



The Philippine Chase

by
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Prologue

The President of the Philippines placed his palms on the top of his desk and rose to face the man who dared argue with him.

"You say it was General Ver?" he angrily asked. "How could you possibly consider General Ver? He has been my best friend. When we were just children we fought the Japanese together. After the war we both supported the new democracy."

He paused for breath. His once full and wavy black hair had long ago been replaced by a graying sparseness that failed to conceal his blood pressure. Each pulse bulged his temple arteries as he struggled with his self-control.

"And when the HUKs came," he continued the defense of his friend. "We fought them together. When it came time to save the country by forming the new government, who did he support?"

He stopped his tirade. He returned to his seat. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his forehead. He felt harried. He was tired and worn. His years in command of his government were taking its toll. Desperation was often becoming his only solace these recent years.

For several minutes nothing was heard but the air conditioner groaning its constant struggle against the sweltering Manila summer.

"My...." he began anew, then stopped. He peered at the man who was causing his anger. His reason again took charge. He changed his tone. "When I entered politics I told General Ver that he would be the best man to take over the government, that he was the strongest, the best leader. The people knew his name, they knew his love for his country, their country. They were his people."

Again he paused, this time gazing out the palace window that overlooked his garden, the prize of his idle hours. He contemplated the garden, thought about his blood pressure, and forced himself to gain control of his anger.

"But General Ver wouldn't have it," he continued, now more confined in his passion. "He said I was the politician. I had to be the one for the people to lean on because I was the one with the ability to deal with the politicians."

His gaze turned to his ornately carved teak desk. He focused on the delicately carved gold and ivory mini-saber letter opener neatly placed beside his desk pad. It was always on the desk in front of him. It was a reminder. He picked it up. He examined it. He examined the many memories

emotionally etched across the blade. It was a memento from the same general who was now in question.

He placed the letter opener down and concentrated on the man confronting him, who was sitting so casually in the chair facing his desk.

Is that a smirk, he asked himself. Is there a touch of contempt in that expression? He suddenly had a strong dislike for the ambitions of this man. He nearly glared at him before continuing. "The General would never cross me," he said. "He would never do anything as stupendously idiotic as that which you claim."

The man who argued with the President, the only man with enough power to argue with him, was E. Aguinaldo Vallerga. He was the Chief Counsel, and also the head of the Central Intelligence Services, the much feared Philippine P.I.S. And his perseverance was undaunted. He had tasted the blood of success. "But the people are asking..." he began, sure of himself. Then he paused. He rethought his approach, and forced himself to be more conciliatory. Such a manner was needed when the President got angry. It was his ability to read his President that enabled him to rise to his position of power.

"Yes. That is true," Vallerga continued at length. "Everything you said is true. It all happened with you and the General. You and he are dedicated to the people and the Philippines. The people were all that you two considered." He changed his position in his chair, using the interlude to carefully consider his next words. "But that was over forty years ago. You were both young men. You were idealistic." He paused again. "But the people of that time are not the people of this time. This is 1983. The people of this time have been pampered, spoiled by the fruits of democracy, spoiled by the fruits of the seeds you planted, spoiled by being allowed to question their government. They have been spoiled by the rights and freedoms you have guaranteed them."

The President glared. "And you would prefer they were not given such a golden apple as freedom of choice?" His expression was full of sarcasm, dangerous in its tone.

Vallerga got out of his chair and walked to the window to gaze at the President's flower garden. He had to allow the President a few minutes to relax, to regain control. He took the minutes to marvel at the beds of black roses, then at length, turned to continue his thrust. "No," he said. "I would not argue with your wisdom on that matter. But the people of this time are young. They don't understand what you and the General have done for them. They have no such memories. They know the assassination was nothing less than premeditated murder and they are asking why you have not come forth with an inquiry. 'Why hasn't the President held an open inquiry to prove General Ver was not associated with the assassination of Benigno Aquino?' they ask. They answer that the only way you can prove that he, and you by way of ordering him, weren't involved, is for you to put him in front of the courts where he can prove his innocence."

"He is innocent!" the President asserted.

Vallerga glanced at his President. Did he detect a weakness in the facade of confidence? "You and I know that," he continued. "But the people do not."

"I cannot ask that of my friend," the President responded. His resolve was not so strong, now. It never was lastingly strong before such a persistent onslaught from his powerful counselor. He often wished he had not appointed Vallerga to such a position, for it included unrestricted access to the Presidency. That access taught Vallerga the methods used in controlling the country, methods that only the President should know.

In the privacy of his own quarters he would confide to his wife that Vallerga knows how to use such delicate information. "It is my fear," he had said, "that someday Vallerga will use that information for his own greed instead of for the good of the country. I'm sure he will try to use it against me. I must keep a sharper eye on him." And now Vallerga was coming close to justifying that fear.

"As always," the President resumed in a relenting tone. "Your reasoning has proven itself." He was tiring of the argument. He wanted to end it without conceding the point. "Yes," he added. "I will speak to General Ver, but I will speak to him in private. I will do this before I'll give any consideration to having an open inquiry. I owe him that."

Vallerga smiled with satisfaction. "And then you will announce an open inquiry?" he asked.

"Then I might have an open inquiry," the President corrected. He decided he would let Vallerga gloat over this slightest of victories. To do so wouldn't cause any harm.

He later wondered if he had made the right choice.

Chapter One

It was one week before the argument between President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines and his Chief Counsel, that Penn Gwinn drove south on Highway 101 from San Rafael, California, heading for San Francisco. He was on his way to work another case, one that required an early evening surveillance.

The late afternoon's sun setting over nearby Mount Tamalpais glared through his car's windshield. He squinted his blue eyes, and shifted his weight in defense of the seat belt. He hated seat belts. In his decades of driving in city traffic he hadn't yet needed the thing, and he didn't expect he would need it in the future. The only reason he fastened it in the first place was because he had to pass a cruising Highway Patrol car several minutes earlier. When he did, the patrolman glanced at him, checking his speed and noting the belt's use.

Penn wasn't speeding - the cop was traveling slower than the normal pace - but had the belt not been fastened, the cop would have had a reason for making a traffic stop. An improperly fastened seat belt citation carried a thirty-dollar fine, and Penn didn't have thirty dollars to waste. Besides, being stopped by a cop was the last thing he wanted that afternoon.

Once past the patrolman, he unfastened the belt, and returned his thoughts to his Great American Detective Novel. He fancied himself a writer. He knew he had the material for such a great work, for the definitive novel on the realities of being a Private Investigator, and his mental writing kept his mind active. Some times he used a portable tape recorder to take notes.

"Viewed from the Marin Headlands," he recorded, "the sliver of summer fog pierced the city's peaks and valleys, buildings and alleys."

He considered the phrase. He didn't like it, but went on, thinking he could always rewrite.

"Inside the city the fog covered the night. Its quieting dampness muted the music of the streets, transforming it to a meaningless, mindless cacophony. It changed one's mood, turning calm reverie to alert anxiety. A cat's keenness would be needed this night."

He paused, and glanced into his rear view mirror to check on the cop, more in need to let

his phrases settle than in concern with getting a ticket. The black and white cruiser was a number of cars behind, no longer a worry, so he played the tape, and intently listened. He wasn't very impressed by what he heard.

He rewound the tape and tossed the recorder on the seat. He wiped his palm over what was left of his close cropped blond hair, subconsciously noting the progress of inevitable male pattern baldness, and expressed his frustration with his writing in a typically male manner: He stomped down on the gas pedal. His 1978 Monte Carlo with an overpowered 454 cubic inch Pontiac Trans-Am engine lunged forward, as though it was anxious to be set free, longing to be free of the hobbles of speed limits. That's why he affectionately called it the Red Beast.

After rechecking the rear view mirror, he found only one thing of interest. It was an all black Ford sedan closing on him. He scrutinized it, assuring himself it was merely a tail-gater and not an unmarked police car. After all, by that time he was going well over 70 mph.

Several minutes later, when he entered the Waldo Tunnel at the top of the grade, he again glanced in his mirror. The black Ford was still behind him. The driver was staying right on his bumper, apparently not the least bit interested in passing. What the hell's on that nut's mind, he asked himself as the Ford kept pace with him through the tunnel.

Then, as if the driver had a sudden change of mind, the Ford vaulted ahead, passing on the downhill curve out of the tunnel. It moved quickly in and out of traffic, not slowing even when it got into the speed control lanes of the Golden Gate Bridge.

At first Penn thought the car might have been following him, though he wouldn't have been able to reason why anyone would want to, but the driver hadn't glanced over while passing. "It must be the paranoia of the profession," he reconciled, aloud. "The guy probably didn't know what he was doing. Most of the drivers in this county are half brained, anyway."

As he approached the bridge, he let the concept of being half-brained float around in his mind. It bounced, rattled, and finally landed on aspects of his present case. He tried analyzing the relevant facts as he drove onto the Golden Gate Bridge, but found he couldn't concentrate. The black Ford had tripped the wire of his anxieties.

What's wrong with you, he asked himself. He felt jumpy, nervous, and he couldn't understand why. This is just another domestic case, he argued. Isn't it? It's nothing to get excited about. And that black Ford means nothing.

The anxiety remained, though, and it was heightened when he recalled the recent incident involving he and partner, PZ. The two of them had emerged from the client's office after getting this particular case. They were both wondering how they were going to spend their half of the meager \$500 retainer, when, just as they stepped off the curb, a car raced past, nearly running over them. That car had been an all black Ford, too.

Penn was in a mid-span lane change in the middle of the bridge when a thunderous blast from beside his ear jolted his thoughts. It scattered them and replaced them with adrenaline filled survival instincts. "God damn fog horn!" he shouted. "Only a half brained engineer would design a channel marking system on a bridge with a horn next to the traffic lanes."

He was surprised by how his hands trembled. It took another quarter of the bridge span before he regained his composure. "PZ and I must have been half brained to take this case in the first place."

He was beginning to wish they had turned the case down. He was wishing that, because

he particularly didn't like meddling around in domestic cases, in someone's dirty underwear. The results always stunk. Hadn't he and PZ planned to limit their work to insurance claims investigations? Hadn't they planned to stay in a field where they knew they would get paid for their work at a fair price, rather than with a measly retainer up front and a fight for the final payment after the case was over?

It was always a fight for the money on a domestic case. After all the information the investigator worked hard as hell to collect is amassed, and after all the truths are worked out and are reported to the client, the client invariably doesn't want to pay for it. Clients don't want to know the truth. The truth makes them angry, and they refuse to pay the bill.

At least with insurance work there's no worry about the client's checks taking the rubber leap at the bank like most domestic client's checks do, he said, arguing with himself. Even like most attorneys' checks do on domestic cases, he added to his argument.

He glanced behind him to change lanes as he neared the end of the bridge.

Domestics are always a rat race, he returned to his argument, secure in his lane change. But, I guess, when one has to eat, half of \$500 on a domestic is better than no money at all, pride or not.

That was the one flaw in the business plan of the Flyin' Penguin Detective Agency. Even insurance companies run out of cases to assign, at times. When that happened it was back to the telephones and solicitation calls, even to attorneys, for business. He hated doing that, but he had to admit its necessity.

It was just such a solicitation call that developed the lead on this particular client. It was a referral from one of the less reliable attorneys they knew. This client, though, seemed to have money, and his check probably won't bounce; a rationalization Penn had used when taking the case. This client is a moderately successful stockbroker. Maybe things would be different this time.

At the San Francisco end of the Golden Gate Bridge, his thoughts were interrupted by the toll-taker. The female money-grabber frowned her impatience while Penn rummaged through his pockets to retrieve the requisite homage to the Bridge Gods, those money mongers otherwise known as the Golden Gate Bridge District Board of Trustees.

He ignored the drivers lined up behind him, but he did notice a black Ford that entered the tollbooth beside him. That can't be the same Ford that passed me in the tunnel, he mused. He kept his eye on it anyway, as he pulled away from the toll booth, and noted there were two men in it.

No, he continued his argument. It can't be the same car. There weren't two men in the other one. At least I don't think there were.

Half a mile from the toll booth he forced the black Ford from his mind, and resumed his thoughts on the present case, on where he was going.

He took the 19th Avenue off ramp, and entered the residential area off California Street. He parked his well-worn Red Beast near a very exclusive residence in the Presidio Terrace area by the designated starting time of 6:00 p.m.

After settling in for the dullest part of private investigating, the long hours of surveillance part, he tried to justify his efforts once again with thoughts of his half of the meager retainer still burning a hole in his pocket. Maybe he would buy Lara something nice, for a change, he mused. She deserves it for putting up with him.

He rolled down his car window to let in the damp evening air, hoping it would keep him from nodding off, and leaned back to wait for the very errant wife of the very rich stockbroker client to make her appearance. She was expected to engage in another one of her tete-a-tetes on this particular evening.

By 9:00 p.m. the city's fog was even heavier, and Penn felt his anxiety inexplicably building. A sense of foreboding came over him. He took a deep breath and held the damp air in his lungs long enough to feel the rush effect of the over oxygenation. He let the air out slowly and controlled, in a manner learned in his Ju Jitsu martial arts classes.

"Something feels awkward, almost feels like a bad omen," he said, listening to his voice in the stillness broken only by the distant siren wailing through the fog.

After several more minutes momentous silence, footsteps clicked on the sidewalk somewhere behind the car. He perked up, and with adrenaline expanded thoughts, quickly glanced in his rear view mirror. He saw nothing disturbing, nothing he recognized as danger. Sound carries a long way in the fog, he reminded himself as he forced himself to relax.

Then came the sound next to his ear. "Click, click," it went, and it sent chills down his spine.

This was a sound he recognized, and it was definitely disturbing. It was the sound made by a revolver when the hammer is pulled back, when the chamber rotates to align another round with the firing pin. It's the last sound a person hears before the explosion of the bullet. Provided, of course, that the explosion is heard. If it is, then either the gun wasn't pointed at you when it went off, or the person who did the pointing wasn't very good at it.

Penn wondered if the person doing this pointing was good at it, but his doubts were dispelled when he felt the cold end of the barrel thrust into his ear. It felt like a very big barrel, and it felt like the pointer was undoubtedly good at what he was doing.

"One move," rasped a gravelly voice with a strange accent, "and it will be your last."

Jesus! Right out of Hollywood, Penn thought. Who the hell is this joker? He didn't move, though. He had played this game before. He knew how dangerous it was. He also knew how much more dangerous it could be when played by someone who didn't know the rules, or was nervous. He wondered if this joker knew the rules, or was nervous.

Being careful not to show any head movement, Penn moved his eyes to glance in his side view mirror. He saw the gun, and he saw the hand that held it, which he noted, was darker than what a Caucasian's hand would be. He also noted it was shaking nervously. That was a bad sign. Nervous hands mean nervous people, and nervous people with guns usually meant death.

"Put your hands in the air," Gravel Voice ordered.

Another thing Penn noted was the speaker wasn't familiar with the vowel sounds of the English language, but that tidbit of information was lost in the situation, in the stress of having to consider self-preservation.

"Do you know where the hell you are?" he responded at length. "Some of the most influential people in town live in this district. San Francisco's Finest aren't going to be happy with you pulling a stickup around here, you know."

"I know where I am. What I don't know is what you're doing here," Gravel Voice said, at the same time moving the gun back from Penn's ear ever so slightly.

Penn watched the man's hand. The gun barrel was still only inches away from his ear. Not

quite far enough, he decided.

"I'm waiting," Gravel Voice persisted. "I don't like waiting." He stood erect and pulled the gun back a little bit farther.

"Yeah? I don't like talking with someone who sticks a gun in my ear," Penn responded. He knew he was taking a chance, but since the guy hadn't yet pulled the trigger, he felt he was safe until he answered the question. He decided he wasn't going to answer the question.

"Smart ass, ain't you?" Gravel Voice rasped. "Well, Smarts, you got ten seconds left for answering."

"Then what?" Penn quipped, striving for more time, hoping the man would move the gun a little farther away.

The front porch light of the nearby house came on. At the same time another siren wailed nearby, louder than the first.

Gravel Voice was distracted.

The distraction was what Penn needed. He pulled up on the door handle. With all his might, he shoved the car door open.

Gravel Voice was standing in the least appropriate position to protect himself. The outside door handle caught him between the legs at gender height. He grabbed himself in pain, and dropped the gun. It clattered across the pavement, landing in the gutter.

Penn stepped out of his car just as another car turned on its headlights and roared up to stop beside Gravel Voice, who was now doubled over and groaning. He jumped back in his car for safety, and Gravel Voice scrambled into the passenger side of the other car, to be carried away at high speed.

Penn stared at the other car. He studied it with rising disbelief. It was a black Ford. It was the same black Ford that pulled beside him in the bridge toll booth.

Penn stared at the car until it was out of view. Then, with a sense of dismay, he got out of his car, crossed the street, and retrieved the pistol. He examined it as he got back into his own car, found nothing unusual about it, and tossed it into his glove compartment for later consideration. He then retrieved his thermos, hoping a cup of black coffee would help him sort out this puzzle.

As the caffeine from the first cup of the stuff hit his nervous system, he found he wasn't concentrating on the puzzle. Instead, he was anxiously watching the street behind to see if the Ford returned. After finishing his third cup, he decided that unless the stockbroker's wife did something within minutes, he would lose his appetite for an urbane domestic case that evening.

Ten more minutes passed without incident, and Penn started the engine of the Red Beast. He was unmindful of the noise the whirring starter made, piercing the foggy damp quiet, and put the car in gear. He was ready to leave when the outside lights of the client's overbearing and overly ostentatious house came on. Then the garage door opened.

Suddenly there she was! Ms. \$, backing down the driveway in her bright red Mercedes convertible. The top was up to protect her from the dampness of the air, but it still gave the impression of a carefree driver.

Penn liked her style, but it wasn't long before he began disliking her driving. He gently eased down on the cat's throttle, trying to avoid peeling rubber and making a lot of noise, but even so, the overpowered machine shot forward as though being shot out of a cannon. He decided that was a good thing, because Ms. \$ was already approaching the first corner at the end of the block,

well on her way towards California Street.

Ms. \$ pushed her Mercedes to its maximum, and Penn found it difficult to keep a discreet distance behind her to avoid detection, yet maintain a tail. He found it even harder to follow her in the smooth and unobtrusive manner expected of an experienced sleuth while in bustling evening traffic.

It was even harder for the driver of the black Ford who followed Penn. He avoided detection only because Penn was intent on the fleeing Mercedes.

Ms. \$ turned onto California Street and headed downtown, her tires squealing across the rough asphalt.

By the time Penn arrived at the corner, she was already approaching the next intersection, at Arguello Street, a block ahead. He hoped to catch her at the light, but it didn't turn to yellow and then red until his arrival, after she sped through the intersection.

Generally, when a detective faced such a situation at a lighted intersection, he would make a casual right turn, a U-turn, then another right turn to continue down the street. In effect, he would be going through the red light without actually going through it. The move is just as illegal as running the red light, but sometimes it went unnoticed by patrolling cops.

This time, however, such a move wasn't possible. One of the city's finest was watching the intersection from a patrol car parked at the nearby Union 76 Station.

"Why the hell aren't you out catching those guys in that black Ford, like you're supposed to?" Penn shouted at the cop in his frustration. He was thankful the car windows were rolled up. At the same time, he hoped the cop hadn't paid too much attention to the way he slid part way into the intersection, reluctantly stopping at the last second on the dew dampened street.

He waited for the light to change, and reconciled that the time lost at this light would surely be gained at the next light, where Ms. \$ would surely have to stop. After all, isn't that the way it is in the movies?

However, the way of the movies wasn't the way of life that evening. The realities were uncooperative traffic lights. The last he saw of the Mercedes were its two tail-lights passing over the hill several blocks ahead of him, merging with the glowing fog, as the signal turned green. At the next intersection he was forced to stop again, still in sight of the cop at the gas station one block behind him.

"Damn it!" he swore. "Some P.I. you are! You can't even tail someone anymore! Why don't you get a decent job? Something you can handle! Maybe you should try driving a bulldozer for a living, or something!"

The light finally changed to green.

"Well, hell," Penn said to himself, slowly starting across the intersection in respect for the cop still watching from the corner station, "you ought to be smart enough to figure this one out." He glanced back at the cop once more for assurance. "Let's see," he continued, "according to the detective manuals, the next step is to try guessing the subject's destination."

So he tried.

She was heading downtown. She was dressed in a fur coat that was probably covering an evening dress, and she was in a hurry. Conclusions? She was going downtown to meet someone.

"Brilliant! How really brilliant!" he castigated himself. "That was obvious when I started." He struggled with his lack of imagination. "How about some real creative thinking for a change,

okay?"

"So, her direction of travel along California Street would take her up Nob Hill past the Mark Hopkins Hotel, possibly for the Top of the Mark cocktail lounge, or the Tonga Room across the street at the Fairmont Hotel. Or, if she turned left at Van Ness Avenue she could be heading for Fisherman's Wharf. Or, if she turned right, she could be heading for the Marion Davies Symphony Hall, or maybe to the Opera House, or downtown to the Top of the Hyatt Regency's rotating lounge, or to the less conventional places along Columbus Avenue and the North Beach area, or to the, or... Right! Anywhere in the city!" He pounded on the steering wheel in disgust.

"But wait a minute!" he argued with himself. "At this hour she wouldn't be going to a concert, and it isn't the opera season. The wharf probably isn't her style; too touristy. It doesn't possess the exquisite she would expect from a tete-a-tete, as her husband would say." He was pleased with his argument. "So? How about the major hotels, after all? Maybe one nearby."

The flood of possibilities cascaded down the canyons of his consciousness as he recklessly increased his transportation up California Street to the top of Nob Hill, slipping and sliding every time he straddled the cable car tracks.

He hurriedly passed a cable car on the wrong side through an intersection, and hoped there weren't any pseudo-cop Municipal Railway Inspectors on board to report his antics.

As he approached the Mark Hopkins hotel he had time for one quick glance at the valet parking area. His luck had returned. There was the red Mercedes, and there was Ms. \$! The car was parked at the Valet Parking stand, and she was striding across the brick paved parking lot toward the hotel entrance.

He had to travel a quarter block down the other side of the hill from the hotel before he could intimidate his way through a hurried four wheel sliding U-turn across four traffic lanes to return to the hotel, but eventually he ended up behind the Mercedes. He slid to a stop in front of a red coated college student parking attendant, where a small miscalculation in his depth perception caused the front bumper of the Beast to become unexpectedly familiar with the rear bumper of Ms. \$'s snobbish status symbol.

The slight clunk of bumping bumpers was barely heard, though, and the Beast had no more than stopped when Penn jumped out waiving a ten-dollar bill. "Take this," he shouted to the attendant, tossing the bill towards him while jogging towards the blue tiled hotel entrance. "There's another ten in it if you promise to have my car ready at a moment's call when I come out."

"Yes, Sir," the attendant responded, catching the bill on the fly.

The Mark Hopkins Hotel is on the southeast corner of California Street and Mason Street, on top of Nob Hill, across the intersection from the other equally famous classy hotel, the Fairmont. Both hotels are serviced by the raucous antiquated trademarks of the city, the polished wood, gold and red painted cable cars that rattle and rumble their way up and down the scenic hills. The same cable car Penn hurriedly passed was stopped in the middle of the intersection in front of the hotel, divulging a swarm of feisty fun seeking tourists.

As he neared the entrance to the hotel he thought he spied Gravel Voice among those tourists, but on second look he concluded he was wrong. He decided his mind was jumbling his thoughts in sub-conscious efforts to overcome his most recent parking faux pas.

At the hotel entrance Penn confronted the doorman, and was greeted with a condescending

frown. The doorman, in his gaudy red with gold waistcoat, didn't approve of Penn's surveillance dress of jeans, leather jacket and tennis shoes. To him it was not accepted attire for the Mark Hopkins.

Penn casually nodded to the doorman in passing, trying to show the aloofness the rich use to acknowledge those who serve them, and hoped the attitude would increase the value of his presence. As he passed through the glass double doors he doubted the ploy had worked. The doorman looked down his nose, humphed, and turned away.

When Penn entered the lobby, he spied Ms. \$ in the elevator, waiting for the doors to close. He rushed across the blue and red carpeted floor as fast as his average length legs could carry him without running, and entered the elevator behind a small group of guests just as Ms. \$ impatiently pushed the 'UP' button to ride to the Top of the Mark.

The elevator door schushed shut on oily slides, and the glass walled conveyance hummed its ascendance along the outside of the tallest hotel on the highest hill in the city. The previously animated passengers were lulled into silence by the proximity of strangers, and Penn looked outward over the spreading panorama of the city lights, ignoring the snobbish glances of his richly resplendent co-passengers.

The elevator reached the top floor, and the doors schussed open.

Ms. \$ hurriedly exited and pushed her way through the small crowd without ceremony. Her presence was one that demanded she be the first to exit the elevator and enter the den, which was dimly lit by pastel neon lights perched on the walls in demand for displays of beatification.

Penn made sure he was the last person to exit the elevator, and sauntered amid the patrons occupying a dozen or so of the chrome and glass cocktail tables while on his way to the bar where Ms. \$ had taken a seat. He tried to appear non-committal in suitable tourist fashion while dodging harried cocktail waitresses in short skirts, and ducking under an occasional overhanging imitation Philodendron branch. For the most part he was successful due to the smoky haze of the atmosphere and the overtone of the crowd's mingled conversations.

At last he reached the bar, and with a contrived cavalier air that hid his anxiety as an investigator who was too close to his subject, he looked around for a seat. The only one available was beside Ms. \$, and at first he was reluctant to sit so close, but he reconciled his concerns with the advantage of being able to overhear the conversations between Ms. \$ and a person on the other side of her.

The bartender appeared from out of nowhere, and Penn ordered his usual Myers's Rum and ginger ale with a squeeze of lime. He watched the bartender do his thing, then did his thing by keeping his ear tuned to Ms. \$.

The bartender delivered the drink, and Penn sipped it, nodded approvingly, then placed a five spot on the table. The bartender took the bill, and forgot to give any change, reminding Penn just how expensive things had become in the finer places in the city.

The first drink went quickly without Penn being able to overhear any of Ms. \$'s conversation.

By his second drink, though, her conversation became animated enough to let him get his first clear look at her without fear of being detected. Her coat was thrown over the back of her barstool. Her very silky, pink dress, if you could call it a dress, had a plunging neckline that must have met the belt somewhere just above the upward slit from the hem. It was a dress designed to

attract attention. It was a dress which could only be worn by a woman possessing an eccentric need for recognition, and who had enough money to afford being eccentric.

It took at least two more glances to fully assess Ms. \$'s eccentricity, and it wasn't until his third glance that Penn realized she had fire red hair, cheekbones the envy of any fashion model, and a grace in movement showing finishing school training. She sat in a manner that made even the barstool seem exciting.

He compared her with her companion, the person on her other side, the woman she was engaging in conversation. That woman appeared older than the 27 years of Ms. \$, and slightly heavier than what Penn guessed she would have preferred. But she was every bit as well dressed.

Penn would have enjoyed further observations, but they were denied by Ms. \$'s sudden exclamation of, "All right!"

It wasn't what she said, so much as how she said it as she slid off her barstool. It appeared she and the other woman, Ms. Older, had reached some kind of agreement. She walked from the lounge in a ruffled manner, and caught the elevator after it disgorged another group of guests hungry for the good nightlife.

Ms. Older eyed Ms. \$'s departure with a Cheshire smirk, then ordered another Vodka Martini.

Meanwhile, Penn, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, slid off his stool to follow Ms. \$.

Mindful that his attempts at nonchalance probably seemed ludicrous to anyone who might be watching him, he scurried across the purple carpeted floor for the elevator. However, with the evening's typical fortune, the elevator doors closed before his arrival, and Mr. \$ was again lost from view.

As he waited, outwardly calm, inwardly impatient, for the next elevator, he was forced to wonder how he was going to explain this latest version of sloppy tailing to his client. Or to PZ, for that matter. He doubted the cynical PZ would believe a tale of such sloppiness. He also doubted his partner would believe a recitation of any of the other events of the evening.

He especially doubted PZ would believe the part about the black Ford. He wasn't sure he believed it himself, yet, but he had one thing to prove his story. He still had Gravel Voice's .357 Magnum in his glove box.

The elevator finally arrived, and it eventually returned him to the lobby. After exiting the lobby for the front parking area, he had to give the expectant car attendant the bad news about not needing his car in a hurry, after all. The extra ten dollars wasn't justified, but he tipped the crestfallen attendant five dollars, anyway, when the car was retrieved. Then, with an engine roar that showed the internal workings to be much more threatening than the dented external appearances indicated, he pulled the Red Beast out of the parking lot onto California Street. He headed toward the Golden Gate Bridge, thinking his night's work was brought to a close. There was no way to locate the Mercedes by then.

It wasn't comforting for him to face the fact the he botched up the surveillance, but he had long ago resigned himself to the acceptance of events. Resignation to fate is the trait of experienced investigators, he often said to himself. It's a form of solace investigators return to when nothing more can be done at the moment. It's a trait good investigators have in common. Some investigators call it rationale, others call it being S.O.L.

There were a number of cars on the highway behind Penn as he descended the last hill northbound approaching the San Rafael off ramp. That was why he failed to see the black Ford continuing past the off ramp when he turned homeward.