the heavens and began screaming, "Landon? Where are you, Landon?" Three minutes later, we set George on the kitchen table.

"You know, George looks good right there," Jerry opening the refrigerator for a final, final final.

"He doesn't leave much room for things like plates or knives and forks."

"You're right," he popped the cap of a Stiller Lite. "You got the lotto tickets?"

"Lotto tickets?"

"The ones I bought at the party. I gave 'em to you for safe keeping. Hell, it was your party, Peter."

I pulled out my pockets. "I don't have `em."

"Who cares? We'd never win anyway," he gave me a knowing grin. The grin didn't register.

Yeah, who cares," I said, holding back a yawn. I went up stairs and collapsed, fully clothed, on my bed. The room twirled as I closed my eyes. I was not going to sleep well that night.

But then, Alan Muniz Jr. was not going to sleep at all.

CHAPTER 3 SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 12, 1979

I

In a four story Victorian, high in the Oakland hills, Alan Muniz Jr.'s blood shot eyes peered above a racing form to his deceased father's Heighbolt Grandfather clock. The silver pendulum rocked from side to side. The clock chimed four. Muniz rubbed his nose. Four a.m. Where was the caveman?

A beat later the front door burst open, then thudded shut. "Hey assbite, it ain't there." Francis Fural's voice rumbled down the hallway, bounced off a mirror, two Picasso prints and a bronze statue of the Spanish explore Pazzaro.

Fural's "Ain't there..." smacked Alan Muniz Jr. in the middle of his forehead. He reeled and ditched the racing form into a slit between the burgundy cushions of the sofa. Godzilla's cloven hooves clunked closer. Fural will tell Andrea. I'm dead! Think. Think. Muniz leapt to his feet as Fural turned the corner into the living room.

"Are you sure it wasn't there?"

Fural eyed Muniz defiantly and flashed his gold tooth. "The fucking fish wasn't there."

"A porpoise isn't a...skip it." Muniz gathered himself. "Ah ha." Muniz rubbed his nose, spun around and marched back and forth across a Persian carpet.

Fural's beady black eyes followed the ballet.

"Yes. Of course. Mister Gallagher must have had trouble. He must have gone to plan B." Muniz spun and almost did a pirouette.

"Plan B?"

"Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I only had one plan? Things go wrong." Muniz touched the side of his temple. "You have to use this. You have to plan for errors. Unexpected events. There were guards. Probably police..... Gallagher must have gone to plan B or C or D."

Fural glared. "Yeah. Sure. Ms. Convee don't get her money, you'll be making plans x...y... and z from a fuckin' wheelchair." He pointed around the living room to a collage of pictures of Muniz and Andrea Convee in Paris, Rome, Venice, sailing, horseback riding and on a photographic safari in Kenya. Feral sneered at Muniz and lifted the phone. "I'm callin' the boss, dickhead."

"Go ahead," Muniz bluffed. "Four in the morning. Andrea loves to get up early. Two hours before the sun rises. What are you going to tell her? I screwed up? She screwed up? Gallagher split with the statue? Go ahead Francis. Please give her a call. I'll bet she'd love to hear from you.... But then again, you just might piss her off."

Fural shuffled to his feet. "Yeah, and I gotta take a leak."

Thank God for the power of suggestion, Muniz thought.

"You cooking somethin'?"

Muniz nodded. Fural pointed over his shoulder. "It's burning."

Muniz turned. A cloud of smoke oozed from the kitchen door. "Shit." Abandoning the bravado, Muniz raced down the hall.

"You better have a plan B, shithead." In the upstairs bathroom, Fural unzipped his slacks. He purposely avoided mentioning the encounter with the Golden Gate Way guard. It's none of your damn business, he thought, missing the bowl in general and pissing on the toilet seat. You ain't my boss. Ms. Convee's my boss. She told me to be polite. Answer your phone. Do what you tell me. That's it. I ain't your flunky, Muniz. I'm Ms. Convee's..., he did not finish the thought. Reasoning and thinking were exhausting tasks for Francis Fural. Not flushing the toilet was easy.

Fural's shaved head was connected directly to his shoulders. There was no neck. His head seemed to be an afterthought --- though he had made a small fortune with it in his youth.

Since he was sixteen, Fural had a standing bet in a pool hall he frequented. For \$20 he would put his shaved head on the pool table, bury his face in the green felt cushion and dare patrons to try and knock him out with the Cue ball. He only lost once. A drunken Aussie rugby player pretended to

misunderstand the wager and whacked Fural over the skull with the Cue stick instead of the Cue ball. While the game hadn't done much for Fural's intelligence quotient, but, it did wonders for his wallet.

The casting director for a low-budget caveman movie could save a fortune. With Francis, make-up would be superfluous. Fural's arms were thicker than most men's legs. He did all his shopping at the Neanderthal Big & Massive clothing store.

In 'his' kitchen, Alan Muniz Jr. scraped the scorched remnants of a Joe's Special (spinach, scrambled eggs and onions) into the garbage disposal. He stared down at the black void. I wonder if I could fit there, Muniz thought as he flipped on the motor. "Five years ago ---" Muniz sighed, remembering his 'Chubby' period. "I probably couldn't have gotten my thumb down the damn hole." The disposal ground to a halt. Muniz's mind wound back five years.

"Frankly, Alan you're too damn fat." Doctor Randal Garrison admonished in the small, sterile examining room. "Get dressed."

Muniz watched Garrison's jowls bounce as he spoke. You should talk, Muniz thought. "I must eat. I am a chef," Muniz countered, slipping off the hospital gown. "A connoisseur, an epicure, a sommelier of wine --"

"You're fat, almost obese and you are going to be dead if you don't go on a diet." Doctor Garrison peeled off the plastic gloves. "You're 80, maybe 100 pounds overweight, Alan."

"Food and drink are my life."

"How soon do you want to die?"

"Oof," Muniz grunted slipping on a sock.

"Join a health club."

"I did."

"You joined a health club?.... And you still look like the Michelin Blimp?"

Muniz fidgeted with his belt. "I joined the F.F.F. Health Club."

"F.F.F.?"

"Free of Fat Forever."

"And?"

"It cost \$2,000 to join and \$300 a month. I thought if it was expensive enough, I'd stay committed."

"And?"

"I didn't last long."

"How long?"

Muniz looked up embarrassed. "A day and a half." He finished tying a shoelace. "But, I'm still paying dues."

Doctor Garrison sucked in a long, frustrated breath. "Make an appointment to see me in three months. Until then Alan, please take a walk everyday. A long brisk walk."

In his kitchen, Alan Muniz Jr. poured coffee from a copper pot and sat in a corner of his booth. The special Guinea dark roasted coffee drifted up into his rather large nasal cavities. Regrettably, Muniz could not smell it. He couldn't smell one damn thing. Which was the paramount reason Andrea Convee would assign Fural to insure he had a long, lingering, painful death. He stared out the French windows to San Francisco Bay and across to the

Golden Gate Bridge. "Yeah... Take a brisk walk. Take a long brisk walk."
Why the hell had I ever followed that advice? I never saw the Volkswagen Bus.
Next thing I know I wake up in hospital room with Doctor Garrison and a Nurse Crachet.

"You might have been killed, Alan," Doctor Garrison counseled from his side of the bed.

"I was following your advice." Muniz scratched his nose. Something is wrong. He sniffed. He turned his nose from side to side like a hound dog on the scent of a possum.

"Alan, I didn't tell you to cross between two parked cars."

Muniz sat up in bed and he sniffed left and sniffed again. "That is some powerful disinfectant. Who's in kitchen? What are they cooking? All I can smell is cinnamon." Muniz blew into a Kleenex. "When can I get out of here?"

Doctor Garrison and Nurse Crachet exchanged a worried glance.

Muniz rubbed the bandages on his head. "I'm supposed to judge wine at the Patterson Winery."

"You've had a rather serious blow to the head, Alan."

"I know that." Muniz said. "When can I get out of here? I feel fine."

"I am glad." Doctor Garrison walked to the foot of the bed and picked up the medical chart.

"What in God's name is that smell?"

Doctor Garrison's eyes widened. "Burnt cinnamon?"

Muniz sat up right and sniffed. "What are you using for disinfectant?"

Garrison took a small vial of ammonia from his pocket and shoved it under Muniz's nose. "Inhale."

Muniz gagged. "Cinnamon, so?"

"Alan," Doctor Garrison looked at Muniz warily, "... head injuries are the leading cause of Anosmia."

"Ana what?" Muniz sat up-right.

"Anosmia," Doctor Garrison said gently. "Alan, I believe you may have lost your sense of smell."

The kitchen door slammed against the wall with a bang. Fural stuck his no neck head through the aperture and asked, "You the big time chef. You gonna fix us somethin' to eat?"

"Eat?" Muniz snapped out of his reverie.

Fural mimed a spoon going to his mouth. "Food, butthead," then shut the door. Muniz stared out at the Golden Gate Bridge. The twin towers. The railing. The one thousand foot drop to the ocean. I used to do a pretty good swan dive.

II

Two miles from the Golden Gate Bridge, in the Sausalito Yacht Harbor, a myriad of boats bobbed at their moorings. A dull buzz echoed through the hull of a thirty-eight foot sloop christened 'Sleeping Lady.'

Lieutenant Richard Hourigan flipped on a light in his vee berth, rubbed his eyes and glanced at a digital clock. 4:18 a.m. "What the....." He climbed out of the berth, ran a hand across his flat top and slipped on a pair of purple boxer shorts. The buzz continued as he passed into the galley and clicked on the chrome toggle switch to the ship-to-shore radio. "Hourigan."

At San Francisco's Robbery Detail, Officer Thomas Joseph Billing's, 'T.J.', a black man in his late twenties, smiled. "Hope I didn't wake you, Lieutenant."

"No T.J., I was out on deck, shinning the brass on the bowsprit." Why does it have to be T.J. at this hour? He always goes on and on. "What is it?"

"We just got a call from San Jose."

"Wonderful."

"Two trucks from the Graure Art Exhibit arrived about 0200 hours and something was missing, Lieutenant." T.J. Billings paused. T.J. loved these pauses. When he knew something and no else did. He waited, listening to the silence on the other end of his telephone line... Finally, he gave in, "You want a hint Lieutenant."

"T.J., do you want me to guess for Christ's sake?"

"Sorry, Lieutenant. Factually, I have to tell you I don't know much about art..."

"Broaden your horizons. Take night classes, T.J. Get on with it."

"Yes Sir. Yes Sir. Seems someone made off with some sculptured statue."

"Does some sculptured statue have a name?"

There was a rustling of papers. "Yes, Sir. Yes it does."

"And?"

"Sir?"

Hourigan didn't know if T.J. was ripped or had been absconded my aliens... the minute and a half of silence made him shout.

"Jesus, Eiaine and Joseph, T.J. what is the name of the statue?"

"Alan Muniz."

"Alan Muniz? ... T.J., Alan Muniz is a sculptor. Not a sculpture."

"Thank you, Sir."

Slowly, word by word, Hourigan spoke into the phone. "Help me here Billings. What is the ---?"

And with no further prompting, Billings offered. "Sir, seems someone made off with Alan Muniz's 'Flying Porpoise'."

Inside the Sleeping Lady, Lt. Hourigan spun and turned on the light above the chart table. "Hold it." He grabbed a felt pen and scribbled 'Flying Porpoise' on a sheet of graph paper. "Go ahead. Give me the details."

"Everything's fuzzy, Lieutenant. It seems that the truck convoy left San Francisco last night at 2000 hours. When it arrived in San Jose the porpoise was missing. They're saying it was stolen on our end."

"What was the name of that exhibit?"

"Graure."

"That's down at the Golden Gateway Plaza?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Find out who was in charge. Get the name of the moving company and the security force and lists of their personnel. I'll be there in forty minutes."

"I'm off at 0500, Lieutenant."

"Not anymore, T.J."

Hourigan flicked down the switch. The 'Flying Porpoise', he thought as he put a pan of water on the butane stove. Someone has balls. With a cup of instant coffee, he returned to the chart table and turned the graph paper side ways. In even columns he wrote:

I. Place	II. Object (s)	III. Destination
a. Graure Exhibit	a. 'Flying Porpoise'	a. suspects
b. dest. L.A	b. anything else	b. thief/gang
c. docent/movers/ security firm	c. current value	c. who would buy?
d. time frame		
e. witness (s)		

Hourigan looked at his notes for several moments. All questions, he thought. He combed his blond hair with his fingers as brown eyes traveled up and down the list. There is always a motive. Who has the most to gain? Who would buy it? Ha, Hourigan smiled, grabbed the microphone and called the ship-to-shore operator. At the bottom of his list in big capital letters he wrote THE CURSE OF THE 'FLYING PORPOISE'.

III

Muniz paced around his kitchen. His Eden. If I call Andrea without the statue.... Self pity is for fools. Think. What has Gallagher done with my statue? Mechanically, Muniz walked to the stainless steel cooking complex in the middle of what used to be his paradise. He looked around the room with pride and remembered. "What can you do with this?" Muniz had asked the interior decorator as they examined the kitchen of his new home.

"This?" The decorator gave a hopeless shrug. "You have money? Lots of money?"

Muniz nodded.

The decorator's eyed widened. "What do you want?"

"The latest in everything. I am a chef. This..." Muniz made a grand gesture "is where I will create."

Walls were demolished and replaced by four large French windows. A skylight dominated the ceiling. The ten-by-twelve kitchen had become a twenty-by-twenty masterpiece.

An island housed a nine burner range, grill, three sinks, and a 2x4 foot chopping block made of hand inlaid teak. On a wall near the island were two industrial ovens. Above them were a convection oven and a microwave,

From the ceiling hung copper daisy wheels, and pots, pans, skillets of every size and description dangled on S-hooks from the copper bands.

One wall was covered with spices. The condiments were listed alphabetically starting with allspice, almandine, angelica in the top left hand corner and ending with a series of vinegars, white pepper and Worcestershire Sauce in the lower right. Sixteen rows, two hundred and forty-one bottles. Only one spice missing. In a fit of pique, after the accident Alan Muniz Jr. had angrily tossed the bottle of cinnamon into the middle of Lake Merritt.

Muniz stood at the chopping board expertly slicing mushrooms. Where the hell was the statue? What went wrong? The plan was so simple: steal the 'Flying Porpoise', collect the insurance money, and resell the statue to a private collector for five or six million, --- hell it was worth four times that. I could recoup my loses, pay off my debts to Andrea, rebuild my father's estate and never make another bet in my life --- though, there are two horses running tomorrow at Bay Meadows, Muniz thought remembering the racing form tucked in the sofa. Damn it.... If I had a little money. Those two are sure winners.

IV

Inside a cluttered apartment, in the Bernal Heights section of San Francisco, a phone rang. On the second peal an answering machine clicked on and delivered the following message. "You have reached the home of Nels Andersen, art critic for the San Francisco Call Bulletin. If you want to be mentioned in my column or have me review your work please leave a message at the beep. If..."

Lieutenant Hourigan held the phone away from the phone as the message droned on. At last there was beep. Hourigan shouted, "Pick up the phone, Nels. Pick up the damn phone."

Nels Andersen's pale blues eyes blinked open. He picked up the phone. "Nels Andersen."

Hourigan slipped on a black turtle neck as he talked. "Nels, I have a story for you in exchange for your expertise. Can you be in my office in twenty minutes?"

Nels glanced at his clock. "It's four thirty, Lieutenant."

"Nels, someone stole your friend's statue."

V

Inside the Muniz kitchen, the phone rang once and stopped.

"It's for you," Fural rumbled from the front room. "It's THE BOSS. Seems she's wide awake."

Oh shit. Muniz picked up the kitchen extension and shouted at the kitchen door. "You can hang up, Francis."

"Ms. Convee?" Fural pleaded from the living room extension.

"Hang up, Francis," Andrea Convee said.

Andrea's voice poured like lava over the lip of Muniz's memories. After the accident, life wasn't worth living. I was suicidal. I wasn't even planning to attend the Lung Association Ball. His mind reeled. The orchestra had taken an intermission. An old college acquaintance had insisted on introductions.

"Andrea Convee," Eugene Berman had said. "I would like you to meet, Alan Muniz Jr."

The introduction had taken seconds. The memories would last forever. Andrea was in a blue-black gown. Tall, lean, naturally blond, with thin lips and perkish breasts. Her left eye, a shade bluer than the right.

"Do you like to travel, Mr. Muniz?" Andrea had tempted.

"ALAN, are you listening to me?"

"Yes --- Yes of course." Muniz's mind jumped back to the present.

"Andy, it's so nice to hear your voice."

"This is a business call, Alan. Do you have the statue?"

A stab of panic shot through Muniz's chest. He raced to the kitchen door with the phone and peered into the front room. It was empty.

"Of course, Andy...Ms. Convee. It's on the table, I'm looking at it now."

"I would be most happy to take it off your hands, Mr. Muniz."

"No, no, I can't afford your sales commission." Muniz tried to laugh, but it stayed trapped in his esophagus. "I've already got a buyer. You'll have your money ---"

"Alan, this is not a personal loan. Other people are involved."

"And they will have their money in three days."

"Exactly what we wanted to hear, Alan."

Alan Muniz Jr. couldn't resist the temptation. "Andrea --- Ms. Convee now that my debt is about to be paid... could you... would your friends mind extending me a little more credit?"

"Certainly, Alan, how can we help?"

"Can I put ten... no make it twenty... thousand on Bon Homme in the first and twenty thousand on Très Éléant in the fifth tomorrow at Bay Meadows?"

"Memories of cooking school in Paris?"

"Other than the times with you...those were the happiest moments in my life."

"I'll place the bets. But, I suggest you stop living in the past, Alan. You'll never be a chef again."

"We eatin' soon?" Fural yelled from the doorway, as Muniz laid down the phone.

"Eggs Benedict," Muniz set six strips of Canadian bacon across the grill.

"Good. I like mine scrambled."

"Dear God."

*** * ***

Andrea Convee smiled into the concave mirror of her dressing table. Dear, dear, Alan, how little you know, she thought, counting the strokes as she brushed her hair. Your wealth and weakness was my entrance to the inner-circle. I prey on phobias and infirmity. And Ramone Cosette, lover of darkness, you were the catalyst. Die you decrepit old man, Andrea leered into the mirror. Life is not a cave. There is a world beyond Suite 2444. You would cringe in this place. Andrea smiled evilly at the stage lights that encircled her dressing room mirror. Photophobics despise the light. You would have been the perfect bat, Ramone. Your life would have been much happier had you lived in eternal gloom. Light is your enemy. You hate the light, Ramone, almost as much as you despise women.

Andrea leaned forward and applied a thin line of violet eye shadow above a cold blue eye. Women have no place within the circle, do they, Ramone. But you forget Gabriel Magliona, 'The Bitch.' She led wisely for

thirty-seven years upon her husband's death. And now it is time for new blood, new vision and a feminine view for profit.

Andrea applied blush to one cheek; then the other. I have discovered new sources of revenue. I have expanded our markets and customer base. So die old man. Make way for the young. Make way for me. The 'Porpoise' is mine!

Andrea slipped a silk kimono over her naked shoulders and snapped off the lights. Make way, Ramone.

VI

Nels Andersen crammed his bulk into a swivel chair and took a look around Lieutenant Hourigan's office. Every nook and cranny of the room held a model ship: the majority was Clipper ships. Lieutenant Hourigan hurried into his office. "Sorry, I'm late." He pulled up a chair across from Nels, took out a pen, a note pad and went to work.

"Nels, tell me everything you know about the artist. And as much as you can about the curse of the 'Flying Porpoise'."

"You won't laugh?" Nels' blue eyes were deadly serious. Hourigan was puzzled. "People have a tendency to laugh when told of the curse and the demise of Mr. Alan Muniz Sr. He and I were good friends, Lieutenant."

"I won't laugh," Hourigan promised. He waited as Nels collected his thoughts. He was well aware of Nels Andersen's love of the English language. Each word would be carefully chosen. Contractions would be used only as a last resort. As Nels began, Hourigan took notes.

"It was dreadful. You see, the 'Flying Porpoise' was actually a model for a much larger piece. Alan Muniz had been commissioned by the Walker Aquarium to create a sculpture for their new facility. He selected a two thousand pound piece of marble he found near Taos, New Mexico. Regrettably, when it arrived in San Francisco, he insisted on directing the placement of the stone. His studio had a removable skylight. Evidently, the crane operator pulled the wrong lever as the slab was being lowered. When the dust settled, there was nothing left of Alan or the marble slab... All that remained was the model. Now known as the 'Flying Porpoise'."

Hourigan's eyes watered. Nels nodded his appreciation. Hourigan bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

"Your orders, Sir." Patrolwoman Carol Wisely scurried into the office carrying a tray on her shoulder, waitress style. She set it down between the two men, placed a cup of tea in front of Nels and shoved a cup of coffee at Lieutenant Hourigan. "The kitchen will be closing shortly." She snapped two napkins professionally and placed them next to the cups. "Would you like anything else, Sir?"

Hourigan sighed. "That will be all, Officer Wisely."

Wisely came to attention and gave Hourigan a snappy salute. "Yes, Sir." She tucked the tray under her arm, did a smart about-face and with a "Hup, two, three, four..." marched out of the office.

Hourigan grimaced and returned to business. "Where were we?"

"Alan's death. Most tragic indeed. The statue has carried a stigma ever since. Of course there was a fire when it went on exhibit in Chicago. And the recent explosion at the museum in Tacoma, Washington. Coincidences actually. Just because an airplane ran out of fuel... Lieutenant, do you believe in curses?"

VII

I awoke in the belfry of Big Ben. It was exactly 37 o'clock. The DONG, THONG, DONG, THONG, pealed through my brain. DONG, THONG. No phone, I begged. Pleasssse phone. I reached out desperately, seized the receiver and shoved the base of the phone off the night table. It KLUNKED to the floor.

"WE WON. We won." The entire population of earth screamed on the other end of the line. "Give me a four, give me a nine, a twenty-three, a thirty-seven, a seven and a forty," the whole world chanted. "Get the stub, Bub. We won! Check the paper. Hurray, hurray today's our day."

"Rah." I hung up. The voice was vaguely familiar, but too much of a cheerful earful this early in the morning. My left eyelid opened. My right refused. Cyclops arose. I shouldn't have bothered. I felt awful. I was amazed that I could feel as bad as I did and still be alive. The entire Nazi Army had done the goose step over every muscle in my body. My mouth felt like an old sock hamper. My breath could have carved a hole in lead. The rest of me was an old jock-strap, no elasticity, limp, sagging with the laws of gravity.

I rolled off the bed and got undressed. There was something wrong about the phone call, but Mush for Brains couldn't figure it out. A team of wine stomping peasants were chanting the chorus from Aida and vigorously crushing the gray matter inside my skull.

In front of the bathroom mirror, I peeled my right eyelid open. It wasn't an encouraging reflection. In fact, it was depressing. My hazel eyes had turned to rust. My eyes were so red I seriously considered covering them with bandages. My crow's feet had become eagle talons. One hundred a sixty-five

pounds of fairly well toned flesh had become flabby lard, hanging from rubber band bones. I fell into the shower, flipped the dial to scald, closed my eyes and sank slowly down the tiled wall toward the drain.

VIII

Nels Andersen put down his cup of tea and dabbed the napkin around his mouth. "Mr. Muniz has one son, Lieutenant. And frankly, Alan Muniz Jr. is a pompous ass. Though I must admit...at one time he was and extraordinary chef."

Hourigan looked up from his notes. "Drugs?"

"No, anosmia."

"You mean amnesia."

"No, I mean anosmia - a.n.o.s.m.i.a. The loss of sense of smell."

Hourigan jotted anosmia on his note pad and motioned Nels to continue.

"Alan Muniz Junior was injured by an automobile. His head struck the pavement." Nels hesitated and waited for Hourigan's full attention. "You cannot cook, Lieutenant, if you cannot smell."

Hourigan flipped a page of his note pad. "Nels, you're the expert. Can you think of anyone who might want the 'Flying Porpoise'?"

"Anyone?" Nels chuckled and clasped his beefy fingers across his beefy belly. "Two, maybe three hundred people come immediately to mind.... including myself, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Hourigan laughed. Nels Andersen didn't. He rose from his chair, depressed the creases in his dark blue suit and turned. "If there is nothing more, I have a story to write. And I would like to call a colleague at Channel Eleven."

IX

The shower helped, though I was certain some mad scientist had implanted a circular saw blade deep inside my head. As I moved, minute teeth broke off lodging in different portions of my cerebral cortex. Any movement caused excruciating pain. I eyed my bic razor carefully and began to shave. What usually took fifteen minutes took about an hour and a half.

In my 'good luck' pair of red Jockey shorts, I stumbled downstairs into the kitchen. The sudden blast of sunlight repelled me. We had no curtains. I shielded my eyes like Count Dracula when he lifts the lid of his coffin at the wrong time.

Booong, Thooong again. Had an hour passed? Big Ben chimed again. I covered my ears and picked up the kitchen phone.

"Peter we've won, congratulations. Good ol' sixteen, twenty-two, six, eleven, nine and forty-nine. I had a feeling, didn't you?"

"Who is this?"

"Theresa, from your divorce party," said Theresa from my divorce party. "Paris here I come. Get the ticket. Let's have another party. Gotta go. Love you. I love everyone. See you later. Hip, hip hooray." She was gone.

Something bothered me about these calls. I scratched my head. An error, pain. George was standing or sitting, I couldn't tell which, on our kitchen table. A large piece of binder paper hung from his nose. My name was scribbled on the front. I smirked. From the Hieroglyphics I knew Jerry wasn't in very good condition either.

Dear Roomie,

Sorry, early morning emergency call from the office! On Sunday, can you believe it? Had to fly to Seattle. Yuck! Should be back by midweek??? Did someone throw a dance contest in my mouth last night? Feel terrible. How about you?? Thanks for all your help when the poo hit the blades. Sorry about the sucker punch. But all in all - Had a good time last night. You???

Jer.

P.S. Good luck in the golf tourney today. Keep your head down.

P.P.S. Take good care of 'George.' Nice name. Nice rock.

P.P.P.S. etc. Did you find the Lotto tickets?

Like a complete ass, I went back upstairs and spent five minutes tearing through my clothes looking for the damn ticket stubs. Being an instant millionaire appealed to me. Though I didn't leap up and click my heels, I did try to figure out my share of the \$10,000,000 Jack Pot. Of course, the analytical side of my brain was on strike.

Back in the kitchen, still semi-conscious, I opened the 'old team's' refrigerator, my kingdom for something cold with lots of bubbles. One look and I knew how Mother Hubbard must have felt when she looked in her cupboard. There was nothing there except two cubes of butter, a box of Bisquick, an empty can of V-8 Juice, a dented can of lima beans and a rancid smell coming from the vegetable bin. I didn't open it.

Taped to the second shelf was another note with a drawing of a big ugly face, beady-eyed and a long tongue hanging out of a large mouth. A balloon caption read, "Feed me! Feed me!" Signed Your Refrigerator. My roomie liked notes. He liked P.S's too. This P.S. asked, are we rich yet? Stapled to the note was thirty dollars saying, "Spend me, Spend me." Alice in Wonderland should be so lucky.

The California lottery continued to blink on and off in the greedy section my brain. I went outside to retrieve the Sunday paper. The lottery numbers are printed on the bottom left hand corner of the second page.

I crossed the lawn and stared down at Dagwood and Blondie, Peanuts and Beetle Bailey. The paper rested on the trunk of our acacia. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't figure out a way to avoid bending over. I decided to suffer the pain for the poor souls in purgatory. Sister Eiaine Michael Marie would have been proud. I genuflected. A buzz saw went off in my head. Pain.

The phone THONGED as I returned into the kitchen. The decibels were lower. I was going to survive. The golf tournament was only two hours away. I picked up the phone.

"Hello."

"Peter, what's the longest river in Africa?"

"The Nile. Hi, Telly?"

"Woody Woodpecker was created by Walter Lantz. Which two men created Superman?"

"Jerry Siegel and Joseph Shuster."

"Perfect. Now the hard one. How are you and I going to spend our share of ten million dollars?"

Now here was a great guy. A lover of life. A wit. One of my best friends.

"Peter, are you okay?"

I looked at my blurred reflection in the chrome griddle on the stove. "I have a brain tumor and elephantiasis," I gagged over the phone.

"Terrific. Peter, did you check the paper? We won!"

Telly wasn't much on sympathy.

"We're rich, Peter. We can retire. I picked half of those numbers. I've that S.T.P. or something. Eight, twenty-one, forty-one, forty-seven, that's cause of how old I am, two and three. Boy, I had a feeling about this one."

Suddenly, I was feeling much better. The headlines didn't even register. They should have. I flipped to the second page. Sure enough, right there at the bottom of the page were the winning numbers.

"Telly, they're right here!" I yelled. "Twenty-six, fifteen, forty-four, one, thirty...." At thirty-three the light bulb went off. "Telly those aren't our numbers."

"They aren't? Oops, guess we didn't win." He started to laugh.

Here was one of my best friends. A great guy, a lover of life, who'd just become a complete jack ass. I was befuddled, but not that befuddled.

"It was Jerry. Wasn't it?"

Telly roared, "Yep, ol' Jer. put us all up to it. 'Member when he left the party to validate the ticket? Well, he asked the bartender to turn on the TV so he could watch the numbers being drawn. He already knew we'd lost. He put your phone number on all our stubs and told us to call you first thing this morning. That Jerry is a real kick in the ass."

I gave phone the finger and decided to give the 'kick in the ass,' a kick in the nuts.

"Did anyone else call you, Peter?"

I extended my finger to the ceiling.

"This one was a classic, right?"

I hung up.

Over a pot of coffee, I plotted revenge. Telly I could always embarrass at Trivial Pursuit or Jeopardy. He loved them and so did I. Jerry was another matter. I would have to plan something evil. Subtle. A waterbed full of Piranha. He didn't have a waterbed. I'd give all his clothes to Good Will. The

way he dressed, they wouldn't take them. He was going to be gone for several days. Ample time to plot revenge. Or so I thought.

For several minutes, I rehearsed a dialogue for the next person that dared to call. I would read off all winning numbers, right from the paper and say that Jerry had mysteriously disappeared with the winning ticket. It wouldn't take a course from the Julliard School of Acting to create a lot of doubt and suspicion among our friends. I glared at the phone. Ring damn it. Ring.... It rang. I smiled and lifted up the receiver.

"Good morning," I said innocently.

"Hello, Peter, this is Mia. I hope I didn't waken you."

Mia, too? Why? I pictured her snapping pictures. Her smile. Her incredible eyes. How could she? I couldn't believe it. But now I was really incensed.

"Mia. How are you? This is a perfect time to call. I was just looking at the lottery numbers. Good old Twenty-six, fifteen, forty-four..."

"Come off it, Peter!" Her voice was shrill and cold. "I just called to warn you about Jerry's stupid joke. I didn't think it was funny. I don't think anything he does is funny. But, if Jerry's your hero and you want to play court jester ... fine with me."

My mind raced. You complete and utter Jackass. Say something. Anything. Ask her to coffee, lunch, dinner, Tahiti.

"Mia, I'm sorry..."

The line went dead in my hand.

"Jerry, you son-of-a-bitch," I yelled. I shook the receiver toward the ceiling. "I've lost Mia!"

I'd never really had Mia, but the temper tantrum made me feel better. I poured myself another cup of coffee. It was terrible, but my brain was coming back into focus. I felt vindictive. I had a vendetta. Somehow, someway I was going to get back at Jerry. A warm, sinister feeling ran through my veins. I felt better. Much better. I shouldn't have.

X

Officer Thomas Joseph 'T.J.' Billings was a good cop but a better actor. Feigning utter exhaustion T.J. dragged himself into Hourigan's office holding a single piece of paper in each hand. He acted as if each sheet weighed as much as a corner stone for the Great Pyramid. He flopped one on Hourigan's desk. "This is a list of all the art exhibit personnel. This..." he stacked the second folder on top of the first, "is a list of the movers and the duty roster from the Donaldson Security Company. If that's it, I liked to go home and go to bed."

"Thanks T.J." Hourigan waved him away.

Billings almost made it to the door.

"Get some rest, T.J. You look tired. Why get involved in a multi-million dollar theft. What cop would want a shot at cracking this one? Might even be a promotion."

T. J. came to a halt at the door. "I think I caught a second wind."

"Good." Hourigan joined him. "Call for a black and white. Get Evans for a back up. We're going to make a house call."

"Anything else?"

Hourigan pointed into the outer office at Patrolwoman Carol Wisely. "Yeah, bring Wisely."

"The Shark?"

"She's a cop, isn't she?"

XI

SUITE 2444

A single votive candle flickered on top of the mahogany table. "I am deeply disturbed," Ramone Cosette's voiced rasped in the darkness. "Miss Convee has accepted another wager on behalf of her long nosed lover."

"Former, lover." Alberto Sinorae said.

"Ramone," Mikeal Glazunov spoke gently. "In Miss Convee's defense, the first stage is accomplished. The 'Flying Porpoise' is ready for the bidding."

"That damned thing is cursed.... Another wager should not have been accepted until the matter at hand has been resolved."

"Ah, ha. Mister Muniz bets again." Alberto Sinorae's laughter echoed through the suite. "He so seldom wins."

"Alberto." Cosette's finger slipped into the light. "He loses with our money."

Alberto Sinorae rose from his chair. "One way or another, Miss Convee will pay her debt. On this you have my word."

XII

With a cup of coffee, I sat down at the kitchen table next to George. I looked across the garden to the golf course. Three men were putting out on the 17th green. The kitchen clock read 8:35. I wiped my eyes. If these guys were on the 17th hole, they must have started yesterday. There's no way to discuss the sanity of golfers. We aren't.

The Jumble is the first thing I attack in the newspaper, even if my mind is already in that state. I peeled out the comic section, placed the bulk of the paper on the table and opened to the Jumble. The first three were easy, PLIHAC had me stumped. My eyes wandered around, seeking inspiration. The front page of the paper was resting next to George. Something caught my attention. There was a familiar figure on the front page. Very familiar. A tidal wave of foreboding surged across my brain. The Jumble dropped to the floor. I grabbed the front page with both hands. It was George!

My hands had Saint Vitus' Dance. I'd perform no open heart surgery today. I looked at the rock and back at the photo on the front page. My mind did a somersault. The veins in my head puckered. The picture gave George more definition. There were subtle eyes and a hint of a mouth. Looking carefully at the statue, they leaped out at me. The protrusion on the side wasn't a nose. It was a dorsal fin. George wasn't a rock. George was a porpoise, a famous porpoise. Flipper paled in comparison. Flipper was a lightweight. George was a heavyweight. I was an idiot.

The paper flapped in my hands. The headline went in and out of focus. I needed another shower. Perspiration dribbled off my forehead. My heart revved. My first major heart attack was moments away.

"Steady. Calm down. Zen Yourself," I said aloud. I took a deep breath, then another. I tried to sip the coffee. I missed my lips. The coffee splattered down my chest and dripped under the elastic band of my favorite, red pair of Jockey shorts. I blotted my crotch with the funny paper and propped the front page on the table against George. I figured that if I didn't have to hold it, the print would stop moving. It didn't.

The morning was not going well. All I wanted to do was play golf. Good golf. In retrospect, Jerry's practical joke with the Lotto was kind of funny. The headlines were not!

I took another deep breath. I tried to hold the paper. My fingers, hands, and arms were not accepting any neuron commands. Shaking, I read the byline under the photo of the ‘Flying Porpoise’.

**‘FLYING PORPOISE’ THEFT SHOCKS ART
WORLD**

by Nels Andersen

Last night, muscular thieves with an eye for art rocked the art world by stealing the ‘Flying Porpoise’, a world-renowned sculpture by deceased artist Alan Muniz. The ‘Flying Porpoise’, a five-year project valued in the many millions, is three feet high and weighs over two hundred pounds. The ‘Flying Porpoise’ had been loaned to the Graure exhibition by the late artist’s son, Alan Muniz Jr.

Around ten o'clock last evening, as the exhibit was being moved to a new site, a gang of thieves, in a well executed raid, diverted the guards and docents, making off in the darkness with this masterpiece.

Ten o'clock? Hell, it was after midnight. Raid? Gang? It must have taken us forty minutes to carry the damn thing two blocks. Without the help of the Golden Gateway guard it would have taken us an hour. I was not feeling well. Nausea set in. I read on.

Dear Reader, it is a peculiar phenomenon of this generation that we tend to praise the daring and ingenuity of thieves. But weigh their five minute exploit against the years of work necessary to create such a work of art. Consider the genius of Alan Muniz and the generosity of his estate. For anyone to deprive the

rightful heirs, the people of San Francisco and art lovers the world over of any creation, is despicable.

It is obvious that a work of this notoriety precludes its sale to another legitimate house of art. The 'Flying Porpoise' is, most probably, destined for a private collection of some depraved individual.

Perhaps it will be held for ransom. Who knows what thoughts trickle through the crazed minds of these thieves?

When these blots on society are apprehended, they should not be idolized or pampered, but rather, prosecuted with a vengeance, to the fullest extent of the law, placed behind bars with other hardened criminals where they can spend time musing on the seriousness of their crime.

As of this writing, no witnesses have come forward. The San Francisco Police Department is diligently making inquiries and has assured this reporter that they will not rest until the perpetrators of this heinous crime are behind bars.

If you have any information that would facilitate the solution of this crime please call this reporter or Lieutenant Richard Hourigan at the San Francisco Police Department.

Witnesses! I looked at George. We may as well have stolen you on national television during the half time at the Super Bowl. The only people the police could possibly find that might connect us to the crime, would be the Golden Gateway guard, the three or four hundred people leaving the Magnolia Theater, the fifty or sixty people at Bender's or any one of the two hundred people that might have walked past George as he sat in the back seat of Del Rado on Irving Street.

Stay calm, no one pays attention these days, I told myself. No one would remember? Nobody wants to get involved. "BULL," I shouted through the condo. "WE ARE DEAD. Jerry? Where are you?"

"JERRY!" I sighed with relief. Of course. I slapped the table with the palm of my hand. It was Jerry all the time. I roared aloud. Ha, ha, ha, ha. This was just

another practical joke. Good old Jer. Ha, ha, ha... This was a phony paper I was reading... Jerry you old son of a gun. I flicked the paper with my forefinger. --- What a crazy guy.

Now it all makes sense. Jerry's upstairs in bed, sleeping off a hangover. What a joke, I laughed. Jerry had taken a picture of George... and gone somewhere at three in the morning... and gotten a phony Sunday paper printed... and wrote this phony article and put it in this phony paper... on the phony front page and... AHAAAA shit! I threw the paper across the table. Damn it. Reality slammed home. This wasn't a phony paper. This was no joke. I'm going to prison! I was scared. I couldn't survive a life behind bars. I'm a nice guy. I do my job. I play golf. People like me. I like people. My self image didn't include being a felon, or a life in prison with hardened criminals. I knew what that meant. I've read enough books. "Hardened" had more than one connotation for those of us in the Big House. The Big Guys in the big house take advantage of you. I'd be new meat. Why me? It had been Jerry's idea from the outset. Jerry in the pen? Ha, he'd cause a riot, curly black locks and little angel face. The big guys would ---

There were two sudden POPS on the roof of the condo. Then a CRACK against my kitchen wall. The room reverberated. THE POLICE! They were shooting at Me! I dove under the table. Aren't they supposed to give you a warning? Come out with your hands up? Something? Anything?

The shooting stopped. I waited for the roar of the bull-horn to give myself up. Silence. I bellied along the floor on my elbows to the wall. Flush against the wall, I moved like a spider up to the bottom pane of the window. I shot my head up and back down. I'd expected to see an army or, at least a well armed S.W.A.T. team. I hadn't seen a damn thing. Easing up again, I peeked through the lowest

pane of the kitchen window. A head, with a 49er cap on it, was leaning over the fence from the golf course.

"Yo, anyone home?" The head in the cap yelled.

My left eye scanned our yard. There was no one else. I stood up with a huge sigh.

"Hi there pal, will you give me a hand?" 49er cap pointed to a bright orange golf ball resting in the middle of our tiny lawn. I almost refused. Orange balls are tacky.

I opened the Dutch door and bent down to pick up the ball. There was almost no pain. Amazing what guilt and a blast of adrenalin can do to your constitution.

"I hope I didn't interrupt anything, pal." He grinned, pointing to my Jockey shorts. "Lost four balls already, can't afford any more."

"Don't take up archery." I tossed him the ball.

"Sorry pal." 49er cap pointed behind me. "I think your dog's getting into your breakfast."

I turned toward the house. George was sitting perfectly framed, in our window for God and every neighbor and golfer in the world to see. What little composure I had left, LEFT. I snapped! I became a human projectile.

"Thanks for the ball."

I ran back into the condo and slammed the Dutch door. They didn't shut. The doors took turns banging at different intervals, the top, the bottom, and then the top again. A monster, they clip-clopped behind me.

I tried to pull George off the table. Now that I knew how much he weighed, he was heavier. He wouldn't budge. Inertia prevailed. I glanced out the window.

Another foursome was plodding ominously up the fairway. I flew up the stairs, grabbed my bedspread and raced back to the kitchen window. I tried to

force the bedspread into the gaps along the sill. I'd get one end of the spread in and the other would come out. The foursome drew closer. I was frantic.

I tore into the garage, almost killing myself on Skitter, Jerry's goddamn skateboard. I couldn't find a hammer or tacks. I did find a monkey wrench and two railroad spikes: both were large enough to keep the London Bridge from falling down.

I jumped on a chair and hammered in one corner of my bedspread above the window. I grabbed the other corner, went to the far side of the window and hammered in the other spike, squashing my thumb in the process. It began to throb in time with the ever-increasing beats of my heart.

With the bedspread secured, the kitchen took on the pallor of a confessional. Little beams of light escaped at different angles from around the makeshift curtain. All I needed was a priest. Bless me Father, for I have sinned. I have stolen a work of art and will, most likely, have to spend the rest of my life behind bars as a plaything for the inmates. Will you visit?

I collapsed next to George. Jerry, you son-of-a-bitch, why is this my problem? You're the con-artist. The glib tongue. You could talk your way out of this. This was all just a lark. A joke. Lousy punch line, but a joke. I picked his note from the floor.

Had to fly to Seattle. What flight? Where is he staying? Back midweek??? I'll call his office. Damn, it's Sunday. Mia..., she'd know where he's staying. Fat chance. Mia thinks you're a court jester. You don't even know where she lives. Sunday, it's my golf tournament.

I had to collect myself. I lit cigarette. Today wasn't a good day to quit. Inhaling long and slowly, I rested my hand on the dorsal fin. "George, you can't stay here."

I needed a course of action. The caffeine, nicotine and adrenalin rushes were taking their toll. I fought off an overwhelming urge to abandon George, then tear out the front door and see how fast I could run to Canada --- with a quick stop in Seattle --- to kill Jerry.

Get rational, I reprimanded myself. I made a tall, strong vodka tonic, sat at the table and thought. God only knew when Jerry would be back; I was on my own. George had to be returned, today, now, immediately. I had several options: I could confess and throw myself on the mercy of the court. I could call the police and calmly, rationally, explain the whole episode. It was a lark. A misunderstanding.

I would invite the police over. We'd all enjoy a couple of beers. A few laughs and George would be gone. But, I had this nagging suspicion that George wouldn't be the only thing they'd haul away.

My pending life in prison filled my thoughts. Would I be allowed conjugal visits? Who would I conjugalize with? My conjugalizer and I were divorced. Those guys in the big house wouldn't mind conjugalizing. I'd need protection. I'd make a shiv out of a toothbrush.

Look at the bright side, I told myself. This is the perfect opportunity to learn a foreign language. When you're not dodging other prisoners, maybe you'll have time to improve your putting. Could you bring a putter? What about balls? I like to read. I wondered if there was an opening in the prison library. Very negative thinking, Peter. You're carrying on a complete conversation with yourself. Stop it!

Hell, any reasonable jury would understand. Sure, I had a few minor skirmishes with the law, but any intelligent, sensitive group would understand. I made an error in judgment. I am a responsible, law abiding citizen, a homeowner... well, I was a homeowner until the divorce. I've never been in jail... except the 24 hours with Jerry over the free garbage in the Haight. That's

another story and may tell it some other time. Oh, and 48 hours with the Pomo Indian for being drunk and disorderly in public. I was in the Marine Corps sitting in a San Diego Greyhound Bus Depot..... Oh my God the Marine Corps! The TANK!

It was an old tank, rusty, vintage World War II, maybe Korea. How could I have forgotten the damn tank where I almost got a dishonorable discharge. The tank had been another lark. Another spur of the moment decision. Any attorney would have a field day with the tank debacle. I could hear the District Attorney now. 'Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury. The defendant told us that the theft of the 'Flying Porpoise' was an error in judgment. A lark. Well, it seems that Mr. Peter Tuelly has a long history of errors in judgment --- of larks and misunderstandings...' I could see him brandishing my Marine Corps records in front of a panel of my peers.

Our company had been playing war games for five days in the hills of Camp Pendleton. For five days we ate lukewarm C-rations, a slight improvement over Alpo dog food. But not much. We were ravenous. There was a fast food place named B&B's three hundred yards from the Oceanside Gate. They made delicious, greasy, hamburgers about twice the size of a silver dollar for 15 cents. Bill Moran and I collected money from everyone in our platoon and, at twilight, we hot wired the tank. We rattled twelve miles through the coastal mountains to the Oceanside Gate. We sneaked under the fence past the guards and jogged up to the counter at B&B's.

Two sisters ran the place, big women, Bernice and Bertha. They both wore grease splattered aprons and sweat rimmed chef hats. Bernice was at the

window. "Take your order fellahs?" She grabbed a pad and wet the tip of a pencil stub with her tongue.

"Two hundred orders of French fries."

She didn't even blink. She printed 200 IR. "Bertha," she called over her shoulder. "I need two hundred bags of Irish Roots."

"And five hundred hamburgers." I waited for a reaction. Nothing.

"Bertha," 500 CP she printed. "I need five hundred cow patties." She looked up. "You boys want everything on `em?" We nodded. "Bertha, drag those patties through the garden. --- You boys taking this back to the base?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Bertha, put 'em in a litter bag. This order's walkin'. Somethin' to drink?" We shook our heads no. Her pencil glided down the pad. "That'll be one hundred twenty-five dollars for me and my sister and..." she did some mental calculations, "six percent for the governor. That'll be one hundred thirty-two dollars and fifty cents, fellahs."

A half hour later, we squeezed back under the wire. We never saw the Military Police.

We got seven days in the stockade for stealing a \$12,000,000 piece of public property. During our incarceration, the tank was accidentally used for target practice on the bazooka range. It was completely destroyed. I left the stockade feeling the same way. I was shattered, but remorseful and vowed never to return to jail.

The more I thought about calling the police and having them return the statue to the rightful owners...The rightful owners! The family. I seized the front page and ran my fingers down Nels Andersen's article until I came to: the son of the late artist, Alan Muniz, Jr. How simple. I'd call the generous estate, tell them what happened. Drop off George any where they wanted. After all, this was an

innocent prank. A rock for our garden. We had just a little too much to drink. The Muniz' were reasonable people. They lent priceless sculptures to art exhibits so the entire world could enjoy them. Humanitarians one and all. It was the perfect solution. Why involve police? Why lock me up forever? Mr. Muniz would understand. With any sense of humor at all, he'd probably have a big laugh over what I'd gone through. I could hear him them laughing now. Ha, ha, ha.

Now, how to get in touch? It was Sunday. Hell, if someone had made off with my estate's pricy goods, I'd sure as hell stay home to see what transpired. This was going to be easy. One phone call and my problems were over.

I dialed Information, asking for the Muniz family in San Francisco. Hope above hope they would have a listed number.

"Hum." I heard silence and some deep breathing. "I have an Alan Muniz Jr. but, it's an Oakland number...Alan Muniz Jr. Chef Extraordinaire."

Humble, I thought. "May I have that number please?" The operator hung up. The silence was replaced with the metallic thing that gives you the number. It gave me his number. I started to dial, then had second thoughts. I'd need a speech. A presentation. Something well thought out. Just give him the salient facts, I told myself. Take your time, this is a wonderful, reasonable man. He will love you for your honesty and straightforwardness. Made he's a golfer?

XIII

Francis Fural returned to Alan Muniz Jr's kitchen with the morning paper and a message. "There's a bunch of cops waitin' for you in the living room," Fural grunted.

"Thank you, Francis. What did I tell you?"

Fural glared. "Tell me what?"

"Plan B., plan B., Why else would the police be here already?" Muniz puffed out his chest and headed down the hall.

Francis Fural was confused. He followed Muniz secretly longing for the good old days when he could lay his bald head on a billiard table and make an easy twenty bucks.

Muniz walked into his living room and nodded. He was no longer proud of this room. Compared to the kitchen, the living room would have made a Spartan proud. Almost everything of value had been sold to pay off gambling debts. Only one of a dozen Persian rugs covered the hardwood floor. Gone was a collection of Iron Wood statues from the Tiwae Indians and a Minoan vase from Crete. Gone from the walls were originals by: Jackson Pollock, Pieter Mondrian, Josef Albers, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, George Rouault and two charcoals by his father's close friend, Bernard Buffet. All that remained were bright squares on the faded white walls.

Lieutenant Hourigan made the introductions. The greeting was brief. Hourigan took a chair by the stone fireplace and waited for Muniz to settle in on the sofa. T.J. Billings leaned against the Heighbolt clock fighting to stay awake. Patrolwoman Carol Wisely moved idly about the room. Francis Fural blatantly followed her every movement.

"You are my prime suspect," he began, looking directly at Alan Muniz Jr.

Richard Hourigan had always been interested in law enforcement. Raised in Texas, he considered a career with the Texas Rangers. But, after a tour of duty in Vietnam he was discharged in San Francisco and had fallen in love with 'the City', especially the bay. Using money from the Veteran's Administration, he attended school at San Francisco State College, completing a Masters Degree in Criminology in only four years. His blond hair was short, military style. Dressed

in a grey pinstriped suit, he looked like the head of a large corporation, one who enjoyed watching heads roll. And for an hour and forty-seven minutes Alan Muniz Jr's head did roll. It bobbed up and down and reeled from left to right. The questioning was relentless. The only respite for Muniz was the constant telephone calls of reporters, friends and well-wishers.

"You have the most to gain, Mr. Muniz. Why did you lend the statue to a traveling exhibit? Was the statue insured? How convenient, Mr. Muniz."

Muniz rose from the sofa. "What the hell do you mean by that, Lieutenant?"

Hourigan looked up from his notepad and glared. "Edgy aren't you. I only have a few more questions."

"Good." Muniz tried to win the battle of the glares, lost and fell back onto the sofa. "I'm exhausted. I was up all night."

Next to the grandfather clock, T.J. gave Muniz a sympathetic sigh.

"Up all night?" Hourigan asked. "The porpoise wasn't reported stolen until early this morning."

"I suffer from insomnia, Lieutenant."

"Insomnia and....What's it called?" Hourigan tapped the tip of his nose. "Anosmia. Interesting combination." Muniz sat upright. Hourigan grinned.

"I love my job. I study hard and really do my homework, Mr. Muniz." Hourigan tucked his notepad away. "Don't plan any extended vacations, you will be hearing from me." Hourigan paused at the front door, took a long slow look at Francis Fural and turned to Muniz. "Last question." He pointed to Fural. "Does this thing have a license?" Hourigan, T.J. and Wisely filed out the door.

On the sidewalk, Hourigan rested his elbow on the top of a black and white. "Evans, I want you to set up a twenty-four hour tail on this clown," Hourigan

said to the driver. "Get an unmarked car that looks like an unmarked car. I want Muniz to know we're on his ass. And get a camera. I want to know where he goes, who he sees and who comes to see him. You got it?"

"Yes, Sir."

"T.J., it's library time," Hourigan said. "Go through our records. See what we have on Muniz. Get a financial report --- Go to the I.R.S. if you have to."

Hourigan started toward an unmarked car. "Wisely."

"Yes, Sir?"

"You remember that ape in there?" Hourigan gestured to the Muniz home. Wisely nodded. "Go through our mug shots. I know that animal with the gold tooth from some place."

Hourigan got in the car. Wisely smoothed out her uniform, then hurried to the open window. "Sir? There is something wrong with that house."

Hourigan ignited the engine. "Okay, I'll bite. What's wrong with the house?"

Wisely backed away from the window. "I'm not sure, but the house is wrong."

"That's very helpful, Wisely." Hourigan sped away.

XIV

I took one last look at my speech and dialed the number.

"Hello, Muniz res...resident...home," fumbled an incredibly deep voice. He made Lurch of the Munsters sound like an alto. I tried to remember my speech.

"Hello, is Alan Muniz Jr. there, please?" I sounded like a member of the Vienna's Boys Choir, in comparison.

"Muniz is busy," The 'busy' reverberated for several seconds in my ear. It sounded like he was talking from an echo chamber. A human's voice didn't go that low.

"Please may I speak to him? I'll only take a few seconds of his time. It's regarding the theft of the 'Flying Porpoise'. I really hate to bother him but this is extremely important."

He must have cupped a hand over the phone. His voice was muffled. "Hey, Muniz, another Porpoise call."

For the hundredth time in an hour, I had a sense of deep foreboding. How could there be ANOTHER Porpoise call? I had the Porpoise. Of course, people were calling to offer their condolences. Stay calm, just tell him exactly what happened. I'd really begun talking to myself.

"Hello," he opened impatiently. But, his voice was normal, dignified, reasonable. Here was a man who would understand.

"Yes... er, Mr. Muniz?"

"What?"

"Yes, well, you don't know me." It was a bad start and I knew it. "I hate to bother you but you see, last night a friend of mine and I, well, you see, we were at a party and had a little too much to drink."

"No, I don't see. I really don't have much time. If you know something about the Porpoise, tell me quickly, I am not in the mood for jokes." His voice drifted from the phone. He was going to end the call.

"Oh, no, please don't hang up. I'll be quick. Real quick and fast. You see, actually, we hadn't had a little to drink, we had way too much to drink." I reached for my speech. I needed help. "You see we were walking along and singing and we saw this rock and---"

"ROCK?"

"Yeah, big as a boulder." The paper began to move. I couldn't find my place. "And we thought, wouldn't it look perfect in our garden. Well, it turns out, ha ha, that it's your rock. What I mean is..."

"Rocks in your garden? Mister, I don't know what drugs you're on, but you need help. You've got rocks where your brain should be." Cymbals crashed through my brain as he slammed down the phone.

That was not a happy man. He would love to see me behind bars being violated by my fellow felons. I shelved the family plan. I was back at square one. All I wanted to do was get George back where he belonged. My plans weren't going well.

I fixed another vodka tonic. I was close to dementia. Should I chuck the whole golf tournament? Sit here and get smashed, until the police came for me? Negative thinking is very bad, Peter. Counter productive. Get out of the gloom. Think.

I desperately needed a confidant. Someone who wouldn't talk. Someone who couldn't talk, like a priest. God, if I told a priest, I'd be doing Our Fathers and Hail Eiaines for the rest of my life. Priests can get testy when---

The reporter! My brain was still functioning. Good brain. Nice brain. Reporters are just like priests; they never, ever reveal their sources. They would go to jail first. Why did the "J" word keep popping into my head? The "J" word is worse than the "F" word. I retrieved the scattered paper from the floor. Dialing the number on the front page, I held my finger on the reporter's name.

"Hayloo, San Francisco Call Bulletin and may I heelp you?" Was everyone taking Lily Tomlin lessons?

"Yes, please. May I speak to Nels Andersen?"

"Whooooooooom?" It was the longest one-word question I've ever heard.

"Nels Andersen, he works there, he's a reporter, he's got a story on the front page of today's paper, NELS ANDERSEN." I wanted to ask her if she could read. I didn't.

"Oho, Nelvin Andersen. It's a big day for Nelvin. A woooonderful day for a woooonderful man. A big story for Nelvy. Well, the paper's gone to bed. No one's here right now, but we'll all be here, bright and early, tomorrow. Goodbye." Click.

How can a paper go to bed? Where did the Monday paper come from? Where are you, Nels Andersen? Why was George out there under a hedge? Why did I go to San Francisco? Jerry, our friendship is over. My stream of consciousness had too many tributaries.

Through all the muddled thinking, a plan began to take shape. At last, a plan. A good, solid, logical plan. I worked out the entire scenario. I'd bring George into work tomorrow, phone the reporter. Give him George, and he could be a hero. He'd be famous. Any normal person would jump at the opportunity. Tomorrow night, the whole episode would be history.

More determined, I went upstairs to Jerry's room and, with a certain amount of pleasure, tore off his prized bed spread. He'd won it pitching dimes onto plates at Great America. Lots of people win prizes at Great America, but they all pick stuffed animals, unicorns, elephants. Jerry picked a damned bed spread. It was his pride and joy. It was a hideous thing; dark blue with a large red and gold sequined heart in the middle. Jerry thought the bedspread was très chic. It was très gauche.

I dragged it back down stairs. Some of the sequins fell off. Jerry loved those little bits of glitter. I laughed and gave the bedspread a resounding kick. It was

about time he suffered. I pictured him in Seattle sitting at a bar with some hussy, enjoying a tall scotch and water, not a care in the world.

I wrapped the bedspread, heart side out, around George. I secured it with twine and finished the whole project with three bungee cords. I felt calmer, more confident. All was not lost. Using a piece of clothesline, I made a lasso, pulling it tight. I tied the free end of the rope to the legs of the sofa-bed in the living room. I placed anything soft I could find around the kitchen table, pillows, cushions, even dirty laundry. The kitchen was a shambles.

I surveyed the scene. Even if I got George safely off the table (and that was questionable) how would I get him from the floor into the garage? I needed a crane. Skitter! The skate-board came to me in a flash. I got it and placed it on the floor under the pillows and cushions.

I held George and began tilting the table over with my knees. George started to move. So did my counter-weight, the sofa-bed. It sputtered across the living floor toward the kitchen. George went over the end of the table and disappeared in the laundry with a plop. I grimaced and felt linens.

You can always find a good body and fender man for your car, but I don't care what they say in the ads, you'll never find emergency sculpture repair listed in the Yellow Pages.

George was whole and miraculously, the bulk of him had landed on the cushion on the skateboard. I untied the rope from the leg of the sofa-bed, wrapped it several times around George and the skateboard, then dragged it across the living room carpet. The board groaned. The wheels began to protest, spreading out from beneath the board at obscene angles.

"I'm killing Skitter, Jerry." I managed an evil grin, opening the connecting door to the garage. There was just one teeny, tiny step. Two inches high, tops. The front of the board went over easily. The back came down with a crunch. The back wheels snapped off, rolling away in different directions.

"I'm dismembering Skitter, Jerry." This was fun. I kept pulling. The back axle made a screeeech across the garage floor, leaving indentations in the concrete. I didn't care. Jerry's name was on the lease and his skateboarding days were history. I left George next to the back door of my company's maroon, Chevy Citation. I felt tired but relaxed. With all that had happened, I'd been able to rise to the occasion. I was proud, relieved.

I got dressed and threw my golf clubs onto the back seat of the car. With all the stress and anguish, I wondered if I could possibly shoot another good round of golf. I gave myself a big affirmative. Think positive, everything's under control. George is safe and you have a plan. Tomorrow at this time, this will make a great story over a cocktail. I drove to the golf course humming the Marine Corps Hymn. I should have been humming a funeral dirge.

XV

Walton Taylor, security guard for the Golden Gateway Plaza, flipped the front page of the Sunday paper across the balcony of his apartment. He was stoned. Helped the honkies carry the sucker. Go to the police and the company'll fire my ass.

Female giggles filtered up from the pool five stories below. Taylor rose from a wicker chair and peered over the rail. Two women shoved a chaise lounge into the sunlight.

Cops 'll wanta urine sample. Or a blood test. He shivered. Hate those damn needles.

A woman in a shocking pink bikini spotted Taylor and waved. He waved back. Fresh. Real fresh. Shit. I was high. That won't cut shit. Dudes were

wasted. Dude was talkin' golf. No brother's playing golf 'cept that little kid on the Bob Hope show, Tiger something. Taylor wrapped a bright yellow towel around his waist and walked between the sliding glass doors. Cops don't need me. Cops won't have no trouble nabbin' those peckerwoods.

XVI

Nelvin Andersen paid little attention to the panorama of San Francisco outside his window. He sat at his roll-top desk, hunting and pecking the second front page story of his life: PORPOISE MYSTERY CONTINUES --- It needs something. More flair. This is an opportunity of a life time. Inspiration, he thought. Absently tapping a chubby finger to Beethoven's Octet in E Flat, Nels glanced around the general clutter of his apartment.

Etchings, oils, and water colors lay stacked in a corner waiting to be hung. Ceramics, small marble pieces and a plaster of Paris sculpture gathered dust waiting to be set in place. All were gifts from aspiring artists in appreciation for a review in his column. All except for you, Andersen laughed, idly rubbing his 'gift' from Russell Kyle. A gift he received after an especially unfavorable review of Kyle's work. It was a hand cast in bronze with gnarled fingers and the middle finger extended. Etched in the bass was the inscription: *Nels Andersen, you are not God.* How right you are, Russell. Would God live in a sty like this? I have got to tidy up this place --- one day. Not today, though. Not with my own by-line on the front page. The phone rang.

"Nels Andersen," he shrilled cheerfully. Large as he was, Nels' voice always rose to high pitch when he was excited. And Nels was more than excited. Ecstatic was close.

In his office, Hourigan held the receiver several inches from his ear, prepared for the high pitched greeting. "How are you doing, Nels?"

"Lieutenant, I am in your debt. Thank you so much for the story. The theft is certainly a tragedy, but what an incredible tale to be sure. And we were the first paper to carry it. Did you happen to notice, I made the front page."

Jesus, Hourigan moved the phone further from his ear. "Yes, congrats. Nels, I'm going to need your help on this one."

"Wonderful, Lieutenant. How may I be of assistance?"

"What do you know about Alan Muniz Jr.?"

"As I explained this morning, I knew his father quite well. We were rather close until his death."

"How much do think you the 'Flying Porpoise' is actually worth? I'm getting all kinds of figures."

"I guess it all depends on how badly someone wanted the statue. How much they were willing to pay. Though a similar piece went for over five and half million and that was seven years ago."

"Tell me more about his son. Any reason why he might want to steal his father's statue?"

"He would be stealing from himself, Lieutenant. According to the will the 'Flying Porpoise' and a whimsical piece called Green Barbet Feeding were to remain in the estate for perpetuity."

"What about money?"

"Though his father was an artist, he had a shrewd business mind. Alan Muniz Jr. is a very wealthy man."

Hourigan drew a dollar sign on the pad followed by several question marks. "You're the art expert. This morning I asked you...Nels, I don't know how to put this delicately. But, do you know, can you think of anyone who might be willing to fence the 'Flying Porpoise'?"

Nels rubbed his hands together. "Lieutenant, this is getting exciting. In my profession, I meet all manner of men...and women. Would you mind if I reflected on that question?"

"No, take your time, Nels. How about an hour?" Hourigan laughed.

"Fine. An hour is fine. Incidentally, how is the Sleeping Lady?"

"The brass needs a shine and she needs a new spinnaker, but that's about it. And I wouldn't live anywhere else. Nels, how about coming down for a sail?"

"Just as soon as we crack this case, Lieutenant."

XVII

Terrace Hills is a beautiful golf course, pampered fairways and manicured greens. The fairways are separated by Blue cypress trees and Monterey pines. Three large ponds are connected by a rambling stream and there are enough sand traps to keep any Bedouin happy.

I fixed myself a little traveler vodka tonic and, all things considered, I felt pretty good. I arrived at 12:30 and hit a bucket of practice balls. Between shots I assured myself that the reporter would be a great guy; he'd understand, they always did in the movies. I had a plan. I was the consummate jackass. I took a few putts on the practice green and at ten to one went to the Pro Shop to meet the other members of my foursome.

A 79 yesterday; if I could just stay relaxed, concentrate and play smart golf, I should do great. Zen golf. Become one with the ball. One with the universe. I should have booked passage on the ship of fools.

The golf pro introduced us. The three other fellows already knew each other. "Peter Tuelly, this is Dave Forkel, Bill St. John and his brother Cappy. We were a kaleidoscope in paisley, checks, stripes and flowers, all with uncoordinated colored caps.

We flipped coins to decide how we would tee off. I won the dubious honor of going first. It was the last time I'd have that honor. It's always hardest going first. All eyes are on you. Invariably, you try to impress the other players. But, most of all you don't want to look like a hacker on the first shot. I waited until the previous foursome was well out of my range. Dave looked at me with dismay. "You really think you can hit it that far?"

"I did yesterday," I said in a rather cocky tone. I wish I saved that tone for a better moment. I teed up the ball and went through my mental routine. Swing easy. Left arm straight. Take the club back in one piece. Keep your eye on the ball. I was ready. But just as I addressed the ball, Cappy hit me in the spine with a javelin.

"Well Sarge, what's the bet?" Cappy said behind me.

Oh, God. With the biggest smile I could muster, I turned around. "Are you guys in the service?"

"Nope, we're cops," they laughed in unison.

I turned back to the ball. It was if I was looking through the wrong end of a telescope. The ball got smaller and smaller. A tic developed in my left eye. My hands and arms began to quake. Worst of all, the pain, in my brain, was back.

Any dummy would have known that there were too many things going on in my mind to play a good round of golf. Not this dummy. Even before my first shot, I seriously considered turning around and saying, 'Oops, I just remembered I have to attend a hanging. Mine. And, you know how testy those executioners get when you're late.'--- But, I didn't.

I honestly don't remember ever completely missing a golf ball before. On the first hole I did it twice. One hole and I was six over par.

"I really play better than this," I said sheepishly, to the group as we stood on the second tee.

Their heads went up and down with a condescending, yes, of course you do. Their faces said, oh sure. There was good reason for their doubt.

Just as I was about to tee up my ball, Dave reached into his golf bag and took out a police radio. He turned it on low and stuck it in the slot on his golf cart where you're supposed to put beer. Everyone puts beer there, maybe an occasional cocktail, even a cup of coffee, but, never a radio. Especially a police radio.

"Might as well see if there's any news at the office," Dave said.

"Yeah, always lots of murder and mayhem in Walnut Creek on Sundays," Cappy added.

They all laughed. I didn't. I put four consecutive shots into a pond about the size of a hula-hoop. I'd cleared that pond a hundred times before and I would have done it again. But I kept envisioning the police radio coming on in the middle of my back-swing.

"Hello, Walnut Creek Police? This is the San Francisco Police Department. We have a suspect in the 'Flying Porpoise' theft currently residing in your jurisdiction. The suspect is a male Caucasian, five feet ten inches, one hundred and sixty-five pounds, sandy brown hair and hazel eyes.

The suspect's last known address is 13249 Middlefield Drive. The suspect's name is Peter William Tuelly."

It was easy to picture Cappy going for his gun. Dave going for his handcuffs and Bill sitting on my chest reading me my rights. I could hear the conversation in squad room. 'He put four balls in the drink and we put him in the klink.'" I could see them all getting medals for my arrest. I'd make a hell of a promotion.

I swung and completely missed the ball again.

Cappy walked over and put his arms around my shoulder. "Peter, do you mind if I ask you something?" I shook my head. "Do you really like this game?"

I bristled inside. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the way you play. Have you ever considered taking a lesson? Can I give you a little help? A few suggestions? Maybe a pointer or two."

I knew he had my best interests at heart. There was no sarcasm, only concern in his voice. I couldn't tell him that all I could think about was spending the next twenty years dodging gangsters in some dark cell in San Quentin. For all I knew, with the damn radio on, he might be the one to slap the cuffs on me. And then it hit me! I looked at Kevin.

Five, four, three, two, one, BLAST OFF. Help? Of course, he could help, they all could. Click, snap, bang, my brain was all systems go. Opportunity wasn't knocking, Gabriel was blowing his horn. I'd approached my predicament all wrong. Here I was riding around with three professionals. Three experts in criminology.

Instead of putting me in jail, maybe, just maybe they could keep me out. To say my golf game was disastrous would be looking on the bright side. It was

catastrophic. Forget golf, I told myself, it was time to take a course at Criminal U. and I had three deans of the faculty to choose from.

"Cappy, you're right. How about giving me some help... A few hints."

We rode up to my ball. We didn't have to drive very far. I'd only hit it forty feet. I started my lesson.

"Police life must be very interesting, eh?"

"Routine, mostly. Same thing day in and day out." He watched me closely for form, as I stood over my ball.

Now that I didn't care, I smashed it two hundred yards straight down the fairway.

"Nothing wrong with that one. Nice shot."

"Thanks," I said, getting back into the cart. "Do you ever catch guys who did something they really didn't mean to do, or did, kinda by accident?" Peter, you're as subtle as an A-bomb, I thought.

"Are you kidding? No one ever does anything on purpose. You wouldn't believe the excuses I hear. I clocked this one woman doing eighty in a school zone. It took four black and whites to catch her. She told us that her accelerator was stuck." Cappy hit a five iron; the ball landed on the green two feet from the flag.

"Nice shot," I said. "Right out of golf magazine."

"Thanks. One time," Cappy went on, "we had this guy who stabbed his wife three times. He told us it was an accident. Said he was just trying to carve a roast and she kept jumping in his way. Can you believe it? Hell, if I had my way, there would be a five-year mandatory sentence for anyone who said I didn't mean to, it wasn't my fault, or it was an accident."

I didn't find his unforgiving attitude very encouraging, but school was in session so I flipped a page in my mental notebook and asked all three of my professors. "Suppose a guy phoned you and admitted to some crime and said that he was really sorry. And you could tell from his voice that he was sincere... And let's say he, oh, stole something. Maybe he even has a record, but... he wants to give it back. You know, make amends."

Cappy made a twelve foot putt. I sunk a tap in. We shook on a good hole. But recess was over and I couldn't remember my trend of conversation.

Cappy did. "First thing I'd do is put a lock on him."

"A what?"

"If a thief called me, the first thing I'd do is put a lock on him."

"Same thing I'd do," Dave agreed from the other golf cart.

I looked back and forth between the two men, confused.

"Usually, when criminals get to confessing," Cappy continued, "they get careless. See, for them, the crime is mentally over. So when they make a call from their home or office or some bar they frequent, you put a lock on the call."

"A lock?"

"Yeah, it only takes two buttons and five seconds, then we know exactly where the call originated. Usually, it's easy after that, especially when a lot of 'perps' change their minds about confessing after confessing."

He went on about how useful locks were to the Fire Department and hospitals, in cases of panic or when a child makes a call and doesn't know his own address. I snapped back to my call to the Muniz family, wondering if the

police had put a lock on their phone. I convinced myself that it was too soon for locks, making a mental note to keep all my calls short and to only use public phones in the future. I was learning. No more dumbness.

On the sixteenth tee, Cappy continued the lesson. "The most common mistake is when people change their routine. Behavior alteration we call it."

"You guys remember old Gloom and Doom?" Bill St. John entered the conversation. "Hell of a golfer."

All three men laughed to a private joke. Then Cappy explained. "There was this doctor. A pediatrician. He hated kids and the kids hated him according to his partners. Then he supposedly sends his wife on an extended vacation to Europe, and bam. He's a different man. He's on time for appointments. Bringing flowers to his nurses and candy and toys to the kids. Any cop would have noticed the sudden change. But, six months went by and no one said a thing. Then the wife's father demands an investigation. We found her in a wine vat in Napa."

"We arrested the good doctor on the seventeenth of San Geronimo Golf Course." Dave Forkel intervened, "and man, it was ugly. He was a twenty handicap and shooting the round of his life. He held five of us with a pitching wedge, begging us to just let him finish the round."

By the 18th hole, I received a crash course on the fine art of returning stolen goods without being stupid. On several occasions, I had been tempted to tell them my plight. Fear of the consequences overruled that temptation.

I completely forgot about my golf game, and consequently, I was playing much better.

About eighty yards from the hole on the 18th fairway I hit a perfect sand wedge. The ball went high in the air, over a small but menacing sand trap, hit on the edge of the green, ran toward the flag, hit the stick and went plunk, right into the hole, for an eagle! Everyone cheered.

"Hell, this game's too easy," I said nonchalantly. "Think I'll take up bowling."

"What a shot!" Cappy scratched his head in utter disbelief. "Do you do that often?"

"Are you kidding? That's why I love this game. Golf is my life."

I was just a little amazed myself. I thrust my sand wedge into my bag like a sword. I waited patiently while they finished the hole. Shaking hands all around, I thanked them for the round and politely bowed out of the awards ceremony. My score of one hundred and twenty-six was only going to earn me the Booby Prize. I'd been enough of a booby already the past few days. I needed my rest. I had a big tomorrow, tomorrow.

CHAPTER 4 MONDAY SEPTEMBER 13, 1979

I

Alan Muniz Jr. hadn't slept well. A clan of Neanderthal cave men, each with a variation of Francis Fural's face, had spent most of the night chasing him up a sheer cliff. When he edged his way over the top Lieutenant Detective Hourigan was waiting there with two of his men. Muniz ran to his left smack into the open arms of Andrea Convee. Do you have something for me, Alan?" Muniz spun away and ran to the lip of a cliff. In the ocean far below porpoises frolicked. They were all made of stone.

The day before, as soon as the two police cars pulled away, Muniz drove to San Francisco for a personal inspection of the Golden Gateway Plaza.

"Francis, you remain here." Sit boy. Good beast, Muniz thought. "If I find it, I'll need your help." Just your muscle, not your brain, you genetic reject.

"You ain't gonna find shit."

Thanks for the encouragement, Einstein.

In vain, Muniz combed the entire plaza. By the time he was back home in Oakland, Muniz was convinced that Timothy Gallagher still had the statue and was holding out for money. Maybe his dental work is going to cost more than he planned, Muniz thought, remembering the black toothed grin of Timothy Gallagher. Or, maybe his kid needs an operation. But, how had he pulled off the theft by himself? And where did he hide the statue?

Muniz settled in his favorite kitchen booth, looked out over the bay and popped open an iced bottle of St. Pauli Girl. I put a lot of effort into finding the right candidate for the theft of my dad's masterpiece. Gallagher should have been perfect. He bounced from job to job. He was under paid and over worked. And, like me deeply in debt. With Andrea's approval, Francis Fural

made the verbal contacts and I mailed him a series of crisp new \$100 bills.
Was Gallagher my weak link?

Two minutes later Muniz had Francis phone Gallagher for the third time that day.

"He ain't there." Fural held the phone to his chest. "Wife says he's still in L.A. You wanta leave a message or something?"

Yes Francis, give them our address and phone number. Invite the family over for dessert. "Hang Up."

Muniz snapped out of his reverie with the BONG from the front door chime. For the second morning in a row Lieutenant Hourigan followed Francis Fural into Muniz's living room. This time Hourigan carried the morning paper and a small tan box. This time Muniz was better prepared.

Muniz pointed to the paper. "I didn't know I was on your paper route, Lieutenant."

"Cute, Mr. Muniz very cute. Let's make this brief. If... your father's statue has been stolen..." Hourigan looked at Muniz doubtfully, "Then you might be contacted for ransom. We would like to put a lock on your phone." Hourigan extended the small tan box.

"A lock?"

While Hourigan explained the functions of a locking unit, Muniz flashed to his calls with Convee and Gallagher. I'm the prime suspect; I don't need my phone bugged.

"No thanks."

"Why not? We need your cooperation, Mr. Muniz."

"Call it invasion of privacy. Many important calls come over my line. I don't wish them locked or eavesdropped upon."

I'll bet you don't, Lieutenant Hourigan thought. "You're not being very helpful, Mr. Muniz ---"

"Sorry, Lieutenant."

"But then, you'll collect the insurance money if it's not returned, won't you?"

"I resent your inference and your tone of voice. My privacy is of the utmost importance to me. If my desire for privacy hinders your investigation, I apologize. But it is your job to catch the thieves, not mine."

"Oh, I intend to do just that, Mr. Muniz."

"Then, good day, Lieutenant."

Hourigan made a half turn pretending to exit. "By the way, Mr. Muniz, leave the investigation to the professionals."

"Pardon?"

"Do not," Hourigan threatened, "muck around at the scene of the crime. You may disturb crucial evidence. Or inadvertently leave something that might further implicate you in this crime."

I'm being followed. The bastard's having me followed. "Good-bye, Lieutenant."

"Two more questions before I leave," Hourigan flipped the morning paper to the couch. Hourigan pointed to Fural. "Does it eat much?"

Fural snarled.

"Cute, very cute, Lieutenant."

Hourigan tipped the edge of an imaginary hat. "Second, are you cooking something?"

Muniz nodded.

"It's burning," Hourigan said, closing the front door.

Alan Muniz shoveled the charred lumps of bacon into the garbage disposal. Why do I still bother, he anguished. The phone rang once.

Immediately, Fural bellowed from the front room. "Muniz, it's the boss."

"How's everything going?" Andrea asked cheerfully.

"Fine. Just fine."

"You made a big mistake yesterday, Alan."

Oh, God she knows I'm screwed. Muniz pictured Francis breaking his legs. No insurance, if I'm lucky they'll let me spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair.

"Bon Homme didn't do well and Trés Élégant wasn't. Your debt now stands at \$1,340,000."

"Oh," Muniz sighed in relief.

"But, all will be well by the end of this week --- won't it, Mr. Muniz."

"Absolutely."

"And you've made contact with your buyer?"

"Of course."

There was a click. Muniz stared at the dead phone. He decided not to call back and not to place a bet on a filly named Lady Luck. Hell it was a long shot, running in the sixth race at Bay Meadows the following day. I've got to get to Gallagher before Andrea gets to me. God had she gotten to me. Muniz's mind raced back to their introduction.

"Do you like to travel, Mr. Muniz?" Andrea had smile. Her left eye a shade bluer than her right. Together beckoning. And I'd leapt at the call. Straight into a nether world of hedonism. Lunch in Paris, dinner in London, breakfast in New York. Movie stars, politicians, rock stars and members of the

underworld. Drugs were everywhere. A part of getting up, sleeping and making love. Ah, making love. Spankings, masks, oils and toys. The obscene calls when we were apart. The playful calls to friends while I was inside her. What the hell happened? Where did I go wrong? "Francis, give Gallagher another call."

II

I awoke in a cold sweat. My dreams had been vivid. In the last one, I was being driven through a crowded square tied to the gun turret of a Sherman Tank. We passed a marble fountain. It was George. On a balcony high above stood Jerry. "Give `em hell, Marine," he chanted. I remember being dragged up the steps of a gallows, kicking and screaming. Around me the throng taunted, "He didn't mean to. He didn't mean to."

My executioner was dressed as a clown in a golfer's cap. He looked a lot like Cappy. He brandished a green and white pom-pom at me, yelling, "There are no excuses. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not steal."

"It was an accident. It wasn't my fault," I cried, waving my putter to a jeering crowd.

I didn't need any help from Sigmund Freud to interpret that one. Though, I do have a dream about a duck, a kangaroo and a rocket launching that I could use some help with.

Sunday had been a mess. The lottery `joke.' George. And I'd shot a 126. Shit.

I showered, shaved and gulped when I found out we were still front page news. The Jumble had lost its allure. With a cup of coffee in shaky hand and dread in my heart, I scanned the paper. On the front page was a black-and-white photograph of a distinguished-looking, round-faced man with a well-

manicured white strip of a moustache and a little beret. His arms wrapped completely around George in a loving embrace. I felt like a louse. Under the picture, the caption read: Deceased Artist Alan Muniz and his sculpture, the 'Flying Porpoise'. I read the article.

PORPOISE MYSTERY CONTINUE

by Nelvin Andersen

Mystery continues to shroud the theft of the 'Flying Porpoise'. According to a reliable source in the San Francisco Police Department, though numerous individuals have been questioned "no one is coming up with the right answers."

Well, this reporter has a few questions. The enormity of this crime suggests several things. How many members are there in this Ninja-like gang?

On more than one occasion, the police have insinuated that this rabble executed some sort of diversionary action. But, what sort of action could divert the attention of six armed guards, eight movers and a docent long enough so that a band of thugs could have time to make off with a multi-million dollar, two hundred and fifty pound statue? A nude parade, perhaps?

This Andersen fellow has a sense of humor. A good sign, I thought.

Could there be a traitor in the world of Art? An inside accomplice? And is this a one-time event?

As my readers will recall, over a two year span in the late eighties, a number of countries in Europe were rocked by a series of major art thefts. (continued on back page)

If you'd been at your desk yesterday, you could have had George in your lap right now. I flipped to the back page and continued reading:

Museums, art houses and even private residences were plundered. Sculptures, paintings, jewelry and religious artifacts were taken. Not a temple nor church was sacrosanct.

And even with the cooperation of Scotland Yard, the Prefecture of the Paris Police and Interpol, no person or persons have been arrested. None of the stolen objects has been recovered. Have these slime merely changed locales? Are we to suffer their cancerous wrath? This scum deserves worse than a life behind bars. I would prefer a public pillory, with their arms and head exposed for the entire world to see. Perhaps, we could or should re-institute public flogging.

I knew Alan Muniz well. He was my friend. I watched the metamorphosis as a piece of stone became a work of art. It is impossible for me to divorce myself emotionally from this crime. Admittedly, emotional bias is not the stuff of good, objective reporting. So be it.

Again, if any of my readers has information that would expedite the solution of this crime please call this reporter, or Lieutenant Richard Hourigan of the San Francisco Police Department.

I finished my coffee feeling helpless. Nelvin Andersen didn't sound like a guy who wanted to share my foxhole. I doubted if he even wanted to be in the same army or even on the same side. Of course, he was seeing the incident in the wrong light, from a different angle. Backwards. I could explain what happened calmly and coolly. My conversation with Alan Muniz Jr. had been a bust. Bad choice of a word, I admonished myself. Anyway, for right now, Nelvin Andersen was my only hope. My only plan. Reporters needed the facts. His were distorted.

If we did this as a team, he would be a hero and I could fade into oblivion and work on my golf game. My last shot yesterday was a beaut.

Jerry popped into my mind. The Great Golden Tongue could have made this pitch much better. I was exhausted. He was well rested. Sure as hell he'd gotten more sleep than I had last night. His dreams weren't wrought with impending doom. Knowing Jerry, they were probably all wet ones.

Vengeful, I wanted Jerry to know every facet of the crime that he instigated. I pictured him in some bar, his hands shaking. The ice clattered against his glass. He'd peer over his shoulder fretfully, waiting for the police to burst through the door and slap the cuffs around his wrist. I liked the picture. Though, I had to admit, Jerry was many things, but he was not a coward. If he had any inkling of what was going on he would be here by now.

The drive from Walnut Creek to San Francisco takes forty-five minutes if you leave before 5 a.m. Anything after and you can add an hour and a half to the morning commute. That Monday morning I don't remember when I left the condo or how long the trip took. Other than the two news updates about the 'Flying Porpoise' on the radio, if they announced World War III, I would have missed it.

I do remember lifting, pushing and tugging George into the back seat of my car, and making a donation of what was left of Jerry's skateboard to the Contra Costa Sanitation Department. "Rest in pieces, Skitter."

George looked forlorn, wrapped with bungee cords and an ugly sequined bedspread, sitting up in the back seat. Hell, if I had one more passenger, I could've put a hat on George and would have tried to sneak across the bridge in the car pool lane. I looked into my rear view mirror, "Goodbye, George. Today, it's back home for you, with a great guy named Nelvin Andersen." I was

definitely losing it. Now I was not only talking to myself, a piece of marble had become my confidant.

Stevenson Steel and Oil is not the most popular corporation on the planet, and being a member of its Public Relations Office is not the easiest job. Recruiting on college campuses is a pain. There is always a group of fledgling radicals who feel obliged to moon us and give us the finger.

Our company headquarters tend to average one bomb threat a week. The bomb threats did have their good side. Every other month or so, the alarm would go off to evacuate the building, always on Friday afternoon. I was convinced, along with almost every other employee in the company, that it was an in-house call, someone trying to get an early start on a long weekend. We'd wave goodbyes to each other as we went through Security, relatively certain that the building would still be standing come Monday morning. We had such a scare last Friday afternoon. But, as I drove across the Bay Bridge and looked at the skyline of San Francisco, I saw the outline of the Stevenson Building; it was still there.

Because of the erosion of our public image and the resulting threats on our life, limb, and property, every employee had been issued a little white plastic I.D. card. Each card had your name, employee number, position, and your picture. If your picture did not make you look like you were in a highly advanced stage of alcoholism or under the influence of a major drug, it was thrown away and retaken until you looked like a derelict. Not having your I.D. card was sacrilege. I was driving down the ramp to the company garage when I realized I forgot mine.

For the past fourteen years, I drove my company car into our company garage, parked it in my company parking place. Each day of those fourteen years as I entered into what we at the Company affectionately called the carbon monoxide cavern, I gave a big cordial hello to our company guard, Kevin Stiller.

Kevin was my friend. He loved Johnny Walker Black Label. I always bought him a liter when we got together at company functions. Every Christmas, for fourteen years, I bought him a liter. In fact, I think everyone else in the company did, too. Kevin usually took his vacation right after the Christmas holidays, never returning until mid-January, always looking a bit wasted. Until that moment I figured he loved to ski. Ha, he loved to drink.

The red and white striped barrier arm was down as I pulled up to his guard station. He was dressed as usual. A trendy uniform. Basic green rumple. It went well with his beet red face and brown stubble. He looked like a well fed Leprechaun.

I turned on a smile. Progressed to a beam from a lighthouse smile. Then faded into the 'we are both at war, under-enemy-fire and trapped in a foxhole smile.' And finished with the 'we-are-all-in-this together and we could only survive with mutual trust and mutual respect,' smile. "Good morning, Kevin." I smiled again.

"Morning," he replied blankly.

Fourteen years, gallons of premium scotch, and he acted like he never saw me before in his life. Without my I.D. badge I was nothing. I didn't exist.

"May I help you?"

I smoldered. "Kevin, I don't need this. For God's sake, it's Monday... that's bad enough, give me a break. I'll go and get a temp as soon as I park. Okay?"

He stood there shaking his head back and forth. This was a big decision, but someone had to make it. Two thousand employees, I surely wasn't the first to forget my I.D. card. Two thousand! I paused. My mind did a double-take and started calculating, 2000 employees times 14 years added up to one hell of a lot of

scotch. No wonder he looked so wasted after vacation. He could retire and open his own retail liquor outlet. Right now, he was enjoying a moment of power.

"Oh, oh, Mr. Tuelly, Mr. Tuelly, is that you?"

My window was down, his face a foot from mine. For fourteen years his eyes had gazed into mine. What did he want for identification, a urine sample? Though, if he really wasn't sure who I was, these past few days were having a bigger effect on me than I thought.

He squinted, looking into the back seat.

"Whatcha doing, returning stolen goods?" He pointed to George through my rear window.

"Pardon?" My heart jumped and thumped.

He started laughing. Both of his hands resting on the brass buttons atop his pot belly.

"You wouldn't believe it Mr. Tuelly, now they got us looking for stuff coming into the building. We're supposed to check for typewriters, those table computers and... Hell, one guy took home a Xerox machine, then he tried to sneak it back, said he was trying to fix it. Can you imagine that?"

"Yeah, I can. Try to copy something on half of the machines in this company. Nothing but blurs and blots. But, that's not company property," I flicked my head toward the back seat. "It's a gift for my mother-in-law."

His brow furrowed. His eyes blinked. I'd said the wrong thing. Kevin stepped back cupping his chin.

"I thought you just got divorced." He looked toward the back seat again.

How did he know that? Dumb question, Peter. Kevin Stiller knew everything that transpired in the labyrinth called Stevenson Steel and Oil.

My mind whirled, then stopped. "Had to find some way to thank her for taking so much time out of her life, to point out all my bad traits to my former

wife. It's a big rock to hang around her neck. Just like she'd hung around mine for so many years." I mentally complimented myself for my quick retort.

Kevin relaxed and smiled. "Say, talking about taking things in and out of here, there was this border guard..., you heard this one?"

Someone honked behind me. Saved. Kevin raised the wooden arm and waved me through. That was the sixth time I would have had to listen at that stupid joke.

It took me ten minutes to get a temporary I.D. card. The company would get everything I owned if I ever forgot my card again. An idle threat. My wife already had everything I owned.

Ethel the dump, the sadist who takes the pictures for our company identification cards, waved a long bony finger in my face. "These cards are important, Mr. Tuelly" she drooled. "They are necessary for your safety and the safety of everyone in this building..." Little bits of spittle landed on my temporary card. "And remember, Mr. Tuelly this is valid for ONE day only."

"I understand, Ethel."

Suddenly her face went into a violent contortion. "YOU HAVEN'T LOST YOUR IDENTIFICATION CARD? HAVE YOU?" She shrieked.

"God forbid, Ethel."

"Well now, that's better, Mr. Tuelly." She turned and walked away still talking. "A lost identification card can cause many problems within the company, many problems." Her arms flailing, she opened the door to an adjoining office. "Many serious corporate problems. Very serious problem ---" She slammed the door and disappeared. She had no concept of a serious problem.

"Muniz is in on this," Hourigan said confidently. "But why the hell would he bother? What his motive? His financial report says he's loaded. He lives well. He's basically good looking."

"Too skinny for my taste," Billings laughed from a desk on the other side of Hourigan's office.

"His only problem seems to be his inability to smell. But why would that have --"

"Anosmia, Lieutenant?"

Hourigan stared. "What do you know about anosmia, T.J.?"

"My Uncle has it, Lieutenant. Got it in 'Nam."

"Wounded?"

"Nothing so spectacular. Bar fight. Beer bottle over the head. But it made him weird. With anosmia you can't smell anything."

"That's what I hear. How weird did he get?"

Billings leaned forward, "Smells are funny things, Lieutenant. Usually we take them for granted. but when you ---"

"Jesus, T.J. cut the lecture."

"Only way I know how to tell it."

Resigned Hourigan sat back. "Go ahead."

"Anyway, Uncle Lamar was somethin' else. One of the funniest men I ever met. And that's not just because he was family."

Dear God, give me strength, Hourigan thought.

"Uncle Lamar was always into one thing or another." Billings leaned closer. "And that includes the ladies if you know what I mean."

Why didn't I just stay in Texas?

"Though all the ladies loved him, Uncle Lamar was a confirmed bachelor. But he wasn't a player, nope. He usually found one woman and spent years with her."

Why did I ask for this?

"But after the...er...accident, he got really strange."

At last.

T.J. scratched his side burn, "Did I tell how funny he was? How loyal to his ladies?"

"You told me," Hourigan sighed.

"Uh huh. Well, anyway after the accident Lamar was the moodiest person you ever met. A snake in the grass. He went from woman to woman like a door to door salesman. Except he wasn't selling nothin'. He was just trying to sell himself -- to himself."

"I don't understand?"

"That's the sad part, Lieutenant. This Anosmia thing doesn't just take away your sense of smell. But it raises havoc with your sex drive --- Least it did with Uncle Lamar's."

"T.J., are you saying that Alan Muniz Jr. stole his father's statue because he was having troubles getting a hard-on?"

"Hey, Lieutenant, you'd have to ask a professional about that. I was just telling you about Lamar." T.J. stood. "But you know, Lieutenant," T.J. gave his crotch a flick of his hand. "Doesn't this damn thing lead us into more places than we want to go? Aren't we most the time --- trying to prove something?"

IV

After Ethel's chastisement, I took the elevator to the 11th floor. Sitting at my desk I lit a cigarette. If you had a private office you could smoke. If you wanted to kill yourself that was fine. Room by room, floor by floor, smoking

had been forbidden. I inhaled deeply, knowing that soon smoking would be banned from the private offices too. So what? I wanted to quit anyway.

My office is the same color as Kevin Stiller's uniform, green. "Pale green," (someone had told the higher-ups) "is soothing. The same color they used in mental wards." And at times the analogy was fitting.

During my eight year occupation I added a few personal touches. A piggy-back fern, an avocado plant (I started from a seed) and a ficus benjamina that flourished by my window. One wall was hidden by a book case. There weren't many books; mostly corporate manuals and old copies of Games Magazine and Golf Digest.

I tacked my college diploma, several certificates of achievement, and an old Sports Illustrated, Swim Suit Calendar on the cork bulletin board above my desk. Though I was still on the month of May. Ms. May was incredible.

Other than a dark grey couch, (that I slept on in times of crisis) an incredibly comfortable rolling steno-chair and my desk, the office was fairly lack-luster. But, where Jerry's condo was new, my office was more of a haven -- worn in.

The only disconcerting thing about the office was the pigeons on the outside. God, they're filthy creatures. Who would buy a book called: JONATHAN LIVINGSTON PIGEON? The window ledge is covered with their droppings and Swiss cheese. I like Swiss cheese. For some reason pigeons hate it. They'll eat anything else, lettuce, tomatoes even bologna. But, tons of Swiss cheese gather mold on the building ledges of San Francisco.

Like the streets, eleven stories below, my department was in a high state of activity. We have a good staff. We all get along. I believe most of them would probably visit me in jail. Oops, negative thoughts again. Time to get rolling.

I pondered my plight and my plan. First I had to make contact with Jerry. I hoped that Mia might know where I could get hold of him. Preferably around his neck. Mia knew Jerry better than anyone. They worked together for six years. She would know the hotels and hangouts he frequented in Seattle. Whether she would confide in me after yesterday morning's phone call was another question. Hell, she might not even talk to me.

If I couldn't reach Jerry, I'd try and strike a deal with Nels Andersen. George had to go, now, today. I wasn't planning the invasion of Normandy, but I had to admit it was a pretty flimsy plan.

I called Jerry's office, Mia answered. Her 'hello' alone, caused me to conjure up a few impure thoughts. My 'hello' must have had the opposite effect. Abruptly, she told me she didn't know what he was doing, where he was staying, or when he would be back.

"He doesn't tell you too much, does he?" I teased.

There wasn't a sound on the other end of the line.

"Mia...are you still there?"

She "hurumphed," me.

"Mia, I am really sorry about yesterday... I was hung over...The phone was ringing off the hook...I was tearing the place apart looking for the lottery tickets..."

"I was calling to warn you, Peter." Her voice eased.

"I know that. I feel like an ass. Please accept my apology."

There was a long pause, then a gentle, "Apology...accepted. It was a dirty trick in the first place."

"Jerry's a rat."

"That rat is my co-worker," she said defensively.

"Do you have any idea how I can get hold of him?"

"Honestly, I don't, Peter. He was called out on very short notice. But he should be checking in today or tomorrow. I'll make sure he gives you a ring. Incidentally, I had a great time Saturday night. What did you and Jerry do after you left?"

We went over to Bender's Bar for a final, final. Oh, yes we stole the 'Flying Porpoise'.

"Mia, I'm really sorry we didn't get much of a chance to talk. I'd love to make amends for my behavior yesterday. How about a cocktail or lunch?"

"Today?" she asked expectantly.

Her eagerness caught me off guard. She didn't know, but I really needed someone who wanted me. Her tone was a real ego-booster, and my ego needed boosting.

"Damn, I have a terrible schedule today," I said trying to make the "terrible schedule" sound like, my God, had I even had a sneaking suspicion that you would condescend to have lunch with me I would have canceled a luncheon date with the Pope. Yeah, I was busy. Busy trying to avoid the long arm of the law, busy trying to dump a statue.... What the hell was it worth? Stay focused, Peter.

"Mia, tomorrow is perfect. Is that okay with you? How about one o'clock at Tadich's?"

"One o'clock's fine. If Jerry calls, I'll have him get in touch. See ya tomorrow." She put down the phone but unless my imagination was running wild, I could have sworn she was disappointed that we weren't having lunch today.

I was excited. The clouds were clearing. My new single status was showing promise. If I could avoid attaining criminal status, I was on my way. An afternoon enjoying Mia's Romanesque beauty, intelligence and wit was

exactly what I needed. I pictured her long black hair and black eyes with a fleck of white in each that give her a feline quality. 'Tadich's at one o'clock.' Was that a purr? I think she purred.

I was in dire need of companionship, preferably female and no one ever questioned Mia's gender. No one. Tomorrow at one, the nightmare would be over. Tomorrow at one, I would take my first major step in my new life. Hell, if everything went according to plan with Nels Andersen, I could call back and ask her out to dinner.

V

"I don't have much time, Lieutenant Hourigan," Dr. D'Anne Quinton said politely. "So I will be brief. Anosmia in adults almost always results from a sudden blow to a certain part of the head. The other senses remain in tact. With regards to food et cetera, the patient is left with a diminished sense of taste, a minor facility at best. Taste buds can decipher salt, bitter, sour and sweet. A rather limited universe, Lieutenant. Odors trigger memories, Christmas trees, summer cabins, perfume, and campfires. And above all, pheromones ---

"Pheromones?"

"Sexual secretions that we all emit. Males from their groin, armpits and nipples. Women from the nape of their neck, nipples and the back of their legs, knees, and groin. The human erogenous zones, Lieutenant."

Hourigan leaned forward. "Uh huh. Could the loss of smell cause anyone to steal?"

"Steal, Lieutenant?... Given certain circumstances --- physiological make up, age, sex, occupation et cetera. The loss of smell could cause someone to kill."

VI

I snuck out of my office around 11:30 heading for a public phone booth. I'd never paid attention before, but the majority of them have been removed. I wanted a booth with doors, windows and privacy. There wasn't one. If you have a phone booth, keep it. They are sure to be collector's items. Superman would have a real problem.

The telephone company has gone to great pains to make it a pain to make a private phone call. They've spent millions of dollars placing these little hollow red bubbles as non-strategically as humanly possible. They've hung them to anything they could hang them to. Now when you make a phone call any passerby may listen. If you try to bury your head in the bulb so that no one can eavesdrop, you have to leave your butt sticking out on the street, where anyone can give you a quick goose or steal your wallet. Here I am, condemning theft. Using a public telephone was a nuisance but, for me, a dire necessity.

Yesterday's education on the golf course had been brief but inspirational. No 'locks,' for me. The master criminal didn't make incriminating calls from places where he could be traced and captured. What was I thinking about? Master criminal? Right at this moment any one of the four hundred eyewitnesses could be identifying me. I could be standing in a police lineup in an hour. Get motivated. Get on with it. Get rid of George, Peter.

Next to an alley off of Montgomery Street, I found a little red phone bubble hanging on a wall. It had been beaten to a pulp. Either someone had gotten some very bad news, or they had a vendetta against the phone company.

I could understand that. I have a theory that when the phone company modernized their equipment, they incorporated a special computer program I call GOBBLE. They've programmed GOBBLE to give you a busy signal, no matter what number you dial. Then, after you hang up, GOBBLE tells your pay phone that you have completed your call and that it should swallow your change. The bodies and shells of many pay phones have suffered from this erroneous information. My phone was no exception.

I put in twenty cents, dialed the number of the CALL BULLETIN, got a busy signal, hung up and listened patiently to the clink-clank as the phone devoured my change. Without a blink, I put in two dimes, redialed, certain my call would go through. It did.

"Hayllo, San Francisco CALL BULLETIN, maaay I help you?" She was back.

"Yes, Nels Andersen, please." I remained calm, restrained.

"You mean...."

"Yes, I mean Nelvin Andersen. Would you be sooooo kind as to put him ooooooooooooooooooon?" I made my on, go on and on. It had no effect.

"Just oooone moooment and I'll coooonect you, Sir."

"Nels Andersen."

My ear jumped off the phone. His voice was high, prepubescent. He'd never be allowed to make a long speech in a crystal shop.

"Uh, Mr. Andersen? Mr. Nelvin Andersen?" I had to be sure I was speaking to someone with pubic hair.

"Nels is adequate." He could make dogs wince.

"If you have a moment, I would like to discuss the theft of the 'Flying Porpoise'." I'd made a conscious effort to lower my voice, hoping he would follow suit.

He didn't. "Sir, I have little time for discussion. As you know a major work of art has been stolen."

"This is exactly why I am calling."

Andersen paused and then continued. "Are you a witness? Did you read my article?"

"Well, no and yes. No, I'm not a witness, exactly, but yes, I did read your article."

"And did you find it revealing...to the point...salient?" he squealed.

"Of course. But...?"

"Then you understand that I am quite busy..."

"Mr. Andersen," I cried desperately. "Aren't you looking for eyewitnesses? Don't you want the slime, scum, cancerous wretch in a public pillory?"

I stopped. There was a wheeze on the other end of line. I wheezed right back. Then he coughed. So I coughed. It was a stand off.

"Who is this?" Andersen demanded shrilly.

At last, I sighed. It was time to put my plan into action.

"Mr. Andersen, before we go any further, I have two questions: Does this line have a lock, and as a reporter, are you willing to keep everything I say absolutely confidential?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Please don't make me repeat myself, Mr. Andersen."

"No, the line is not bugged," he said seriously. "Though, one of my unfulfilled fantasies is that something...anything... worth bugging would come across this electric abomination." He continued in a lighter vane. "Secondly, I've never had a call that had to be held in the strictest of confidence; I think the experience would be novel and refreshing. Most of my calls are not intended to be confidential. In fact, quite the opposite. They are usually pleas for exposure... someone soliciting a word in my column, for a charity ball or an art exhibit..." He paused, breathing in deeply. "On occasion, I get calls from some enamored patron of the arts, who is having an affair with some aspiring young artist. They are usually more than willing to get a bit risqué just to have said artist's name mentioned in my column. Now, enough of my vocation. With whom am I speaking? And what is the purpose of your call?"

Nelvin Andersen may have squeaked, but he wasn't squirmy and he was definitely no yo-yo. His razor edged voice aside, he demanded respect. He probably suffered through this first impression hundreds of times. I felt we were in sync, we had rapport. I was elated. Elated, but not stupid. A series of aliases flashed through my mind, though I was tempted for a moment to use Jerry's real name.

"Mr. Andersen." I decided to keep it formal for the time being. "You may call me Mr... er... Chang." I remembered from Trivial Pursuit that Chang is the world's most common surname. "But unless I have your solemn promise of confidentiality I can tell you nothing about the theft of the 'Flying Porpoise' and will..." I paused for affect, "reluctantly, have to terminate this call."

"Mr. Chang, what good would a vow of silence be when you have related nothing of importance?" He almost whined. What was interesting, he sounded like he was enjoying the theatrics. The subterfuge.

"This is a debate, Mr. Andersen, I need your word or I cannot continue this conversation."

"I want you to know that I am unaccustomed to this sort of dialogue, though I understand the custodial response is: hereafter, anything you say is off the record and strictly confidential. Does that suffice?"

I was satisfied. I looked over both of my shoulders and buried my head between the red petals of the phone bubble and began. Once I'd begun telling him the story, I realized there wasn't a whole lot to tell. I couldn't tell him who I was, what I did or where I lived. I couldn't tell him what we'd done before or after the theft. I wasn't about to implicate the guard who'd helped us carry the statue, nor my friends at Bender's. In relating the story to Nels, a series of questions unrolled in the back of my mind. Why hadn't that guard stepped forward, by now? Why hadn't someone at Benders put two and two together? We weren't talking calculus here. The more I thought about it, the most puzzling aspect of the whole thing was; why in the hell was the statue sitting out under some hedge in the middle of the night? I didn't share any of these puzzles with Nels. What I thought would take an hour to explain took less than two minutes.

"Are you telling me you sort of found it?" His voice rounded off a bit, but he sounded exasperated.

I was confused by his tone.

"Found it, that's right. Mr. Andersen, I don't want it. I'm not a crook. Tell me where you want me to put the statue and in less than ten minutes Alan Muniz's 'Flying Porpoise' will be yours, to do with what ever you wish. You'll be a cause celebre. A hero. Famous." I wanted to finish big. With cymbals,

trumpets and big, long drum roll. Instead I got another cough and a long pause.

I didn't know it, but by Thursday I would become used to Nels Andersen's long pauses, right then they were annoying. "Where would you like me to deliver the statue?"

"Now that Mr. Chang is a most interesting question. I am definitely on your side."

Thank God. I had a friend.

"And believe me, I empathize with your plight."

An ally.

"You've just made an error in judgment."

An error in judgment.

"You're not a crook."

I'm not a crook.

"BUT."

Up to that big 'but,' my head was nodding up and down like one of those figurines of Elvis in the back window of a car. But, I didn't like that 'but.' I could sense there were wheels turning on the other end of the phone. My gears were jammed with a big wad of bubble gum.

"Let me phrase this succinctly. It is imperative that WE understand each other... perfectly, Mr. Chang. We just can't return the statue.... at least not immediately... not quite yet...now can WE, Mr. Chang?"

WHAT HAPPENED? Our conversation had been going so well. I felt as if my head was in a giant clam shell. The edges of the phone bubble were closing slowly around my neck. The BUT was bad enough. I hated his use of

WE. I backed out for a breath of good old polluted air. Someone behind me gave me a sharp poke in a kidney.

"You finished, buddy?"

"No," I snapped.

"No?" Andersen squealed with delight. "Well, well, good thinking, Mr. Chang. I believe we are on the same wave length," Nels' voice had brightened considerably.

On the same wave length? He was in Microwave. I was at the other end of the spectrum.

"That 'NO' wasn't for you, that was for this animal behind me." I heard a grunt from the animal behind me. "What do you mean 'WE' can't give it back? You have nothing to give back! You called me a VERMIN. I should be put behind bars for the rest of his life! Do you want the 'Flying Porpoise' or not?"

"Vermin, spermin, Mr. Chang," he said. "Now that we have discussed the matter, I am more enlightened. The theft was not the work of a criminal genius. You are anything but a master thief --- Ha. Ha. Far from it. Basically, you are the ignorant vessel of a bizarre set of circumstances."

I was pretty sure I'd just been insulted. His voice gathered authority.

"Of course the 'Flying Porpoise' must be returned. And, ideally I would be the one to hand it back to the proper authorities. But you must consider my side, Mr. Chang."

My face flushed. "Your side! What has your side got to do with anything? I'm giving you the opportunity to be a goddamn hero! For all I know, the mayor will give you the key to the city. You'll be on television. Do you want the damn thing, or not?" Civil conversation was impossible.

"Now, just a minute, Mr. Chang. Do not engage in the use of profanity with me. I did not steal the 'Flying Porpoise', you did! I did not call you for

assistance, you called me!" His voice had risen to a new frequency. "Here is my side, and pay close attention to it, Mr. Chang. Did you see my articles the last two days...?" He paused.

"I've already told you that I saw ---"

"Of course you did, and so did two hundred thousand other people in the greater Bay Area. My own by-line on the front page, Mr. Chang. For twelve years, I have been the art critic for this paper. NEVER --- have I had my own by-line. I have never even had an article in the front section of the paper.....Now I'm on the front page. Do you know where my articles usually appear?"

I tried to say no.

"Usually between the pornographic movie advertisements and ads for condoms or breast and penis enhancements. Before yesterday morning, had you ever heard of me?"

I tried to say no again.

"Since early yesterday afternoon, Mr. Chang, my phone has rung off the hook. I am in demand! Because of my familiarity with the San Francisco art community, the police have been asking me for leads, suggestions and possible suspects. Me! This morning the editor said hello to me. In twelve years he has never even acknowledged my existence. Then, less than one hour ago, my boss walked into this office and expanded my expense account. 'Delve deep into this one won't you Nels,' he said to me. He even gave me a long, conspiratorial wink. He's blinked at me before, but never an authentic conspiratorial wink. Because of your folly, I am no longer just a third section, page fifty-six, hack art critic; I am an investigative reporter, on the front page! And, please understand this clearly, Mr. Chang, I am wallowing in it, by God! I want my

moment on center stage. I have worked hard. I have earned it. I deserve it. Damn it, I deserve it!"

I thought he might explode. He sucked in a large gulp of air. If he collapsed with a heart attack I'd have to come up with another plan, so I shut up. He took an eight second pause and returned with vigor.

"Now, you Sir can either be a godsend or a curse. We can either resolve your rather delicate predicament, or since I have given you my word, and because my integrity is very important, I will lay down this receiver... and, as far as I am concerned, our conversation never took place." He paused again. "Mr. Chang, it is up to you."

No lunch today. My stomach was taking a trip on the high seas. My mind registered everything he said, digested it and ran it past the synapses of my brain that were still functioning. Most of them were in shock. What was going on? He couldn't give up the chance to be the person to recover the 'Flying Porpoise'. He couldn't.

"As I see it..." he began again. "You are a nice fellow, honest, hardworking, who inadvertently made a mistake. But your little one-time mistake was a coup-de-grace. Art thieves all over the world are envious. Where is your sense of the dramatic, your sense of adventure, Mr. Chang? Make a plan. Return the statue with flair. Choose a sensational location. Someplace that takes daring and cunning. Allow me a few precious days in the limelight. I may come out of this as hero. But my fame will only be momentary.

"Famous and infamous people become legends not just because of what they do, but how they do it. With a dramatic, sensational finale, you'll be the subject of books, maybe a movie. Innocent though you may be, in the eyes of the law you have committed Grand Larceny. If you resolve this theft in the

correct manner, you will have created the stuff from which legends are made. And you, Mr. Chang, not I, will become that legend."

Reflecting back now, I know that somewhere during his speech, I'd gone insane. Completely past the wading pool, I was in the deep end. Jerry was a mute. Jerry was a mush mouth compared to Nelvin Andersen. On the phone was an oration by William Jennings Bryant.

Even before he'd stopped talking, I was no longer thinking of how many years I might spend in jail. No, the 'Legend' was already considering several dramatic and exotic locations for the triumphant return of the 'Flying Porpoise'. I knew I wasn't a master thief or a 'Legend.' But when Andersen insinuated the same it plunked a chord of anger in my subconscious. The non-Legend, I assured myself could become a criminal genius.

The 'Flying Porpoise', still sitting in Jerry's sequined blanket in the backseat of my car, deserved a send off with pomp and circumstance. Somehow I agreed to keep George for two more days. Nels promised to keep silent and retrieve the statue from any location I chose. Slowly, I set the receiver back in the bubble.

It took me less than a day to realize, that like my divorce, I'd been duped. This was a very one-sided arrangement. Neither of us had reached an amicable agreement. I backed away from the phone in a daze. Behind me, I heard.

"You finished, pal?" He pushed past me dressed in basic sports catalogue. San Francisco Giants cap. San Francisco 49ers Jersey. Oakland Raider sneakers and New York Yankee pinstriped shorts.

I checked for my wallet. It was still there. He dialed quickly. I couldn't help overhearing his conversation.

"Paddy, this is Dutch...yeah, I know, I know the track's closed Monday. Will you put fifty on the nose on 'Lucky Lady' in the sixth tomorrow? Thanks."

I almost skipped back to my office with a new sense of purpose and determination. I found myself humming the theme from 'Rocky.' Dum, dum, dum, da, da, da. Jerry told me I was dull. Boring. The world found me dull and boring. Watch out planet Earth.

For the rest of the day, my salary from Stevenson Steel was a gift. I did nothing for the company unless I was forced to. My "in" pile grew. My "out" pile remained the same. My secretary Eiaine had me sign a few papers. But she backed off when I grunted at her.

"Peter, I want you to know that I could have phoned you yesterday morning with the phony lottery numbers." Eiaine set her hands on her hips. "I could have, but I didn't."

I grunted again. Eiaine turned and vacated my office in a huff. I must have looked engrossed in my work. No one said a word to me for the rest of the afternoon. Actually, I was engrossed in my plans. A criminal genius was loose. Nels Andersen wanted dramatic. Nels Andersen would get dramatic. And suddenly I needed it. I needed dramatic. When Jerry came back from Seattle I wanted him blown away. The theft of the 'Flying Porpoise' would always be our shared adventure. The incredibly brilliant, dramatic, imaginative return of the 'Flying Porpoise' would be mine. Mine alone.

Working in Public Relations proved to be a great asset. I had a large number of resources available. The main function of our P.R. Department is to educate the some what ignorant public. It is our job to convince anyone who will listen, that we are the good guys --- we wear the white hats. I have an expense account to host tours and entertain. We're encouraged to use any form of legal enticement to improve our corporation's rotten image.

To that end, a sexist genius in our department created a computer program fondly known as SLUT: Sometimes Let's Use Temptation. SLUT kept an up-to-date list of local events; the better restaurants (even recommending meal and wine selections), theaters (including seating) and, I found to my amusement, a list of up-coming art exhibits. SLUT even contained a section on Special Interest activities in which special interest groups might be interested. Finishing the entire document, I noted that the only parts of San Francisco's night life that SLUT ignored were the most decadent.

The phone call with Nels Andersen had channeled all my direction. I was focused, excited, filled with a sense of adventure. For the first time, I was glad Jerry wasn't here to share it. I had to return the statue on my own. I was on a mission.

While abusing SLUT, my ideas coalesced. I moled through guides to San Francisco. I made a list of historical monuments, important buildings, squares and parks. I even considered famous restaurants, religious sanctuaries and hotels.

By three in the afternoon, my list had thirty possible sites. I wanted to narrow it down to five or six. By four o'clock, I had ten. Stand aside Mr. Capone, Peter Tuelly is on the loose.

My list included: the Golden Gate Bridge, the Gates to Chinatown, Candlestick Park, the top or bottom of Lombard Street ---the curviest street on the planet, Fisherman's Wharf, Golden Gate Park, Coit Tower, the Fairmont Hotel, the Transamerica Pyramid Building and, my own favorite, right smack back under the hedge, twenty feet from the front door of the Golden Gateway. Maybe with some fire crackers and an American Flag.

Leaving George where we found him would be perfect irony. A magician's trick. He would have simply disappeared then reappeared at the Golden Gateway Plaza. I considered the logistics. Renegotiating the stairs by myself would be too vexing for this emerging criminal master-mind. Watch out Dr. Jekyll, Hyde is gaining control. I crossed the Golden Gateway from my list. And now there were nine.

It dawned on me that, although all my sites were dramatic and world famous, each site presented unique problems. I added logistics to my drop-off list. George was heavy, a three-man rock. I couldn't call for volunteers, so no stairs. The location had to be a place where I could put George safely and quickly. I couldn't risk dropping or damaging him. A secluded area. No witnesses. I left a space on my list in case I'd forgotten anything.

I wrote down the word 'materials' then went to my desk top computer. Finally I had something I could work with. I banged out my new drop-off list:

DROP-OFF LIST

Sites

- 1. Golden Gate Bridge**
- 2. Chinatown Gates**
- 3. Candlestick Park**
- 4. Lombard Street**
- 5. Fisherman's Wharf**
- 6. Golden Gate Park**
- 7. Coit Tower**
- 8. Fairmont Hotel**
- 9. Transamerica Pyramid Building**

Logistics

- 1. Famous**

- 2. Dramatic**
- 3. Easy Access**
- 4. Possibility of Witnesses**
- 5. Distance from Car**
- 6. Safe for George**

While whacking away on the keys, I tried to recall every movie and TV show I ever saw; every mystery I ever read. The bad guys always left some asinine clue at the scene of the crime. Near the end of every movie or the last chapter of every book, the asinine clue would jump up and spit in the eye of some ingenious cop, usually a male detective or some mystery writer, usually an elderly female. No locks. No changes in behavior. No asinine clues. I began a list of materials.

Materials Needed

- 1. One clean rag to wipe away all fingerprints**
- 2. One dolly/hand truck to move George?**
- 3. One broom to sweep away footprints. (If it rains watch out for mud and wear over-sized galoshes).**
- 4. Check for tire tracks**
- 5. Buy a new car, dull colored, nothing flashy? Rent one instead? Same with clothing**
- 6. A disguise????? mask -- fake moustache**
- 7. Get a haircut, each strand of hair is unique. Wear a hair net/go bald?**

By number seven I knew I was getting carried away. I looked back over the list. Had I thought of everything? Most likely not. I left space for late additions. I looked up, the office was quiet. The clock read five thirty-five.

"I'm working overtime!" I said aloud to no one. The entire place was empty. A pigeon landed on the ledge outside my window and took a close look at a ham and cheese on rye. It discarded the Swiss cheese and pecked into dinner.

With a certain degree of satisfaction, I folded my list, put it in my pocket and headed home.

I sang to George as we crossed the bridge back to the East Bay. I discussed each option with him too. I was going mad.

Almost home I decided to stop at the golf club to have a few drinks. I deserved them. Just inside the door, I heard a shout of recognition.

"Hey, Peter, come on over."

At the corner of the bar sat Ernie DiBenedetto, a short guy who could whack the dimples off a golf ball, and Gary Thomas. Gary hit the ball well, but his chin hung three inches below his bottom lip. It seriously affected his putting. He was terrible on the greens.

I ordered a vodka tonic and walked over.

"Hey, good buddy, did you really shoot one hundred and twenty-six yesterday?"

"Thanks for reminding me, Ernie."

"Well, at least we know it's an honest score," Ernie yelled down the bar. "No one would lie about shooting one hundred and twenty-six."

"Hell, he had to be honest," Gary added. "He was playing with three cops."

"You guys should apply to that new game show 'Assholes for a Day'. You'd be perfect."

When you shoot a lousy round, you have to suffer the consequences. I know the rules. Bad scores and great shots have a way of making the rounds quickly in any country club bar. My score was big news, but I was miffed that my last shot on 18 had been lost in the shuffle. When I tried to describe it, no one would listen. I finished my drink and started to leave. The bartender beckoned me.

"This is for you, Peter." He handed me a box. It was gift wrapped. I must have looked puzzled. "It's from the awards committee for yesterday's tournament. Come on, open it."

I had a lot of friends on that committee. I'd won something after all. It had to be for that last shot. An eagle had to be worth something.

I opened the box, smiling. I pulled out a little statue. My smile quickly waned. The statue was a man bent over with his head up his ass. On the bronze plaque, one word was carefully engraved: Booby. That hurt. My good friends on the tournament committee would get a surprise at their next conference. I knew what they did at those meetings. Nothing! Except play poker and watch porno tapes. I decided to call Cappy, Brian and Albert the next time the committee met. It wouldn't be much of a bust, but for the bust they'd given me, they deserved to be busted.

I went home and put on a TV dinner. I love `em. My mother was a terrible cook. I must have been six or seven years old before I realized all plates weren't tin-foil and all dinner servings weren't necessarily presented in four individualized compartments, with dessert always in the top right-hand corner. I had a vodka tonic and spent an hour going over the drop-off list I had now christened DOL.

I went to sleep resolving to personally reconnoiter each site before I reached a final decision. George would go home in style, I vowed.

VII

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU MEAN, T.J.?” Lieutenant Hourigan screamed into the boat’s phone. “I have three men on this investigation. It’s 23 hundred hours and you’re telling me that they might have lost the damn thing?”

“Lieutenant, that’s what they’re telling me.” T.J. apologized.

Hourigan stretched the cord of the phone across the galley of the Sleeping Lady and sat at the chart table. “Okay, T.J. run it by me again. Keep it brief. Just the essentials.

“According to the docent, all the items were checked off during the loading stage in San Francisco. When the exhibit arrived in L.A., the porpoise was missing. That’s when we got the call, Lieutenant.”

Hourigan gritted his teeth and hissed. “I know when we got the call.”

“Yes, Sir. Anyway, in the panic, none of the personnel reported that there was a breakdown of one of the vehicles in transit. They had to shift the contents from one truck to another. Apparently the transfer had to be done in a thick fogbank. The fog in the valley this time of year ---“

“You’re digressing, T.J.”

“Right... It seems the people at Donaldson Security believe the “Flying Porpoise” is sitting out in the fog on Highway 101.”

“What do you believe, T.J.? Do you think it’s sitting out there on the freeway?”

“I don’t know.”

“For Christ Sake! You saw Muniz’s face. Why the hell did he go back to the Golden Gateway Plaza and putter around in the garden? Why the hell was he so bent out of shape about the tail we put on him? Why wouldn’t he let us put a lock on his phone?”

“Yes, Sir. He did seem very upset.”

“Thank you, T.J.”

Hourigan hung up the phone in disgust. “The damn thing’s not lost!”

CHAPTER 5 TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 14, 1979

I

Tuesday morning Lieutenant Richard Hourigan didn't walk in to the home of Alan Muniz Jr. with the morning paper, Andrea Convee did. A trace of Chanel No. 11 wafted through the house as she took off her grey, full-length chinchilla coat.

"Mr. Muniz, I would like to see OUR statue."

Alan Muniz Jr. could not smell the Chanel, but he did smell a rat. A rat named Francis Fural. I'm glad I didn't buy new skis, Muniz thought. Don't panic. Plead. "I... We don't really have it here... right now." Muniz shot a look at Francis Fural.

Fural glared. His gold tooth gleamed. "I told ya, boss." Fural's tongue dropped out of the side of his mouth. He looked at Andrea Convee like a beagle waiting for a pat on the head. If he had a tail to wag, it would have been slapping on the sofa.

Six feet tall and standing on three inch stiletto heels, Andrea Convee towered over Muniz and Fural. Her intimidating air made her seem even taller. Andrea's blond hair and pale blue eyes belied her Italian heritage. She was the progeny of sixteen hundred years of inter-breeding in a gene pool of Visigoths that had left Scandinavia in the 5th century A.D. and gone to Italy to rape, pillage and plunder. The raping, pillaging and plunder had been

excellent. And so was the food and climate, so the Visigoths had stayed.

Andrea Convee stood motionless, on well tampered legs, in the center of the living room. Lasers of anger flashed from her pale blue eyes. She waited for a response from Alan Muniz Jr.

"We... I'm certain the guard, Gallagher, still has it. He's out for more money." Muniz sputtered.

"Have you spoken with him, Mr. Muniz?" Andrea said solemnly.

"The police have been here. There've been reporters and interviews. The phone's been ringing off the hook---"

"Don't make me repeat myself, Mr. Muniz. Have you spoken with Mr. Gallagher?"

"I've made twenty attempts to contact him," Muniz took short, rapid breaths. "But he hasn't returned from Los Angeles. Maybe he's back by now. I'll call him."

"You'll do nothing," Andrea said coolly. "You're no longer in charge here, Mr. Muniz." She clasped her hands in the small of her back and began circling slowly, like a jungle cat.

Good, Muniz thought, keep those talons hidden and away from my Jugular vein.

Convee stood for several moments in front of the large cobblestone

fireplace and stared up at the antlers of a nine point buck.

The antlers were a memento of a hunting trip Muniz had taken four years earlier. He hadn't shot the deer. He'd hit it with his car returning to San Francisco. His Mercedes was a total wreck. So was the deer.

Andrea put her right toe behind her left heel and executed a smart about-face.

Here it comes, Muniz thought. Here go my legs.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Alan. You lied to me. You had the audacity to place a bet without the statue and without funds. I don't like liars. Neither do my associates. You like to read don't --- you?"

Muniz's head went up and down.

"You don't want to have to hire someone to turn the pages for you, do you?"

Muniz shook his head from left to right.

"My associates and I have discussed your ... um..transgression, Mr. Muniz. If you were to suddenly depart from this planet, we would still be out \$4,000,000 ---."

"FOUR MILLION!" Muniz gasped.

"Liars fine," Convee pursed her lip and snickered. "As I see it, the only way for me to recover my losses and for you to retain the use of your appendages, is for us to retrieve the 'Flying Porpoise'. Don't you agree?"

Muniz nodded reluctantly.

"Good. We tried it your way, now we will do it the right way. My way."

Convee pointed to Francis Fural, her eyes never wavering from Muniz.

"Francis is the only one that's talked to Gallagher, is that correct?"

Muniz nodded.

Convee turned purposefully to Fural. "Get that jackass on the phone, Francis. I'll tell you what to say. You may listen on the extension if you like, Mr. Muniz."

Convee and Fural sat at the patent leather writing desk and shared the receiver. Muniz ran to kitchen, grabbed the portable phone and carried it out to the hall. Muniz was ecstatic that he could still run and grab.

"Timothy Gallagher?" Francis rumbled.

Mr. Etiquette, Muniz thought, no hello, nothing.

"Yes?" Gallagher responded suspiciously.

"Mr. Gallagher, do you recall our business arrangement?"

Muniz watched in amazement. Andrea would mouth the words and Fural repeated them immediately. Verbatim. They were a ventriloquist act. Francis was the biggest dummy ever created, but they could have played Vegas.

"Sure, I remember. But, it got very crowded if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't know what you mean." Andrea mouthed and Fural repeated with a longing look at her lips.

"The damn thing fell out of the crate. It broke my foot. I had to leave it. I'm in a cast."

"Where did you leave it?"

"Under the hedge at the top of the stairs. I tried to get to the debris box....there were too many people... What's this all about?" For the first time there was a trace of panic in Gallagher's voice.

"It wasn't there, Mr. Gallagher."

Muniz couldn't believe that Fural's voice could get any lower, but it had.

"It rolled off my foot... it went under the hedge... it was safe... hidden."

"It wasn't there, Mr. Gallagher."

There was a hard meshing noise. "It had to be there.... Is this a joke?"

He's grinding away the rest of his teeth, Muniz thought.

"No joke." Fural menaced.

Gallagher gulped aloud. "Lord be my witness, I left the statue under the hedge."

"We want our \$15,000 or the statue, Mr. Gallagher." Andrea grabbed the phone from Fural and slammed down the receiver.

He's telling the truth, Muniz concluded, returning to the living room.

"Another damn liar," Convee glared at Muniz.

Fural sat on the couch staring at Andrea like an ape after a banana.

"He's got it," Convee hissed to no one. "Francis!" Obediently, Fural and loped to Andrea's side. "Francis, do you remember that plumbing contractor we had that...em...little difficulty with?" Andrea smiled evilly and ran a sharp, red finger nail down the side of her neck. Fural grunted. "I want you to treat this in the same manner, Francis."

"Will you write the note, boss?"

"You can do it, Francis." Convee patted Fural's shoulder and turned to Muniz. "I'll be back." Andrea tossed the chinchilla coat over her shoulder and sashayed toward the front door.

"Andrea?" Muniz asked.

"WHAT?"

"Nothing."

For the second day in a row Muniz decided not to ask Andrea if he could place a bet on Lady Luck, the long shot running in the sixth race at Bay Meadows.

Muniz walked back to the kitchen and poured a second cup of coffee and settled in his booth over looking the bay. Gallagher's telling the truth, I know it. Andrea is barking up the wrong thief. Somebody else has the Porpoise. And that somebody knows what they have. Mostly likely, one of the

docents or one of the guards or movers discovered the statue under the hedge. In any case, someone has it in their possession and I've got to find him. It has to be an amateur. And he'll have to get rid of it.

An idea exploded in his mind. A tactic right out of the Andrea Convee primer on intimidation, Muniz applauded himself. He took a felt pen and a 3x5 card from a recipe box by the kitchen phone. He wrote the message several times. Finally satisfied, he walked into the living room.

Francis Fural still sat at the patent leather writing desk scribbling a message of his own with a number 2 pencil. At his feet lay wads of crumpled paper.

It can write! Muniz thought in amazement.

Fural covered his message protectively as Muniz approached the desk.

"What do you want?"

What the hell does he think I'm going to do, copy it? Muniz laughed to himself. "Francis, I want you to place this ad for me." Muniz couldn't resist.

"Francis, what are you writing, your autobiography?"

"Nah, I don't know nothin' about cars."

II

Tuesday was beautiful. Already in the high sixties at five-thirty a.m. I

went through my usual routine: a pot of MJB coffee, two Thomas' English Muffins in the toaster and went for the paper. I'd even decided to do the jumble. I stood for a moment in the doorway, enjoying the morning, stretching and breathing in the warm, cloudless day. I had a friend and ally in Nels Andersen and a date with Mia at one. A sensational start to a sensational day.

At least Dorothy had Auntie Em to warn her of the approaching cyclone. Within two minutes, my tranquility was devastated by tropical storm Andersen. That headline alone should have told me it was time to turn the gas on high and spend the rest of the day with my head in the oven. Coffee splashed over the edge of my cup, scalding my hand. It was a prophetic act; I was about to be burned again.

CRIMINAL MAKES CONTACT IN "PORPOISE" HEIST

By Nelvin Andersen

The audacity, the gall, the outright brazenness of this gang! At approximately 11:30 yesterday morning, the leader and mastermind behind this weekend's disgusting theft of the Muniz sculpture 'Flying Porpoise' contacted this reporter. At first, I thought I was dealing with a prankster, but quickly, I realized this was no joke. The caller was too well informed. Too professional. He cleverly disguised his voice with some sort of electronic cloaking device. Even though his voice was muffled, his tone was quite clear. It was a tone of utter contempt for society and law and order, a tone of disdain and mockery for his fellow human beings; here was an example of

egocentrism personified. This, my dear readers, is an evil man.

I pushed away from the table. Evil? The son-of-a-bitch. I sat transfixed.

I was Faust. I'd made allegiance with the devil. I spread a large glob of

Smucker's raspberry jam on my muffin and chomped.

When I pleaded for the return of the 'Flying Porpoise' I was greeted by fits of sinister laughter. Any attempt at reaching his conscience was greeted with words of scorn. When asked about his plans for the statue, he laughed grotesquely. "Perhaps I'll smash it with a sledge hammer and sprinkle the dust on the streets of San Francisco. Or maybe I'll hide it and send you clues. We'll have a big treasure hunt," he taunted. Dear readers, we are dealing with scum. A man with no heart or sense of justice. A carbuncle on the skin of society. Behind bars is where..."

Furious, I slammed my fist on the kitchen table. I wanted to enter a sidebar to his article. I'd be a tri-line in his bi-line. Let me interrupt this column for an important announcement from Mr. Scum. I scribbled on a notepad. A CARBUNCLE RESPONDS: Dear Editor, I may be scum, but you have published the words of a psychopath. I hereby volunteer to spend my life behind bars if Nelvin Andersen will volunteer to have himself committed and spent the rest of his life in a padded cell, in a strait jacket. Now let me return this column to its crazed author.

... this poor excuse for a human being and his gang of thugs belong.

In my humble opinion, this pervert enjoys orgasmic pleasure in the execution of his crimes, and then wallows in the notoriety after its perpetration. If the slime is reading this article, again I implore you to make amends and return the 'Flying Porpoise' to its rightful heirs and turn yourself in to the proper authorities at the most opportune moment.

The family of the late artist is very distraught. "I would do anything to have the 'Flying Porpoise' back in my possession," said the son of the late sculptor.

Finally, if any of my readers feels he might have any information that may expedite the solution of this travesty, please call this reporter or Lieutenant Richard Hourigan, SFPD, the officer in charge of this investigation.

I was livid. I would have pledged Brutus, Judas and Adolph Hitler into my fraternity before Nelvin Andersen. What a team we were, the two musketeers, all for him and screw me. He hadn't just stabbed me in the back; he'd harpooned me. He was Ahab and I Moby Dick. I liked the analogy. Moby Dick got back at Ahab and so would I. Nelvin Andersen was mine.

I would buy a gun. Silver. Well polished. One that shot big bullets. Bullets that made ragged, gaping holes. And I'd only need two. One for Jerry and one for Nels. It was so simple. I was so calm. There are enough glib tongues in the world, and, not all of them are in public office.

Usually a complacent commuter, that morning I blared my horn at the

slightest provocation. I made obscene gestures and, at one point, seriously considered ramming a brown and white van whose occupants were going to work smiling and laughing. I was an animal. I was hurt, betrayed and pissed. A beautiful morning had turned to guano.

San Francisco had its air conditioning on. The day was crystal clear. From a mile away you could see a fly walking up the Ferry Building. Sailboats whipped across the bay. Sparse clouds hovered over Twin Peaks. A glorious day. Beautiful. I despised it. I wanted black clouds. Thunder and lightning. I wanted a silver gun with two bullets.

Crossing the intersection of Kearny and Montgomery I remembered I'd left my DOL list and my damned I.D. badge at the condo. I had placed them both, on my caddy, on the bureau so I wouldn't forget either. I had forgotten both.

My brain was a mess. I slammed on my brakes. A garbage truck nearly made love to my trunk. George almost joined me in the front seat. I knew I couldn't survive another bout with Kevin Stiller or Ethel the "dump" over my Identification Tag.

I needed more bullets for my gun. Kevin Stiller and Ethel had to go. At the rate I was going, I'd soon need a twenty round semi-automatic Uzi.

I parked in a yellow zone, in the shadow of my office building, two doors from Telly's. At least four good sized signs, said TRUCKS ONLY.

"Give me a ticket," I laughed, locking the door. "Go ahead. Tow the damn car away." I cackled. "Then George is your problem."

I walked into Telly's and ordered a Baklava and Grecian Espresso. I was beyond a basket case; I'd graduated to Casket Construction 1A.

"Six, forty-three, twenty," Telly laughed as he served me. I gave him the finger in person for the Sunday morning lottery call.

"Rather testy this morning, Peter." Smiling, he leaned over the counter, "Okay, I've got a good one for you."

I knew what was coming. Telly loves trivia, he's good at it. So am I. Every afternoon he turned on 'Jeopardy.' All the regulars were hooked.

"Over which eye did Long John Silver wear his patch?"

I thought, and then guessed, "his left."

"Nope."

"Oh yeah, his right."

"Nope, ol' Long John didn't wear a patch." He laughed and wiped his hands on his apron. He leaned closer, "You look awful, Peter, are you feeling okay?"

"Good observation, I feel lousy."

"Why don't you take the day off?"

"Telly, that's the best suggestion I've had in two days." I toasted him

with my coffee cup then stuck it across the counter. "Fill it 100 proof Ouzo."

Telly shot me a grin. "Hey, it's only 8:00 A.M., Peter." He moved away to help another customer.

I used his business phone to call my office and told them I wouldn't be in. I was sick. I was, physically and mentally.

I watched as Telly busied himself around his restaurant, a human dynamo. Telly was unique. His real name was Jose, but someone had kiddingly told him he looked like Telly Savalas. That's why JOSE'S became TELLY'S, and he wouldn't answer to anything else. In twenty-four hours, he'd changed his sign, menu and his entire motif.

The piñatas, huge sombreros and bull fight posters were gone. In their place were busts of Archimedes, Plato, Aristotle and Socrates. Doric columns framed the front door and Corinthian and Ionian columns bordered the restrooms. Lush plastic grape vine spewed from Grecian Urns and on each table was a miniature model of the Parthenon holding a menu written in Greek and English. Only the old taco counter remained.

Where Jose once served excellent chili, tacos, enchiladas and crispas, Telly now served excellent slouvakia, moussaka and baklava. Telly was a genius chef.

The transformation of his restaurant had been accompanied by some physical alterations to his person. Telly was overweight and insisted he was

five feet four. He'd shaved his head, purchased several pairs of elevator shoes and began 'smoking' a Tootsie Roll. "I like something in my mouth," he told me once, in confidence.

"Telly, there are many places in San Francisco where a comment like that can get you into a lot of trouble."

Actually, several of his regulars and I agreed, after he shaved his head, Telly looked more like a short version of Yul Brynner than Telly Savalas, but since none of us knew what Yul Brynner ate, we kept our mouths shut. No one wanted to risk a new menu.

III

Nelvin Andersen carefully snipped his new front page article from the morning's edition of the Call Bulletin. Don't smear the print, he thought, sliding the column on to the cardboard backing of a picture frame. This is wonderful; he smiled, hanging the second article below the first on a "J" hook in the beaver board of his cubicle.

A short 'bing' and his phone lit.

"Nels Andersen," he spouted cheerfully.

In his office, Lieutenant Hourigan held the phone a foot away from his

ear. "You have been very helpful, Nels," Hourigan began.

"Then you received my list, Lieutenant."

"Yes, and thanks for all the trouble, Nels. But, there have been some rather peculiar developments with regard to the 'Flying Porpoise'. Nels, we are no longer convinced that the statue was stolen."

If they've apprehended, Chang, I'm off the front page. I am an accomplice. "What do you mean it wasn't stolen?"

"If I didn't know better, Nels, I'd say you sound disappointed," Hourigan laughed.

"Actually, I'm speechless. Where is it?"

"Well, we haven't recovered it yet. It appears that..." Lieutenant Hourigan spent several minutes repeating the story that T.J. Billings had relayed earlier.

"But," Andersen stuttered, "what about the fellow that called me yesterday?" Chang has it. I know he has it.

"Probably just a crank, Nels." Someone working for Muniz I'll bet, Hourigan thought. Someone trying to keep the heat off, and our attention diverted.

"But you don't lose a multi-million dollar sculpture on a highway, in a fog, Lieutenant."

I couldn't agree more, Hourigan thought. But I can't tell you that, Nels.

If everyone thinks we're screwing around down on 101, maybe one of the rodents will stick their neck out. "I know it doesn't make much of a story, Nels. But can you get it into tomorrow's edition?"

"Yes. Of course, Lieutenant."

Hourigan signed off. Nelvin Andersen held the silent phone in his hand and stared at his two front page articles. Chang did not fabricate that story. He was too sincere, too remorseful. Hourigan is wrong. I know it. And they know nothing of Mr. Chang. Nels set down the receiver. In two days the porpoise will be back where it belongs. And for now I am still on the front page. What a snafu! Everyone thinks it's lost. Of course I will print the story.

Nels slipped a sheet of paper into the typewriter and struck the keys.

NEW DEVELOPMENT IN PORPOISE'S THEFT???

IV

Much calmer I left Telly's an hour later. Some of the knots were out of my jangled nerves. I'd decided to get rid of George at the easiest, most convenient place I could find. Theatrics were hereby canceled. The show closed in Oakland. I'd call the police and tell them where I'd put George. If I got caught, I got caught. Talk about a defeatist attitude.

Calling the police was the second item on my list of priorities. First was a call to Nelvin Andersen. My friend, my cohort, my ally. His by-line was a thing of the past. His chance of a lifetime, gone. Back to section three, Nels; between the condom ads. No parade for you. No key to the City. No visit with the mayor, as far as I was concerned, he could go make love to himself.

On a concrete post, outside of Telly's I found a pay phone and dialed my good ol' buddy. The phone didn't eat my change, but I had to go through that same damn "Haylloooooo," operator. While I waited for her to put me through, I decided to get a fifth bullet for my gun; someone had to put her out of MY misery.

"Nels Andersen," the forked tongued snake squealed like a brat on Christmas morning. I'll bet Mr. Cheerful had spent years slithering around Eden waiting for the arrival of Adam and Eve.

"It's me, the slime!" I said no more.

"Well, hello, and how are you this radiant morning, Mr. Chang?" He was bi-lingual. He spoke fluent acid and syrup. Nels Andersen had lived before, in his past life, he was Benedict Arnold.

"Did have you seen this morning's edition? And did you like my article?" He paused and started again with a high whining chuckle. "Oh, slime, ha-ha, of course you did."

I didn't say a word.

"Well, Mr. Chang, we have had some most interesting news. I hope you are prepared for a rather curious series of events."

I didn't say a word. But my silence meant nothing to Mata Hara Andersen.

"As you must know I wrote my latest article last evening. You are not going to believe what has transpired since then," Nels giggled. "First of all, everyone is convinced that the statue has been misplaced. Lost, if you will. Ha, can you believe it? The authorities are keeping quiet, but they are quite certain it wasn't stolen. The police think you're some kind of nut. I've been advised me to ignore you."

The conversation wasn't going as I'd expected.

"Apparently, they already have three confessions. None is being taken seriously..." He paused.

He paused again. It was annoying. His demeanor changed. He exhaled deeply. "Mr. Chang, you are serious? You do have the porpoise?" Now, he was pleading.

I broke my vow of silence.

"Sure, I do. I can see it right now."

I turned and watched as a meter maid slipped a ticket under my windshield wiper. Cute, I admonished myself, a seventy-five dollar temper

tantrum. The police were right, I was a nut. Though when Nels said it I took umbrage to the remark.

"Wonderful. Wonderful." Reassured, he continued. "According to a reliable source, here's what they think happened. Around 8 P.M. Saturday, each article from the exhibit was wrapped, crated and each item checked off as it was loaded into one of two trucks, destination, Los Angeles. They are certain the porpoise was on one of the trucks. Enroute, one of the vehicles suffered a mechanical failure. The convoy had to wait for a replacement vehicle, which was too small, so they had to rearrange all the artifacts, and in the confusion they think they misplaced the statue. Ha. But we know the truth, don't we, Mr. Chang?"

Mr. Andersen was having a wonderful time, I was thoroughly confused.

"Anyway, they didn't even notice it was missing until they arrived in Los Angeles. For the time being, we are off the hook, so to speak. The entire investigating team is on a treasure hunt along a two hundred mile stretch of Highway 101. As you can see, I am holding up my end of our bargain, what have you been doing?"

I was definitely suffering some major mood swings. My anger had quelled, but I wasn't finished yet. "What's all this slime and carbuncle crap, Mr. Andersen?"

There was a new edge to his voice when he began again.

"I have explained my position, Mr. Chang, I'm in neon. How would you write the story? Yesterday I spoke with a lovely fellow, a prince of a man. He told me he found a statue worth millions. Where did he find it? Under a shrub. And since no one was around, he simply picked it up under his arms, all two hundred odd pounds, and took it home for safe keeping.

"Really, Mr. Chang, how could I tell my three million readers, it was just an accident? Do you know how often crooks use the old, it wasn't my fault --- it was an accident line?"

I remembered my conversation with Cappy. "I've been told it's used a lot."

"Then you understand, Mr. Chang. I believe it was an accident, but who else in their right mind would? Do you think you could convince a jury that you sort of found it? Really, Mr. Chang.... Though, in your behalf, I'll try to make tomorrow's article less scathing. Now, enough of this, let's not be negative. How are your plans coming along?"

"After reading your rather abrasive article, I'd decided to give the sculpture to the police and tell you to go to hell." I said, frankly. "For now, all of my plans are in limbo."

"Limbo? For heaven's sake why man? I agree that the situation has changed, but it's changed for the better, Mr. Chang. To abandon our project

at this juncture would be fool-hardy."

"Our project? Come off it, Mr. Andersen. It's my project. This morning I was going to sue you for defamation of character, but under the circumstances that would have been a little difficult. Sure, I have made some plans. In fact, I put quite a bit of effort into 'My Project' and I have some damn good locations, but now---"

"That's what I like to hear, Mr. Chang. Give me one more day in the spotlight. One more day on the front page. Tomorrow, I'll pick it up where ever you want. One more day isn't asking too much, is it?"

"What if I'm caught?"

"Well, I've considered that possibility."

"So have I," I added quickly.

"If by some unfortunate circumstance you are apprehended, I give you my word that I'll come forward and explain the whole arrangement. Actually, right now I'm making myself an accessory after the fact, what more can you ask? "

"How about something in writing?"

"A reasonable request. Where would you like it mailed?"

I thought for a moment. "Mail it in care of Telly's Restaurant, on Montgomery Street.

"It will be in this morning's mail."

I wasn't finished yet. "I don't want any more bad press. No more slime, scum or carbuncles, or I swear I'll turn myself in." I was testing him.

"Then I'll be sure to visit you in prison."

That wasn't such a good test, I thought to myself. I should have made it a multiple choice question.

"You know, Mr. Chang yesterday I had the honor of speaking to a man. A leader. A possible legend in his own time. Today, I feel like I'm conversing with a wimp. The corridors of greatness lie before you. March down the aisles of fame. You have an opportunity to step out of the doldrums of life and on to the pages of history. Walk on, Mr. Chang, dare to take the step. Tomorrow we will close the book on this matter. We have only twenty-four short hours to achieve our place in history."

Three times in as many days, my brain had gone on default. "You're right."

"Of course, I am right. And please be careful. It would be most awkward for... us both, if you were arrested."

He gave me an emergency phone number and in a daze, I hung up.

The day was clear and beautiful. I walked back to my car in a pea soup fog. I peeled the parking ticket from my windshield and sat behind the wheel for a few minutes reflecting on recent events. I know now, all my grey matter

had turned to silly putty. I didn't know it then.

So the police thought I was some damn nut. Screw them. It was down the aisles of greatness for me. The legend lives. So the police think it's been lost, fine ---that's funny. They'd look like a herd of mules when the 'Flying Porpoise', reappeared tomorrow.

In retrospect, "herd of mules" was an interesting choice of words; when I was being such a complete jackass.

One thought was gnawing at me. Why was the statue out there under the hedge in the first place? If we hadn't been stumbling drunk we never would have seen it. My trend of thought was interrupted by a tapping on my window.

"You can't park here Mister," said a cute, well freckled meter maid.

"I know, I'm moving." I started the car.

"Not so fast, bub." She handed me another ticket.

I picked the first ticket off the front seat of my car and showed it to her.

"I've already got one." I smiled.

"Double your pleasure, double your fun." She handed me the second ticket and walked back to her meter-scooter whistling the tune from Doublemint Gum.

"Bitch," I yelled driving away.

The human ego is a strange, mysterious thing. At least mine is. Mine is

very demanding, often putting my brain on hold, while it takes over the decision making process. I'd been insulted so I reacted. My brain (Captain of my body... Colonel of my soul) knew I was being manipulated. But there had been a major coup, the ego had taken command and the new General should have been assassinated.

Fortunately, I had a whole day to check out each site on my DOL list. Unfortunately, I had forgotten the list at the condo. So the police thought George was sitting in some box on Highway 101, I was going to put George in such a clever, unique and picturesque place, that the return of the 'Flying Porpoise' would rival man's landing on the moon.

I stopped for a can of beer at a mini mart on Kearny. I conjured up a mental picture of San Francisco and coordinated it with each site I'd chosen. I grabbed a piece of scratch paper from my glove compartment, scribbled a rough draft of my DOL list and with my cold Heineken planted firmly between my legs, I set out on my own reconnaissance tour of San Francisco. I figured if I was stopped by the police, drinking and driving would be the least of my problems.

For one day, I'd be the perfect criminal. Peter Tuelly, titular head of Public Relations for a well known, but somewhat unpopular, steel company; now disguised as a typical tourist, was about to use his guile and cunning to

resolve the most dastardly crime the San Francisco Art World had ever seen. I didn't know if that was true, but I liked the imagery. I was immersed in the role of a criminal genius. Genius, ha. I should have stuck my head on a tee and let Jack Nickalus use it to try out a new driver.

I drove up California Street and found a fifteen-minute parking place on Post Street, next to Shreve and Company. I had a job there in high school, polishing silver place settings. It took about two and a half months to go from the 'Petite Rose' all the way around the counter to the 'French Baroque.' Not a very intellectually stimulating occupation. When they promoted me to the head duster of Ming China, I quit --- there was too much pressure.

I walked up Grant Avenue and stood in front of the pillars that identify the entrance to Chinatown. The pillars were a gift to the citizens of Chinatown from the producers of "Flower Drum Song" for allowing them to use the annual New Year's Parade in their film.

Thousands of people pass the columns everyday on their way up Grant Avenue into Chinatown. I could drive right up to one of the pillars, drop George, and be on my way. I liked the association of Chang and Chinatown. But this was a one man job and I had a three-man rock. Getting George from the car to the pillars posed too many problems. With the heavy traffic and stream of tourists, it didn't take much imagination to see myself propping George up against the bottom of a pillar and then being bathed in the amber

lights of a police car. The Chinatown Gates got a five on a scale of one to ten.

At the top of California Street, I pulled into the large, circular driveway of the Fairmont Hotel and parked at the curb. A bright red carpet dangles out of the front door like a giant tongue, runs down several steps, under a canopy and drips over the lip of the sidewalk. I pictured some unsuspecting tourist stepping on it and being snapped into the lobby, luggage and all, like a fly in the clutches of a monstrous toad.

The Fairmont wasn't lacking for service. I was besieged. Two bellhops were at my door in a flash. A huge doorman dressed in a full white tuxedo, complete with top hat and cane, came up to my window and tipped his hat grandly. "May I help you?"

Quickly, I analyzed the situation. There is no way I could get George discreetly past the forward guard of bellhops and doormen. "May I help you?" The doorman repeated.

I covered my can of beer and rolled down the window. "Have you seen an incredibly ugly woman, about four-foot-nine, two hundred and eighteen pounds, in shiny yellow slacks and a lime top, with a K-Mart shopping bag and black and gold sneakers?"

The doorman wiped his brow with the back of his hand as he looked at me with pity. "No, I don't believe I've seen anyone fitting... uh... that

description."

"Thanks. I guess the old bat's gone shopping."

I waved good-bye. In my rear view mirror, I watched the doorman repeat my description to the two bellhops. I scratched the Fairmont Hotel off my list.

Coit Tower proved more promising. It had been constructed with funds donated by Mrs. Lilly Hitchcock Coit as a tribute to the bravery of fire-fighters everywhere. Coit Tower is a large, circular column over three hundred feet high and very phallic in appearance. Although it resembles a giant erection, it is intended to depict the nozzle of an old-fashioned fire hose. Up close, it does. But, from a distance it looks more like the former than the latter and it receives its fair share of lascivious remarks from natives and tourists alike.

I got out of the car and walked around the bottom of the giant nozzle. At its base was a perfect spot for George.

Coit Tower filled all my prerequisites. It was dramatic, famous, and there would be little or no traffic at night. I underlined it on my list.

From Green Street I made a right onto Broadway, passing all the topless joints. At the stoplight on Broadway and Columbus, I looked at empty spot were Carol Doda's breasts once blinked on and off in bright pink neon. Now those were land marks.

On the top of Hyde Street, I waited with the rest of the traffic to make my way down Lombard, known as "the crookedest street in the world."

Jerry had staged an illegal skateboard race there in June. He'd had challenged a group of kids from a skateboarding club. Telly and I lost a \$100 apiece betting against Jerry and Skitter. But, Skitter was no more. I snickered.

Lombard Street had an extra advantage. If I put George right at the top, any imaginative photographer could snap a picture of George and have Coit Tower, the Pyramid Building and the tip of the San Francisco Bay Bridge as a background. Very front page. Nels would like it. A honk behind me broke my reverie. I went down Lombard, executing turn after turn after turn. I rated Lombard an eight with special marks for photogenic possibilities.

I followed the Powell Street cable car down to Ghirardelli Square and Fisherman's Wharf. The Wharf and the Porpoise had a nice ring. I had a fresh crab cocktail and another Heineken. I spent a couple of hours just walking around. Nothing struck my fancy. Even a marginal site failed to present itself. The Wharf is a beautiful setting, but I'd have to bring George too far or be too exposed for too long. I scratched the Wharf off of my DOL list.

I looked at my watch. Three o'clock, still plenty of time to check my other --- THREE O'CLOCK, oh shit! I flew to the nearest phone.

I only had two dimes. Don't do it, phone. Don't GOBBLE my change or

I'll have to buy another bullet for my gun. It didn't.

"Hello."

"Hi, Mia. This is Peter. I am sooo sorry...."

"Who??" Brrrrr, icy chill, very cold. Glacial.

"Mia, please, there is so much going on, I'm really sorry, I just forgot," I said meekly.

"Oh? Forgot what, Peter?"

"Our lunch date at Tadich's?" I was perplexed.

"Oh, did we have a lunch date. Today?" Pregnant pause. "Oh, I must have forgotten too. How silly of me."

She'd forgotten too. I felt relief. The pressure was off. "Of course I forgot, Peter. I didn't go to Tadich's, stand drinking two glasses of white wine looking like some lush in heat while every creep in the Financial District tried to put the make on me. No, I probably won't die of ptomaine poisoning because I had to wolf down a hot dog so I could get back to work on time. Only a jackass would do that, and said jackass would be pissed, Mr. Tuelly. Em... yes, pissed is the definitive term."

She hadn't forgotten.

"Mia, I am really sorry. You wouldn't believe what's been happening to me the past few days. I don't know what I'm doing."

"If you're writing a book, make it a mystery and keep me out of it."

"Mia, please. Since the first time I saw you, I've really wanted to ..." Oh, my god, I almost told her what I really wanted to do to her. "Get to know you better. You know... as a person." Peter, you are beyond lame; turn on the charm. Be funny. "Mia, I prostrate myself, I am your servant, your slave, your wish is my command. You may pick three free gifts from my S & M catalogue. Pick something painful, I deserve it. Can't we have dinner tonight, please? I need a friend. I grovel at your feet. I'm a good groveler. Please?"

Her wrath waned. "S & M catalogue? Sounds kinda kinky." When she said kinky, there was a smile in her voice.

"It is. But I never bring it out until a second date."

"Don't push your luck, buster. You already blew your first date with me."

"Mia, please, let's have dinner tonight?"

"Well, against my better judgment, but you do sound contrite. Okay, meet you in front of work about five-fifteen. You do know where I work, don't you?"

"Sure, sure, I know Jerry's building, how could I forget."

"You forgot Tadich's pretty easily."

Foot, stay out of mouth.

"Speaking of Jerry, have you heard from him?"

"No, no one has. Our boss talked with one of the reps in Seattle yesterday and they'd all met. But no word since then. I promise I'll have him call you as soon as I hear from him. Excuse me, Peter, someone just came in, gotta go. See you at five-fifteen." She put the phone down gently. The chill in her voice was gone.

I felt like a louse. I've never stood anyone up in my life. I'd been the standee on several occasions, but never the standor. I knew what Mia was feeling. In the 8th grade I had a gigantic crush on a girl named Linda Garvey. It took me a whole party to muster up enough courage to ask her to dance. When I did, she said no. Twelve years later, I saw her at the wedding of a mutual friend. I walked over confidently and said, "Hi Linda would you like to dance?" She said, "Sure." I said, "Screw you." I felt much better, though I was glad Mia hadn't taken the same stance.

A date with Mia was just what I needed, a bright, glorious respite from all this. I regrouped. Mia had upset my priorities. Bound and determined, I continued my trek. I left the Wharf and drove to the Golden Gate Bridge. In any kind of weather, the bridge is awe-inspiring. The beautiful day only made it more so. I crossed the bridge, parked at Lookout Point and gazed back at the skyline of the City. San Francisco rivals any city in the world for pure beauty, and the Golden Gate Bridge is the ultimate compliment. It had to be the Golden Gate Bridge. The bridge was known all over the world; the bridge had

style. It had to be here.

I drove back across the bridge and parked in the South parking lot next to a fleet of tourist buses. For the next hour and a half, I walked around considering different locations. With a criminally artistic eye for background, I found my site. George would be placed directly under, and to the right of the statue of Joseph Strauss, the man who engineered the span. George would look sensational on the front page with the Golden Gate Bridge in the background. I could hear the cameras clicking. I could see the T.V. cameras as they panned past George and out across San Francisco Bay for that special panoramic effect. I was happy. Nels would be delighted, and Mia's going to be pissed again if I don't get my rear in gear, I thought, looking at my watch.

All decisions made, I tore up my DOL list and with a theatrical gesture, tossed the scraps into the air and watched them blow towards the bay.

"Mommy, mommy that man's a litter bug," some little kid in Batman t-shirt shouted behind me. The kid was right. I started to explain, but his mother pulled his left arm out of its socket in the other direction. "Come along, Thomas." The kid protested. His mother whispered loud enough for me to hear. "There are a lot of strange people around."

"Alan, Alan it's been ages."

Alan Muniz Jr. had picked up the phone on the first ring. He recognized the high pitched voice of Nels Andersen immediately. He thought of Francis Fural in the other room. If genetic engineers could raise Fural's voice four octaves and lower Andersen's four octaves then we might get something approaching the norm, he laughed to himself.

"Yes it has been a quite a while, how are you Nels?"

Alan Muniz Jr. was in no mood for an extended conversation with Nels Andersen. The only time they spent more than a moment together was at his father's funeral, years earlier.

"What have you been doing, Nels?"

"Busy, busy, trying to solve the theft of your father's statue."

Don't try to hard, Muniz thought.

"I have some good news though."

"You do?" I can hardly restrain myself.

"Yes, the police do not believe that the statue has been stolen after all."

"They don't?" Muniz said suspiciously.

"No they think it's been lost."

"Lost?"

"Misplaced actually."

Muniz stifled a laugh. "Do they now?" Well, they're wrong. "How is the rest of the family taking the loss?"

I am the rest of the family, you twit. I've got to end this conversation.

"I've been following your articles, Nels."

"Have you enjoyed them?" Nels Andersen tried to change his gleeful tone in mid-sentence and hurriedly added. "The whole episode has been horrible for us all, Alan."

Worst than you could ever imagine you jerk. "I noticed in your article you quoted me without speaking to me, Nels. That's a bit irregular, isn't it?"

"Well I've tried to reach you," Nels said defensively. "I got that from a newscaster, I hope you don't mind."

Alan Muniz Jr. said nothing.

"I was hoping to get an interview with you, Alan. Something for tomorrow's edition. After all your father and I were quite close."

Close my ass, Muniz sneered into the phone. "Print what ever you want, Nels. That seems to be your practice anyway."

Nelvin Andersen flipped. "Listen you pampered little--- I told your father a hundred times he was raising a spoiled, pompous, egotistical little bastard. You never gave a damn about anyone else in your whole life..."

Nels Andersen continued the tirade for several minutes before he

realized the line was dead. He rolled his chair into the wall of his cubicle at the Call Bulletin.

He's right about the quote, Andersen admitted to himself. I never should have put that into the article without speaking to him. But something else is askew. Muniz has more than a vested interest in keeping the 'Flying Porpoise' on the front page. Why not grant me an interview? When I told him the statue may be lost he seemed indifferent. In fact, he seemed certain that it wasn't lost. Nels fumbled with an envelope and a silver, dagger-shaped letter opener. Nels suddenly stood with a start. Chang and Muniz --- could they be in this together? A well executed ruse with me as the victim? The fall guy. Andersen stabbed down with the letter opener just missing his open palm.

VI

Les Collier was working up a good sweat in his make shift gym which took up most of the small basement apartment. "Eighty-two, eighty-three..." Checking his reflection in a mirror, he continued to pump twelve pound weights in both hands. A television in the corner of the room was showing a video of Wrestle Mania. Les had seen the tape daily for months. He didn't care. He loved it. He and his brother had a dream of opening their own gym someday.

“Look at this!” His brother Mark flew through the door and shoved the newspaper picture of the ‘Flying Porpoise’ in front of his face.

Les kept on pumping. "Ninety-seven, ninety-eight---"

Mark gave him a slap on the cheek. "Damn it Les, will you look at this."

Les stared. He stopped counting and pumping. The weights dropped to the floor at the same moment Les' mouth dropped open.

"We helped those guys. One of ‘em had a bad back, remember?"

Mark remembered. "And they got us to carry it for them. Our finger prints are all over the thing."

Big as he was, Les was scared. "We going to jail?"

Mark put his arm around his younger brother. "Right, bro. That's exactly where we're going."

VII

"You’re my soul and my heart's inspiration," I sang aloud with the Righteous Brothers as I sped down Doyle Drive into San Francisco. Mia looked stunning in a royal purple mid-length skirt, a long-sleeved white blouse and a yachtsman's cap with white and purple trim. Coal, black hair cascaded from under her cap. I was smitten. I wished I'd had a chance to use SLUT

again. I wondered what it would suggest to do with a beautiful woman, on an incredible day. I'd trust my imagination.

"Hi, there, going to be in town long, sailor?" She jumped in the car with a warm smile. She should have been a toothpaste ad.

"Been at sea for six months, just in town for some R&R, lady."

Her smile disappeared. Why do women do that? They smile. You go from attention to at ease. You think you're safe, out of trouble, that they may have forgotten your most recent social blunder and then they pull the string on the Venetian blinds with a zap and the sun disappears.

"Easy, I'm not even sure I should be talking to you, let alone allowing you to take me some place very expensive for dinner. I still want to know why you stood me up for lunch." She patted her skirt and pushed imaginary hairs from her eyes. "And even if you lie sailor, you'd better make it a good one."

VIII

Mark Collier shuffled nervously in front of Lieutenant Hourigan. Les Collier was fascinated by the array of boats and had to be constantly brought back into the conversation.

"...and the statue wasn't covered with anything?" Hourigan asked.

Mark looked at his brother for help, but Les was busy picking lint off

the rigging of a model clipper ship. "No, Sir." Mark managed.

"Do you think you could give one of our artists a description?"

Les turned from the models. "Yep, and a damn good one."

Hourigan sighed and called to Patrolwoman Wisely in the outer office.

She entered with a salute.

"Wisely, take these two men down to Comoski. Then get the composites to the next briefing and a copy to Nels Andersen at the Call Bulletin."

Wisely, clicked her heels and came to attention. "Yes, Sir. I'll usher these men downstairs, then hop on my bike and peddle my---"

"Do you have any questions?" Hourigan sighed

"No, Sir. None, Sir." She motioned the Collier brothers and led them out of the office. Hourigan leaned back in his chair and glanced at the clipper ship Les had been fiddling with. Just like wet paint or wet concrete, someone always has to touch them. His musings were interrupted by a beep. He hit the intercom button. "Hourigan."

Officer Evans was excited. "I've got a picture of the blond that visited Muniz this morning. And Sir, she's a knock out."

Hourigan closed his eyes and dropped his chin on his chest in frustration. "What color eyes?"

"Blue, I think. But it's hard to tell."

"How tall is she?"

"She could play center for any woman's basketball team, Sir."

"What is she wearing?"

"Maybe I should bring up the photo. I'm right downstairs."

"Officer Evans, that is an excellent idea. Why didn't I think of that?"

"You've got a lot on your mind, Lieutenant. Now me, I've--"

Hourigan hit the switch.

IX

Mia didn't look thrilled as I escorted her into Speckman's delicatessen on Church Street. I pointed to the display case. "See anything you like?

Macaroni salad? Pig's feet?"

I got the 'look.' The This-is-IT? This is where you're taking me to dinner look. Laughing, I took her arm and ushered her through a couple of racks of chips and dips and up the secret ramp to the upstairs restaurant. Fifteen steps and you're in Heidelberg, Germany. The waitresses wear peasant dresses. The food unbelievable. The Rhone wines world class.

We found a quite nook. Mia waited until we'd ordered, and the wine had been sniffed, tasted, sipped and our glasses clinked. "Okay, Peter why did you stand me up? And I would appreciate the truth."

I don't like lying, but the big lie seems easier. You can always get out of it with a... 'You have to be kidding. I thought no one would fall for that one.' Little lies seem to hurt more.

I was juggling my alternatives when I took a sip of wine and looked into Mia's eyes. The white flecks seemed to dance. They were almost hypnotic. I don't know what possessed me. But, before salad was served, I told her the truth. The whole story poured out, the night, the guard, the golf cops, the reporter, the Golden Gate Bridge, everything. I was bleary-eyed, hoarse, I was a kid on my mother's knee crying, "Poor me." I looked at Mia. Her eyes were glazed. She attempted a smile. I was dismal.

They say confession is good for the soul, bull. Confession never made me feel better. Confessions are for confessionals, not your friends. Now I'd burdened Mia with my problems. A tear appeared on each of her cheeks. She was so sensitive, understanding, and empathetic. She was making a physical effort to try and restrain herself. I felt horrible.

Then it began, a short tee followed by a longer hee. She was gone. Her laughter filled the restaurant. She was electric. "And you named it George?"

"George," I nodded caught up in the moment and starting howl.

"George? Why not Oliver?"

"Oliver?"

"Oliver Stone." Get it?

We laughed on and on. One of us would get under control, look at the other and be off again. We gasped for air.

"Peter, my god," she roared. "Oh, I think I wet my pants," she stammered. "Ho ho ha ha," we couldn't stop.

From separate corners a waiter and waitress sidled over to our nook. I knew they were going to ask us to leave; who would blame them? We were loud. Laughing much too loud. The waitress leaned over close, "Can we share some of whatever you've been smoking?"

"Smoking?" Mia laughed. "What we've been smoking?" She looked into my eyes and we were off on laughing binge again. Her laugh was infectious. A couple to our right joined in. I don't remember laughing so long or hard. I was hurting and so was Mia.

"Sailor, when you tell a girl a story, you tell a story." She was still laughing gently. "Okay Peter, I don't care what really happened; it's probably none of my business anyway. I forgive you." She reached over and caressed my hand. "What an imagination. What a tale."

I looked at her blankly. Her eyes widened. The white flecks in each eye expanded. Her lashes almost touched the bill of her Yachting cap. "Oh, my god...it wasn't a lie. Was it?" She grabbed my arm dragging my elbow across a basket of German Brown Bread and peered directly into my eyes; doubt

remained.

"Peter, you made that whole thing up didn't you?... Tell me you were lying." She pulled my wrist. "It was an excuse. A story. Wasn't it?" Her fingers tightened.

"Mia, I never should have involved you."

"IT'S NOT A LIE." She screamed. Every head in the restaurant did a quick swivel. "I don't believe it. Peter, I love it. How exciting. It's wonderful."

I sat there dumfounded.

She moved her chair next to mine, and put an arm around my shoulder.

"Peter, I must be honest, I was miffed about lunch, but now I understand. Where's the 'Flying Porpoise'?"

"In the back seat of my car."

"That lump in that hideous bed spread is George? Are you out of your mind?"

"Probably, but it isn't your problem."

"You're worried about ME?" I got a hug and an honest kiss on my cheek. "Peter, you wouldn't believe my life. It's been so drab ---

"That's what Jerry said."

"To hell with him. You have to get rid of the statue."

"I know that. I have a pretty good plan. Tomorrow I'm going to---"

Mia dabbed a napkin across her lips and rose. "Come on, pay the bill sailor, I've decided."

"Decided what?"

"My place. We're going to my place."

Any woman anywhere who invites a male to 'My Place' has any man anywhere dreaming about the invitation.

"Don't get any wild ideas. One, I don't sleep around. Two, you are in deep trouble. Three, I want to be part of it. Now please take me back to my car."

I drove to the Stockton Street garage and parked next to her olive green M.G. I held the car door open for her. "Nice car," I said in all honesty.

"Thank you, Sir."

"Give me the directions," I asked politely.

Mia flung her yachting cap onto the passenger seat and got behind the wheel. "It's too hard to explain." She turned on the ignition. "Just follow me." She spun out of the garage, past Union Square and up Market Street.

A woman says my place. Follow me and any normal man's mercury begins to rise. Despite her warning my mind was filled with erotic imagery.

Sure, I'd only been divorced officially for a couple of weeks; I hadn't touched a woman in six months. Mia had set the parameters for the evening and I would respect them. But I still decided to flirt with my car. I nuzzled her

bumper at each stop light. I blinked my lights and honked my horn at every opportunity as we raced through the streets of San Francisco.

I followed the M.G. into a carport in Diamond Heights. “You can park over there, Peter.” Mia pointed to an empty stall at the far end of the garage. “They’re on vacation.”

I pulled in backward. Mia reached my car as I was locking the door. “I can’t believe you’ve been driving around with that,” she gestured to the back seat, “for two days.” She gave me the old ‘how-can-you-be-so-dumb’ look.

It was dumb.

“May I see it?” She batted her eyes.

I was no match for a good eye batting. I opened the back door and rather dramatically unveiled George’s head.

“Peter, he’s beautiful!” Her eyes shone.

Under her gaze, I was Gumby. And as it does so often, my engorged ego overwhelmed my limp brain. Within seconds, I had George completely exposed for Mia’s inspection. The garage lighting gave the statue a shimmering, translucent air. Mia strokes the marble. I was envious.

An eerie glint flashed in Mia’s eyes. “It’s a shame you have to give it back so soon.” I looked at her warily. “Just kidding. What kind of woman do you think I am?”

I was still hoping.

“Sorry about the mess,” she said ushering me into her immaculate apartment. “I wasn’t really expecting company. Vodka’s in the top cupboard. Would you mind making the drinks? I’ll be back in a minute.” She disappeared through a door.

Please change into something more comfortable, I crossed my hands in fervent prayer. Something slightly revealing.

I made vodka tonics. Sliced up a lime, squeezed in some juice, put a wedge on the lip of each glass and checked out her apartment. It was compact, painted a light coral with blush red wall-to-wall carpeting. The kitchen was small, but it included a breakfast nook with a view of the bay and the Oakland hills. A serving counter separated the kitchen from the living room. A low white sofa rested in the center of the living room facing a brick fireplace. One wall was almost completely covered by stacks of records and tapes surrounding a state of the art stereo system. Against the far wall was the biggest hat rack I’ve ever seen. At least sixty wooden dowels had been drilled into a huge peg-board and from each hung a hat. There were fedoras, sombreros, berets, panamas, a pith helmet, a Shiner’s fez, a slightly bent mortarboard, a yarmulke, sun and Easter bonnets, two homburgs, a bowler and smack dab in the middle a dunce cap. Framing the entire creation were the baseball caps of every team in the American and National Leagues.

Mia caught me holding a pale yellow sunbonnet with a long white ribbon. “I’ve got a purse and shoes to match if you want to borrow those.”

I tried to hide my disappointment. She had freshened her lipstick, but hadn’t changed.

Mia read my eyes. “Come on, Peter. What did you expect? One, I am not a one night stand. Two, you have a very expensive problem sitting on the back seat of your car. Three, I want to be part of the adventure. Lastly, Peter, please tell me you don’t want me to take you bed out of sympathy?”

I was ashamed and embarrassed. The idea had crossed my mind.

Mia sat on the floor next to the sofa. Stan Getz was blowing a soft sax over her stereo. She patted the carpet next to her hip. I sat. “Let’s discuss the matter at hand.” She sipped her vodka tonic and began what I later realized was a sales pitch. “The statue must weigh a few hundred pounds.”

“At least.”

“Then,” she flexed her muscles. “I come from strong Italian stock. You’ll need some help getting it out of the car.”

“Maybe.”

“It took two of you to steal it, didn’t it?”

“Three, actually.”

“There you are. And what about a lookout?”

“Lookout? For what?”

“All great crooks have a lookout. In fact.” Mia turned her head abruptly, her black hair flipped around almost obscuring her face. I could still see her eyes. “Any great criminal or gangster worth his salt has a Moll and I’m applying for the position.”

“I’m not involving you in this.”

“I am involved. I want to be a part of it.” She leaned in close, eye to eye. We were also lip to lip. She noticed I noticed. She backed off an inch or two and continued. “Come on Peter, we’ll be Bonnie and Clyde, Napoleon and Josephine, Zelda and Bruce.”

“Zelda and Bruce?”

“Just wanted to see if you were paying attention.”

I was though I wasn’t to sure I liked the direction her conversation was taking. I had enough to worry about.

“Besides, I owe it to Jerry. He deserves it. I’m certain he told you about my recent promotion.” She turned giving me a quizzical look.

“No he didn’t. Congratulations. That’s wonderful.”

Mia ‘hurmped’ me a rose. “May I fix you another drink?”

“Yeah. Sure. Tell me about your promotion.” I followed her into the kitchenette.

“Jerry really didn’t tell you?” She held the bottle of vodka high above

my glass and arched an eyebrow.

“No.”

“About a month ago,” Mia poured a more than liberal shot in both of our glasses, “Jerry spun into my office with a rose and long congratulatory speech on ‘MY’ promotion. ‘Wasn’t I surprised?’ he asked. I was stunned. He went on and on. How I did the most work. Put in the extra hours. How I deserved the promotion.....and how he didn’t.” Mia gave me a sad look. “Peter, actually I was feeling terrible. Almost guilty. Jerry worked hard too. I knew he wanted the promotion. You know Jerry’s angelic face. I thought he might burst into tears. I felt awful. I wanted to win, but not at Jerry’s expense.”

Drinks in hand we returned to the carpet. Mia hit some gizmo and her gas fire place came to life. Mama Cass of the Mama’s and Papa’s broke into ‘Dream a Little Dream of Me.’ I hipped in real close to Mia.

“Jerry was a whirlwind,” she said. “He helped me box all of the things in my office. He called a stock boy to bring up a moving cart. Together they collected my pictures and packed all of my personal effects. Then Jerry officiously shook my hand and told me there would NEVER be any hard feelings between us. I’d lead the team. Been the most productive. He’d hugged me and planted a rather passionate kiss on my cheek.”

I could picture Jerry's lips on Mia's cheek. Lucky bastard.

"He pushed me out the door and told me to go to the eighth floor, room 811. Your new home, he promised."

She took a long sip of her drink. "I stood there banging on the door for fifteen minutes. One of our custodians came up to me and asked 'what I was trying to do? 'Trying to get into my new office,' I told him. He broke into a conniption fit. 'Your new office?' he roared pointing to room 811. 'I doubt it, lady. That's the Executive Men's Room.' I was confused. I thought I'd misunderstood the room number so I took the elevator back downstairs."

My vodka tonic stopped half-way down my throat. I gagged. "Jerry is a prick."

"Worse," Mia continued. "I'd only been gone twenty minutes. By the time I returned to our office there were five men there. Two were tearing up the carpet and the other three were pulling out rollers and paint brushes and mixing paint. One of the guys in paint-splattered coveralls handed me a note. It said something like: Hi Mia, one of the mucky-mucks decided we deserved a do-over. Glad we're still a team. See you after lunch, Jer." Mia looked at me shyly. "That's one of the reasons I tried to warn you Sunday morning."

"And the other?"

"I like you and I'm glad you're single," she said hurriedly. "Please let me help you with the 'Flying Porpoise'. It there is a curse, I know some terrific

incantations.”

“Really?”

“Got a D+ in Voodoo 1A.” She crossed her heart. “Besides the Golden Gate Bridge isn’t far from here…… so…… am I in?”

I must have nodded, because the next thing I knew she was in my arms. She fit perfectly. We kissed. It was spontaneous. The most natural thing in the world. Wonderful.

“Thank you,” I smiled as we eased apart.

Her face had a slight sheen. We sat in silence for several moments looking into each other’s eyes. Mia tried to hide a yawn.

“Must be the company,” I teased.

“No way,” Mia glanced at her watch. “This has been an incredible evening, but it’s 2 a.m.” She rose quickly and disappeared into the other room, returning seconds later with sheets, blankets and a pillow. “But, tonight you sleep in here,” she pointed to the couch. There was something of an invitation on her face, but I didn’t pursue it. The night had been fantastic, without tension. I felt at ease, comfortable. I wasn’t going to blow it.

CHAPTER 6 WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 15, 1979

I

Alan Muniz Jr. watched from the kitchen door as Francis Fural, rat fink and squealer came in with the paper. For the first time in three days he was unaccompanied. Muniz was glad the ritual had been broken.

"You making breakfast?" Fural was hungry.

Go buff your tooth, Muniz thought. "In due time, Francis."

"In due time," Fural muttered out the door.

Muniz turned to the sporting green as the phone rang.

"You're off the hook," Lieutenant Hourigan said.

Whose? Muniz thought.

"I know you'll be thrilled to hear this. Two young men came into my office yesterday with a very interesting story. They said they helped put your statue into the back of an Austin Healy late Saturday night."

Muniz almost dropped the phone. "Have you made an arrest?" Muniz made a conscious effort to keep desperation from his voice.

"Not quite."

Muniz sighed with relief.

"They're just kids. But they gave us good descriptions. And now we have composite drawings."

"That should make your job easier." Muniz tried to make his voice sound eager. If they catch the thieves, Andrea will make sure I never have children.

"With a little luck and some good police work, we'll probably have the culprits in custody this afternoon. You'd like that wouldn't you, Mr. Muniz?"

Muniz paused a moment too long.

"Wouldn't you?"

"Of course. That would be wonderful, Lieutenant."

"You wouldn't know anything about two men and an Austin Healy, would you, Mr. Muniz?"

I'm being baited, Muniz thought ignoring the query. "I appreciate all the trouble you've gone to, Lieutenant. You've demonstrated great investigative prowess."

Andrea will have Francis break my legs, then throw me off the Golden Gate Bridge --- maybe the Bay Bridge, it's closer. If the police get to these guys before I do. What am---

"You don't sound very enthusiastic, Mr. Muniz."

"Oh, but I am, Lieutenant. I'm very encouraged by your progress. But I'll wait until you have my father's statue in your hands before I jump up and down and shout hallelujah."

"Cute. You're very cute."

If Hourigan catches them, and Andrea Convee catches me, singing hallelujah may still be possible. But jumping up and down won't. Think. They have two eye witnesses. How can I -- "Lieutenant, would you be kind enough to give me the names of the witnesses?"

"I can't give you any information during the investigation, Mr. Muniz."

"Lieutenant, we both know that it takes a special breed of man to step forward and give information in these matters. In my father's memory and on behalf of my family I would like to send a check their way. Perhaps, if people were rewarded monetarily for giving information, the police wouldn't find it so hard to get cooperation from the public."

"For the first time in this investigation Mr. Muniz you're making sense. This might be too early in the investigation, but if you're feeling charitable please go ahead. They're the Collier brothers."

"Pardon?"

"The witnesses for God's sake."

"Of course."

Muniz jotted down the names and number on the side of the sports page. "And by the way, Lieutenant, cancel the watchdog in front of my house or you will be hearing from my attorney." Muniz hung up the phone. Witnesses, composite drawings damn it. The police are moving too fast. I've got to get to that statue.

Muniz paced around cooking area in the center of the kitchen. Gallagher doesn't have it. I knew it wasn't lost. I can only hope that I'll get a response to the advertisement I placed in the paper. So for now this is my only link. Muniz fondled the scrap of paper where he had written the Collier brothers number. He took a 3x5 card from the recipe box and began a list of questions.

- 1. Brothers\ why did the thieves need help?**
- 2. What about the Austin Healy**
 - a. color**
 - b. make**
- 3. Anything else about the thieves???**

He reached for the phone. Shit two kids are my only hope for survival.

II

The pompous son-of-a-bitch! Cancel the watchdog my ass. Lieutenant Hourigan leaned against the bullet proof window of his office idly rubbing the hole left years ago by an irate parolee with a twenty-caliber "midnight special."

Officer Evans sat at Hourigan's desk flipping through the third book of mug shoots. Four more albums were stacked to his left. "They're all starting to

look alike, Lieutenant."

"Keep the faith," Hourigan said. "A few years from now they'll be computerized. Just punch in the basic statistics and the hood will pop out on the screen."

Evans shuffled the two photos he'd taken outside the Muniz home the day before. "God this guy's ugly," Evans dropped the photo of Francis Fural on Hourigan's desk. By general consensus, Fural had been christened 'Gold Fang.' Evans kept his fingers on the edge of the photo of Andrea Convee. "She's really something."

"So I noticed. Keep searching," Hourigan said. "I know they're both in there somewhere."

His desk occupied, Lieutenant Hourigan sat down in a high back chair cowboy style facing the bullet hole.

I should have joined the Texas Rangers, he thought. First it's stolen. Then it's lost on 101. And now I've got two eye witnesses that say they carried the damn thing into the back of a Healy. His mind wandered. He ran the palm of his hand over his flat top. I need a hair cut. I've got to get a new spinnaker for the 'Lady.' And I should give Nels a call and give him an update. He's been a big help. A grin crossed Hourigan's face as he watched Patrolwoman Carol Wisely come through the far door of the outer office.

"Here comes trouble." Hourigan laughed.

"Lieutenant?"

"Wisely's heading our way."

"The Shark." Evans whispered and began humming the theme from Jaws.

Wisely bulled her way through the outer office. Loose papers and

pencils flew to the floor in her wake. She burst through Hourigan's door. Stomped across the floor and dropped the stack of composite drawings on the desk.

"I want a transfer, Lieutenant," Wisely said. All five feet one inch of her stood tense and defiant. "I want to be a cop. Not a secretary. I want to be involved. Put me on traffic detail. Maybe I can give someone a goddamn ticket."

Hourigan watched her grey eyes flash. A row of freckles twitched across the bridge of her nose as each word clipped between the sharpest, whitest teeth Hourigan had ever seen. The Shark is aptly named, he thought.

"Well? Do I get a transfer?"

"Immediately, Officer Wisely."

Wisely hadn't expected such a prompt response. She blinked several times and accepted her fate. "Thank you, Sir."

"You are hereby assigned to the theft of the 'Flying Porpoise'."

The promotion took a beat to register. Wisely's knees buckled. She breathed deeply and forced herself into a professional posture. "Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

"We need these composites distributed," Hourigan said, returning the stack of drawings. "Get them out to all the briefing sessions. I want a copy in every patrol car. Deliver the rest to the media."

Wisely bristled. Hourigan you con-artist, she thought. I'm right back where I started. "Oh, thank you, thank you, Lieutenant." Wisely curtsied. "Should I requisition a bicycle, Sir?"

Evans tried to smother a hoot.

"Not you, damn it. Delegate, for Christ sake! I just assigned you to this case. And you'd better get out of here before I change my mind."

Wisely started for the door.

Evans motioned her over. "Hey Wisely, how about a cup of coffee before you go?"

"Stuff it, Evans."

III

I awoke the next morning semi-erect. It felt good. I could smell Mia on the pillow case. The entire evening flashed through my mind. But, in the light of day I was very leery about including her in everything."

"I am finished showering," she called through a crack in the bedroom door. "Bathroom's all yours."

I discussed my fears with her as we got ready for work. Mia was having none of it. She adamantly refused to be left out of the adventure.

"I'll squeal," she teased over coffee in the breakfast nook.

"A fine accomplice you turned out to be."

"Moll," she said.

"Not yet."

Mia ignored my retort and went on with plans for the evening. "You have enough to worry about. Big a Mamma is a gonna make you a lasagna dinner," she kissed her fingers, "primo, gonna knock you out. We gonna have a lotsa garlic bread, keepa the werewolves away, and nice a bottle of vino. Then, when it's a good and dark, we two crooks go to the Golden Gate a Bridge, droppa the goods and come back here and a watcha the news on T.V. Eh, whatta you think, Boss."

"Any good crook worth his salt..." I clanked her coffee cup with mine, "should have a Moll."

In the car port, we kissed slowly and drove away separately.

On my way to work, I sang along with the radio, hummed and occasionally a smirk would cross my lips as I recalled the previous night. The traffic was awful but it didn't faze me. I was content. I was happy. I was a moron.

Half way down the ramp to the Stevenson garage I remembered I hadn't been home. My stupid badge was still back at the condo. A cluster of curses flashed through my mind. I wouldn't let Kevin Stiller ruin a perfect morning on protocol. My brain went into high gear. Kevin wouldn't remember that I had taken a day off yesterday. With any luck, he spent last evening in deep rapport with a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label. My entire consciousness was focused on my I.D. badge. Kevin didn't even mention it as I stopped. Wide-eyed, he stared directly into the back seat of my car. "Peter, just what the hell is that thing?" His finger pressed against the back window.

My head flipped backward. My lust crazed hands had failed me last night. The blanket had fallen off George's head. Six inches of marble was exposed. Mostly the fin. It poked out like a good sized barb above the sequined heart of Jerry's bedspread. Kevin's head bobbed back and forth between me and the statue.

My brain did a cartwheel. I tried my power of suggestion. Kevin, Kevin, I thought with all the brainpower I could muster, I have no badge, Kevin forget the damn rock. I am nude. I have sinned. Make a scene, forget the statue. As a telepath, I stunk.

"I told you it's a gift for my mother-in-law. I was just airing it."

"Oh, I see," he nodded understandingly.

I couldn't believe it. He was satisfied.

"Oh, ho, we've forgotten something again, haven't we?"

The 'we' word again. He sounded like a kindergarten teacher scolding a five-year-old.

But I'd come to class prepared for that question. "Yes, they took my permanent away yesterday. Ethel is making me a new one." I gave a furtive glance around the garage, then whispered, "because of the promotion...You know." I gave him my best who-deserves-it-more smile. And mentally, thanked Mia for the alibi.

"Promotion?" He flushed. All the little broken capillaries on his face filled with blood.

Kevin Stiller building clarion, professional rumor-monger. He knew more about everyone than anyone. If he wanted, Kevin could have retired and lived off blackmail checks. He knew what was happening before it happened. How could I be promoted without someone telling him? I could read his mind. He was miffed. Someone had taken pruning shears and snipped his company grapevine.

"Oh, yes, of course, I remember. Your promotion." He nodded. His reputation was at stake. "Yes, well, Peter, I guess congratulations are in order."

I put my fingers across my lips, "nothing official yet, let's keep it mum."

"Nothing official," he winked, "Mum's the word, Peter." He rested his hands on the sides of his pot belly and went on. "You know, when I first heard the good news, I said to myself, who works harder than ---"

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TWO DOING," someone yelled behind us. "HOLDING A GODDAMN CONVENTION."

The red and white pole rose slowly. I drove into the garage knowing that the next ten cars through that barrier would hear about the pending promotion of Peter Tuelly.

It took me ten minutes to rewrap George.

I got another temporary card with less trouble than I expected. Ethel, the 'dump' wasn't at the counter. She was probably in the darkroom, force feeding drugs to some new employee. No one left that room with a decent picture.

I got my new card from Steven Mills, one of the few humans that worked in the Visitor & Employee Identification Office. He took one look at my rumpled slacks, shirt, tie and coat and correctly deduced that I hadn't been home for a day or two. "Get lucky, Peter?" He smiled knowingly.--- That knowing smile that all men know.

"Spent the night with a friend," I said honestly.

IV

Patrolwoman Carol Wisely eyed the pictures that Officer Evans had taken at the Muniz home the previous morning. Only a face a mother could love, Wisely thought, slipping the photo of Francis Fural under the picture of the tall, blond woman. She is beautiful. A natural blond, blue eyes, elegantly dressed. Wisely scanned Evans' report. Eight a.m. she arrives all made up, in a BMW, dressed to the nines. What is a woman like this --- We're looking in the wrong place. Wisely leapt from her desk and bolted down the hall.

V

Andrea Convee, in a gold lame blouse and black slacks, waited until Dharmesh Patel took his seat at the table, then nodded to the armed woman at the door, “Megan.”

Megan bowed slightly and threw a bolt. A loud CRACK echoed through the circular brick room.

Three of the four people at the table jumped at the sound. The last, Ria Obelea, a Filipino woman of indeterminate age, didn’t flinch. She watched carefully as Andrea sat in chair.

“The bidding will begin at four million,” Andrea said.

“Four and one half million,” a man of Arabic descent opened.

“Five million,” Dharmesh Patel raised.

Andrea looked across the table at Ria Obelea. Ria glared back at her and motioned to the Japanese man on her left. “I defer to Mr. Kumagai.”

The two women’s eyes locked.

“You do not wish to enter a bid?” Andrea asked.

“Andrea, dear. You are holding a most unusual auction. Usually, one has the opportunity to view the merchandise.”

“These are unusual circumstances,” Andrea hissed. “The Porpoise is said to carry a curse.” She gestured around the table. “Several people requested that it not be on display.”

“I understand,” Ria rose. “I believe I’ll wait for a private viewing.”

Andrea shoved her chair across the floor and rose. “You dare to question the integrity of the Circle?”

“On the contrary, my dear, I have every confidence in the ‘Circle’.” Ria walked to the door. Megan blocked her path. Ria clasped her hands and turned slowly to Andrea. “Regrettably, no one from the ‘Circle’ is here.” An

ice pick appeared her hand, she shoved it an inch from Megan's ear. "If you will not show me the statue, I will be leaving. Please tell this bitch to unbolt the door."

Andrea glared for several beats, then nodded. Megan threw the bolt.

"I too would like to see the porpoise," Dharmesh Patel said.

Andrea glared. Patel stood and walked to the open door. Kumagai and the Arabic man joined the exodus.

Two minutes later, alone in the empty brick room, Andrea screamed.

VI

The pile of Swiss cheese on the ledge was gathering mold. If they hadn't sealed the windows, I would have gotten a broom and swept it away. Though, from eleven stories, that could be dangerous. What a headline. "Man felled by a decaying, slice of Swiss."

I had missed two days of work. One physically; two mentally. On my desk, there was a lot of IN where there should have been OUT. I put my criminal career on the back burner and worked like a man possessed.

I was downstairs in a conference room, deeply engrossed in my tour calendar when a co-worker popped his head through the door.

"Peter, are you getting a promotion?"

At first, I thought he was making some snide remark about the blistering pace I had set for myself. Then it dawned on me. Kevin Stiller, the rumor-monger, was flexing his tentacles. He just had to know about my promotion. Good. Kevin had forgotten about George. I left my co-worker with 'no comment' and returned to my office. On my desk was a note from Mia.

Dear Peter,

**Good morning again. I have some good news,
more good news and some strange news. Meet me
at the fountain in Hyatt Plaza at twelve-thirty.**

Your Moll.

**P.S. I still haven't forgotten Tadich's. Please,
no sequels.**

P.P.S. I'll bring the munchies.

**My secretary, Eiaine, had come in to the office while I was
reading. The message was in her handwriting.**

"Divorced less than a week, moving rather quickly, aren't we."

"Eiaine, don't `we,' me."

**Eiaine has been with me for six years. She is a tall, attractive brunette.
The ultimate in prim and proper. She dresses impeccably and is without a
doubt, the most organized and efficient person I have ever met. Consequently,
she can be a royal pain in the buttocks.**

"It's from my sister, Molly."

**"Oh sure." She didn't move. Her eyebrows went up and down.
Something was on her mind. I didn't have to wait long. "Peter,...are you
getting a promotion?"**

**I give her a wink. Hell, if enough people thought I was about to be
promoted, I was open to a self-fulfilling prophecy. I should have done this
years ago. Maybe this company was run from the garage.**

**Eiaine left my office briskly. Now she had two juicy tidbits. People love
gossip. Add a dash of smut and you had yourself an item. I could hear Eiaine
telling the gang over coffee: 'Have I got a few yummy morsels. Item number 1.
With Peter's promotion, we will be moving upstairs to the new offices. Item
number two. Peter's got a girlfriend already.'**

I decided to leave it alone. Any denial would only embellish the rumors and Peter's got a girlfriend is easier to deal with than Peter's come out of the closet.

Wouldn't Eiaine love to have item number 3. 'Oh, incidentally, Peter's stolen a sculpture worth millions and he will be spending the next ten years in jail. We get the social committee to plan a visit.'

I left my office at noon. I called Nels Andersen from an undented phone bubble in the Hyatt Plaza and I was not greeted warmly. At least when he's mad, his voice was lower.

"Are you an acquaintance of Alan Muniz Jr.?" Nels demanded.

"Who?"

"Alan Muniz Jr."

Now what the hell was all this about? I thought. I decided to be honest. "I've talked to him on the phone."

"And?"

"And nothing. I was trying to give him back the statue and he hung up on me."

"That was all?"

"That was all." He was beginning to ruin a wonderful day. "What seems to be the problem, Nels?"

"I would hate to think that you and Mr. Muniz---"

"Whoa. Hold it. Mr. Andersen, you were the one that begged me to keep the statue for two more days. You wanted to be the one to FIND it. Do you want me to try Muniz again? I would be more than happy to give him a call. I have his number right here."

"Lord, no," Nels gasped. "Muniz is a pompous ass."

"My sentiments exactly. That's why I called you. Tell you what, let's call the whole thing off. I'll meet you in Call Bulletins parking lot in ten minutes with the statue."

"Mr. Chang, I apologize for my suspicions. There is no reason for us to be arguing like this."

"Agreed." He's driving me nuts, I thought. "Then we're all systems go. The 'Flying Porpoise' will be in your hands this evening."

"The photographer is standing by, everything is ready, Mr. Chang." His voice shot up an octave. I winched.

"I'm glad to hear it. As soon as it's in place I'll give you a call."

"Wonderful... and Mr. Chang...Thank You."

"It's been a pleasure, Mr. Andersen. I'm glad it all worked out."

I left the bubble whistling "Tonight Tonight," from "West Side Story."

*** * ***

Nels Andersen's call holding light blinked as he hung up the phone.

"Nels, it's Hourigan. Here's a scoop for all your help."

"I really haven't done much, Lieutenant."

"Don't be modest, Nels. Your list of possible 'fences' and shady art dealers has been invaluable. I'm just returning the favor."

"I appreciate it, Lieutenant."

"We have had a big break in the 'Flying Porpoise' case. It wasn't lost. We've gotten a description from two eye witnesses who helped the perps lift the statue into an Austin Healy Saturday night. Composite drawings are on their way to your office. Can you get them into tomorrow's edition?"

"COMPOSITE DRAWINGS?"

Hourigan shook his head to clear out the pain. "Nels, what is the matter with you?"

Andersen regained his composure quickly. "Nothing, Lieutenant. That's wonderful, tomorrow's edition, composite drawings. Thank you for the lead --- I'll be glad to." Nels put down the receiver. What have I done to Chang? Why hadn't Hourigan called five minutes earlier? If they arrest Chang before he gets the statue in place. Nels looked at his front pages articles. He almost wept.

*** * ***

Lieutenant Hourigan sat back, clasping his hands behind his neck. What the hell is going on? I finally get a break in this case and Muniz is furious and Andersen goes into a state of shock. Am I the only one who wants this case solved?

Hourigan's eyes widened. I assumed--- Hourigan slapped his forehead. "T.J.," he yelled through the open door. "See if there's any connection between Alan Muniz Jr. and Nelvin Andersen at the Call Bulletin."

VII

At 11:30 a.m., Alan Muniz Jr. finally reached the Collier brothers. "People like you make me proud to live in America," Muniz lied, holding the phone to his ear with one hand and filling a Waterford goblet with Cognac.

"Thank you Mr. Muniz," Mark Collier said. "We were only doing our civic duty."

"Stepping forward was a very courageous act," Muniz said with bravado.

"Well thank you, Sir."

"So, why did you help them?"

Mark Collier set down his bar-bells. "Hey. We didn't know they were stealing anything."

"I wasn't implying that, Mr. Collier. I was simply wondering why they asked you and your brother for assistance."

"Oh. They were kind of puny, if you know what I mean. My brother and me are body builders."

Muniz jotted 'puny' on his 3x5 card and continued. "Do you remember anything else besides the color and make of the car?" "I think we told the police everything. Hey, maybe Les remembers something else. LES?" Mark Collier screamed in Muniz's ear. "YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING ELSE ABOUT THOSE GUYS?"

Muniz could hear a distant response. He sipped the Cognac. It deadened the pain in his ear.

"Nah, he doesn't remember anything else. Hey, Mr. Muniz, I remember now they had a personalized license plate."

"Personalized?" Muniz panted. The Cognac slipped down his throat.

"Yeah, I remember. It was that John Wayne movie. El Cid or something like that."

That was Charlton Heston, you simpleton. "El Cid, Mr. Collier? Is that what was on the plate?"

"Well... something like that."

"Do you remember anything else?"

"Nope, that's about it."

"Are you sure?"

"Hey," he paused uneasily. "You sound like the cops."

"It's MY statue, Mr. Collier."

"Yeah, sure. I'd better give Lieutenant Hourigan a call."

Muniz choked. "What for?"

"Tell him about the license plate. Could be important."

"NO, no, no. You've done too much already. I call him for you."

"You sure it wouldn't be putting you out?"

"Absolutely certain. And Mr. Collier I will be sending you and your brother a little check for all your help."

"Hey, you don't have to ---"

You bet I don't have to, Muniz pressed the disconnect and redialed.

"Hank," Muniz cried cheerfully. "How are things up at the Department of Motor Vehicles?"

"Alan? Long time no hear."

"How are Betty and the kids, Hank?" What drivel, Muniz thought.

"We are all fine, Alan. Thanks for asking. How about you?"

I tried to steal my father's statue. A group of thugs are going to kill me. My nose doesn't work. And I haven't had sex since Andrea left me. "I'm doing fine."

"Good to hear, good to hear."

"Hank, I need a little favor. Some klutz in a late Healy dented my Mercedes in a Safeway parking lot ---"

"Didn't ruin the reception?"

"Reception?"

"You still have one of those car phones don't you?"

"Yes, it's very convenient. In any case ---"

"I've always wanted one of those phones."

Why the hell don't you buy one, you miser.

"But working for the government. Well you know."

"Hank," Muniz said in desperation. "A witness gave me a couple of letters of the license plate El Cid or something like that."

"El Cid? Wasn't Wayne the greatest? No one around like the old 'Duke' anymore. Nope no one like the 'Duke.'

The world is an insane asylum. "Would you run it through your computer and see if you can get a match?"

"Anything for you, Alan. You're having lots of problems these days, aren't you?"

"What?"

"I read about your father's statue and now this accident."

"Hank, it's been worst than pledge week ---"

"Fei-gga Bouts, Fei-gga Bouts, have lots of luck." Hank Guernsey tore into the secret fraternity pledge. "Fei-gga Bouts, Fei-gga Bouts love to ----- SING."

Jesus. "Hank! Can you get on this today?"

"No problem. No problem. Are you at the same number?"

"Yes, and thanks, Hank. I really appreciate this."

"Get back to you this afternoon."

Ignition. Muniz rubbed the goose-bumps off his arm. Andrea doesn't know. Hourigan has his head up his ass. And I'm closing in on the bastards that stole the statue I was stealing.

A giddy laugh filled the kitchen.

I've got it all. Muniz took a long sip of Cognac. I'm solving the case. Muniz opened the sports page to racing results. "NO!" Muniz screamed.

Lucky Lady won and paid 88 to 1. I just lost ONE MILLION SIX HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS!"

A dreadful wail filled the Muniz home.

VIII

Patrolwoman Carol Wisely found Lieutenant Hourigan attacking a coffee machine in the third floor lounge.

"Damn thing!" Hourigan gave it a final kick. The machine gurgled. Hot, black coffee spewed from the spigot. As the last drop disappeared down the drain, the empty coffee cup dropped on the chrome grate.

"Sort a like this case, 'eh Wisley? Everything going down the sewer."

"Not everything Sir. I went through some files. Checked out some recent political events and ---" she handed Hourigan a photo of huge man lying face down on a pool table. Hourigan flashed her a puzzled look.

"Actually, I was searching for the blond." She pointed to the photo. "Gold Fang is Francis Fural. This was taken about a year ago at the Mayor's Celebrity Pool Tournament. He crashed the party and demanded that someone try to knock him out with a cue ball. It took three officers to subdue him. Wisley handed Hourigan a second sheet of paper. "Fang's rap sheet. It goes back to seventh grade."

"Excellent work. Anything on the blond?"

"Not yet." Wisley's teeth flashed. "But I have a few ideas."

"Then why are you standing here?"

IX

At 12:30, I was at my appointed position standing next to the Hyatt Plaza Fountain watching the water cascade off the marble slabs. Street artisans hawked jewelry, paintings, books and other wares, many from makeshift racks or displayed on blankets and towels. Off to my right a young musician was singing an old Ledbetter blues tune on a steel string guitar.

Mia ran up to me. She was carrying a large brown bag in one hand. A newspaper and two baguettes stuck out of the top. She added a white panama hat to her morning wardrobe. She was radiant.

"Okay Mister, fifty dollars for the whole afternoon, but that's as low as I go," she shouted. Several passersby took sneaky double takes. Mia got her free arm in mine and whisked me across the street before I could react.

"Did you see their faces?" she giggled, spreading out our lunch on Pier #3 where we could watch the bay ferries come and go. We dangled our legs over the edge of the pier and kissed unhurriedly. Her mouth was warm and wet. "Now, don't get me all hot and bothered," she broke away. "I love a picnic. Did you bring the ants?"

"Invited my two favorite uncles, but they declined," I said as she dug into the brown paper bag.

"Their loss."

There were submarine sandwiches, macaroni salad and two frosted bottles of Samuel Adams beer. She handed me a sandwich and a cup with a spoon. With a red Swiss Army knife, she deftly popped the tops of the beer bottles.

"Us Campfire Girls are always prepared."

"You should've been a scout, sexier uniforms," I teased.

"Don't mention the Scouts."

Sometimes people say don't mention, or don't bring up something; when, in reality, they want you to mention, or bring up something. This wasn't one of those times. For some reason Mia didn't like the scouts. I didn't pursue the matter.

I pointed curiously to a large whistle which dangled on a chain from the end of her knife.

"A rape repeller. I was going to let you borrow it the night of your surprise party, but I thought a good looking, vulnerable guy like you probably had one his own."

I was mesmerized. I don't remember being so quiet for so long. I ate, drank, and swallowed. I don't remember a chew, sip, or gulp.

She continued, "Not too curious, are you, today?"

I came out of my reverie with a brilliant, "Huh?"

"Am I gonna have to engrave my messages on clay tablets and make you carry them around your neck? You did read my message, didn't you? Incidentally, your secretary sounds like a love. I didn't get much of a chance to talk to her at your party." She took a sip of beer. "Well, you're here so you must have gotten the message." She answered her own question and waved a finger in my face. "Now, do you wanta the news?"

My Moll was back. "Sure," I smiled.

"First," she looked in my eyes. She hesitated.

I watched as she made a physical effort to pull her thoughts together. Her forehead furrowed. The flecks in her eyes shone. God, you're beautiful, I thought.

"First, thank you for letting me help. I know you have reservations but, I haven't been this excited since my senior prom. Jerry is going to flip...This will probably sound stupid... I know it sounds stupid... and I know you're still getting over your marriage... but, I've been rehearsing this all morning... I

have a feeling about you and me." Her head went down but her eyes were fixed on mine.

"So do I." I said softly.

"Whew." She leaned over and kissed me gently.

"Now back to more mundane matters. Have you had a chance to read today's paper?"

I shook my head.

"Didn't think so. Here try it. Me thinks you'll like." She handed me the front section neatly folded in half and snuggled in close. We both read in silence.

NEW DEVELOPMENT IN PORPOISE'S THEFT

by Nelvin Andersen

There have been some strange developments in the theft? of the 'Flying Porpoise'. The late sculptor, Alan Muniz must be writhing in his grave.

As of yesterday evening, the San Francisco Police have discontinued questioning possible suspects and potential witnesses in the porpoise theft. There may not have been a theft after all.

According to an authority close to the head of this investigation, the facts in this case may well prove to be very embarrassing to the Bay Moving Company and the Donaldson Security Firm.

At approximately 8 P.M. last Saturday night, the 'Flying Porpoise', along with the other objects in the Graure Art Exhibit, was packed into one of two Bay Moving trucks under the scrutiny of guards from the Donaldson Security Firm.

Around eleven that same evening, one of the trucks broke down enroute to Los Angeles. The entire entourage had to wait on the highway for over two hours for a replacement vehicle. The new truck was

inadequate in size, which necessitated the removal of the entire exhibit onto Highway 101.

According to witnesses, two variables made the repacking operation very difficult: a low fog had settled in on the highway, and the entire episode took place with only the light afforded by flashlights and the headlights of the two trucks.

It was not until their arrival in Los Angeles, that the 'Flying Porpoise', was discovered missing.

The SFPD, in conjunction with the California Highway Patrol, is currently soliciting any and all civilian aid in the statue's recovery. Pending further developments, the official status of the 'Flying Porpoise' – is that it is missing.

Although I heard some of it the day before, in print the loss of the porpoise had a more legitimate ring. My mouth was wide open. I looked at Mia. Her restraint was almost gone. It went. We both started laughing. It was last night at dinner all over again. After a few minutes, we calmed down and sat there grinning like two kids who had made a safe junket to the cookie jar.

"Wow, talk about easing the pressure, good ol' Nels opened all the faucets. He told me yesterday that they thought the statue had been lost. I believed him but, I was certain the police would get a clue or a witness would come forward by now. They're looking for the statue a hundred miles away," I grinned. "This is perfect. No witnesses and not one suspect. Moll, with a little bit of luck, I think we can pull this off."

"Ain't they in for a shock when we give it back tonight," Mia smiled. "Let's rub their noses in it."

"Easy, Moll don't relax too much. Give me the strange news?" I was still the leader of this mob.

"Well first this, I'll save the weirdest for last." She took the newspaper, pulled out the classified ads and hid them behind her back. She gave me a

wary look. "All the advice columns warn you not to expose too much of yourself at the beginning of a relationship."

"Go ahead. It's okay with me." I urged. "Expose yourself."

She ignored my lusty tone. "Well I hope you can handle this one...em...deviant... part of my personality," she laughed. "I don't watch soap operas..."

"Praise the lord."

"But, I love personal ads. I'm hooked."

"I want a trial separation."

"I'm a junkie, an addict."

"Can I get an annulment?"

"We're not even marr... Peter, are you going to listen to my confession, or not?"

"Of course my child." I blessed her. "Say five Our Father's and six Hail Eiaine's and jump the nearest male and your sins will be forgiven."

"PETER, listen, I love the personals, especially the smutty ones. But this one is a doozy." She folded the paper over and handed it back to me. "Take a look."

One of the ads in the personals column had been circled with a black felt pen. I read it silently.

Children, you took my present
Saturday night. I want it back.
It isn't yours, it's mine. Reply
this paper immediately.
Mamma.

"Whadda make of that, boss?"

"Odd. A coincidence?" For one second I squirmed. For one second, I had a chill. It passed.

"Yep, that's what I thought. Okay, good thing you're sitting down." She refolded the paper and stuck it back in the bag. "Ready?"

"Yep." I leaned back on both arms.

"Jerry quit."

My elbows collapsed. I fell over backward. "Quit? What do you mean?" I grabbed her.

"I knew that would get a reaction," she said, easing away. "I was sitting at my desk and into my office storms Harry Cohen, GOD. Our boss, you know."

I didn't. But I nodded.

"He started tearing through Jerry's desk. I offered to help, but he kept opening and slamming drawers. He didn't want anything, he just wanted to open and slam drawers. He started son-of-a-bitching around the office. Ten minutes later he calmed down. According to Harry, Jerry was half in the bag, cheerful as all get out, full of thank you's for everything, but this was an opportunity of a lifetime, one he couldn't pass up. `What are we going to do without that bastard?' Harry yelled at me. I just stared at him. Then he apologized and stormed out, yelling `my best man, my best man.' I thought the last part was pretty funny. If Jerry is our best man, our company's in a heap of trouble. Think I'll sell my shares of stock. Well whadda ya think, boss?"

"What do I think?"

Jerry's quitting didn't bother me. The fact that he had a new job, a new life and was happy and drunk, at noon, in Seattle without a care in the world, made me furious.

"Mad, huh?" Mia was clairvoyant.

"Pissed is the definitive word. Jerry's sitting on his ass in Seattle, safe and drunk. I've got good reason to be pissed."

"Hey, sailor, but you've got a Moll." Mia grabbed both of my hands and pulled me toward her. "To hell with Jerry. Isn't this is our show? "Do we want to share the marquee with him?" She bent me over backwards and planted light, wet, wonderful kisses over my face and down my neck. I shivered warm all over. My anger wavered and was gone.

Two jealous, voyeuristic joggers went by our heads. From our prone position we heard one comment, "I mean, one in the afternoon, it's disgusting."

We sat up, laughing.

"Come on, Boss; time to get back to the salt mines."

We cleaned up the remnants of our lunch and walked back to the Hyatt Plaza. We kissed again.

"Pretty clever meeting place don't you think, Mr. Dillinger?" She gestured to the fountain.

I looked at her vacantly.

"Criminal Mr. Big you may be, Mr. Observant you ain't." She tugged me around to the side of the fountain and pointed to a brass plaque imbedded in the stone wall. An inscription read: *Abstract, 1976, by Alan Muniz*

We kissed, snuggled, hugged and parted.

X

Alan Muniz Jr.'s eyes were blurry. He was feeling no pain as he poured a third glass of Cognac. \$1,600,000 dollars! If I'd bet a crummy \$80,000 my

debts would be paid. I would be rich again. Francis would be gone. Back in his kennel, "arf, arf" not lurking around waiting to maim me. "Arf, arf." Fural is a dog. Nothin' but a hound dog." Muniz stood up, sidled across his kitchen strumming an imaginary guitar, and in pretty damn good Elvis like tenor, sang a verse of Hound Dog. Moments later, still sweating Muniz slid the stem of his glass around and around in the puddle of Cognac on the table. I'd be free. The phone rang. "Ring-a-ling ling," Muniz sang as he reached for the phone.

"Hi, there."

"Yo, Alan, it's Hank, Hank Guernsey. The guy that hit you lives in Walnut Creek."

"Sit me?" Muniz slurred. He'd forgotten his own lie.

"The guy that hit your car, in the Safeway parking lot."

"The guy that hit my car in the Safeway parking lot."

"Are you okay, Alan?"

"Just fine, Hank ol buddy. Fei-gga Bouts, Fei-gga Bouts, rah, rah, rah."

"Well, the guy that hit you lives in Walnut Creek. He's Caucasian, five eleven, one hundred and eighty pounds, black hair and brown eyes. Are you getting all this, Alan?"

"I am saertainly."

"You into the booze this early?"

"Saertainly."

"I see. It must be nice to be wealthy. Anyway, here's his name and address."

"Just a sec-cone-dah."

Muniz went for another 3x5 card. He dropped the felt pen and banged his head on the bottom of the kitchen table retrieving it. Finally with the pen firmly in his grasp, he scrawled real thief on the card.

"Ready, Hanky boy."

"The fellow's name is Lynch, Jerry Lynch."

"Lynch is going to get lynched," Muniz hummed.

"Pretty severe Alan," Guernsey chuckled. "Hell, he only dented your car, he didn't steal your father's statue."

Muniz sobered noticeably. "What?"

"By the way, it wasn't the John Wayne movie. It was Del Rado."

"Pardon?"

"The license plate..." Guernsey paused. "Skip it. Alan, I have to go. Lynch lives at 13249 Middlefield Drive or he did the last time he got his driver's license renewed. I have a picture here of the guy. Do you want me to mail it to you?"

"That would be super-duper. Hanks for everything."

"No problem. No problem. And, next time you're up this way, let's get together for lunch."

"You said it, Hanky Panky. Out to lunch."

Confused, Muniz stared as his scribbling. Lynch's name went in and out of focus. The dial tone went off in his ear. Muniz rubbed his nose vigorously and punched the buttons for information.

XI

Cappy's advice on the golf course was excellent. Following my normal routine proved to be the ideal way to keep my mind off the evening's activities. I caught up on most of my paper work and later, I took two gentlemen from Texas on a tour of our computer facility.

"I'm Zeke, and this here's my bro Bartholomew," said the taller and wider of the brothers.

The shorter and thinner offered his hand. "Now you just call me Bart." We shook hands. He pumped my arm like he was drawing water out of an underground spring. My hand was pulverized in the process. "We're the Winslow Brothers," Bart finished and so was my right hand.

"A pleasure to meet you both. Peter Tuelly."

Zeke wanted to shake too, but I turned down the hall and started the tour. They were decked out in typical Texas business attire: boots, slacks, identical light beige suede jackets, white hats and shoestring ties choked tight to their necks by different medallions. Zeke's had an etching of a longhorn steer and Bart's was brilliant polished amber that you could see through. Inside there appeared to be two insects caught in the act of copulation.

"Git ya one just like it, if ya want." Bart caught me eyeing it. "Ma bro and me cornered the market on these little trinkets, didn't we Zeke?"

"That we did, little bro."

"Oh, that's okay, thanks anyway."

Bart looked a little disappointed. Going down in the elevator, I decided that if I was given a second chance I'd order a dozen. Public relations is public relations.

The Winslow brothers were bright. They asked pointed questions about our entire system. Zeke carried a portable tape recorder in a satchel over his arm. Every time I said something poignant, he poked a microphone in my face. After several minutes, I surmised they were corporate spies. They didn't know it, but with the proper monetary incentive, I could have been bought. Though I had to admit, all the information I had about our entire system was probably worth about a dollar twenty-five.

"We like you, Peter," Bart said as I concluded my part of the tour. "You ever down Texas way, we'll show you a good ol' time. Say, you like horses, don't you?"

"Love `em." I lied, but you have to leave the tourees happy. In my opinion, horses are strong, fast and not particularly bright. My kind of horse is slow and so swayed bellied you'd have to fasten a roller skate to its stomach to keep it from touching the ground.

"Yeah, cowboy," Bart slapped his thigh. "Zeke, we gotta put this boy up on ol' Thunder." He looked at his brother for consensus. Zeke gave it. "That horse is a fire cracker, Peter." Thunder was definitely not the horse for me. A horse named Molasses was more my style. "Sounds like fun. Next time I'm in Texas, I'll take you up on the invitation."

"You do that, hear."

We shook farewell. Pain. My hand was maimed. I turned the Winslows over to another member of our staff, Ray Calegari. He would continue their tour. Before I could go through the introductions, Calegari congratulated me on my promotion. He was the third person in an hour to do so. Zeke and Bart gave me alternating slaps on the back, then I watched Ray walk off down the corridor between the two brothers. His head twisted to the right, then the left as they spoke. Ray had both hands behind his back, and, was vigorously trying to get circulation back into his right hand. I empathized. He still had to shake good-bye.

"Yes indeedy... Yes indeedy ...deedydoo! " Muniz sang and slurred aloud. Muniz had pulled the top row of spices from the rack and was in the process of constructing a building on the kitchen table. "Mr. Lynch your days are bumpered. I mean numbered" Muniz tittered. "A toast to Middlefabble Drive. I've got you Mr. Jerry Lynch. You stole from thieves you thieving thief." Muniz emptied his goblet of Cognac with one hand and delicately stacked a bottle of cardamon on top of a bottle of cayenne. "To my wit, cunning and continued good portune, I mean fortune. I make a toast to me." He refilled the glass.

The Cognac decelerated his good sense and accelerated his courage. Why, I've got to tell Andrea the good news, Muniz thought. He rubbed his nose, staggered to his feet and dialed the phone.

"Andy, Andy darling how are YOU?" Muniz was passionate. "Let's get together. I'll tie you up. Or you can tie me up.

Silence.

"Andy...it is I,... Alan. Spank me, I've been such a bad, bad little boy."

Silence.

Drunk, happy and randy Alan Muniz Jr. was. Stupid he was not. What have I done? I can't hang up. He fought for control of his tongue. He lowered his voice and annunciated lowly. "Good afternoon, Ms. Convee... this is Mr. Muniz ... I am sorry for bothering you."

Silence.

"May I buy you dinner tomorrow night? I have some wonderful news and by then, it should be sa stabulous." Muniz grabbed his lips. Don't giggle. You don't giggle at Andrea Convee. He couldn't help himself. He covered the phone and giggled.

"Can you afford it Mr. Muniz?"

"Yessssh....Certanamaninly.... Of course." His lips fell away from his fingers.

"Make reservations, Alan."

There was a click. Muniz rubbed nose. By tomorrow night I'll have the statue. In two days, I will be a wealthy man again. Muniz stumbled to the kitchen door.

"FRANCIS, I ---" Stupid dumb, dumb, Fural would never do anything for me. "Francis, Ms. Convee has an assignment for you."

Five minutes later, Francis Fural proudly, lumbered down the front stairs of the Muniz home. 'Now I got two important jobs to do for Ms. Convee.' The descent was too much. Fural's brain fuzzed over. He stopped on the bottom step. He looked at the sheet of paper in his left hand and touched his shaved, dented head with his right. 'Two jobs. That's right.'

*** * ***

Lieutenant Hourigan picked up the pager on the first beep.

"Evans here, Lieutenant. Gold Fang is leaving the Muniz home. Do you want me to tail him?"

Hourigan fingered the rap-sheet on his desk. "Wisely got an I.D. on that ape. He's a small-time hood named, Francis Fural."

"Francis? That thing's named Francis? Should I let him go, Lieutenant?"

"You stick with Muniz. Fural's probably going out for some gorilla food."

"That's a copy, Lieutenant."

Hourigan stared at the picture of Francis Fural a moment longer. Why the hell is this guy hanging out with Muniz?

Wisely flew into the office. "I've got a make on the blond, Lieutenant. And Sir, I don't mean to sound catty, but, Andrea Convee is one very busy lady."

XIII

"Very smiley and happy, aren't we." Eiaine commented on more than one occasion that afternoon.

"Don't 'we' me, will you Eiaine."

"Sorry, I forgot. We're a bit out of sorts today aren't YOU?" She sneered and left the office.

I shouldn't have said a word. Now that she'd found the kink in my armor, I was destined to be "we-ed" to death.

At four-fifteen, one of the city's bicycle messengers came into my office, the ever-curious Eiaine in close pursuit.

"You Peter Tuelly?" he grunted.

"Yes, he's Peter Tuelly," Eiaine answered.

I nodded and added a sarcastic, "thank you so much Eiaine, I'd almost forgotten."

"Then this is for you." He handed me an envelope and waited. I dug in my pocket and handed him fifty cents; it was all I had.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you kind Sir. Now I can finish medical school. My child can have the heart transplant. Many thanks, sahib." He made a deep bow, touching his forehead, chin and stomach with his right hand. He slowly backed out of the office, repeating the gesture over and over.

I pulled out my empty pockets and tried to explain. "No cash. My wallet's in the car."

"Sure," Eiaine could barely restrain herself. "Did WE get a special telegram, sahib?"

"I wonder if they'll give me a new secretary when I move up to the thirty-sixth floor."

Eiaine backed away. "Peter, you wouldn't. Peter, please?"

"Away with you, harlot."

She scrambled out of my office. I opened the envelope.

Dear Sir: This is to confirm your dinner
reservations at Biga Mamma's Restaurant this evening.
Stop. Looking forward to tomorrow's headlines. Stop.
I am excited. Stop. You?

Your Moll xxxx

I dialed Mia with a big silly grin on my face. I was excited. "You want me to bring anything?"

"Just you and your friend George. Jerry is going to be soooooo pissed."

"Speaking of Jerry, I've got to go home and change. This outfit is getting just a bit gamey. Do you mind if I push dinner up to about eight-thirty?"

"Eight-thirty's fine. I think tonight's dress code should be something in a discreet Ninja Black. You bring the charcoal."

"Charcoal?"

"Charcoal, for our faces, honky." She was having a ball. "Oh, and we are out of tonic."

Why did a 'we' sound so good coming from Mia and so horrible coming from Eiaine?

"Peter, I have lots of vodka. I don't know about you...ah ha...sure I do. We'll both need a little liquid fortification for tonight's escapade. Eight-thirty, then." I heard a kiss as she hung up the phone.

The rest of the afternoon I spent clearing up loose ends. I had three meetings and two mini-tours planned for the next day. My 'out' pile was gaining on my 'in' pile. And there were two more pieces of Swiss cheese on the ledge.

At five after five, I walked into the outer office, barely hearing, "Here he comes." The entire staff was standing in front of their respective desks. With Eiaine in the lead, they all shouted "Shalom, masta," and gave me a long, low, Arabian bow. I wanted to give them all a long, high, American digit.

With complete dignity, I walked the gauntlet of bowing people stopping in front of my semi-hysterical secretary, I curtsied slowly. Rising again, I grabbed her in my arms and gave her an impassioned kiss. I whispered, just loud enough for everyone to hear:

"I love your sense of humor. Thanks so much for last night. But you have to keep a low profile." I put a finger (my middle one) across my lips. "You know how people in the office talk." I turned back towards the group. "You folks are too much, good night." Turning to Eiaine, I winked, "See you later at your place."

Eiaine looked at me dumbfounded. There was a collective gasp from the rest of the office. I turned and walked through an open elevator door.

Back at the condo, I picked the morning paper out of a branch of the acacia and checked the mail. It was all for Jerry. I noticed that one of his letters had been hand delivered. JERRY LYNCH was hand printed on the

envelope. There was no stamp or return address. Jerry has a little friend in the neighborhood, just like Mr. Rogers, I thought, getting into the shower.

Mia's Ninja idea had merit. I dressed in grey slacks and a dark blue turtleneck sweater. I spread out a change of clothes and folded them into a beat up Adidas racquetball bag. I had a fling at the sport a few years ago, but I kept getting hit with the damn ball. That ball smarts. Running nude through a briar patch was just as much fun and cheaper. So I quit.

I was in my car, backing down the driveway, when I remembered my I.D. badge. Retrieving it, I made a mental note to totally ignore Kevin in the morning.

* * *

Crouched in a grey Mercedes sedan, Francis Fural watched Peter Tuelly re-enter the condo. Fural stared at his hand. He wanted to use his fingers as reference points. Although the instructions had come from Alan Muniz Jr., Fural believed they came verbatim, from the mouth of Andrea Convee. Fural looked at his hand. He couldn't decide on whether to start his count on his thumb or his forefinger. It took a long time before, he chose his forefinger. For Francis it was a major decision.

One. I was `posed to put the envelope into the mail slot. I did that. He folded his finger to keep his place. Two. I was `posed to wait here until a guy pulls up in a red Austin Healy. He squinted across the street at the maroon Citation. That piece of crap ain't no Healy. And the license don't say, he read the scrap of paper - D E L R A D O . He folded his middle finger. Three. When

the guy gets here I'm supposed to bring him to Muniz and I ain't supposed to take no for an answer. He laughed. Hell I never take no from nobody.

Francis Fural was still staring at his little finger hoping he hadn't forgotten something, when Peter Tuelly pulled away from the curb.

XIV

Nelvin Andersen waited at the Call Bulletin until seven o'clock for Chang's call. When the police messenger delivered the composite drawings to his cubicle at four, panic set in. Nels wasn't surprised that neither of the men appeared to be Asian, but he did wonder which was man was using the Chang alias. Nels spent several desperate hours questioning his own integrity. If Chang is arrested will I step forward? Will I confess that I asked him to keep the statue so that I could enjoy center stage for a few days? What good would my confession do? I didn't steal the statue he did!

Nels Andersen's conscience countered.

But Mr. Chang offered to return the statue on numerous occasions. Today, in fact --- in your parking lot.

At seven-ten. Nels crumbled up the police receipt for the composite drawings and sped to his flat in Bernal Heights. He paced anxiously around the artifact on his carpet. He pulled books from his library. He snatched unfinished articles from manila folders. Looked at them. Read nothing. Sat at his roll top desk. Checked the messages on his answering machine. Tested his phone. He returned to his roll top desk, glared at the bronze "Finger" from Russell Kyle and read the inscription, *You Are Not God*. Nels remembered his own comments. Would God live in a sty--- "I'll clean!"

In a frenzy, Nels gathered glass cleaner, furniture polish, dust rags and a mop, all the while pleading, sub-consciously --- "Call me, Mr. Chang. Please dial the phone."

XV

I arrived at Mia's at a quarter to nine. "Door's open," she responded to my knock. A delicious aroma of garlic bread and Italian pasta filled the apartment. I stopped at the hat rack and spun the bill of a San Francisco Giant's cap and entered the living room. There was a fire in the fire place and Louis Armstrong's trumpet wailed erotically from the stereo. My brain went on fast forward. At ease Marine. I walked toward the kitchenette. Don't ruin this.

"Hungry?" Mia gave me a quick kiss and took the bottle of tonic from my hand. "Lasagna's just cooling, everything's ready." She mixed us drinks. She was dressed in dark, very tight, blue Levi's, and a gray turtleneck sweater.

"You look super."

"Do you think so?"

My smile said, I knew so.

Her eyes flashed. "Really?" She did a slow pirouette. "Would you like to eat? Or would you like to try on a few of my hats?"

"No to the hats. I think my transvestite days are over."

"Pity. I have a turquoise frock that would go wonderfully with your brown eyes."

"Hazel."

"Vanity is so unbecoming." She slid around the counter with cocktails in her hands; a wedge of lime hung on the rim of each glass.

I took my drink with one hand and pulled a bouquet of red roses from behind my back. "For standing you up at Tadich's and for the wonderful lunch today...dinner, for everything. Thanks."

Mia smiled. A warm, glorious, smile. "They're beautiful." She sniffed the roses, then sniffed again. But it was a different sniff. "Be right back." I watched as she returned to the kitchen and threw open a few cupboard doors, found a vase, snipped the stems of the roses and poured a half teaspoon of sugar into the vase.

"Sugar."

"Everything loves something sweet." She turned on the tap.

Seconds later she set the bouquet on the coffee table and joined me on the sofa taking a second look at my outfit.

"You look great too, boss."

We toasted. Her hair was off to one side, the flecks in her eyes shone.

"Is that lasagna real hot?"

She looked at the look in my eyes. "It's really... really hot."

"Do you think we should let it cool...down?"

"I think we should let it cool." She snuggled against me.

While Ray Charles sang 'Georgia on My Mind', unhurriedly we kissed. When the kiss became too fervent we broke away by mutual consent. I closed my eyes and explored her face with my fingers; tracing her eyes, her nose, her mouth. At times, she trembled. Wondrous sounds would escape from her throat. I ran my lips along her neck. And, just as the pillow case had the night before, her scent overwhelmed me. We said little. Occasionally, we would break for air. Mia would change a record. I would add a log to the fire. Otherwise, we were lost. Delightfully, deliciously lost in each other. At peace.

XVI

Lieutenant Hourigan sighed and leaned against his desk. "It's almost 22 hundred hours, T.J. Everyone's put in a hell of a day." Hourigan laid down the dossier on Andrea Convee. "She knows from Hollywood to Washington D.C. and we can't tie her to Muniz, Fural ... or Nels Andersen. And I can't find a current address. "

"THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING, I HAD TO SOUND THE ALARM," a huge man, wearing high-top sneakers, in a long blue and gold cape screamed in the outer office. In his arms was a seventy pound fire alarm box. He pushed the alarm button and leapt around the room. "THEY'RE EVERYWHERE." The man jumped on the desk of Sergeant "Santa Claus" Bream, the only person left and whispered in his ear. Bream turned ashen.

"Jesus, we don't have enough troubles. Look at this clown T.J." Hourigan pointed through the window. "He's got an entire alarm box in his arms. You'd need a crow-bar or a tow truck to pull one of those off a post. Probably on Angel Dust," Hourigan said. "Fries your brain, but makes you Superman for awhile." "Oh shit," for the first time Hourigan noticed Bream's demeanor. "Bream's in trouble." Hourigan and T.J. Billings eased slowly into the outer office.

"THE RUSSKIES ARE HERE." The man pointed to Hourigan and T.J. "CALL THE POLICE. CALL THE POLICE."

"I think he's talking to us, Lieutenant." T.J. reached into his jacket for his shoulder holster. Hourigan shook him off and started across the floor.

Petrified, Sergeant Bream said, "Says he has a bomb."

The man tossed the alarm box into a wall and leapt off Bream's desk.
"THE RUSKIES ARE TAKING OVER."

Hourigan eased forward. Angel dust for sure. Closer, Hourigan saw his eyes. Blood red. Crazy. The asshole wanted a fight. Wanted to kill.

Hourigan began humming the opening strains of the "Blue Danube Waltz." Da...Da...Da...Da...Dum ...Da...Da...Da...Dum.

The man hadn't moved. Hourigan gently took his hand, put his arm around the man's waist and danced. The man's cape flew as Hourigan glided him around Bream's desk.

Hourigan raised an imaginary baton behind the man's back and orchestrated. "Da...Da...Da...Da...Dum." Bream and T.J. joined the choir.
Da...Da...Da...

"Of course the Ruskies are here." Hourigan whirled the man around and around. "But, keep it a secret and you will be rewarded. Spas sebo, Comrade." Hourigan kissed the man on the left cheek and pulled handcuffs out of his pocket. "Spas sebo." Hourigan kissed the man on the right, jerked the man's arm forward and snapped on the cuffs. Fifteen seconds later, Sergeant Bream escorted the man out of the office.

"Saseedo? What the hell does that mean?" T.J. asked, as Hourigan rejoined him.

"I think it means thank you in Russian."

"Oh shit. Things weren't bad enough." T.J. began humming the theme from "Jaws."

"Dum, Dum. Dum, dum," T.J. looked over Hourigan's shoulder.
"Here comes the Shark."

Officer Carol Wisely planted herself firmly behind a red haired man. She placed one hand on her night stick and the other on the butt of her service revolver. She nudged the man with her elbow. "Tell him what you told me."

"You're Lieutenant Hourigan?" The man asked softly through blackened teeth.

"Yes." Hourigan nodded perplexed.

"I am Timothy Gallagher. I stole the 'Flying Porpoise'."

XVII

Nels Andersen tossed the dust rag across the room and picked up the phone half way through the first ring.

"Mr. Chang, we had an agreement. You were---"

"Who the hell is Chang?" Hourigan asked.

Nels collapsed at the roll top desk and gathered his thoughts. "Sorry Lieutenant, I was expecting a call from one of my contacts. I was hoping Mr. Chang had some information regarding the 'Flying Porpoise'."

"You can forget Chang. I just arrested the man who stole it." The receiver started to vibrate in Nels Andersen's hand. "If you're not too busy, perhaps you'd like to come down and talk to him."

Nels slid sideways on the chair. "Talk to him?"

"Man says he'll only talk to you, Nels."

Nels sucked in a big gulp of air. His cheeks puffed up like a groper.

"Well, are you coming down?"

Nels exhaled slowly. "Yes. Yes of course." Nels set down the phone. Well, Mr. Chang, Nels thought. I hope Lieutenant Hourigan is in a good mood. We have a lot of explaining to do.

XVIII

Lasagna takes a long time to cool. We ate two hours later. By midnight, I felt like a terrorist with a stick of dynamite in each hand. Both fuses were lit and burning to the quick. The first was definitely sexual. But even if Mia and I had abandoned the whole thing and hopped into bed, it wouldn't have put out the second fuse.

As the moment of truth neared, I became more and more apprehensive about Mia's participation in the whole exercise. I washed the dishes. She dried.

"I can do this alone, you know." I handed her the last plate. "Are you sure you want to be a part of this?"

"Is the Pope a virgin?" We both paused and reflected on that possibility, looked at each other and laughed.

"Be back in a sec." Mia bounded off to the bedroom.

I don't think I'm a sexist, but early on in my life I concluded that there's a definite difference between male time and female time. Women have more sand in their hourglass. Everything takes longer. The word "second" should be excluded from feminine vocabulary.

Fifteen minutes later, I heard some garbled comments coming from behind the bedroom door.

"Ta Dum." The door flew open and some strange blond was standing there, behind a hand truck, with her Swiss Army knife between her teeth.

"Well, whatcha think?" She chomped, taking the knife out of her mouth.

"Pretty good, eh, buster."

I sat there flabbergasted. I didn't bother asking where she had gotten a hand-truck. She was the perfect Moll right down to the gum she chewed and the mole she'd put on her right cheek. Her black hair was gone. From under a seaman's watch cap, long blond hair curled softly past her shoulders. She

powdered her face white and enlarged her mouth with a humongous amount of lipstick.

"No comment, eh?" She chomped the gum, hands on her hips, she swayed to the left and right seductively. "Too much for you, big guy?"

My mouth just hung open. The transformation was astounding. "The gentleman prefers blonds, does he?"

She pushed the hand truck toward me. "Come on, Mr. Bekins man, let's get moving."

"Wow, are you a welcome sight for these old criminal eyes." I was getting in the mood. "What'd you do with that dumb Eyetalian broad that was here earlier?"

"She's tied up in the back room. Ya want I should waste her?" She grabbed her Swiss Army knife and popped out the corkscrew blade.

"Naw, leave her there. Let her rot. We've got more important matters to attend to."

"Whatever you say, you're the boss, boss."

In the carport, we stowed hand truck behind the front seat. I turned on the ignition and revved the engine. "Ya ready, Moll?"

"Ready, boss."

I took the long way to the Golden Gate Bridge. Thank god, I thought, in forty minutes this would all be over.

XIX

One dim light bulb dangled from a cord at the far end of the brick wine cellar. Ramone Cosette gently turned the neck of an ancient bottle of Haut

Brion. "One quarter turn, Luiz," he said to the man standing in the shadows behind him. "Nothing more, nothing less or the cork loses moisture and the wine turns." He sidled to the next bottle in line. "Which brings us to Andrea Convee." He twisted the neck a quarter turn. "She has turned. Become vinegar so to speak. She initiates private deals on our property and invokes the name of the Circle. Mr. Muniz's debt continues to grow and that woman makes light of the situation."

Shielding his eyes, Cosette turned towards the light. "Luiz, find her and when she finally gets that cursed slab of marble in her possession seize them both and bring them to me."

"I will inform Mr. Sinorae and Mr. Glazunov of your plan," Luiz said.

Cosette's hand whipped out of the darkness striking Luiz on the cheek. A red welt appeared instantly. "You will do exactly as I have instructed. Nothing more. Nothing less. You will inform no one of anything."

XX

'Rio,' by Duran Duran blared from my radio. Mia and I liked our music loud, too loud as it turned out.

Mia looked over her shoulder. "Ain't no one tailin' us"

"Ya sure, Moll?"

"I'm tellin' ya boss, we're cool as ice."

From Diamond Heights, we wound up the drive to Twin Peaks. We drove slowly around the summit. What a night! No fog. The lights on Bay Bridge made it look like a brilliant diamond necklace. Spectacular.

"Da village looks lively, 'eh, Moll?"

"Yeah, it do." There was awe in her voice. It was that kind of night. Just above the Oakland hills a autumn moon began its ascension. Incredible.

A few cars were parked along the edge of the road at the top of Twin Peaks. No people. No heads. Just cars and windows covered with thick steam.

"Whatcha s'pose dems doin' in dem cars, boss?"

"Smoochin', Moll."

"Moll wants to smooch too."

I wanted to too, but I kept driving. Mia slid down in the seat and pouted. My blond bombshell was totally immersed in her role. I tried to keep her focused. "Keep an eye out for the fuzz, Moll."

Pouting, she ignored me folding her arms across her chest.

XXI

Concord Policeman Cappy McDonald looked at his passenger. "I'm going to check him out," he pointed to a Mercedes Benz parked away from street lights.

Sergeant Olivia Bishop was along for the ride. An evaluation ride. She looked up from a football betting card. "Think Green Bay can beat the Raiders? They're given four points." She held a pen-light on the card. "They're playing at home. But the quarterback's got a bad thumb."

Cappy looked over his shoulder as he drove up Middlefield Drive past the Mercedes for the second time. "There's something wrong with that guy."

"Yeah, I know that but Green Bay has some good people... They got doctors. Team physicians can fix the thumb."

"I'm talking about the guy in the Benz. He's been parked there for hours."

Bishop decided to give the four points to the bookie and circled the 49ers on her football card.

Cappy made a U-turn, turned off his head lights and coasted to a stop behind the silver gray Mercedes. Bishop copied down the license while Cappy ran a radio check on the car.

Cappy waited three minutes before exiting his patrol car. He stepped forward twirling a flashlight. At the rear bumper he stopped. From inside the car came grunts of pain. Groans of anguish. Cappy dropped to his knees and crept along the side of the car grabbing the handle of the rear door. The entire car vibrated. Cappy stood and flashed his light into the rear seat. No one. Nothing. He ducked. Inched forward. The car moved up and down. Cappy rose. Peeked through the glass of the drivers window.

In the front seat of the Mercedes, Francis Fural was in deep snore. A long strand of drool hung from his lip. Cappy put his light on the window and tapped on the glass. "Hey, roll down the window."

Fural scratched his crotch with one hand and rubbed his eyes with the other.

"Roll down the window." Cappy repeated.

Like Kong on the Empire State Building trying to wipe away the bullets from the airplanes, Fural tried to wipe the beam of light from of his eyes. He couldn't. He rolled down the window and bellowed from the depths of Hades. "Get that fuckin' thing out of my face or you won't have one."

Cappy recoiled, lowered the flashlight and set his hand on the butt of his revolver.

Inside the black and white, Sgt. Bishop caught the move, opened her door and eased along the far side of the Mercedes.

"Sir, have you been drinking?" Cappy asked.

Fural snarled.

"Please, breathe in my direction."

Fural blew a breath in his face. Cappy gasped and waved Fural away. Fural ignited the engine and sped into the night. Bishop joined Cappy. "What the hell was that?"

Cappy shook his head. "I don't know. He wasn't drunk, but I swear to God he must have just swallowed a skunk."

XXII

I drove down the north side of Twin Peaks, through Golden Gate Park and up Funston Avenue to the Golden Gate Bridge. On the far side of the parking lot were five or six cars facing away from us out toward the San Francisco bay. Just like Twin Peaks, none of the cars appeared to have occupants.

"Smoochin', boss?" Mia pouted again and pointed to the cars. She turned toward me with a little girl face and pleading eyes. She turned the radio louder. Pink Floyd sang 'The Gig in the Sky' and Mia's shoulder swayed in a suggestive rhythm. Not a let's hump rhythm. More of a let's dance rhythm. And I was catching the beat.

"Moll," I begged. "Will you stop it. We have work to do --- Smoochin' comes later, I promise."

She wasn't buying it. My mind raced. "It'll take Nels Andersen at least twenty minutes to get here after I call. What do you think you and I should do during that long, long time it'll take him to get here?"

Mia flashed a smile. "Okay, boss." She jumped out of the car with an imaginary submachine gun tucked under her arm and ran back and forth, spraying the parking lot with bullets. "It's all clear, you can come out."

"Ya done good, Moll." I was having fun. "Let's ditch the goods and we'll wait over there." I pointed to the row of cars. "And steam up some windows."

"We'll melt 'em."

Mia opened my rear door. And to the beat of Donna Summer singing about 'Bad Girls' we pulled out the hand-truck and laid it on the ground. She climbed into the back and began to push. From the outside, I pulled. George moved. He inched along the upholstery. I pulled. Mia pushed. George went over the edge of the seat and tipped onto the hand truck. I bent forward locking my fingers under the blanket for the final effort.

"Ready, Moll?"

"Ready, boss."

"On three."

"One, two ---" On three the sky exploded. Gunfire cracked to my right and left, below me, above me. I dove toward Mia whacking my head on the door jam and fell stomach first onto George's dorsal fin. I gasped and crumbled to concrete. Garbled shouts came from every direction. More cracks and pops echoed around us. Dim figures darted about in the shadows. I blinked and wiped my eyes. All I saw were multi-colored spots. Thousands and thousands of spots. I was blind. "Mia!" I crawled across the pavement, up the hand truck, over George and reached blindly into my car. "Mia!" Two loud POPS came from my right. I rose to my feet with my hands in the air. "Mia?" What had I done to Mia? The flashes continued to explode, but more sporadically. Slowly, my vision returned and I found myself in a spider web of people.

Somehow, while 'Bad Girls' pulsed from my radio; while Mia pushed and I pulled, two red buses from the Franciscan Line, filled with about a hundred Japanese tourists, had managed to park less than fifteen feet from my car. They were scurrying around everywhere, snapping pictures of everything, anything. The parking lot sound like a Kellogg's Rice Krispies ad; SNAP, CRACKLE AND POP. I searched for Mia.

Heads appeared in the parked cars. One car started abruptly, screeched into reverse and flew out of the lot, while the driver busily wiped the steam from the inside of his windshield. I wished I could exit with them.

Less than twenty seconds had passed when I heard, "Movie star, movie star." The crowd was all around Mia, pleading for a picture. An arm went around my shoulder. It scared the hell out of me.

"Hi ya, pal. Hope you'll understand. I've been driving these guys around all night. It's been a real drag. Know what I mean? I told them your lady friend's a movie star. These guys love blonds. And man, she could pass for a star. Know what I mean?" He took a long lusty look in Mia's direction. "Humor them, will you pal? Let 'em snap a few pictures. Give 'em something to spice up the ol' vacation stories. You know what I mean?"

I pointed to Mia. "If it's okay with her." I pulled his arm from my shoulder and sidled up to Mia. She was in her element, throwing smiles at everyone.

"Got a little crowded, don't you think, boss?"

For the first time, I noticed there wasn't a woman among the group. I stared toward the statue. Through a gap in the sequined heart, George's eye winked out at the crowd. I turned back to Mia. "Jaaaaaneet, we have a... prob...lem." I whispered. My lips didn't move.

"Oh, that little ol' thing, Peter, really."

She grabbed the arm of the widest human being I have ever seen. He must have been a Sumo wrestler. With sign language, Mia had him put George and the hand truck back into the car. A task he performed by himself and basically with one hand. God, I was glad I hadn't taken off the blanket.

I got a poke in the spine. "Movie star?" Four Japanese men stood in line pointing at Mia. "Famous movie star," I said. Mia took off the seaman's cap, tossed it in the back seat after George, fluffed up her blond wig, leaned against the car and with her hand on a jauntily-tilted hip, and said, "shoot boys."

My Moll had become a femme fatale. The lot came alive washed in flashbulbs.

As one of bus drivers smoked a cigarette I stood to one side, enthralled.

"Here, that'll make a good shot. Over here with the bridge in the background." She posed in ones, twos, anyway they asked.

One elderly, very dignified-looking Japanese man had remained on the periphery of the 'Mia Fan Club.' He must have caught her eye. Mia edged over to him, gently took his camera and handed it to someone in the throng. She placed the elderly man's arm around her waist. "Smile," she said, giving him a long, warm kiss on the cheek. The flashbulbs popped again amongst many Ah So's.

"Gotta go, fellows." She backed away blowing kisses.

I don't know any Japanese, but I know men's eyes. And at least twenty pair were imploring her to come home with them and spend her life in opulence.

"What a gal." Both bus drivers gave her thumbs-up. I couldn't have agreed more.

Mia had her window down and waved goodbye. The group bowed and said sayonara in adoration. I turned on the ignition. There was a tap on my

window. I rolled it down. The elderly Japanese gentleman clasped his hands and bowed.

"Dearest Lady, if you are not a movie star, you should be." He gestured to the rest of the assembly. They all bowed. "Thank you both for a most wonderful time."

Mia's eyes glazed over. "Thank you, Sir." He bowed again and returned to his friends. "What a beautiful man, that was very touching."

"You made the moment." I passed her a Kleenex. "Here, blow. You're not such a tough Moll, after all."

She dab her eyes and blew, then turned to me. "I didn't even hear those buses pull up."

"Me either," I admitted driving out of the parking lot.

"I didn't know what was happening. At first, I thought your friend Nels Andersen had ratted us out..." She paused. "What a terrific group of guys. I think one of them proposed."

"ONE?" I laughed. "Twenty, at least, and ten potential offers. Probably one or two in writing if you'd hung out a few minutes longer. Wouldn't you be something in the family wedding photo?"

"Twenty proposals, you think?" Mia was contemplating life as a blond in Japan.

"Photos, oh crap." My mind whirled. "Do you realize we're trapped forever on film in a minimum of seventy Nikon cameras? And I could have mad it worse, I almost insisted on unwrapping George before we brought him out. That would have been cute. Talk about being caught with your pants down. Whew. I think my adrenaline supply just went to empty. I'm exhausted, how about you?"

"Well, I suffered through one cardiac arrest, twenty minutes of stardom, it's two in the morning and I have to go to work tomorrow..." Mia hesitated and turned toward me. "But we still have our George in the back seat. And since, to my great relief, I'm neither in handcuffs nor behind bars..." She ran a finger nail down the nape of my neck. "I wouldn't trade this night for anything --- at least so far. So, what's the plan, Stan?"

I mentioned Coit Tower, Lombard Street and several other locations from my D.O.L. list as I drove aimlessly down Doyle Drive.

"Peter?" Her voice was barely audible. "Would you mind if we kept the statue an extra day?"

My foot eased off the gas. "Why?"

"Give me a chance here 'cause it's going to sound silly, but... do you believe in curses?"

"No one believes in ---Why?"

She peered over the back seat and looked at the sequined bedspread. "I have this feeling."

"Feeling?" I pulled into the Travelodge parking lot on Lombard Street.

"You phoned Muniz and he hung up, right?"

I nodded.

"You called Nels and he asked you to keep the statue for a few days, right?"

"Yeah."

She looked at the sequined blanket for a long moment before, "I know this sounds crazy... but maybe... George doesn't want to go back."

"Mia, we're talking about a rock here."

"I said it would sound crazy..." She turned to me. "Forget it...but I still think we should keep him."

"Why?"

"Because that was pretty close back there on the bridge. We are both tired. And we might make a mistake." Her nail walked up and down the back of my neck. "We need time to think." Her left knee nudged my thigh.

Knee nudging and neck touching are illegal tactics. Nels Andersen was home waiting for my phone call. His photographer was on call and Nels had probably already written his story. Jerry was in Seattle, in some hotel room with a bottle of scotch and a girl's basketball team. Sure I wanted to see Jerry's face when he read the headlines. But George and I had spent enough time together. I had to get rid of him tonight. Now.

I'd drive Mia home. I'd agree to keep the statue. Drop the statue off somewhere. Call Nels. Tomorrow there'd be headlines. Mia would be pissed. I'd apologize. She'd let me take her to dinner. She'd know I made the right decision. She'd thank me. And we'd laugh over the whole thing.

"So we're going to keep it, right?" Her hand never left my neck. She folded her knees on the seat. "Besides, I have a much better plan."

That was the catalyst. The Moll was taking over from the boss. I folded my arms across my chest.

"Okay Moll, what's your plan?"

"We keep him for one more day."

"That's not a plan. That's a statement."

"I know. It needs to be formalized. "I think we should go back to my place..." she paused for an instant, "and formalize the matter in bed."

On their own accord: my hand turned the key to the ignition and my foot pushed the accelerator. It was a brilliant plan. One day. What could possibly happen in twenty-four hours?

CHAPTER 7 THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 15, 1979

I

Francis Fural slammed the front door and stomped into the Muniz home with the morning paper. He proudly rubbed a brand new red bruise on his shaved, dented skull.

"How did it go, Francis?" Alan Muniz Jr. called softly from the second floor balcony. "Did you see Mr. Lynch?"

Fural wiped the powder blue pool chalk from his forefinger and raised his head toward Muniz. "I made a hundred and sixty bucks. What the fuck did you do last night? You weren't sitting in a cold car freezing your ass off. I don't have to answer questions from you. You ain't my boss. You ain't shit."

Fural's nostrils flared with excitement as he watched Muniz try to grip the oak banister, miss, trip and stumble down the staircase. Dude's hurtin', Fural thought.

On his butt, on the bottom stair, Muniz looked at Fural through puffed eyes. "So what happened?" Muniz fought to enunciate each word.

Fural covered his nose and backed away. "Damn man you smell like a piss pot."

Fighting to regain the upper hand, Muniz rose and pulled himself to his full five-foot-six height. "I asked you a question. What happened?" Muniz's terry cloth robe fell open, exposing little of importance.

"Nothin'. I did what Ms. Convee told you to tell me to do."

Muniz tightened the belt on his robe and staggered to keep his balance. "Ms. Convee just hung up one second ago. She wants you to tell me what happened."

Fural shot him a suspicious look.

"Francis, she's on a plane. She can't call back. No one can call you back from a plane."

Fural's eyes went wide, his lips curled into a snarl exposing his gold tooth. Muniz knew he said the wrong thing, but he didn't know what the wrong thing he said was.

Fural inched closer. "You're bullshit, Ms. Convee hates to fly. She don't trust no motors or wings. She don't fly."

What is going on? Muniz thought. I'm hung over, sick to my stomach, millions in debt and this cretin wants to play mental ping pong with me? Okay, dick head, my serve. "Ms. Convee's on a hang glider. Hang gliders don't have motors. She not really flying, she's gliding."

Fural pawed his bald, dented scalp trying to ignite a thought. But his wick was wet.

"She loves gliding, Francis. You know that. You can't hear a sound. Just peace and quiet. Clouds. Sunrise, sunset." Muniz pointed out the window to San Francisco Bay. "Maybe she's right out there..." Eyes agog, Fural stared out the French Window. Behind him Muniz encourage. "Do you see her, Francis...? That tiny dot soaring over the Golden Gate Bridge."

Fural nodded and nodded again, and shoved a stubby finger toward a speck of bird crap on the window. "Yeah, Sure. There she is."

"Good, now what happened to Jerry Lynch?"

There were too many off ramps in Fural's highway of thought. "I put the envelope in the mail box." Francis tucked his hand behind his back and kept count, on his fingers again, to make sure he got it right. "Then I waited for a guy in an Austin Healy, just like Ms Convee said. I watched the house all night," Fural lied. He spent some of the night in the Mercedes all right. But most of it was asleep. When the cops roused him he drove to the closest billiard hall and spent the rest of the night with his head stretched out on a

pool table. He fingered the money in his pocket. You ain't my boss. He looked at Muniz with contempt.

"So nothing happened. No one came by?"

"Nope." Fural lied a second time and handed Muniz the paper.

Catching Jerry Lynch on the first try would have been a lucky break, Muniz reasoned. This guy is smart, knows what he has and he hopes to make a fortune. That's okay Mr. Lynch there is more than one way to bake Baked Alaska.

Muniz pushed open the kitchen door and froze. "Jesus!" On the floor in the center of the room next to the cooking complex was a four foot high, three foot wide pyramid constructed entirely of spice jars and condiment bottles. Next to the complex were two water goblets, a brandy snifter and two empty bottles of Cognac. No wonder I don't feel well.

Muniz pulled a club soda from the refrigerator and tried to get comfortable in the booth. He didn't get far after he saw the morning headline.

GUARD CONFESSES - WITNESSES DESCRIBE OTHER THIEVES

By Nels Andersen

There have been two major developments in the on-again off-again theft of the 'Flying Porpoise' sculpture by Alan Muniz, missing since last Saturday evening. Until yesterday, the statue was presumed lost in transit to Los Angeles. Recent events have changed that assumption.

Mr. Timothy Gallagher, a guard for the Donaldson Security Firm, turned himself into the San Francisco Police Department late yesterday, admitting complicity in the theft.

According to police, Mr. Gallagher was paid a large sum of money, by parties as yet unidentified, to make sure that the 'Flying Porpoise' never left San Francisco.

The irony of the episode, again according to Mr. Gallagher, is that the party that paid him to perpetrate the crime, never received the stolen goods.

Muniz sipped the club soda. Why had Gallagher turned himself in?

Further disclosures revealed that for the past several days Mr. Gallagher and his family have been inundated with threatening calls and notes. The police suspect these threats are coming from the instigators of the crime. Mr. Gallagher is being held in police custody pending further investigation.

Muniz's eyes widened. "Francis, can I see you in the kitchen," he yelled.

You ain't my boss, Fural thought, not moving from his prone position on the living room sofa.

"Francis," Muniz repeated.

Fural got up grudgingly and walked into the kitchen.

"What did you do after you left this house yesterday?"

Fural put his hands behind his back and began to count. "Just like I said. I put the envelope in the mailbox ---"

"Did you do anything before you went to Middlefield Drive?" Muniz interrupted.

Fural bristled. He thinks I'm stupid.

"Did you do anything to Gallagher yesterday?"

"I didn't do nothin' to...Gallagher," Fural glared.

He's giving ME the run around. I don't believe it. "What did you do yesterday afternoon, Francis?"

"I did like Ms. Convee told me. I went to the trailer park. Found Gallagher's little girl and gave her the note."

"Gallagher's daughter?"

"Yeah, just like the plumbing contractor that didn't give us the money he owed us. I gave his kid a note too." And I'm going to give you more than a note, Fural thought, if you don't give Ms. Convee her money.

"That will be all Francis."

"That will be all Francis," Fural muttered as he left the kitchen. And it may be all for you too, Fural smirked. He raised both arms above his head and snapped an imaginary leg. All Ms. Convee's got to do is give the word.

They threatened his daughter! My god, no wonder Gallagher turned himself in. Muniz returned to the article.

Secondly, two witnesses to the theft came forward and gave information to the San Francisco Police Department to develop composite drawings of the thieves (please see above). If anyone recognizes either of these two men, please contact..."

How had I missed that? Muniz flipped to the top of the article. So these are the culprits. Two thieving thieves. I wonder which one is Jerry Lynch? And who's the other Bozo? Muniz read on.

...the SFPD. These new developments pose one important question. If, as Mr. Gallagher claims, the people who paid him to steal the 'Flying Porpoise' do not have the statue, then who does?

I know the answer to that question, Nels. Sorry I can't share it with you. Muniz looked at the pyramid in the middle of the kitchen floor and then at the empty spice rack. God, all sixteen rows. "Francis, would you---." What am I doing? It would take Fural a year to get them back into alphabetical order.

Muniz folded the paper and went to check the mail. Come on, Hank, send me the picture of Jerry Lynch. I dinning with Andrea Convee.

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Officer Evans watched as Alan Muniz Jr. descended the front stairs of his home. Evans pulled a pad of paper from his dashboard and wrote: Muniz/ checks mail/ 7:05 A.M. Directly under: Gold Fang returned/ 6:38 A.M.

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The movement in the white Chrysler caught Muniz's eye. Hourigan you bastard. You didn't pull off the stake-out.

II

We were wonderful. We made love and plans and napped throughout the few hours to day break. We laid between silk red sheets in a pink canopied bed with a matching spread. Mia sleepily rubbed parts of me I love having rubbed. She had the hands of a master artisan, and I was putty. The hell with sculptor extraordinaire, Alan Muniz.

But the early morning light had a way of putting things in perspective. Though I didn't want to be the pooper at our party, I had some serious concerns. With everything that had transpired last night, we were very lucky and too damn nonchalant. I nudged Mia to a semi-conscious state. "Do you know how fortunate we are to wake up together instead of in separate cells,

banging our cups on the bars? Let's forget the drama. Let's just dump George someplace and get on with our lives." I looked at her hopefully.

Mia shuffled around under the sheets for a second, wiped the sleep from her eyes and propped her chin between her hands, a position I was starting to recognize as her pensive pose.

"Can I ask you something?" She batted her eyes. I have no defense for a good eye batting.

"Sure."

"How do you feel this morning?" She squinted, concentrating on my reply.

An odd comment, I thought, but I couldn't resist moving closer. "Here, feel me. Feel me," I offered her my entire body. "I feel fine." I said when she didn't respond.

"Me, too. Amazing, when you think about it. With all that happened last night, we should be a couple of dishrags. For the first time in ages I feel alive. Vibrant." She pulled the sheet tighter. I didn't interrupt. "I've always envied characters in books and movies. They get to dive over waterfalls... fly space ships, or walk on the bottom of the sea. Dangerous,... thrilling things. The hero or heroine is always inside a secret laboratory photographing secret plans,... while, just outside the door the villain sticks his key in the lock. Heroes use their brains, ingenuity, to escape from the damndest situations. They're enveloped in an aura of adventure. Suspense." She turned away. "I'm making a mess of this. Do you get what I'm getting at?"

I knew what she meant. I love those movies, too. "I'm beginning to get the gist." I had a sneaking suspicion where this conversation was leading.

"Peter, last night we had it all. Terror, humor, adventure, and romance." She gave me a sexy smile. "We did it, you and I. I loved it! The whole evening was thrilling. A marvelous rush of energy. Maybe anything else

we do will be anti-climactic, but we've got to try. I'm looking forward to the headlines. I can't wait to see George on the front page, knowing I had a part in putting him there. Peter, we just can't dump him any old place, can we?"

"It was exciting, wasn't it?"

"Exciting? Honey, that's like saying making love sort of feels good. Exciting? Positively exhilarating is more like it. These past few days with you has been like a roller-coaster . We've still got the ticket. Let's take one more ride." We kissed.

I was getting back in the mood, but her speech hadn't totally swayed me from a more pedestrian solution.

Over breakfast I confided. "Frankly, I'm out of clever, dramatic and devious ideas. I formally open the floor to any new clever, dramatic and devious plans. The Golden Gate Bridge would be perfect, except it wouldn't take much imagination on the part of your Japanese fan club or one of those drivers to put two and two together, if George appeared there."

"Agreed." Mia fed on adventure. "Tell you what. No light bulbs going off in my brain, either. Today, let's both make a plan or ten, anything goes. San Francisco must have a hundred good spots for George. This evening, we'll weigh them, pick the best one, and do it. How's that?"

She looked great, vibrant and much better without the wig.

"Ya gotta deal, Moll." We clunked our coffee cups.

"How about dinner, out or in?"

"Let's eat out. I know a great place and one of my best friends is the maitre'd."

"Great." Mia grabbed a maroon tam-o'-shanter from the hat rack as we went out the door.

"Good morning, George," Mia waved to my car as we got into her M.G. We formed a car pool. I drove. When I followed her home Tuesday evening, I realized she had a drag-racer fantasy. She drove at one speed, full throttle. But, who's complaining, she makes love the same way.

"Hey, mister, you deaf?" she reached over and turned down the radio. "That little habit coulda put us both in the big house." She shook an emery board at me in a scolding gesture. We snuggled together like Siamese twins; there was only one way we could get closer and I didn't feel agile enough to attempt it in the front seat of an M.G.

We kissed goodbye in front of her office building and I headed for the company garage. I remembered my vow not to speak to Kevin Stiller. I took my I.D. card and pinned it on the sleeve of my sports jacket for special effect.

Kevin took note. "Good Morning, Peter, how are you?"

I eased my face into a wide, farcical grin. I said nothing. I motioned him to lift the barrier.

"Got yourself a new car?" He admired the M.G.

"To go with my new title. Vice President in Charge."

"Way to go." He took my hand and pumped it like he was trying to draw water from an underground well. "And a new girlfriend too I hear --- that's great."

HOW DID HE KNOW THAT? Was he having me followed? I was in awe.

"Eiaine's a real nice lady, Peter. A real looker and a good secretary too, I'll bet?" He gave me that damn wink. His head bobbed up and down, confirming his own comment.

Eiaine? Ah ha, a simple kiss and the rumor mill strikes again. And now the company clarion had an item. Smut was in the air. Mia would love it.

"Kevin, you know the company rules, not a word about any of this, okay? It could affect my promotion."

He pursed his lips, giving them a zipping motion as he threw away the key. "Not a word, hey, you're talking to Kevin Stiller. There won't be a word. Not from me, Peter." The barrier arm rose.

Mr. Stiller, your nose is growing, I thought. And you're a damn liar.

The pile of Swiss cheese outside my window had a new addition. An olive. If I waited long enough, maybe I could open a deli. I started to light a cigarette and realized I had the same pack for two days. I tapped the filter on my desk and returned it to the pack. You're not quitting --- just cutting down, I told myself.

As I flipped through my calendar, the phone rang. "Good morning, Peter Tully."

"Good morning. And now that we're all in our places with bright shiny faces, Mr. Boyle wants to see you in his office immediately." Susan Markell bit and then elongated each word. It would have driven me nuts. My boss, Paul Boyle didn't seem to mind.

"Any idea what this is about, Susan?" Maybe my promotion had come through.

"Oh, I wouldn't have that information."

I waited. I knew Susan knew.

"Inter-office relationships, perhaps, Mr. Tully."

Each word struck like a cleaver's blow.

"Thanks, Susan, be right there." Another fun day at the office.

I have yet to meet anyone who doesn't like and respect Paul Boyle. He's simply a super person. Always there in a pinch or crunch, never afraid to roll

up his sleeves and lend a hand. In our office, Paul never let a birthday or anniversary go by without some memento.

Paul's five feet-eleven, paunchy, with a sweet round, butter ball face. A light brown fringe of hair circles his bald head, giving him the appearance of a Roman Caesar. He has one idiosyncrasy. Whenever he is in a delicate situation, his Adams apple goes on a rampage. Up and down, like one of those strong man machines you see at a carnival.

When I entered his office, his Adams apple was caught in a hurricane in the Bermuda Triangle. Up and down. Left and right.

"Good morning, Peter." He stood, then sat back down.

I said, "hello." He stood again, smiled, and sat again and frowned. He pushed papers all over his desk, tried to catch his Adams apple, missed and stood again. "Please sit down."

I didn't. He did.

"Morning, Paul." I stood in front of his desk, my hands clasped in front of my crotch, head bent, awaiting chastisement.

"Peter, I hate this part of my job, but... It's come to my attention, er, that is, it's come to the company's attention and they brought it to my attention, that there might be some, well, no one's certain, of course. Peter... are you and Eiaine fooling arou... having more than a professional, relation, an, er, ... affair?"

I stood motionless, my eyes downcast, staring at his carpet. There was a big snag in his shag. When I didn't respond, he went on.

"I know. It's no one's business. But I've, well, been directed by the powers that be to, uh, discourage ... inter- office.. .well, liaisons. You understand, don't you, Peter?"

I shrugged an I'm-getting-the-message-shrug. The snag in his shag was moving. It had lots of legs and brown and yellow spots. Paul needed an exterminator. But, this didn't seem like a good time to bring it up.

"Eiaine is a beautiful woman, and your divorce being final, and working in such close proximity these past few years, it's only natural that the two of you, well, ... Peter, you're not making this any easier. Would you please say something?" He smiled at me faintly.

I whispered, "You're absolutely right." I kept my eyes on the ground and shuffled my feet. I was about to burst. The thing on the floor was crawling toward my foot. One more inch and it was history.

"Peter, you know the rules of the game. Rumor has it you're up for a promotion..."

Way to go Kevin! They had promised me a promotion in September, but now my prospects were brighter. I'd gone right to the bottom --- right to the garage and Kevin Stiller.

"Discretion, you've got to be discreet, Peter." He stood and walked around his desk. "I'll say one thing. No one can blame you. Eiaine is a knockout."

You should see Mia.

"I've been tempted myself, for God's sake. Tell me, Peter is she...? "

Spit it out, Paul --- Don't be shy.

"You know Eiaine, is she..."

Why Paul Boyle, you old leech.

"Of course, it's none of my business."

I was having a good time. I decided to play it for all it was worth. "Man to man?" Paul nodded. I checked the door. "It won't leave this office?" Paul

shook his head no. I peaked behind the couch and under his desk, then, "Wonderful, Paul, exquisite." I kissed the tips of my fingers and threw up my hand with a flick. I gave him the wink. The knowing wink. The guy to guy, mano a mano wink.

Repeating his advice about discretion, Paul escorted me out of his office. Eiaine sat at a desk about fifteen feet away, with some papers in her hand.

Sorry, Paul, you and the powers that be deserve this.

"MORNING, DARLING," I screamed across the office. "I love you."

Everyone froze.

Paul looked at me agape, then tried to stifle a laugh and whispered, "You son-of-a-bitch, you haven't---"

"Nope, she's never even crossed my mind," I lied.

I walked back to my office with Eiaine clicking behind me. I'd know her 'click' anywhere.

"Peter, I'm sorry, I apologize. The whole 'sahib' thing was a joke. Will you give our love affair a rest? I'm getting looks from everyone. We're number one on the gossip chart. And I don't like it one bit!" I thought she was going to jump up and down and stamp her feet. "Peter," she bent down and whispered, "one of us is going to be transferred if you don't stop."

With the mentality of the powers that were, a transfer was a strong possibility. I looked up.

"Peace?"

"Peace." She kissed me on the cheek.

There were giggles behind us.

"Oops, more fodder for the rumor mongers." I pointed to the door. Two women from Payroll were on their way for coffee, peeking in all the open doors for potential ammunition for their gossip guns.

"Screw you!" Eiaine whirled in their direction. They disappeared down the corridor.

"Sorry, Eiaine, I wouldn't consider dating a woman with such a vile vocabulary."

She gave me the finger.

"Strange peace sign," I said as Eiaine 'clicked' out the door.

I looked at my calendar. I was scheduled to take a group through our Communications Department at nine o'clock. My heart got a jump-start when I walked out of my office straight into my group of conductees. Six gentlemen from Japan and they looked very familiar. I wanted to ask them if they had enjoyed the Golden Gate Bridge last night. I didn't.

The tour went well. When I turned them over to Ray Calegari for the remainder of the tour, I noticed he didn't shake their hands. The Winslow brothers must have really gotten him good.

After the tour, I went over to Telly's. His restaurant was packed. When he was free, I asked him if he had received a letter for my associate, Mr. Chang. He nodded. I asked him to hold it. If I opened, it the letter would be inadmissible in court. And if Nels elected not to keep his promise I would probably be tempted to waste him. Calm down, I told myself. I ordered some coffee and a Greek pastry. Depending on the cook, Greek pastry can be addicting. Telly's is heroin. One bite and you're a junkie for life.

"Where are your cards?" Telly asked taking a long pull on his Tootsie Roll and pointed to his hand-made Jeopardy Board.

Oh, shit, I had committed a grave social error. If you wanted any special favors from Telly, and he was a veritable Pandora's Box of special favors: he could place a bet, get you a Cuban cigar and almost always find a pair of great

tickets to any event that had been sold out for months. But to be a candidate for his favors you had to do your homework. The assignment was simple. Make up five good trivia questions for his Thursday morning Jeopardy game. Telly played Alex Trebek. At 11 a.m. each Thursday, about thirty trivia buffs would gather and play. The player with the highest amount of points at the end of the month got a free lunch. I forgot my homework assignment, and Telly knew it.

"One day a week. Five questions. One thing I ask." Telly shook his head in disbelief.

"Telly, you wouldn't believe what's happ---"

"Forget it." He scowled and directed me to the far corner of the counter. "These stools here are reserved for the Jeopardy players."

I took a seat next to a white Grecian Urn. It was a phony. The two nude wrestlers on the side were circumcised.

"Here." Telly left my order on the counter.

My hot coffee wasn't and my baklava had been baked sometime during the previous century. I knew the drill. Errant students got a dunce cap. Dunce cap. I thought of Mia's hat rack and smiled.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, let's play Jeopardy," Telly yelled extra loud for my benefit.

Sorry I'd offended Telly, I picked up one of the ten odd discarded morning papers and moved to a table near the rear. I dunked a piece of Baklava into my coffee, munched and turned to the front page. I gagged, choked and coughed. Two more colors had just been added to my Rubik's Cube.

GUARD CONFESSES - WITNESSES DESCRIBE THIEVES

By Nelvin Andersen

The mystery began to unravel as I read about the guard turning himself in --- no wonder it was sitting under that hedge. It was an inside job. I read on.

Secondly, two witnesses to the theft came forward and gave information to the San Francisco Police Department to develop composite drawings of the thieves (please see above). If anyone recognizes either of these...

It took a moment, but just a moment to register. Please see above? Composite drawing? My coffee cup flew across the table. I flipped back to the two faces sketched above the article. A gasp of relief escaped my throat as I stared at the drawings. Neither picture remotely resembled Jerry or me. If we ever got arrested because of those drawings, it would be total luck. I couldn't even tell who was supposed to be who. Either the witnesses were drunk or the artist should be working for Stevenson Steel and Oil --- with Ethel, the 'dump', in the Visitor & Employee Identification Office, drawing our company Identification Badges.

I felt better. Not much, but a little better.

"Who were ALEXANDER HAMILTON and AARON BURR," someone shouted in response to one of Telly's answers.

I returned to the article.

...These new developments pose one important question. If, as Mr. Gallagher claims, the people who paid him do not have the 'Flying Porpoise', then who does?"

We know the answer to that one, don't we Nels? The Jeopardy game was going well. The 'Flying Porpoise' game stunk. The other team had too many

players. With Telly preoccupied, I walked behind the counter and poured myself a hot cup of coffee.

“Who was Theodore Roosevelt?” A woman shouted.

At least now things began to fit. There's a jig-saw puzzle called 'Needle in the Haystack.' There are six million strands of hay and one needle. I had just found the needle.

Everything that had happened came rushing out from the synapses of my brain. I remembered from SLUT that the Graure Exhibit ended at 8 P.M. Jerry and I left Harrington's at midnight. If Jerry hadn't slipped, we never would have seen the statue. It was a fluke. The guard left the porpoise for the bad guys, but the good guys found it. I felt better. I wished my brain idled at that juncture. It didn't. It shifted into high. I pictured a football stadium. I was on the twenty yard line, but I wasn't holding a football. I carried the ‘Flying Porpoise’ in the crook of my arm. Coming down the field at me full bore were: the police, the artist's son, probably a team of investigators from the insurance company, and the media. I didn't want the statue. I turned to run into the bleachers, but the stands were filled with bad guys. As far as I was concerned the game was over. I lost. Enough was enough.

I stopped at the counter and promised Telly I'd come prepared next week. Prepared wasn't enough, he insisted I make up fifteen questions for next Thursday's game. A just penance, I thought. Only close friends get chances to make amends.

From a public phone, I called Nels. To my relief the phone did not eat my change and a civil, businesslike woman answered and patched me through. I was in no mood for the operator with the big Haylloooo.

"Nels Andersen."

His voice was lower, disconsolate.

"Hi, Nels, it's me, Chang. It seems to me that the 'Super Bowl' of theft is in the final quarter, and the other team just brought in the first string. Your article this morning was a doozyer."

"Oh, Mr. Chang, how kind of you to call." His voice was hollow. "I hope you have not been inconvenienced in any way."

I didn't even notice the sarcasm. "No, not really. What's all this ---"

"Not really? What happened to our plan? We had a verbal agreement. Last night I waited here until seven o'clock and then dashed home like a mad man so I would not miss your call. Lynn McCarthy, our best photographer, broke an engagement because I promised her there would be a major break in the porpoise story."

"Nels, I---"

"Then Lieutenant Hourigan called and said he had eye witnesses and composite drawings ---"

"Don't worry about the drawings."

"And would I put them in this morning's edition?"

"Honestly, the drawings ---"

"And then Hourigan called AGAIN and said that an arrest had been made. That the thief would only talk to me. I thought it was you." Nels paused for a long moment. His voice wavered as he added. "And the most embarrassing part, I seriously doubted whether I would have had the fortitude to admit my complicity in this entire endeavor."

"Forget the guilts Nels. Everything's okay. Honestly, we tried to get the statue in place last night."

Nels kept rambling. "I am not sure if ---"

"Nels, tell me where you want me to put the 'Flying Porpoise'."

"Are you really Chinese? You're not Chinese, are you?"

"Nels, please listen to me. The time for the dramatic is over. Let's get the statue into the hands of the proper authorities."

"It doesn't really matter.... As things have evolved, I guess it is just as well that the porpoise is still in your care. Though, I have to admit, I was expecting a picture of me and the statue on the front page this morning, not one of you...and your friend."

"Nels?"

"A scenic location..."

"Nels. Please?"

"A picture with my arm around the 'Flying Porpoise', perhaps..."

"Nels?"

"I am not jealous... and thank God you still have it... things are getting a bit sticky... don't you think, Mr. Chang?"

"Nels are you listening to me? Where do you want the statue? I'll drop it off in your office. I'll put it on your lap. Call the photographer. Lynn, what's her name....."

"Oh, NO, Mr. Chang don't you see... it's much too late for that."

"Too late for what!?"

"Mr. Gallagher's confession changes everything."

So has the appearance of two eye witnesses, I thought. "The guard's confession is exactly what I'm talking about, Nels." At last, a breakthrough. A line of communication between a reporter and as it turns out, an idiot. For the past several moments, I felt as if I was talking to someone underwater, garble, garble. "Nels, do you think I should just call the police?"

"Mr. Chang, you have not been paying attention. Did you read my article today? They have a suspect."

This conversation isn't happening. It couldn't be. It was a dream. Actually, a nightmare. I was on Neptune, the ammonia atmosphere causing hallucinations. I was underwater. Drowning.

"Don't you see, Mr. Chang. Someone really did attempt to steal the 'Flying Porpoise'. The scum," he said bitterly. "The slime."

"Nels, don't get started again --- I've already read that article."

"Mr. Chang, we can not give it back now. If we do, the real villains, these carbuncles on..."

"Stop!" I yelled.

"Sorry, Mr. Chang." He continued deliberately. "If you return the porpoise... even to me, then the crooks will just crawl back into the woodwork waiting to strike again."

"So what! Then it'll be someone else's problem."

"You don't mean that, do you, Mr. Chang?"

"What do you mean, do I mean it? Of course I mean it."

"There are people all over the world with that sort of attitude, Chang." Nels snapped.

In less than twenty seconds, Nels had changed, from a whimpering, disjointed sop, into a man of determination and resolve.

"People who refuse to get involved --- Who can not be bothered. People who ask: Am I my brother's keeper?"

"It's a statue for Christ sake! A piece of marble."

"I see. When the going gets tough, you resort to vulgarity and flee into the night. Frankly people like you appall me. I expected so much more from you, Mr. Chang. Courage. Fortitude. Baaaaah. Baaaaaaaah."

He bleated at me like a sheep. At ME. Turning George over to the proper authorities was the sensible, logical thing to do. Why, for the first time in my life, did I feel like a complete wimp? A nerd? A coward? I felt like I had to make an excuse. So I did.

"Nels, we had a real tough night. We almost got caught. Don't you see what I mean? If we were caught, I would have had to tell the police that you were my accomplice, you knew everything, and in fact encouraged me to delay returning the porpoise. Then both of us would make the front page," I said. "I can see it now; you and I in attractive orange jump-suits with necklaces of numbers dangling from our neck. Now, you wouldn't have liked ---?"

"I told you I have already considered that possibility and, after much soul searching, I would be willing to take that risk, if we could set up a trap for these vermin."

How come every time he said something, it made more sense than when I said something.

"Who's we?" Nels continued.

"We?" He caught me off guard.

"Yes, We. You always said I before when we talked. Now you are saying we. Who is the other guy in the composite drawings?"

No flies on Nels.

"The statue's heavy. I needed help, so I got it. Nels, when we began this on Monday, you convinced me that I might be able to pull it off. I got caught up in it. What the hell one great adventure in my life. Something to tell the grand kids. It's way out of control. More complicated by the minute. I've got a work of art I don't want. Besides the police, I've got real live crooks after me, the porpoise has to be insured, so let's toss in two or three very eager and dedicated insurance agents. Right now I'm --"

"Crooks, smooks, they're pansies. They didn't even have the pluck to pull off their own robbery. I purposely avoided mentioning this aspect of the robbery before but let me share something about these eunuchs of crime. This fellow Gallagher, the guard who turned himself in ---"

"I read the article, Nels."

"Well whoever these people are, they did their homework on Gallagher. They knew his background and about his financial difficulties. They paid him fifteen thousand dollars up front to hide the statue, an offer he could not refuse, as the Godfather would say."

"Did Gallagher stage the breakdown on the highway?"

"I don't think so. Most likely that was a freak accident, but perfect for their plan. Even Gallagher felt he was off Scott-free when the statue was reported missing in transit. But the threatening phone calls to his home...and a hand printed note compelled him to go to the police and through them to contact me. He read my articles and felt I was a compassionate ---"

"Stop it Nels. What calls? What note?"

"I was leading up to that. Last night, when Gallagher finally spoke he told me that the crooks left threatening messages on his phone. One message really upset his wife..."

"Play with the bad guys you play by their rules," I said unsympathetically.

"That is just the point. And exactly why these hoodlums are such weasels. There is an unwritten code of honor among crooks. They NEVER involve family. But these fellows." Nels' voice rose. "First, they terrified Gallagher's wife. Then, yesterday, one of the slime stopped their nine year old

daughter on her way home from school and handed her a note. I don't have a copy here, but if I remember correctly it went something like... no hold it, do you have a pen?"

I pulled a bic fine point from my pocket. "Yeah. Why?"

"To get the full import of this note I have to read it exactly as it was written. I'm going to read it and spell it to the best of my memory. Ready?"

I nodded.

"Are you ready?"

I nodded again and finally realized he could not see my nod. "Ready." As Nels read/spelled the note I copied. The further he went the angrier I became.

"Wheare's de statue? or our fifteen grand? Insidently, neaice litle gril you have here, Messtr. Gilligher. Such a preaty litle face, bee a shame to mess it up reel bad."

"What a bastard! A nine year old girl." I seethed, a major cord had been struck and I think a major vein in my forehead almost burst.

In the seventh grade a gang of kids had chased my little sister, Cindy. She was the youngest. The spark-plug, the effervescent bubble of the family. She came home from school every day at 3:10. One day she didn't. The whole neighborhood helped us search. By 5:00, we called the police. They found her the next morning huddled in a stack of garbage cans behind Saint Agnes School. The gang had never caught her. They'd never touched her, but some of the sparkle was gone from her eyes and she never laughed as much again.

"Bastards," I repeated.

"Bastards!" Nels agreed with vehemence. "Notice all the misspellings?"

How could I miss them? "We're dealing with idiots. Uncaring, terror-breeding animals."

"Mr. Chang, this case can be solved and I must be part of the solution. Do you want to allow these creatures to roam the earth? If the statue is returned --- I am certain they will disappear. I---" Nels broke off.

I felt him gathering his thoughts. He didn't know it, but the incident with the young girl was my catalyst, now I was willing to do jail time to get the pricks.

"Lieutenant Hourigan of the San Francisco Police Department is a valuable ally. He's assured me that I will be informed immediately as matters develop. And with a bit information, a bit of luck, a few clues --- you and I may be able to spring our own trap."

"There is no excuse for involving children. None!" My thoughts were still on Cindy. My sense of justice inflamed.

"Then we agree," Nels said. "Now with regards to a plan. As soon as I get one name, one clue to their identity we will invite the scum to a rendezvous. After all, we have the bait. We have the statue. Set the perfect trap and we will catch them with their proverbial pants down. And I'll be there along with the police and a photographer. We will have engineered the ultimate fait accompli."

"Nels, it's a good idea. But, I need a time frame. This can't go on for months."

"I realize that I am asking a great deal from you...Do you remember Benjamin Franklin's advice to those who wanted to be immortalized?"

"I am no longer interested in the fame, Nels. I'm doing this because of the young girl."

"We have a common cause, Mr. Chang. Which is what Franklin meant when he wrote: 'Either write things worth doing or do things worth writing.' I

am a the writer you are the doer. Admittedly, the return of a lost work of art would be exciting. But returning the 'Flying Porpoise' with the capture of the thugs would be a triumph we'd remember the rest of our lives."

We were allies, but. "A time frame, Nels?"

"Will you keep it forty-eight hours?"

Two more days? I didn't sound like an especially long time. But neither does ten minutes, unless you're in a dentist chair and he's drilling into an open nerve without Novocain. Then I thought of Cindy. "Okay, forty-eight hours, max."

I heard Nels shuffling papers on the other end of the line. Deeply concerned he continued. "Mr. Chang are you absolutely certain no one will be able to identify you from those drawings?"

He'd been listening after all. I glanced at the pictures a second time. "Positive."

"Good. I'm confident that you have already gone to a great deal of effort in finding a dramatic place to leave the statue. See if you can incorporate that labor into the perfect spot for our rendezvous. Let's get this rabble, Mr. Chang."

"We'll get this rabble, Mr. Andersen."

I hung up.

I stood there in the middle of the sidewalk after I put down the receiver. Stealing a statue I could understand, you had a chance for adventure and monetary gain. But involving a nine year old girl was despicable.

III

"You've read this morning's paper?" Ramone Cosette mouth filled with bile. One slit of light was allowed through the parted curtains. It crossed the olive carpet, crossed the mahogany table and ended high on the opposite wall. No one responded to Cosette's query. "Andrea has broken a sacred rule," Ramone continued, his voice rising. "She has involved the Gallagher family. Children."

"Times change, Ramone," Alberto Sinorae replied from the shadows.

Cosette's pale, white hand crept into the beam of light. Thin fingers closed quickly around the brass, lion claw ashtray. He rose from his chair. His arm passed upward in the beam of light and returned to the mahogany table with a splintering crash. The brass gavel spun from his grasp.

"THE FAMILY IS SACROSANCT!" The room echoed. "IT IS WRITTEN."

"It is written," Mikeal Glazunov agreed from the darkness.

"It is the debt and the profit which are important. The means of payment," Alberto Sinorae said calmly, "are incidental."

"ALBERTO," Ramone yelled fiercely. "LITTLE GIRLS? You want we should threaten little girls?" Cosette's fingers dragged through the splintered mahogany. He lowered himself into his chair.

"Alberto, the family should never be involved." Mikeal Glazunov offered from the far end of the table.

"Really?... The family is sacrosanct?" Sinorae hissed. He stood. The beam of light parted his hair. His face, invisible. "I SPIT ON SACROSANCT!" A droplet of spittle flew from his mouth. "I SPIT," he slapped the table with the palm of his hand. "ON WHAT IS WRITTEN!" Sinorae edge slowly around the table. "Gentlemen, we deal in weakness.

Human frailty. Without them we would not exist. The sacrosanct family, ha!" Sinorae said with disgust. "Who buys our drugs, Ramone? Who has made us wealthy men, Mikeal? Our sons become our patrons while we recruit our daughters to become whores. We create the junkies. And you sit insolently and cry piously about the sanctity of the family? I...I... " Sinorae turned slowly from man to man; he clenching his fist visibly attempting to restrain his anger. **"It is better left unsaid. There is a debt to be paid. Andrea will pay that debt."**

IV

Eiaine grabbed me coming out of the elevator. She pointed at her watch, "You have a tour, computer floor, eleven o'clock."

I checked my docket. Phelan Junior High School (teacher & seven junior high students, -- Gifted.) This would be a cinch. Kids love our computer tour. And I love giving it. Two years ago we purchased a bank of state-of-the-art I.B.M. computers. They took up the fifth floor of our building. I'd access a few games, show them a few tricks on the ol' I.B.M. and turn them loose.

"Seven of my best students," the teacher said, introducing seven of her best students. A pretty little girl stuck out her hand.

"I am very pleased to meet you," she smiled politely.

I thought of the note --- Nice little girl you have here Mr. Gallagher. --- Such a pretty little face. --- It would be a shame to mess it up. I said a silent prayer. We needed clues. I wanted those bastards.

The teacher looked like a teacher, in a plaid skirt and a long sleeved white blouse with a high collar and a brooch. The little girl looked like a little girl. The other six kids, however, looked like the progeny of an orgy from the bar scene in Star Wars.

I abandoned my usual computer room speech after three minutes. One of the aliens, young boy with pink and green hair, had taken charge. His spikes of hair jutted out in every direction. He looked like he'd tried to make love to an electric cattle prod. He had three earrings in his left ear and a miniature charm bracelet hanging from his left nostril. Black levis, a black leather jacket, studded gloves and a matching neck collar finished off his ensemble.

What do the parents of these kids talks about at dinner?

"Pass the mash potatoes, son. Is that a new earring? Wonderful. And that green shirt compliments those pink slacks. It's a real nice touch, son. Very tasteful. Balances off the nose ring. Don't you agree, mother?"

The genius from planet Zorkon knew everything about computers. All the other 'six best students from the class' called him Snoop. As soon as he began to speak, I knew I was out of my league. He played for the majors and I might have qualified to sit on the bench of a farm club. He took over the lecture. Snoop had teethed on micro-chips. But I never took my eyes off him for a second. Two minutes alone at one of our terminals and he I knew he would own Stevenson Steel and Oil. I learned more about computers from Snoop in forty-five minutes, than in my three years of night classes.

When Snoop concluded the tour, I thanked him for all his help and for giving me a new insight into the world of computers. His teacher graciously thanked him too. The little girl shook my hand in parting. Snoop handed me a piece of paper.

"My fax number and phone number, in case you need help, Mr. Tuelly," he said flatly. No malice was intended. I liked this kid, but lord I was glad he

wasn't mine. Snoop slipped on 'Blues Brothers' dark glasses. He looked like a bug applying for a part in a science fiction movie. But Snoop you know your stuff, I thought admiringly as he led the class down the corridor.

I took the piece of paper and absently stuffed it in my wallet. I didn't know it then, but before this war ended, Snoop and I were to become close friends.

V

Between visits to his mail box, Alan Muniz Jr. spent the morning putting his spice rack back together. On his fifth trip to the box, he received the letter from Henry "Hank" Guernsey.

Dear Alan,

Here is the picture you requested. Also, in case the address I gave you isn't valid, the car is registered to Breefer Shipping, San Francisco. Keep in touch.

Hank

P.S. I still think hanging the guy is a bit severe.

Family sends regards. Fei-gga Bouts Fei-gga Bouts.

Muniz sat at the kitchen table perplexed. He glanced bank and forth between the drivers license picture of Jerry Lynch and the composite drawings in the morning paper. He held the D.M.V. picture under one sketch then the other. Neither of these guys looks like Lynch. Hell, they're not even close. He tossed the paper into the corner of the booth. Lynch has the statue... If he doesn't I'm dead. Why did I invite Andrea to dinner? I know Lynch has it. He

has to have it. Lynch must know someone at the exhibit. GALLAGHER, he knows Gallagher. They're in this together. But if they are, why did Gallagher turn himself in? Damn it, nothing fits.

Muniz took a second look at Guernsey's letter. He ran his finger across the text until he came to Breefer Shipping.

Three minutes later Muniz hurried into the living room carrying his portable phone in one hand and rubbing his nose with the other.

Fural watched from the sofa with disinterest as Muniz pulled a second chair up to the patent leather desk, pulled a slip of paper from his pocket and turned.

"Francis."

"What?" Fural bellowed.

Andrea's no fool, Muniz thought. When Fural speaks, people pay attention. "Francis, remember that thing you did with Ms. Convee?"

Fural sat up. "I never did nothin' to Ms. Convee."

"That's not what I--- Skip it. I want you to read my lips and repeat what I say."

"Why?"

"Ms. Convee's orders." Muniz patted the empty chair. Here boy. Good doggie. Sit and I'll give you a chicken bone. Something you can chew, choke and die on.

Fural sat. Muniz dialed the desk phone, handed it to Fural and clicked on the portable phone. Their faces inches apart they waited for the connection.

* * *

Inside her office, Mia closed a file and picked up the phone on the fourth ring.

"May I speak with Mr. Lynch?" Francis rumbled.

Mia recoiled. The question was easy, but the tone of voice was the deepest, most demanding she'd ever heard.

Mia didn't think. She reacted.

"He doesn't work here anymore. He quit."

Muniz almost fell over backward. "He quit?"

"He quit?" Fural repeated.

"No, don't say that." Muniz said.

"No, don't---"

Muniz covered Fural's mouth piece and glared. Fural grinned.

"Where is he now?" Fural rumbled as Muniz mouthed.

"Seattle."

"Where is he staying?"

Mia collected herself. What the hell am I doing? "Who is this?"

"An old friend from the service, we used to fish together in the Army. I'll try to reach him at home." Fural roared.

VI

On top of Lieutenant Hourigan's desk sat the bright red, fire alarm box. T.J. grabbed the note scotch-taped to the side. Hourigan and T.J. read the note together.

**A souvenir from the Russian K.G.B. to Comrade
Lieutenant Richard A. Hourigan. We would like to
thank you for all your help over the years.**

Comrade T.M.I.T.B.C.

"What the hell does the T.M.I.T.B.C. mean?"

"T.J., you'll never make detective that way."

T.J. gave a confused look to the taller man. "You think it means something."

"Forget it." Hourigan grabbed the alarm box and tried to lift it off his desk. "Jesus, how did that guy carry this thing around under his arm?"

Together they set it on the floor. "I'll bet, T.M.I.T.B.C., doesn't mean a damn thing."

Hourigan cocked his head, "How much?"

"Come on, Lieutenant."

"It's simple --- T.M.I.T.B.C. means 'the man in the blue cape.' Now will you ask Wisely to come in here?"

Moments later, Carol Wisely hurried through the door. "Yes, Sir."

"I need a fem---" Lieutenant Hourigan bit off the word. "I need both of you to listen and offer your... er ... separate points of view."

"Yes Sir, Lieutenant." Wisely enjoyed Hourigan's uneasiness. She took a legal pad from the desk, wetted a number two pencil with the tip of a very pink tongue, crossed her legs and said, "all set, Lieutenant."

T.J. chuckled. "Me too, Sir."

Hourigan began slowly. "When the Collier brothers gave us the descriptions of the two perps." Hourigan paused and looked at Wisely. "Perpetrators of the crime."

"Oh, thank you, Lieutenant." Wisely pretended to scribble on her pad. "Prep means perpetrators. Yes, Sir. Got it." She looked up her white teeth flashed.

Ignoring the rebuff, Hourigan began again.

"When the Collier brothers gave us the description of the two perps, that let Muniz, Fural and Convee off the hook. But does it?" Hourigan pointed to Wisely and T.J. "Let's suppose you planned to steal a major work of art. A sculpture perhaps."

Billings sat back in contemplation. Wisely leaned forward.

"You've planned for months. You've waited patiently as the 'Flying Porpoise' passes from exhibit to exhibit. You've waited for the most opportune time, the perfect moment." Hourigan paced. "You find a guard in dire financial straits and you give him fifteen grand to leave the statue by a debris box. But we know that Gallagher couldn't get it to the debris box. In fact the crate broke open. The statute dropped on his foot. So he ditched it under a hedge. Hourigan spun around and stopped. "Right?"

"Yes, Sir," T.J. and Wisely said in unison.

"And then, we have the Collier brothers. I ask you." Hourigan came to attention in front of his desk. "Why, after months of clever planning, bribing a guard, disabling a freight elevator, rigging a packing crate and all of the rest of the crap that goes into a successful heist, why in hell, after all this preparation would two brilliant thieves need to ask two goddamn strangers to give you a hand with a multi-million dollar statue. Why the hell would you use a red, Austin Healy convertible as a get-a-way car. And,---" Hourigan took two paces and stopped abruptly. "Even if you needed help, why wouldn't you cover the goddamn thing with a blanket or a garbage bag?" Hourigan turned a high back chair and sat down cowboy style. "Well?"

VII

During the tour, Mia called. At noon I returned it.

"Hi, honey," I said.

"Hi ya Mr. Big. Now you're on the front page of the paper..... well sort of," she laughed. "Those pictures of you and Jerry aren't very becoming."

"Not funny, Moll. How about lunch? We've issues to discuss."

"Can't today, got a date with the girls I can't break. You can't have all my time, you know. Guess what?"

I knew who she really wanted to have lunch with. "I'll bite. What?"

"Jerry called."

"Does he know what's going on? What did he say?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't really get to talk to him. They patched him straight through to Mr. Cohen." Her voice rose, she was getting to the good part.

"And, Harry Cohen is livid. Jerry's coming back to tie up some loose ends. Then he's going on a three-week vacation."

"A three week vacation?"

"The company owes him that much." Mia said, in Jerry's behalf.

"Want to know really set Harry off?"

"Nope."

"Jerry kept telling Harry how much he loves him. He even kissed him over the phone. Harry hates any physical displays, poor guy. How's that devious and horny brain of yours doing in the 'let's-get-rid-of-George department'? Conjured up anything clever?"

"Did Harry tell you where Jerry's staying?"

"That's the second time I've been asked that question in the last ten minutes."

"Uh?"

"Some guy... Peter, you should have heard his voice. He wanted to know where Jerry was staying too."

"Did he leave a name?"

"No, he said he was an old friend from the service."

Flat footed, Jerry Lynch, never qualified for military duty, but I didn't remember that then. "What'd you think of today's headlines?"

"Sounds like we've got some competition."

"More than that..." I gave her a quick summary of Nels' summary.

"A nine year old girl," she said fiercely. "What creeps. I'd like to stick needles in their nuts.... OH, damn."

The "Oh, damn," spelled t.r.o.u.b.l.e. I heard Mia moving papers in the background.

"Peter, did you read today's personal ads?"

"Oh, sure. Wouldn't miss them for the world. Don't you ever have to work?"

"Well, I told you I love them." I could see her pouting. "There's one today about a single white female who desires three strong, healthy males to fulfill a fantasy... but that's not the important one." She continued rustling papers. "Ah, here it is. Get this, I'll read it exactly. This one stuck out like a whale in a fish bowl." She cleared her throat and began:

"Dear Children, you have something of mine you're not supposed to have. No HARD feelings. Peter, they put the 'hard' in big bold letters..." Mia hesitated. "Place ad here for PURPOSES --- and purposes is in big bold letters too. Of reconciliation. Signed Mamma.--- They spelled reconciliation with s.e.a.l instead of c.i.l. What do you think?"

"What do you think?"

"No fair, I asked you first."

I didn't like what I was thinking. "Coincidence?"

"Peter!? Take purpose, switch a few letters and you have porpoise. That's too much of a coincidence to be coincidental. Do you think 'seal' is just a typo? Come on Peter."

I had no doubts. It was from the creeps that hired Gallagher. These pricks were determined. Any mistakes and Mia and I were in deep trouble. Damn it! I was wavering again. If I turn it over to the police, it's all over.

"I think we should give it back." Come on Mia, agree. Say you think we should ditch it or give it back to the police. Come on Mia, say it.

"Peter, this is really exciting! I didn't think we'd get a chance to decipher cryptic codes in this caper. All we need now is a safe house, a Swiss Bank Account, and a couple of phony passports and we're big time. This is like a movie, but real."

I had a sneaky suspicion that the voting was over.

"I'm with you and Nels, let's get the bastards. Dinner still on tonight? Gotta git to lunch now. Maybe I'll ask the girls for some recommendations."

"Mia?"

"Only kidding, boss. See you at five-fifteen, in front, okay?"

"Okay Moll, five-fifteen."

I put down the phone and rested my chin on my hands and thought. Get rid of George --- and the adventure is over. Mia would be disappointed but she would be safe. Sure, she has a fondness, HELL a frantic zeal, for excitement. And Nels had a cause. I remembered the little girl on the tour. I wondered what Timothy Gallagher's little girl looked like. And then, I recalled Christmases with my little sister Cindy.

"Talent Show, Talent Show, Everybody," she cried, above the crackle of the fire.

Cindy loved to be Master of Ceremonies. The whole family would come to attention on her request. My dad gave her an old corn cob pipe for a prop. She sprayed it black and called it her pipe-a-phone. Every year she'd hold the stem and speaking into the bowl she'd summon the whole family into the front room for the Christmas show. "Tell a joke, grandpa." And grandpa would tell a joke. "Play your guitar and sing a song, Peter." And I would strum and sing a song. But the highlight of every family gathering was Cindy's rendition of the "Spider and the Fly."

"A Poem --- by Eiaine Howitt," Cindy always began. "Who was born in 1804 and died in 1888. And that was a long, long time ago."

In the middle of the room, she would curl into a ball, then slowly open her arms. Strands of tinsel would dangled from her fingers.

"`Will you walk into my parlor? Said the spider to the fly;
'Tis the prettiest little parlor that ever you did spy.

The way into my parlor is up a winding stair,'"

Cindy would rise. Her fingers climbing an imaginary web.

"`And I have many curious things to show when you are there.'"

Now her voice squeaked. She squinched her face and became the fly.

"`Oh, no, no,' said the little fly. `To ask me is in vain,'"

"`for Who goes up your winding stair ne`er comes down again.'"

Never once, after she spent that horrible night in the school yard; never once, did she ask grandpa to tell a joke or me to sing. We lost our M.C. for our Christmas Show. And Cindy never again performed "The Spider and the Fly."

Give the statue back and the pig that threatened Gallagher's child would probably never be apprehended. That son-of-a-bitch belonged behind bars. The criminal genius returns. I'd find the perfect place to trap that rat. `Come into my parlor said the Spider to the Fly.'

VIII

At her desk, Patrolwoman Carol Wisely studied the photograph of Andrea Convee. Elegantly dressed, natural blond and dressed to kill at eight in the morning. Where'd she come from? Wisely thought. Where was she going? No one wears a mink coat to a breakfast tryst. No one---

One minute later, Wisely strolled into Hourigan's office. "Sir, I have an idea. I'm going to the Call Bulletin."

Hourigan picked up a folder from his desk. "Good, I want to talk to Nels. Mind if I tag along?"

Wisely didn't mind. She didn't mind in the least.

IX

The decision to keep George didn't make ideas come any easier. I spent the rest of the afternoon working and occasionally jotting down a thought. Responded to the 'Mama' advertisement and I'd be dealing on their terms. I wrote Mama? And then spent a half hour with my DOL list and the SLUT computer program. My original list was still a good one. If we could entice these bastards to any one of the places on the list it would be a real coup de grace. We had the right hook, but what lure would get them to nibble... and where... would I find the perfect fishing hole?

You can ruin a good round of golf by thinking too hard. You get tense and you can't do anything right. I thought of Mia. She was definitely the

bright light in all this confusion. Bright light? I reconsidered, more like a solar flare.

At five-fifteen, I pulled into the red zone front of Breefer Shipping. I'd had no spectacular revelations during the afternoon. So, I decided to wait for Mia and a vodka tonic; maybe with the proper company and fortification, I'd come up with an idea or two.

When Mia eased her way through the crowd in front of the building, I beamed. She looked totally different. She held an I. Magnin's bag in one hand and a legal pad in the other. She tossed the bag behind the passenger seat.

"The old stuff," she laughed, doing several pirouettes on the sidewalk.

The maroon tam o'shanter and plaid skirt were gone. In their place Mia wore a bright yellow tyrolean hat, and a pale yellow turtle neck under a bright yellow sweater with the signs of the Zodiac woven in black. Solar flare nothing. I was falling big time for a Super nova.

"Like the outfit?" she asked, hopping into the car. She smelled brand new. "Needed some new duds. I mean, you wouldn't want your Moll to be standing in some police lineup looking all tacky, would you?"

"Nope, no one wants a tacky Moll. Clever, treacherous and tantalizing? Yes. Tacky? Never. Give me a kiss. Are you hungry, thirsty?"

Mia licked her lips and leaned back. "What a day."

"A cocktail?"

"You're the boss, boss."

We stopped at Coupes' Tavern on Bay Street. We ordered drinks, then fought over the one pinball machine.

"What do you want to play for?" I teased.

"Name the stakes." Mia interlocked her fingers and cracked her knuckles confidently.

We settled on sexual favors. After four games, Miss Nimble Fingers had me as her personal slave well into the 21st Century.

"You'll never collect," I warned.

"You mean you'd renege on an honest bet? What a guy."

"I'd never renege on a bet. I just think you'll find it difficult to collect."

"How's that?"

"I figure my period of bondage to you should just about coincide with my release from jail, if I'm caught with the porpoise."

She thumbed her nose at me, "If WE are caught."

X

Patrolwoman Carol Wisely was surprised to find Lieutenant Hourigan pacing beside the patrol car outside the Call Bulletin. "I thought you were going to visit with Mr. Andersen."

Hourigan looked up at the building. "I thought so too." He opened passenger side door for Wisely. She smiled with appreciation, but Hourigan missed it, still staring at the third floor.

Fine, Wisely mused. In the car, she purposely laid a stack of news articles next to the door. It was Hourigan's turn to be surprised as he climbed into the vehicle and found Wisely right next to him. Wisely smiled. "Is there a problem?"

"I don't care where you sit." Hourigan said.

"Not with the seating arrangements." She pointed to the building.

"With Nels Andersen."

Hourigan stuck his key in the ignition and hesitated. "Something is wrong with Nels. This damn---" He turned to Wisely.

Her face was close. Her lips were parted and her white teeth sparkled. For a moment Hourigan lost his trend of thought.

"Wasn't he there?"

"Who?"

"Nels Andersen." Wisely moved closer. "Weren't we talking about Mr. Andersen?"

Hourigan tried to back away, but he had little room. To hell with her, Hourigan thought. I'm not giving ground. "He was on long distance and he did it politely, but in so many words, Nels told me to bug off. Nels and I've been friends for years. Muniz is mailing checks to the Collier brothers and Nels treats like a leper. I don't get it."

Wisely tapped the stack of newspaper articles. "Maybe there's an answer in here. And speaking of Alan Muniz Jr."

Hourigan gave her a hopeful look.

"There's still something's wrong with his house."

Hourigan sighed and turned on the engine. "I should be sailing."

"Sounds terrific, Lieutenant."

XI

Except for a towel wrapped around her hair, Andrea Convee strolled naked across the plush white nap of her carpet. Droplets of water still clung to her back from the recent shower. She listened intently to the phone tucked in her neck. Nodding occasionally, while buffing her nail with a vengeance. "And when was that," she hissed. "Uh huh...uh huh." She listened for a moment longer, then, "Louis, I'll remember this. I owe you one..." She listened. "Okay,

two. I'll call you when things are more....er... resolved." She pushed the disconnect button.

Like her body, Andrea Convee's apartment was sterile by choice. The walls, two ply carpet and furniture were all shades of white - broken only by her taste in the whimsical, fantasy of abstract art. Copies of mobiles by Alexander Calder and David Smith hung from the ceiling at various locations. Ovoid shapes in stone and bronze by the Romanian Constantin Brancusi filled the corners. Only two paintings adorned the walls. An original 'nonobjective' by Fritz Glarner and a first edition print by Pierre Soulages.

Andrea chose her favorite piece, Alexander Calder's mobile of steel wire and aluminum to vent her anger. She held the cord of the phone and hammered the receiver into the assemblage. "Cosette you impotent old bastard." A loud THUD echoed off the walls. Shards of aluminum and steel scattered across the apartment. "You dare to follow me." She smashed the receiver again into the mobile. A steel mesh basket ripped from the bottom and flew into a tall, white lamp shade. The lamp went over. Its two bulbs shattered on the carpet. "Cosette, you make me do this." Andre dropped the phone, whipped the towel from her hair and marched through the debris into her dressing room. "And Mr. Muniz, you'd better have some good news. Because, if you don't my little big nosed, well endowed friend ----." A shrill, sinister laugh filled the apartment.

XII

At eight, we headed up Telegraph Hill to the Twilight Restaurant for dinner.

There are at least 10,000 restaurants in San Francisco. Each night, 250,000 people go out to dinner, which presents a problem of some magnitude. After 6:00 P.M., there are no more than fifty legal parking places in the entire city. Which leaves prospective diners three options: Park illegally and ruin your dinner worrying about whether you're going ticketed or towed away. Or you can park in a U-Park parking lot. I have a theory that the U-Park was conceived by a sadist for the enjoyment of a masochist. The amount of damage your car can incur during one five-course meal is astounding. The cost of parking is phenomenal; no matter where you eat or what you order, the tab for dinner and parking bill maybe identical. Though, if you're willing to skip the appetizers you'll usually beat your parking fee by a couple of bucks.

This leaves option three: valet parking. Valets are a special breed of individuals. Their dress code, physical appearance and job qualifications are unique. A valet must wear white coveralls dipped in grime-of-the-day. Sneakers must look as if they've just followed a parade of Clydesdale horses.

Physically, you must be hexed with an acute case of dandruff, post adolescent acne, need a shave, use Vaseline Gel as your main hair conditioner and ideally have small patches of hair missing from your scalp, chest, moustache or beard.

Valet job qualifications are minimal. Other than being able to say 'What Car? What color' --- A valid California drivers license, a green card, a fleeting experience with the English language, would be incidental. In fact, superfluous. The top applicants arrive with a minimum of three years experience driving in demolition derbies... The best haven't had a single victory.

Our valet was the role model. He had flakes, pimples, black hair and stubble. I handed him Mia's keys. He hopped in the M.G. and obligatorily burrrrrred the ignition.

"Wonderful," Mia cringed.

Crunched and ground the transmission.

Mia covered her ears with the yellow legal pad. "And I was so fond of that gear."

And burned rubber as he tore up Vallejo Street to some clandestine destination.

"Nice smell," Mia commented

"Maybe he'll bring us back the wrong car---" She winced as her brakes screeched in the distance. "Something in an off-white Rolls Royce would be nice."

I shrugged. "That's why I always bring the company car when I come here for dinner."

"Why you, son....." Mia started.

I put my hand over her mouth. "No more suppositions about my lineage. People have been calling me that all day." I gave her a kiss.

XIII

"Lieutenant this is Stout, at the Muniz home."

"What's going on?" Hourigan asked.

"Gold Fang and Muniz are on the move."

"Keep a tail on them. And Stout..." Hourigan paused.

"Yes, Sir."

"Get a backup to watch that house."

"Roger, Stout out."

Hourigan fingered the composite drawings, stacked separately from the rest of the data on the 'Flying Porpoise'. What is driving me nuts about these two guys? Two calls and one from some crazy woman who wanted to marry the guy on the left.

XIV

The Twilight is a restaurant I save for special occasions and special people. It's magical. Besides its excellent food, the atmosphere is unique. Years ago, some imaginative soul had converted an old Victorian into one of the finest restaurants in the world. Built during the gay 90's and situated on a cliff, the Twilight has a spectacular view of San Francisco Bay and the Financial District. Crystal chandeliers dangle from the ceilings. Old newspapers depicting the last hundred years of San Francisco's history cover the walls. Everything from the Great Earthquake to the great years of the 49'ers and Giants.

It's a labyrinth of red and gold carpet, with winding staircases and hallways darting off in every direction. Each dining area is a separate room or nook off a maze of corridors.

By far, its biggest asset is maitre d', Jean Paul Coates. We'd known each other since high school. Jean Paul is the epitome of all that is good in a superb maitre d'. His French accent is brilliant. Eat there once, and he'll remember your name and favorite table. His dark skin, pencil thin moustache, knowledge of French and beret are his trademarks.

He meet us at the coat check. "Pierre, Pierre, comment ça va?" He said, as I went through the introductions.

"Enchante, Madame." He kissed Mia's hand. "Vous est très jolie," he said as if she were one of the Hors d'oeuvres. "Pierre, elle est magnifique."

Mia nodded in agreement. "Monsieur et Madame, your table will be ready tout suite. May I suggest un cocktail?" Jean Paul ushered us into the bar. "Permettez-moi?" Grandly, he held out a chair for Mia. "Et Pierre?" Jean Paul glanced in my direction. "Beaujolais Jadot? And your table as usual?"

"Please, and thanks, Jean Paul."

He left us alone, with a quiet, "O la la."

"What a beautiful place." Mia said with awe.

I was glad she liked it. "History has been made in here over the past ninety years. These walls and rooms have heard and seen it all: politics, chicanery, indiscretion..."

"Indiscretions?" Mia leaned forward.

"The famous and infamous dine here. This place would make an ideal locale for a smutty soap opera."

"Yeah, smut. And now we're here, Zelda and Bruce. Got any good stories about this place?" She set the legal pad on the table and cupped her chin in her hands. "Pleasure before business --- smut me, smut me."

Her eyes beckoned for tales of dastardly deeds.

"I really don't know any," I said frankly. "But Jean Paul relates a comedy classic of indiscretion." I sipped my vodka tonic.

"He's gone. Will you tell me?" she pleaded.

Who could resist. Who wanted to? So I give it the old Marine Corps try.

"If I remember correctly --- a certain, very, very famous couple who came here for dinner often."

"What were their names?"

"They must remain nameless." I ran my fingers across my lips.

"Don't ruin the smut, Peter. You've to name 'em. Name 'em!"

"One night, they arrived for dinner," I gave one of Nels' pauses to build the suspense. "But.... they arrived separately...he with another very famous she, and she with another, very famous political he."

"Give me a clue. Just one clue. Please?"

"They arrived within minutes of each other."

"Was she a blond? Was she? I'll bet she was blond."

"Do I get to tell this story or are you going to keep interrupting?"

"No, no, I'm sorry. Tell me the story ---- Was she a blond?"

I sighed, but I kept on trying. "Jean Paul said he immediately realized that neither the husband nor the wife knew the other was here. And that neither of couples seemed intent on conducting a business meeting."

Mia rubbed her hands with vigor. "Ah ha, real smut."

"Cleverly, he seated them on different floors and opposite ends of the restaurant. To be on the safe side, he warned their respective waiters of the potentially volatile situation---"

"Was one of the he's... say the guy in politics, like a president, maybe?"

"Jean Paul made sure that one couple was exactly one course behind the other---"

"Was he young and good looking? The political guy?"

"As fate would have it, the couple that should have finished last, skipped dessert trying to make a theater date..."

"Ah, ha, she was in the theater. That eliminates..."

Her eyes closed in thought. "I think I know."

"So the giant took out his penis and urinated on the smoldering volcano. The children were saved and the new church would be built after all. And the beautiful baby bird grew up into an ugly buzzard and everyone lived miserably thereafter. The End."

"Got it! The woman with the politico's a brunette, huh? A singer. 'The ?'"

"Mia you're not paying attention."

"I am too," she pouted.

"Okay what did I just say?"

"I dunno, but I was listening, really." I got the batting eyelids. "Please finish." She leaned across the table.

"Anyway, both couples had a head-on collision at the coat check stand. No one said a word for two minutes. A long time when you're not having fun. A gun fight at high noon. A stand off. Everyone stood there glaring at each other. Then, the politician started laughing and they all joined in."

"Yes, yes, yes," Mia flew out of her chair and spun in a circle. "A POLITICIAN! I knew it."

Bar patrons from stools and tables turned and gave Mia a curious glance. Hell, I found her outbursts becoming the norm. I fought onward.

"Over Cointreau and Grand Marnier, they resolved some of their issues and left arm-in-arm. Each year on the same date, they come here with their new spouses and celebrate the event. As Jean Paul says, très civilized."

"One of the guys was a famous baseball player, wasn't he?"

"Your table is ready, monsieur." Jean Paul said from the shadows.

"Thank God."

"He played for the New York Yankees, didn't he?"

For half hour Hourigan went over each item, each report, line by line. Finally, he spread the photographs of Muniz, Fural and Convee in a semi-circle wondering how to connect the faces.

"Lieutenant, Lieutenant," Stout cried over the pager.

"What is it?"

"Lieutenant, I found Convee."

"Where?"

"I tailed Fural and Muniz to an apartment building on Taylor Street, Sir. They both disappeared inside and now Muniz is helping Convee into his car."

"Where's Gold Fang?"

"Don't know, Sir."

"Good work. Follow the happy couple and get a stake out on the apartment building. Now that we know where the vulture's nesting, we can keep an eye on her."

"That's a copy, Lieutenant."

Hourigan glanced at the "Flying Cloud," one of his favorite clipper ships. A storm is brewing, he thought. I know it.

XVI

A young Asian woman escorted us upstairs to my favorite nook. Three lit candles and an uncorked bottle of 1974 Beaujolais Jadot awaited us.

"That wasn't such a smutty story. I'll bet Jean Paul tells it wonderfully, with his French accent."

"It's a better story if it's not interrupted twenty times."

"Okay, I give. Who were the people in the story?"

"I honestly don't know. I never even thought to ask Jean Paul. There is the sacred code of the maitre d.' Who ever comes in with whom --- is sacrosanct."

"Okay, I'll ask him. He's so continental." Mia opened the menu. Besides being curious, Mia was charmed. In all the years I'd been married to 'Bugs' I honestly don't remember being jealous. Three days with Mia and the green-eyed monster began gnawing at my heart. I liked Jean Paul. I knew he was handsome and charming. I just didn't want Mia to like him. Well I wanted her to like him. I just didn't want her to like, like him. In fact, if he got too charming, I'd kick his ass.

I was in the pool swimming towards the deep end. I watched Mia's eyes. The white flecks darted from side to side as she scanned the menu. I hated to destroy her image, but I had to tell her the truth about Jean Paul.

"Mia?"

Mia looked up. I couldn't do it. I was saved from making a complete ass of myself, by the waiter. As he left with our order, Jean Paul whisked pass our nook with another couple.

"He's darling. Do you think he'd give me his beret for my hat collection?"

I gave her a who-knows shrug. I wanted to give her a who-gives-a shit shrug, topped with a screw Jean Paul finger.

Mia got her wine glass half way to her lips, then gave me a wary look. "Peter, are you...?"

She didn't need to finish. She knew I was jealous. She patted the legal pad and sat it on the table. Brilliantly changing the conversation and I great

fully acquiesced. She patted the pad. "Enough of that. What's your plan, boss?" Back went the chin now propped on the palms of her hands.

I decided to fake it.

"As I see it, any of the locations on my original list could still serve as the site... for er... the trap we are intending to set with a... skill and cunning, --- fox like ...executing the arrest and having Nels and a photographer there when..."

"Peter, you don't have a plan, do you?" She giggled.

"Not like a real plan, planned. I have more of an idea that's not perfectly formulated at this particular juncture in time. It's more of a kernel of a not-quite-finished plan."

"Sounds clever," she covered her mouth with her hand. "Guess that's because you're the boss, boss. Would you like to hear my idea?"

"Lay it on my, Moll."

XVII

Nels Andersen spent two hours on the overseas lines to Europe contacting friends at the Louvre in Paris, the Pardo in Spain and the Uffizi, in Florence. Not a clue and my phone bill is going to be outrageous, he thought, putting down the phone. I need a clue. A name. His eyes widened. I am an investigative reporter. He looked at the hundred or more artifacts cluttering his apartment. Each one of these artists must know ten others. They would have contacts that I never dreamed of. He looked at the bronze finger from Russell Kyle. What better place to start. Nels smiled and picked up the phone.

XVIII

Our waiter returned and served dinner with much ado.

"Fettuccini Alfredo for Madame and Chateaubriand for m'sieur, very rare. Bon appétit. A man of excellent taste, he retreated twice looking back in Mia's direction.

I sliced into the steak. "How about a drive-in movie? We can drop off George, then watch a film and keep an eye on George at the same time. When the bad guys arrive, Nels and the police can leap from their cars and make the arrest." From out of the blue, came a pretty good idea.

"That's an important point," Mia said between bites of pasta, ignoring my pretty good idea. "Where ever we leave him, it has to be safe between the time we drop him off and the time the crooks fall into our trap." She pointed her fork. "Today at work I thought of the perfect way to get rid of George. That is --- if we ever really decided to throw in the towel."

I cupped my ear. "I'm listening."

"Well, first of all, we get a big box and put George inside. Then we wrap it in some gorgeous paper, tie it with ribbon and put a beautiful bow on top. We drive your car, mine has suffered enough, close to City Hall and go out to dinner and a movie."

She gave me a satisfied grin as though everything should be perfectly clear. I shrugged blankly.

"Don't you get it? Heck, by the time we get back, your window will be broken and someone will have ripped off the statue. Then it's their problem." She laughed. So did I.

"Anyway, I heard that some guy in New York got rid of his garbage like that for three and a half years. You probably won't approve." She screwed up her face and opened the legal pad. "But this morning I started a competition at the office. Sort of an essay contest." She slid a white piece of cardboard

across the table. Printed in neat black letters with a green border was inscribed.

**The Big Challenge! \$25.00 Prize for Best
Answer. HOW WOULD YOU GET RID
OF UNWANTED STOLEN GOODS.**

Please answer below. Be concise.

She had to be kidding. I couldn't see her eyes. She wouldn't put something like this on a company bulletin board. She wouldn't. Had she?

Now the legal pad covered her face. From behind the paper barrier I heard.

"Of course, some of these aren't too practical, but they are food for thought." A fork full of fettuccini disappeared behind the legal pad. "Here's the first contest entry..." I heard a swallow. "I'd put an ad in the Unwanted Stolen Goods section of the paper. The second seems to be more of response to the first entry, rather than a new idea. Here let me read it. Whoever heard of unwanted stolen goods? If they're stolen, I'll take them. How much do you want? I've got thirty-three bucks in cash and six dollars in food stamps."

Mia peeked over the top of the legal pad. "There's only a few more."

I motioned her on.

"Entry number three. Unload it on some ass you hate and call the cops."

Give it to someone you hate, rang through my mind. I immediately thought of 'Bugs,' and immediately realized I didn't hate her. If I was still running around in her carrot patch, I would have never found Mia.

"Number Four. Keep them. Everyone needs a hobby."

Besides, if 'Bugs' was such a louse, why the hell had I married her in the first place? Hell, and if she thought I was such a creep, why had she married me?

"Number Five. I have friends in the underworld. I can fence them for twenty cents on the dollar. Give them to me, signed Guido."

We'd both changed. Nope, we were different all along.

"Peter, see if you like this last one..."

And suddenly everything Jerry had said came into focus. Peter you've lost your sense of adventure. You're boring. I'd blamed Bugs and she'd nothing to do with it. I'd lost myself in golf and work. I'd stopped paying attention.

"I don't have a clue on how to get rid of them, but give them to me."

And I'd be damned if I was going to make the same mistake with Mia.

"Peter are you listening?"

I bounced out of my reverie. I knew she was kidding, but she'd put in a lot of effort. "Mia, you didn't put a note... you couldn't have." Her eyes peeped over the top edge of the pad. "That's not funny."

"Yes, it is." Her brows furrowed, her eyes dark and innocent. "We needed a little levity, don't you think?" Her smile was beautiful.

"You wrote all that at work?"

"Yep."

"Doesn't sound like you're awfully busy."

She put one finger across her lips. "Ssssh, since Jerry left I haven't had to do anything."

"I'm telling."

"You're a skunk."

"I couldn't agree more Madame," Jean Paul interrupted. "Ah zee truth is out, Peter. Your meal, eet iz zatisfactory, no?" Jean Paul said with a bow.

"Delicious," Mia said for the two of us.

Jean Paul pulled out a chair to join us, but before could get comfortable, a waiter motioned him into another room. "Duty calls," he said disappearing down the hall.

Mia snapped her fingers. "Oh, damn. I forgot to ask him."

"Ask him what?"

"About the couple in the story. Aren't you dying to know who they are?"

Actually, I was dying to get closer to Mia. There must have been a neon sign on my forehead. She moved her chair closer to mine and began rubbing my neck.

"Tired?" She turned me around and began to rub my back. "Did I tell you I got an A in back massage."

"You give pretty good front massage too." I glanced over my shoulder and grinned.

"Yeah, but I gotta keep practicing."

"I volunteer to be your massagee."

Her fingers kneaded my shoulders. "You know what I think? We need a day off. A day to really do this town. A day to formulate some concrete plans. A day of fun and frivolity in the most beautiful city on earth."

"That's impossible; we can't get to Paris and back in one day."

"One more wise-ass remark, mister, and the parlor's closed. Let's take tomorrow off. Two pros like us are bound to come up with the perfect solution."

Her fingers were having their way with me. I was helpless, a lump of silly putty. But I tried to protest. "I already took a day off on Tuesday and did a tour of the town."

I was all hunched over, my head between my knees. I must have looked like I was trying to perform some obscene act on myself. The knots in my neck and shoulders were untied.

Mia clenched her fists and thumped them up and down the sides of my spine.

"But not with me, you didn't! Let's go home and make a porno movie."

We paid the bill, thanked Jean Paul and handed our ticket to the valet. A silver-grey Mercedes stopped in front of us.

"Not a Rolls." Mia laughed reaching for the door handle. "But it will do."

"Don't Mia!"

"Jezze, I was just kidding, Peter."

Mia's green M.G. screeched to a halt behind the Mercedes.

"I'll get the tip," Mia said.

I watched as she handed the valet two pennies.

"I didn't want to complain," she said sitting smugly in passenger seat.

"But I had to get my two cents in."

"Boo." I boomed as I drove up Montgomery Street.

XIX

Andrea Convee stepped from the Mercedes in a black Mink stole over a shimmering blue, strapless evening gown and open toed blue-back spiked

heels. Alan Muniz Jr. followed in her wake. Jean Paul Coates greeted them at the front door, giving Andrea Convee more than an appreciative glance.

"Bonsoir, m'sieur Muniz."

"Good evening, Jean Paul."

"Votre table est pret, m'sieur."

As they were being seated, Andrea inhaled deeply. "What a wonderful aroma."

Muniz frowned.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Alan." Andrea taunted. "I'd forgotten about your nose." She gave it a gentle squeeze.

Andrea waited patiently while the waiter took their wine order, coiled in her chair and she struck. "Tell me what you've found, Allan and for your sake, for your sake, it better be better than the discovery of King Tut's Tomb."

Over soup, salad, and most of the entree, Muniz proudly related his discoveries of the past two days.

"And you are certain about all this, Alan?"

"Positive. I don't know how he did it, but Jerry Lynch somehow managed to get a hold of my statue.

"Our statue," Andrea corrected.

"Our statue," Muniz said carefully, nibbling on a strip of Beef-Stroganoff so tender it literally melted in his mouth. But with no sense of smell, there was no taste, he thought. It might as well be Alpo.

"And this fellow, Jerry Lynch, is out of town?" Andrea twirled a strand of pure white pasta around her fork.

Muniz watched the noodle disappear between Andrea's lips. He thought of Paris, London, New York, and Las Vegas. Handcuffs, mask and blindfold. Tonight with a little luck ---

"He is out of town?" Andrea repeated vehemently.

"Yes, he's in Seattle. What bothers me most is that he quit his job. He may have already found a buyer."

"Oh, now, that would be most unfortunate, Alan."

Muniz gulped adding quickly. "But he couldn't have the statue with him. He has to come back and get it. And when he does, he's mine."

"You mean, he's ours, Mr. Muniz."

"Yes, of course." Muniz pushed a piece of beef back and forth on his plate. "I have Francis watching his house"

"I know that! He's driving my BMW for Christ sake."

"Yes, of course."

"Has your Board of Directors posted a reward as I suggested?"

"Yes, they were all for it."

"I hope you're right about all this. Five million is a lot of money."

"You mean four million?" Muniz gasped. "Don't you?"

"Oh Alan, and you used to be such a bright, charming individual."

Andrea rose from the table and touched her lips with the linen napkin. "My associates insisted on adding interest to your loan. Fifteen thousand an hour -- the same amount WE paid to Mr. Gallagher."

"\$15,000 an hour? That wasn't an hourly payment, that was all I... you paid to Gallagher."

"Alan. Honey. Sweetie pie. This was your plan."

Muniz tried to push himself away from table.

"Do not bother rising, Mr. Muniz." Andrea glared. "We will be leaving separately."

"Separately? I was hoping that with all the good news, we, you and I, might drive back to my home for a night cap. Like the old days," Muniz pleaded.

"WE won't be driving back to your place. And YOU won't be driving anywhere." Andrea held out her hand. "The car keys. Your Mercedes has become collateral."

"Fine, fine, Andrea. But couldn't we spend one night ---?"

"I want your keys, Alan. Give them to me."

Muniz fished in one pocket then another, then another. Convee waited. "Perhaps you left them with the valet," she chuckled.

Exasperated, Muniz inhaled, "Of course. The valet--- shit, my car?"

Andrea's bare shoulders slithered into her mink stole. "And thank you for a marvelous evening, Alan. An exceptional dinner, though, nothing you couldn't have done a hundred percent better before you lost..." She tapped the end of his nose. "Ta,ta."

XX

Officer Evans bolted up-right as Andrea Convee left the Twilight Restaurant unaccompanied.

Lieutenant Hourigan picked up his pager on the first beep. "Wait for Muniz. I'll get another tail on Convee."

Hourigan smiled. Muniz says he barely knows Convee. But then he takes her out to dinner and gives her his car --- casual acquaintance my ass.

"Bingo," Patrolwoman Wisely flashed a smile as she came into Hourigan's office. "It took a while. But ---"

Wisely handed Lieutenant Hourigan a four year old clipping from the Call Bulletin society page. The caption read: Lung Association Ball a Great

Success. Beneath the headlines lay a black and white photograph of a crowded ballroom.

"And?" Hourigan asked.

"Look closely, Lieutenant." Wisely handed him a magnifying glass.

On the left edge, Alan Muniz Jr. and Andrea Convee were locked in an intimate embrace.

"We've already made that connection, Wisely."

Effervescent, Wisely pressed forward. "Look closer, Sir" She lowered the glass and pointed to one of the faces surrounding the dancers.

"NELS ANDERSEN!" Hourigan exclaimed.

"And in this corner," Wisely shifted the photograph under the glass.

"GOLD FANG!" I'd know that ape anywhere. Wisely," Hourigan continued with admiration. "This is excellent police work."

"I know," Wisely smiled. "Let's celebrate. Can I buy you a drink, Lieutenant?"

"I never mix business with ---"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Lieutenant. If T.J. or Evans offered you a ---"

"That would be different."

"This is the seventies, Lieutenant. One drink?"

Hourigan hesitated for a long second. "One drink. We deserve it." Hourigan threw his sport jacket over his shoulder and shot Wisely and stern look. "First thing tomorrow I want you to phone Gallagher's wife. I want his daughter down here to look at Fural's mug-shots."

"Yes, Sir."

Wisely slipped her arm in Hourigan's and propelled him to the door. "Do you really live on a boat, Lieutenant?"

Hourigan quickened his pace.

“I love to sail.”

XXI

Eighty-four dollars for a goddamn cab, Alan Muniz Jr. thought, as he slammed the front door. He flipped his coat on the grandfather clock, stomped into the living room and froze. Snoring away on his burgundy sofa was Francis Fural.

“What the hell are you doing, here?”

For the second time in several hours, Fural had been rudely awakened.

“Why the hell aren’t you watching out for Lynch?”

“Fural rose slowly. “Don’t you---yell at me! You ain’t my boss. You ain’t shit. I been polite. I done what you said.” The veins in Fural’s bald head filled with blood. His eyes tightened into minute slits. “Now, I’m gonna teach you. Teach you real...”

Muniz fled up the stairway in terror.

Fural grinned and snarled after Muniz. “Cops told me to beat it. Asshole.”

CHAPTER 8

FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 17, 1979

I

Mia and I awoke entangled; my mind in the same geometric configuration. One giant knot. I turned on my back, stared up at the bottom of the pink canopy and ran through my game plan. We needed to set a trap for the bad guys. I prayed no more eye witnesses would come forward. Jerry didn't hop off a plane, read the headlines and go to the police. Conversely, I prayed that

Gallagher or someone else would give the police a lead. We needed to plan our next move.

Gingerly disengaging myself from Mia, I slipped out of bed and got into the shower. I was soaping away when the shower door flew open. A crazy blond jumped in screaming like a banshee and kept stabbing me with a sponge. I felt like Mia Leigh in the shower scene from Psycho, though..... I preferred ending. We toyed around until we ran out of hot water.

"Decadent," she said, drying my back.

"And wasteful."

"Yep." She tried to snap her towel on my rear, but I grabbed it and pulled her to me. My libido hadn't responded like this since I was sixteen. Naked we flopped on the bed. I handed her the phone, insisting that she call work first. I wasn't about to take another day off and spend it alone.

"You call first, Peter. I won't have any problems. I'll go put on some coffee."

"Nope. You first, no one will be in my office for at least a half an hour."

"Hey, that's right. No one will be in my place either. What should we do, play Monopoly?"

"Great idea," I said, nibbling gently on Boardwalk, then Park Place.

Forty five minutes later we called.

Mia dialed. "Hello Harry---, Mia here." I ran my nose up her back. She tried to smack me over her shoulder. I dodged her blows. "I'm sick. See you Monday..... Harry, please don't worry about getting Jerry a farewell gift. I'll pick up a little something from all of us, over the weekend. Bye. CLICK." She dealt me the phone. "Your turn." She jumped off the bed and headed for the kitchen.

"That was quick. Didn't you want to say anything else?" I called into the other room.

Mia reappeared in the doorway. "You must be kidding. Jerry quit three days ago. Since he's been gone, out office is in an up-roar. No one knows where to send anything to get it finalized, editorialized or mailed. My desk is empty. The less said, the better. How did you like that line about a gift for Jerry?" She headed back to the kitchen, "swear to god," Mia crossed her heart. Harry screamed. Sort of like a banshee's bellow." She mumbled something else, but I lost it in the CLANG of pots and pans.

I called my office. I was surprised to hear my boss, Paul Boyle pick up my phone. "Public Relations, Stevenson Steel and Oil."

"Paul? This is Peter ---"

Before I could say another word, he said, "Don't tell me, Peter....let me guess. You're sick and won't be in today." Mr. Paul Boyle sounded like Billy Goat Gruff.

"Well," I gasped for air, coughed. "Paul, you see ---"

"Peter, it's okay. They've been after me to cut expenses. No one knows what you do anyway. Cutting out your salary should save the company at least twenty dollars a year."

"Paul." Wheeze, wheeze, raspy voice.

"Do I care that only three people came in today? Do I care that I've been running around here like a crazy man? What happened --- did we have an office orgy last night? Why wasn't I invited? Maybe you all get some itchy, social disease." He laughed at his own joke. "Seriously, Peter, I could really use --"

I coughed, wheezed, and hoarsely, "Paul, I've been fighting this damn thing all ---"

"What about your promotion?"

Way to go Kevin Stiller. "You've heard about---"

**LET'S TWIST AGAIN LIKE WE DID LAST SUMMER
LET'S TWIST AGAIN LIKE WE DID LAST YEAR**

Jesus, Mia! I cupped my hand over the receiver and aimed a pillow through the bedroom door. She'd just turned on an old Chubby Checker album full blast and was doing the Twist semi-nude in the doorway.

"Real sick, eh, Peter? I assume the music in the background's funeral dirge?" I coughed, harrumphed and wheezed again, glaring at Mia, who got the message and turned down the volume a mite.

"Skip the theatrics, Peter. It's Friday," His voice began to fade. With any luck some jerk-ff will call in a bomb scare and we can all go home early." It sounded like he might be encouraging me to call in a bomb scare. But I wasn't sure, so I didn't. Besides, 'the mad bomber caller' always waited until after lunch.

Mia danced around her bed in Frederick's of Hollywood attire. "Wanna disco, Mr. Travolta?" She shimmied provocatively. Chubby Checkers vanished. 'Staying Alive' by the Bee Gees blared from her stereo. The music pulsed out her of speakers echoed around her hat rack, smacked into her brick fire place and disappeared and reappeared into and out of the kitchen. We danced. I tried my best moves. The behind the back catch, followed by the full body twirl. I tossed her away, spun her back, folded her into my stomach, tossed her away again. Thought I might surprise her with my patented 'Peter Tuelly,'

dip, turn and dip. But we were one. Where ever I moved, Mia moved with me.

We danced through the rest of the Saturday Night Live sound track, then settled in for breakfast.

While the bacon sizzled and the eggs poached, Mia handed me the paper. Until that moment, Nels hadn't even crossed my mind.

"I didn't know you took the paper."

"I don't," Mia looked away. "I borrowed it from down the hall."

"That's stealing."

Mia turned. "Oh, talk to me. Who has slab of marble sitting in the back seat of his car?" She gave me a kiss. "What would I get? A year tops for stealing a newspaper."

Who could argue? "I wonder what our investigative reporter has turned up in the way of clues?" I watched as Mia dropped a teaspoon of white vinegar into the boiling water. "What's that for?"

"An old Italian secret, it holds the poached eggs together." I slipped off the rubber band and unfolded the paper. Nels and the Porpoise were gone from the front page. Our ratings were dropping. On the bottom of page six I found Nels' column. The composite drawings were still there. Under the pictures was the question: "Do You Know These Men?"

I held up the paper to Mia. "Do you know these men?"

"No, I can honestly say I have never seen either of those two men before." She smiled.

"\$55,000! Look at this."

She raced around the partition and we both read the article.

\$55,000 REWARD FOR THE "FLYING PORPOISE"

by Nels Andersen

**In a dramatic move yesterday afternoon, the
Donaldson Security Company offered a twenty-five**

thousand dollar reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person(s) responsible for the theft of the 'Flying Porpoise', by the late artist, Alan Muniz.

"Twenty-five thousands bucks, we're rich!" I grabbed the pith helmet off the hat rack and tried to lift her off her chair for a quick two-step around the kitchen table. She wouldn't budge.

"Cheer down." She pointed to the first paragraph. "That's for the arrest and conviction of the thieves, not the return of the statue."

"That's strange."

"So are you, but I love it."

In a written statement from the Board of Directors of Donaldson Security Company, and I quote: '... whereas one of the admitted perpetrators of this heinous crime was formerly employed by this company, as an inducement to its solution, we hereby offer the sum of twenty five thousand dollars for the arrest and conviction of the person(s) still at large, responsible for this brazen act...'

The one suspect now in police custody, Mr. Timothy Gallagher, has been unable to give any further information as to the identity of the people who hired him. The mystery continues, if as Mr. Gallagher claims, the real thieves never received the stolen work of art; where is it?

She cupped her chin and gave me a long once over. "Twenty-five thousand big ones, that's awfully tempting. You'd look cute in grey and white stripes. A human zebra." Mia laughed and served the poached eggs.

"It works."

"How's that."

"The white vinegar, it does keep the eggs together."

"Ah ha, now he's trying to use the ol' white vinegar trick to ruin my train of thought. What about Nels?"

"What do you mean?"

"Newspaper reporters don't make a heck of a lot of money. Do you think he'll be tempted to turn us in for the reward? People have changed sides for a lot less."

"Moll, ya got lots of dem smarts. Dat's a good point you're makin'." I cut a piece of egg and English muffin. "I'd hate to be the hunter laying the trap for these bums and find I was the hunted and the trapee."

"I hate handcuffs," she said, rubbing her wrists. "They're so... confining and they do nothing for a nice outfit. I'll do the dishes. Why don't you give Nels a call."

II

Mark Collier took one look at the \$25,000 reward and another at his brother. "Les, we should be eligible for this reward."

Les was lying on a workout table bench-pressing a two hundred pound weight. "Eighty-eight," he counted methodically.

Mark snapped the page with his finger. "We were the ones that gave the police the descriptions."

"Eighty-nine."

"We gave them the license plate num...er... letters."

"Ninety."

"I'm going to give Lieutenant Hourigan a call."

"Ninety-one"

"Heck, we were the only eye witnesses. And we could really use the money."

"Ninety-two."

"With twenty-five thousand, we could open our own gym."

The bar dropped across Les Collier's chest. "Say, what?"

III

Twenty-five thousand big ones, Walton Taylor thought as he gazed at the pool five stories below. The Golden Gateway Guard sat in a wicker chair on the balcony of his 5th floor apartment. In one hand, he held a can of Coors Lite. In the other, the morning paper. I was stoned. I even helped them carry the statue across the Plaza. But for twenty-five thousand --- It shouldn't be a problem to come up with a good story for the police. Hell --- I've got useful info. I might have been ripped, but neither one of those honkies looks anything like the drawings in the paper. Who deserves it more? He crunched the empty beer can with his hand.

IV

Alan Muniz Jr. hadn't slept well. Andrea has my car, he thought wrapping the sash around his terry cloth robe. Fural was shooed away by the cops. Lynch still has the statue. And I can only hope that the reward keeps Hourigan off my rear.

"Francis," Muniz called gently. Jesus, I don't want another encounter like last night.

"What?" Fural asked from the kitchen door, moments later.

"Let's make a call to the Lynch home."

V

Traci Gallagher entered Lieutenant Hourigan's office holding her mother's hand.

Wisely and Hourigan were rumpled, hung-over and sexually spent. Traci stared with fascination at Hourigan's collection of ships. Her mother stepped forward.

"I want both of you to know," Ellen Gallagher glanced at the haggard figures. "Timothy is a God-fearing man. He has never been involved in anything of a sinful nature." She wiped a tear from her cheek.

"I want to help my dad," Traci said with no prompting. Her red hair bobbed along her shoulders. Her brown eyes keen and somber.

They've both been crying, Hourigan thought.

"This will only take a minute, Mrs. Gallagher." Wisely spread six mug shots on the desk. "Do you recognize any of these men, Traci?"

Traci scanned the pictures for an instant. "That's him." She pointed to the picture of Francis Fural. "That's the man that gave me the note."

"I appreciate both of you coming down here." Hourigan escorted the Gallaghers to the door.

Ellen's eyes glazed over. "Will this help Timothy?"

"I believe so, Mrs. Gallagher." The women left the room.

"Do you want to pick up Gold Fang?" Wisely asked.

"Nine year old children don't make the best witnesses, Carol."

"Keep it formal, Lieutenant." Wisely pointed to the outside office.

"What did I say?"

"Carol," Wisely whispered. "We should be careful, Richard."

"Yes," he said nervously. "You're right."

Men, Wisely thought, as Hourigan began fidgeting with the reports on his desk.

"Lieutenant," Wisely paused. "This is the office and last night---was last night --- Sir."

"It's been awhile. Thanks."

"The pleasure was all mine."

"Nope, it was mutual."

"I got work to do." She clicked her heels, grinned and left the office.

"Mutual." Hourigan returned to the business at hand. The little girl's sharp. Fural's a positive I.D. Evans is still on Muniz. And T.J.s covering Convee. We're closing the gap.

VI

The Haylloo operator was back. I really hadn't appreciated her absence on my previous calls. I suddenly remembered where I'd heard a voice just like that before. There was an incredibly obnoxious woman on Wheel of Fortune. 'Caaaaan I haveeee aannnn Rrrrrr?' She got every person, every quote and every phrase on the first letter. I kept hoping that one of the contestants would push her over the rail onto that spiked wheel. Then forty million people could watch her spin around and twirl to death. Before I could

offer the Hayllooo operator a free trip to Burbank, she patched me through to Nels.

"Hello." It was a tiny hello, very despondent. "Nels Andersen here."

"Hi Nels, it's Chang, how are you?" I tried to sound upbeat.

"Mr. Chang," he almost wept my name. "Page six, do you believe it. The art story of the decade and they put it on page six. My editor said it was old news..."

"People are fickle, Nels." My cohort in crime was depressed. "When we bust this thing wide open, they'll be sorry."

"Why? Have you heard something?" His spirits rose. Regrettably, so did his voice. I shoved the receiver from my ear.

"Nels, that's my line --- You're the one with the police connections." I was cheering down. "You promised a big break in the case. You could feel it, remember. What have YOU heard?"

"You are right again. I'm sorry."

"Nels, where is that firebrand I talked to yesterday? The gentleman who's ready to take on the sons-of-bitches? Any developments? Any leads? New clues?" We were undergoing a role reversal and I wasn't thrilled about it.

"Yes, there is one new item." He sounded a bit better. "The fellow talks funny."

It was Neptune time again. Ammonia gas. I had to go easy, Nels seemed fragile. "Would you mind repeating that? I lost the import of the last sentence."

"As you know the guard, Gallagher, never met the degenerates who paid him. But he did talk to one of them on several occasions. He told the police that he would know the voice anywhere. It's one of those unique voices I suppose."

I remembered how Nels' voice struck me the first time I heard it. It was still above high C but I'd gotten used to it. It was Nels.

"What a break-through! The guy talks funny. That narrows down our possible suspects to five or six million people." I wanted to say, including you. I didn't. Tread lightly, I told myself. "So right now the only ..."

Mia jabbed me with sharp little pokes.

"Nels, would you excuse me for moment?" I cupped my palm over the phone, "What?"

"Look at this." She handed me the paper folded neatly to the personal ads.

"Mamma?" I said before looking. She nodded.

**Dear Children, Mamma wants her heavy
trinket now! Since we are not on speaking terms, place
reply here, today! Mamma.**

I felt a sudden rush of stomach acid.

"Honey," Mia whispered. "Someone is paying for these ads, see if Nels can find out who. This could be the perfect way to contact the bad guys."

"Nels, will you do me a favor?" I explained the nature of the ads.

"That does sound peculiar, I will see to it immediately." Authority returned to his voice.

"One more thing. About this twenty-five thousand dollar reward. I would hate to think---"

"Mr. Chang, Mr. Chang, if you think a twenty-five thousand dollar reward is going to take precedence over catching these wretches, think again! If money was a concern, I would have chosen a more lucrative profession, like teaching."

"Okay, check on the ad and keep your ears open for clues. We're in the final stages of setting our trap. I'll call you later today or early this evening and give you a progress report."

VII

Andrea Convee appeared to be in mourning as she sat in a corner of the Marina branch of the San Francisco Library. She pushed aside the black veil and smiled lovingly as Alberto Sinorae sat down beside her.

He grabbed her hand and caressed it against his cheek.

"You are having trouble, my darling?"

"I will need more time."

"How much...." Sinorae eased her hand from his face. "Time?"

"A day or two." She lifted the veil. Her blue eyes flashed. "Please?"

Alberto Sinorae grinned. "Those eyes. They have always caused me problems, Andrea. I will speak with Ramone."

VIII

My stomach was a mess. "Do you have any Roloids?"

"I thought that ad might get a reaction." She handed me a roll of Tums. "Looks like someone has lost something, doesn't it? Let's place our own ad --- Dear Mamma, up yours, the kids.--- That's brief, cheap and conveys a certain image, don't you think?"

I pointed to the paper. "If the police don't come up with any leads... and Nels can't find out who is placing the "Mamma" messages ... maybe placing an ad would be the way to make contact. But, then we would be dealing on their

terms. And if these guys ever find out who we are, I think they'd enjoy inflicting major bodily harm."

"I agree with Nels, they're wimps." Mia said adamantly.

"That guard didn't turn himself in because he thought he was dealing with the Good Witch of the North. They scared the hell out of him. Think about what they could have done to Gallagher's little girl. I don't think they're wimps."

"That's what I mean, using a nine-year old kid is a very wimpy act."

I dropped the subject. I wasn't going to win anyway. "Let's go find our spot. If Nels doesn't come up with something concrete soon, I want this over with."

"I'm with you. Isn't that why we got so much rest last night, tee hee, tee hee. 'Zelda does Bruce', catchy title for a porno. Come on, let's do the town."

IX

"Jesus Christ!" Hourigan slammed down the phone as Wisely entered his office with Walton Taylor. "The Colliers gave Muniz the license plate letters." He pointed to Taylor. "Who is this? Another damn witness?"

Wisely nodded and pulled out a chair for Taylor. Taylor shifted uneasily from one foot to the other as he repeated the story he'd rehearsed for several hours.

"Let me get this straight," Hourigan demanded. "Saturday night you saw two male Caucasians carrying a large object across the Golden Gateway Plaza?"

"Uh huh," Taylor answered nervously.

"And our sketches do not resemble either of the two men you saw that night?"

"That's it. That's right."

"Then you were close enough to identify both men --- but, you're not positive, if they were carrying the 'Flying Porpoise'? Is that correct?" He watched Taylor's eyes roll. **"But if you're not certain, then your information isn't pertinent to this case."**

The twenty-five thousand dollar reward flashed through Taylor's mind. "Looking back on it... I'm certain it was the 'Flying Porpoise'. Yep, the 'Flying Porpoise'. Uh huh, I'm sure now."

"Then why the hell didn't you do something about it then?"

"It was real dark." Taylor's eyes dropped to the carpet. "And foggy."

"But NOT too dark to make out the faces?"

"That's right."

"Why didn't you come forward before?"

"I was out-of-town. Didn't even know somethin' had been stolen, till I read this morning's paper."

My ass, Hourigan thought with disgust. "Wisely, take this gentleman down to Comoski. And get the new drawings distributed."

Wisely pointed to the door.

Taylor gave Hourigan a winsome smile. "I hope my information will help you catch the thieves."

"If it does," Hourigan frowned. "You'll get the reward."

"Hey, now you're talking." He pumped a fist and followed Wisely out of the office.

What a crock, Hourigan thought. That guy's been sitting on his ass somewhere just waiting for a reward to be offered. He hit the intercom button.

"T.J."

"Yes, Sir."

"Put a call into D.M.V. I want a make on the Healy. Vanity plate. Letters: Echo, Lima, Charlie, India and Delta or something close to that --- registered somewhere in the Bay Area."

X

Alan Muniz Jr. peeked through the curtain of his front window. The police are still there, he thought angrily. Commissioner Roberts promised they would be removed.

Muniz trudged down the hall into the kitchen. If Lynch is home, he isn't answering the phone. Maybe he's found a buyer. But he must have stumbled onto the statue. Without connections, it would take him weeks. The twenty-five thousand hasn't brought him out. He's either greedy or he doesn't read the paper. The paper, of course. Maybe it's just the opposite. Maybe he saw my ad and he wants to negotiate.

Twenty seconds later, Muniz came to a stop at the end of the hall. He watched with disgust as Fural cleaned his toes with a letter opener.

No more confrontations, Muniz thought. "Francis, I want ... I mean Miss Convee wants you to go to the Call Bulletin and see if there has been any response to our ad."

"Why don't you do it?"

**"I lent Miss Convee my car. She doesn't want me to drive her BMW. Would you please go and see if there has been any response to my advertisement? And when you return, park her car on Lecon Street. There's --
--"**

"Lecon Street?"

"It's right behind this house. There's a vacant lot, walk through it and you'll find a small gate."

"Why can't I just ---"

"The police are outside watching the house outside."

"Fuzz?"

"Fuzz."

XI

By noon, we'd covered most of the spots on my DOL list. Each location presented a different problem. We still wanted to leave George in a place of renown, but we'd agreed that wherever it was, we wanted to be able to hide, and watch the crooks get arrested.

We met a balloon-selling fish standing near the entrance to Steinhart Aquarium in Golden Gate Park. It was sort of a hybrid between a swordfish and a large mouth bass. Big patches of scales were missing from its costume exposing worn out netting. Too many kids were using it as a gum rack. And someone had plopped a scope vanilla ice cream cone on the tip of its dorsal fin. The fish-man thing was a mess.

Mia eyed the balloons. I picked a purple one from a hand that dangled out of the gill slit. Mia thanked me with her smile. I handed the hand a dollar.

From within came a pitiful cry. "Talk to me, adults, please. You can have the balloon. Has the war ended? Is L.B.J. still President? Who won the World Series? What's your names? What's my name?"

A cloud of funny smoke followed the voice out of a screen in the middle of the fish belly. I wondered how he could smoke anything in those confines. How the hell did he light it?

Mia had other concerns. "How do you go to the bathroom in that?"

"I haven't for a month. Kiss me lady, set me free. The ocean is my home, my boudoir. Grab a fin. Take me to lunch."

"LUNCH!" Mia screamed. "Peter, I've got it. The perfect place." She grabbed my arm and pulled. I went.

XII

SUITE 2444

"Alberto. It is Friday," Mikeal Glazunov opened quietly. "I speak in behalf of Ramone. He wishes no further tension within the circle. The light is dimmer because of the pain it delivers to his eyes." He rose and paced at the edge of the shadow, behind a votive candle. "In behalf of myself, I wish to apologize. I have been relatively silent --- though the idea was Miss Convee's -- - Ramone's infirmity, the inspiration --- Ah, but I have gotten ahead of myself. As you have aptly explained we are an enterprise based on human needs and deSires. Founded on the belief that the services we provide, will heal the drudgery and mundaneness of our customer's existence." He rested his hands on the top of a black leather chair. "It was with this in mind that Andrea conducted her search for individuals of considerable wealth. Persons who suffered from unusual afflictions..." He pointed to Cosette. "In the hope that we might find new markets for our product. And to that end, Andrea has been successful. But the week has passed. The money owed has not been returned."

"Ramone, Mikeal," Alberto Sinorae said evenly. "I assure you, one way or the other, the debt will be paid."

XIII

"Captain Griffin on the line, Lieutenant," Wisely called over the intercom.

"Afternoon, Collin. How are you?"

"Don't give me that crap. Do you have a stake-out on the Muniz home?"

"He is still my prime suspect. Muniz has the most to gain."

"You have Gallagher and two eye witnesses. Have any of them identified Muniz?"

"Nothing conclusive, Captain."

"Jesus! Hourigan, are you just playing a hunch?"

"Honestly?"

"Cut the crap."

"Yep."

"You were never one to bullshit," Griffin roared. "Muniz is crying harassment to the higher-ups."

"I've got a car parked outside his home. Piedmont Heights is a very high-crime area."

"Yeah, I understand they caught a jaywalker there in 1932. You think Muniz's in on it?"

"Absolutely."

"Good enough for me. Just for the record, Muniz is being guarded for his own protection."

XIV

Against my better judgment, I let Mia drive. We hit light speed warp-three, before I had my safety belt snapped. She tore through the park. My knuckles were white from my grip on the seat.

She eased off the pedal as we went between the pillars of Golden Gate Park on 19th Avenue. "Perfect!" She cried. My head almost went through the windshield as she made an illegal U-turn. I cringed, ducking down in the seat as the cars behind us honked their horns and screeched their brakes.

Two hundred yards up 19th Avenue, we came to an abrupt halt.

"Have we landed, Captain Kirk? Beam me out." I opened my eyes.

"One of our problems is solved."

Mia was out of the car, motioning me to follow. Numbly, I followed her into the 19th Avenue Diner, a two story bar, restaurant and disco. And, at the same time a mini time machine. The lower floor is all neon and stainless steel, with a wall mounted jukebox in each booth. The decor is mid-fifties.

A trip up a circular staircase takes you back to the twenties: walnut paneled walls and a huge fireplace. The only incongruity on the top floor is the disco floor and the high tech music system. Both floors had a few patrons; one determined couple was on the dance floor doing a dance out of the sexual variations of the Karma Sutra.

The entire perimeter of the top floor is glass, affording the customers a panoramic view of 19th Avenue and the pillared entrance to Golden Gate Park. To complement the twenties motif, an artist had painted an attractive Art Deco mural on one wall, depicting the park's major attractions.

Large brass fans on spiral columns come down from the ceiling. I stood there waiting for some revelation. One look at Mia told me I was missing the obvious. She looked inspired.

"Perfect, don't you think?" She gestured toward the park.

"Perfect? What's perfect?" I looked again, trying to follow her gaze. On each side of 19th Avenue stand thirty foot pillars, topped with shiny globes. Sentinels at the entrance to Golden Gate Park. Not the Golden Gate Bridge, but pretty damned dramatic.

My brain went into high gear, considering all the pros and cons. Thousands of cars passed through those pillars everyday. The manicured lawns and flower beds beneath the pillars would suit George perfectly.

"And we can watch the whole scene from here," Mia whispered, reading my mind. "With a cocktail."

"It's brilliant. I love it."

"Thought you might," she smiled.

"Let's take a closer look."

XV

Wisely clenched her fist in the air. "We've got one of them." She set the composite drawing and a D.M.V. report on Hourigan's desk. "Though, he doesn't look like a crook. He has such a baby face."

"They never do." Hourigan fingered the edge of Jerry Lynch's drivers license photo. "Phone the Concord Police, Wisely. See if they'll---"

"They're setting up a stakeout on Middlefield Drive."

"Good work." He returned the driver's license. "Let's get these copied and---"

From behind her back, Wisely pulled out a stack of Xeroxed copies of the D.M.V. report and pictures of Jerry Lynch. "I'll get these to the media."

"Not yet. In fact, I want you to put a hold on those composites that Taylor gave us. He was close to the mark with Lynch. But now that we have

identified one of the perps, I don't want to scare his pal away." He cleared his throat. "Get one of these down to Nels. See if he knows Lynch or his pal. And speaking of Lynch, put a call into Breefer Shipping. I would ---"

"He's quit his job. He is currently in Seattle on a special assignment. But, they expect him back on Monday or Tuesday to clean out his desk."

"Carol, you are amazing."

"Officer Wisely," she grinned. "But, thanks...There's an interesting aside to the Breefer Shipping angle."

"Go ahead."

"Lynch shares a management position with a..." she read from her note pad. "Miss Mia Kerr."

"Yes?"

"She called in sick today. Her boss said she didn't sound sick, in fact, she sounded ecstatic. She said something about planning a big homecoming for Lynch."

"You think they're an item?"

"There have been rumors."

"We're spread thin as it is. Get her address and phone number for the record. In the meantime, take Lynch's photo to Taylor and the Collier brothers. I'm certain this is our man. But let's get a positive I.D." She nodded. "Carol, there could be a promotion in this."

"Wisely, Sir. Patrolwoman Wisely."

XVI

"I'm driving," I said with my hand out, waiting for the keys.

Mia bent her head and handed them to me. I parked twenty feet from the column on the right side of Martin Luther King Drive. With our hands clasped behind our backs, we walked toward the bed of marigolds.

"This is perfect."

She gave me a 'of-course-it's-perfect,-did-you-expect-anything-less,' look.

"Come, my little accessory to the fact, let's give Nels a call."

XVII

Nels Andersen withdrew a #2 pencil from his desk. With the eraser, he dialed the San Francisco Police Department.

"Extension 1212, please." He waited, then, "Good afternoon, Lieutenant. Anything new with the 'Flying Porpoise'?"

"Good timing. You will be receiving some new composites."

"Pardon?" He bit the eraser off the pencil.

"The \$25,000 reward has perked some interest. I have witnesses coming out of the walls. Hell, four people swear that they saw a crate on Highway 101."

"The Porpoise was not lost. That was three days ago."

"No offense, old friend. But people don't always read the front page. Sometimes it's too depressing."

"Too depressing?" Nels gnawed into the yellow paint of the pencil.

"A guard from the Golden Gateway gave us new information. Better composites. I've sent you copies. See if you recognize either of the men. We may want them in tomorrow's edition."

"New drawings?"

"Hell, we might want you to run all four. The guard was hiding something, but I don't believe he's involved with the theft. Can you incorporate them in your article?"

"Do either of the men... appear to be of... the oriental persuasion?"

"Oriental? That's the second time you've asked that question. Do you know something I should know? You didn't have any Asians on your list of suspects."

"Rumors. Simply rumors."

"Nels?" Hourigan hedged. "Do you know an Andrea Convee or a Francis Fural?"

"Artists?"

"Not really."

"I don't believe so. But I will be glad to check my files."

XVIII

Now it was up to Nels. We had the perfect location. Either there would be a break in the case or not. In either instance, he had twenty-four more hours and I intended to hold him to it.

We drove up Martin Luther King Drive and parked next to several phone bubbles across from the Japanese Tea Garden.

"Do you have a quarter?" I pulled my pockets out.

"I am writing this down," she kidded. "And, I am not giving the telephone an extra nickel." She handed me two dimes.

The line was busy. "We'll pick up our disguises after I talk to Nels. We should be prepared just like the Boy---." I stopped quickly.

"Yeah, I get to wear my ---"

"No wig! It's a little too...how do you say?... attention grabbing. We need some gardener's garb."

While Mia frowned, I redialed. Hayloooooo wasn't there. Her absence made the day even better.

"Maybe she's been fired." I said, covering the mouthpiece with hand.

"Who?"

"Tell you later."

"Good afternoon," Nels said.

"We have the perfect spot for the trap. You'll love it. Very clever and very dramatic. Any news on the bad guys?"

"Mr. Chang..."

There it was again, that major pause. You ask what you think is a relatively simple question, then you have to wait and listen as someone does a mental rewind, searching for the most delicate way to respond.

"Mr. Chang... You are REALLY not Chinese, are you?"

I had Sherlock Homes on the other end of the line. I did not like the question. "We have already been through this."

"But when you insinuated that the composite drawings did not resemble you in the least...I thought... you still might be..."

"Get on with it. What's happening?"

"Mr. Chang."

Please don't pause.

"I am not trying to pry..."

He did.

"I believe...an obstacle has arisen."

There goes a beautiful day, I thought.

Nels, "Hemmed," a couple of times. Whatever was coming next, he didn't want to say. And, I knew, I didn't want to hear it.

"Today, a guard from the Golden Gateway reported to the police, that he saw two white males lugging a large stone object, that he is certain was the 'Flying Porpoise'...."

I wasn't even stunned. Where had that guy been? The dark side of the moon?

"He claims it was very foggy, but he's quite certain it's the object in question. And, he has given the police much better descriptions of the culprits. Does any of this sound familiar?"

"That guy helped us carry it across the Plaza!" I hadn't meant to say that aloud.

"Did he now?" Nels roared. "That explains it."

"Explains what?" I was shouting. Mia whispered to me to whisper.

"The police wanted to know why he hadn't stepped forward before now. They said he was very evasive. Now I see why. If he assisted you he must have felt like a fool. The twenty-five thousand dollar reward seems to be a handsome incentive. I am sorry about all this."

And I'd felt so good, just moments before.

"Oh, and another thing..."

I didn't need another thing.

"As you requested, I visited our classified section and asked about the payment of that personal advertisement. The head of the department, told me that it has been paid for daily, and in person, with a postal money order."

I don't know why I asked the next question, but I did.

"Did you get a description?"

"Oh yes, a vivid one. Let me see, how was it put? Large, bald, Cro-Magnon or something like that."

"Wonderful."

"I am afraid that is not the worst of it..."

Terrific, now for the bad news, I thought.

"Around two this afternoon, I received a call from someone with the deepest voice I have ever heard. He wanted to know why I was interested in his message. He had a most intimidating tone. And when I attempted a reply he told me, 'leave it alone, Mr. Andersen!'"

"Nels, this has been a real fun phone call. I'll call you right back."

"No, Mr. Chang don't hang---"

XIX

"Francis," Muniz said. "'Let me get this straight. You went to pay the bill for the advertisement..."

Fural nodded as much as he could without a neck.

"And the lady asked you why you paid with a postal money order..."

Fural nodded again.

"And then you asked her why she wanted to know and she said Nels Andersen wanted to know?"

"Yep."

"So you phoned Miss Convee and she told you to call Nels and warn him off."

"That's it."

Jesus. Muniz sat back in the kitchen booth. What has Nels Andersen got to do with all this? How did that twit solve my message? Nels knows something

about the statue...but what? Muniz took out a 3x5 card. I've got to figure this out. What have I got?

FACTS:

1. Jerry Lynch has the statue.
2. He quit his job.
3. He's in Seattle, trying to find a buyer.

But why lug the statue all the way to Seattle? Suppose he doesn't want to sell it. Suppose he wants to keep it.....

or.....GIVE IT BACK! OH GOD! Lynch is the guy with the rock. The babbling idiot that called on Sunday morning. He had the statue all along. I could have had it right then. I could be free! And out of debt. Francis would be gone. I could have bet on Lucky Lady and been rich. Damn it.

Lynch must have found it. But why didn't he turn it in? Ah ha, he must have a record. He's scared of the police. So he called me. That is exactly what I would have done if I'd found a statue and didn't want to get involved with the authorities. But, I hung up on him.... so he called Nels...of course, it makes sense. He is going to give the statue to Nels.

Moments later, Muniz peeked through the living room curtain. They're still out there, he thought, tightening his fist around the material.

"FRANCIS, let's go out the back way. We have work to do."

XX

Mia pulled me from the phone. When someone has some news, you should always get a choice. 'Do you want the good news or the bad news?' It's

only fair. There's not much of a choice between; bad, worst, worster, and worstest. I turned to Mia in shock.

She touched my forehead. "You look very pale. Are you all right?"

"I need a cigarette. Let's sit down."

I hadn't made any commitment to quit, but I was down to one or five cigarettes a day.

We found a bench and sat. As soon as we were comfortable, two pigeons roosted at our feet. I tried to use one as a football. "You're not going to believe this." I took a deep drag, and in a cloud of smoke, I related the conversation with Nels.

"Well. What do you think?" Mia was visibly shaken. She took my hand.

"I think every cop in San Francisco has a good description of Jerry and me and it's just a matter of time before I'm behind bars..."

"Do you think that the guy who called Nels is one of the bad guys?"

"Yep." I snuffed out my cigarette after two puffs and tried to kick another pigeon.

"I think it's time to part company with George."

"Me too. Let me see if I can convince Nels."

I had him back on the line in a matter of minutes.

"Chang, thank God it's you," he gasped.

"Nels, are you all right?" I didn't need a heart attack on my conscience. "What's the matter?"

"The composite drawings just arrived. Are you the one with the baby-face?"

"No, that's Jerry." My brain was in such a muddle I'd responded without really hearing him. "The jig's up. We're back to plan A. I'm going to put..."

The fog cleared. The register rang. KA....BOOOOOOOOM! "Holy shit! Baby-face! I'm screwed." Mia tugged my arm. I pulled away.

"I am supposed to get it printed in tomorrow's paper."

I looked over my shoulder at Mia. "They've got real good pictures and we've got real big problems." I was soaking.

Mia mouthed a 'damn it.'

I took a deep breath.

"Nels, I've been with you in this since the beginning. I've done---"

"Mr. Chang, put the statue anywhere you like. The time for heroics is over. I apologize for letting it get this far. If the statue is returned tonight, it should ease the situation. I don't care where you put it. I am sorry for causing all this grief."

I'd expected more resistance. "I wish we could have caught those bastards."

"Such is life. Now it is time to cover our respective rear ends." His spirits were up. "Chin up, at least we'll be back on page one."

"You can bet on it, Nels. We have a great location, photogenic and famous. Get your best photographer and lots of film. I'll call when the statue's in place. I guarantee the 'Flying Porpoise' will return in style."

I hung up the phone. "This is it." I said to Mia. I tried to sound stout-hearted and brave. I was faint-hearted and scared.

XXI

Nels Andersen was typing 'FLYING PORPOISE' RECOVERED, as his phone lit.

"Nels, I want you to put a hold on those composite drawings," Hourigan spoke sharply.

Fine with me, Nels thought, stifling a cheer.

"We have a positive I.D. on one of the thieves and I don't want to tip our hand."

"POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION?"

Hourigan let the ringing clear from his ear, then went on.

"You can't print this. But one witness remembered the license plate numbers of the suspect's vehicle; it was a simple matter after that. We're closing quickly. And you should have one hell of a story by tomorrow."

"Fuck."

"What?"

"Good luck," Nels said quickly. "Keep me posted."

"What in God's name came over me?" Nels pinched the side of his cheek. "I have never used that word in my life."

XXII

Nels said 'fuck', Hourigan thought. He is acting just like Muniz. Anytime I give either of them good news ... Muniz! The license plate! That bastard Muniz had those letters all along. Why the hell hadn't he given them to us?

Hourigan dialed the Muniz number several times. After the fourth try he slammed down the receiver and pressed the paging button.

"Evans, here."

"This is Hourigan. Are you watching the Muniz house?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Is he there?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Then why the hell isn't he answering the phone?"

"I don't know."

"Evans. Go up to his door and ring the bell."

"What should I say?"

Dear Lord, Hourigan thought. "Ask him if he'd like to buy tickets to the Policeman's Ball."

"We don't have a Policeman's---"

"Move Evans!"

"No one answered," Evans reported moments later.

"Great!"

XXIII

We came out of the park on 10th Avenue. I took a right on Irving and drove past 11th, 12th and Funston. San Franciscans are a superstitious lot. There isn't a 13th Avenue. For that matter none of the taller buildings has a 13th floor.

We stopped at Hendrick's Building & Garden Supplies and bought a flat of marigolds.

"Mia, do you have a trowel or rake at your place?"

"Oh, sure, would a power lawn mower or a back-hoe be of any assistance?"

"I'm trying to create the perfect disguise, and you're making jokes. I could use some support."

"Sorry," she backed away. I felt like a louse. "How about a large plastic salad fork?" She chuckled, and put her hand over her mouth.

I purchased a trowel and one of those hand claw things and two beige painters' caps.

Back at Mia's, we changed. I put on a pair of Levi's and a navy blue sweatshirt. She struggled into a pair of white, painters' coveralls and did a quick spin. "Do I look gardenerish?"

"That's not even a word."

"Come on, do I?"

I nodded and threw a change of clothes into a shopping bag. I grabbed the bag and hand-truck and took them to my car. Mia was busy at the kitchen table with two big marking pens and a piece of white cardboard when I got back. "Drink?"

"Yes, and strong."

I grabbed some ice. "Nervous?"

"Aren't you?" She picked up the cardboard and walked in my direction.

"Yep!" I handed her a drink. "We can still leave it someplace less conspicuous."

"And miss the fireworks? Ha." She handed me a professional-looking sign that read:

**SAN FRANCISCO
PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT
OFFICIAL BUSINESS
VEC.CD. 434343**

"It's for our windshield, when we park in the Park."

"Great idea." We clinked glasses. "Ready?"

We made the trip back to Golden Gate Park in relative silence. It was getting dark. There was a spectacular sunset over the Pacific Ocean. We were both pensive. My stomach churned. But oddly, I was also thrilled. It was

almost over, not quite how I'd imagined, but satisfying nevertheless. My senses were sharper, more acute. And, I was experiencing one incredible side effect, I could not believe, I was almost erect, and randy as hell.

"This is going to sound stupid ... are you...horny?"

Mia burst out laughing. "You too!? Unbelievable, how can I put this... em... discreetly?"

"To hell with discreet."

"I don't remember being so...em...damp! It must be that criminal high I've read about."

"I may have to sit here for a moment when we get there."

She glanced at my lap and smiled. "You men are so obvious."

I parked thirty feet from the column. The sun had set over the Pacific. There was a little daylight left. Mia stuck the Park & Rec. sign on the windshield and we went to work.

It took us five minutes to get George in place. My heart pounded as I pulled off Jerry's bedspread exposing him to the world. Mia dug a few holes around the statue and planted marigolds. All at once everything looked perfect. The statue belonged. George looked like he'd always been there.

We cleaned up the evidence and raced back to the car.

Every plan has a weak point and this was ours. We had to leave George for five minutes unobserved, while we changed clothes and drove back to the 19th Avenue Diner.

In his cubicle, at the Call Bulletin, Nels looked down with pride at his final 'Flying Porpoise' article. He'd left two spaces for photographs. One for the discovery site. And one for a large photograph he had already titled, Return of the 'Flying Porpoise'. Everything is ready, he thought placing the article in a manila folder. He crossed his fingers and rose from his desk.

"Mr. Chang, good luck."

XXV

"Yes?" Hourigan said as he lifted the pager.

"This is Kurpita, Lieutenant."

"Kurpita?"

"At the Convee stakeout, Sir. Guess who I found?"

"I'll bite."

"Mr. Muniz is going courting. And he's got Gold Fang with him."

"Good work. How the hell did they get pass Evans?" Hourigan thought aloud.

"Sir, I'm not making excuses for Evans. But Muniz must own several cars. They pulled up in a white BMW; not the Mercedes."

"Point taken. Keep an eye on them. Let me know immediately if there's any movement."

"They're not going anywhere. We're bumper-to-bumper."

XXVI

"So now you believe that there is a connection between Nelvin Andersen and your mysterious Mr. Lynch," Andrea motioned Muniz into a rigid, white leather chair.

Muniz rubbed his palms together. "That has to be it. Some-how Lynch has made contact with Nels. And if my suspicions are-"

"They had better be more than suspicions, Alan."

"They are. They are." He added hurriedly. "I've known Nels for years. He must be wallowing in the notoriety. They have a plan. And if ---"

"STOP PLAYING!" Andrea shouted.

Muniz jumped to his feet. "I am not playing."

"Not you. Francis, stop it."

Fural gave the David Smith mobile a parting flick with his thumb. "Yes, Miss Convee."

"He's such a little boy at heart," she smiled. "Now where were we?"

Muniz returned to the chair. "Though we've been unable to locate Lynch, we do know the exact whereabouts of Nels Andersen. I propose that ---"

"A reasonable conclusion." She walked to the door. "Let's pay Nels Andersen a visit."

XXVII

We pulled into the Diner's parking lot. I gave George a furtive glance. He was right where we left him. He looked terrific.

It was A & A, Attitude and Adjustment hour at the bar, two drinks for the price of one. Apparently there were a lot of people who needed their attitudes adjusted. The 19th Avenue Diner was packed. We sat in a corner booth, at a perfect angle to keep an eye on George and enjoy a cocktail.

"How are you doing?"

Mia looked out at the statue and sighed. "Super. Like a Bedouin reaching an oasis after a long trek across the Sahara. George belongs there."

"I was thinking the same thing. But, keep a close eye, some idiot might try to steal him for their garden." We laughed. "It's time to make Nels famous."

"First." Mia reached into her purse and took out her Canon automatic camera. "Smile."

I smiled. She snapped. Then turned and pointed the camera out the window and snapped a picture of George.

"What's this all---?"

"We have to have a souvenir of the Capers of Bruce and Zelda.

I shook my head. "Guard them with your life. I hate to see them used as evidence in a trial." I stood up. "Time to put Plan 103A into effect."

"Say hi to Nels."

To my surprise, the Diner had a real telephone booth. The interior had been properly initiated. I am convinced that boring classroom lectures and telephone calls are responsible for the advanced state of doodling and graffiti in America. I was reading one of the walls when the operator at the CALL BULLETIN answered.

"Ummmmmmmm. Hayaaloo."

She was back.

For the first time, I noted that the yoke was off my back. With George in place, ready to be returned, I felt at peace. Even Hayaaloo couldn't rile me. I was my old self.

"Hi, there, sweetheart."

"Ummm..and hello to you, too," she sang.

"Is Nelvin Andersen there, please?"

"Weil, Sir. It is after six P.M. - - but eye weil check for you, immediately. Eye weil be putting you on hold for one moment."

"Thanks a million." I held the phone and was greeted with a dial tone. Unperturbed, I took out a felt pen and found a nice blank space on the wall of the booth. Using the Palmer method of printing, I wrote, "For a night you'll never forget, call," I wrote in the Call Bulletin number, and ask for," I redialed the number...

"Haylloo, San Francisco CALL BULLETIN. Ummm maaay I hellp you?"

"Hello. With whom am I speaking, please?"

"Sorry, Sir, we are nooot allowed tooo gieve out---"

"A beautiful voice like yours must have beautiful name."

"Weil Sir, Brenda is my first name, but that iss---"

"Brenda. That's lovely." I wrote "Brenda" in capital letters on the wall.

"Brenda, dearest. I believe we were disconnected. I was trying to reach Nelvin Andersen..."

"Oh, I'm sooooo sorry, I must have pulled you out," she tittered. "Oh-oh, now that doesn't sound very nice, does it?"

No, it sounds like you're in heat and could use a bucket of ice water, I thought. "Naughty, naughty. Brenda, is he there?"

"Actually, nooo one answered his line, but we do expect him in, in the A.M. Nelvin isss always sooo punctual." She ah hemmed. "You do know my naaame, and what might yours be, Sir?"

"Adolph, as in---"

"Adolph, well now that is a coincidence. Adolph is my---"

I hung up the phone very gently, certain she would talk for a while, whether someone was listening or not.

I dialed Nels' home number.

XVIII

Lieutenant Hourigan watched Wisely plow through the outer office. She's really something, he thought.

She barged into the office in mid-sentence, " ... and Taylor is positive that Lynch was one of the men he saw last Saturday night. The Colliers are a little uncertain."

"Okay, we've got Lynch. Would you get me Convee's home phone number? Muniz and the gorilla are having a little tête à tête in her apartment. It's time to rattle their cage."

"My pleasure."

"And get someone to run a background on Lynch. Somehow he and his buddy don't really fit into this puzzle."

"Perhaps we could have another...er...cocktail later this evening?"

"At the Sleeping Lady Bar and Grill?"

"My favorite spot."

Hourigan made three attempts to reach Convee's apartment.

"Kurpita," Hourigan shouted impatiently into his pager.

"Yes, Sir. They're still inside."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. My eyes are on the door and I'm bumper to bumper with the BMW."

"And there are no other exits?"

A low empty hum filled Hourigan's office.

"Kurpita?"

"Just the garage."

"SHIT. Put an A.P.B. out on Muniz's Mercedes."

XXIX

I was rereading my message on the telephone booth when I finally got hold of Nels. He gasped, "Hello."

"Nels, are you okay?" I hated that gasp. He sounded like he was one exhale away from the coroner.

"Chang, Chang, Chang!"

I shoved the phone away from my ear, but I could still hear his voice. It was piercing. "... just got in the door and heard the phone...arms full of groceries...is everything all right?"

"We're all systems go on this end. Any trouble on your end?" Don't pause Nels. Please don't pause.

Silence.

"Well..."

Shit.

"The new composite drawings won't be appearing on tomorrow's front page."

"That's great!"

"Not really... Someone identified your car. And the Department of Motor Vehicles gave them your photograph."

My Adams apple dropped down my esophagus. My stomach flipped on its axis. DELRADO's in an airport parking lot. A 1960, Austin Healy sticks out

like a pimple at a prom. If Jerry flew home tonight? Relax. Zen damn it.

"Won't everyone be happy when the statue's returned?"

"I hope so."

He hoped so.

"There's more."

I slid down the wall of the phone booth. Why did there have to be more?
My rear found a little swivel stool.

"Do you have a new girl friend? Lieutenant Hourigan mentioned the name Mia. Mia Kerr."

I fell off the swivel stool, jamming my foot in the accordion door.

"There's something else."

I didn't need anything else. Nothing. Nada. Mia was now a suspect.
"What, something else?"

"When I left the parking lot this evening... I know this sounds like the onset of paranoia...and, well I'm probably over-reacting but, I have this uncanny sensation that someone is following me. It's eerie."

I freed my foot from the door and struggled to the stool.

"Have you seen anyone?"

"No, but that doesn't alter the feeling."

"Do you want to call it off?"

"Certainly not. We've waited too long for this moment. I've got a photographer and two other members of our staff ready. Besides, I fear that if we dally any longer we both may be standing in a police line up."

"Let's call the police now."

"Would you mind if I called them from the scene? I have Hourigan's number right here. That way my staff and I can get all our photographs before they muck up the area."

Mucked was my brain. "Okay, I need two things. First where do you live?"

"Why?"

"Because I want to put you on my Christmas mailing list. Come on Nels, where do you live?"

"Bernal Heights."

"Good."

"Why?"

"You're about a half an hour from where I've put the statue."

"Where is it?"

"One second. Do you have a pencil?"

"Right here."

"Good, I want you to take down this number." I gave him the number in the phone booth. "After I hang up, go outside and take a good look around. Make sure you're not being followed. If you see anything --- anything out of the ordinary, or suspicious, come back and call this number. We're both excited. Let's not do anything stupid. No heroics, okay?"

"No heroics."

At last the moment I'd been waiting for.

"Okay Nels, my friend, let the trumpets blare. It's front page time again, compliments of your common criminal slime."

"Oh, God bless you, scum of the earth." Nels squealed. "Where is it?" I could hear his feet tip-tapping on the floor in eager anticipation.

I held out no longer. "You know the two columns that serve as the west entrance to Golden Gate Park?"

"Yes, yes, on 19th Avenue." He could have done the voice-over for the Munchkins in the Wizard of Oz.

"Look at the base, of the column on the right. I think you'll find an old friend."

"Brilliant! Brilliant! I'll be there in half an hour. Thank you Mr. Chang, it's been exciting to say the least. We must get together. This week deserves fine champagne and a long reminiscence."

"I'll wait here for five minutes. See you on the front page."

I leaned back, opened the door to the booth and listened to the music. Three songs later, I started to leave. All was well. As I unfolded the door, the phone rang.

"Mr. Chang?" There was a god-awful wheeze.

"Nels, are you okay?"

"He was out there. I didn't even see him. He's huge. His voice is terrifying. I've never heard anything so deep. He asked me if I knew anything about the statue. I am an awful liar. He had a club. A baseball bat, I believe. He may have broken my rib. And I know he broke my leg. I can see...the bone." He made a high painful, manic laugh. "I am so sorry. I told him. I am so sorry. I didn't mean---

"Nels, it's okay, it's okay."

"The man is vicious. Enormous. Call the police. Don't let him get the Porpoise..."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I called an ambulance before I called you. I have my priorities." His voice faded. "Have you ever seen your own bone? They're not really...white. Not white at all. Call Lieutenant Hourigan. He's a friend of..."

"Yeah, sure." I could hear an approaching Siren in the background, as I set down the receiver.

The entire incident had an odd effect on me. Rather than having the good sense to be scared and intimidated, I was pissed.

Venomously, I told Mia what had happened. I slapped the table. "We've got at least twenty minutes before that asshole gets here. Do you want to call the police?"

"Nope."

"Me either."

"I think Nels has paid his dues. He's the one that should get the statue, not the cops and especially not the son-of-a- bitch that broke his leg."

"So why are we sitting here?"

"I love you, Moll. If we---"

The music was playing much too loud. People had to shout to talk. The bartenders were making drinks as fast as they could. A weird silence cut through the din. In a millisecond, every nerve in my body went on alert. I didn't think, I reacted. Some subliminal instinct took over. "Down." I forced Mia under the table and laid on top of her.

"Peter, are you out of your mind" She mumbled from beneath me.

A deafening roar broke the split second of silence. It hit. The building took off in several directions at once. A huge CRACK was followed by an explosion of glass shards as several of the bay windows imploded. Bottles flew off the bar, crashing on the floor. Screams and curses came from everywhere at once.

"Oh, my God."

"Holy shit."

"I'm bleeding, I'm bleeding," a young woman's voice cried. There was long tearing sound as one of the huge fans ripped itself loose from the ceiling, smashing on the carpeted floor. The music whined to a stop.

"Eiaine in heaven."

"My leg."

The lights flickered on and off, giving the scene a slow-motion effect. Settling dust, cigarette smoke and the permeating smell of alcohol heightened the room's surreal image.

Through the shattered windows came the screech of brakes and the crunch of impact after impact. The bar lights blinked and went off. Darkness. Silence. Then a gasp for air and an audible sigh of relief.

Everyone started talking at once. One calm voice rang out, breaking the pandemonium.

"Everyone stay still, do not move. Please listen to me." The voice of authority sounded under control. A general quiet came over the room. "Please stay where you are. There is glass and debris everywhere. We've got flashlights and candles. Please remain calm. Is anyone badly hurt?"

"My girl friend's got a bad gash on her face," a man called from one side of bar. We could hear her whimper.

"I'm a nurse. I'll be right there," came another voice. A beam of light shone through the smoke and haze from the direction of the bar.

"Nurse, over here."

A shadowy figure crept gingerly through rubble.

A moment later, "You'll be fine, it's only a scratch. We get worst nicks than this when we shave our legs." The nurse comforted.

I gave the nurse a 'ten' for bar-side manner. Mia squirmed beneath me. "How did you know?"

I shrugged, I had no answer to the question.

Mia shoved me up. The back of my sweater stuck into the stalagmites of gum underneath the table. She grabbed my collar and pulled down. "Peter, it's George. It's the Porpoise. It doesn't want to go back. It wants to stay with you."

‘Let’s go.’

It took us fifteen minutes for the traffic jam to sort itself out. Fog crept in from the coast. The Park was misty and dark. A pine tree, a leafy version of Mount Everest, had fallen over statue. And the way it was situated, there was a good chance that George had become a pulverized pile of marble dust.

I clawed through the pine tree. Branches stabbed me. Sap covered my hands. I kept pushing until I found his head sticking out. I ran my hand over his body. He was whole. I turned to Mia and gave her a thumbs up.

She folded her arms across her chest and grinned. "He likes you."

"Are you going to help?"

We used a broken limb as a sled and dragged George back to the car. It worked better than I thought.

"They shoot looters, don't they?" Mia grunted.

"Pleasant thought."

We wrestled the statue into the back seat. Mia hopped in the driver's seat, while I rewrapped statue in the sequined blanket. I was tucking in his head when --- George GRINNED. I don't believe in curses or sorcery. And it could have been my imagination, but just as he grinned and all hell broke loose.

An ominous rat-ta-ta rat-ta-tap-tap of a diesel engine ricocheted off the trunks of the trees. Headlights exploded out of the mist.

"MIA, GET OUT OF HERE!"

I dove through the passenger door and fell across the back of the front seat. I tried to pull the door closed behind me. It wouldn't shut. The damn sequined blanket was caught in the jam.

Mia shot down Martin Luther King Drive, making a screeching right on 19th Avenue. The Mercedes screeched behind us. My right arm was draped out the window, trying to keep the door from flying off. "Make a left up here. Don't let them get close enough to read the licen---"

Mia flew across three lanes of traffic ignoring a red light and a no left hand turn sign. I almost lost the door. We almost lost our lives. Rubber peeled. Horns blared behind us.

"One command at a time Captain Kirk."

The Mercedes gained.

"Come on, baby," Mia patted the dashboard coaxing my car along.

"Get ready to make another sharp left."

"There's no road."

"There will be."

There was. Sand and gravel. The rear end of the car slid into a patch of ice plant. The back wheels spun. My finger were slipping off the door.

"Move it please."

"I... am... trying...to move it."

She got the car under control, ground into second gear and sped up a dirt frontage road. I looked over my shoulder. The Mercedes had as much trouble as we did negotiating the turn.

"Where are they?" Mia muttered with a trace of panic.

"You're doing great," I said. **"We have to make a hard left tur---"**

Mia spun the wheel.

"NOT ---"

Too late.

"WE'RE FLYING...!" Mia screamed.

We were airborne. The door flew out of my hand and flapped in the air like a crippled bird. We landed with a SPLAT, in a meadow next to a sprinkler. I bit my tongue, grabbed the door and got blasted with a jet of water.

"WOGOOOO." My tongue broken.

"In coming," Mia yelled, jerking the steering wheel from the right to the left.

"Camera," I sputtered.

Mia gave me a look. I found her purse. The Mercedes came in for a landing ten feet to our right. Fred Flintstone's Neanderthal cousin was driving. He rolled down the window, reached into his coat and grinned. A gold tooth shone. He pulled out what looked like a howitzer. I snapped a picture. He blinked.

I screamed. "GOTTA ICTURE. WOGOOOOOOO, YANET!" The car heeled over to the right. The camera fell out the window. We took off down the meadow toward the Polo Grounds.

"Weft, make a weft."

"Uh?"

I pointed to the left. One hell of a time for a game of charades, I thought. We raced past a concrete outhouse, through a grove of trees, and out onto a bridle path.

The numbness in my tongue subsided. The Mercedes crashed out of the bushes behind us.

"Yanet take the next yight, in about wifty yards you'll see another dirt road, make a hard yight up it and turn off the wights." I sounded like Elmer Fudd.

We careened around the first turn, she down-shifted, feathered the brakes and spun through the second turn like a pro. She turned off the lights as we flew up the dirt road behind the Polo Grounds.

I looked over my shoulder and counted. One thousand and one, one thousand and two, one thousand and... the Mercedes sped past, missing the turn.

"Hurra---"

Mia slammed the brakes. The car spun in the sand. My head hit the dash board. The passenger door came out of my grasp.

"What the well was that?" I said, rubbing my head. "My wody's not used to all this abuse." My head hurt and my tongue ached.

"Something jumped in front of the car. A squirrel, I think."

"You could see a squir--- skip it." I rolled off the back of the front seat onto the ground. I stared at the statue. "Welcome back George."

XXX

The silver-grey Mercedes stopped next to the boat house at Stowe Lake. A flood light shone on the score of boats and canoes chained to the dock.

"Was that Lynch?" Andrea demanded.

"Which one?"

"For Christ sake Alan, one of them was a woman. Was the other one Lynch?"

"I couldn't tell."

"Get out of the car."

THIS IS IT! They're not going to break my legs. She's going to have Francis kill me. "Andrea, I know I can..."

"Get out of the car, Mr. Muniz."

Muniz broke into a cold, damp sweat as he stepped from the car. He waited for the bullet in the back of the head.

"Shut the door, Francis." Andrea Convee rolled down the window and waved to Muniz. "Have a pleasant trip home."

XXXI

Sergeant T.J. Billings, Officers, Evans, Collins, Wisely and Kurpita sat in various postures around Lieutenant Hourigan's desk.

"Have all of you checked with your families since the earthquake?" Hourigan spoke loudly to make himself heard above the incessant phone calls, chatter and exclamations coming over the partition from the outer office.

"Yes, Sir," The assemblage said as one.

"Any problems?"

Collins raised his arm. "My son may have broken his arm."

"You're dismissed."

"Thank you, Sir."

Hourigan began as Collins departed. "I have been instructed to assign every available officer to emergency status.' I.E., you are to aide and abet any citizen(s) in distress. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir," the group said with confusion.

"Therefore, Evans, I want you to proceed to Oakland and see if any citizen needs aid or abetting."

"Yes, Sir."

"Kurpita, I want you to check the fourteen hundred block of Sacramento Street for that same reason."

"Yes, Sir."

"And park were you can watch the door, the car and the garage."

Embarrassed, Kurpita dropped his eyes to the carpet. "T.J. and Wisely, I want you to find some responsive judge who will give us a warrant for Lynch's condo and permission to tap the phones of Muniz, Convee and..." He vacillated, "Nels Andersen. Dismissed."

They stampeded out the door. Hourigan flipped his calendar and wrote down: Room 303/St. Joseph Hospital. Nels old pal, he thought. How did you fall in the quicksand?

CHAPTER 9 SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 18, 1979

I

Muniz picked up the telephone on the second ring.

"Good morning, Mr. Muniz. Nice to find you home."

"What do you want, Lieutenant?"

"Did you manage to get hold of the Collier Brothers?"

"Who?" Muniz sighed with disinterest, rubbing his sore feet. Two hours sloshing through Golden Gate Park trying to find a crummy cab.

"The Collier brothers; remember? You were going to send them a little something. A monetary congratulations because they stepped forward so courageously." Hourigan stopped purposefully.

"Oh, yes, I sent them a nice check," Muniz lied. What is he getting at?

"Send it again. They didn't receive it. Now they're applying for the \$25,000 reward. They think they deserve it."

"Why?"

"That's the interesting part. They say they deserve the reward because they gave me the descriptions of the thieves."

"I've heard all this."

"And because they gave me the letters on the license plate," Hourigan said. "But THEY didn't give ME the letters on the license plate did they, Mr. Muniz? They gave them to YOU!"

Muniz slumped in the kitchen booth.

"Did the Collier Brothers give you the letters on the license? Did you withhold evidence in one of the major art thefts of this century?"

"How stupid of me. I must have forgotten to call you. It was an oversight."

"Oversight?"

"I've had a lot on my mind these past few days, I apologize. I honestly forgot to tell you about the license plate, but if you have nothing further, I really must be going."

"Oh, there is one more item."

"What?"

"I've asked you this before. Are you certain you don't know a Miss Andrea Convee?"

"I know many women."

"I'm sure you do. Handsome dog like you. But does the name Andrea Convee ring a bell?"

"Convee? Not particularly."

"Strange, I have a picture of the two of you dancing together."

"I dance with many women at many charity functions."

"I didn't mention a charity function."

"Will that be all?"

"It was really a shame about last night, wasn't it?" Hourigan added quickly.

"What about last night?"

"There was an earthquake," Hourigan taunted. "Or haven't you heard?"

Hourigan put down the phone before Muniz could reply. I've got you, you little worm. You and Convee and Fural are in this deeper than shit.

II

We awoke groggy, a brisk shower improved my disposition. Mia's needed music. Loud.

As I dressed, I listened to her mutterings. They were in perfect time with the beat of the music. "Secret codes... An earthquake! A car chase! I drove a get-way car in a real car chase..."

I shook my head in disbelief, went to the kitchenette and cooked breakfast. Out of the stereo speakers, Rufus Reid fingered a loud, five minute bass solo. My foot tapped.

Mia stole the morning paper again from her neighbor. And we shared it over a Spanish omelet, Thomas' English Muffins and coffee. The first seven pages were pictures and stories dealing solely with the earthquake. Sprinkled here and there were anecdotes from the previous evening.

On page eight, there was a short piece on Nels. No by-line, just a mention. I showed it to Mia.

CALL REPORTER BEATEN

Reporter Nelvin Andersen was severely beaten at his residence last night. Mr. Andersen has been the Theater and Arts reporter on this newspaper for the past nine years.

The SFPD is currently investigating the possibility that Mr. Andersen's current assignment, the theft of the 'Flying Porpoise' sculpture, (see photos above) had in some way provoked this assault.

Fans and well-wishers are advised to direct their cards and letters to Mr. Nelvin Andersen, St. Joseph's Hospital, San Francisco, 94011, Ca.

Mia pointed a finger nail to the middle of the column where it read (see photos above.) I saw the photos above. I did not like the photos above.

Four hand drawn faces. Two were new. Very different from the two that had appeared yesterday. Very familiar. Too familiar.

The apartment vibrated. Rufus Reid's bass kicked into a duo with one hell of a drummer. My head started to throb in time with the beat.

"Where are my scissors?" Mia squealed, "I'm starting a scrapbook."

"That's not funny, these are pretty close."

Mia pulled the paper from my hand, placed it against my cheek and looked back and forth.

"Not that close, Peter. Besides, everyone's talking about the earthquake today. No one's thinking of the statue."

"I'm thinking about the statue. You should be thinking about the statue."

Slyly, Mia eased open a drawer and pulled out a pair of scissors.

I grabbed her arm. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

"Thinking about George."

My brain was beginning to thump in time with the music. My patience rose and fell with the stroke of the drum beat. "Jesus." I pointed at the drawing with the angelic little face. "There's Jerry."

There was a click. The scissors were ready to snip. "Okay, but which one is you?"

"Do you mind if we turn down the music?" It was blaring.

"I'll get it." Mia went to the stereo and fiddled with a dial. "How's that?"

"Fine," I shouted. There was no discernible difference in volume. "Can you turn down the bass?.....THE BASS! My blood ran cold. "LET THE MUSIC PLAY." I screamed. "What a jackass I've been." I grabbed the dunce

cap off the hat rack and plopped it on my head. Head bent, I chased Mia around the sofa like a one horned bull.

"Peter!" She tried to thwart my attack. "Stop it."

"Don't you see, the butler, or what ever the hell he is, he did it." I'm positive. "Or at least he tried to do it but Jerry and I did it first."

"Peter, the pressure's been too much. What are you talking about?"

My mouth was a hundred words behind my brain. My heart pounded. I took a deep breath. "Remember, I told you that the first thing I tried to do was give the statue back to the Muniz family. Well..., when I called. A guy with an incredibly deep voice answered, like God gave him an extra pair of gonads."

"Oh, balls you say."

"Mia!" She backed away. I moved in. "Remember the guard from the security company?"

"Timothy Gallagher?"

"Yes. He turned himself in after he started getting those phone calls from the creep. He said the guy talked funny. And then Nels got a call from someone with a weird voice who tells him to back-off or he'll--- "

Mia's mouth dropped open. "And Jerry's old Army buddy."

"What?"

"The guy that called the office asking for Jerry. He sounded like he was standing at the bottom of a well."

"Jerry was never in the Army... I'll bet on Saturday night they watched Jerry and me walk away with George and couldn't do a damn thing about it. We were with the guard and then the people from the theater."

"What now? Do we call the police?"

"No. The only clue we have is a voice. The only evidence we have is the statue. And we'd appear awfully silly telling the police that this asshole was attempting to steal the statue from the thieves who stole the statue."

"Say that again? I've missed something."

"If I'm right, and my gut tells me I'm on target, whoever this guy is, he paid Gallagher \$15,000 to ditch the statue. When he went to get it, it was gone because Jerry and I already had it." I smiled. "But he doesn't know that. So he calls Gallagher demanding his money or the statue. The guard turns himself in to prove he doesn't have it either. Now, he must believe Gallagher. So he places ads in the personal section, ads that only the people who had the statue would understand. Then Nels starts nosing around and it dawns on the creep that Nels must know something about the statue or he wouldn't have been asking questions about the ads. He roughs up Nels and hits the jackpot. What do you think?"

Mia's mouth fell open. "Boss, you chose the wrong vocation, you'd make an expert detective. It all makes sense, except... "

"Don't pause. You sound just like Nels."

"Then who were the three people that were trying to kill us last night?"

"Neanderthal," I waved a finger excitedly. "He's got to be the one with the voice. The blond and the other guy are in on this too. WE'LL GET THEM ALL!"

By ten a.m., we had concocted a plan. Somehow, we'd spring Nels from the hospital, set a trap for the trio of thieves, call in the police and watch them carry the crooks off to a life of molestation in our state penal system. I felt pretty sure of the Who and Why. The How and Where of our plan were two incidentals we still need to reconcile.

Mia got the phone number for St. Joseph's Hospital and the operator put us right through to Nels. Mia insisted on sharing the ear piece. When he heard my voice, I felt him smile.

"Mr. Chang. I don't believe it."

"Call me Peter."

"Peter it is. You didn't call the police; did you?"

"Nope."

"Why?"

I told him of our decision and gave him a brief summary of the car chase.

"Very dangerous but very thoughtful. What do you intend to do now?"

"Do you still want to be part of this?"

"My exit may prove difficult, Peter. My friend Hourigan has stationed a police officer outside my door. And in my present condition, I am afraid a quick sprint down the corridor is out of the question."

Mia grabbed the phone, "Stop the defeatist comments. If you want in, you're in and if you're in, we'll get you out." She rolled her eyes and returned the phone to me. "What did I just say?"

"Hell if I know."

"Rather dogmatic, isn't she," Nels said. "But she's right. I'm in."

"What room?"

"Three Zero Three."

"Hang in there Nels, we'll see you soon."

We hung up.

"Do that one again, hon. If you're in and out you're out then in to be out

---"

"Stop it, Peter," she gave me a bony elbow poke in the back.

"The police guard is going to present some problems."

"If you can get us some hospital frocks," Mia smiled shyly. "I'm sure we can get him out."

"What is this obsession with disguises?"

"I love a masquerade." She did a pirouette. "And I can get him out, you can't."

"How?"

"Can you get the costumes?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"No fair, I 'howed' you first." We were both getting giddy.

"I used to work in a hospital. The police are not given access to all the rooms. We can slip him in one door and out the other. Got it?"

I feigned comprehension. Whatever her plan was, it was better than the one I didn't have. I called the man of a thousand favors, Telly.

Every other phone in San Francisco has Muzak. When you call Telly's, you have to listen to the first twenty bars of the theme music from "ZORBA THE GREEK".

"Telly, Peter. I need a favor. Can you get me a doctor and nurse's uniform. Size? Just a sec." Mia held up her hands, four fingers and a thumb on one hand and three fingers on the other. "A size eight for the nurse's uniform."

"Sexists," Mia flipped me the bird.

"Telly, can you make that two doctor's outfits?"

"When do you need them?"

"Yesterday."

"Is one hour, okay?"

"You're a saint."

III

"Good morning, Illingworth," Hourigan said to the police officer propped against the wall beside room 303.

Officer Illingworth eased his chair to the ground and came to attention. "Good morning."

"That's a bad habit," Hourigan pointed to the chair. "Damn thing can slip right out from under you, and you're crippled for life."

"My mother used to say the same thing."

"How's Nels doing?"

"Not a peep."

Hourigan slipped into the room and whispered. "How are you---?" He stared at the sling and the cast.

"Fine. How is the investigation proceeding?"

"After last night's earthquake, I've had to put the 'Flying Porpoise' theft on the back burner." Hourigan studied Nels carefully for any tell-tale reaction. "Most of my personnel had to be pulled off the case."

"I understand. We all have our priorities."

"I have a few photographs here that I'd like you to look at...if it wouldn't be too much trouble?"

"None whatsoever."

Hourigan slipped six photographs from a manila folder. Along with the pictures of Jerry Lynch and Francis Fural, Hourigan had included shots of

two police officers, his brother-in-law and a recently cut linebacker from the San Francisco 49er's. "Do you recognize any of these men?"

Nels flipped through the photos until he reached the picture of Fural. He jerked involuntarily.

Hourigan swooped and snatched the photograph from his hand. "Do you know this man?"

Nels grabbed the side of his cast, trying to disguise his sudden reaction. "No. It's my leg. There is quite a bit of pain. Do you have any others?"

Hourigan bit his tongue in anger. "What the hell is going on? You don't understand. I know that's the son-of-a-bitch who broke your leg! I gave you police protection! You don't understand this prick." He pushed his thumb nail into Fural's face. "This shithead used a nine year old girl---" Hourigan turned away in disgust.

Angrily, Nels shuffled his good leg underneath the sheets. His mind churned. Time wound back to his youth. He thought, I understand, Lieutenant. However, I am afraid you do not. It would have been much simpler to have called you last night, rather than an ambulance. I had done enough to Mr. C...Peter. I could only hope. And Peter rose to the occasion. My parents died when I was four, Lieutenant. My father was an accomplished pianist and composer. My mother was his voice. A beautiful singer and lyricist. A boating accident I was told when I 'was old enough to understand.' I love music, Lieutenant. I love art. Creativity is my life. My father wrote marvelous songs and my mother sang them. After their deaths, other people claimed them as their own, Lieutenant. Friends stole their work and accepted accolades for their genius. But, you would not understand, Richard my friend. To you the world is black and white; right or wrong. To steal a work of art - so that only certain eyes may enjoy the creation? To deprive an artist - his due?

And to use a nine year old girl. I understand perfectly. And I want revenge. My own revenge.

He looked up at Lieutenant Hourigan and with the sincerest look he could muster, "I am terribly sorry, Lieutenant. But, I've never seen any of these men in my life."

IV

Forty-five minutes later we arrived at Telly's. Saturdays are usually quiet at Telly's, but he had a good crowd when we arrived and most of it took a long envious look at Mia as we entered.

"Not much earthquake damage, Telly," I said, noticing that a Grecian Urn was missing and there was a crack in one of the Doric columns.

"Hi Mia," Telly yelled from behind the counter ignoring my comment.

"Hi ya, Telly, how are you?" Mia said. "I see a thirty."

Telly clasped both hands against his temples. "I feel a twenty-seven."

I paused in mid-stride. "How do you two know each other?" I asked, unlinking my arm from Mia's.

"From your divorce party." Mia gave me the how-can-you-be-so-dumb look.

"Be right back." Telly disappeared into a small office, then returned a moment later. On hangers, were two white uniforms cleaned and pressed, encased in clear plastic.

"Telly, how do you do it?"

He gave me a I-don't-ask-you-nothing, so-don't-you-ask-me-nothing look. He reached over the counter. "One more thing." He handed us each a white plastic name tag. "For that special effect."

"Above and beyond the call of duty." Mia curtsied.

"Read them. Will you?"

In bold, type-written print, our tags identified us as Doctors I.V. Gottsit and I.M. Studly.

"Ummm... Doctor Studly, I presume." Mia handed me my badge.

"I have one more surprise," Telly said. "Here they are now."

A man in rumpled brown suit, bolted through the front door of the restaurant. "Got 'em," he panted and handed me a brown paper.

I opened it and pulled out two stethoscopes and two clipboards.

"Clipboards for that official air."

"Telly, I don't know how to repay you."

"No repayment necessary." He gave us both a wary look. "Good luck to you both. I hope you know what you're doing."

"Me too."

V

"Kurpita here, Lieutenant. The three Mouseketeers are back together at the Muniz home."

"Is Evans still there?"

"He's parked down the block."

"Don't lose them."

"We won't."

"Well Alan," Andrea smiled as she paced the floor. "Your debt has grown and payment looks doubtful."

"Lynch has the statue," Muniz insisted.

"But last night you didn't know if that was Lynch in the car. And the car was not an Austin Healy. Besides, you said he was in Seattle."

"He was trying to get the statue to Nels. It's got to be in his house."

"We didn't see it."

"What?"

"After we dropped you off last night..."

Seventy-eight dollars for the cab, Muniz recalled.

"Francis and I paid a visit to 13249 Middlefield Drive --"

"Did you find the statue?"

"DO NOT INTERRUPT ME. The police had a stakeout posted at the Lynch home. It appears that you are not the only one to conclude that Lynch is an integral part in all of this."

"Then you couldn't get in the ---" Muniz stopped abruptly under Andrea's biting glare.

"Oh, we got in ---"

Muniz sat upright. Words formed in his throat. He swallowed them.

"If you interrupt me one more time," Andrea pointed to Fural.

Muniz clenched his teeth. Shut up, he told himself.

"We did not find the statue nor did we find Lynch. Believe me we searched. Didn't we Francis?"

Fural sneered. "We searched real good, Miss Conveen."

"Now, unless you can convince your good friend Andersen to confide in you," Andrea pointed to Fural.

"I'll call him right now, immediately."

"YOU WILL LISTEN," Andrea said fiercely. "YOU WILL DO EXACTLY WHAT I TELL YOU TO DO. The three of us will go to the hospital. And YOU will bring him a large bouquet of flowers ---"

"He might have seen me last ---"

"GODDAMN IT! Francis," Andrea hissed. "HAIR!"

Fural took two steps and jerked Muniz off the sofa by his scalp.

"And a large box of candy," Andrea continued evenly. "YOU will plead, beg and cajole. YOU will not leave his room until you know where to find the 'Flying Porpoise'. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME!"

*** * ***

"Lieutenant, the Mouseketeers are leaving their hole."

"Stay with them, Kurpita."

"That's a copy, Sir."

*** * ***

Francis Fural looked into the rear-view mirror as they coasted to a stop at the Bay Bridge toll Plaza. "We're being followed. Two cars."

"Lose them." Andrea dug her nails into the palms of her hand. Ramone Cosette, she thought. Two cars. Getting desperate old man?

We parked behind Saint Joseph's hospital near the ambulance entrance. While Mia drove, I slipped on my doctor's costume. Mia had won driving privileges for her exploits the previous night.

"Meet you inside, doctor." She pointed to the large door marked Emergency Only. "We wouldn't want to start any malicious gossip about doctors arriving at work together. Would we?"

I flicked my stethoscope and checked my outfit in the side view mirror. "Eat your heart out Dr. Kildare."

I waited inside the door for less than a minute. When Mia came in, I wanted to be a patient, ill, maimed, hell, a bad case of athlete's feet, anything. Mia was a vision.

"Doctor, doctor, nurse MEeee. Pleeease," I pleaded.

"Your behavior is highly irregular." She tilted her head professionally. "I believe we have business to attend to." She brushed off her uniform and started down the pale green hallway.

Mia was a doctor. I was a fraud.

I raced after her. "Let's keep these costumes for a few days. I want to play doctor, doctor."

"We are playing doctor, doctor."

"No, the other kind. You know."

"Very unprofessional, Dr. Studly."

"I humbly apologize, Dr. Gottsit."

"Humble apology accepted."

I stood stiffly. "Shall we begin our rounds."

"Certainly."

BONG. A metallic voice summoned through the halls. "Will Doctor Moran, please report to surgery."

"Do we know a Dr. Moran?" Mia teased as we passed the emergency admittance desk.

"Med school," I said gravely. "Tall, rather eccentric."

BONG: "Will Doctor Moran, please report to surgery."

"Eccentric? Yes, I remember. He appears to be late for an appointment."

"Most unusual. He was always so prompt."

We walked briskly down the corridor through a parade of other doctors, nurses and technicians who offered casual greetings in passing. We found an elevator and rode it to the third floor.

A stunning girl, in the pink and white stripes of a hospital volunteer, started to get in.

"Are you busy, miss?" The voice of authority oozed from Mia.

"Well Doctor, I'm ---"

"Would you be so kind as to get Doctor Studly a wheelchair." Mia pointed to me.

"A wheelchair?" Her large green eyes darted from Mia to me. "Sure."

Mia flipped a few pages on her clipboard. "Please bring it to room 303."

"Room 303, okay." She scurried down the hall.

"Good thinking, Dr. Gottsit."

"Thank you, Dr. Studly."

BONG: "Doctor Moran, please report to surgery."

"Get a move on, Moran."

"He was never like this at Johns Hopkins." Mia added. "Dependable. He always kept a real sharp scalpel."

All hospitals have one thing in common: the bizarre way their rooms are numbered. If people's homes were numbered like hospital rooms it would drive the Postal Service bonkers.

Mia and I strolled down a hallway that ended in a T. We passed rooms numbered 309, then 308, etc. the last room before we reached the T was numbered 305.

"Getting close," Mia whispered.

"Don't bet on it."

We reached the T. The rooms to the right started at 388. The rooms to the left began with 357.

"Trapped like rats in maze, Doctor Gottsit."

"BONG,BONG: WILL DOCTOR MORAN PLEASE REPORT TO SURGERY."

**"Moran would love to report to surgery," I yelled down the empty hall.
"He can't find it."**

"Not very professional."

"Point taken."

Several miles later, we broke the corridor code. We found Nels' room. A San Francisco policeman was propped up against the wall reading the sports section of the newspaper. I was glad he wasn't reading page eight. The drawings weren't perfect but they were close.

I took the initiative. "Good morning, Officer. And how's Mr. Andersen doing this morning?"

"Fine, I guess..."

"I've always loved the police uniform." Mia said coyly, batting her lashes.

"Morning, doctor." He said to me. "Good morning, DOCTOR." He said to Mia. Ineptly, he tried to get the two front legs of the chair back to the floor and fell over sideways in the attempt. With some effort, he got to his feet, hitched up his utility belt and squinted trying to read Mia's name tag.

Mia squinted back reading his. "Officer Illingworth," she smiled.

"Doctor Gottsit," Illingworth leered.

"You fellows do a marvelous job." Mia took his hand and shook it firmly. "Thanks from all of us here at the hospital."

"Happy to be of service."

Mia stepped back and waited. The guard got the picture and opened the door to Nels' room.

"A true gentleman. Thank you. There are so few left." She shot me a look. "Doctor?"

We entered room 303. Nels was laying on his right side looking out of a small, barred window. There was a lot more of him than I expected. He had to be six feet tall, almost three hundred pounds. I flashed on the first time I had seen Wayne Newton, there was a lot more of him than the voice that sang, "Danke Schoen".

Already, there were three bouquets of flowers and a few get-well cards on the counter near the window. And one open box of See's Candy on the bed next to his knee. Wrappers were everywhere. Half of the candy was gone.

Nels' left leg was in a cast, slightly elevated and in traction. A series of weights and pulleys dangled from the foot of the bed.

"Nels," I whispered.

"Peter, we meet at last." He hadn't even turned around.

When he did, I noticed he had a glass of orange juice in his right hand. "I hope you brought the vodka. A Screwdriver sounds divine and I have been screwed enough," he raised his glass. "A toast to the 'Flying Porpoise'."

Mia and I toasted with imaginary glasses.

"How are you doing?" His appearance still had me startled.

He noted my reaction. "I apologize. My personage is a bit disarming, and a bit disabled at the moment. But then, neither of you look like doctors and you certainly don't appear to be Chinese." He winced.

"Hi, I'm Mia." She looked at me with 'it-would-have-been nice-if- you-introduced-us,' eyes.

"I'm sorry. Mia, Nels. Nels, Mia."

"Pleased to meet you," Mia said.

"Young lady, you are a sight for a battered body," he said. "I'll survive. A few bruises here and there, but you folks have my spirits awfully high."

A few bruises here and there? Nels looked like he'd been in the middle of a tractor pull.

"Are you sure you want to come along?" I was having serious doubts. Mobile, he wasn't.

With both arms, he pushed himself up. "Please don't make me watch the finale on television."

There was a polite rap on the door. The candy striper backed into the room with the wheelchair. "Where should I put it, doctor?" She looked at Mia.

Smart child, she knew where the power lay.

"Next to the bed, please."

She performed her duty and shyly backed out of the room.

I was filled with misgivings and from the look on Mia's face, she shared my concerns. Nels leaped in quickly.

"Peter? Mia, please?"

"Do you have any clothes?"

"They are in tatters. Torn and stained, regrettably with my blood."

I reached a decision. "Then it's a 'go as you are party'." I rolled back the sheets. "Ready?"

"Ready, willing and---" A tear of pain rolled down his cheek as I eased his leg out of the sling and repositioned it on the bed.

"Going to make it?"

"You bet."

"Mia, give me a hand. Nels, put your arm over our shoulders. On three. One, two, three."

We levered him off the bed and into the wheelchair.

"Nels, where is your bedpan?" Mia asked.

Nels looked at me, confused. He had company.

"The bedpan?" Nels pointed to a white end-table at the side of the bed.

She found it and wheeled Nels over to me. "Let's go."

Illingworth rose from his chair as we opened the door. Mia gave me a nudge down the hall.

"Mr. Andersen is shy" Mia rubbed the bedpan as if she were summoning a genie. "He won't give us a specimen. So... it's enema time."

I couldn't see his face, but I felt Nels grimace. "You'll get used to her." I whispered over his shoulder pushing him quickly down the hall. Mia behind me and Officer Illingworth behind her.

"Doctors?" Illingworth panted behind us. "I have orders, I have to stay with the patient."

"We'll be right back," Mia assured him.

"I can't do that. I have orders to remain with---"

"Of course, come along, Officer." Mia slowed her pace and fell in step with Illingworth. "We need a specimen," Mia said adamantly. "You men," she patted Illingworth's shoulder. "You're all so darn shy."

I stopped pushing in front of a door marked Obstetrics.

"Doctor Gottsit?" I turned to Mia.

"Doctor Studly." On cue, Mia swept the wheelchair from my grasp and rolled Nels through the doors.

I braced myself against the door and turned to Illingworth. Obstetrics is a big word. I hoped he didn't know its meaning. I also hoped the room had more than one entrance otherwise Mia and Nels were trapped.

Illingworth tried to walk past me. "I'm sorry, proctologists only." I made a serious face. "Enemas are very personal."

"Why do they give enemas in Obstetrics? Seems to me---"

"Officer Illingworth, are you married?"

He nodded.

"Think about it."

He didn't think about it for long. With Mia and Nels gone, all his attention came back to me. "Doctor, do I know you from somewhere?"

"Are you taking any night classes in brain surgery?"

"No."

"Then probably not. I specialize in lobotomies."

Illingworth gave me a puzzled look.

"Officer, it is imperative that our patient's safety is assured. Would you please guard this entrance?" I stepped aside. "I have other matters to attend to."

Illingworth took my place. "Of course, doctor." He snapped to attention and folded his arms across his chest.

I gave him a snappy, Marine Corps, 'well done' and walked right around him into Obstetrics.

I pulled the door closed behind me, then turned my back to the door and held the brass handle, to make sure he didn't follow. The room reeked of disinfectant. Several people in masks and green smocks milled about. Their conversation was hushed. A door opened at the far end of the room. A woman, who was either going to give birth or erupt, was rolled in on a gurney.

The puzzled eyes of the staff wandered back and forth between the woman, Mia, Nels and me. Mia broke the silence.

"Oh, this isn't kidney transplants, is it? Sorry, my mistake." She whisked Nels across the room, dodged the woman on the gurney and disappeared out the far door.

I stood in the middle of the room. Alone. All eyes on me. I referred briefly to my clipboard, clasped my hands behind my back and made the trek across the lab. My head swayed from side to side. "Hydrogen, Oxygen, Argon, Radium," I mumbled. I wanted to sound medical. "Taciturn, aorta, redundant, suppository," I said to no one.

"I'VE HAD ONE." The woman on the gurney exclaimed.

"Ah ha, then it's Riboflavin, after all!" I touched the side of my temple and followed Nels and Mia out the door.

"What the hell was that?" Someone said behind me.

Down the hall, Mia and Nels were struggling into an elevator.

"Where are they?" Illingworth screamed from inside the door.

I looked down the hall. Mia and Nels were gone.

"You there... Stop!"

I turned. Illingworth shot out of Obstetrics and slid to a halt on the highly polished floors.

"You there," he yelled.

To my right was a stairwell. Mia and Nels need a few minutes to get away. I dove through the doorway and took the steps three at a time.

"Stop, damn it." Illingworth's voice echoed beneath me.

I flew down a maze of corridors on the second floor. My heart pounded. I was on the verge of cardiac arrest. Thank god I was still in a hospital. I came to a stop. Caught my breath.

"Where the hell are they?" Echoed down the hall behind me.

I pushed open a door to my right.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Today's lecture is 'Disorders of the Human Heart'."

That's fitting, I thought, stepping onto the stage of a C-shaped lecture theater. A short, rosy-cheeked man, dressed in a white smock stopped speaking. He gave me a look.

"Sorry I'm late." I gave him a wave.

He gave me a long, distasteful second look and began again. "Yes, the human heart. In Old English, heorte. From the Greek, Kardia."

There were a dozen bottles on his lab table, each with a heart floating in formaldehyde. The classroom was packed. I looked at the rows of students, each row one tier higher than the other.

"May I help you?" the teacher asked.

"This is the heart lecture?"

"Yes."

"This is simply a routine teaching observation."

"Observation?" He asked bewildered.

I leaned across the bottles of hearts and whispered. "This is your evaluation." I tapped my clipboard. "I'm here to observe your teaching techniques. We've had a few complaints. But, please carry on. Pretend I don't exist."

"Yes, of course." His cheeks got pinker. His voice faltered, as he looked back towards the class.

"... from the Greek ...Kardia."

I sidled across the floor and walked up the stairs to the rear exit. I paused on different tiers and questioned several members of the class.

"Do you approve of his teaching methods?"

Someone would nod and I would climb the stairs.

"Disorders of the heart arise from congenital defects, structural or functional changes, infection of the heart tissue, and from high blood pressure, drugs..."

"Are you quite satisfied with this man's knowledge of his subject?" I asked a very attractive student.

"Oh, yes."

I was one step from the rear exit when Illingworth burst into the room below me on the theater floor. I heard him yell something but I was out the door and heading for the ambulance parking lot.

BONG, BONG, BONG: "Dr. Moran, your presence is no longer necessary in surgery."

VIII

"HOW COULD YOU LOSE THEM? Hourigan wailed into the police intercom. "Jesus, Kurpita you had two cars.

"It was a fluke, Lieutenant. I'm really sorry. We came out of the tunnel on Treasure Island and they were gone."

"Send Evans back to the Muniz home and you come back here."

IX

"Nels?" Alan Muniz Jr. whispered as he peered into room 303. He quickly surveyed the empty room and hurried down the corridor to the nurse station.

"Nelvin Andersen is not in his room!" He yelled to a passing nurse.

"How did you get past this desk?"

"Why isn't Andersen in his room?"

"Are you family?" The nurse took one more look at the agitated man in front of her, turned, and lifted a microphone. BONG: "Would security report to the third floor nurse's station immediately."

When she turned around, Muniz was gone.

*** * ***

Officer Illingworth stood by the admittance desk on the ground floor of St. Joseph's Hospital. Reluctantly, he pulled the radio from his utility belt. I'm in deep shit, he thought as Lieutenant Hourigan answered his page.

"It's Illingworth, Lieutenant."

"What? I'm busy."

Illingworth tried to speak through parched lips.

"What do you want?"

"Sir, there's been an incident."

"A what!"

Flustered and embarrassed, Illingworth still managed a concise summary of events.

"Andersen has his leg in a cast, two broken ribs and you let two doctors wheel him away? I ought to put you on foot patrol in a patch of poison oak---"

"Oh, shit," Illingworth gasped.

"What?"

"I knew that guy was familiar." He wiped his head with a handkerchief. "One of the doctors was the guy in the composite drawings."

"Was the woman a blond?"

"No, Sir. Brunette.... "Of course, she might have had a dye job."

Bong: "Would Officer Illingworth report to the third floor nurse's station immediately."

"I'm being paged, Lieutenant."

"Find out what that's about, then send out an 'all points.' And get down here. I want you to look at some pictures." Hourigan cut the connection and fingered the photos of Convee, Fural and Muniz. Kidnapping! Okay, assholes, it's bottom of the ninth, two outs and it's my turn at bat.

X

Andrea Convee sat patiently in the back seat of the Mercedes listening to Muniz finish his report. "It appears Mr. Lynch and Mr. Andersen are quite shrewd. In any case, we can be certain the 'Flying Porpoise', will soon be in the hands of Nels Andersen or the police. Which leaves you," she eyed Muniz menacingly. "In a particularly awkward position." Andrea crossed her legs and tapped Fural on the shoulder. "Let's take Mr. Muniz home, Francis."

"Yes, Miss Convee," Fural leered at Muniz.

Muniz slunk down in his seat. Shit!

XI

Outside Saint Joseph's Mia and I settled Nels comfortably in the back seat of my car. Mia collapsed his wheelchair and ditched it in the trunk of the car.

"You can't just steal a wheelchair, Mia."

"Peter, we have a what? A seven, ten, twelve million dollar statue in your back seat." She tapped the trunk of my car. "I really wouldn't worry about a slightly used wheelchair." She slammed the trunk.

In the car, the class of theft and skull-duggery held our first war council. I gave Nels a summary of events and told him my bass voice theory.

"The parking lot of the Golden Gate Bridge," Nels said with admiration.

"Now, there was the definitive place for the 'Flying Porpoise'."

"You mean George," Mia corrected.

"George?"

"Nels," I said with embarrassment. "We christened the 'Flying Porpoise' George."

"So be it. Speaking of the Fly...George, where is it, heem... he?"

"If you search under that tacky sequined spread to your right," I said, from the front seat. "I believe you will find an old friend."

Nels tugged, pulled and finally removing the sequined blanket. His hands roamed over the statue erotically. "I'd forgotten how beautiful.... To think that degenerate almost got this. I am glad that you did not call the police. His voice had changed. It probably didn't drop more than a note, but it was

different. He pushed himself up on the seat. "I would like you both to know that the son-of-a... blind-sided me. Excuse my language, Mia, but with a voice and torso like mine, you learn to defend yourself. And I have devoted some time to the art of self-defense. I would give anything for another round with the lummoX that blindsided me...." He paused again.

It was driving me nuts.

"You believe that the ape works for Alan Muniz Jr.?" Nels asked pensively.

"I believe he answers his phone. Why?"

"That raises some important questions."

Mia's foot eased off the gas. The car decelerated. Her attention now directed towards Nels. I wished she'd focus on the road.

"I do not think it is quite as simple as you think. There are many unanswered questions. For example, how did this scumbag know that Gallagher was in such dire financial straits? How did he get Gallagher's name and phone number? And how on earth did he find out where his daughter went to school?" Nels caressed the statue unconsciously as he spoke. "How about me? My phone number is unlisted. And I don't believe there are ten people on earth who know my address. But, my friend Alan Muniz Senior and his pompous son did! More importantly, of all the types of art to pilfer, why would a thief choose to steal a two-hundred pound statue? Why the Porpoise? Why not a painting? A painting would be easier in every respect. The market is larger, more clandestine. More buyers. And paintings appreciate at a faster rate. A painting is easier to hide and transport. And, if push came to shove, a painting is much easier to destroy if one was about to be apprehended." Nels wiped his brow on the sleeve of his green hospital smock. "There are so many questions..." Nels jerked upright. "And I believe I know where we can get the majority of the answers. Peter, are you certain you have the right fellow?"

"Now that you're here there's an easy way to find out. Let's give Muniz a call and see who picks up the phone."

"Who's going to do the talking?" Mia asked. "He might not remember my voice. But I'd hate to put him on alert."

"He won't remember mine. He hasn't talked to me since Sunday."

"Don't be too sure. He's been very clever so far."

"I agree," Nels said.

My mind shifted gears. "I have it! Make a left."

XII

"It wasn't easy, Lieutenant," Wisely bounced into Hourigan's office grinning from ear to ear.

"WHAT WASN'T EASY!" Hourigan shouted.

"Ouch." Wisely returned a hurt look. "Jesus. What the h ---?"

"Sorry, what have you got?"

"It's hard enough to find a reasonable judge on Saturday. Let alone the day after an earthquake. But," she waved two documents. "Signed, sealed and delivered. One search warrant for 13249 Middlefield Drive," she extended a paper. "And one permit to tap the phones of Alan Muniz Jr., Andrea Convee, Nelvin Andersen and Jerry Lynch."

"Outstanding."

"And as soon as this is over...?" Her mouth opened into a warm, wet smile, white teeth flashing.

"We're going sailing." Hourigan grinned, and gave her a thumbs up. "You set up the taps and I'll take care of the search warrant."

As she left the office, Hourigan picked up his pager. "T.J.?"

"I'm enroute, Sir."

"Get over to the Lynch residence in Walnut Creek, 13249 Middlefield Drive. You just may find our marble mammal."

"Sir... er... Don't I need a warrant?"

"I've got a warrant."

"Yes, Sir. But, shouldn't the warrant be in my possession?"

"MOVE IT, T.J.!"

"Yes, Sir."

"Evans is trying to get through," Wisely called over the glass partition.

"What is it?"

"The Muniz contingent just pulled up."

"Is there someone in a cast with them? Someone limping?"

"No, Sir."

"How about a brunette?"

"That's a negative."

What the hell have they done with Nels?

XIII

During the ride to Baker Street, I squeezed Nels into my doctor's smock. He felt the draping of the hospital gown was a little too revealing.

We came to a stop in front of a beautifully refurbished Victorian. The base color was a blush coral and every intricate wisp of molding, every flower, every indentation was a different pastel. Two six foot African tree ferns fronted the tiled stairway.

"Who lives here?" Mia asked.

"It's a surprise. Help me with Nels."

We boosted him up three stairs. I twisted the bell in the middle of the front door. I hoped it wasn't an omen, but from behind a stained glass window I could hear Johnny Cash singing the "Folsom Prison Blues."

As the door swung open, Mia let out a gasp. Except for a pair of oxblood snake skin boots, Jean Paul was all in black right up to a ten gallon Stetson hat. "Mia, Peter, who's the cripple?" He pointed to Nels. "Sorry Nels," he said sympathetically. "I read that you got banged up some."

"You two know each other?" I asked in disbelief.

"Sure, he's regular at the ol' Twilight. Ain't ya?"

Nels smiled, smacked his lips and extended his hand. "Wonderful food. How are you?"

"Fine. Hey, don't ya all just stand out here. Come on in. Welcome to the ranch. What can I do you for?"

"Say hello, Mia," I prodded.

"Bonjour, Miate. Come on in," he stepped to one side and motioned us through the door. "Make yourselves at home."

"Hi?" Mia managed finally, as her eyes traveled up his body.

It had to be his outfit. The transition was disarming. Over dinner at the Twilight, it would have sounded mean spirited and petty if I told Mia that Jean Paul was born in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. I would have sounded jealous, if I told her he played lead guitar for a country and western band called the Oklahoma Shit Kickers. And his French accent was a phony. I saw the disillusionment in her eyes. The truth must prevail.

Johnny Cash was still stuck in Folsom Prison as we entered.

Black and white photos of famous cowboy stars, rodeo posters, spurs and bridles covered one wall. The other wall would have made an arms dealer

ecstatic. It was an arsenal. Four glass cases displayed Remington and Winchester rifles, a collection of derringers, Smith and Wesson, and Colt pistols. Draped over a Gatling gun was a U.S. Cavalry saddle. He had enough artillery to start his own range war.

"Can I get you something, a beer?" Jean Paul tucked his thumbs in his belt. "Say," he gave us all a puzzled look, "why are you folks dressed up like doctors?"

"We need a favor. Will you make a phone call for us?"

He looked at each of us in turn. "What's this all about?"

"I can't tell you. Will you do it?"

"Sure partner." STOPPED HERE

"I want you use your French accent."

"Bien sur, mes amis."

"Do you have an extension?"

"Mais oui." He pointed to a high vaulted saloon that adjoined the living room.

Nels gave him the number. Mia and I carried the extension back into the living room. Nels listened in with Jean Paul.

"HELLO, MUNIZ RESIDENCE." A tidal wave of sound rumbled through the line.

"That's him, that's him," Nels squeaked.

"MUNIZ residence?" Jean Paul forgot his French accent.

"That's the guy who called for Jerry," Mia yelled.

"Bonjour monsieur," Jean Paul tried to regroup. "Comment ça va...?"

"WHO IS THIS?" A full fledged avalanche coursed through our ears.

I slammed down the receiver. "I knew it! I told you it was him!"

I signaled Jean Paul to hang up. He pushed down the button but held the receiver in his hand.

"You told me he had an extra set of testicles." Mia snickered. "But that guy must have the Bells of Saint Eiaine's dangling between his legs."

I started to laugh. Nels went into a conniption. Tears streamed down his cheeks. "The Bells of ..."

Jean Paul stood in the middle of the room stunned. "Was that Alan Muniz Jr.'s residence?"

"Yes."

"Did something happen between the two of you at dinner Wednesday night?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"He had dinner about the same time you did. Did you folks have a fight or something?"

"He did?" Mia roared.

"Is this a joke, Peter?"

"It is sort of a joke, but I can't go into it. Thanks for everything."

"But I didn't do anything."

Mia gave him a peck on the cheek. "But you tried, Monsieur."

XIV

"The taps are all in place, Lieutenant," Wisely called over the intercom.

"Time to rattle a few cages. Ready?"

"All set."

Hourigan leaned back in his chair and dialed.

XV

"Who was it, Francis?"

"Some French guy. Musta had the wrong number, Miss Convee."

"Thank you, Francis," Andrea smiled and redirected her gaze to Muniz.

"Dear, dear Alan. Your excesses have put us both in a most difficult position. Placing another bet without collateral has only compounded the matter. And now that the 'Flying Porpoise' appears to have slipped through our grasp, there will be no insurance money. No sale." Her blue eyes darted about the room. "Have you had your home appraised recently?"

Muniz sighed. "We were so close last night. Why were they in Golden Gate Park? If they were going to give the statue back to Nels, why didn't they just drop it off at his office?"

The phone rang. Francis Fural jumped for it.

He enjoys maiming people, Muniz thought remembering the snap of Nel's leg the previous evening.

"It's for him," Fural said with disgust.

"Give him the phone, Francis."

"Good morning, Mr. Alan Muniz Jr." Lieutenant Hourigan let the Jr. roll off his tongue. "Glad to catch you at home."

"I beg your pardon."

"Someone just sprung Nels Andersen from the hospital. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't know anything about that."

"How about Andrea Convee?"

"Convee?" Muniz gasped involuntarily.

Andrea glared at Muniz. "Who is that?"

"Ask her, Muniz. Ask Convee if she knows anything about the Andersen kidnapping. Ask her if she knows anything about Timothy Gallagher or your missing statue. I'll wait right here."

"Who IS that?" Andrea hissed.

"There is no one here."

"What a pity."

"Pity?"

"You've lost your eyesight as well as your sense of smell. Anyway, I want you to know that your police department is hard at work trying to recover your stolen statue. Say good-bye to Andrea. She's a knockout. You lucky dog."

White froth collected in the corners of Andrea's mouth. "Who was that?"

"Lieutenant Hourigan," Muniz offered meekly.

For several minutes he sputtered replies to Andrea's barrage of questions.

"And you didn't want to alarm me? How chivalrous, Alan. Francis!"

Fural rose with glee in his eyes. The veins on his head filled with blood and his gold tooth glittered.

Muniz looked in several directions at once for an exit. He tried to move. Instead he lost control of his bladder.

Andrea put the palm of her hand across her lips. "My, how clumsy." Andrea turned to Fural. "Call Lisa and have her bring over another car from the City." She turned back to Muniz and let him squirm for several seconds. "Nothing is going to happen to you.... yet," Andrea reassured. "We still have

to visit your safe deposit box and get the pink slip to your car and the deed to your house."

XVI

Nels, Mia and I sat in the car and planned our assault.

"One question's answered. That's our man." I turned to Nels. "You mentioned there was a place where the majority of questions could be answered."

"Would either of you mind if we made a brief trip to the morgue?"

Mia paled. "The morgue?"

"Sorry, Mia. There is no cause for alarm. The 'morgue' is a special department at the paper. Every branch of the media keeps a running account of the lives of famous people. It is rather macabre, but we have to have something on hand to print when they die. The information is on microfilm or in a computer and it is constantly updated. Are either of you adept with a computer?"

"If it's not too complicated I might be able to---"

"It's complicated, Peter. We'll need someone who is more than competent. Mia?"

Mia shook her head.

"That puts us in a bind."

"Hold it." I fished through my wallet. "I know this kid. They call him Snoop. He's a genius. He's incredible."

"A kid?" Mia asked in dismay. "You want to bring a child into this?"

"We need an expert," Nels said. "Someone who really understands computers."

"I swear to God, the kid's a genius." I crossed my heart. Wait till you see him --- work." I quickly added. I remembered his hair. The Snoop didn't make a good first impression.

They gave me a quizzical look.

"Believe me. He's terrific."

It took some convincing, but I got Mia to pull into a Chevron station. When an elderly woman vacated the phone bubble, I popped in.

"Hello," A woman answered gruffly.

My brain malfunctioned. I couldn't think of a thing to say. I couldn't open the conversation with, do you have a son with pink and green hair? So I tried, "Hi. Are you the mother of a computer whiz they call, Snoop?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You another one of those government agencies trying to use my boy?"
A very irate female was on the other end of my Campbell Soup can.

"I'm sorry?"

"Why are you sorry? Who the fuck are you?"

The woman had a lovely vocabulary. There was no time to be coy. "My name is Tuelly, Peter Tuelly. Your son was part of a class that recently took part in a field trip to the Stevenson Steel & Oil Company. Would you mind if I spoke to him a moment."

"You missing something? One of those goddamn computers?"

"No ma'am."

"The little sucker's altered your payroll. Didn't he?"

"No ma'am."

"I hate those damn field trips. If I wanted him in the field, I woulda bought a goddamn farm."

"Yes ma'am."

"The boy's only thirteen. He should be in school, not pissing his time away wandering around the goddamn state."

"Yes ma'am."

She put down the phone, but she was still talking. "Never shoulda bought him that fucking computer, neither. SNOOP, SNOOP, phone's for you."

"Hi, who's this?" He cupped the phone. "I GOT IT MOM, YOU CAN HANG UP."

She didn't. Our whole conversation was punctuated with excerpts from the Price Is Right. "Come on down," the announcer screamed in the background.

"Hi Snoop, it's Peter Tuelly from Stevenson Steel. You said to give you a call if I ever need a hand. Here's the call, I need a hand."

"All right!" he said enthusiastically, "How ya doing? What's the problem?"

"Snoop, I'm involved in... well sort of... a game and I need a computer expert. Do you want to play?"

XVII

Carol Wisely sat in front of a black, oak-paneled board laced with minute glass bubbles. Above four, were the names of Muniz, Convee, Andersen and Lynch. In the Lynch bubble a light blinked on. Wisely grabbed the inter-office phone. "Lieutenant, someone's in the Lynch house. There's a call going out."

"Listen in. Tape it. I've got another call." He scattered the rind of a pomegranate and picked up the phone. "Hourigan."

"It looks like Attila the Hun hit this place."

Hourigan sighed, "T.J. are you calling from the Lynch residence?"

"Yes, Sir. The place is devastated. But no one's here. The refrigerator's empty ---"

"The refrigerator's empty," Hourigan pounded his desk.

"T.J.! Get off the goddamn phone and get your ass back here, NOW!"

T. J. held the silent phone in his hand and turned to Officers Dave Forkel and Bill St. John. "Do you have any openings in the Concord Police?"

"Do you play golf?"

XVIII

We were a motley crew as we entered the Call Bulletin. Snoop pushed Nels up the handicapped ramp. God bless those ramps. You never appreciate them until you need them. Mia and I lagged behind.

Nels and Mia had done a double-take when Snoop bounded into the car. Neither made a comment. I did the introductions.

"What's the game, Mr. Tuelly?"

"You'd better ask Nels, Snoop. He knows the rules."

Nels and Snoop were immediately engaged in an animated discussion. Nels asked can you this and that? And Snoop would reply "of course" and "cool". A friendly rapport developed in minutes.

Snoop was coiffured and dressed for the occasion. His hair was still pink and green. But he added dashes of yellow to the spikes on his cowlicks. The

addition complimented his turquoise T-shirt, which demanded in large black letters, trimmed in gold, QUESTION AUTHORITY.

Mia pulled me backward.

"Remind me to take a picture of Snoop."

"For the scrapbook?"

"No. I want to use it as blackmail if he ever goes into politics."

"You've got a mean streak, lady." I said as we entered the building.

Nels and Snoop disappeared around a corner in the hallway in front of us. Over the general din it came. She was here! "Gooooood, moooorrning, Nelvin." It was the voice. It was Brenda. "Eeeye didn't eexpect to seeee yooou tooday. Hooow are yooou feeeling?" I raced ahead of Mia. My eyes rolled. Brenda was a knock-out. Luscious. I stared. Auburn hair, a full mouth, with soft hazel eyes and dimples that pulsed as she spoke.

"Good morning, Brenda." Nels' voice moved into the treble cleft. "We need something from the morgue. It will only take a few moments."

"Yooour veery brave, Nelvin. Iss there aaanything eeeye kin doooo?"

"No thank you. Though I appreciate your concern."

Any fool could see the mutual attraction.

"Is that your lady?" Mia asked, as we went down the corridor.

"Oh, no," Nels blushed.

Mia noticed his reaction. "She sure could be."

"Do you really think so?" Nels was flamingo pink.

If these two mate, I thought, we'll have to add another octave to every musical instrument ever invented. All in the upper register. Their offspring would offer a new dimension to sing-along songs.

We walked through a set of double doors with small wired windows. On one door was lettered MOR. The other was lettered GUE. Nels rolled himself to a wall of files. Snoop ran from the microprocessor to computer terminals in

ecstasy. I stood in the middle of the room, in awe. The place was a hovel, huge, dirty, and beige. Extension cords, wires and electrical cables ran everywhere. They would have driven a python into a sexual frenzy.

"Howda do. Kin I help you?" I turned to a man in a black apron and a green plastic visor. With his lips, he shifted the butt of a Bull Durham into the corner of his mouth. It belonged there. There were years of nicotine on that side of his upper lip.

"No, I'm here with Mr. Andersen."

"He's had hisself a time of late." The cigarette twitched up and down as he spoke. "That yearn." He pointed to Snoop.

"Nope."

"Good." He walked away.

I felt like St. Peter denying Christ. Before I could muster a word in Snoop's behalf, I was alone.

Stepping over the electrical coils, I joined Snoop at a computer. I put my arm around him. It was the least I could do.

"This is a beauty, Mr. Tuelly. Think it's got any games?"

"I doubt it." Nels joined us and handed Snoop a floppy disk. "Snoop, it's up to you."

"You got it, Mr. J. Let's boot this sucker up."

His fingers pounded the keyboard. Within seconds he had that glazed look old ladies get in Las Vegas when they sit down with a stack of quarters at "their" slot machine.

Snoop kept a running dialogue. "She's booted. Let's see your menu. Okay, what does this guy do?"

"He's an artist."

He tapped a key. "What kind?"

"What kind?" Nels sounded perplexed.

"Yeah, what kind of artist, Mr. J.? Is he in T.V., rock 'n'roll or the movies?"

There was a definite communication gap.

"A sculptor."

Snoop sighed. "I was hoping he'd be somebody important. Who would make a game with a sculptor?" He tapped two keys. "Name?"

"M-U-N-I-Z, Alan," Nels spoke fluent computer.

The screen went blank then filled with artists whose names began with 'M'.

"We got two Muniz's here. Do you want senior or junior?" Snoop leaned inward. "Hey, the junior's a chef. How can a cook be an artist?"

Nels and Mia went wide-eyed. I touched Snoop gently on the shoulder. "The world was not built on Golden Arches alone. Senior first, please."

"Piece of cake." Snoop hit the retrieve button.

On the screen popped the entire life of one Alan Muniz Sr.

UP Dated: 07-24-79

Alan Theodore Muniz

Born: San Francisco/ July 21, 1911

Deceased: San Francisco/ March 27, 1982

Parents:

William Theodore Muniz

Eiaine Alice Beck

Education:

Commerce Grammar School: 1917-1925

Lowell High School: 1925-1929

School of Fine Arts: New York/1929

L'Escole des Etudie: Paris/ 1931

Sculptures

Man On A Park Bench

Bitch and Pups

Young Woman of Yaounde (Cameroon)M

Fulah Woman (Rep. of Guinea)

Moths on a Light Bulb

Muskellunge Spawning

Rainbow Lorikeet

Elderly Bantu Chief

Feeding Birds

Pondo Girls/Port St. John S.A.

Flying Porpoise

Green Barbet Feeding

California Condor Perching

An Exaltation of Larks

Location

Louvre, Paris

Private Collection

Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.

El Prado, Madrid

Wilstach Coll. Phil.

Walters Gal. Baltimore

Albright Gal. Buffalo

Private Collection

Hyatt Plaza San Francisco

Art Institute Chicago

Estate

Estate

Peabody Museum of America

Field Museum of Natural

History, Chicago

Busts

Claudio Monteverdi

(Composer 1567-1643)

Karen Horney

(Psychologist)

Thomas Edmund Dewey (1902-1956)

Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Golden Gate Museum San F.

Tate Gallery, New York

Metropolitan Museum of

Art New York

Stuart Gallery London

MiscellaneousCoprinus Comatus

(Bed of Mushrooms)

A Badelying of Ducks

Wilstach Collection Phil.

Field Museum of Natural

History, Chicago

Marital Status

Juliette Streaux/1933 Children 0

Agnes Pentergest/1937 Children 0

Patrice Lamberson/1942 Children 1 Alan Theodore Muniz Jr.

Sandra Ambler/1960 Children 0

Hobbies

Amateur: Botanist/Zoologist

Travel/ esp. Africa

Reading

Golf

"I knew I liked this guy," I pointed to the last item on the screen. "He was a golfer."

"Do you want me to scroll up?" Snoop asked.

"Pardon?"

"There is more here if you want it."

I think we all felt like voyeurs.

"No, that's enough. Punch up his son, Alan Muniz Jr.?"

Snoop pressed several buttons. The screen cleared, then filled.

We all read together. It started with his birth date, schools etc...then it got interesting.

Occupation:

Entrepreneur.

"What do you suppose that means?" I asked Nels.

"I'm not sure, but I have a suspicion."

Personal Statistics:

Marital Status: Divorced (1)

Ex-spouse: Marie Cambell: See-M.Cambell Socialite.

Children: 0

Hobbies:

Cooking

Wine Connoisseur - See Update

Update 1976

Accident: 11-15-76/ Suffers from Anosmia/ loss of smell

Hobbies

Gaming/Horses

Activities/Interest

- 1. Unpaid advisor San Francisco Museum - See - Alan Muniz, artist (Father)**
 - 2. Paid: Vice-Chairman Donaldson Security Corporation**
 - 3. Board Member: San Francisco Tourist Bureau**
 - 4. Member: Neptune Society**
 - 5. Member: Native Sons of California**
 - 6. Honorary Member: Board of Directors/ De Young Museum
San Francisco Fine Arts Guild**
-

It took a moment for number 2 to register.

"BINGO. We just got I-22."

Nels, Mia and Snoop stared at me. I pointed to the screen. "That was the company responsible for guarding the statue. The one that Gallagher worked for. The one that offered the \$25,000 reward. The bastard."

"You're right." Nels tried to do a wheelie in his chair.

"Snoop, can you get a fix on his financial status?" My heart accelerated.

His fingers flew. Chopin should be so nimble, I thought as his fingers played the keyboard. But, as quickly as the concerto began, it stopped. His hands were poised, cocked to strike the next key. \$25,000 reward?" he murmured. His back to us, Snoop looked at the screen. "This is for real, isn't it?"

None of us said a word.

Snoop swiveled and leaped from the chair. We jumped backward. "This is no game. Is it?"

"No game."

"Twenty-five thousand big ones?"

"Twenty-five thousand."

Snoop spun on his right heel, his left leg in the air. He stopped directly in front of us. He bobbed to the left and right clapping his hands rhythmically, gesturing for us to pick up the beat. The man in the green visor looked over in dismay.

**I gotta treat this with zeal,
cause this is for real,
Just give me the name,
cause this is no game,
I'll give you no jive,
just slap me five.**

Snoop high fived the three of us. We'd just been rapped. He was back at the keyboard punching keys. "Here comes his financial picture. It's for real, for real," Snoop hooted.

The three of us stood there, dumbfounded.

"Hey you folks want this or not?" Snoop said over his shoulder.

The fog cleared. We went back to the screen.

Assets/Property:

1. House/ Oakland	
387 Grand Park, Ca.	<u>\$600,000</u>
2. Horses:	<u>\$12,000</u>
3. Savings:	<u>\$180,000</u>
4. Stock Holdings:	<u>\$320,000</u>
5. Yacht:	<u>\$70,000</u>
6. 'Flying Porpoise'	<u>\$7,600,000</u>
7. Green Barbet Feeding	<u>\$1,075,000</u>
8. Other/Misc.	<u>\$200,000</u>
Net Worth	\$10,975,000

"\$10,000,000!" Nels was furious. "Alan should worth six times that much. His father wasn't just a superb artist, he was a shrewd business man. He owned real estate all over this planet. His stock portfolio must have weighed ten pounds." Nels beat his hand on the arm of the wheelchair.

Mia gave me a nudge. "Kind of breaks your heart. Poor fellows down to his last ten mill."

Nels pointed to the screen. "Mia, this information is several years old. How did he squander his father's fortune? What happened?"

"You've got to pay attention," Snoop said. "Even if it isn't a game." The computer hummed. The data rolled backward and the cursor came to a stop under the 'H' in horses.

Hobbies:

Gaming/Horses

"Horses." We said in unison.

Snoop didn't want to go home. I slipped him twenty bucks and gave him a ride to Pier 39. A conglomerate of shops and restaurants, with the largest video arcade center in San Francisco. According to Snoop, the ultimate video game had arrived, Xellon the Magnificent, and he wanted to bring it to its knees. Xellon the Magnificent didn't stand a chance.

XIX

"Costume party?" Telly said as we wheeled Nels between the Doric columns. Except for eight street people he feeds on a regular basis, the restaurant was empty.

"Telly. Nels Andersen. Nels. Telly." They shook hands. "Telly, do you have any clothes?" I pointed to Nels.

"Sure." He grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and rolled Nels into the 'Employees Only' area. In record time, cast and all, they reappeared. Nels, in dark brown slacks, white shirt and a tan cardigan.

"The slacks are kind of baggy," Telly apologized, "because of the cast."

Mia returned the stethoscopes and doctor outfits. "Thanks a million."

"Anytime."

Even through the bronze skin, I knew Telly was blushing.

Over coffee and baklava, we reviewed the facts and plotted the final battle.

The consensus was that Muniz had lost a fortune gambling. To recoup his losses, he attempted to steal his father's sculpture. Then planned to collect the insurance money and, with his connections, sell the 'Flying Porpoise' to a private collector, doubling his money. That Muniz would sell the statue irked Nels more than his beating.

"What a misfit." Nels said. "You both would have adored his father. It's a shame his progeny is such a disgrace."

I looked around the war table. "Now that we are all in agreement. How do you want to proceed?"

"It's simple," Mia said. "We've got to set up a trap and I still think it should be someplace dramatic."

"We're back to the dramatic?" I asked.

"I think your original choice was ideal," Nels smiled. "The Golden Gate Bridge is the definitive location. The tour bus and everything was simply God's way of saying, not yet. Had you succeeded at that juncture, Muniz and his bunch would have gotten off scot-free."

Back to the Bridge? I thought.

Mia rubbed her hands together. "The bridge is super. Let's call Muniz. Tell him where he can find the statue. Call the police and get them ready for the big bust." She paused and took Nels' hand. "You can get your photographer and we'll drop off George and watch the fireworks." She sat back satisfied.

"It is a good plan, but too simple." I scratched my temple. "Mr. Muniz's proven adept at putting two and two together. He'll get suspicious if we offer to drop the Porpoise in his lap."

"Demand a ransom," Mia said.

"An excellent idea," Nels agreed.

"\$10,000 sounds fair."

"\$25,000 sounds fairer," Mia reasoned.

"\$75,000 is easier to divide three ways." I offered.

We joined hands and headed for the door. Telly stopped us at the exit. "The bill for the clothes and the costumes." He handed me an envelope with the Call Bulletin masthead. It was addressed to Mr. Chang. "This has to be from Nels. And you have to be Chang. Whatever the three of you are up to, good luck."

We glanced at each other and back to Telly. "Thanks for everything," we said as one.

Mia wheeled Nels across the street to the same phone bubble I used the first day I called in sick. It seemed like a thousand years ago. But, now I was ready. I pulled out two quarters.

"I started all this. I'll do the talking." I turned to Mia. "Do you have fifty cents?"

Confused, she pointed to the change in my hand.

"I know. I just want to be prepared."

* * *

"Lieutenant," Wisely yelled over the intercom. "Muniz is getting a call," "Put me on it."

* * *

"Francis, find out what's keeping the car?" Convee looked up from the leather desk. She moved two small pieces of paper and dipped the tip of a fountain pen into a bottle of India ink. "Without the Porpoise your new debt is \$9,500,000."

Muniz sunk deeper into the burgundy sofa.

"Now, if we sell everything," she turned her head sideways. Her chin rested on her shoulder. One eye, her left eye, focused on Muniz. "I could be off by a hundred thousand or so, you would still owe \$340,000. Divide that in two and it comes to exactly \$170,000 a leg. You do understand that I can't return to my associates without some form of payment."

Fural lifted a pencil and SNAPPED it in half. He grinned at Muniz. His gold tooth gleamed.

The phone rang. Saved by the bell, Muniz thought. If it's Hourigan I'm going to tell him everything. And then I'll make a run for the door. Hourigan couldn't have pulled off the tail, could he? Muniz rose quickly. "I'll get it," Muniz screamed.

Fural got there first. He lifted the receiver.

*** * ***

I heard the rumble then, "MUNIZ RES....RESIDENT...HOME," I dangled the phone away from my ear. "It's him. The caveman." I tightened my throat and spoke through my nose. "Put Mamma on the line. One of her children wants to speak to him."

"HUH?"

"Put Mamma on the phone, asshole."

"I DON'T NEED---"

"Now! You prick!"

I heard a muffled call to "Mr. Muniz..." There was a verbal exchange, I couldn't hear.

"MR. MUNIZ IS ---" His voice boomed from the bottom of Grand Canyon.

"Do not screw around with me, needle dick! Put your boss on the line." I said sinisterly. I mustered up every tough guy in every movie I had ever seen.

"Who is this?" asked a new voice.

"My name is irrelevant. You've sent amateurs for your daddy's sculpture, you bush-league son-of-a-bitch. You want it?"

"Of course I want it. Who are ---"

"There's been an influx on the price of marble. \$85,000 and it's yours."

Mia and Nels applauded my \$10,000 mark-up.

"I'll call the police."

"Please do. That should prove interesting. No sculpture, no insurance money, no nothing, butt breath."

"I can't get \$85,000 just like ---"

"Borrow it from Donaldson Security. Sell your goddamn yacht. Eunuch nose." My feet danced.

Short, sharp breaths snaked over the line. I felt his fury. "You certainly seen to know quite a bit about my personal affairs." The breaths came quicker. "\$85,000 is a large sum of money---"

"Get it, clown." I slammed down the receiver.

*** * ***

"Who in the hell was that?" Hourigan cried. "Who in the hell is MAMMA?" He hit the intercom button. "Wisely, that all on tape?"

"Yes, Sir. "

"What the hell's going on?"

"Sounds like someone is shaking down Muniz."

* * *

Alan Muniz Jr. clutched the receiver. You don't know it, Muniz thought, fighting an incredible urge to rub his nose. Whoever you are, you probably saved my life. He set down the phone. "Someone," he turned to Andrea, "wants \$85,000 for the statue."

"Who?"

"He didn't volunteer his name."

"Most unfortunate." Convee placed her forefinger across her lip.

"Umm." She stared into the black, empty gap of the stone fireplace. Much like suite 2444, she thought. Ramone would never be placated with a deed to a house or the pink-slip of a car or a yacht. At best, I would be ostracized. For one week, I have lied to the circle. I have lied to myself. The debt must be paid. There must be profit. I must gain entrance. I belong. I have dreams. There are horizons they have never considered. And the power.

"He wants \$85,000 for the statue," Muniz repeated.

"I'll snap his neck." Fural grunted. Fucker called me needle-dick."

"Easy, Francis," Andrea returned from her thoughts.

"He sounded genuine. This didn't sound like a crank call." Muniz looked up hopefully from the sofa. "I may be wrong. I know I was wrong."

"Calm down," Andrea said. "Suppose he does have MY statue. \$85,000's a bargain under the circumstance? I believe you should count your blessings. Alan, you may have been granted a very short reprieve." She ran a long tapered finger nail along the edge of her mouth. "But,...your friends appear to be a bit clumsy."

"My friends? I don't have any friends."

"Alan dearest, I'm hurt." Andrea whirled and threw her hands in the air. "What about Francis and I? We feel a special bond. Don't you?"

"I swear, Andrea, I don't know who that was. I've never spoken to that - --"

Andrea spun and glared. "Don't have friends? You snorkel nosed idiot. That was Jerry Lynch. And somewhere close by is your daddy's friend, Nelvin Andersen. You think Lynch and his pals abducted him from the hospital to take him jogging?"

"Lynch?" Muniz flustered.

Andrea ignored the question. "And they seem most determined to play with professionals. Interesting. Francis, bring in the kitchen phone."

Francis lumbered out of the room.

Andrea tapped her fingers on the back of the sofa four inches from Muniz's throat. "Sit back and relax. They will call back. And when they do....Plead with him, Alan. Beg if you have to. But, strike some sort of compromise. Promise anything. Because," Andrea brushed a strand of blond hair from her eyes, "Mr. Jerry Lynch is history!"

*** * ***

"You were. You are. Wow," Mia kissed me.

"An inspiring performance," Nels shook my hand.

"We'll let him stew for a few minutes." I tried a stern look, but my face broke into a grin. "You should hear him. Mr. Alan Muniz Jr. is pissed off!"

Five minutes later, I redialed. I pointed my fore-finger against my neck. "Now for the Jugular."

* * *

"They're back on, Lieutenant." Wisely called over the intercom.

"Put me on it," he cried. "Get a trace on the incoming call."

* * *

"Hello." Muniz answered.

"I hated to terminate our conversation so abruptly, but another buyer interrupted our call."

"I don't understand."

"Allow me to explain, dipshit. Before the episode in Golden Gate Park, you might have had an exclusive on the statue. But now the price of poker has gone up, the new sale price is \$100,000." I couldn't believe me, I was great.

"You don't understand."

"No, Mr. Muniz, YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND. This isn't a weekend sale. You want bargain basement prices, try Mervyns"

"Please hear me out." He pleaded, but something intangible was missing. My senses went on alert."

"I don't have much time. You see, I owe a large sum of money. The Porpoise was a way of expunging debts ---"

"If this is a confession, save it for a priest. I don't have time for a soap opera. Can you get the \$125,000 or not?"

Mia let out a hoot.

"You said \$85,000. Now it's \$125,000."

"Time is money and unless you have the money, you're wasting my time."

"Okay, okay, I suppose I can pull together \$100,000, then what?"

I heard the markdown, but ignored it. I was having fun. "Then it's yours. You can do what you want with it. Lose it again for all I care."

"It will take some time to ---"

"You don't have any time. None. Small denominations, Muniz. Used currency, no bill over a hundred. And I want a hand written letter from you, stating that the \$100,000 is a reward from the grateful estate, for the return of the 'Flying Porpoise'. I'll call you back."

"Just a mom ---"

I hung up.

*** * ***

"Wisely, did you get a trace on that call."

"It's a public phone, Lieutenant. From somewhere downtown."

"T.J., get two more cars to Muniz's. Wisely, don't move."

Lieutenant Richard Allen Hourigan, inspected a clipper ship off his shelf and adjusted a few sails and the rigging. What the hell happened in Golden Gate Park? Who does Muniz owe money to? Expunge what debts? Muniz is loaded. And where in hell can MunizWhere could anyone get one hundred thousand bucks on a Saturday afternoon? And who the --- Oh, Sweet Jesus. It's LYNCH! Muniz was really covering his ass. He got Gallagher to steal the statue and hide it next to the debris box. Then he paid Lynch and some other clown to make the pick up. But Lynch goes vigilante. He's after more money. What a fiasco, Hourigan smiled. Up yours Muniz. I'll get you and all your piss-ant friends by the short hairs.

*** * ***

Convee took the phone from Muniz and returned the receiver to the cradle.

"Come along, Alan." Andrea tucked herself into a black mink jacket.

"Where are we going?"

"This is a set up, you twit. We're heading for San Francisco. Nels Andersen is in on this and that man has a flair for the dramatic. He choreographed the fiasco at Golden Gate Park. He wants headlines. Big ones. Look out your window."

Muniz peered through the glass across the bay to the Golden Gate Bridge.

"Where would you leave the 'Flying Porpoise'?"

"Andrea, that's a big leap."

Convee turned to Francis Fural trying to pick the skin off a Zinfandel grape.

"Francis?"

The grape dropped to the kitchen floor.

"Where would you make an exchange for the 'Flying Porpoise'?"

Fural picked up the grape and plopped it in his mouth, "The Golden Gate Bridge." He said spitting the seeds on Muniz's kitchen floor.

Andrea smiled at Muniz. "Of course if we are both wrong." She pointed to Muniz's legs.

Muniz wiped his forehead and looked at the front door to escape.

"Lynch said he's going to call back."

"I know," Andrea leered, her blue eyes radiated a cold chill. "And I can hardly wait. Because you have one of the newest phones."

"But?" A light went on in the brain of Muniz's. "Ah ha."

"There may be hope for you yet." Andrea smiled coldly. "Francis, bring the car around to Lecon Street. I don't think anyone will follow you. But if they do, lose them. We'll go out the back way, Alan." She took Muniz's arm and propelled him toward the rear door.

*** * ***

"Gold Fang's taking the Benz, Lieutenant."

"Damn it. I've got two cars on their way. Evans."

"Yes, Sir."

"Stay there. Report any movement by Muniz or Convee. And tell me immediately when Fural returns."

"That's a copy."

XX

"Peter, you were fabulous."

"Bravo. Well done, Peter. Have you considered a career in theater?"

I bowed. "I'll save my encore for the last act. Let's get to the bridge."

We left the phone bubble in celebration, but we fought traffic all the way across the City . By the time we reached the on ramp to Golden Gate Bridge thirty minutes later, our mood was solemn.

None of us spoke. A bank of fog held fast a few miles off the coast. It was still a glorious afternoon. Occasionally, we glanced at each other, though no one violated the silence.

It took us awhile to find a parking. Tourists from every corner of the earth were assembled to enjoy one of the most spectacular creations of mankind.

Mia gently brought our mission back into focus. "Awfully crowded, boss. You sure we want to pull this off in broad daylight?"

Nels leaned over from the back seat. "When you see the Bells of Saint Eiaine's ---"

"Big Balls?" Mia asked.

Nels nodded. "When you see the Neanderthal up close and personal you will be glad you're in a crowd. He's a fire plug. Pugnacious, ugly, vicious and evil."

"Point taken," Mia said seriously. "Okay, gentlemen, our next step?"

I looked back-and-forth between my cohorts in crime. "Nels, I think it's time we brought in the gendarmes. What's the name of the inspector in charge of this case?"

"Lieutenant Hourigan," Nels paused. "Do either of you like sailing?"

"WHAT? Sailing?" Ammonia time again.

Mia twisted peering to the back seat. "Nels, I love sailing. I spent six months in the Caribbean. St. Thomas, Virgin Gorda and St. Barts. Incredible."

"Mia, you'd love my boat, the Sleeping Lady," Nels smiled. "Lieutenant Hourigan's leased it for the past three years. But if you'd like to take her out on the bay I'm sure ---"

"Mia, Nels stop." I was spent, tired and ready for war. "Nels, we're in the final phase of the war. Get Lieutenant Hourigan on the phone."

Nels nodded, sharing my urgency. Mia and I struggled him out of the back seat into his wheelchair and pushed him up to a line of telephone bubbles. Most of them were occupied. There were a lot of people reaching out and touching someone.

I inserted twenty cents and turned to Nels. "Tell Hourigan what we're doing and ask him to get some men out here. Lots of men. A battalion would be nice."

"Ah yes, good afternoon Lieutenant, Nels Andersen here --- Oh no --- No, I am quite all right. Ha. No, well I'm really sorry. Far be it from me to be a cause for alarm. Just a moment." He cupped his hand over the receiver. "They thought I had been kidnapped. They have an All Points Bulletin out for me --- and the two of you."

"Wonderful," We said together.

"Lieutenant, there is about to be a major break in the "Flying Porpoise" case. Will you bring some men....No, I cannot go into specifics right now.....No, I am sorry there isn't enough time. Please bring some men and meet me in the parking lot at the south end of the Golden Gate Bridge..... Thanks, I will explain everything then." He hung up the phone. "Can you imagine that, an All Points Bulletin out for us!"

I could imagine. "Now it's my turn." I slipped past Nels and dialed.

* * *

"WHAT IN GOD'S NAME IS GOING ON?" Hourigan screamed. How the hell does Nels know where the exchange is going to take place. He pushed the intercom. "This is Hourigan. Get every cruiser within five miles of the Golden Gate Bridge to the south parking lot... No lights. No Sirens. And I want a Black and White waiting outside for me."

"Yes, Sir."

"Lieutenant," Wisely called over the intercom. "Someone's calling Muniz."

*** * ***

The Neanderthal answered the phone. I was not greeted with a very gracious 'hello.' I had a distinct feeling that the climate in the Muniz's household was not a very happy one. Which made me very happy. "Put Muniz on the phone."

"I'll get him." There was no nonsense now.

There was an odd hum in the background. Maybe they're putting a lock on this call, I thought. So what. I am going to tell them where we are anyway.

I'm not an expert on human behavior. I squeaked through Psych 1A. But from the tone of Muniz's voice, I knew I was no longer talking to a broken, defeated man. They had concocted some sort of plan. I hoped our brew was stronger.

"Mr. Muniz, do you have a package for me?"

"Look, I've ---"

"Do you have the cash or not?"

"Yes, I have the money." I heard him mutter something after he said money, but I didn't pursue it.

He must be in the kitchen, I thought. There was a dishwasher running in the background. "Are you ready to make an exchange?"

"I'm ready." There was that confident tone again.

Something was wrong. I could feel it. I turned to Nels, sticking the receiver up against my chest.

"Where does Muniz live?"

"In Oakland."

"That's right," I said, recalling the financial sheet Snoop had on the screen. "I just want to be sure that the police get here before they do."

"Hello? Hello? Are you still there?" Muniz didn't sound so cocky now.

"Yeah, still here. You have exactly one hour to meet me at the statue of Joseph Strauss at the south end of the Golden Gate Bridge."

"Are you out of your mind? In broad daylight?"

"All the better to see you with, my dear. Exactly one hour."

*** * ***

"Jesus Christ! Nels was right," Hourigan bolted from his office.

Wisely intercepted him at the top of the stairs.

"You're supposed to be manning the phones," he said.

"I've got that covered." She tapped a toe on the tiled floor. "I've put a lot of effort into this."

"I should have stayed in Texas....Come on." He raced down the stairs two at a time.

"Sir?" Wisely yelled as she followed. "That last Muniz call was---"

Hourigan flew out the door.

*** * ***

"Are you sure they'll come?" Mia asked.

"I'm sure." I said with a certainty I didn't quite feel. Nels made a final call to the Call Bulletin for a photographer. "Yes. Yes. The south parking lot --and hurry." He replaced the receiver. "This is marvelous."

We wheeled him back to the car. The entire United Nations had gathered at the bridge to enjoy a beautiful view on a spectacular day. People were everywhere. Two hang gliders hovered over the South Tower. The Slice Blimp drifted above Angel Island. Only the snap of camera shutters interrupted the tranquility.

"Okay, we're all set. Nels, we'll get you and George next to the statue. Mia and I will hide in the car --- You don't suppose the police will come in here lights flashing and Sirens blasting?"

"Hourigan is a professional," Nels said. "We don't worry about him."

Nels insisted on carrying George to his temporary resting place. It took four minutes to find a couple of 2x4's. I laid them across the arms of the wheelchair, then the three of us set the Porpoise on top of the boards.

"Sure beats using a hand truck," She said as, we rolled Nels across the lot to the statue of Joseph Strauss.

A teacher herded her kindergartner class up the path to the bridge's pedestrian walk-way. A troop of Boy Scouts trooped down from the opposite direction. I wanted ask Mia why she hated the Boy Scouts, but decided to put that question on hold.

We waited for several moments while two tourists took pictures of each other next to the figure of Joseph Strauss.

"Ready?"

Nels and Mia nodded. I bent over and whisked off the bedspread from George. I heard a terrible gasp behind me and spun around. The Neanderthal with the gold tooth had Mia's head in a Full Nelson. Slowly he put her feet back on the ground.

"One word, asshole, and I'll snap her neck like a twig."

Nels inhaled.

I was mute.

To the caveman's left stood a man in a dove-grey suit. On his right stood the blond from the Golden Gate Park encounter in a dazzling white sheath.

The blond spoke first. "Well, well, our petty blackmailers seem to be caught without any stamps." Bits of spittle flew from her mouth. Her cold blue eyes pierced through me.

"Alan, are you out of your mind?" Nels blurted.

"Sorry, Nels," the man in the dove-grey suit shrugged. "I had no choice."

Alan Muniz Jr., I concluded, standing there like the all-time simpleton, while Mia dangled in the V of King Kong's arm. How had they gotten here so fast? Rocket ships aren't allowed to land by the Golden Gate Bridge.

"Andrea Convee," the blond hissed the introduction. "You appear amazed at our prompt response to your rather demanding call, Mr. Lynch."

No wonder I'd been outsmarted. She wasn't just a crook, she was a mind reader.

"Who's Lynch?" Nels whispered, at my side.

Convee ignored him. "Cellular phones are such a convenience. And, the one in Muniz's car is very --- functional."

"I guess our \$100,000 deal's off?" I was trying to stall and that was the best I could come up with. Don't be a jackass, Peter. Think.

"Mr. Lynch, don't insult my intelligence. Make no further attempts to delay me. I'm quite certain you've planned some sort of reception in our behalf. Our negotiations are complete. Francis," she gestured to the bald headed monster. "Give the bitch to Muniz and get the statue."

'Francis,' I couldn't believe it. Thug or Hulk maybe, but what parent would name a thing like that, 'Francis?'

Kong flung Mia to Muniz.

ERROR Number 1.

Muniz never heard the crowd roar, but he'd just stepped into the Roman Coliseum. The lone Christian against 5,000 lionesses. Each with long black manes and little white flecks in their dark eyes. And, each and everyone named Mia.

She cocked her right leg and PUNTED the shin of Alan Muniz Jr. into the next county. He screamed and grabbed his leg.

ERROR number 2.

Mia followed her kick with a tremendous left hook to his chin. The SCRUNCH was wonderful.

Behind me I heard another scream of pain. Kong had the Porpoise cradled in both arms. Following Mia's lead, Nels dumped the boards and rolled his wheelchair on to Kong's right foot. Francis couldn't extricate himself. Nels pummeled him at will.

"DON'T DROP THE STATUE," Convee yelled behind me.

"I'M GOING TO KILL YOU," Kong bellowed. He bent over and set the statue on the ground.

ERROR number 3.

Nels lifted himself high off the chair and came down with a vicious rabbit chop to the back of the monster's neck. Francis fell face down into the gravel path.

I turned to Convee. I didn't even see the punch that dropped me. Four years of combat training gone to hell. I was furious. I grabbed her leg as she

tried to step over me. She screamed and kicked me in the throat. I gasped for air.

"Call me BITCH!" Mia hurdled over my body as I writhed in pain. I heard a tremendous CRACK as Mia's fist smacked into Convee's nose. Andrea fell to one knee. Mia grabbed two fists of blond hair and began to spin. Andrea was pulled back to her feet. Her arms flailed as she attempted to get her balance. Mia spun faster. Andrea's legs churned as she tried to keep up with Mia's circular motion. Around and around Mia spun. Andrea's feet came off the ground. Mia twirled faster, then let go. Andrea glided through the air and smashed into the statue of Joseph Strauss.

Muniz plowed into my side as I tried to stand. I made a perfect military roll back to my feet. "MY TURN," I screamed. Then froze.

Kong had Nels by the throat. His fist cocked to blast Nels in the face. Muniz leaped on Kong's back and held his arm. "Leave him alone," Muniz yelled.

Kong looked over his shoulder. "I should have---" He kicked the wheelchair into the parking lot and ripped Muniz from his shoulder like a bug and tossed him into the air. His head smacked against the nose of the 'Flying Porpoise'. His mouth flew open. He made an idiotic grin. His eyes rolled and closed.

"Want some, asshole?" Kong lumbered toward me. To hell with the Rules of Queensbury, I thought. I seized his tie with my left hand and whacked him with a right. He grinned. I hit with a left and right to the mid-section.

"That's it?" He grinned. "Best you've got?"

I was losing confidence. He grabbed my neck and lifted me off the ground.

ERROR number 4.

Never give the enemy the higher ground. I locked my fingers into a double fist and hit him on the bridge of his nose. The CRACK was music. He kept his grip on my neck and we crumbled to a heap on the ground.

Above me, somewhere, I heard Mia yelling 'FIRE! FIRE!' In an instant the ape and I were covered by blue uniforms.

It took me several moments to extract myself from the pile of bodies. Boy Scouts were everywhere. Mia dusted off her hands. Convee lay limp at the foot of the Joseph Strauss, with parts of her scalp exposed. Muniz lay next to George, unconscious. Kong must have had thirty kids on him. But Nels had disappeared.

"Where the hell ---?" To my left, I saw Nels rolling his wheelchair up the long concrete incline away from the scene. Why was he running away?

Fifty feet up the hill, he spun around. His eye caught mine.

"Tally-Ho! Peter!" He aimed down the grade and started spinning the wheels of the chair as fast as he could. His hair flew. The spokes blurred as his momentum increased. I finally saw his target. One of Kong's tree stump legs dangled out from the sea of Boy Scouts, completely exposed. Two wheels and all two hundred and ninety-seven pounds of Nels Andersen hit the thigh and shin bones simultaneously. The "SNAPS!" could be heard in Los Angeles. Kong's wail filled the parking lot. Nels squealed in triumph.

The police arrived on cue. Late.

"Let's get out of here," I grabbed Mia and slipped into the gathering crowd. We stopped near the rear to watch the arrests being made.

Lieutenant Hourigan lifted Muniz by the back of his jacket. Muniz struggled pleading. "I tried to help. They were going to kill me." His eyes darted from face to face in the ever increasing throng. "Ask the---"

"Duck. He's looking for us," I whispered to Mia. We squatted as his eyes passed over the crowd.

"I did try to help."

Hourigan put handcuffs around his wrists. "Of course you did, Mr. Muniz."

"Ask Nels Andersen," Muniz gasped as Nels rolled up to Lieutenant Hourigan. "Didn't I try---" Muniz stiffened. With his hands cuffed behind his back, he leaned forward awkwardly. His nose twitched. He inched closer to Nels. Nels rolled back. Muniz pursued, head bent and buried his nose in Nels' neck.

"What the ---?" Nels tried to get away.

Muniz screamed with delight. "ENGLISH LEATHER! ENGLISH LEATHER COLOGNE." He hopped, skipped and fell into Hourigan's chest. He ran his nose up the lapel of Hourigan's sport coat. "Do you live on a boat?"

Hourigan nodded.

"I CAN SMELL!" Muniz lifted his head to the sky. His nostrils flared. He bobbed from side to side sniffing the air. "I CAN SMELL! I CAN COOK! I AM WHOLE!"

"I should have stayed in Texas," Hourigan sighed as T.J., Kurpita and Wisely joined him. "T.J., call for an ambulance. Then you and Kurpita get Fural." Hourigan pointed to Kong. "Wisely, put the cuffs on Convee," he turned to the statue of Joseph Strauss. "What the hell?"

Mia and I spun. Andrea Convee had disappeared.

"She was right there." Muniz cried. "She was the one ---"

"Got her, Lieutenant," Wisely shouted, tearing up the incline.

"There she is," Mia poked my side.

Convee was forty feet away, just topping the rise. Wisely covered the distance in three seconds flat. Head bent she caught Convee in the lower spine.

Convee crumbled. In two swift motions, Wisely pulled Convee's arms behind her back and snapped on the cuffs.

"Beautiful day for sailing, Lieutenant," Wisely smiled as she returned with Andrea Convee in tow.

"It should only take a couple of hours to book this group," Hourigan looked out across the Bay. "A sunset dinner on board, Officer Wisely?"

A Call Bulletin staff car pulled into the lot. Nels coerced two bulky police officers to reposition George on the boards of his wheelchair. Mia and I watched from a distance as Nels posed. "Make sure the Bridge is in the back ground," he insisted. "Please take one more for Brenda."

"He has a flair for the dramatic, don't you think?" Mia placed her arm through mine.

We got into the car.

"How's about a kiss, Moll?"

"First things first." She reached into her purse and took out her checkbook. I started the car. I watched as she wrote Donation on the top of a blank check. Payable to the Boy Scouts of America. I never saw the amount, though, I'm sure it was generous. The kiss that followed certainly was.

* * *

Ramone Cosette sneered through the heavily tinted glass of the black Cadillac Brougham sedan as the last patrol car drove out of the parking lot. He adjusted the cane between his legs and covered the brass, lion-paw head piece with his hand. He glared at the other two men in the back of the car.

"Women," he spat. "They are inept. They are good for one thing and one thing only."

Albert Sinorae glared from the seat opposite. "The debt will be paid."

"Ha. The whore is going to prison. That slut will---"

Mikeal Glazunov put his hand on top of Cosette's. "Gently, Ramone."

Alberto Sinorae reached into his coat and took out a small metal tube.

Cosette brought his face close to Glazunov. "Gently? You want peace? There will be no payment. The 'Flying Porpoise' is cursed. And that bitch of a--"

A PINCH OF METAL. A squeak interrupted his tirade. He turned and watched as Sinorae finished twisting a silencer on to the muzzle of a 9 millimeter Beretta. "Andrea Convee....My beloved daughter.... Her debt and my debt will be paid to this circle," Sinorae said. "But the only way to extinguish a curse." He pointed the barrel at Cosette's forehead. "Is to kill it." He squeezed the trigger.

*** * ***

I drove back to my place. A change of clothes was in order and with Jerry leaving for Seattle, I was in the market for a new roommate. Female, preferably, with small white flecks in her eyes.

Proudly, I threw open the door to the condo. Mia stared in dismay. "Is this how you live?"

I looked over her shoulder. The condo looked like the aftermath of a hurricane, volcanic eruption and earthquake.

"Muniz and his pals," I said stepping through the rubble into the kitchen. I pointed to table. "That's where George was sitting when I picked up the paper last Sunday."

"Were you expecting a message?"

"No. Why?"

"There's a note on the table." She handed me a sheet of lined paper.

"It's Jerry's handwriting."

Aloud, we read it together.

Dear Roomy,

**What have you done to my home? Party? And where
did you sleep last night? Sinner! WHAT A WEEK I'VE
HAD. YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE!! Whew. I am
EXHAUSTED.**

**Too my exciting things have happened to old Jer. Wait
'til you hear. You'll flip. Did you find the lottery
tickets???? Heard we won. Ha Ha. Sssssh keep a lid on
it, please --- Met a friendly stew on the flight back.**

What a week! Jer.

**P.S. Where's my sequined bed
spread?**

P.P.S. What did you do with George??

I wanted to show him off.

**I calmly picked up a broom, pulled out two straws and hid them in my
fist. "Short straw gets Jerry first."**

Mia reached out.

Tucker Spolter