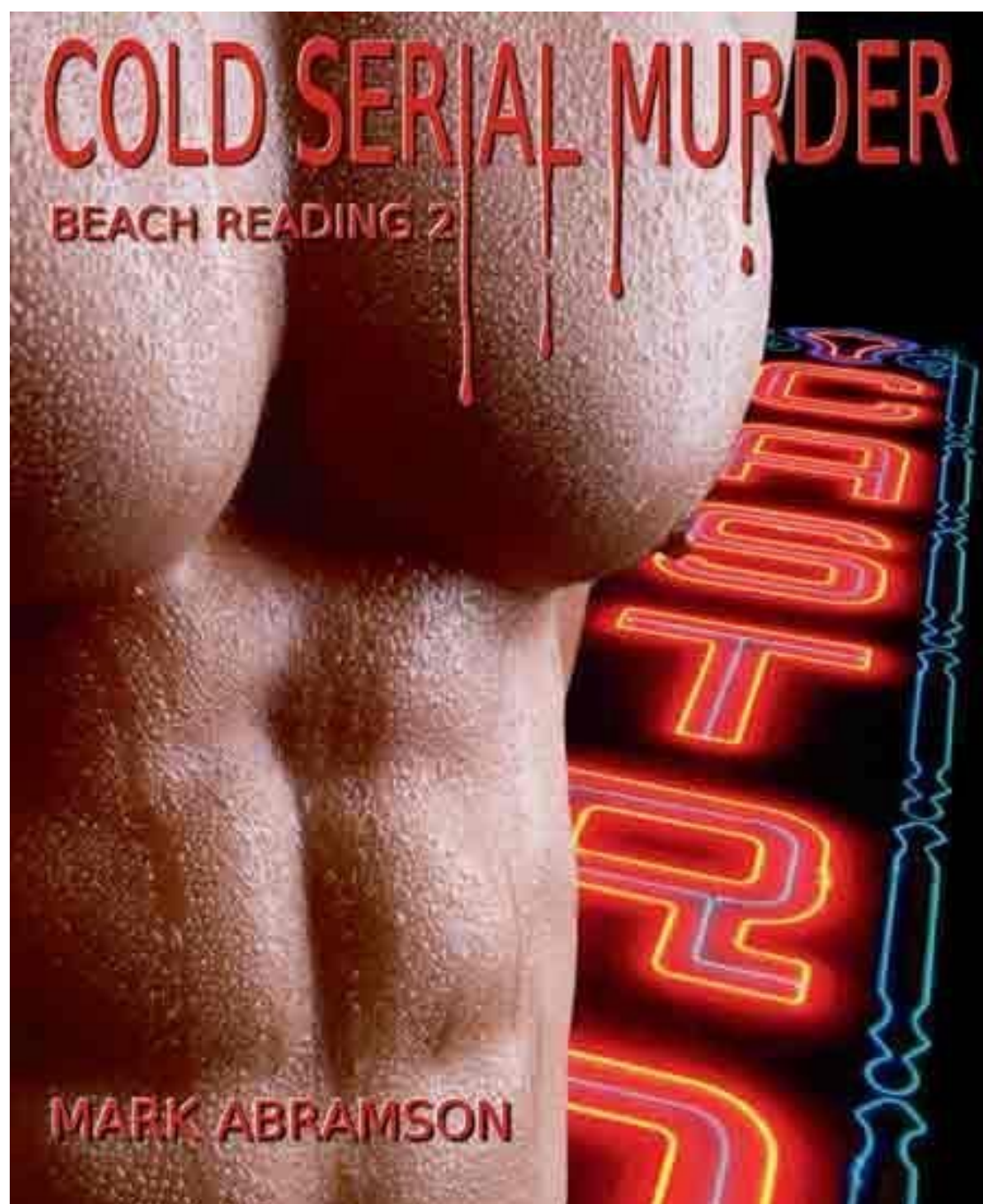


COLD SERIAL MURDER

BEACH READING 2

MARK ABRAMSON



Cold Serial Murder

(Book 2 in the Beach Reading Series)

Mark Abramson

Lethe Press

Maple Shade, NJ

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Chapter 1

"The first thing we should do, Aunt Ruth, is fire up a joint. We need to celebrate your arrival in San Francisco." Tim Snow reached for the ceramic Dalmatian next to the couch. He'd seen it at a yard sale and thought it tacky enough to be cute. The appeal tripled when he brought it home and found a few stray buds and rolling papers under the secret lid.

Tim was thrilled to host the only family--by blood, not by Castro--that he cared about. It had been years since he saw his Aunt Ruth. Of course, he couldn't remember the last time he'd entertained a houseguest for longer than one night. Did it count if you couldn't remember their names? "I'll roll us one while you get comfortable."

Ruth Taylor kicked off her shoes and rummaged through her carry-on bag for a pair of sandals. "I haven't smoked marijuana in ages. Not since my college days at Stanford."

"Trust me; it's like riding a bike." Tim didn't make the joint as thick as he normally liked, just in case. "Then I'll call Jason and see if he still wants to drive to San Gregorio this afternoon. It's a perfect day to put the top down on his convertible and head to the beach. If not, we can just walk over to Dolores Park for some sun. Are you hungry? I had a bowl of cereal earlier, but I could whip up some eggs and toast."

"No thanks. I bought a bagel in the Minneapolis airport that's still sitting on my stomach like a rock. Who's Jason, sweetie? Someone new in your life?"

"Oh, we're not like that anymore. But he does have a great car." Tim flicked the lighter. He was pleased that he could talk, could think, about Jason as a friend.

"What do you mean?"

"We went from boyfriends to *just friends* in less time than it takes some guys I know to pick out an outfit." Tim offered her the joint, but she was gazing out the window, not seeming to pay attention. "Are you okay?"

"Sorry, dear. I must be jet-lagged. I shouldn't be smoking pot, that's for sure. What were you saying about your friend?"

"He's a handsome guy, but I'm not the only one who thinks so. He can get anyone he wants. I'm glad we can be friends since we still have to work together."

"You're a very handsome guy, too, Tim."

"From an unbiased source, I'm sure." Tim took another hit off the joint and held it a while. "I'm so glad you could break away long enough to visit me. How was it volunteering for Al Franken's Senate campaign?" Tim imagined his aunt attending her

neighborhood caucus in Edina, hosting a room full of wealthy liberal suburban housewives munching organic crudités and sipping white wine.

"You know, I liked him way back when he was on *Saturday Night Live* and I didn't even know he was political. Or that he was from Minnesota. But it's Obama that really got me excited this year."

"Yeah, he's kinda hot if you like that skinny type, I guess." Tim took another hit off the joint and held it toward her.

"Maybe just a tiny puff, but don't you dare tell your cousin Dianne. She'll have her entire Bible class praying for me again. She thought they could pray me out of my divorce." Ruth pursed her lips and raised the joint to her mouth like she was taking a sip off a drinking straw.

"Now, don't get me wrong," a sudden cough broke her words. "We could all use the power of prayer now and then, but it seems to me that the people who are sure they have a direct line to heaven are most often calling collect with bad news."

She handed the joint back to Tim, stood up and took a couple of steps toward the window to stare out again and caught her reflection. She was amazed at how quickly the years had passed. *I'm 57 years old. It seems like only yesterday I was just a college girl.* Her wedding announcement in the society pages of the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* had read *Stanford Class of '73*. How many other graduates had tried to cover the growing belly under their wedding dress with a bouquet?

Ruth handed the joint back to Tim. "That tastes kind of nice. Brings back memories."

"How is dear cousin Dianne, anyway? I haven't seen her since we were kids."

"She was such a sweet baby, really. Now my bundle of joy is all big-haired Texas housewife who still thinks George Dubya Bush walks on water. I don't know where she gets it. I always knew she was rebellious, but I never dreamed she'd turn out this way. The last time we talked on the phone she cut me off because it was time to watch her favorite blowhard on Fox News. You can imagine what a disappointment she's been to me."

"If that's how she feels, I guess I'm beyond the help of her prayers."

"It's ridiculous. The whole world can be blowing up, but people want to fuss about gays getting married and same-sex couples raising kids. Plenty of children grow up well-adjusted with only one parent in this day and age. If two people love each other and can take good care of a child... aren't those kids better off than living in an orphanage? I've seen a lot of straight couples that were lousy parents."

"Like mine?"

"You turned out just fine, dear."

"You were always a bleeding heart, Aunt Ruth." Tim smiled up at her. "How did you and my mother become so different?"

"I don't know, Tim. We were like black and white ever since we were little girls. It's almost like you should have been my child and Dianne hers."

"I'm just glad you were there for me when my parents weren't. I would have dropped out of high school and run away after that fiasco with my track coach. I couldn't have spent one more night under their roof. I don't know what I would have done if you and Dan didn't take me in."

"Sometimes people just have to be there for each other, sweetheart." Ruth stretched. Pot always left her feeling more restless than mellow. "Weren't you going to call your friend?"

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot." Tim reached for the phone and dialed. "Jason, it's Tim. Are you screening your calls? Pick up the phone. Where are you? My Aunt Ruth is here from Minneapolis... the one I told you about. Are we still on for that drive to the beach today? It should be hot at San Gregorio. Hello? Jason? Call me if you get back soon. It's about 10:30 now."

"What happened to your car, honey? The black Mustang on the Christmas card when your hair was curlier and longer?"

"It was always giving me trouble, so I sold it. Besides, you don't need a car in this city except to get *out* of the city. We can walk to Dolores Park from here. It looks like the fog has burned off and the view is great from the corner at the top. We can stop on Castro Street and pick up something to eat. I'm getting the munchies already."

They left the apartment on Collingwood and turned right past the wine shop, Spike's and the dry cleaners. One of the coffee-drinkers seated on the sidewalk greeted Tim as they passed. When they crossed 19th Street someone honked and waved at him from a motorcycle.

On Castro Street, a tall blonde coming out of the plant store struggled with a ficus tree.

"Teresa!" Tim yelled. "Can I help you with that?"

"No thanks, darlin', the car is right here. Well, maybe you could shove those jumper cables over a little, thanks. Is this your Aunt Ruth?"

"Sure is. Aunt Ruth, I'd like you to meet my upstairs neighbor, Teresa. She's a teacher at the Harvey Milk School. Is this tree for your classroom?"

"No, this is a gift for Lenny, my ex-husband. He's getting married to Teddy, that guy he met at Lazy Bear Weekend up at the Russian River last summer." Teresa made a face as she pinched a leaf. "I'd kill it for sure if I tried to grow it. I've never had any luck with ficus. My place is just as drafty as yours and the man at the plant store told me they don't do well in a draft. I hate to admit that I don't have a green thumb at all."

"Tell Lenny I said hi." Tim dusted whatever dirt from the pot clung to his palms.

"I sure will. They're moving into a place in the Mission together. It has southern exposure and tons of windows, so all they need is plants. Between the two of them they have two of everything else. Two Cuisinarts, two blenders, two microwave ovens, and two of every cookbook Julia Child ever had a say in. What they need to have is a yard sale. Anyway, thanks, Tim. Nice to meet you, Ruth. Seeya later."

"My word, Tim! Do you know everyone in this city?" Ruth asked as she waved to Teresa.

"Not yet, but it's a friendly neighborhood. Castro Street is just like the business district of any small town in America. Main Street, U.S.A. only a little more colorful, I'll give it that, and with better taste, for the most part. You should see it during Christmas. They put up a big tree across the street there in front of the bank and the stores and other businesses go all out. The decorations in the Castro are a lot less tacky than in most places."

Outside one of the 'adult novelty' stores two young men were smoking cigarettes. "Hey, Tim. How's it going? Did you get the trouble with your computer straightened out?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Marty. I called your friend Bob. He was terrific. Hey, Marty, this is my Aunt Ruth visiting from Minneapolis for a couple of weeks. Ruth, this is Marty. He works here. Be nice to him and you might get a discount on some souvenirs to take back home. The Jeff Stryker model would be a big hit with your Edina friends."

"I'm sure it would, dear." She glanced at the window display and then took a closer look. There were boxes with pictures of the male anatomy in ridiculous sizes, right out there in full view! *They would never get away with this in Minneapolis*, Ruth thought. *Not even on Hennepin Avenue.*

At Rossi's Deli they ordered sandwiches and cartons of salads and then headed across Castro toward the Twin Peaks bar. Ruth said, "This place looks cozy."

"The glass casket? I've heard that this was the first gay bar in town with windows onto the world outside – maybe the first in the country - way back in the seventies or something. We'll stop in there sometime. It's a good spot for people-watching."

They walked past the Castro Theatre and Ruth heard another voice call out to Tim. It came from a bleached-blond girl in bib overalls coming out of Cliff's, the neighborhood hardware store.

"Hey, Stella. Buying some new power tools?"

She laughed. "No, I've got all I need now, Tim. Who's the pretty lady?" More introductions were made and Ruth was starting to feel at home already.

Tim said, "Let's walk by Jason's house on our way to the park. He might have been out in the yard when I called."

They turned left on 18th Street and Ruth asked, "Where are we going, Tim? You said something about the beach, but the ocean is the other way. Am I turned around?"

"If Jason's not home we're going to the top of Dolores Park. It's a great place to sunbathe. You get all the same rays as at the beach without having to listen to that noisy surf!"

"Tim, I thought you loved the ocean. Isn't that why you moved to California?"

"I moved to California for the men, but the ocean was a close second. I love the beach. I'm just teasing you, Aunt Ruth. That's one of the things I love about you; you're so easy to tease."

"Well, I'm not stupid. I'm sure you're more comfortable around people you can relate to better than you could your family, myself excluded." Ruth sighed, "Tim, can we slow down a little? I'm not used to so much walking. These hills make me feel my age."

"Sorry, Aunt Ruth. Some days these hills make *me* feel your age. What are you now, anyway... thirty-five?"

"You're closer to thirty-five, dear. I have a daughter nearer to your age, remember?"

"I'm not even thirty, yet! My next birthday... maybe. You look great. My friend Renee could touch up your hair color and you'd look even better. Here's Jason's place. And there's his car in the driveway. He is too home. I thought so."

It was a 1965 cherry-red Thunderbird convertible with black interior. "Nice car, all right," Ruth said. "I've always wanted a convertible, but they're so impractical in the Midwest. They rust out before they can wear out and there just aren't enough days when you want to ride around with the top down. It's too cold in the winter and in the summertime in Minnesota you definitely want a car with air conditioning." Ruth was admiring what great shape the car was in while Tim ran ahead down the driveway and around to the back door of Jason's house.

Ruth looked down and saw bright shiny pools of red on the ground as if the car had just been sloppily painted right there in the driveway. But the red on the ground was a few shades darker than the Thunderbird's paint color and it looked like it was still wet. That was when she heard her nephew scream.

Chapter 2

The emergency room at SF General wasn't crowded on a Friday morning. Tim and Ruth took a cab there as soon as they could get away from Jason's house after the ambulance left. The police would have more questions for both of them, but were satisfied to take down Tim's contact information as well as Ruth's cell phone number.

"Honey, stop pacing!" But Tim wasn't listening. "Come over here and sit down with me for a minute. Do you want one of these sandwiches we bought?"

"I'm not hungry anymore. This place smells too funky. You go ahead if you want one." He sat down beside her long enough to wrestle the brown paper bag from the deli out of his crowded backpack and hand it to her. Then he jumped up and walked over to the nurse's window again.

Ruth unwrapped her sandwich, but stopped short of taking a bite. "I guess I'm not really hungry, either." She walked to the doorway and stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. It was turning into a hot day by San Francisco standards and the Mission district was one of the warmest parts of town. It was cooler inside the waiting room, so she settled into one of the row of plastic chairs and waited for Tim to return. "What did they say about Jason, honey?"

"Not much. He's in surgery now. It could be a long while before they know anything more. Did you finish your sandwich already?"

"No, I gave them away to a couple of hobos who were sitting outside."

"Hobos ride trains, Aunt Ruth. We call them homeless people here... unless you meant homos, but you don't sound like you have a cold. And we prefer the term gay, except for the ones who like 'queer.' I guess there must be some homeless gay people in San Francisco, come to think of it." Tim had a way of rambling when he was upset. He forced himself to stop talking and went back to pacing instead.

"Well, whatever you want to call them, there are a couple of hungry and appreciative gentlemen who looked like they'd been down on their luck for some time now." Ruth knew there was no sense in arguing with Tim when he was like this. She patted the seat of the plastic chair beside hers. "Come and sit down here, honey. Tell me more about your friend Jason. You said that the two of you work together, but you haven't told me anything about your job. How do you like it? How long have you and Jason worked together?"

"Yeah, we both work at Arts. It's just around the corner from where I live. I'll take you by there when we get a chance. It's my landlords' place on Castro Street."

"You haven't told me about him either."

"Them," he corrected. "Arturo and Artie are a couple of great old guys. They met in Vietnam, although they never talk about those days much. They've been a couple forever. I also have some job security because they know if I don't get my paycheck they won't get their rent check. They live on the top floor of the building on Collingwood, across the hall from Teresa, the lady you met in front of the plant store. Artie was a major drag performer at Finocchio's up until they closed. I've heard it was a famous place in the old days."

"Of course it was." Ruth stood and moved around behind her nephew to massage some of the tension out of his shoulders. "Finocchio's was renowned for its female impersonators for years. I remember going there with a group of friends once, back when I was at Stanford. Maybe I even saw Artie perform there."

"I don't know if he was there *that* long ago," Tim replied without meaning to be rude.

Ruth paused the backrub and glared at him a moment, but she let the unintended insult pass. "And what about Arturo?"

"He's the chef. He handles the business end of things like the menus and ordering and payroll and Artie runs the front and deals with the public... not in drag, though. In fact, I've never even seen him in full drag. He tends bar with Jason and sometimes he just schmoozes and seats people and visits. He's much better at schmoozing than at bartending."

"Tim, I know this might not be the time or place, but... I haven't had a chance to ask you yet... how are you?"

"I'm fine. What do you mean?" But he knew what she meant. She was about to start prying into his personal business, his *psychic powers*, or whatever her mother had called them. Tim knew he'd inherited something weird from his maternal grandmother and it wasn't something he'd ever asked for or wanted. He didn't want to talk about it. Living in San Francisco, he could go for long periods of time without even thinking about it. He should have known his Aunt Ruth would get around to asking, but that didn't mean he would make it easy for her.

"You know what I mean, honey. I love you and I worry about you. And I *know* you, Tim. Are you still having those dreams, dear?"

"No!" he lied. And she knew he was lying. It was no use. "Not lately... not often, anyway. I have lots of dreams that don't mean anything and some nights I sleep straight through and don't remember any of them. Some nights I have lots of crazy dreams and I don't know what the hell they mean anyway, so what good are they?"

"I don't know, honey. I wish I knew a way to help."

"I know how to help," Tim said as he broke away from her and stood up again. "I can help myself by smoking a lot of pot and trying not to think about it, okay?"

Ruth took a deep breath. "So... you and your friends all work together at Arts?" She tried to keep the conversation going, rather than have her nephew resume his pacing.

Tim was relieved to have a change of subject. "Everyone calls it Arts, but the sign over the door says, 'Arts Fine Foods' or 'Fine Arts Foods' or 'Foods Arts Fine' depending on how you look at it and provided that none of the lights are burned out. They also promote local artists with exhibitions on the walls and singers drop in and perform sometimes if they can get along with Viv. Mondays and Tuesdays are her nights off, so they sometimes do Comedy Night. They've even tried karaoke."

"And Viv is...?"

"She *was* known as 'Vivacious Vivian and her Nimble 88's' back in her hey-day on Polk Street. I guess she's mellowed out enough in her old age to play music people can eat to. She looks like one of the oldest drag queens in the world, which must be part of her charm--if she has *any*. When she gets a request she doesn't know she'll fake it and I'm sure she makes twice as much in tips as the rest of us put together."

Sirens sounded as more ambulances pulled up. "There must have been a big accident somewhere," Tim said with a shiver in spite of the heat. "I don't want to watch them carrying bodies in here and I can't take this waiting. We can call later and see how the surgery went. Let's get out of here."

"Whatever you say."

"I should stop by the restaurant and tell them about Jason, anyway. He was scheduled to work tonight, so Artie will have to call someone in or do it alone. I could help out, but I'm not much of a bartender. I'm not even on the schedule this week. I took some vacation days in order to spend time with you. Come on. I can show you where I work right now. Let's take the #33 bus back to the Castro."

Riding up Potrero Avenue, Ruth asked, "How could Jason afford to buy that house on a bartender's pay? Is the restaurant that successful?"

"We all do okay, but not enough to buy real estate in San Francisco. Are you kidding? You'd have to win the Lotto just for a down-payment these days. The house was Karl's. He was Jason's lover who died of AIDS several years ago. Karl grew up in that house. When his parents died they left it to him and he and Jason moved back in there together. It's a duplex, so Jason rents the top half out to some old widowed lady that Karl's parents have always had as a tenant. I've never met her."

They got off the bus at Walgreens on the corner of 18th and Castro, crossed the intersection both ways, walked up the street to Arts, and pounded on the door. Arturo finally came out from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dirty apron. "I'm coming. I'm coming! Hold your horses!" He unlatched the door and shouted, "Holy cow! You look like hell, Tim! What happened? Oh, sorry. I didn't see the lady."

"This is my Aunt Ruth I told you about." Tim had nearly forgotten that Ruth had just arrived that morning and introductions were called for. "Aunt Ruth, I'd like you to meet half of the Arts – this is Arturo. He's the chef."

She stepped through the door as Arturo backed out of their way, "Nice to meet you, Arturo."

Tim looked at himself in the mirror. "Geez! Why didn't someone tell me I still have blood on my jeans? Arturo, I've got bad news. It's Jason. We went by his place this morning and I found him lying inside the kitchen door with blood all over the place. Someone stabbed him. He's in surgery now. We just came straight here from General."

"Mi dios en cielo! Who would do such a thing? Is he going to be all right?"

"I don't know. He looked pretty bad, Arturo. I thought we'd better come here and let you guys know in person. Where's Artie?"

"He's in the office. Jorge! Call Artie out here, will you?" Jorge was Arturo's nephew who worked in the kitchen and bussed tables. "Jorge! Where the hell did that boy go? He was just sweeping up in the kitchen a few minutes ago. Wait here and I'll go get Artie."

Ruth looked around at the place. There were at least a dozen stools at the bar, about fifteen tables of various sizes and another group of stools around the piano up one level in the rear. The largest wall of the restaurant was covered with color photographs of the gay pride parade in simple black frames. On another section of wall near the front cash register smaller black and white portraits were autographed and framed in silver.

It was several minutes before both owners appeared from the back of the place and joined them. Artie was as round as Arturo was tall and Ruth nearly laughed at the difference, but the looks on their faces told her to keep still.

"Tim," Artie rushed forward and hugged him. "We just called the hospital. You'd better sit down. Jason didn't make it. He'd lost too much blood. He didn't pull through the surgery. There was nothing more they could do. I'm so sorry."

"No, I don't believe it. I was the one who found him." Tim's shoulders fell and he slumped forward across the bar.

Artie moved around to meet Ruth. "You must be Tim's Aunt Ruth. I'm Artie. Sorry to meet you under such sad circumstances. And you've met my partner Arturo. When did you get in, Ruth?"

"I-I just flew in... just this morning... from Minneapolis. I'm pleased to meet you both. I'm so sorry about Jason."

Artie stepped behind the bar. "We don't usually drink this early, but under the circumstances I think a stiff cocktail might be in order."

Tim lifted his head and said, "Good idea, Artie. Thank you."

When Artie had finished making four Bloody Marys he came around and sat down at the bar on the other side of Ruth. Arturo broke the silence with, "Well, welcome to San Francisco, Ruth... and here's to Jason... and happier days." They raised their glasses.

Artie said, "To poor, dear Jason. What a horrible shock! He didn't have any enemies that I know of. I thought everyone loved Jason... didn't they?"

"Everyone." Tim nodded and started to choke up again. As much as the end of his romantic relationship with Jason had hurt, he never could have imagined his murder. "Jeez, we were just getting to be friends, after all... and now this. I found him! He was still breathing. There was a lot of blood, but I didn't think he was that bad off. I can't believe it."

"Why don't I walk you home, honey?" Ruth asked her nephew and then turned to Arturo and Artie. "I'm sure I'll see both of you fellows soon. I'll be in town for a little while." Ruth knew that there would be plenty of time for conversation and questions after the initial shock of Jason's death wore off.

"I haven't seen that picture of you and mother in years." Ruth stood in the doorway of Tim's bedroom as he sat down on the bed to take off his shoes. "I took that picture myself. It was the Fourth of July in Powderhorn Park. You adored your grandmother. I'll never forget how broken up you were when she died. You were just a boy, of course."

"I don't remember any of it. I hardly remember her at all." Tim tried to act normal, but his voice was that of someone in a trance. "So, yeah, this is my bedroom. It doesn't get any direct sunlight, but there's fresh air from the air well and it's nice and quiet. I guess I didn't give you the grand tour earlier, not that there's anything very grand about this place."

Ruth picked up the framed photograph. "She adored you, too. She never had much time for your cousin Dianne. It wasn't as if she meant to play favorites, but everyone could tell she was crazy about you; it was so obvious. And you were so much like her. You had her sweet smile and that funny way she used to turn her head to one side when she asked a question. You used to do that when you were a little boy, too."

"I don't remember..." Tim didn't *want* to remember. He didn't know why he kept that picture beside his bed, but he'd had it there for years. He didn't want to think about the things that happened when he was a little boy. He'd managed to block most of them from his memory, but his Aunt Ruth almost seemed to be in a trance of her own as she stared at the picture and kept on speaking about things that happened years ago as if for the first time.

"She used to see things too, you know, and so did you when you were younger. It scared you sometimes and your grandmother tried to comfort you, but then she died before she could really help you understand it, whatever it was, and then they seemed to get even stronger for a while... your dreams, I mean. Your mother, Betty... well... she and I never what to say. We were all just glad when we thought you'd outgrown that phase..."

Tim had outgrown that phase to some extent, but it was mostly a matter of learning not to mention what he saw. It only worried people. These days his visions were usually limited to his dreams, but right now he was wide awake... or was he? He could picture Jason running naked on a white sandy beach with perfect blue waves crashing at his feet. It might be San Gregorio, where they had planned to go today. Jason was alone on the beach at first and then he was joined by someone whose face Tim couldn't see. And soon he was surrounded by some of the most beautiful and exotic men Tim had ever imagined. Jason always loved the male body--his own and others--he reveled in all that was sensual and he treated sex like pure fun. Tim envied him and hoped to learn from him, but now Jason had gone on to another place, the "better place" that people always talked about when someone died, and Tim watched this scene as if from behind glass. He couldn't touch it. He couldn't join in. He couldn't reach that far. Still, he was glad to know that Jason was having the time of his life... or death, in this case.

Ruth heard her own voice blathering on in her head about something. She closed her mouth to make it stop. She didn't want to be annoying on her first day in Tim's world. When she set the picture of her mother back down on the bedside table, her nephew was fast asleep. "Well, maybe I'll go have a little lie down on the couch, myself. I've been up since before dawn in Minnesota and it's been quite a day already."

Hours later Ruth awoke to see the eerie glow of streetlights on Collingwood Street with a thick fog swirling around them. She heard sounds coming from the kitchen in the back of the apartment so she forced herself to get up and go see how Tim was doing.

"What time is it, Tim? Did you have a good nap? I must have dozed off too." Her nephew was dressed all in black and rummaging through a kitchen drawer for a flashlight.

"It's just past 10. You slept for hours. I called out for a pizza and you didn't even hear the doorbell. Aren't you hungry? I already ate most of it, but there's still a couple of slices left in the refrigerator."

"Maybe later..." Ruth was about to ask whether pizza was a staple in Tim's diet and suggest that he needed better eating habits, but she didn't want to put him on the defensive. There'd be plenty of time for that later. "What are you doing, honey? What's the flashlight for? Did you lose something?"

"I remembered that I have to take care of some business over at Jason's house. You can come along if you want to help."

"You can't just go barging in over there. The police will have strung up that horrid yellow tape all over the place. They might even have it under surveillance. Don't they say that killers sometimes return to the scene of the crime? They might be watching for him to come back and they could think you were involved."

"You've been reading too many detective stories. Besides, I'm going to use the front door; the murder happened in the back. I know where Jason keeps... kept...a spare key. It's inside a phony rock in the flower bed. Nobody will see us and I'm sure the cops have better things to do than hang around there all night. Come on... come along! You can be my look-out, but wear something dark, just in case I'm wrong."

"All right Tim, but this makes me nervous."

He reached into the hall closet and handed her a navy blue hooded sweatshirt that was much too big, but she pulled it over her head, fluffed up her hair and tucked it back inside. "You don't need to come anywhere near the house if you don't want to, Aunt Ruth. Just stand at the end of the driveway and whistle if you see a police car – really loud!"

"I don't even know if I can," she started to say, but Tim was already on his way out the door and not listening. She picked up the big purse she'd used as a carry-on bag and slung it over her shoulder. She dropped her cell phone inside. At least she could call the police if she needed to, but it was the police she was afraid of, come to think of it. Tim was already outside the gate on the sidewalk. "Tim! Wait up. I'm coming." She pulled the apartment door shut behind her and heard the lock click.

Hancock Street was only two blocks long from Noe Street to Dolores Park at the other end. Ruth paced back and forth on the sidewalk while Tim found the key and went inside Jason's house. She heard a car's brakes squeal on the Church Street hill. It frightened her and she was relieved that the car didn't turn onto Hancock. She walked around Jason's Thunderbird convertible again and stood in the exact same place she'd been when all this madness started. The dried pools of blood were barely visible now in the shadowy streetlights and Ruth wondered why the police had strung their yellow tape across the back door and left the front unguarded.

She crossed the street and stood in the shadow of a tree. Ruth didn't know what she would do if anyone drove up and stopped at the house. She tried to practice whistling softly, but she'd never been able to whistle worth a darn in her whole life. Didn't Tim

know that? She would just have to yell, she supposed. A man down the block opened his front door to take his dog out for a walk. Ruth heard the dog barking happily and the man's voice shushing him, but thankfully, they weren't headed in her direction either.

Then she looked down and saw something shiny in a cluster of groundcover. It reflected the streetlight enough to arouse her curiosity. She bent to get a closer look and saw a large chef's knife. It looked brand new and expensive and it was spotless. She rummaged around in her purse for a handkerchief and picked up the knife in it, being careful not to touch it with her fingers. *This could be the murder weapon*, Ruth thought to herself with a shiver. She lowered the knife into her bag and was glad she'd brought her biggest purse along tonight.

By the time she crossed back to Jason's driveway, her nephew was coming out the front door with two large suitcases. "Tim! I can't believe you're stealing things from your friend!"

"Relax, Aunt Ruth. I'm just trying to de-fag the place a little. I had to at least clear out the porn and the sex toys before his family finds them. He would have done the same thing for a friend."

Ruth looked back at Jason's beautiful red convertible, still parked in the driveway with the top down. The black upholstery was damp from the fog. "Do you know how to put the top up on this car, Tim? It seems a shame to leave it out here like this."

"No, I'm sure you have to turn the engine on in order to put the top up. I don't know where the car keys would be." Tim had no qualms about removing certain things from Jason's house, but he didn't feel right about searching through drawers and pockets for a set of keys to the Thunderbird... not so soon... not tonight.

"That was one thing Jason was pretty good about. When he was drinking, he didn't drive. At least he lived close enough to walk to all the bars in the neighborhood. God, I still can't believe..."

"I know, honey, I know..." Ruth tried to comfort her nephew. "Would you like me to carry one of those bags for you? They look heavy."

"No thanks, I've got 'em. They're heavy, but at least I'm balanced."

Across Hartford Street someone else stepped out his front door, walked to a car down the block and got inside. "He probably doesn't even know about Jason. I guess the neighbors can read all about it in the papers tomorrow. I just want to go home."

They headed back toward Collingwood Street with their secrets. Ruth's purse felt heavier with the knife inside. She waited until they locked the door of Tim's apartment before she dared to tell him what she had found. She considered keeping it

to herself until morning, but the police would have to see it sooner or later. Even though he was upset about his friend, Tim would know better than she would what to do. At least she hoped so.

Chapter 3

When Ruth woke and found herself staring at the hands on her travel alarm showing just shy of 5 o'clock, she hoped it was p.m., but no, the apartment had that early morning gloom. Her body had not yet forgotten Minnesota time. She rose from the pillow and felt a bit of a hangover. Tim had insisted they share a bottle of wine when they came home from Hancock Street. How strange, she was starting to feel this city was 'home' already.

Tim was as dear to her as if he were her own son. He'd always been a good kid and she was happy to have been there for him in high school when his parents threw him out, even though it had taken a toll on Ruth's relationship with her sister Betty. Ruth was glad she could be here for him again now, when he must be in shock over the brutal murder of his friend.

And she needed him, too. She was no youngster anymore.

She tip-toed down the hallway past Tim's room, opened the back door, then took a deep breath of the jasmine vining up the wall. He had a nice, little garden. A dozen or so clay pots, a cherry tomato heavy with fruit was staked up in one corner, flowers were blooming on pedestals, hanging from the fence, even suspended from the wall above her head.

She thought this would be a lovely place to sit and read or sip a cup of coffee, but not right now. The fog was thick. A thermometer mounted in a psychedelic sunflower reminded Ruth of Haight Street. 53 degrees. Brrr... She shut the door and returned to the couch. Flipping through a magazine she'd picked up at the Minneapolis airport left her drowsy, and she fell back to sleep.

"Aunt Ruth, aren't you up yet? It's nearly eleven. I've got coffee on. Do you want cereal... eggs?" When Tim stuck his head around the corner Ruth could see the strain of the past 24 hours on his face. He was bare-chested, wearing a pair of gray sweat-pants and white athletic socks that were silent and slick on the hardwood floor.

She wiped sleep from her eyes.

"The cops just called. They're coming by around noon to pick up that knife you found." He sat down on the couch's arm. "I already told them it was wiped clean of any blood, if it *was* the murder weapon. There probably aren't any prints. God, I can't believe I'm saying that... '*murder* weapon.' They want to take it to the lab for tests and they also want statements from both of us."

She smiled up at him, touched her tousled hair and tugged her nightgown down over her knees. "Then I'd better get dressed and make myself presentable."

Tim headed for the kitchen. "I told them you were waiting out in front on the driveway the whole time yesterday morning until the ambulance came. The house numbers on that block might as well be invisible." She heard him open the fridge door. "And I told them you had your cell-phone with you and you used it to call 911. I was glad I didn't have to climb over Jason to get to the phone inside. I refuse to get a cell phone. I don't want people to be able to reach me all the time."

"I hope you know they're only doing their jobs, dear. The police, I mean. I hope you told them we'll be happy to help the investigation in any way we can."

Ruth thought that Tim must still be in state of shock over the violent death of his friend. She was relieved that he was talking, rather than retreating into a gloomy silence, so she decided to wait until after the police were gone to take a shower and finish unpacking. The blouse and slacks she'd worn yesterday were handy, so she pulled them on and followed Tim into the kitchen.

"Mmmm... That coffee smells so good. How are you feeling this morning? Did you sleep okay?"

"I don't remember any dreams, if that's what you mean." He hefted the coffeepot. "I forget how you like it. Black, isn't it?"

She nodded. The mugs had *Got Harvey Milk?* in bold lettering. If Tim ever stopped to catch a breath, she could ask what that meant.

"I also talked to Arturo and Artie and they're throwing a party for Jason on Sunday afternoon. Oh man, that's tomorrow already. Nothing heavy, not like a funeral. Gay people have had so many deaths over the years that we've got these things down to a science."

Tim stirred a heaping teaspoon of sugar into his mug. She needn't wonder where some of his energy came from.

"Come to think of it, nobody I know has died in a long time. If Jason's relatives want some kind of religious service, they can do that in their town where he came from. That's funny... I never even knew where he grew up before. He never talked about his family. Anyhow, the *gay* family will just get together and raise a glass to his memory. A glass or two... or ten or twelve... I guess it's kind of like what the Irish do, isn't it?"

"Like an Irish wake?" Ruth asked. The coffee tasted foreign and expensive. She approved.

"Yeah, friends get together and tell stories and bring pictures and stuff... nothing weepy. It's going to be Sunday at the bar from 2 to 6, from the end of the brunch shift to the early part of dinner. Arturo said they would have waited a week to list it in the *B.A.R.* first--that's one of the gay newspapers--but the following Sunday the Gay

Men's Chorus is doing a big concert with Dame Edna at Davies Hall. Even Jason wouldn't try to compete with that."

Ruth had a dozen questions come to mind, but she didn't interrupt.

"He has too many friends in the chorus... or *had*, I should say. They'll put the obituary in next Thursday's paper. Artie said they were already packed last night with people who'd heard what happened. Word gets around fast. Tonight they've got reservations like crazy, too. I might need to go in and help out. I told them you and I didn't have any plans for tonight... Do we?"

"No, that's fine," Ruth said. "I'm sure that under the circumstances they'd appreciate your being there. If there's anything I can do, just let me know."

"Sure... thanks for being here, Aunt Ruth. I appreciate it."

Now the back door was standing wide open and sunlight bathed the patio. It sparkled off the marble tabletop illuminating a clear glass bowl with a floating gardenia that Ruth hadn't noticed before. "Tim, could we take our coffee outside?"

"Of course. Good idea. I almost always do when it's warm enough." He refilled his cup and joined her.

"I love your little garden, Tim." She smiled and looked directly into his eyes. She could tell that he was trying hard to be cheerful, in spite of everything. Maybe it was for her sake or maybe he was still in shock. He looked tired, but why wouldn't he be? "My darling nephew Timothy Snow... how are you holding up, my dear boy?"

"All right... I guess. It was such a shock to see someone you know like that... someone you care about, I mean... someone I thought I cared about once. I felt like I was only a kid when I arrived in San Francisco. You know... there were lots of other guys before Jason, but I thought he and I were going to be different, something special... for a while, anyway."

"It's got to be a terrible shock, honey."

"Yeah, it is. I'm old enough to have known death, though. People don't die from AIDS as often as they used to, but I've known some. Even in those days when they were, no one I knew was getting murdered! There were the Andrew Cunanan killings, of course, but that was before I got here and I didn't know any of his victims. I don't exactly travel in the same social circles as Versace..."

Ruth was glad she was here for Tim to talk to, but sometimes he seemed to fade away and she tried to bring him back. "We had some friends in Minneapolis who lived in the same building as that young man Cunanan murdered there. Our friends' bedroom wall backed up to the kitchen of the apartment where they found the body rolled up in a rug."

Tim shivered and made a face. "They say that no one would have guessed by looking at him. Andrew Cunanan came into Arts one night for dinner. Jake was working and

he told me all about waiting on him with a party of four. Cunanan went to the bathroom and stopped by the piano on his way back to make a request and then he stuck a fifty-dollar bill in Viv's tip jar, but he stiffed Jake."

"No!"

"Yes! And guess what he asked her to play...'What I did for love' ...can you believe it?"

"From *Chorus Line*? Oh Tim..." Ruth reached across the table, caressed her nephew's hand and tried not to laugh.

"Did your friends in Minneapolis hear any noises or anything?"

"No, they were out of town when it happened. Didn't I tell you about all that?"

"No, you didn't tell me. But I haven't told you... listen to this! When I called the restaurant this morning Arturo told me he dug up Jason's file in the office from back when he first started working there, years ago. It had his Social Security number, date of birth and all that stuff. They found his mother's phone number and she lives in Sacramento. That's where he was born. I always thought he was European! I remember he once mentioned going to a private boarding school in Switzerland. Anyway, Artie thought somebody should tell his relatives about this gathering Sunday. Some families would want to be part of it, to at least get to know who he really was, maybe get to talk to some of his friends, right? Guess what his Mother said!"

"I have no idea, dear."

"She said, 'I'm not interested in meeting any of Jason's perverted friends. Just let me know when the police are finished and I can have access to his estate.'"

"What a horrible thing to say about her son's friends."

"Can you believe that? What a bitch!"

"Maybe she was still in shock, dear."

"I should have let her find the damned Jeff Stryker dildoes and the pornography and the vacuum pumps... not to mention a gross of surgical gloves and buckets of lube! He owned every video that Al Parker ever made! Well, it's all stashed here in the storeroom, now. We could maybe donate some of it to a charity auction."

"I'm sure he'd approve of that, dear." Ruth was feebly trying to keep up her end of the conversation and trying to remember why the name of Jeff Stryker sounded familiar.

"I mean, some of those videos I already have on DVD, so I don't need them," Tim said. "But it makes me sick that Jason's mother never had anything to do with him when he was alive and now she's all excited to inherit a nice chunk of real estate. He never would have had that house or car if Karl hadn't left *him* everything. Jason

deserved it, too. I know I probably told you Jason was a slut, but that was only in recent years. According to Artie and Arturo, Jason took really good care of Karl when he got sick. Jason and I didn't really have a future together, as much as I might have fantasized about it..." Tim stepped inside and refilled their coffee cups just before the doorbell rang.

Ruth guessed that this must be the police so she stood up and followed a few steps behind Tim down the hallway toward the living room. She watched him open the door and give a partial embrace to a couple of guys, one at a time. No... one was a man and the other was a woman, but both were in SFPD uniforms. Everyone seemed to know each other in the Castro.

Chapter 4

Business was jumping at Arts that night. Though Tim had taken the whole week off to spend with his aunt, he couldn't refuse helping out if they needed him. "It's kind of weird not working on a Saturday night," he said to his aunt as they walked in the door. "Even weirder not to see Jason behind the bar."

"Dear, you're bound to miss your friend."

They found bar stools near the front door just as Viv sat down at the piano on the little stage in at the back of the club. She toyed a moment with the microphone--rarely used, since she didn't sing herself. Tim knew she would use it as a prop, especially if someone cute had a good enough voice for a solo. She turned it on and announced that her first set was a medley of hits from recent Broadway shows.

Tim snickered and said to his aunt, "Viv is hopelessly out of date. I'll bet her idea of Broadway hits is the overture to *Gypsy*. I'm sure she's never even heard of *Avenue Q* or *Spring Awakening*."

Artie brought Ruth a glass of chardonnay and popped the top off Tim's beer. He wiped the sweat off his forehead with a bar towel. "I'm sorry you had to wait so long. Everybody's heard about Jason by now."

"Don't worry about us," Ruth said. "We're not in any hurry."

"I think they wanted proof." Artie glanced at the crowd. "If it wasn't true, he'd be making their drinks, wouldn't he? I can't remember when I've worked so hard."

"So much for the night off," Tim said, but he squeezed one of Artie's thick forearms to show he didn't mind.

"And what's worse, Jorge is missing again and Arturo is furious."

"Who's Jorge?" Ruth asked Tim.

"Arturo's nephew. He started here a few months ago helping out in the kitchen, doing prep work, peeling vegetables and washing dishes. Arturo speaks to him in Spanish and tells him what to do. Sometimes he comes onto the floor to bring a tub of dirty dishes back, but I hardly know him, what with the language barrier and all. At least he was dependable... up until now."

Ruth said, "You know, Artie, if things get out of control, I could always help out. During the summers when I was at Stanford, I worked as a cocktail waitress. Even learned to tend bar in a little place on the west bank in Minneapolis."

But Artie was already heading back toward the waiter's station and Ruth didn't think he'd heard her offer.

"No shit?" Tim asked his aunt.

"When did you start using that kind of language?"

Tim lowered his head for a moment, and then meekly looked into her eyes. "Sorry, but I never heard about you working in a bar. My Aunt Ruth is a woman with a past."

"Hardly--I was only a girl at the time and there are lots of things you don't know about my past. That was before you were born or back when you were a tiny baby. I had a lot of fun bartending. I wasn't even old enough to buy a drink in a bar myself, but they needed someone fast. I got pretty good at it too and the college boys liked me. I even had a fake ID just like everyone else in those days."

"No shit. I mean, no fooling? You had a fake ID?"

Ruth took a sip of her wine, leaned close to her nephew's ear and whispered, "No shit."

Tim laughed and gestured with his head toward a tall man in a cowboy hat and boots coming out of the men's room. "Look who's checking you out... Roy Rodgers."

"Who's that?"

"Viv's newest husband. Number four or five. I don't think she even keeps count. His name is really Roy Rodgers, with a 'D'. I heard he has a lot in common with a horse. That might explain why she's a bit more pleasant lately. They live in the house she inherited from her last husband out in the Sunset District someplace."

"He's not bad looking in a rough and tumble sort of way." Ruth noticed how he stared at her. She looked back down at her glass.

"He must be giving her quite the tumble, all right. He drops her off every night when she works and he picks her up afterward in an old Cadillac, but I've never seen him hang around like this before. She's off Mondays and Tuesdays and she usually quits playing on Sundays by about 10 or 10:30 unless there's a good crowd. As long as there are tips going into that big brandy snifter on the piano she'll stay until they turn out the lights."

"I think the cowboy is obsessed with me," Ruth said. "He's still staring."

"It must be your great-looking legs, Aunt Ruth. You've only been in town for less than 48 hours and you're already getting hit on. I should be so lucky."

"He'd better not be hitting on me if he's married to Viv."

"Aw, it doesn't hurt to look. He's kind of weird anyway. The first night he came in to wait for Viv he asked Artie if he could eat at the bar and Artie said sure, that was fine, but Roy wanted to order a bowl of corn flakes!"

"For dinner?"

"Yeah, Artie told him we don't even serve cereal at brunch. This isn't some greasy-spoon coffee-shop. He told him to go to Orphan Andy's. They serve breakfast 24-hours. I actually like Orphan Andy's."

"What did the cowboy say?"

"He said, 'Tell Viv I'll be back.' I guess he went to Orphan Andy's and had his corn flakes. I hope he didn't stop in at the Twin Peaks on his way. Some of those old guys would have probably tried to hit on him. It would serve him right, too. If he's gonna hang out in the Castro, he'd better get used to it."

"I can't imagine," Ruth laughed.

"I'm sorry I haven't taken you anyplace fun yet. I wanted to show you more exciting things in San Francisco than Castro Street and the restaurant where I work."

"That's okay, dear. We still have plenty of time."

"We could have gone to *Beach Blanket Babylon* while you're here, but it's always sold out months in advance. Next time you come I'll try to get tickets if I plan better. It's been running for years. They have these huge mechanical hats that light up and grow and do everything but levitate. It's lots of fun! You'd love it." Tim took a swig of his beer. "I didn't intend for you to be stuck here at Arts for your entire vacation in San Francisco."

"I really don't mind, as long as I get to spend some time with you."

"Well, we may need your expertise behind the bar if things get any busier. The trouble with working with Artie is that it's hard to get past him back there," Tim chuckled.

"Legend has it that he was bartending one night in the Tenderloin years ago with some other old drag queen named Greta Grass and they got stuck between the beer coolers trying to pass each other."

Tim pointed out the Ladies' room beyond the swinging kitchen doors. Ruth excused herself and as she stood up she noticed Roy Rodgers with a 'D' staring so intently that it made her uneasy. As she walked past him his eyes moved up from her legs to her face, so she introduced herself. "Hello, I'm Tim Snow's Aunt. My name is Ruth Taylor."

"How do, Ma'am. Roy Rodgers here." He gallantly stretched his lanky frame up off the bar stool and raised his cowboy hat. "Ah'm mighty pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Thanks... same here," Ruth said. "My goodness, you're certainly are a tall fellow, aren't you Roy?"

"Yes, Ma'am, six foot five inches without the hat and boots on." He raised his hat again as Ruth headed back to the Ladies' room.

She had to dodge one of the waiters carrying a row of hot dinner plates up one arm.

Artie leaned over the front corner of the bar. "Tim! Pssst! Hello!"

Tim was staring out at the foot traffic on Castro Street. So many cute guys were going by and some of them were stopping, getting in line for dinner. "Yeah, Artie? Sorry. What's going on?"

"Could you check on Arturo in the kitchen? That damned Jorge still hasn't showed up and I'm sure Arturo's swamped with orders. Make sure he's okay, would you?"

"Sure. No problem. I'll do what I can."

"Oh... and Tim... when you get caught up with Arturo, could you get me a couple of buckets of ice and see if there's another keg of Anchor Steam in the walk-in cooler. I know this one is going to blow any minute."

"I'm on it, Artie."

When Ruth came out of the Ladies' room, Tim was gone and Roy was still staring at her. She wasn't so sure it was flattering any more and hurried back to her bar stool and her glass of wine, wondering where Tim had disappeared. Artie was even further behind and she restated her offer to help him. By the time Tim got to the kitchen, Arturo was frantic, too. "What can I do to help you, Arturo?"

"Tim! Bless your heart! I've got all the burners going with veal scaloppini and salmon steaks grilling that I have to keep a close eye on. Could you rinse that lettuce that's in the sink and grab another container of crab out of the fridge please? Then give a stir to that sauce... oh, never mind. I can reach that. It must be crowded out there tonight the way the orders are coming in."

"Everyone's heard about Jason."

"How's Artie doing tending bar by himself?"

"Slow, but the customers are patient."

They could hear Viv plunking out *Nine to Five* in her best honky-tonk fashion whenever the swinging doors opened.

"I never realized how much I've become dependent on Jorge lately."

Tim asked, "Where do you think he is, anyway? Has he ever just disappeared like this in the past?"

"No... I don't know... not this long, anyway. That damned kid! I couldn't find him this morning when you and your aunt stopped by. He came back though, said he'd been at Walgreens getting something he needed. This afternoon I told him to take my car to Costco for a couple of flats of strawberries. For some reason our order got fouled up and they didn't come with the produce delivery. He took my keys and I didn't think about it again, but I looked outside later and saw my car parked up across the street in front of P.O. Plus. The keys were still in the ignition, but there was no sign of Jorge and I still need the strawberries. I told Artie I'm ready to send him back to Nicaragua!"

"What did Artie say?"

"You know Artie. He's always trying to calm me down. He reminded me that Jorge was born in Daly City. I'd send him back to his mother there, but her phone's disconnected and I don't know where the hell she is, either."

"You mean your sister or your sister-in-law?" Tim asked.

"No... neither. Jorge calls me 'Tio Arturo' but I'm not his real uncle. I suppose we could be some distant relation, but Artie and I have had lots of *nephews* work for us over the years. It's just a term of affection. Jorge's mother might have gone back to Nicaragua, honestly. I heard Jorge mention that his grandmother was sick and she must be a hundred and two!"

Tim shook his head and laughed, "Well, just let me know what I can do to help. My Aunt Ruth is here with me, but she's cool. I think Viv's new husband has the hots for her. Oh, I forgot! Artie needs ice and I've got to check on that keg, too."

"Go on, Tim, I'll be okay now. Thanks." Arturo turned back to stir his sauce.

At the ice machine, Tim filled the bucket in six quick scoop-fuls. On busy nights Jorge might carry at least a dozen buckets-worth to the bar.

A medley from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* began for the two drunken straight couples who'd just discovered they were in a gay bar. Viv was working them for all they were worth with her pink feather boa around the shoulders of one man while his wife snapped pictures. The other woman scrounged through her purse for more money to stuff into Viv's tip jar.

Jake pointed to one man, cursed with a leisure suit. "J.C. Penney's all the way."

Tim chuckled. "Look at his feet. Nothing spells *tourist* like white patent leather shoes with gold buckles and a matching belt."

"And nothing screams *closet case* louder than pink marabou feathers with polyester."

Arms heavy with ice, Tim paused while Artie slipped past him. He caught Aunt Ruth's asking someone, "Three with salt and two on the rocks? Or was it the other way around?"

Artie rubbed his back. "Your aunt is a lifesaver. She just jumped right in and the customers love her!"

Tim dumped the ice in the front well as his aunt stepped back to make room for him. "Aunt Ruth, you're bartending?"

"I'm having a ball. This all reminds me of my college days." She turned back to the customers. "And how are you sweet boys doing over here?"

Chapter 5

Tim and Ruth were on his patio laughing about the events of last night when they heard a crash of broken glass. "What the heck is that?" Ruth almost spilled her coffee.

"It must be Teresa. I don't know who else would have so many bottles." Tim yelled over the fence, "Hey, Teresa! Is that you? What's up with all the racket?"

"Sorry, Tim. I had to haul out the recycling before it overflowed. I wondered where that cackling was coming from. Are you and your Aunt Ruth still on coffee?"

"Yah, you betcha!" Tim said in his best Frances McDormand in *Fargo* accent. "Come on and join us. People from Minnesota drink coffee morning, noon and night, ya' know. It's nice and sunny in my little garden."

"I'm through with coffee, hon. I need a hair of the dog and it must be after five o'clock somewhere on the planet. I had to celebrate a wedding yesterday, remember? My ex and his new husband tied the knot. Why not bring your aunt up to my place instead? I'll mix up a pitcher of margaritas."

"Don't start without us, Teresa. We're still in our bathrobes."

"Don't get dressed up on my account, honey. If I look as bad as I feel you'd better dress down! Better yet, wear blindfolds. Just come on up! My door's always open!"

They found Teresa's door standing wide open when they got to the top of the stairs. "Yoo-hoo! Here we come!" Ruth yelled out. "Teresa?"

"I'm on the deck out in back. Come on! It's nicer out here than inside the apartment. The fog's almost gone." She poured margaritas from a tall pitcher into three salt-rimmed glasses. "Here you go Ruth, welcome to my humble abode. I didn't ask if you wanted salt. If you don't like it, just wipe it off on a cocktail napkin."

"No, salt is fine. My blood pressure is good." Ruth raised her glass to clink with Teresa's and Tim's. "What a lovely view you have from up here!"

"It's real pretty at night when those lights are turned on over at the Castro Theatre. They finally got them all working again when Sean Penn was making that movie about Harvey Milk a while back. So tell me, Ruth... How are you enjoying your San Francisco trip so far?"

"Other than starting a new job and almost witnessing a murder, it's been quite... well I can't call it relaxing, but I do love being back here in the city again."

"Murder? What murder? Who murdered whom?" Teresa sat up straight. "What are you talking about... murder?"

Tim said, "Haven't you heard? I guess we haven't seen you to bring you up to date. Someone killed Jason."

"Jason who? I saw you outside the plant store on Friday morning! Where'd you go after that? Who's Jason? Give me all the bad news! I'm already sitting down."

"I don't think you even knew him," Tim said. "He was a bartender from Arts. We found him stabbed. Well, I did... on his kitchen floor. It must have been just a few minutes after we saw you."

"Jason. The handsome one... with those eyelashes? The guy you were going out with a while back?"

Tim nodded.

"I thought he was a little old for you, but he was gorgeous. Oh, my Lord! Do they think it was an anti-gay thing? Why would anyone want to hurt him?"

"Nobody knows," Tim said.

Teresa sat back in her chair, took a sip of her margarita, and squinted hard. "Was he into something kinky, Tim? I read the papers, you know."

"Teresa! How could you even ask that? Why do people want to jump to the conclusion that a victim is responsible for the crime? Even if he was into *something kinky*, I've never heard of any sexual fetish that involved getting knifed to death, have you?"

"I'm sorry! That was insensitive of me, but you know me and my big mouth. It always kicks in before my brain does." She sat quietly for a moment and then reached over to pat his knee and he finally squeezed her hand.

"I'm sure it was a shock to everyone," Ruth said, wanting to break the tension.

"I just can't believe it... only a few blocks away from here!" Teresa said. "Do they have any idea at all who could have done such a thing, Tim?"

"Not yet, but the police are working on it. Aunt Ruth found a knife on the ground across the street from the house. That might have been the murder weapon, but I doubt if there were any fingerprints. There wasn't even any blood on it. An autopsy will tell more."

"This is all so hard to believe... and you two found him?"

"I did. Aunt Ruth was still out on the driveway. She called the police on her cell phone." Tim was feeling strained enough without reliving the scene in his head. "Meanwhile, Arturo's nephew has disappeared, too."

"Jorge is gone again?" Teresa wagged her finger at them. "Well, this isn't the first time. He's got that cute little girlfriend of his over there on Guerrero Street, you know. I'll bet he's run off somewhere to shack up with her again."

"How do you know about that?" Ruth didn't want to appear nosy, but she was becoming intrigued with the mystery, in spite of herself.

"Because I caught them going at it in my bed in this very apartment!" Teresa was shouting now. "And wouldn't you know it... I recognized the girl! Carlotta Sanchez! She was one of my students a few years ago. They grow up too damned fast nowadays!"

"In your bed? What was Jorge doing in your apartment?" Tim asked.

"Well, right after school let out this spring I went to visit my mother in Seattle. She'd just had her surgery and needed help and I hadn't been to visit since my divorce. Arturo suggested it. He thought Jorge could be trusted to house-sit, water my plants and bring in the mail for a week or so. You know I'm no green thumb, but I've got a few African Violets and I hate to leave the place empty and come back to it all closed-up and musty-smelling. Heck, I thought Jorge would appreciate a few extra bucks, too. He can't make much more than minimum wage in the kitchen, I don't imagine. I figured it would be convenient for him to stay here and he'd be able to walk to his work at the restaurant.

"Oh yeah, I remember now. I saw him in the building, but I figured he was visiting his Uncle Arturo across the hall from you. We tip him when he busses tables for us, but you're right; I don't think he earns more than minimum wage and meals."

"I even paid him in advance and I told him when I'd be back," Teresa said. "I always figured his understanding of English was selective, but maybe it's worse than he lets on. Or else he just doesn't know how to tell time! I told him exactly when I'd be home. It was a Wednesday afternoon. My flight landed at 2:05. I had to wait at the baggage claim for a few minutes and then I caught a cab right away. Anyway, I walked in my apartment door and there they were in my bed going at it!"

"What did you do?" Ruth asked.

"What would anyone do? I screamed. Oh, they both grabbed their clothes and ran like the blazes. What a sight for the neighborhood. The last thing I saw of him was that little brown butt running naked down the hill, with Carlotta close behind him, trying to get her bra strap fastened." Teresa laughed out loud at the memory.

"He does have a cute butt," Tim said with a nod, "although I've never seen it naked."

"Well, he disappeared for nearly two weeks that time," Teresa said. "I'm sure he was afraid I'd tell his uncle about it. It's not that I would have volunteered anything. I didn't want to get the dumb kid in trouble, but Arturo knew he'd been staying here. Anyways, that was no secret. Arturo and Artie were both pissed off and more than a little worried about that boy. Arturo had to squeeze the dirt out of me about the girlfriend and then he really hit the ceiling. On top of that, my poor African Violets

were as dry as a bone. They're about the only house plants I can grow and I had to replace nearly all of them."

"I love African Violets, too," Ruth agreed. "Tim has some beautiful plants on his little terrace. I would think with all this sun you get on the top floor, there should be lots of things you could grow. I'll try to find you a book on house plants one of these days, Teresa."

"Don't waste your money, Ruth," Teresa protested. "I'm better off dusting than fertilizing. See that big rubber tree in the corner. It's about as real as half the noses in Hollywood..."

"Well, I don't know what set Jorge off this time," Tim said. As glad as he was to get his mind off the vision of finding Jason, another thought occurred to him. "I hope Jorge didn't have anything to do with Jason's murder. Artie and Arturo treated Jason more like family than they did Jorge. Maybe the kid was jealous. Boy-oh-boy... that would be the last straw for them if Jorge was involved in Jason's murder."

"I can't imagine Jorge having it in him to kill anyone," Teresa said.

"I can't either." Tim held out his empty glass. "I just thought he might know something about it... something that would make him stay away. But hey, Teresa, you haven't told us how was Lenny and Teddy's wedding and all?"

"Oh, Ruth, you'll have to forgive us for talking about all these people you don't even know." Teresa lifted the pitcher to fill their glasses again. "I can whip up another batch of these in a minute, but first I have to tell you..."

Ruth said, "Don't make any more for my sake--"

Teresa patted Ruth's knee, "You nephew is one of the more *normal* people around these parts. I'm afraid you've walked into quite a hornets' nest this week."

Tim didn't want the topic of conversation to steer back toward him again. "Teresa, the wedding?"

"Yes, yes." She took a deep swallow, and then burped gently into her palm. "Well, first of all it's not 'Lenny' anymore. He wants to be called 'Leonardo!' On our wedding license it was only 'Leonard,' for crying out loud! I think he saw *Titanic* one too many times."

"I loved DiCaprio in *Revolutionary Road*," Tim interrupted.

"Oh yes, so did I," Teresa agreed and then continued her rant, "and 'Teddy' was always good enough for 'Teddy' back while they were just 'dating,' but now that they're officially married, whether it's legal or not, he insists that people call him 'Theodore,' don't you know?"

Tim laughed. "You're not 'Terry,' either, are you? You've always used your full name."

"My point exactly. I've always been Teresa. I didn't go by Terry for twenty, thirty years and then expect everyone I know to up and start calling me something else! It's just you gay guys that do that, if you ask me. If someone were a criminal or something and had to start out fresh with a new identity, that might be a good reason to change your name, but in that case you would move to a new place where everybody doesn't have to learn to call you one thing after they've known you by something else your whole life."

Ruth said, "I once knew someone in Minneapolis who changed his name, but I think it had to do with the fact that he owed a lot of money to a bunch of people."

"Well, Leonardo doesn't have to worry about that. They're both making good money at their jobs. No, these days 'Dick' becomes 'Richard' and 'Al' is suddenly 'Alexander.' You never find a 'Bob' or a 'Chuck' or a 'Pat,' in the Castro any more. They want you to call them Robert and Charles and Patrick."

"Or Roberta and Charlotte and Patricia," Tim laughed.

Teresa slapped his knee, "I'm surprised you don't insist on being called 'Timothy' yourself."

"I don't care what you call me. Just don't call me late for... How does that old saying go? ...last call?"

Ruth said, "I think it's 'supper,' dear... 'don't call me late for supper.'"

"Yeah, that's right," Tim said. "I was thinking there was a sexual reference in there somewhere, but you're right. It's 'supper.' So... how was the wedding, anyway?"

"Well honey, thank heaven the ceremony was short and sweet, but the reception was something else! I think I was the only woman in the entire Lone Star Saloon. And there were some big boys there, too. Some of them made the two grooms look almost malnourished. Lenny's... I mean... *Leonardo's* father was there too and he's gotten to that wobbly stage in the brain, you know, God love him. I had hardly seen him since my own wedding and that was right out of high school. He somehow got it in his head that the reason I was there was for his son and me to renew *our* vows."

"Oh, the poor old fellow," Ruth said.

"He was so confused, and it didn't help that everyone kept buying him drinks. Oh, he's a sweetheart, and so are Teddy and Lenny. I mean ...Leonardo! I wish the two of them all the happiness in the world. Besides, I'm sure he'll be a lot more exciting in bed with *Theodore* than he ever was with me!

"Teresa, I think it's great that you're such a good sport and remain friendly with your ex-husband, but you deserve better than that," Tim blurted out.

"Well honey, don't I know it! We were the best of friends since we were kids and then we were high-school sweethearts, married way too young. We should have just stayed friends!"

Ruth glanced at her watch. "Look at the time. We've got to get ready for Jason's memorial. Thanks for inviting us up, Teresa. I'm sure I'll see you soon. Are you coming down to Arts for the gathering?"

"Well... I don't know. I barely knew Jason. Still, I maybe ought to pay my respects for the sake of Arturo and Artie. I'm also curious to see if that rascal Jorge shows up. I'll bet you anything he's run off with his little girlfriend again. I'll probably come down later on after I check my e-mail, have a hot shower and a teensy bit more tequila. Are you sure you two wouldn't like some more? I could mix up another batch in a jiffy. I'm finally starting to feel human again."

"No, thanks," Tim said. "We'd better get going. We've both got to shower and change into something in basic black."

"Oh Tim, I don't know if I brought any..."

"I'm just kidding. Wear whatever you want. I already told you it's not going to be heavy." Tim turned to Teresa in a mock whisper and added, "I'll never get used to having a woman on the place with the pantyhose drying over the shower rod and having to wait while she spends hours in the bathroom, you know."

"Don't listen to him!" Ruth gave her nephew a loving slap with the tips of her fingers across his chin. "I am nothing like that!"

Teresa carried the remains of the pitcher of Margaritas into the kitchen to say good-bye. "I'll bet Tim takes twice as long in front of the mirror as you do."

"Now the women are ganging up on me. Come on, let's get out of here. Seeya' later, Teresa. Thanks for the drinks."

Chapter 6

When Tim and Ruth arrived at Arts the restaurant was already filled with flowers for the celebration of Jason's life. Ruth wandered among the tables admiring the arrangements along the walls, in each window and spilling out from the corners of the room. She said hello to a couple of guys she served during her cameo appearance behind the bar, but most of the customers who had closed the place at 2 a.m. weren't here this early on Sunday afternoon.

Tim said hi to Artie behind the bar and then headed to the kitchen to check on Arturo who was busy arranging hors d'oeuvres on silver trays. "How's it going, Arturo?"

"Hi Tim... okay, I guess. Brunch was a little slower than usual, which suited us fine. I'm glad you're here early, though. Every florist in the neighborhood has made at least two deliveries, starting first thing this morning. Reservations are already coming in for dinner tonight after the gathering for Jason is over. Some of the brunch crowd seems intent on staying here straight through until then. We announced that we'll host an open bar from four to five in Jason's honor, so some of these queens want to be sure to have bar stools, since they won't still be able to stand up by then. Is your Aunt Ruth here?"

"Sure, we walked over together."

"Good. Artie told me what a lifesaver she was last night. Maybe she can help him out this afternoon, too. We'd really appreciate it."

"I don't think she'd mind. She said she had a great time bartending again after so many years. Who knew?"

"I'm sure Artie will be swamped otherwise. We haven't had time to think about hiring another bartender yet and he's taking this awfully hard, I think. Artie always had such a crush on Jason, you know."

"He did?" Tim asked, but Arturo ignored him.

"I could sure use some help from Jorge, but he still hasn't shown up. He'd better have a damned good excuse or I'm going to wring his neck this time!"

Tim considered mentioning to Arturo what Teresa had said about Jorge's girlfriend Carlotta in the Mission district, but decided against rubbing salt on the open wound. "Just let me know what I can do to help."

Arturo wiped his hands on his apron and reached for a potholder to open one of the big oven doors. "Thanks, Tim. I think these mini-quiches are done. They're just as good at room temperature as they are hot. Then I've just got the rumaki, but... nah... I

think I can handle it all. Why don't you see if Artie needs anything behind the bar, okay?"

"Sure, Arturo...no problem."

Artie was serving customers while Ruth was sitting at one end of the bar. He already had her hard at work cutting lemons and limes. "Is there anything I can do for you, Artie?" Tim asked.

"Come to think of it, there is something..." Artie said. "Take that bulletin board down from the wall by the pay phone and take off all those flyers and the stuff that's posted there. It will be just the right size. I found a bunch of old pictures of Jason this morning. I left them on top of the desk in the office and there's a box of pushpins in the left-hand drawer. We found pictures from parties going way back to the 80s, from Castro Street fairs and Halloweens and the Tricycle Race. There are some really sexy ones of him in spandex! Just pick out what you think are the best ones and arrange them somehow on that cork board. We should put it up where everyone can see it, maybe near the front door with a couple of those nice flower arrangements on either side, okay?"

"Sure, Artie," Tim said. "I can do that."

When Ruth finished cutting the bar fruit she looked around for Tim and found him sitting at a table near the front door, sorting through stacks of photographs. She watched him place several pictures to one side and put others back into a large manila folder. He turned and gazed out the window to Castro Street for a few moments and then slumped forward with his head in his hands. She wasn't sure if she should leave him alone, but her instincts told her to reach out to him. "How are you doing, honey?"

"Oh, God. Aunt Ruth, I'm really going to miss him. I don't know if I can do this or not." Tim was misty-eyed as she rubbed his neck and shoulders. "I can't help but think of what there might have been between Jason and me if only the timing had been different."

"My, how photogenic he was," Ruth said, unsure whether she should speak at all at a time like this.

"Yeah, he sure was handsome," Tim said. "Look at him here! He must have been in his early 20's. That's him in a Speedo at Baker Beach. Here he is on stage in some leather contest. I'll bet that's at the Eagle or the Powerhouse. And just look at this one! This was the Saturday before Halloween last year. That's him on the far left. All eight of those guys are buddies from Gold's Gym and they all went dressed as Cher! They were a riot! This one must have been at the Halloween party here at Arts. Look at Jason in all his leather posing with Viv at the piano. She came dressed as Little Bo Peep."

Ruth reached over to the bar and Artie handed her a stack of cocktail napkins without a word. They all knew this day wasn't going to be easy, but Ruth was glad to be here for her nephew and for all of the rest of them. Artie's eyes were puffy and red. Ruth said, "Here, Tim, blow your nose. I could help you with this if you'd like." She started

to arrange the pictures he'd chosen onto the bulletin board. "Why don't you go and see if Artie needs some ice or anything?"

"I'm okay Ruth, thanks," Artie said. "It's Arturo I'm really worried about. He's taking it awfully hard, I'm afraid. He always had kind of a crush on Jason, you know... Most people did, I imagine.

Tim thought it was interesting that Arturo had said the same thing about Artie. Sometimes it didn't occur to Tim that you could have strong feelings for someone even though you'd never slept with him.

Ruth decided that a change of subject might be in order for everyone. "Some of these flower arrangements are spectacular! I was wondering why do they all have the names of drinks on them?"

Tim asked, "What do you mean... drinks?"

"Well, this one says *Pilsner*. That refers to beer, right? And the one in that corner over there said it was from the old *White Swallow* gang. That sounds like a creamy after-dinner drink. One says *The Mix*. Well, I know what mix is. And that one says *The Edge*. That sounds like it must be lethal. Nobody ordered an Edge from me last night, but if they told me what went into it, I'm sure I could have made one."

Jake had arrived by now and he and Artie started laughing. Artie said, "The White Swallow was a bar on Polk Street years ago. That must have been the first place Jason ever worked. I think he was still underage with a fake ID. I'm surprised any of those old guys are still around to remember him."

"Those aren't drinks, Aunt Ruth. They're all names of bars where Jason either worked or had friends," Tim said.

"He worked here at Arts the longest," Artie said, "but the others will miss him too, I'm sure. He had friends all over town."

Jake walked across the room. "These flowers are from Moby Dick. That's the bar on 18th and Hartford. These are from Grenier, the liquor distributors. And the arrangement over here in this corner is from the Hole in the Wall Saloon down South of Market. Who would think to put black ribbons in with cactus and yellow roses? They must have found the one and only butch florist in San Francisco!"

People began arriving in groups of twos and fours and more. Ruth hurried to get all of the photographs of Jason on the corkboard and Tim helped her set it up on a table near the entrance. "He certainly was handsome! He could have been a model," Ruth said. "I wish I could have had the chance to know him."

"He did some modeling too, didn't he?" Tim asked in Artie's direction. "Artie must have those magazines locked up somewhere."

"He wasn't exactly modeling fashions, you know..." Artie said with a smile.

Patrick arrived, then the front door opened again and Artie yelled, "Here come the bridegrooms! Congratulations! Lenny and Teddy! It's not time for the open bar, yet, but let me buy you boys a couple of drinks on the house anyway, in honor of your recent nuptials."

"Two Manhattans, thank you... and it's Theodore and Leonardo, please!"

Jake turned to Tim and Patrick and said in a loud stage whisper, "Ooh, it's the artifice formerly known as Teddy. What an honor!"

Artie scowled at Jake and quickly turned back to Theodore, "Please. I mean... of course. And please have a seat. Arturo and I wanted to come to your wedding ceremony, but with so much going on around here, we just couldn't get away."

Leonardo took the drinks and handed one to his new husband as they moved toward a table, even though there were two open stools at the bar. "Thank you, Artie. It's quite understandable. Oh, to think of it... our joyous wedding one day and then poor Jason's funeral to follow. It's too, too much! Here's to us, anyway, and here's to poor, dear Jason. I remember him from the years when he worked at the Powerhouse on Folsom Street."

Theodore said, "Oh you knew Jason then, did you? I knew him then, too. Just think... you and I might have met each other way back then!"

"Perhaps we did, darling. Perhaps we did," Leonardo answered. "Do you want to go dancing when this is over, sweet-heart? Planet Big is happening at the Stud tonight!"

Tim saw Arturo waving to him from the kitchen and gradually worked his way through the crowd to get back there. "Tim, I hate to ask you this, but I'm in a terrible bind. We just got a reservation for Gail Wilson, party of ten for dinner tonight. They used to be such regulars and if she's with a bunch of her musician friends, I know at least six of them will order the New York steaks. I had such a run on them last night I'm nearly out. They'll either be musicians or restaurant people from Memphis Minnie's."

"Right," Tim said. "I know that group--big eaters. They haven't been in for a while. I didn't even know she was back in town. What do you need, Arturo?"

"Take my car and make a Costco run, will you? How's it going out front?"

"It's starting to get crowded already. I'll be glad to get out of here for a while. I can't stand it, everyone standing around talking and laughing. Jason was murdered and his killer hasn't been caught! How can people just forget about that and act like nothing happened, Arturo?"

"They're not forgetting Jason. They're here to remember him. You're too young to have been around during the worst of the AIDS years, Tim. Every week there were dozens of people who died and they'd post their pictures in the B.A.R. Between Artie and me we sometimes knew every single one of those young men."

"I've known some," Tim said with a catch in his voice as if he was trying to defend himself against an accusation. "I knew that guy they called Beatty that used to come in for lunch every Saturday in his wheelchair. He had AIDS. I even went to his service at Most Holy Redeemer. At least it was in a church. I was trying to tell my Aunt Ruth that gay people handled death better than most, but when it's someone you were really close to..."

"It's not a competition, Tim. I know this is hard for you. We all do. Artie and I even talked about giving you some time off if you want it."

"I'm supposed to be in the middle of my vacation right now so I can spend time with my Aunt Ruth during her visit, remember? It seems like she's working here more than I ever did."

"We meant after that, but if you'd rather be working this week we can arrange that too. Whatever you want, Tim."

"Thanks, Arturo."

"You bet... but you know, Tim, if there's one thing we learned during the worst of those AIDS years, it's that life goes on. You don't do Jason any good by being sad. You have to wake up every morning and put on the coffee and put your feet in your shoes and grab hold of yourself. You're not going to forget about Jason, but you don't do his memory any justice by curling up into a ball."

"I know... I know... what do you need besides meat at Costco, Arturo?"

"Could you pick up two flats of strawberries and a couple of dozen limes for Artie? My car is still across the street where Jorge left it. I imagine I've got parking tickets on it from all day Saturday, but I just haven't had time to deal with it. Thanks, Tim. You're a saint!"

Tim took Arturo's car keys and started off to run the errand. He was glad to have something to do to get him away from the restaurant for a little while, anyway. It was already getting crowded and the open bar was still a long ways off. It had been long enough since he and Jason were together that most people didn't treat Tim like the *grieving widow*, but a part of him still felt that way.

A large elderly woman stood outside the swinging doors of the restaurant kitchen. Tim pulled one side back and said, "Excuse me." Twice. She moved a couple of inches to one side and let Tim pass, but not without brushing up against her. The woman must have bathed in cologne. Getting one whiff of her was like having a mouthful of cheap shampoo. *Why can't people be content just to look their best without having to share their favorite fragrance with an unwitting world?* Tim coughed and sputtered. If he couldn't be sad, at least he could have the satisfaction of being irritable!

On his way out, Tim noticed that Artie had already enlisted Ruth to help him tend bar again. Tim was proud of her and glad that she was willing to pitch in, although it didn't surprise him.

Tim wasn't used to driving Arturo's car. First he had to adjust the rear-view mirror so that he could see the traffic behind him on Castro Street. A #24 Divisadero bus had him blocked in for the moment. Tim found the lever to move the seat up so that he could reach the pedals better. Jorge was shorter than Tim, so it seemed strange that the seat was back this far.

Costco was relatively calm for a Sunday afternoon and Tim was able to get in and out in about thirty minutes. He tossed everything from his cart into the back seat of Arturo's old Buick. On Market Street, mid-way between Noe and Castro he noticed a funny "whap-whap-whap" sound so he slowed down and pulled over to the curb. He opened the door and looked back. Sure enough, the left rear tire was nearly flat.

"Damn!" Tim said out loud. He could just make it back if he drove slowly. Then he or someone else would be able to deal with Arturo's flat tire later. There was a parking place opening up on Castro right in front of Arts. If he was lucky he could get it. He made an illegal U-turn and slipped Arturo's car into the spot.

Tim carried the steaks and strawberries to the kitchen and headed back through the crowded room when the front door of the restaurant burst open again. Teresa was arriving, dressed in pink with her blonde hair piled in a knot on top of her head. Seven muscular Cher impersonators she didn't even know followed right behind her as if they were part of her entourage. Someone inside shrieked as the Chers made their entrance and found their way toward Artie's end of the bar to order drinks.

By the time Tim got the limes and handed them over the front corner of the bar to his Aunt Ruth it was getting hard to move. If the fire marshal saw the place this crowded, he would close them down. Tim thought this was as good a time as any to go out and change the flat tire so that Arturo wouldn't need to worry about it after work. He also thought he'd have an easier time not getting too emotional about Jason if he kept busy.

Tim bent to put the key in the trunk and smelled... something... something terrible. The trunk opened. Tim caught his breath. Jorge was no longer missing. Rather, he was found, found naked in the trunk of Arturo's car amid dozens of rotting strawberries in a pool of blood.

Tim jumped back as the bile rose in his throat and he tried not to vomit. He looked around to make sure no one else was close enough to see what he saw. Then he closed the trunk again. The seven muscle-bound Cher impersonators were gathering on the sidewalk to have a group picture taken in front of the restaurant for the *B.A.R.* There was nothing Tim could do for Jorge now and he saw no reason to disrupt Jason's memorial gathering.

A police car double parked near the bus shelter in front of the Bank of America. There was nothing Tim could do for *either* Jason or Jorge besides tell the authorities, so he headed toward the corner of 18th and Castro with Arturo's car keys still in the palm of his hand.

Chapter 7

A young woman was fumbling in her purse at the front gate as Ruth was about to venture down the steps and out onto Collingwood Street. "Hello," Ruth said. "May I help you?"

"Oh, hello. I'm looking for my keys. I just bought this big new purse and I can't remember which compartment they're in. Wait a minute... who the hell are you?" She glanced up at Ruth with a startled look.

"I'm Ruth Taylor. I'm Tim Snow's aunt, visiting from Minnesota." Ruth wasn't used to hearing someone swear at her first thing in the morning, but she didn't want to make an enemy out of a stranger, either. She must have frightened the girl, and Ruth was the outsider, after all. "Come on in. I'll open the gate from the inside. If you're looking for your key, you must belong here. I was sure that Tim told me about everyone who lives in the building, but you're certainly not old enough to have a five year old child."

"You must mean Jane Larson. She and Ben are little Sarah's parents. I'm Marcia. I'm staying at Malcolm's place next door to them. I'm his... um... sister. I'm... ah... taking care of his apartment while he's away. Here are my keys. They fell all the way to the bottom. You know how it is with a new purse, huh? Thanks for letting me in." She held up a key chain and showed it to Ruth as if to prove who she was and that she belonged there. Then she did a little curtsy, spun around and disappeared up the stairs.

What a strange time to be coming in, Ruth thought. If I wasn't on Minnesota time I'd still be sleeping. Then her mind turned back to worrying about Tim as she descended Collingwood and turned left onto 19th Street. She walked past the Harvey Milk Elementary School. *This must be the place Tim mentioned where Teresa teaches. Well, it couldn't be any more convenient for her to get to work, could it?*

There were few sounds so early on a Monday morning but birdsongs and distant car doors slamming. Ruth walked and pondered the events since her arrival. She couldn't help but dwell on the fact that two murder victims had been found in only three days and that her nephew Tim had discovered both of them. She hoped the police didn't think Tim had anything to do with murder. *Nonsense! Besides, he's hardly been out of my sight except when he went to the store.*

During the few hours she was helping Artie behind the bar she'd been so busy she hadn't noticed much of anything besides taking care of the customers, but she was almost sure she could vouch for her nephew if it came down to his needing an alibi.

Ruth continued up the gradual slope of 19th Street. It was going to be a gorgeous day. The sky was a deep, clear blue directly overhead and the fog was burning back, but still visible over the hills to the west. She could just see the very top of that red and white tower sticking up like a ship on a windy sea.

She passed a yellow Victorian building and was startled to hear a buzzer. The security gate swung open to deposit a clatter of small children on the sidewalk in front of her. They carried book bags almost as big as they were. Their yawning mother followed them down the winding staircase with one baby in her arms and another in her belly. Ruth smiled and said good morning.

The woman said hello and returned a gentle smile. Tim made it sound as if only gay men lived in the Castro neighborhood, but that must have been exaggeration. Ruth saw toys in apartment windows and strollers inside gates and open garage doors, child safety-seats in the backs of parked cars. There seemed to be fertility in the air on a day like this and Ruth thought this must be a lovely neighborhood to raise children.

In spite of the houses being side by side with no room for the lawns and expansive yards she was used to in Minneapolis - even more so in the wealthy suburb of Edina - each home here in San Francisco seemed to have found a few inches of earth in which to plant something green. Glorious roses and dahlias bloomed everywhere. Spectacular vines that Ruth didn't recognize covered entire sides of buildings in purple, red or orange. On closer inspection they weren't really flowers, but looked more like colored leaves. She would have to ask Tim about them.

Near the corner of Eureka and 20th Street was a big blooming vine, all purple, lavender, and white. Some of the white blossoms had turned a little rusty or they wouldn't have looked real at all. The people who lived there must have been asked about it a million times because they put out a sign under a plastic cover. Ruth stopped to read it. *Brunfelsia... floribunda... Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow... also called by the common name: Morning, Noon, and Night... native to the Amazonian rainforest, the roots were once used to treat syphilis in South America.*

Ruth flinched at the word "syphilis," but then she noticed that the blossoms looked strangely familiar. She tried to remember those flowers as she walked. They were exactly the same colors of the artificial flowers she had once seen on an old lady's black felt hat. It was a subconscious flash of familiarity. Ruth tried to see the woman's face, but couldn't picture it. Ruth was sitting in church in the pew behind the hat. She was just a little girl and the old lady was some friend of Ruth's mother. She could smell her lilac perfume and sensed that her sister Betty – now Tim's mother - was squirming in the pew beside her. It was a solemn moment – a funeral, maybe – as still as the morning air in the Castro neighborhood. Then Ruth looked up at the street signs – 18th and Eureka – and she was back in the present.

How odd!

Ruth wondered if this was how Tim felt. She didn't know what to make of the tingling sensation down her spine. If this was how Tim experienced his grandmother's "gift" then Ruth could understand why he complained. It was downright creepy, but it passed the way a feeling of déjà vu ends as soon as you recognize it. She wanted to ask Tim about it, if only she could find the right time.

Ruth crossed Market Street at Eureka and saw a bright yellow snapdragon growing six inches tall right out of a crack in the sidewalk! It was a wonder that no one stepped on it. At 17th Street she had to make a turn to either the left or the right. To the left

was a long steep hill leading upward into the fog. She'd climbed enough hills lately. To the right was Market Street in the distance and the sounds of traffic. Ruth turned right and in a few moments she came across a homeless man and his shopping cart full of cans and bottles in the middle of the Pink Triangle Park and Memorial. He turned and walked away as Ruth picked up a brochure and read that the fifteen granite pylons, each inlaid with a pink triangle, were placed there in remembrance of the 15,000 gays who were murdered by the Nazi regime.

"15,000!" Ruth said out loud as her footsteps crunched across the pink stones. *My word! I never knew about that. I had no idea.*

Ruth crossed Market Street and looked up at the enormous rainbow flag flapping in the wind on a pole at the corner. She had seen rainbow flags flying from houses and apartment windows on every block of this neighborhood, but never one so huge! She thought to herself that there was a whole lot of San Francisco that she wanted to explore and she would start in earnest tomorrow. She'd been away for years, ever since her college days at Stanford, and it felt good to be back. In spite of two recent violent murders within blocks of where she stood, she felt safe here. It was a strange realization and she knew that it was partly because she was a woman.

A couple of guys were talking and laughing outside Orphan Andy's restaurant. It seemed to be the only place open at this hour of the morning. They wore hospital scrubs and had apparently just finished working the night shift. As she continued up Castro Street past the intersection of 18th, Ruth noticed that most of the people she saw at this time of day were either walking their dogs or bustling off to work. Many of them--men and women--returned her open smile and said good morning. They probably hadn't yet heard about Jorge's body being found in the trunk of a car yesterday in the same block where she was walking right now. Even Jason's murder hadn't made front-page news in the *Chronicle*.

At the corner of 19th and Castro Streets Ruth heard the clatter of a bicycle cutting through the thick, fragrant air toward Dolores Park. Then she heard the jingle of the collar on a large dog trundling down the sidewalk; his master ran behind, calling, "Booboo! Wait up, Booboo!"

Ruth imagined that every day must be a perfect day for a dog. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before she headed back up the hill toward her nephew's apartment. She thought of the scent of freshly cut grass on a summer lawn or the ripe smell of gasoline from the lawnmower. She hadn't seen a single lawn on her walk this morning. *How do these people in San Francisco manage to live their summer lives without lawns?* Ruth thought she might even like to smell the gasoline of an outboard motor on a fishing boat beside a creaky wooden dock on a cool blue Minnesota lake. *Am I getting homesick already?* She wondered... If she was, it wasn't for the bitter winter snows.

Tim was sitting on the front steps to his apartment with a beautiful golden-haired child. "Good morning, Aunt Ruth," he called. "You're up early! I wondered if you'd run away from home. I was nearly ready to call the cops and send out a search party."

"Oh Tim, I had the loveliest walk. It was just what I needed. How are you doing, dear? Did you sleep well? And who is this lovely dear?"

"Aunt Ruth, I'd like you to meet Sarah, the magic child," Tim said, smiling. "Sarah, this is my Aunt Ruth who came to visit us all the way from Minnesota."

Ruth crouched down and reached to shake hands, but the little girl jumped up and threw her arms around Ruth's neck and kissed her on the cheek. "Hi, Aunt Ruth."

Ruth hugged her gently and set her back down on the sidewalk. "My goodness, it's nice to meet you too, Sarah."

Sarah said, "Uncle Tim, why do you always call me 'magic child?' Who's magic?"

Tim reached over to pull the little girl back onto his knee and snuggled his face against her neck. "Because you *are* a magic child. You always have a smile and a hug for me. You almost never cry. You make me and everyone else happy just to see you. I don't know anybody else in the whole wide world that can do that. So you must be a magic child."

Sarah giggled.

"What a delightful little girl you are. Oh, Tim. I met another of your neighbors earlier this morning. Malcolm's sister, Marcia."

"His sister? Are you sure that's what she said?"

"Of course I am. She said she was apartment-sitting for him while he's away. She was coming in when I was going out. She'd just bought a great big new purse and she was having trouble finding her keys, so I opened the gate for her. It was barely daybreak yet. I guess I'm still on Minnesota time. I don't know what she was doing coming in at that hour of the morning."

"That's odd. I barely know Malcolm but I remember meeting him once up at Artie and Arturo's apartment shortly after he moved in here. I was kinda stoned. I probably wouldn't even recognize him if I saw him again."

"Well, I'm sure I'll meet him when he gets back in town and you'll be able to meet his sister Marcia, too."

"I remember at that party Artie introduced us and we talked for a little while and then Artie got distracted by a phone call or something, but Malcolm and I found at least one thing that we had in common and that was what we talked about."

"What was that, dear?"

"We talked about what it was like growing up as an only child."

Chapter 8

While Tim carried Sarah upstairs to her parents' apartment, Ruth poured herself a cup of coffee and then stepped out into the back garden. When she heard the apartment door open, she broke the calm with a yell, "I'm out in back, Tim. Come and join me, won't you? What a darling little girl."

"Yes, she's an angel, all right. Should I make another pot of coffee?"

"Only if you want more... this is plenty for me."

Ruth heard Tim making noises in the kitchen, the coffee grinder, the water in the sink turned on and off a couple of times. She closed her eyes and felt right at home in the presence of the one member of her family who still mattered deeply to her. "Thanks for making the coffee, by the way. I need you to show me how to make it the way you like it."

"Next time," he said.

"Come out here and tell me all about the rest of your evening."

Tim plopped down in the old wicker chair beside her. "What a night!"

"Did you have to stay late at the restaurant, dear?"

"Yes, I thought I'd never get out of there and I was already exhausted by the time Jason's gathering ended. Then the dinner shift was crazy. The place was packed!"

"Really? I left as soon as the open bar was over. Artie said he wouldn't need me any more when people started having to pay for their drinks again. You must have been tired..."

"Well...it was bad enough that I had to be the one find Jorge's bloody body in the trunk of Arturo's car. I'll have nightmares about that for years, I'm sure. Then the police came with all their questions. I didn't know any of the cops this time. They weren't gay, that's for sure, and a few of those muscle boys in the Cher wigs were still hanging out. The policemen didn't know what to make of them at all. You saw them."

"They were so funny," Ruth said.

"Well, yeah, all San Francisco cops have seen drag queens, but I doubt they're familiar with ones strong enough to snap a man in half. After you went home I stayed and helped out until the wee hours. Artie and Arturo were pretty shaken up about Jorge, of course, and there was still a ton of cleaning to do from the party, even after the dinner shift was all over and done with – dirty glasses and plates and empty hors d'oeuvres trays and tons of garbage to haul out to the dumpster."

"Arturo must have been especially upset about his nephew."

"Jorge wasn't his real nephew, you know. I always thought so too, but Arturo just called him that as a term of affection or as part of their shared heritage or whatever... anyway... I never realized all the work Jorge does... or *did*... until I got roped into some of it. Well, it was my own fault for offering to stay and help out."

"I'm sure your loyalty is appreciated by both of them, dear. Do the police have any idea who might be responsible for these horrible murders? Their showing up must have been quite an intrusion on Jason's memorial party!"

"Yeah... but it was time for it to wind down," Tim said. "No, they don't know who the killer is yet, but I'm sure they'll catch him. They already found Jorge's bloody clothes and the knife in a garbage can in the parking lot at Costco. The killer had stripped off Jorge's clothes with a knife but had left him his boots."

"Why would the killer cut off his clothes?"

"I don't know. Jason's clothes were cut, too. Weird, huh? And whoever stabbed Jorge had wiped all the blood and fingerprints off the knife, like he did with the one you found at Jason's. They've impounded Arturo's car to dust it for prints, but if the killer was smart enough to leave the knife clean he was probably smart enough to wear gloves. I'm sure they won't find any prints on Arturo's car except for his and mine and Jorge's and Artie's."

"How would they know?" Ruth asked

"That's another thing--they fingerprinted all of us last night. You can still see the ink on the edge of my thumb. The knife they found in the trash can at Costco was similar to the one you found on Hancock Street, like they must have come from the same set or something."

"So Jorge went shopping that day after all? And the killer drove Arturo's car back to Castro Street with Jorge's body in the trunk? It gives me a chill. How would the killer have known where to leave the car?" Ruth grimaced and stood up. "Do you want some more coffee dear? I think I'm going to have another cup after all, since you made fresh."

"Sure, you can top mine off."

"What a lot of nerve to leave that poor boy's body for Arturo to find it! I'm sorry it had to be you, but in any case it was just plain sick."

"Arturo still hasn't been able to track down Jorge's family. He doesn't seem to think it will matter to them much, except that there's a small life insurance policy. I imagine his mother will be happy to get that. I take it she wasn't much of a mother while he was alive. It reminds me of the situation with Jason's mother, although Jorge wasn't gay. It seems strange that these people should profit from the deaths of their children."

"Tim, we don't know what circumstances Jorge's mother found herself in," Ruth said. "Let's not criticize people we don't even know."

"You're right," Tim said with a sneer. "I guess I was just thinking of my own parents. Since Jorge wasn't even gay, it's kind of comforting to know that parents can abandon their children for other reasons. I hate to be cynical, but if it makes me feel better I will."

Ruth knew better than anyone how her own sister had treated the fact of Tim's sexual orientation. Ruth loved her nephew no matter what, but Betty was her only sister and Ruth hated to get in the middle of such a sensitive family issue. She tried to bring the conversation back to the present. "So the killer isn't necessarily targeting gay men. That's interesting. I thought maybe he had something against--"

"He might have thought that since Jorge worked on Castro Street he must be gay."

"That's a good point, of course. I hadn't thought of that. How about you, dear? This is all so shocking. How are you holding up? Do you need to go in to work again tonight?"

"No, they won't need me tonight. They're trying something new this month, since weekday business has been so slow. They close the kitchen and do comedy night on Mondays and karaoke on Tuesdays. At least Arturo gets some time off this way. They'll have to hire another bartender soon, but Artie's been training Patrick. One of the comics lined up tonight's schedule and Patrick and Jake can take care of the cocktails."

"Yes, I saw the schedule on that bulletin board we used for Jason's pictures. Did you put all that back the way it was? No wonder you were there so late."

"Yeah, I did," Tim answered. "I put all those pictures of Jason back in the envelopes in the desk drawer in the office... well, all but one. Artie will never know I took one of my favorites."

Ruth wasn't sure whether she should console him and condone Tim's petty theft, but she thought instead it might be better to keep his mind from wandering down the path of missing Jason. "Maybe we could get away somewhere today then, just the two of us."

"Hey, that's a good idea. Let's get out of the neighborhood. Where would you like to go?"

"I'd like an escape. I haven't been to San Francisco in years, you know. Do you want to go somewhere touristy, maybe? How about the Haight/ Ashbury? Coit Tower? Alcatraz? What would you suggest?"

"Well, if you want someplace touristy there's no place like Fisherman's Wharf! You haven't seen the Ferry Building since they refurbished it, have you? I know... let's take the F-Line all the way from one end to the other - from Castro Street to the squawking seagulls. We could walk around Chinatown too, if you like - stop in for an espresso at

one of those old coffeehouses in North Beach. The neighborhoods in that part of town all run together."

"That sounds like fun. We can see how long our legs hold out. I already had a nice walk around the neighborhood this morning. That reminds me... What are those beautiful, brightly colored vines that grow so big around here? I see them in purple or red or orange, usually."

"You must mean bougainvillea," Tim said. "In Palm Springs I've even seen them in sort of a salmon-colored pink and almost pure white."

"And what are those bushes with the big yellow trumpet-shaped flowers hanging down? They look so exotic!"

"I think those are called 'Angel's Trumpet.' You see them in a lot of Art Nouveau designs, in lamps and things. They're in the belladonna family. You've heard of deadly nightshade? Well, I'm not sure how poisonous these are. If you really wanted to kill someone, you'd probably want something a little stronger, like strychnine... or a knife."

"That's not funny!"

"I'm sorry," Tim said as he stood. "I'm gonna take a shower and roll a joint and then we can escape, maybe stop for breakfast in the neighborhood first and then go see the sights... wherever you'd like. I haven't felt like a tourist in San Francisco in a long time."

They stopped at Orphan Andy's near the corner of Castro and 17th Street, just east of the Twin Peaks bar. It was early enough on a Monday morning that they didn't have to wait for a seat. They got a prized little table in the window where they could watch the ever-changing view of pedestrians and the brightly colored antique streetcars as they started their run to Fisherman's Wharf. They both ordered chicken fried steak and eggs with biscuits and gravy. Ruth could almost hear her arteries slamming shut with every bite. She pictured great greasy globs of cholesterol piling together like automobiles in a multi-car collision, but they were delicious. Tim paid the bill and flirted with their waiter before they walked across 17th Street to the island and boarded a 1936 bullet-shaped Brooklyn streetcar on the F- Market Line.

More people got on, mostly tourists with maps, until the half-full streetcar started up at last and rounded the corner, clanging its bells as it turned onto Market Street. Ruth and Tim were both so stuffed from their huge breakfast that they barely talked for a long time.

Ruth looked around and said, "Tim, this is amazing! It's like living in Disneyland or something. I can't believe people actually ride these gorgeous old antiques to work every day. Don't you want to pinch yourself sometimes?"

"No, I'm not that much into S&M."

Ruth wasn't sure what he meant by that, but she was hesitant to ask. Knowing Tim as well as she did, he was probably trying to embarrass her again with some sexual innuendo. They watched people getting on and off the streetcar block after block, as well as the carnival of pedestrians on Market Street.

At Powell, Tim nudged his aunt and pointed at the line waiting to ride the cable car. "Look at all the tourists in their matching plaid polyester, souvenir T-shirts and shorts. They're comfortable now, but they'll be covered with giant goose-bumps by this afternoon when the fog rolls in again."

At Fisherman's Wharf, even after such a huge breakfast, Ruth was tempted to buy a crab cocktail from the sidewalk vendor outside Alioto's. Tim saw her eyeing them. "Go ahead, Aunt Ruth. We'll walk it off. How about scaling Telegraph Hill?"

"Sure, I guess so. These hills look pretty steep, though."

"Big hills build great asses! Nobody in this town needs a Stairmaster, that's for sure. It's quite a climb, but the views are worth it and we can walk off some of this food. We don't want to gain twenty pounds each on your vacation."

"That looks like quite a climb. I don't know."

"I've got an idea - let's compromise. We can take a bus from Pier 39 up to Coit Tower and then walk back down."

It was the most convoluted bus route Ruth had ever seen. They stopped at Filbert Street to let dozens of Chinese schoolchildren cross. All of them were exactly the same height and wore matching purple t-shirts, walking hand-in-hand, two by two, smiling and laughing. At Washington Square, Ruth nudged Tim and pointed out the window. "Look at that old man in the park leading all the people in some sort of dance." Tim explained to his aunt that it was a Tai Chi class. Outside Mama's restaurant a long line waited in the sunshine to get inside for lunch.

This bus was about half the length of a normal one. Ruth doubted that a full-size bus could have made the sharp twists and turns through the streets of North Beach and the narrow, winding incline up Telegraph Hill. At the top of Coit Tower they got separated by a group of Japanese tourists coming down the stairs to the elevator level. When Tim caught up to Ruth on the observation deck, she was standing still with her eyes closed, not even facing the views. "What's going on?" he asked. "You look like you're lost in thought about a million miles away."

"A million *years* away," she corrected him. "The last time I was here a boy kissed me right in this very spot."

"A boy? Not a man?"

"A boy." She closed her eyes again. "I was just a girl then myself, a college girl at Stanford and he was a college boy, so sweet."

"Uncle Dan, you mean? You met in college, right?"

"I said sweet." Ruth opened her eyes and laughed. "Oh, okay, you're right. Dan could be sweet at times, I'll give him that, but this was before I met Dan, a boy named Frank. It was sunset and it was our first date and our first kiss. I could have fallen pretty hard for Frank."

"What happened?"

"The lottery."

"He won the lottery?"

"No, the draft lottery – Vietnam – ask Arturo or Artie about it sometime. Frank's number came up so close to the top he enlisted before they could draft him. I never heard from him again after he left for basic training."

"Do you think he's still alive?"

"I don't know. I doubt it. I never knew his family and I don't even remember where he was from, but I doubt it. I sure do remember that kiss, though. Somehow, I think I would have heard from him again if he got back alive."

"I'll bet you would have."

"War does terrible things to people's lives. Even when we think we're far away from it, the consequences reach us eventually, like dominoes falling; somewhere down the line we get hit, whether it's the senseless death of someone you love or something as mundane as higher gas prices. During the Second World War they had rationing, you know."

"I've heard of that, I guess," Tim said, "in history books."

"If it hadn't been for the war, all of our lives might have taken different paths." They turned toward the view of Sts. Peter and Paul Church beside Washington Square directly below them. In the distance, the bay was dotted with sailboats and ships sailing under the Golden Gate Bridge. "What were you thinking about, Tim?"

"These windows are filthy. They're not even real glass. What a waste, to lure people all the way up here for the view and you have to look at it through this murky scratched up Plexiglas. And why do people have to stuff pennies behind them? This isn't a wishing well. It's worse than graffiti. People can be so stupid!"

Ruth took Tim by the arm and led him back toward the stairs to the elevator. "Come on. You're starting to sound just like you did when you were a little boy and about to throw a tantrum. Maybe you need some chocolate. Let's find the gift shop."

Tim was feeling irritable, but he didn't need chocolate. Maybe it was talk of war or thoughts of the different paths that any of their lives might have taken. Why did Jason's path have to lead him to the point of a killer's knife? Maybe Tim just needed

to get laid. Once outside, the air was fresh and damp and salty, wafting all the way up from Fisherman's Wharf to the top of Telegraph Hill. Tim felt fine again and then he noticed a familiar-looking Cadillac across the parking lot. "Hey, look! I think that's Viv's car, the piano player from Arts. Yes, that's her and her cowboy husband, Roy."

"Where?"

"The old Caddie over there." Tim pointed and they headed toward the car. The passenger side window was half-way open and they could see Viv and Roy making out in the front seat like a couple of teenagers.

"Will you look at that? It's bad enough what heterosexuals do in the privacy of their own homes, but why do they have to rub it in our faces?" Tim let out a long whistle and walked right up to the open window. "Hey, Viv! Why don't you two love-birds get a room? This is enough to scare the horses."

Viv looked up and giggled, "Oh look, Roy, it's Tim from the restaurant and his Aunt Rose from Michigan."

Ruth let the mistake pass. "Hello again, Vivian. Nice to see you, Roy."

"My Aunt Ruth is visiting from Minnesota. But anyway... what brings you two honeymooners all the way up here when you have a bed at home?" Tim kept on teasing.

Viv pointed to a pile of shopping bags in the back seat. "Roy took me shopping at Macy's and Pier One and then we went to lunch at the Buena Vista."

"What a lovely day to be outdoors," Ruth said.

"Yes, well, we needed a little break from all the work going on at home."

"What work?" Tim asked.

"Didn't I tell you? Roy is painting my whole house inside and out from top to bottom. He's already finished with the bathroom. We thought that old pink decor in there was much too feminine for a big husky guy like him. We bought new shower curtains and soap dishes and the little rug that wraps around the commode, you know. Next he's going to paint the kitchen and redo the chipped tiles."

"What a handy guy to have around," Tim said.

"Oooh, he sure is!" Viv cooed in her best Mae West imitation. "And he's doing wonders with my little yard already, aren't you, honey? I couldn't grow anything, but he's going to buy me some roses out at the big nursery on Sloat one of these days. We just thought we'd take a drive up to Telegraph Hill today and take in the view before we head home. Fancy running into you two! I haven't been up here in years!"

"Me neither," Ruth said.

Tim noticed that Roy's fly was open and Viv's blouse was unbuttoned, revealing a lacy black push-up bra. "Yeah, it's a great day for the view, Viv. You're getting to see Coit Tower up close and personal and Tex is getting a grand view of your Twin Peaks."

"Oh my goodness!" Viv spread her bejeweled fingers across her cleavage.

"Well, you two lovebirds have fun and try not to get arrested. We'll see you back at work one of these days, I guess."

As they walked away from the car, Ruth said, "Wasn't Roy awfully quiet today?"

"No more so than usual. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever heard more than two words out of him. He just makes a few grunts from time to time and points at things when he wants them. Viv must like the macho caveman type."

Ruth laughed. "Maybe he didn't like their little afternoon tryst being interrupted."

"Then he should have picked a better place to park than Telegraph Hill in tourist season."

They took their time walking down to Grant Avenue and stopped for a cold beer at the Savoy Tivoli. After riding the Cable Car over Nob Hill on their way to Market Street and the F-Line back to the Castro, Ruth said, "This city is so beautiful! I've only been here a few days and I don't know if I could bear to think about leaving."

"Maybe you don't have to. Worse things could happen than making a move to San Francisco. What do you have to go back to Edina for? You already have a job lined up at Arts if you want one. You should think about it."

"Maybe I will," she smiled, "...think about it, I mean."

Chapter 9

Thursday's edition of the *B.A.R.* ran a photograph of Jason on the obituary page with a full-column biography listing all the places he had worked and the organizations he'd belonged to and volunteered for: from the Castro Kiwanis to the board of the AIDS Emergency Fund and Project Open Hand. Tim never realized how philanthropic his ex-boyfriend had been over the years. The front page also had an article about Sunday's gathering at Arts. It continued on an inside page with a photograph of the muscular drag queens in their long dark Cher wigs posing in front of the restaurant. Tim couldn't help notice that the taillight and part of Arturo's car were visible in the photograph. He wondered if it occurred to anyone else that Jorge's body was still in the trunk when that picture was taken.

Another feature article focused on the murders in the gay community. This one was more specific in exploring the attempts to find a link between Jason's death and Jorge's, even though Jorge was straight. That little fact didn't seem to matter to the police, the journalist or any of the people he'd interviewed for the story. Anything was possible when the whole neighborhood was so rife with speculation about a serial killer in the Castro.

On Thursday evening Ruth wanted to get out of the neighborhood again. "Let me take you someplace nice for dinner, Tim," she offered. "You name the place and I'll provide the credit card... wherever you want to go!"

"How about the Grand Café in the Hotel Monaco? I've heard that the food is terrific and expensive."

"It's a date."

"You buy dinner and I'll spring for cab-fare," Tim said. "We should get all dressed up. It'll be fun."

"Do you even own a steam iron, Tim? I need to find something nice to wear and I'm sure I'll need to press some wrinkles out."

"Yes, it's in the kitchen cupboard under the sink. The ironing board is behind the door. You have to move the blue chair to get at it. I'm going to check my email, okay?"

"Take your time, dear."

Tim hadn't logged on for several days, not since his Aunt Ruth arrived in town. The computer was in the living room, after all – her room, for the time being. More

important, he hadn't logged on to any of the gay sites. The first one he checked was dudesurfer.com, the only site he actually paid for. That entitled him to unlimited access and he could post up to eight pictures of himself – he only had three – and view anyone else who was logged on to the site, member or not, and use the "search" feature as many times as he wanted.

The "search" feature was the one he'd hardly ever used, much less mastered, but he was curious about it. When he'd cleaned out the sexual paraphernalia from Jason's house – unnecessarily, as it would turn out – he wondered what other traces of Jason's sex life were left behind after his death. Tim had no idea how many web-sites Jason belonged to, but dudesurfer.com was one he was sure of. Jason probably had profiles on dudesnude, manhunt and all the recon sites as well, but Tim remembered him mentioning this one.

It was when they first met, when Tim started working at Arts. Arturo introduced them and they shook hands across the bar. Tim tried to be friendly, but he was intimidated by Jason right off the bat. Jason was so handsome that Tim considered him way out of his league. "Dudesurfer" was among the first words Jason said to him:

"Hi, Tim. You look familiar. Where have I seen you before? On-line, maybe? You on dudesurfer?"

"What? What line?"

"On-line... on the Internet... you know, the computer?" Jason looked at him like he was a blithering idiot, which was exactly how Tim felt at that moment.

"Dudesurfer.com. I thought I'd cruised you once, even chatted you up, but nothing came of it. That wasn't you? Castrohottie?"

Tim didn't know whether to be flattered or not. He just felt stupid. "No, I've never even heard of it. That wasn't me."

As soon as Tim got home that night he punched in dudesurfer.com and bought a one-year membership on his credit card. Then he searched for the user name

"Castrohotty, castrati, castrotoddy." He wasn't sure exactly what Jason said, but he finally found the one he must have been talking about under "Castrohottie" and he wasn't a bit flattered anymore. Tim didn't look anything like that guy!

Now, all these months--no, *years* later--he tried to find Jason's profile by doing a search on everyone who lived within the 94114 area code. There were dozens of profiles, but Tim finally found a picture of Jason's face and clicked on it. That opened several other photographs, some nudes and some that zeroed in on specific body parts. Tim had never seen these pictures before and it seemed wrong somehow to be looking at them now that Jason was dead. He'd never searched for Jason's profile before because at first he didn't think he stood a chance with him and later, when they were together, Tim forgot all about that silly website.

"Handcock" was his screen name, a take-off on Hancock Street, Tim imagined, but there was also a very sexy picture of Jason holding his cock in his hand. Tim looked more closely at the profile. It said that Jason was 90/10 active and open to just about

everything, even things Tim had never heard of before. Then he looked at the date of the last time Jason had been on-line and it was the same as the last "update" of his profile. It was right about the time that Tim and Jason were at the peak of their relationship when Jason had posted: *Already have the hottest BF in town. Not looking for LTR, but trying to interest him in a NSA three-way one of these days.*

Tim wished he had a dictionary to explain these initials, but BF meant boyfriend; that much was obvious. Tim couldn't be happier to know that Jason had called him "the hottest boyfriend in town." Jason *was* attentive toward him, especially at first, but Tim had to face the fact that Jason was always raring to go. Jason was as horny as a Great Dane pup locked up in a room full of bitches in heat. But still... this was the nicest thing Jason had ever put into words.

Tim read the profile again and stared at the pictures of Jason. He wondered who took them. Some looked like professional shots or stills from a porn movie. LTR had to mean "long-term relationship" and when Tim thought a little harder he figured out that NSA stood for "no strings attached." He remembered the three-ways toward the end of their relationship. They were never Tim's favorite times, but he went along for the ride.

"How do you like this one?" Ruth stood in the doorway of the living room holding a freshly pressed green dress in the air. "Is it formal enough for a date with my favorite nephew?"

"It'll be great. I'll get my suit out of the closet." Between the two of them in a one-bedroom, one-bath apartment with Ruth's suitcases in the living room and Tim's dirty laundry spreading out from his clothes hamper into the hall, it was a major chore to get dressed up enough to look presentable at the Grand Cafe, but they managed. Tim liked having his Aunt Ruth around. Or was it simply that he liked having another person in his daily life? Someone else's energy and voice after he'd lived alone for quite a while now? Tim wondered whether he would ever meet a great guy and really settle down.

Each week the *B.A.R.* ran pictures of happy gay couples all decked out in suits and ties with announcements of their recent weddings. Sometimes Tim would stare with envy, especially when one or the other was someone he'd bedded. On one occasion Tim knew both men in the photograph *intimately*.

Having his Aunt Ruth around reminded Tim of when they lived together before, all the while up until he finished high school and moved to San Francisco. They had a lot more room there in the sprawling suburban home in Edina, Minnesota. They had his Uncle Dan around too. He wasn't a bad guy. Tim was grateful that Dan didn't object to his wife taking in her gay nephew after his parents disowned him.

Tim and his uncle were never "buddies," the way Dave Anderson, the track coach, had been at first. That was the first man Tim ever had sex with, the first time he

thought he was in love, the first time for so many things that happened just before all the trouble started when people found out. If only they'd been more careful, Tim sometimes thought. "But everything happens for a reason," his Aunt Ruth would say. "It's all part of God's plan."

Ruth wasn't much of a church-going person, at least not during the years when Tim lived with them. Neither was Uncle Dan. Tim tried to remember whether they said grace at meals like at his parents' house. Maybe Ruth had gone to church when she was younger, growing up sisters with Tim's mother Betty. Maybe Uncle Dan had drawn her away from the church.

There were so many things that aroused Tim's curiosity now but had never come up. This week he and his Aunt Ruth had all the time in the world together. Tim might even ask her what happened to her marriage, not that it was any of his business. They'd never been big on secrets, though, even back in high school. His biggest secret, his being homosexual and having sex with a teacher, was so far out of the bag and out of the closet that any secrets before that one were now a dusty pile of "maybe's" and "if only's" and "what if's?".

They were seated at a table for two at the base of a pillar in the main dining room of the Grand Cafe. "What a beautiful place," Ruth said. "I feel like we're on a movie set in the 1920s."

"Well, it's quite a change from Arts," Tim laughed. "Don't get me wrong. As long as you're paying for it I'm not complaining. But one thing about Arts is that you can leave there feeling twice as full and spend half the money."

Their martinis arrived as Ruth studied her menu. "Look at all these choices. You go ahead and order whatever suits your fancy, dear. I think I'll have the filet of sole."

"I've heard the lamb is great. I'll have that. Be sure to save room for dessert. They're famous for them here."

All Tim knew for certain was that his mother had enough church-going fervor for ten normal people. Her whole life could fall down around her like a crumbling house of twigs in the great quake of 1906. She didn't care. All that mattered was her church and her bible. He could picture her holding it over her heart, a shield against the arrows of anything ugly or distasteful or anything too humanly real. All she needed was to pray and read her bible. And drink, of course.

Thinking back on it now, Tim wanted to laugh out loud. Ruth and Betty Bergman grew up good little Minnesota girls whose father was rich and whose mother was a

psychic. Now Betty clutched her bible and her booze and Ruth was slinging drinks in a gay bar on Castro Street in San Francisco. Which one had turned out normal?

They had taken a taxi to the restaurant, but after dinner they walked a while to let their food settle. Only after they headed south toward Market Street did Tim realize they would pass through the seediest parts of the Tenderloin. Not the best sights of the city. A toothless woman in glittering green short shorts and spike heels lunged out of a doorway and screamed at someone in the window above. They stepped over a snoring man splayed across the sidewalk and then they had to walk out into the street to avoid a fight between two large drunks. Tim pulled his Aunt Ruth toward him and waved down the next cab. "Come on. Let's get out of here and go home. I'd forgotten how dicey this part of town can be at night. Better yet, let's stop in at Arts and see if there's any more news. If there's one thing those queens are good at it's gossip."

It was nearly 11 p.m. and Arts was fairly busy, but they found a couple of open stools at the bar. Artie was glad to see them. "It's been steady like this all night," he said. "I guess the folks who weren't here on Sunday afternoon read about Jason in the gay papers today. It's like another memorial, but without the drag queens."

"Look who's talking about drag queens," Tim said. "I was just telling my Aunt Ruth this evening about your former career in show business. I told her she could probably get you to bring out some of your old photo albums from Finocchios if she asked you real nice."

"You don't want to see them! Those days are ancient history... but that's mostly because I don't fit into any of my old gowns anymore," Artie laughed and got their drinks. "You know, I thought we'd slow down right after the dinner rush, but it's only starting to get civilized now that the kitchen is closed. We have simply got to hire another bartender. You should have been here earlier, Ruth. I would have put you to work again. Arturo hired a new *nephew* he's training in the kitchen tonight, so I hope he works out."

"Tim and I just had a wonderful dinner at the Grand Café, but we can stick around for a while if you think you might need us," Ruth offered.

"I don't think we will, Ruth, but you never know," Artie said before he walked back to the rear waiters' station where Patrick and Jake took turns ordering trays of drinks. Viv was playing show tunes, but no one was singing along, even though there was a good-sized crowd on the upper level around the baby grand piano.

Ruth tried to bring up the subject of moving into a hotel again, but before Tim could respond Jake plopped down on a stool at the bar beside them. "I think Patrick can

handle the business alone from now on, don't you Artie? The dinner plates are all cleared and it's just cocktail service now. I'm beat and I have an appointment for a new tattoo in the morning."

Ruth suspected that another tattoo was the last thing Jake needed. He reminded her of one of those men who traveled with carnival sideshows when she was a girl. Jake had more visible piercings than anyone she had ever seen in Edina. She'd been shocked when the college girl who came in twice a week to do housekeeping for Ruth had gotten a teensy little diamond chip for the side of her nose, now tame compared to Jake. The other waiter, Patrick, was such a contrast. He appeared to be the stereotypical blue-eyed blonde All-American boy. Ruth tried not to be judgmental. They all seemed to get along fine.

"Sure, go on home," Artie told Jake. "But you need another tattoo like you need another hole in the head and I mean that literally!"

"It's because I'm Jewish," Jake said. "I got hooked on bodily modification from day one. If I hadn't been circumcised, none of the rest of this would have followed." He disappeared into the back room and came out a few minutes later with a black leather jacket over one shoulder and a backpack over the other.

"Hey, did anyone see the paper today?" Jake asked.

"I don't read the papers much since the *Weekly World News* stopped publishing." Patrick said. "Remember that issue with the headline: 'MERMAN CAUGHT IN SOUTH PACIFIC!?' Gee, I loved that paper. And it's lucky they caught her before she took it on the road. Ethel Merman would have been just so wrong for Nellie Forbush... but what a career move, especially after being dead all these years!"

Jake laughed. "You are *so* blonde. Have you been snorting crystal again?"

Ruth felt lost in their banter. "Of course we saw Jason's obituary and the article about-"

"No, not the *B.A.R.*, either." Jake sighed. "I'm talking about today's *Chronicle*."

"I have it delivered every morning, but I barely glanced at it today," Tim said. "It's still sitting on my kitchen table at home. Why?"

Jake draped his jacket across an empty barstool and pulled the newspaper out of his backpack while leaning into the bar next to Ruth. "I've got it right here."

"I saw it," Artie took the paper from Jake and spread it across the bar. "It's on the bottom of page four: *Knifing victim found in car trunk in Golden Gate Park*. Here, Jake, you read it. I can't even bear to think about it anymore."

"Oh my God," Tim said.

"Listen to this," Jake said, "*multiple stab wounds to torso and face... blah, blah, blah... 19-year-old foreign student... sophomore at SF State... blah, blah... body wrapped in pink plastic... native of Paris...*"

"How dreadful," Ruth said. "He was only a child, just like Jorge, and they found his body in the trunk of a car too?"

"What else does it say?" Tim asked.

Jake went on, "He had a part-time summer job as a pizza delivery boy ...blah, blah... oh wait, I love this part... *four large cold pizzas were still stacked in boxes on the back seat... keys left in ignition of the car.* It was abandoned in the parking lot next to the Stow Lake boathouse... here's the last line... *name withheld pending notification of next of kin in France.*"

"Do they say if they think it's the same killer?" asked Tim.

Jake said, "They don't say anything about that here, but it seems pretty darned likely, doesn't it?"

"Jason wasn't found in the trunk of his car. He was just inside his own back door on the kitchen floor and he was still alive when I found him. Barely alive, but breathing."

"Let's just think about this logically for a minute," Ruth said to the group of them. "The first two murders, Jake and Jorge were both linked to this place, but this boy wasn't. You don't even serve pizza here, right? And Arts doesn't deliver food at all."

Artie said, "We're listed with 'Waiters on Wheels,' but that's a small part of our business."

Ruth asked, "Does this boy's description fit anyone you might know?"

Patrick was standing at the bar by this time, "I had a fling with a Frenchman last winter. Ooh, la, la. He was so hot! There's no way he could have been only nineteen, though. He had to be at least in his thirties. Hey Tim, are you still seeing that sexy French flight attendant? What was his name? Jean-Yves?"

Tim ignored the question, mostly for his Aunt Ruth's sake. He pulled the paper closer to have a look at it. "Aside from Arts, did Jason and Jorge have anything else in common? I'm starting to wonder whether the gay angle had anything to do with their murders. Jorge was straight. Does it say whether this French kid was gay? I don't see anything about that. He could have been either."

"Who knows?" Patrick said. "*The Chronicle* might not have brought it up, but the gay papers will. We'll have to wait until next Thursday for a follow-up story."

"You're right. There's too much we can only guess at. We can check the local television news and watch the Chronicle carefully every day to see if they do a follow-up story on it, too."

"I'm outta here," Jake said, "Good-night, everybody!"

Viv had finally gotten an elderly straight couple to sing along to *The Rose*. They had obviously had a lot to drink, but they were putting money in her tip jar, so she was happy to play anything. Roy Rodgers with a "d" was waiting for her to get off work, sitting at a corner table all by himself, nursing a beer and working the crossword puzzle in the Examiner. If nobody else came in, Viv would be ready to go home soon.

"I'm tired, too," Tim said. "If you don't need us, Artie, I think I'm ready to turn in."

"No, I'll be fine," Artie said. "Thanks for sticking around. Go on home."

"Shouldn't we say hello to Arturo, at least?" Ruth asked.

Tim pushed the swinging kitchen doors open and led the way. "How's it going, Arturo?"

"Hey, Tim. Ruth. You two getting a taste of the city?"

"Yes, Tim showed me a wonderful place tonight, the Grand Café in the Hotel Monaco."

"Fancy." Arturo let out a whistle. "Especially compared to this place."

"She paid," Tim said.

"There is nothing wrong with this place, Arturo," Ruth insisted. "By the way, I met another one of your tenants this morning. Or, I should say, the sister of one of your tenants. Marcia. She said she was Malcolm's sister... on the second floor?"

"Sister?" Arturo looked as surprised as Tim had been. "Malcolm doesn't have any sister that I know of."

"She had her own set of keys," Ruth said. "She told me that she takes care of his place when he's out of town. I think she mentioned watering his plants or something."

"Takes care of what plants? He doesn't have so much as a cactus. Besides, Malcolm's not out of town. I just saw him yesterday."

"You *saw* him?" Tim asked.

"Well, I talked to him." Arturo explained. "I was giving some water to those dead geraniums Artie put out on our deck. I don't know why he drags home these plants and doesn't bother to take care of them. Anyway, the soil was so hard that the water spilled over and ran down between the floorboards. I heard it hitting paper, so I yelled down to apologize and Malcolm said that was okay because it was yesterday's paper. He travels a lot and we rarely see him. I asked him when he'd gotten home but he must have gone back inside and didn't hear me."

"How odd..." Tim said under his breath.

"Well, Ruth, if you see any more of this Marcia person, you let me know, okay?"

"I sure will, Arturo, I sure will," Ruth picked up her purse and put her jacket over her elbow. "Good night."

Chapter 10

Tim had never cared for church except for Sunday school where you sang silly, repetitive songs, recited Bible verses, and a nice lady would read to the class. At Christmas time, he had enjoyed arranging fabric stars and camels and wise men on a felt-covered board. The stories were as much fun as the funnies in the Sunday paper and just as far-fetched, especially once Tim learned to read the words. Burning bushes might be believable, but not getting two of every animal in the world onto a home-made boat.

Tim remembered funerals too, but not so much from childhood as from recent years. They were his only church-going experiences of late. Most of Tim's friends preferred to be remembered the way Jason was. A few drinks and toasts to his memory would be plenty for Tim when his time came but some gay people, no matter how ostracized they had been by their church while they were alive – and unable to have a church wedding – still insisted on the pomp and pageantry of a big church funeral.

And they could well afford to, some of those rich old queens Tim waited on at Arts over the years. The church was as happy to get its hands on their inheritance as the undertakers and caterers with whom they'd made "pre-arrangements." The bars where they'd spent a fortune in their lifetimes were happy to rake in the bucks from their friends for one last big bash.

Tim couldn't remember now, but he supposed he said his prayers when he was a kid – right along with the rest of them. As a small child he probably prayed for a sought-after toy like a boy who wrote a letter to Santa. What did he expect? It didn't take many Christmases to figure out which of his wishes would come true. Did he talk to God and did God answer? Tim couldn't be sure, all these many years later, just as he couldn't be sure that it *didn't* work out exactly the way they said it did either. When he didn't get what he wanted, they told him, "God works in mysterious ways," and that was that.

Tim was only a boy when his grandmother died. That was when it really kicked in. That's when he remembered starting to see things in his dreams that sometimes happened in his waking life. That was when the grownups whispered about his grandmother's "gift" being passed along and they started watching him closely.

Tim remembered rolling over onto his back in the middle of the night. He could smell his mother's dry scent of gin or bourbon and old perfume and he would know she was there in the dark. Afraid to open his eyes, he'd whisper, "Mom?"

"Yes Tim. I'm right here."

"What are you doing?"

"I came to see if you need anything."

"No, I don't need anything. I'm fine. Go back to bed." The last traces of the vivid Technicolor dream he'd been having were skittering away like roaches under the kitchen light bulb. Then he dared to open his eyes and his mother would not have made a move from her chair in the dark. She would still be sitting there... staring at him.

Pot helped. It was Friday afternoon when they went for a walk in Golden Gate Park. Tim lit a joint and offered some to his Aunt Ruth, but she declined. She hadn't smoked with him again since that first day when she arrived in town, the day they found Jason's body. Neither of them intended to go to Stow Lake today, where the French student's body was found, but here they were. Tim stood in the sun in the parking lot and felt the violence hanging in the air like the smells from a nearby trashcan. He'd stopped to use the funky old restrooms near the rose gardens, but his Aunt Ruth waited until they got to these newer spotless facilities. Tim waited outside for her and sensed the smell of blood and fear in this spot, not to mention the angry insanity of the man who wielded the knife.

Tim didn't mention it when Ruth came out. It was another perfect San Francisco afternoon and none of the hikers, joggers, dog-walkers or mothers pushing strollers seemed aware of the recent violent murder nearby.

That night, Ruth would have been happy to go to bed early, but when Artie called she agreed to come into Arts and help out. Tim came along too and it got busy again. Both Arturo and Artie kept saying they needed to hire more full-time employees with both Jorge and Jason gone. Ruth couldn't agree more. The new *nephew* that Arturo was supposed to be training didn't even bother to show up that night, so Tim helped out in the kitchen. Jake was moving slowly all evening while he complained about the soreness of his latest tattoo. Ruth hated to think where on his body this one might be located. She was squeamish about such things.

Ruth slept blissfully late on Saturday morning and awoke to the sad peaceful howls of distant foghorns on the bay. There was still no sound from Tim's bedroom, so she crept out the apartment door and down the front steps to pick up the morning paper. The little girl named Sarah was just outside the gate with a pregnant and pretty blonde woman. She was surrounded by grocery bags and searching for keys. Ruth turned the latch to unlock the gate from the inside. "Hello Sarah. How are you, dear?"

"Aunt Ruth!" She jumped up into Ruth's arms.

"Is this your Mommy, sweetheart? Hi, I'm Ruth Taylor, Tim's aunt from Minnesota."

"Oh, hello. I'm Jane. Thanks for letting us in. What perfect timing. It's nice to finally meet you. Tim told us you were coming to visit. My husband Ben is parking the car. We usually do our grocery shopping early on Saturday morning before it gets too crowded at Safeway. Sarah just adores your nephew. Here comes Ben now. I want to introduce you."

Ben set down the case of laundry soap from his shoulder and removed his baseball cap to reveal a full head of red hair. He shook Ruth's outstretched hand and then wiped his brow before he put his cap back on. He was built like a lumberjack with piercing green eyes. Ben reminded Ruth of the statue of Paul Bunyan outside Bemidji, Minnesota.

Jane said, "Ruth is Tim's aunt from Minnesota. I was just telling her how much Sarah adores Tim."

"You bet she does. Tim is a great guy. How long are you in town for, Miss Taylor?"

"Call me Ruth, please. Well, for another week or so, I guess, if Tim can put up with me. I keep meaning to find a hotel room, but whenever I mention it he changes the subject. I'm getting used to the couch. Tim's crazy about your little girl, too."

Ruth didn't remember if Paul Bunyan's hair was red or not, although she thought he wore a cap over it. She wondered if his eyes were the same color green. Ruth had never seen a picture or a statue of his wife Lucette, but Jane might as well be the model for her. All that was missing was Babe the blue ox. It was clear that little Sarah got her porcelain skin from her mother and her fine, coppery hair from her father.

Sarah said, "Uncle Tim calls me 'magic,' Daddy."

"Well... maybe you are, kid." He picked up his daughter to give her a peck on the cheek and set her down again on the top of the three steps inside the gate. "Maybe you are."

Jane said, "If we're not careful Tim will spoil her rotten. We're lucky to have such a good neighbor...well, I should say *neighbors*. Have you met them all yet?"

Ruth said, "Up until today I guess I had met everyone except you two. Oh no... I forgot that I haven't met Malcolm yet, but I did meet his sister."

"We don't know Malcolm well," Ben said. "He's the newest tenant and the youngest. We rarely hear him and he's right next door to us. He must be away a lot... seems nice enough, though. Jane and I are the token breeders in the building."

"I see," Ruth said and tried to stare at Jane's protruding belly. It seemed to be growing, even as they stood there.

"I think we're the only ones on the entire block!" Jane laughed.

"Well, there are a lot of gays, it seems, but I'm an outsider, too. Heterosexual, I mean... like you two... *breeders*?" Ruth tried the same word Ben had used, even though it didn't sound right coming from her lips.

"Do you have any family, Ruth?" Ben asked. "Other than Tim, I mean?"

"I had a daughter. I mean... I *have* a daughter, present tense... Dianne... but she's married and lives in Texas now." Ruth spoke of her daughter with such a touch of sadness in her voice that the young couple looked at her with sympathy.

"Well, it's nice to finally meet you, Ruth," Jane said. "Tim has been looking forward to your visit for a long time."

"And it's nice to meet Sarah's parents at last. Children can be such treasures. I often wish I'd had some others... I mean... some *more*," Ruth glanced at Jane's belly again. "Do you need help with those groceries?"

"No thanks Ruth," Ben said. "I can get them just fine. See you later..."

Ruth took the *Chronicle* back inside and tiptoed down the hallway past Tim's bedroom. She turned on the coffee maker. She had finally learned to do that much in a strange kitchen. Then she poked her head out the back door and saw that the fog was stretched across the sky in a ceiling of white fleece. The sun wouldn't reach the back garden for quite a while if it came out at all today.

Ruth was eager to see if there was anything more in the newspaper about the French boy whose body was left in the trunk of a car in Golden Gate Park, but she found nothing. The best thing she discovered in the Saturday *Chronicle* was the crossword puzzle from the previous Sunday's *New York Times*. Ruth got a pen from her purse. She didn't think Tim would mind if she worked on it a little.

Artie called again that afternoon to ask if Ruth could help him out behind the bar at Arts that night. The number of reservations coming in on the phone was staggering. When Tim covered the mouthpiece of the phone and told Ruth about the call she said she'd be happy to do it. Tim said, "Aunt Ruth, are you sure you don't mind? This hasn't turned out to be much of a vacation. You're only here for a couple of weeks and you're spending most of your time working."

"And you're only off for this one week... or you were supposed to be, anyway. I don't need the money, but at this rate my vacation will pay for itself. The customers at Arts are generous with tips and Artie pays me in cash. I'm sure it's more than minimum wage. I can understand the bind they're in and it's kind of nice to feel needed, but Tim... would you rather I didn't work there?"

There was something bothering him, but it had nothing to do with work. As much as he loved his Aunt Ruth, he hadn't had any time to himself lately. He *could* use the

opportunity of a free Saturday night to go out on his own for a change. He could head South of Market and listen for any gossip that was traveling through the leather bars about the recent string of murders. He also had in mind the fact that it had been too long since he'd had sex. "No, it's fine with me if you want to work, Aunt Ruth. I can find a way to entertain myself in San Francisco on a Saturday night. I'll manage. You go ahead."

He spoke into the telephone again, "She'll be happy to, Artie. Is five o'clock okay?"

Ruth was long gone to work at Arts by the time that Tim got out of the shower, dried himself and rolled a joint. It was a chilly summer night, a good night for leather. Tim hadn't worn his since last winter. Most of it remained stored under Tim's bed in the same boxes it came in. Jason had helped him pick out everything soon after they met--chaps, boots, a vest and a cap. The jacket was the most expensive thing. Tim had charged it all on a credit card and only recently paid off the balance. He thought it was a waste of money when the bills came in and he made the payments. He'd only bought it for Jason's sake in a futile attempt to keep him interested but tonight the leather would feel good. With its strange meteorological patterns, San Francisco could provide "leather-weather" during any month of the year.

He zipped up the custom-made chaps over his tightest jeans and slipped his stocking feet into the shiny boots. Still bare-chested, he eyed himself in the full-length mirror in the hallway and smiled. He tugged at the crotch of his Levi's and said, "Hey there, hot stuff! Come here often?"

He pulled on a crisp white sleeveless t-shirt that made his shoulders look like he'd just come from the gym. A narrow band of chest hair curled out above the collar. He pulled on his vest and zipped up his leather jacket. "What do you think, Nana?" he asked the photograph beside the bed. "Your little Tim has come a long way from that barefoot boy in Powderhorn Park on the Fourth of July."

Nana's photograph had the same expression as always. She never answered him. He had trouble now remembering much about her at all. She'd been dead so long he couldn't remember her voice or her scent. The smell of leather reminded him of Jason. Tim headed out the gate onto Collingwood Street and saw his reflection in windows of parked cars and closed shops on Castro Street. He looked good and he knew that Jason would approve.

Tim said hello to a couple of guys in front of the 440. One of them whistled and said, "Looking good, Tim! Can I buy you a beer, stud?" Tim was tempted to stop in at one of the bars in the Castro, but it was Saturday night, after all. As long as he had gone to the trouble of getting dressed for a leather bar, he might as well go to a real one South of Market. He could feel the couple of hits he'd taken off the joint and he was in the mood for Folsom Street.

On the corner in front of the old Bank of America building, now Diesel, a chain that sold worn-looking denims for top dollar prices, Tim noticed something swirling and white besides the fog. He thought he must be so stoned he was imagining things, but then the spinning stopped and an old man grinned at Tim through his thick white beard. Tim expected him to ask for spare change. The man was wearing a tattered wedding dress and a dirty veil studded with seed pearls. On his feet he wore black leather boots like Tim's, but badly scuffed and without laces.

Tim just shook his head. Here was someone who'd dropped too much acid in the 1960s. The old man smiled at Tim and said, "Nice day!" He had more gaps than teeth in his mouth and Tim was sure the old guy would asked for a cigarette, but instead he repeated, "Nice day!"

Nice day my ass! It's nighttime and it's damn cold, but if it makes you feel better, okay, it's a nice day... Damn! The light turned red and Tim just missed the F-line streetcar clanging its bells and rounding the corner onto Market Street. Even in his leathers, it was too cold to wait outside for the next one, so he turned around to catch the MUNI underground. The old man in the wedding dress followed him down the stairs and started singing that old Billy Idol song about a white wedding.

The old man sang and spun around and around as Tim went through the turnstile. There was nobody in the glass booth, but the sign said "Please Enter" so the old man did. He went down the stairs on the north side of the tracks to the platform for the outbound trains. Maybe he lived in the avenues or maybe he only wanted to come inside to get away from the cold, though Tim couldn't imagine that the old guy was feeling any pain. Tim waited alone on a bench. Two men in business suits walked past him down the platform holding hands. They were oblivious to the crazy old man across the way who was still singing until an inbound train came between them. Tim couldn't hear any more when the doors closed, but he could see the old man's twisted grin and read his lips that still sang, "nice day."

Chapter 11

The last time Tim had come to the Powerhouse was with Jason. He remembered the rain coming down hard that week--the city seemed to exhale with relief after months of drought.

It must have been during the phase when Tim worried that Jason was getting bored with him, but a three-some wouldn't have been out of the question. Three-way sex was never Tim's idea, but he gave in sometimes when Jason got him stoned enough and insisted on it. Sharing Jason with someone they might never see again seemed a better alternative than not having Jason at all. That last time they were in the Powerhouse together, Jason seemed to know everyone in the bar. Tonight Tim didn't recognize a soul and he felt more alone than ever.

He worked his way down the bar toward the foot of the stairs and leaned in to order a beer. That was when he remembered a story Jason had told him--was it that night or an earlier time? It didn't matter now, but he started remembering the story Jason told about when he used to work there. Tim was standing now at the spot where it happened. Tim took a sip of his beer and felt himself slip into a trance as he felt Jason's presence. He could almost picture him and hear Jason's voice from that night so long ago:

"It was Friday afternoon, getting on toward happy hour. I usually left the flap open at the rear end of the downstairs bar. That was easier than crawling under it every time I needed to go in or out. There seemed to be more deliveries than customers that day and I needed to unlock the liquor room a couple of times or go into the office to look up a phone number. Then I went to take a leak and the place filled up all at once in those couple of minutes I was gone. That's just how it goes sometimes..."

I was slammed, but I was catching up in a hurry. That was when I noticed two skinny guys in suits come in. I thought they were liquor salesmen or maybe they were doing some kind of business in the neighborhood. They sure didn't look like gay guys. Even though I was busy, I noticed that something didn't feel right about them. There are guys who wear suits all day and wear leather at night, but these didn't look like those kind of guys or those kind of suits. Their jackets didn't quite fit and their neckties were a dead give-away that there wasn't a gay gene within a hundred miles when those two got dressed that morning.

One of them stood back away from the bar at the front end and the other one walked toward the back. I figured maybe they'd just stopped in so he could use the toilet. I was almost all caught up with my customers when the one near the back came toward me where the flap on the bar was open. He pulled out a gun and said, "This is a stick-up!"

I wasn't even thinking. I said, "Fuck you, man! I don't have time for this shit! Can't you see how busy I am?" So I slammed the flap down, knocked the gun out of his hand

and it hit the floor behind the bar. It went off and the bullet hit a bottle of grenadine. It splattered red everywhere, but at least no one was hurt. Those guys in their bad suits were so freaked out they just ran out the door while I dialed 9-1-1. The cops told us later that the gun was stolen. They got prints off it and it turned out both the guys had a long record. They caught them about a week later trying the same thing at another bar in Oakland."

Jason laughed while he told Tim the story. He laughed all the way through it and Tim could hear his laughter now, but it made Tim angry. The more Jason laughed and the more Tim thought about what a close call Jason had, the madder Tim got and he told him so. "You should have just given them the money, Jason! That was the stupidest, most stubborn thing to do! The bar must have insurance against that sort of thing. You could have been killed!"

"I was all right!" Jason laughed some more. *"All they lost was a bottle of grenadine."*

Tim looked down at the bottom shelf and saw the back-up bottles of sweet and dry vermouth, Rose's lime juice, triple sec, sweet and sour mix and grenadine. Tim pictured the pool of Jason's blood on his kitchen floor where he'd found him. "You could have been killed!" Tim heard his own voice telling Jason again.

He had to get out of here. He wanted another hit off the joint in his pocket. Maybe that would help turn off the pictures in his head - if not the voices. He finished his beer on the way to the front door.

Outside, Tim headed north on Folsom Street toward the Hole in the Wall. He lit the joint. His lungs filled with smoke. That stupid song about a white wedding started playing in his head again and Tim knew it would be stuck there for the rest of the night.

Ruth was busy at Arts that night, just as Artie had predicted. Patrick seemed edgy and a little too loud. Ruth suspected he was stoned on something besides marijuana. She was tempted to ask Artie about it, but maybe she was only imagining things. According to the evening news, there'd been another cocaine bust at the port of Oakland last week. Ruth tried to remember when they were all laughing about Ethel Merman and she hadn't fully understood the joke. She'd never read that weekly newspaper they were talking about... something about world news. She still took the New York Times at home in Edina, plus the Star and Tribune, but here she only got her news from the Chronicle and the television. The SF Examiner had turned into a right-wing tabloid endorsing the McCain/ Palin ticket, so whenever Ruth saw one it went in the nearest trash can.

She was trying to remember the rest of what they said that day. Didn't Jake ask Patrick if he'd been snorting something? It wasn't cocaine, though... china? Maybe he'd said crystal. Ruth didn't know much about drugs except what was in the news. She knew that her nephew Tim liked to smoke marijuana, but that seemed harmless

enough. Ruth's own experiments with pot had mostly been back in her college days at Stanford when they drove into the city and tried to fit in by pretending to be *weekend hippies* on Haight Street.

Arturo stuck his head out of the kitchen and hollered at Ruth, "Where is Patrick?"

"I'm not sure, Arturo. He was here a minute ago. I heard him ask some guys at the bar if they were looking for Tina, but I haven't seen any girls around. All three of them have disappeared now. They were sitting right here where these empty glasses are. I guess they've finished their drinks."

"Can you read what this says, Ruth?"

She looked down at the dinner check in Arturo's hand, but she had no clue. "There they are on the sidewalk. Here comes Patrick now."

"Patrick. Come here. I can't tell your Bs from your Ps from your Rs when you squiggle like that. If you want your customers to get the food they ordered, you're going to have to make a better attempt at writing legibly!"

"Sorry, Arturo..."

It slowed down after the dinner rush. Other than a few romantic couples at isolated tables, most of the stragglers were gathered around the piano. Viv was plunking out requests and her tip jar was overflowing. Ruth noticed that there'd been no sign of Roy tonight. By midnight Artie told Ruth he could handle things alone if she wanted to go home.

"But Artie, you've been working non-stop since Jason died. Are you sure you wouldn't like to go home early? I wouldn't mind closing up for you tonight."

"No thanks. There's some paperwork I need to do. That's what comes of owning the place. We have to hire another bartender pretty soon, but first we want to see how this new kid works out. Arturo says he's a big help in the kitchen. I'll have to ask Jake and Patrick how he's doing for them on the floor as their busboy. You go on home. You've been wonderful."

When Ruth got back to Tim's apartment there was no sign of her nephew. It felt strange to be coming into the empty apartment all alone. She wondered if she should be worried about Tim or anything else, but it was Saturday night. She hoped he was out having a good time on his own and Ruth fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Sunday morning church bells woke her. Then there were distant sirens and she tiptoed down the hall to put on the coffee, but Tim's bedroom door was open and there was no sign that he had ever returned. Now she started to worry. She went to the gate for the Sunday paper and by the time the coffee was ready she heard Tim's key in the door. "Good morning, dear. Did you have a nice night? I was just about to put out a missing person's report."

"Aunt Ruth, you don't need to worry about me. I'm a big boy. I would have called, but by the time I thought of it, I was sure you'd be asleep." He was still carrying his leather cap in his hand and hung it on the coat tree inside the door.

Ruth had never seen him in full leather before, but she decided not to mention it. "Did you have some adventures... meet anyone new, dear?"

"Not exactly," Tim said as he sat down at a kitchen chair to unzip his chaps. "He was someone Jason and I met together a while back. His name was Ed. We were both thinking about Jason, I guess, and both of us in the same sort of mood. He invited me back to his apartment, but it was a little strange without Jason there... different... almost like Jason was watching, like last time. It was pleasant enough."

"I'm glad you had a nice time, dear." Ruth didn't want to hear the details of Tim's sexual exploits; she was just glad to know he was all right and got home safe and sound. "I just picked up your paper and put on the coffee a few minutes ago. You know, Tim, I've been thinking... about the latest murder, I mean."

Tim had walked down the hallway to his bedroom. He yelled back, "Sorry, I've gotta get out of this leather. I can still hear you, though. Thinking what?"

"Well, wouldn't the pizza place where that French boy worked have the addresses of all the orders where he was supposed to deliver on the night he was killed?"

"Probably..." Tim put his boots back in their box and felt twenty pounds lighter. Who knew when he'd have the opportunity to wear them again?

"So I was thinking... If we could find out where he worked, then maybe we could take a trip over there and act friendly and see if anyone would talk..."

"Hold on there just a minute, Nancy Drew!" Tim reappeared in the kitchen in gym shorts and a tee-shirt. "Is there any more coffee in that pot or did you drink it all yourself?"

"No, I told you I just made it. There's plenty."

"Great. I need some."

"You just sit down and relax and have some coffee and then think about this pizza angle. Are you hungry? Want some breakfast?"

"No, not yet." He opened the back door and quickly closed it again. "Brrr...It's freezing out there. It was a good night for leather, that's for sure. I still forget how cold it can get sometimes in San Francisco." He leafed through the Sunday paper and started separating the ads from the news.

"Well?" Ruth asked. "What do you think?"

"About what?"

"About the pizza idea, silly."

Tim took a long sip of his coffee. "I think it's too easy. I mean... the police would have already thought of that, wouldn't they? If it was that simple they would have already found the killer and made an arrest by now."

"Don't you have friends in the police department? Couldn't you find out? What about those two who were here the other day to question us when they picked up the knife I found? Couldn't you call and ask them?"

"I don't know..." Tim was hesitant. "I think some of these gay cops are a prime example of taking a uniform fetish one step too far."

"But you could at least ask him, couldn't you?"

"You know those cops you're talking about... the ones who stopped by here the other day? I'd met the woman at a fundraiser at Arts, but the guy..."

Tim was stirring his coffee and his voiced trailed off into such a long silence Ruth couldn't wait any longer. "Yes... the guy? What about him?"

"Well, I tricked with him once, shortly before I met Jason. It was okay, but no great shakes, nothing serious. Anyhow... he knew Jason and he certainly knew about it when Jason and I got together. It wasn't like I had to spell it out to him why I wasn't interested in getting together with him again. The whole neighborhood knew about Jason and me... the whole town!"

"What does this have to do with..."

"The other day when they stopped by here, he started making *innuendos* about getting together with me again, now that Jason is gone. I really didn't appreciate him coming onto me like that, especially under the circumstances."

"I see," Ruth said. Once again, she didn't want to know the details of Tim's sex life, but she was curious about what they might be able to find out. "Well, what about that police woman, then? She seemed nice enough."

"Yeah, I guess it wouldn't hurt to talk to her. Still, it's a long shot. It's like I already said... if it were that easy they would have thought of it. I don't know what her schedule is." He reached for the phone and they were both surprised within a few moments when Tim began speaking to the policewoman he was looking for at Mission Station.

She must have just finished the night shift, Ruth thought, or was starting a new day. Ruth tried to listen in on Tim's end of the conversation as he relayed her suggestion to check the pizza deliveries. Then all she could hear was Tim saying, "Uh-huh... yeah, hmmm...yup... yeah... but what about the orders? Uh-huh... I thought so... the computer? Oh, I see... Uh-huh...yeah, that makes sense... aw, darn it... so even if they... well, that explains that, I suppose... thanks a lot. Sure thing... yup... seeya."

"What did she say?" Ruth was on the edge of her seat and brimming with questions, but she let Tim talk first, before he could forget anything. If it had been her on the phone, she would have been taking notes.

"She said the police went to the pizza place first thing, Aunt Ruth. From what I could gather, whenever a call comes in for a delivery, they punch everything into a computer: name, address, phone number... size of pizza, what all they want on it--sausage, mushrooms, extra cheese--and if they want any extras, side-dishes or soft drinks. They'll even sell you and deliver a six-pack of beer."

"Yes? Go on..." Ruth was sure they'd really hit upon something now.

"If it's a regular customer they'll already have the address on file. They keep everything in their database, so they know where to target their advertising. It tells them how much pepperoni to order and things like that. If someone has been a regular customer for a long time and they don't place an order for a few months, the computer automatically sends up a flag that lets the management know. Maybe they've found someplace cheaper to order their pizza. Or maybe they've moved out of the area. Anyway, they know to send that person a special flyer, maybe with a discount coupon in order to lure them back. If they don't hear back or if they find out the person is no longer living at that address, they'll try to find them or else they can remove their name from the database entirely. It's all well organized in the computer age."

"This is wonderful, Tim!" Ruth said.

"Yes, it would have been. Their computer ought to have been able to give the police all sorts of information."

"Yes? And? What happened?"

"Their computer was down that night."

"No!"

"And whenever that happens, they go back to the old-fashioned way; they write the orders down on paper. But they don't keep carbon copies anymore." Tim stopped talking long enough to take a sip of his coffee.

"I can't believe the killer would have such luck," Ruth poured herself another cup while mulling over every word Tim said.

"Do they even make carbon paper anymore?" Tim asked.

"I don't know."

"The only pizza orders the police could find--the paper kind--were taped to the four pizzas that were still in the big thermal envelope in the back seat of the car. The only information they got from them was the names and addresses of four customers who never got their pizzas that night. They might have been hungry and angry, but that doesn't implicate them in the French boy's murder. "

"Darn it!" Ruth said. "It seemed like such a good idea."

"It was, Aunt Ruth. It was a great idea. Keep thinking. Maybe you'll come up with an even better one."

Chapter 12

Monday morning dawned clear and bright for a change. During the past few days of fog, Tim and Ruth had been talking about going on a little trip somewhere if the weather ever turned nice again. After a lengthy discussion they decided on a ferryboat ride across the bay to have lunch in Tiburon.

Once she was out on the water and admiring the views, Ruth began to feel depressed at the thought that her flight back to Minnesota was only a few days away. "Tim, I don't want to go home and leave this beautiful place. Look! There's Alcatraz. There's nothing like that at home. The Minnesota State prison at Stillwater isn't nearly as romantic!"

"No, I guess it isn't," Tim laughed. "So don't go. Stay here."

"Really? Do you really think I should stay? In San Francisco, I mean... not in your little apartment. I should have been out of your way a long time ago!"

"You're not in my way, Aunt Ruth."

"You're just saying that to be kind and I love you for it." She inhaled the salt air deeply and smiled into the sun. "I'm not sure what I have to go back there for, anyway..."

"So move to San Francisco," Tim encouraged her. "It would be great! You can stay with me until you find a place. I'll help you look for a nice little apartment in the neighborhood. I see FOR RENT signs all over the place." They strolled to the uppermost deck of the ferry with the San Francisco skyline growing smaller in the distance.

"I don't know. Have you looked at the prices on some of those signs?" Ruth asked. "Rent on a studio apartment in San Francisco costs more than mortgage payments on a four-bedroom house in most parts of the country! At least my house in Edina is paid for."

"But how often do you drive to Stillwater to admire some ugly prison?" Tim asked and they both laughed. "You even told me the other day that the cracks in the sidewalks here grow prettier flowers than your garden in Minnesota."

"Well... that would be especially true in January, I'll have to admit. The snow shovels tend to chop them off. Do you want a cup of coffee?"

"I'm skeptical about the coffee they serve on the ferry." Tim was looking down and behind them at their wake. "I've heard they make it with the water right out of the bay. It's pretty vile stuff."

"Oh, Tim... you're joking."

Tim looked at his watch. "It's past noon. Let's live it up and have a Bloody Mary. How bad can they be? Come on. The bar is one level down."

When they disembarked in Tiburon, it was only a few steps up the dock to Guayma's restaurant. The host seated them outdoors on the lower deck with the sounds of seagull cries overhead and waves lapping at the rocks nearby. "They have terrific margaritas, here, Aunt Ruth. How does that sound?"

"Delicious. I wonder how they compare to Teresa's... or *mine*."

"Those Bloody Marys on the boat were pretty bad, weren't they?"

"I wasn't going to mention it, but they tasted almost metallic and there was a strange spice in that mix. Maybe oregano?"

"I don't know what it was." Tim looked up at the cute waiter who'd appeared out of nowhere, "We'd like to start with two of your best margaritas, please."

They both decided on salmon and salad for lunch and let the waiter talk them into some decadent chocolate desserts afterward. "I can see why you like this place," Ruth said. "Not only the view is great, but the food is delicious."

They watched their waiter bring a plate piled high with steaming shellfish to the next table. "He's not bad looking, either," Tim said.

"I think he's been flirting with you."

"Nah, he's just being a good waiter. I never hesitate to flirt with my customers either, if it means a bigger tip."

The waiter turned slightly toward them and smiled knowingly before heading back inside. "He is *definitely* flirting with you Tim," Ruth insisted. "But you work on Castro Street in the city. Why would he even imagine way over here in Tiburon that it would do him any good to flirt with you? He doesn't even know you... does he?"

"Gaydar!" Tim announced. "It works everywhere in the world--even in Timbuktu... or so I've been told. I haven't actually gone there to try it."

After dessert they lingered over coffee. "Seriously, Aunt Ruth... I'd love it if you moved here. Arturo and Artie need to hire another bartender to take Jason's place and the customers adore you. Not everyone has a job lined up before they decide to move here. You could stay with me until you find a place. It'll be perfect! "

"I don't need to work, but I'd be glad to help out until they find someone permanent. I'm so tempted," she said as she stared out across the bay at the San Francisco skyline. "Back home there's nothing but a big empty house waiting for me and an ex-husband I only speak to when we have to sign papers. I've got my charity work, of course, but they could get along without me. They were always more interested in the checks I forced Dan to write when we were married than in any of my suggestions. It's true, if I *could* sell the house in Edina I'd have quite a nest egg, but not in this economy. Still, I have my own money and my alimony."

"You never did tell me why you and Dan split up," Tim said hesitantly. He didn't want to pry, but this seemed as good a time as any to clear the air. "I sure didn't see that coming, did you?"

"It was the oldest story in the book," Ruth sighed.

"You mean another woman?"

"Barely a woman. She was just out of college," Ruth watched the ferry that would take them back to the city as it pulled into the dock. "I guess I should have seen it coming, the typical male mid-life crisis--a younger woman, new sports car, a fancy *bachelor* apartment in a new high-rise with a view of all of downtown and the Mississippi River. I didn't even find out about *that* place until he'd been renting it for nearly a year. He used to work late so often anyway, and then there were more and more winter nights when the roads were too icy to come home at that hour. I can hardly believe I was so gullible."

Tim stroked her hand across the table. "That must have been horrible for you to find out."

"It was and it wasn't. In a way it was almost a relief! We'd only been going through the motions in the years since Dianne left home and got married." She reached for the check.

"Hey, I was going to take you to lunch," Tim protested, but only mildly.

"It is my great pleasure to treat my favorite nephew to a nice meal now and then--outside of the restaurant where we both work," Ruth insisted. "I'll tell you what, dear... I'm going to think seriously about moving here, but I have to be sure, first."

They walked past Arts on the way home. A flyer was taped to the glass of the front door listing the line-up of comics for the evening. Tim stopped at Buffalo Whole Foods, the produce market on the corner of 19th and Castro, to pick up the makings for a big salad for dinner. They were still full from lunch.

Ruth waited outside, looking at all the newspapers in the racks at the curb. She was crouched over, reading the headlines through the plastic panels when someone behind

her said, "Excuse me," and reached for one. Ruth fished for change in her purse and was embarrassed when she realized that most of the papers were free. She grabbed what turned out to be last Wednesday's Bay Guardian.

Then it dawned on Ruth that she recognized that voice. The person who'd said "excuse me" was Tim's upstairs neighbor Malcolm's sister Marcia.

"Marcia!" Ruth felt like she had been in a daze all afternoon and had just been jolted wide-awake. "Marcia!" she yelled. Tim came out of the store with a large bag of produce and Ruth yelled, "Marcia was just here. She went that-a-way."

"Who?"

"Marcia! Malcolm's sister from upstairs! How come I'm the only one who ever sees her?"

Tim glanced down the sidewalk but there was a crowd of people in front of the plant store and their mysterious neighbor was already out of sight. When they got home to Collingwood Street they arrived at the gate at the same time as Teresa, who was carrying three heavy grocery bags in each hand. "Hey Teresa! Can we help you with those?"

"You're an angel, Tim." Teresa set them all down inside the gate. "My fingers were about to fall right off!"

Tim set down his own bag just outside his apartment door and picked up three of Teresa's, dropping a box of Cheerios.

Ruth picked it up and said, "Here... let me help, too," while she gathered up the rest of the bags.

"Thank you both so much." Teresa arrived at her door empty-handed, slid her purse off her shoulder and searched for her keys, still shaking the stiffness out of her fingers.

"You should get yourself one of those little two-wheeled carts, Teresa," Ruth suggested.

"I had one, but the wheels fell off. It was a cheap piece of junk, anyway. I should spend more than ten bucks on Mission Street and get a good one next time and it might hold up better," Teresa admitted.

"Where's your car?" Tim asked.

"It's at the top of the hill and around the corner. I got too good a parking spot to move it."

"You could have your groceries delivered, couldn't you?" Ruth asked. "I saw a truck from Safeway delivering groceries just the other day on our block. Or you should make smaller trips more often?"

"You know, Ruth, those are all good suggestions, but I'm a creature of habit, I guess," Teresa said. "Tim, your Aunt Ruth is no slouch, is she?"

He laughed, "No, she's no slouch at all."

"I'm sorry. It's really none of my business." Ruth felt embarrassed, but she was still upset about seeing Marcia when nobody else did. She thought maybe she was just tired from so much sunshine and fresh air on the ferry ride across the bay.

"Nothing to be sorry about, Ruthie. I like a gal with all the dots on her dice! Why don't you two come on in and have a cocktail while I put these things away. This time it's definitely after 5 o'clock."

"Thanks, Teresa, but I've got groceries to put away, too," Tim said. "Rain check?"

"You bet, honey... any time. My door is always open!"

"By the way, Teresa," Ruth said. "Have you seen Malcolm's sister Marcia today? I'm sure I just saw her on the corner a few minutes ago."

"I've never even met her," Teresa answered. "I heard Malcolm downstairs this morning, though. He was getting his mail and talking to someone on the sidewalk. I had my front windows wide open for a change, after so much fog lately."

As Tim unlocked his front door he heard the answering machine click off. There were two messages--one from Arturo and another from some lawyer he didn't know. They both said the same thing. Tim was to be at an office on Montgomery Street tomorrow morning at precisely 10 o'clock for the reading of Jason's last will and testament. This was surprising news to Tim and he hoped it might be good news for a change.

Chapter 13

Arturo, Artie and Tim arranged to meet Ruth for lunch at Harvey's on the corner of 18th and Castro after the reading of Jason's will. She was nursing a tall glass of iced tea at the bar when they returned from downtown. The men ordered drinks and each gave Ruth a hug. She was about to scream with pent-up curiosity, but tried to stay calm and not let it show. The place wasn't busy yet, so they were able to score the prized window table in the front corner facing Castro Street.

They settled in, but didn't touch their menus. "Here's to Jason!" Arturo said and they all raised their glasses.

"Here's to all of us," Tim added.

"What happened?" Ruth couldn't take the suspense any longer. "What was in Jason's will?"

"Well..." Artie started in slowly, pretended to have a coughing spell and took a sip of his water before he set that glass down and had another slug of his drink. Ruth was sure he was only trying to be dramatic. "Everyone... *especially* Jason's mother, as you might well imagine... assumed that she would be the main beneficiary of Jason's estate."

"And?" Ruth asked.

"Ruth, dear, you didn't even know Jason, did you?" Artie asked. "Well, he did love surprises."

"So what does that mean? What surprises?"

"You are looking at the proud new owner of an honest-to-God parcel of San Francisco real estate!" Tim stomped a foot on the tiled floor. "He left me the Thunderbird, too, which I never even dreamed of. He knew how much I loved that old car. But the main thing is that he left me the house on Hancock Street and everything in it. He left it all to me!"

"That's wonderful." Ruth squeezed her nephew's hand. "But what about Jason's mother? How did she take it? She must have been terribly upset if she thought she was going to inherit everything. What did she say?"

"We *all* thought she was going to inherit everything," Tim said. "I didn't know why they even called me down there unless he wanted to leave me his porn collection. He had a great sound system that he spent a fortune on, but it was all built in, so I didn't think..."

"What did his mother say?" Ruth asked again. As a mother herself, she tried to imagine what the woman must have thought. Even though Jason's mother didn't sound like a sympathetic character, Ruth felt some empathy for her.

"Did you ever see *Mommie Dearest*?" Tim asked. "Jason's mother was just like Joan Crawford. Or I should say...she was just like Faye Dunaway *playing* Joan Crawford."

"I might have seen it when it came out, but that was years ago."

"Next time it plays at the Castro Theatre, you should go. It's almost as good as *The Women* with an all-gay audience screaming Joan Crawford's best lines back at the screen! Don't you remember that scene when she was in front of the board of directors of the Pepsi-Cola company?" Tim asked.

Artie laughed and boomed, "Don't fuck with me, fellas!" doing his best Faye Dunaway--as Joan Crawford--imitation from the movie.

Arturo said, "She threw a perfect fit! She called our sweet Tim every name in the book and threatened to hire a dozen lawyers to have the will contested. Then she picked up her hat and her purse and she stormed out the door!"

"You could tell she was miserable to be in the same room with a bunch of queers in the first place," Tim said. "She arrived nearly fifteen minutes late as it was, all dressed in black, as if she was really in mourning. I don't think she'd even spoken to Jason or had anything to do with him in years!"

Arturo said, "She was careful not to *touch* anything. She wouldn't shake anyone's hand, not even the lawyers. She never even took off her gloves or her sunglasses the whole time."

"Can she contest the will?" Ruth asked.

Arturo said, "I don't think so. It's all pretty cut and dried. Jason left her \$1,000, not a penny more or a penny less. Whatever liquid assets and investments he had in various stocks and bonds will be split among his favorite charities."

"And what about you two?" Ruth let go of Tim's arm and turned toward Artie and Arturo. "Didn't Jason remember you two in his will? Not that it's any of my business, but..."

"Well, that story is somewhat longer. It goes back to Karl." Arturo picked up his menu. "Maybe we should order lunch. Where did that waiter go?"

"Good idea. Being a land baron sure makes me hungry all of a sudden," Tim said. "The best part is that it's a duplex, so if I wanted to live in one unit I could use the rent from the other one to pay the property taxes. I don't know anything about how all that stuff works, but I guess I'll learn."

Artie said, "I don't either, but Arturo knows all about it. He'll help you figure it out."

"I'll take all the help I can get. It's probably a good thing Jason didn't leave me a lot of cash to go with the house and car. If I were rich I'd have to change my voter registration to Republican! I think I can afford another round of drinks, though. How about it?" Tim tried to wave down their waiter, but it took quite a while, even though the place still wasn't busy. When he finally came over he had a lot of trouble getting their drink order straightened out, as simple as it was.

Artie said, "He's cute, but I'm sorry... cute only goes so far. This place was named for Harvey Milk, whose killer got off on the 'Twinkie' defense and nowadays they hire a bunch of Twinkies to work here!?"

"It's even worse up the street," Tim said. "They can't open a beer bottle and chew gum at the same time. Talk about casting-couch hiring! All they have to be is pretty. If I were that slow at work at Arts, the customers would have a fit."

"Whose killer, Artie? What do you mean about Twinkies?" Ruth demanded, ignoring Tim. "Don't tell me there's been another murder!"

"No, Aunt Ruth," Tim said. "Harvey Milk was killed a long time ago."

"Dan White shot him and the mayor, George Moscone," Arturo explained. "Dan White was on the board of supervisors with Harvey Milk."

"The school down the street from the apartment," Ruth said, "the one where you told me Teresa is a teacher... that's the Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy, right?"

"The same," Artie said. "This all happened back when Dianne Feinstein was president of the board, long before she was a Senator. Dan White shot Harvey Milk and Mayor Moscone in their offices in City Hall."

"I do remember hearing about that, now that you mention it," Ruth said. "There's a new movie out--"

"Yes, that's right. Sean Penn plays him. Gus Van Sant directed. They were all here filming in the pouring rain this past winter, just up the street from Arts. Anyway..." Artie got back to the story, "This place was called the Elephant Walk then, after that old Liz Taylor movie, you know, but later on it was renamed for Harvey Milk. He was the first openly gay politician ever elected in San Francisco, maybe even in the whole country... I'm not sure. It's all there in the history books."

"Nowadays it seems like politicians almost have to be gay," Tim said, "or at least gay-friendly. Dan White got away with murdering two men because his lawyers claimed he had a sugar imbalance or some such thing. I've read all about it since then, but you've got to see the movie, Aunt Ruth. Arturo and Artie were already living here, weren't you guys?"

Artie said, "You bet! The night of the riots we were sitting right over there on those two bar stools when the cops came in and smashed up this place."

Ruth stared at the bar in the direction Artie pointed. Tim tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Aunt Ruth... I'm sure they've replaced the bar stools since the seventies."

"The cops wanted revenge for the gays torching police cars and breaking the windows trying to bust into City Hall. What a bloody mess!" Artie said. "Dianne Feinstein automatically became the mayor when Moscone was killed. The night of the riots she was shocked, but what the hell did she expect? Harvey Milk was ours and Dan White was some homophobic, red-neck, ex-cop from the Excelsior district."

"To this day, we don't always necessarily agree with Dianne, but we always end up voting for her," Arturo said.

"Maybe *you* do," Artie challenged him.

"Artie, I thought you were a lifelong Democrat!"

"I used to think Feinstein was, too, but I'm not so sure anymore," Artie said. "If she came from anyplace else besides San Francisco, she'd be on the other side of the aisle."

The somewhat longer story Arturo promised came together over lunch, mostly from Artie. "We were all in the army together... Karl, Arturo, and me... Vietnam. Arturo saved Karl's life over there and by some miracle we all made it back home safely to the states. I was released first and I moved up here to check out San Francisco... or was Karl discharged first? I can't remember now. It doesn't matter. Anyway... Arturo still had a few months to serve out at Fort Ord and he nearly got caught up in a bar raid in Monterey. "

"Nobody was out of the closet in those days," Arturo shook his head. "Bars were being raided all the time, even here in San Francisco."

"How awful," Ruth said.

"Well, we'd been hoping and planning all along to open some kind of business and it was always a dream of ours to own our own restaurant. Arturo finally moved up here and worked as a cook in some of the old places - the Fickle Fox and Jackson's - and I tended bar on and off while I was getting my act together for Finocchios."

"Artie's act was a huge hit, but he was thinking about hanging up his dresses when Finocchios closed and it was about the same time that the place on Castro Street went on the market. We didn't have that kind of money, but Karl did," Arturo explained. "He put up the money to open Arts or we'd have never gotten off the ground."

"But where does Jason fit into this story?" Ruth asked. "Did you hire him as part of the deal?"

"No, Ruth," Artie answered. "They didn't even know each other before. We hired Jason as a bartender. He'd worked all over town, but never on Castro Street. He and Karl met at Arts. Karl was *several* years older than Jason, but something just clicked. They moved into the house on Hancock after Karl's parents died. Then Karl got sick with AIDS and... well..."

Arturo picked up the story, "Karl was a silent partner in our business. When he died he left everything to Jason, so Jason became the third owner, although nobody knew that except the three of us. He didn't want anything to do with management. He was having too much fun just working for us as a bartender. It was always like being on stage for him and he had such a loyal following of fans."

"So the point is..." Artie went on, "in his will, Jason left his share of the business to us, so now we own it free and clear."

"Oh my!" Ruth said. "Poor, dear Jason thought of everything, didn't he?"

"Well, he got tested for HIV when Karl got sick," Artie continued. "He knew he was positive, but he was responding to all the medications. He should have gone on to live a long and productive life."

"What a shame," Ruth said. "But isn't it wonderful that he thought so much of all of you to see that things worked out this way. Otherwise, his mother might have inherited the house and she would have been your silent partner in the restaurant."

"I'd have set fire to the place and watched it burn to the ground before I let that happen!" Artie said.

Tim said, "I guess we didn't need to go over there to smuggle out Jason's porn collection that night after all, Aunt Ruth."

"But that was when I found the knife," she reminded him, "so maybe it was meant to be."

"Now I could hang his sling back up in the basement playroom. I'd been trying to imagine what Jason's mother would think about those four hooks in the ceiling. It's not as if he could grow hanging plants in the dark. As it turns out, I didn't need to move a thing." Tim slumped in his chair. "Who am I kidding? I could never live in that place after finding Jason there bleeding to death!"

Ruth patted his hand. "You don't have to make any decisions right away, dear. Take some time. This has all happened so fast. It must come as quite a shock."

As they were leaving Harvey's, Arturo said, "I need to stop at the restaurant on the way home and do a little paperwork."

"We can walk that way with you," Tim said and the four of them crossed Castro Street at 18th. Ruth saw someone who looked familiar using an ATM outside the Bank of America. She touched Tim's and Artie's shoulders to slow them.

"Hello! Marcia! It's me--Ruth Taylor, Tim's aunt from downstairs. We met the other morning when you were coming in the gate, remember?" Ruth felt vindicated that at last, she wasn't the only one to see Marcia. "Is Malcolm out of town again?"

"Oh yes, he's gone for good," Marcia did another little curtsy just like she had the time Ruth saw her running up the stairs. "I've done away with Malcolm once and for all. He won't be coming back any more this time, thank God!"

Ruth blanched at Marcia's wide grin. She stepped back, into Tim. And she did the only reasonable thing a sensible lady could do when confronted with a boastful murderer. She fainted.

Chapter 14

When Aunt Ruth came to she was surrounded by a crowd of people bending over her. One of a passing pair of lipstick lesbians offered Ruth her bottle of water and the other one announced that she was a doctor. Arturo and Tim had caught her and carefully lowered her to the sidewalk out of the way of pedestrian traffic at the south end of the MUNI bus shelter.

"I think she'll be all right," Tim said. "She just fainted."

"Where am I? What's going on? What happened?" Ruth blinked a couple of times at the young woman hovering over her with a plastic water bottle and wondered why Tim was holding her hand with such a serious expression on his face.

"You fainted."

"But... but Marcia... the killer." Ruth rubbed at her brow. "She said she did away with her brother."

Tim helped his aunt back to her feet.

"No, Marcia didn't kill Malcolm. Marcia *is* Malcolm... or *was*. Malcolm *became* Marcia, don't you see? I'm not sure if she's finished with all the surgery, but he won't be... *She* won't be appearing as Malcolm anymore. That's all she was trying to say." Tim stumbled over the explanation. How can you ever really explain to a breeder from the suburbs all about gender-reassignment.

"I still don't trust her," Ruth said. "Remember when Teresa was telling us about gay people changing their names and making things difficult for everyone around them? Lenny became Leonardo and now Malcolm wants to be Marcia? Well, this just takes the cake."

"That wasn't what Teresa was talking about. A sex-change is different." Tim knew that his Aunt Ruth was a loving and open-minded person, but getting used to life in the Castro wouldn't happen overnight.

Marcia and Artie finally came toward Ruth to see what all the fuss was about. Artie was so excited to see Marcia that he'd pulled the two of them toward the bank and out of the line of foot traffic and they missed Ruth's fainting spell entirely.

"You told me you were his sister," Ruth said. "Why did you lie to me? Why did you let everyone think I was the only one who ever saw you? They must have thought I was crazy! Why did you let them? I'm not a mean person. I could have kept your secret, if that's what you wanted."

"I'm sorry I lied to you, Ruth," Marcia said. "I didn't even know who you were that day we met and I told you that."

"I said I was Tim's Aunt Ruth, I'm sure I did."

"You said you were just visiting. How did I know you'd be sticking around? It seemed easier at the time to just say the first thing that popped into my head, rather than to go into a lengthy explanation for a stranger I would never see again."

"I'm no stranger here. I'm Tim's Aunt Ruth from Minnesota where we don't play nasty tricks on people," she said. "I'm staying in the same building where Malcolm lives, for heaven's sake... or *lived*. Tim said Malcolm was one of his neighbors on the second floor and you said you were house-sitting. Oh, I'm so confused..."

"Let's get you out of the sun, Aunt Ruth," Tim said as he put his arm around her. "Maybe we should go home now and you can lie down for a while."

Ruth turned to face Artie. "And you knew who she was all along?"

"I can keep a secret too," Artie said in his own defense. "I didn't even tell Arturo."

"See you later?" Marcia said. "I'm sorry, Ruth."

"It wasn't your fault," Artie said as Tim and Ruth walked away and he turned back to admire Marcia's outfit. "You are such a doll! I remember when I was your size, but that's ancient history. You can really wear clothes, just the way I used to do when I was your age. And those colors are perfect with your complexion. I haven't dared to wear bold patterns and bright prints since I was in my forties!"

Tim and Ruth walked up Castro Street past the restaurant and around the corner to his apartment. "Marcia is a transsexual," Tim tried to explain. "That means she was born into a male body, but never felt comfortable as a man. It's like if you had been born with male parts, Aunt Ruth. Wouldn't you do everything you could to make things right?"

"But what about Artie? Is he going to have surgery too?"

"No--no--no, not at all. Artie is just a drag queen. He likes being a man. He just likes to play dress-up and let out his feminine side. He would never want to be a woman full-time. It's all just a fun and creative expression for him. It's totally different. It's not even sexual, in his case, although I've never asked him about that. I can't quite imagine Artie as a sexual being in the first place, especially not in drag."

"I don't understand."

"Ee-ew. I don't even want to think about it. Maybe you can ask Artie to explain it all to you sometime."

"Maybe I will," Ruth said with a touch of indignation. She still had the sense that someone had tried to hurt her feelings on purpose. And she still didn't care for this Marcia person, whoever she was, or her former brother Malcolm, whom she'd missed out on. Ruth's head was spinning... *Maybe Marcia is stronger than she looks under that dress... in high heels, she could be tall enough to have inflicted those knife wounds...*

"In fact," Tim said, "I've heard the majority of men who like to dress up in women's clothes are actually heterosexual. Go figure."

Ruth patted her chest. "I think I need to lie down right now, dear."

Once he got his aunt settled on the living room sofa, Tim took a walk over to Hancock Street to have a look at his new property. It was going to take some time to believe that the house and car he'd admired for so long were now his. Tim had no problem with the idea that he would never see Malcolm again, whom he hardly knew anyway. But it was still hard to believe that Jason wasn't coming back.

Tim knelt beside the front steps and found the phony rock in the flower bed. He removed the hidden key and transferred it to his own key chain. He opened the front door and walked down the hall to the back of the house. Tim opened windows along the way to let in the fresh air and finally opened the kitchen door for cross-ventilation. Someone had removed the yellow police tape, but Tim could still see dried blood on the kitchen linoleum. He tried to remember where he'd heard about a service that cleans up the gory scenes of crimes and accidents. He hated to think of some of the sights they had to deal with, no doubt much worse than this one, but he would feel better after a professional did a thorough cleaning in here. He also wanted to get the locks changed right away. If Tim knew where Jason kept an extra key hidden, there was no telling who else might have known and already had one made, although Tim didn't suspect that the killer would return to the scene of the crime.

Tim thought of all the good times in this house when he and Jason were together, but there was no way he could envision moving in here after Jason's murder. He walked back from the kitchen down the hall past the guest room and Jason's study. There, on the roll-top desk were Jason's computer and his answering machine. Tim instinctively hit the "Play" button and was startled to hear his own voice from what seemed like a lifetime ago:

"Jason, it's Tim. Are you screening your calls? Pick up the phone. Where are you? My Aunt Ruth is here from Minneapolis... the one I told you about. Are we still on for that drive to the beach today? It should be hot..."

Tim lunged for the button to turn off the machine. Jason might have still been alive when Tim left that recording. Or he might have been struggling with his attacker at that moment. Tim would never know.

He sat down on the edge of Jason's bed and looked around. Being here brought a flood of memories. Tim stared at the Robert Uyvarri nudes on one wall. They were his now, as well as a framed poster from the San Francisco Eagle signed by the same artist. The sliding doors of the closet were a wall of mirrors. The bedroom was stark compared to Tim's mess at home where he had photographs and mementos everywhere.

Jason's hallway told a richer story, lined with photographs of a full and happy life in San Francisco. Several were of Jason and Karl together. More recent ones showed Jason with Tim; some were copies of the same snapshots Tim had on his refrigerator on Collingwood Street.

Tim moved on to the living room. He used to tease Jason about being a boy scout because the fireplace was always ready to light, no matter what time of year. Like all San Franciscans, Jason knew how a perfect summer day could turn cold by late afternoon. Today was still warm, but Tim felt a chill in the house and struck a match to Jason's handiwork. This was the last fire Jason built and Tim wanted to burn it right now, without delay – get it over and done with, a ritual of cleaning and an attempt to make the place his own.

Tim watched the flames take hold and pulled the poker out of its stand, but he didn't need to use it; the fire was perfect. He set the poker down on the hearth and sat back in Jason's favorite chair. The colored flames of kindling licked the larger logs until they crackled. The warmth soothed Tim and he could smell Jason again in a combination of wood smoke, good bourbon and the clean sweat that comes of hard work. Tim closed his eyes, took a deep breath and sank into the soft leather chair.

Sometimes the dreams started out blurred around the edges like the borders of a picture trimmed with pinking shears. A hazy figure in leather stood over Tim, bare-chested except for a chain harness. As his vision came into focus he recognized Jason's face under his leather cap, a snap-on codpiece, boots and gloves. He held a riding crop in his right hand and was smacking it into the palm of his left.

"Jason?" Tim was frightened and excited at the same time. "What's going on? Is that really you?"

"Of course it's me. You were expecting Cher, maybe?" Jason took a step closer, still slapping the riding crop into his gloved hand. "I left you the house and everything in it, but it's not exactly free, you know. There's a catch."

"What do you mean?"

"And I know I shouldn't have left you the T-bird, but you always loved that car and no one else would appreciate it quite as much. Knowing you, you'll probably wrap it around a tree within a month! By the way... it'll need a new muffler soon. I already

ordered one from a place in L.A. that handles classic car parts. It's paid for, so don't let them try to screw you into paying C.O.D. when it arrives."

"Jason... I still can't believe..."

"Tim, there's something you need to do, so just sit tight and listen. We don't have all day... I'm still going through orientation. Man, it's a riot to see everybody again and they're all looking so good and healthy! Even the ones who... well, you'll see what I mean when your time comes, but that's a long ways off. They're keeping me busy, though. I'm on a break right now and I noticed you dozing off, so I thought this would be a good time..."

"A good time for what, Jason?"

"Well, you know by now that all of this would have been yours anyway, since I wrote my will quite a while back, but I didn't think it would happen for a long time. Consider yourself lucky that you're inheriting this so young that you'll have years to enjoy it. But I need you to do something for me. Let's just call it a price you have to pay."

"What price?"

"Somebody has to stop the killer, dummy! And it has to be soon or he'll keep on killing people. He's gone way off the deep end, you know. He's really crazy! There are three victims the police don't even know about. They might never find some of the bodies..." Jason's voice faded and Tim's vision of him began to blur.

"Who is he? Why is he killing people, Jason? Give me something to go on, here..."

Jason's body became transparent and Tim could see through him to the flames of the fireplace. "Jason? Jason... I miss you!"

When Tim opened his eyes the fire was only a pile of glowing embers. The sun was sinking past the living room window beside the fireplace and Tim was drenched in sweat. He'd never had one of his dreams in the daytime before and he knew one thing for sure; he would never fall asleep again in the same flat where Jason had been murdered.

This dream was one of the important ones, he was sure of that, but what did it mean? How did it help solve anything? What was he supposed to do? Tim tried to remember what Jason had said and what he could have meant by it. "There's a catch... a price to pay... off the deep end ... C.O.D.... three victims they don't even know about?"

Tim had been having these dreams since he was a kid. The more brightly lit they were the more real they seemed and this one was practically in Technicolor. These were the ones he was supposed to figure out, but he never could. If only his grandmother had taught him what to do with this so-called "gift" of his.

Tim thought about what Jason was wearing and remembered where he kept his leathers--in the bedroom closet. Tim stood up, ran down the hall and opened the

sliding mirrored doors. It was all there. He had thought about clearing it out the night he packed up Jason's porn, but there wasn't room in the suitcases. The boots were on the floor. There were several pairs, actually, but the ones Jason was wearing a few minutes ago were his favorites and they were right in front. The chain harness was hanging from a hook on the wall. *The only thing missing was the riding crop.*

Tim remembered seeing it hanging from a hook inside the back door. It played across his mind like a dream, but he knew he was as wide awake now as he had been that day and he remembered exactly how it happened:

It was a sunny afternoon. He and Jason were sitting in the kitchen. It might have been the first time that Tim was ever there in the daylight. Jason got up and went to the refrigerator to get them a couple of beers and Tim started laughing. He could hear Jason's voice again now.

"What's so damn funny?"

"That leather thing... that thing that's hanging on the hook inside the back door."

"It's called a riding crop."

"But why is it hanging inside the back door? In Minnesota we'd have a fly swatter hanging there, but that would make an awfully skinny fly swatter. You'd have to have really good aim to hit a fly with a thing like that. Even with screen doors and screens on the windows, the flies get inside sometimes and..." Tim hated when he started blathering on about nothing, but he couldn't help it, especially when he was unsure of himself.

Jason handed Tim a beer and set his own down on the table. He reached for the riding crop and put his free hand on the back of Tim's neck, lifting him up out of the chair and bending him over. They were both laughing now. "I'll show you what this is good for swatting, smart-ass! It'll really sting when I get you out of those pants and we'll see what's wide enough..."

The riding crop had been on a hook inside the back door for as long as Tim could remember. He ran to the kitchen and stopped just short of stepping in Jason's dried blood. It was gone! There was nothing but an empty hook there now. Had Jason's killer stolen the Riding crop as some kind of a sick souvenir?

Tim heard footsteps coming from the upstairs half of the duplex. He looked out the kitchen window and saw something parked in the driveway behind the T-bird. He hadn't heard anyone drive up, but they could have arrived while he was dreaming of Jason. Tim stepped out the back door as a muscular pair of hairy legs in cut-offs and dusty brown boots came down the stairs. That's all Tim could see below the big cardboard box the man carried. "Hello. Do you need any help there?" Tim asked.

"Just tell me how I'm doing. I lost count. Am I five steps from the bottom or six?"

"You're on the fifth step from the bottom." Tim stepped up and took the weight off the near side of the box. Now that it was lowered, Tim looked into the handsome face and

bright eyes of a man who seemed familiar, but maybe they had only met in one of his dreams. They carried the box down the driveway together and set it down in the bed of the pick-up truck.

"Hey, thanks a lot."

"You're welcome. I'm Tim Snow. Who are you?"

"I'm Nick Musgrove, see?" He pointed to the logo on the door of the pick-up truck, a picture of a tree and letters that spelled out: *Musgrove Landscape and Gardening Service, Rohnert Park, California*. Tim had seen this truck in the driveway before, but he always assumed that it belonged to one of Jason's tricks.

"I remember Jason mentioned that some old lady rented the upstairs, but I never saw her around..."

Nick Musgrove had a blonde pony-tail that hung just past the neck of his sleeveless T-shirt, a dime-sized gold hoop in his left ear, and strong tanned arms speckled with golden hairs. "She does...or... she *used to*... my grandmother..."

"I'm sorry. Did she pass away recently?"

"Oh no, she's fine. She just got back from a trip. Maybe you've heard of her, Amanda Musgrove, the writer. She's getting up in years, but she still loves to travel. The stairs here were starting to be too much for her, that's all. My folks retired and bought a house in Alameda with an in-law unit. They like having her nearby and it's all on one level. She asked me to come by and pick up the last of her things, an old typewriter and some books to take to Goodwill. They're heavy, as you could tell. Thanks again."

"No problem."

"She wanted to give Jason notice when she got back from her trip, but then we heard about what happened here and she wasn't sure who she should give notice to."

"That would be me," Tim said. "I still can't quite believe it, but Jason left me the house... and the car, too!"

"The Thunderbird?" Nick asked. "Wow! What a great old car. I've always admired it! I'm really sorry about your friend, though. Have they caught the killer yet?"

"No. Not yet. Did you know Jason, Nick?"

"Not well... I think I might have met him once through the Freewheelers, you know the gay car club? I knew Karl better than Jason. When I was a kid we used to come into the city a lot to visit my grandparents when Karl's folks lived downstairs. My grandmother and Karl's mother were the best of friends until she died. Karl was quite a bit older than Jason and me... nice guy! You know The Freewheelers?"

"I've heard of them, I guess." Tim said.

"My grandpa had a '57 Desoto. It was his pride and joy and he took excellent care of it. When he died, my grandmother gave it to me. I hated to part with it, but I couldn't afford to keep it in shape. I finally sold it and bought this truck when I started my business. The truck is a lot more practical, I guess, but I've always had an eye for old cars. They're like works of art." Nick walked around the red T-bird, admiring its lines and chrome. "They don't make 'em like this anymore. Have you had her out for a ride, yet?"

"Not yet," Tim said. He was more interested in the line of Nick's jaw, the curves of his biceps and calves, and the way his cut-off Levi's fit his legs and ass. "You wanna come with me for a test drive?"

Nick grinned. "I'll move my truck out of your driveway first. You pull out, okay Tim? Then I'll pull back in all the way and then let's go!"

"Sounds great." Tim thought it sounded even better than great, but he didn't want to say too much for fear of getting tongue-tied. "I'll go in and get the car keys."

Chapter 15

Tim climbed in behind the wheel for the first time and they were soon driving down Castro Street past the restaurant. Tim hoped he'd see someone he knew... or vice versa. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to show off the fact that he was driving Jason's Thunderbird, which a lot of people would recognize, or Nick, the sexy guy in the passenger's seat.

Tim glanced over at him and smiled. He figured Nick must be at least a few years older than him and he had long blonde hair, something you didn't see every day. Tim always said he wasn't interested in blondes, since they were a dime a dozen in Minnesota, but he might make an exception in this case. And the pony tail... that sure set him apart from most guys. Nick smiled back and said, "This old car sure is a beauty. It runs pretty good too, but it sounds like it needs a new muffler soon."

Tim blurted out, "There's one on the way," and cringed.

Here he was, about to start blathering again. Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut? Tim didn't want to turn off this handsome guy he'd just met with crazy talk about his weird dreams and precognition. *Shut UP Tim*, he told himself. He couldn't wait to tell someone about everything that happened, but who? Jake? Artie? Arturo? It wouldn't be Patrick. Patrick would put the make on Nick if he had the chance. Patrick, with his perfect teeth and perfect pecs and perfect hair and his perfect political correctness, wasn't someone Tim could trust enough to feel close to. They'd had one adventure together when they brought down a closeted homophobic preacher, but "Perfect Patrick" had been acting weird lately. Nick seemed perfect too, but in a different way.

The light turned green and it was just Tim's lousy luck that there was no one he knew at 18th and Castro or on the sidewalks on either side of the street in the next block. The light was red when they pulled up in front of the Twin Peaks bar. He and Nick turned at the sound of the streetcar's bell as it swung onto Market Street, starting its long trek toward Fisherman's Wharf. Nick's bare knees bounced to the music from the open window of another car beside them.

"You ordered a new muffler already?"

Tim let his glance slide up from Nick's bouncing legs to his chest until Nick turned and grinned at him. *He has such beautiful blue eyes... Nah, if I tell Nick I just had a dream about Jason a few minutes before we met... and Jason told me he had a new muffler on order... and that I need to stop the killer before he kills again... Nick will think I'm nuts!*

"I just meant... Jason always took such good care of his car that I'm sure he probably thought of that and has a new muffler ordered already..." Tim took a left on Fell Street so they could drive through Golden Gate Park.

He'd tell his Aunt Ruth about the dream. She might understand. She was the only one who knew about his past. She could put on her Nancy Drew cap and she might even have some ideas about what the dream meant and how it would help them catch Jason's killer.

Them... or him? Jason hadn't said anything about his Aunt Ruth helping him, but then Jason had never met her.

What was it that Jason said about the muffler? "Don't let them try to screw you..."

After they passed Stanyan Street and were cruising into Golden Gate Park, Nick stood up in the passenger's seat and pulled the elastic band out of his ponytail. He shook his head, letting his hair fall free, "Woo-hoo!" he shouted. "Great day, nice car, hot guy. What more could a person want out of life?"

Tim smiled and thought about it. If he considered the rhetorical question seriously, he might have wanted a lot for himself, like having things turn out differently with Jason. He could have wanted his dead ex-boyfriend back and a relationship that was never going to happen. Did he really want to wish for a ghost that might appear in his dreams now and then?

Something was missing in his life, but Tim wasn't sure whether Nick had come along to fill that void or if he was just a reminder of that something. There were reminders every now and then, men like Jean-Yves and Corey, he supposed. Or did he just miss having a regular sex-life... normal... naked... lying down... in a bed... complete with touching... with someone who had a name Tim could call him after he yelled "Oh, God..." and before they went to sleep?

Having his Aunt Ruth in town lately reminded Tim of when he still lived with his parents in Minneapolis, sneaking around with his track coach Dave Anderson until they found out about it and all hell broke loose. Then he moved to Edina to live with his Aunt Ruth and Uncle Dan to finish his senior year where nobody knew him. Tim still felt like he owed her big time. He also thought about the way things were with Jason for their first few weeks together. Jason acted like everything in life was like that old song goes, *just one of those things*, but it was always more than that to Tim. Now he had the melody stuck in his head and reached over to turn on the radio before it got to the lyric: "too hot not to cool down." He didn't want to make the same mistake with Nick before he even knew him.

Damn, he hated himself when he let his mind go off in this direction. He wasn't even stoned! Maybe that was the problem. Here he'd just met someone sexy and friendly and fun and he was thinking things to death. As if reading Tim's mind, Nick reached for his jacket in the back seat and pulled out a small clay pipe. "Smoke a little? It's from Humboldt County. Some of my clients grew it."

Tim tapped the brake and pulled over. "Great idea." He was concentrating on avoiding two laughing, bare-chested guys on roller blades, so he let them pass. Then he took the pipe from Nick and inhaled a deep hit.

They were driving by the Conservatory of Flowers when Nick said, "I've always loved this park... especially that building. I'm so glad they saved it. One of my earliest memories as a kid was when my grandmother would take me here on sunny afternoons. We would look at all the flowers and she would read the Latin names on their tags. Sometimes we'd go to Stow Lake and rent a boat. I loved the Arboretum, too. My grandmother sometimes packed a picnic lunch and let me wander around while she scribbled in her little notebook, working on plots for her mysteries."

"So you were already a budding horticulturist when you were still in diapers?" Tim asked.

"I suppose you could say that."

"How did you get into the business?"

"I went to UC Davis," Nick answered and took another hit off the pipe. "Studied Landscape Architecture and took lots of science courses. I grew up in Santa Rosa and I've always liked Northern California. So many amazing things grow here! There must be lots of worse places to grow up."

"I'm sure there are, although I don't hate Minnesota--just the winters. How long have you been helping your grandmother move out?"

"A little at a time on my weekends... there wasn't any rush, since she's been away. I told you she just got back from a trip, right?"

Tim nodded. "So you must have met Jason before... aside from that car club?" Nick had just admitted that he'd been there alone several times recently. Jason would never pass up a guy as hot as this one. How many loads in his pick-up truck would it take to move a lifetime of some old lady's possessions? Did he and Jason know each other better than Nick was letting on? Or could this mean that Nick had a motive in Jason's murder? Tim didn't know what to think, but he didn't want to think that!

"Not really... I guess he was never around when I was... so you're from Minnesota, huh? I've never been there." Nick changed the subject. "What kind of work do you do?"

"I grew up in Minneapolis... and one of the suburbs," Tim answered. "Now I'm working as a waiter on Castro Street. "

"Right in the thick of things, huh?"

"I'm so used to it by now that I hardly think about it any more. Hey, do you need to be anywhere?" Tim asked. "I've just been driving around."

"No. I've got plenty of time. The nursery is between Rohnert Park and Sebastopol, but I live in Monte Rio. I was thinking about staying at my folks' house in Alameda tonight and driving back up north in the morning. I'm always up for getting to know a guy like you better, though," Nick grinned and Tim started to blush. "That's one of the best things about owning my own business--I can give myself the day off."

Sebastopol, Rohnert Park, Monte Rio--Tim had been to the Russian River and seen those towns' names on road signs. Jason was from somewhere up north, too, according to Artie. It wasn't really Sacramento, but some town near there. Was it possible that Jason and Nick didn't know each other before? No, Tim didn't want to go there in his head. This Nick guy was too sexy and he seemed really nice. He couldn't have anything to do with Jason's murder. Tim had never even been to Sacramento and it was the state capital. That was how little he knew about things. He must be stoned now and he hated when it made him paranoid.

Tim turned up the Great Highway past the Cliff House and they were soon enveloped in thick fog. "Owning a nursery must be pretty cool. That means you're naturally butch, I guess. Most guys your age are only interested in talking about when Patti LaBelle was still singing with The Supremes or when they last saw Madonna in concert. I've met lots of guys your age that are like that, anyway. Have you ever eaten here at Louis'? They make great waffles!" Tim pointed over his left shoulder toward the ancient café hanging over the cliff above the ruins of the Sutro Baths.

"Guys *my* age? How old do you think I am?"

Tim felt like he'd stepped in something by mistake. "I don't know... sorry. You must be nearly forty, I guess. I didn't mean anything by it. I think older guys are hot! Don't you love that smell of eucalyptus?" Now Tim was trying to change the subject, but not doing a smooth job of it. "It doesn't grow in Minnesota."

"Eucalyptus is great up to a point. Too much of it, though, and it starts to remind me of cat piss."

"I never quite thought of it that way. There must be a horticultural term in Latin for that."

"I could look it up for you when I get back to my office," Nick said. "...and it was Diana Ross, by the way."

"Huh?"

"Diana Ross sang with The Supremes," Nick corrected him. "It wasn't Patti LaBelle... not that I would know much about it. I'm so butch, you know."

Tim cringed and pulled into Lincoln Park. The fog was so thick through the golf course that it condensed on the trees and fell like raindrops. Tim parked beside a bed of huge white and yellow poppies that towered over the car and looked like friend eggs on ten foot stems. "Too bad we can't see anything. You know that statue of *The Thinker* by Rodin? It's right over there in the courtyard beyond those pillars and there's the most amazing view of the Golden Gate Bridge from up here on a clear day.

It's shaped like this." Tim drew an imaginary picture on the dashboard with his fingertip.

"I know what the bridge looks like," Nick grinned. "I grew up here, remember?"

"Sorry, I forgot." Tim lowered his fingertip from the dashboard and placed the palm of his hand flat down on Nick's knee. "Look. You've got goose bumps on your legs."

"So I do. It's so cold I'll bet the balls on *The Thinker* over there are shriveled up to the size of raisins."

"Mine will be too pretty soon," Tim said and tried to laugh.

"Do you want to put the top up?"

"No, do you?"

Nick took Tim's hand and pulled him closer. "No, I'm okay. I have a better idea for something to warm us both up." Tim closed his eyes as Nick kissed him. They were quiet for a moment, both grinning, and then they attacked each other like hungry cannibals.

Now Tim really couldn't wait to tell someone about everything that had happened. He couldn't talk to his Aunt Ruth about his sex life. Maybe when he got to work he could tell Jake, but he didn't think so. Nick didn't have anything pierced besides his ear or Tim would have discovered it by now, but that didn't mean he wasn't Jake's type. Tim thought labels belonged on soup cans, but he could just hear Jake now, saying, "That man has *Daddy* written all over him!"

"Waaa..." came from a crying baby in the back of an SUV that pulled up beside them.

"Yikes... breeders!" Tim said, pulling away from Nick and adjusting himself. "I think we'd better go back to my apartment before we get arrested out here."

"Great idea," Nick agreed. "Hurry!" He sat back in his own seat but they never completely let go of each other all the way back to the Castro. By the time they crossed Arguello Street the sun was shining again.

Chapter 16

Ruth woke up from her nap and was trying to decide whether to extend her stay in San Francisco when she got a call from Artie asking her to come in to work that night. He'd been behind the bar every single shift since Jason's murder and Ruth could understand how much he needed a night off. "Sure, Artie, I'd be glad to," she told him as she put the airline receipt back in her purse. "I guess I can handle the bar myself by now."

"I'd really appreciate it, Ruth. It won't be that busy with the kitchen closed. It's comedy night starting at nine. I'll get the bar all set up for you. Tell Patrick or Jake to get you a bucket of ice from the ice machine out back whenever you need it and if you have any trouble, the boys can handle it or you can just call me at home and I'll run right over."

Ruth was headed toward the kitchen on Tim's cordless phone. He still refused to have a cell phone. "Okay, Artie. I haven't seen Tim since this afternoon, but I can leave him a note. Oh wait... here's one from him. He's gone over to Hancock Street to have a look around. Well, he could probably use a night on his own without his old aunt hanging around, anyway. I'll get dressed and I'll be there by five for the after-work crowd, okay?"

"Thanks, Ruthie. You're a lifesaver! Arturo and I could really use a night at home alone together."

Teresa's ex-husband Leonardo and his current husband Theodore were among Ruth's first customers, stopping in for drinks on their way to dinner at the Sausage Factory. Ruth imagined each of them could put away a whole pizza. They were drinking beer and paging through a photo album while excitedly telling Ruth about their plans to go back up to the Russian River where they had first met at *Lazy Bear Weekend*.

"This will be like another anniversary, " Theodore explained to Ruth while he turned the page of the album. "Look, there you are in your little pup tent, Leonardo."

"We probably should have bought a bigger tent for this trip, but it was so cozy, wasn't it?" Leonardo said.

"Then I'm sure congratulations are in order," Ruth said. She didn't know enough about gay relationships to be sure, but she figured these two would never pass up any cause for a celebration.

"Of course we'll always acknowledge the day of our actual marriage much more formally than the day we first met," Theodore added. "Who knew that it would grow into this?"

"Well, maybe you didn't think so, but I knew." Leonardo was clearly upset by this remark. "For me it was love at first sight."

Theodore quickly reached over to pat his husband's beefy hand, "Now, honey. Don't be upset. I didn't mean anything by it. I'm just not one to take anything for granted, especially where you're concerned."

Ruth thought it would be a good idea to change the subject before they started squabbling. "I don't believe I've ever been to the Russian River--maybe years ago when I was in college, but I don't remember. Tim has mentioned that it's a lovely area. Is it far from here?"

"It's about 90 minutes by car," Theodore said, "mostly north. It's in Sonoma County, the next one past Marin, which is the county you're in after you cross over the Golden Gate Bridge."

"I see. Where Tiburon is?" Ruth asked. "Tim and I went there the other day on the ferry boat for lunch at a place called Guaymas."

"Yes, Guaymas is in Tiburon and there's Belvedere, Larkspur, Mill Valley... they're all in Marin. Sonoma County is beyond all of them," Leonardo answered.

"Where do people stay when they visit the Russian River?" Ruth asked. "Are there hotels or motels or something?" She imagined she might like to take a trip up there herself sooner or later.

"Well yes, there are several gay resorts," Leonardo answered. "Theodore had a room at the Highlands, but we met at a dinner party at the campground where I was staying and that's where we're going this weekend. I can't wait to see if we can find that same tree where we first..."

"Leonardo." Theodore interrupted. "Hush. There's a lady present."

"I've never been on a camping trip," Ruth remarked. "How fun that must be."

Jake arrived at the service well and ordered, "JB soda, Tanqueray tonic and a glass of house Merlot please, Ruth. When you hear people talking about going camping on Castro Street, they're not usually referring to tents, but feather boas."

Ruth made the drinks and smiled indulgently while everyone else within earshot laughed. She asked, "How did you happen to meet while camping?"

Theodore answered, "A mutual friend..."

"In other words, we were set up!" Leonardo laughed.

"Those things so rarely work out, you know," added Theodore. "But in this case, we just can't thank him enough."

"Ah, yes," Leonardo said, "he gave a sit-down dinner for eight and our place-cards just happened to be side by side."

"Your friend gave a sit-down dinner in a campground," Ruth asked, "complete with formal place-cards?"

"Yes, ma-am," Theodore answered. "He did five courses out of three igloo coolers and a Coleman stove! Oysters on the half-shell and Caesar salad...what else?"

"...a divine Cassoulet..."

"Oh yes... and Steak au Poivre with green beans..."

"...and potatoes au gratin."

"That sounds wonderful." Ruth said. "Is your friend a professional chef?"

Leonardo answered, "No, he's in hospital administration, but he loves to entertain. You should see the Christmas party he throws every year. It's to die for!"

"I'd love to," Ruth said and she meant it.

"He has a fabulous apartment on Russian Hill," Theodore said. "But can you imagine lugging all of that stuff to the Russian River? Each course had its own wine, crystal stemware, silver candelabra, linen tablecloth, and the works!"

"But the best part was the music... don't you remember that, honey?" Leonardo asked.

"Oh, yes." Theodore nodded. "How could I forget? He trucked in a white baby grand piano with huge silver candelabra and he hired this absolutely gorgeous number to play it."

"Naked!" Leonardo chimed.

"No, really?" Ruth thought that by now they might be pulling her leg.

Jake had stepped up to the service station again to order, "two Stoli tonics, a Bombay gin screwdriver and a bourbon and seven, please." He looked over at the photo album and nodded. "Hey, I know that guy. The piano player...I forget his real name, but there's a good picture of him in the back of the *B.A.R.* too...only from the neck down. It doesn't show his face. He played here for a couple of weeks when Viv was on her honeymoon with the cowboy. He's really hot. It's too bad he didn't play naked here at Arts. He would have packed the place."

"He wasn't totally naked at the river," Theodore said. "He wore a collar and bow tie like the Chippendale dancers."

"And cuffs with gold cufflinks," Leonardo added.

"And dress shoes and socks with those old-fashioned garters like men used to wear in the 40's."

"And don't forget the gold lamé jock strap. But he took all that off afterward and spread out naked on top of the picnic table. For dessert they popped the champagne corks and everyone gathered around to lick whipped cream and eat fresh strawberries right off the pianist."

"Oh, my," said Ruth. "I've never been to a party like that. I've never even heard of anything so elaborately decadent! So that was your first date?"

Theodore said, "We couldn't keep our eyes off each other all during dinner. We let the others finish dessert. Leonardo had a pup tent a few yards closer to the river and we hardly came out of it for the rest of the weekend."

The only kind thing Ruth could think was how romantic and extravagant it all sounded.

"Yoo-hoo! Hi everybody!" They all looked up to see the commotion at the front door.

Ruth said, "Speaking of pianists. Can one of you boys help Vivian with the door?" Viv was trying to hold the door open with her knee while both her hands were full of shopping bags.

Patrick said, "Hey, Viv. It's comedy night. What are you doing in here on your night off?"

"I've been shopping in the neighborhood and I told Roy to pick me up here at six o'clock sharp to go out to dinner. I hope he won't be late. I'm hungry. He's got my kitchen all torn up and he's not even finished painting the outside of my house and then he got sidetracked with some new gardening project. He loses all track of time. Could you make me a white wine spritzer while I'm waiting, Ruth?"

"Of course, Vivian," Ruth said. "The fellows here were just telling me the most romantic story about how they met last summer up at the Russian River. I'll bet you and Roy have some romantic stories too, don't you? How did you two love-birds meet?"

"Roy and I met on the beach... at sunset," Viv let out a dramatic sigh and took a sip of her spritzer. "My last husband Walter and I got in the habit of going for long walks after he had his quadruple bypass surgery. The Cardiologists told him to try to walk at least a mile a day."

"It is good exercise," Ruth agreed.

Viv went on, "Well, I started going along just to keep him company and I really enjoyed it. We'd walk maybe a mile or two every morning--I live out near the beach,

you know--but of course Walter chain-smoked the entire time we were walking, so I guess it wasn't doing him all that much good."

"In the morning?" Ruth asked. "But I thought you said you and Roy met at sunset..."

"I did. I did," Viv answered. "Be patient. After Walter died I stopped walking entirely, but then I noticed I was putting on a few pounds and I missed the exercise so I started in again, just on my days off and when the weather was good. And I kept seeing this tall handsome stranger at about the same time every week, usually near the windmills in Golden Gate Park."

"I think I know where you mean," Ruth said. "Tim and I went for a walk in the park just the other day. I'm not sure if it was him or some of the other boys here in the restaurant who mentioned the windmills in Golden Gate Park."

Jake snorted, tried to stifle his laughter and reached for a paper cocktail napkin to wipe his nose. "They're popular with some of the guys, you know... the Dutch guys, mostly."

"You should see it in the spring," Viv went on, she and Ruth both oblivious to the fact that the windmills had been a notorious gay cruising area for decades. "It's so pretty with the tulips in bloom! Anyway, one evening I was just resting on a park bench and this handsome stranger sat down right beside me and introduced himself and said his name was Roy Rodgers, but with a 'd' in it, not like the movie star. I thought he was joking at first because he had on those cowboy boots and a big old Stetson hat, but then he told me he was widowed, too and I could tell from the way he talked that he'd been lonely for a long time..."

"I knew you'd have a romantic story for us, Vivian," Ruth said.

"Well, my Roy can be quite a charmer, as you well know, Ruth," Viv smiled. "I told him the other day I only wished we'd met years ago. Walter was husband number five... or was it six? Anyway, I told Roy I'd always regretted not having any children, but now we're too old for that... and do you know what he said?"

"No, Viv," Ruth replied. "What did Roy say?"

"He said to me, 'you may be too old to have children, but I'm not. Just look at Larry King! He's older than I am with two little boys... and what about Willie Brown? He fathered a child when he was well into his sixties.'"

"Yes, it's true," Ruth agreed. "Men can parent so much later in life than women can, but I wonder if they have the energy to be as good at the actual fathering at that age." She couldn't help but think of her ex-husband Dan and the much younger women he was with now.

"My Roy is such a tease," Viv smirked. "I just told him, 'Don't you even think about it, you big old stud!' Oh, there's the Cadillac, now. I've got to run! Have a nice evening..."

"You too, Viv. Good-night." Ruth was afraid it was going to be a long evening working alone behind the bar and the comics hadn't even started showing up yet.

Chapter 17

Tim woke up in the middle of the night and reached to scratch his nose. His fingers discovered a bicep up against it and while they made baby steps across that smooth muscle, the afternoon came back into focus. A moment ago he'd been sound asleep and dreaming he was on a Ferris wheel going too fast, but instead of screams he heard a deep "mmmm..." and Nick pulled him closer. Nick only seemed like a dream.

Lots of men had been in this bed, but few had spent the night. Tim tried to remember how long it had been – probably since Jean-Yves, the French flight attendant, when he came to town this past summer for the big party at the Moscone Center.

Most guys started to search for their underwear--if they'd worn any--within five or ten minutes after sex. If they were cigarette smokers it was even sooner. They might have spotted an ashtray in Tim's apartment, but it was only used for marijuana, not tobacco. With Nick it was clear from the beginning that he intended to spend the night. Tim didn't need to use any of his psychic senses to figure that out. They'd been talking about the next morning's breakfast already while they were driving back from the Legion of Honor.

The numbers on the alarm clock said 4:07. Tim wanted to get a better look at Nick sleeping, but there was hardly any light besides the clock and the dark gray squares of window panes facing the air well. He reached for the TV remote to hit ON and MUTE at the same time, flipped through infomercials and settled on an old Western on one of the movie channels.

Now that he could see Nick's profile up close Tim remembered his first sight of him, the tanned muscular legs below a cardboard box coming down the back stairs yesterday. It all came back now, driving through Golden Gate Park to the fogged-in beach, their first kiss in the front seat of the convertible and making out in the parking lot above the ocean. Then they'd raced back to Tim's apartment to make love--well, to have sex, actually. It was as furious as anything on the Discovery Channel, but tender afterward.

Tim took a deep breath and sighed. It was rare for him to feel this satisfied, not to want anything else in the world at the moment, not even ice cream. How long had it been since he felt this good? He wouldn't let himself think how long it might last. He saw chopsticks and the red and white cartons and remembered when they'd called out for Chinese food, both liking the same things and doubling up on pot stickers. No wonder he wasn't hungry. Then he remembered Jason's murder at the house on Hancock Street--Tim's house now. Was it possible that Jason and Nick didn't already know each other?

Tim closed his eyes and drifted back into another dream. He and Nick were seated in the last row of the Castro Theatre watching a black and white movie from the 40's. Bette Davis was pacing across the screen with a lit cigarette and Nick had one arm

around Tim's shoulder. Their shared bag of popcorn was in Nick's lap. When Tim reached for another handful he felt something cold and wet, but he could barely make out what he saw in the shadows. Strawberries, ripe ones, dripped their juice like blood from Tim's fingers and across the leg of Nick's khaki trousers. Nick's free hand was covered in blood, too, and he hadn't even started eating yet.

Nick was in the aisle seat and Tim looked past him toward a theatre employee walking by with a flashlight. She was dressed like an usher from the same era as the movie – red jacket with gold braids and matching pillbox hat, black pants with a stripe down the side. Tim looked back down at Nick's hand. There was no blood... no strawberries... nothing but popcorn in the bag. Nick smiled at him and pulled him closer. The usher walked back up the aisle but this time she didn't have a flashlight. She carried a large chef's knife dripping blood from the tip.

A fog horn bellowed as if it intended to wake him. Tim thought he knew by now the difference between a psychic dream and an ordinary one. He thought he could distinguish a mere nightmare from a premonition, but sometimes they weren't so clear.

Sometimes he thought a guy was special too and then it turned out to be nothing but more of the same--nothing--a mere release and then *moving right along* to the next one. For Tim it was too easy to invest his heart into someone wonderful and discover later on that the guy he was with didn't recognize that Tim was special at all.

Then he noticed the half-smoked joint in the ashtray. The bottom drawer of his dresser was wide open, which meant... ah, now he remembered digging through old jock straps and mementos of his sexual history to find the fresh lube he'd bought on Castro Street... how long ago? Nick stirred and pulled Tim closer again, shook back his hair, looked up into Tim's eyes by the blue light of the television and mumbled, "Fog horns."

"Huh?"

"Fog horns... outside..." Nick reached for the back of Tim's neck, pulled his face down and kissed him and Tim forgot all about Jason. "Hey Tim..."

"What?"

"Did you know that San Francisco got rid of the foghorns once?"

"What do you mean?"

"They stopped them... years ago... turned them off."

"I don't get it?" Tim sat up and placed his fingertips on Nick's cheek, tracing the outline of his face. "Wouldn't the ships run into Alcatraz or something?"

"No." He caught Tim's index finger in his teeth, licking it from end to end until Tim lowered it to slide down the center of Nick's chest. "Ships navigate by instruments

these days. At least that's what I heard. They don't need foghorns anymore... they haven't for years."

"Then why can I hear them right now? I'm not dreaming that sound, am I?"

"No, you're not dreaming. People missed the sound of the foghorns, I guess. They brought them back purely for aesthetic reasons... mmm." Nick coaxed Tim's mouth across his chest to his other nipple for equal time. "I think we should do more things for purely aesthetic reasons, don't you? In San Francisco people understand that, but not everywhere...hey, don't bite quite so hard... ooh... that feels great," he moaned.

"Understand what?" Tim tried to ask, but Nick's hand was still holding him down so that the words came out in a mumble.

"Like the 'Summer of Love' back in 1967. I don't think it could have happened quite the same way anywhere else in the world."

Tim wasn't sure what Nick was talking about, but even though it was the middle of the night he would be happy to spend hours like this, listening to Nick's voice in the semi-darkness and making the same triangular route from nipple to nipple to mouth and back again. Tim thought of himself as a runner on a baseball diamond. He lifted his head and took a deep breath. "I think it's great that you grew up around here and you know so much."

Nick arched his back and moved a couple of inches to the left so both his hands were free now and Tim was all the way on top of him. "You poor boy," Nick rubbed the backs of Tim's shoulders. "Growing up in Minnesota... deprived of the music of foghorns... I'm not sure, but... you'll probably need years of therapy to recover from a thing like that."

"We had tornado sirens, instead," Tim said. "They're almost as good, but not as romantic, I guess." When he settled back down into the nipple-mouth-nipple pattern, it occurred to him that he was only working the outfield. The next time he rounded the bases, he went all the way down to home plate where the batter was standing at attention. The top sheet and the comforter slid off the foot of the bed when Tim crouched to his knees. It was high time for a grand slam home run.

Nick held the back of Tim's head down and moaned until his breathing quickened and Tim couldn't stop until Nick arched his back and let go with a long, loud groan, his mouth wide open, head thrown back and another foghorn drowned out the sound of his release like thousands of roaring faithful fans.

Ruth woke the next morning to hear men's voices in the garden outside Tim's kitchen. She stuck her head out the back door and asked, "Good morning?"

"Good morning," Tim jumped up to greet her and Nick stood, too. "I'd like you to meet Nick Musgrove. Nick, this is my Aunt Ruth I told you about." They shook hands while Nick tried to hold shut the robe Tim had loaned him, but it was too small. "Nick's grandmother lived upstairs in Jason's house on Hancock Street and he's been helping her move to Alameda."

"It's good to meet you, Nick. Oh, look at me. No, *don't* look at me! I'm a mess. I'm sorry. I just woke up. What a terrible first impression I must make."

"You look fine," Nick said. "It's good to meet you, too. We didn't even hear you come in last night."

"It was late," she said. "Those foghorns were really something, weren't they? I've never noticed them so loud before. The conditions must have been just right for the sound to carry, but they lulled me to sleep like a baby, anyway."

Nick wondered what time she'd come in and how much she'd really heard through the thin walls of Tim's apartment, but he changed the subject. "Tim was telling me how much he enjoys having you here. Have you decided to move to San Francisco yet?"

"I've been thinking about it... seriously. I like the people I've met here so much and last night Artie said they'd love for me to stay on more or less full-time if I'd agree to it. I need to make a decision before he hires another bartender. It's not that I need the work, but it's so nice for me to feel needed. And everyone's so good to me. Oh, before I forget... last night some customers gave me a pair of tickets to the Giants game this Thursday afternoon. They said they have season tickets, but they'll be out of town. How would you two boys like to go to the game together?"

Nick said, "I can't. Thank you, though. I have to go back up north today. I've got to get a lot of work done this week so I can come down on the weekend to see your nephew again."

Tim grinned at Nick and asked Ruth, "How was work last night at Arts, anyway?"

"There was a good crowd... five comics, two men, three women," she poured herself a cup of coffee while she talked. "You know, they were all good, I'm sure. The crowd loved them, but a lot of their humor goes right over my head, I'm afraid."

Tim said to Nick, "Aunt Ruth has never taken Gay 101."

"If you'll excuse me," Nick interrupted and glanced at his watch, "I really have to get going. I left my truck over on Hancock Street by my grandma's... I mean Tim's house. Then I've got a long drive and a big day at work ahead of me."

"Don't you want to shower first?" Tim asked. "Let me find you a clean towel. Help yourself to more coffee, Aunt Ruth."

It was at least an hour later by the time Nick left and Tim and Ruth could talk about him. She heartily approved, based on her first impressions, and was certain that this was the perfect man for her nephew. Nick was, in fact, the first and only man of Tim's that she'd met since the scandal with Dave Anderson, his track coach back when Tim was still in high school, but that fact didn't deter Tim from wanting to believe her.

When she had carried on about Nick long enough to embarrass Tim, he thought of a way to change the subject. He had yet to tell her about his dream and he wanted to do it with as much detail as he could remember--the car muffler, Jason dressed in all his leather, the fireplace crackling behind him and the urgent need to catch the killer, but not who the killer was. "It was so real, Aunt Ruth, like Jason was standing right there! I haven't had one of my dreams in quite a while, and I don't know what good will come of it, since he didn't tell me who the killer was."

"Your dream could still be meaningful, Tim. I read a fascinating book about dreams a while back. I wonder if they'd have a copy at the San Francisco library. I could read it again and maybe it would help me figure things out. Now, are you sure you've told me every little detail of your dream about Jason?"

"Yes, I think so. That's all I can remember," Tim said. "I mean... I know it was a dream, but it wasn't like any normal dream. *You* know what I mean, of all people. It was one of *those* dreams... vivid."

Ruth knew what he meant. Her mother had always had those dreams too, but Tim's grandmother had also seen things when she was wide awake. "And you said he was wearing this leather and chain outfit... with a riding crop."

"Yes, and the rest of Jason's leather was all there in the closet, but the riding crop that he kept on a hook by the back door was missing!"

"What could be the significance of that, do you think? Did Jason dress that way often?"

"Sometimes he'd wear his leather to a Sunday beer bust at the Eagle Saloon or down to the Lone Star. He called it his 'dead cow hide.' He'd wear it sometimes on a Saturday night if he was going to one of the bars South of Market, but he usually worked on Saturday nights until closing time, at least since I've known him. He would definitely wear it to the Folsom Street Fair and Dore Alley."

"Dore Alley?" Ruth asked. "What's that?"

"It's another street fair, only smaller. The same people who produce the Folsom Street Fair organize Dore Alley, but it's more for the locals. The Folsom Street Fair has become international, like San Francisco's version of a one-day Mardi gras, almost as big as the gay parade. People come from all over for Leather Week and..."

"Tim," Ruth interrupted. "You don't think it might have been someone Jason knew from one of those street fairs, do you... the killer, I mean?"

"Anything's possible..."

There was something familiar about the riding crop that bothered her when she thought about it later. She couldn't imagine why it stuck in her mind or where she had seen a riding crop lately. It must have been on TV. That was the only thing Ruth could think of. Maybe she'd watched Barbara Stanwyck in an old episode of "The Big Valley" late one night while trying to fall asleep.

She said to Tim, "Well, Nick certainly seems like a nice young man with a good head on his shoulders. Perhaps you should concentrate on this new friend of yours and let me ponder the dream you had about poor Jason, dear."

"Okay, Nancy Drew," Tim said as he stepped into the kitchen and rinsed out the empty coffee pot. "You analyze my dreams and I'll think about Nick. Hmmm... I can't complain about that. I'm getting the easy job."

Chapter 18

The weatherman predicted that the entire next week would be cool and gray, not uncommon in San Francisco this time of year. By midmorning on Thursday the fog still hovered over the hills, but the sky was clear overhead. The helicopter view on the news showed sunshine on the bay and Tim opened the back door to see rays of light move across his red geraniums as the clouds parted. While loading the dishwasher after their late breakfast Tim noticed the tickets to the Giants' game still stuck behind the toaster. "Hey, Aunt Ruth," he yelled down the hallway. "Whatcha doing?"

"I'm just reading my book, dear."

"You never found anyone to use these tickets, did you? The game starts at 12:20. Let's you and me go to the ball game. Come on. It'll be fun. We can both be back in time for work."

"Okay, dear. I'll get my shoes on and grab a jacket."

"It should burn off down at the ball park if it's nice anywhere," Tim said. "You're right to bring a jacket, though. You'll probably need it by the time we're headed home. You get used to wearing layers in the summer. Welcome to San Francisco." There were times when he missed the true heat, the sticky sweltering summer days he grew up with in Minnesota, when the sky would finally grow black with the promise of bolts of lightening and a soaking downpour. The weather report in San Francisco never talked about dew points or heat indexes or air inversions. He didn't miss tornadoes, though, or hail. And giving up thunder was a small price to pay for living in the world's gayest neighborhood.

Coming out the front gate, Tim got a reminder that not everyone was gay. They saw his upstairs neighbors Ben and Jane and little Sarah. Ben was helping his pregnant wife into their double-parked car on Collingwood. Sarah waved to Tim and Ruth from her car seat in the back. Jane had trouble fitting into the low car on the steep hill, but she tried to wave, too. "When is your baby due, Jane?" Ruth asked.

"In about another week," she answered. "It's a boy and I think he's going to become a soccer player from the way he likes to kick already."

"How nice," Ruth said. "Sarah will have a little brother to play with."

Tim moved as if to help shut her car door and Ben looked up. "And I'll have my old wife back. What are you two going today?"

"Aunt Ruth scored us two tickets to the Giants' game," Tim said, trying to sound excited. He had never been a baseball fan, but it would be something for them to do together and he knew his Aunt Ruth would enjoy it.

"Have fun at the ballpark," Ben said. "I wish I could join you. It would sure beat spending an hour in the lobby of the obstetrician's."

Tim thought of all the reading he could catch up on. He had three magazines on the table that he hadn't even opened yet and wished he could trade places with Ben, but it was too late for that. His Aunt Ruth was waiting for him.

On their walk to the MUNI station, Tim said to his aunt, "You know I've been thinking... there's just no way I could live in the bottom of Jason's house after finding him there that day, but I could maybe live upstairs. Nick's grandparents lived there for years and he's finished moving all their stuff out now. They left it spotless. All it needs is a fresh coat of paint and I'd want to get rid of some of the old-fashioned wallpaper, but it's a great apartment."

"What a good idea," Ruth said as she stopped to pet a dog that was tied to the parking meter outside Walgreens.

"And I was thinking that Ben and Jane might be interested in moving into the bottom half. I doubt that they ever met Jason, so it wouldn't have the same association for them that it does for me. It's technically a three bedroom and with another baby on the way..."

"And you'd have someone you already know and trust living right downstairs, and you'd still be close to little Sarah," Ruth said.

Tim thought about finding Jason's nearly lifeless body in a pool of blood on the kitchen floor. Then he pictured Jason dressed in leather holding the riding crop and standing in front of the fireplace in his dream. "If there's anyone who can counteract Jason's angry phantom it would be Sarah, the magic child. Besides, it's got a little yard for the kids to play in. It's pretty hard to play hopscotch on a sidewalk on the side of a hill. "

"That's true, dear."

"And then you can live in my apartment on Collingwood Street."

"Oh, Tim, you've thought of everything, haven't you? Let's not move quite so fast."

"But I heard you tell Nick that Artie wants you to stay on and you like it here and I hate to think of a stranger moving into my old place, but it would be perfect for you."

"I *said* I was thinking about it."

They descended the stairs and boarded the MUNI train at Castro Station with a sea of Giants' fans. There were people of all shapes and sizes crowding onto the car and most were wearing Giants' logos on their clothes.

"My goodness," Ruth said, "doesn't anybody have to work in this city on a Thursday afternoon? I feel like we're in a sardine can." At each stop the platforms were mobbed with more people trying to push their way onto the train. The visor of one little boy's red and black baseball cap pressed into Ruth's hip until the train jerked and her position shifted.

"This is nothing," Tim said. "You should see it in June on the day of the gay parade. It's even more crowded then. From Castro Station all the way downtown it's jammed with people, but instead of Giants' colors, everyone's wearing rainbow stripes and beads and high heels, especially the nuns."

"Nuns in high heels?" Ruth asked.

"Not real nuns, Aunt Ruth. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence."

"I've never heard of them in Minnesota, I don't think."

"The story goes that they got their start in Iowa by borrowing a bunch of habits from some real nuns. They told them they were putting on a production of *The Sound of Music*, but now there are convents of them all across the country," Tim explained. "They're gay guys who dress up as nuns... sort of. Some are even real girls. They're funny and colorful and they do charitable work. At least these Giants' fans wear sensible shoes."

The subway finally emerged to the view of the Bay Bridge. They passed Red's Java House and the enormous Claes Oldenburg sculpture of the bow and arrow. Ruth said, "Oh, Tim... look how sunny and warm it is in this part of town. What a beautiful view with the bay and all the ships and sailboats. It's almost as if we were in a different city from your neighborhood."

"Yeah, San Francisco can be like that," Tim said, "especially in the summer."

They finally spilled out of the train and were swept along the crowded platform. The deck of Momo's restaurant was bathed in sun and so packed with sports fans there didn't appear to be room for even one more person. A pair of buxom blonde twin girls in matching orange outfits handed out free samples of a new soft drink. Tim said, "We're here plenty early. Do you want to walk around for a while?"

"Sure."

They strolled the China Basin marina past dozens of sailboats. Seagulls screeched overhead as the smells of garlic, fish and hot dogs wafted over the walls of the stadium. A huge ferryboat like the one they had taken to their brunch in Tiburon pulled up to the dock and hundreds more people got off it and filed into the ballpark. Ruth said, "If I lived across the bay, that's how I would want to come to the ballgame--by boat--and leave the driving to someone else."

"There's McCovey Cove," Tim said. "All those people in the little boats and kayaks are hoping to catch a ball whenever someone hits a home-run over the wall."

"It sure is a lot bigger than it looks on television," Ruth said.

While waiting in line they heard a voice over the public address system announcing that the national anthem would be sung by several of the cast members from *Beach Blanket Babylon*. Ruth said, "Oh darn, we're going to miss it! That's the show you said you'd take me to see next time I come to town for a visit."

"I'm sure Val Diamond isn't here in the San Francisco skyline hat," Tim said. They probably just sent a bunch of understudies. If it'll make you feel any better I'll sing the national anthem for you... *O-oh say can you see...?*"

Ruth laughed and put her hand over his mouth. "That's quite all right, dear."

They climbed several ramps to find the section where their seats were and at one point when they rounded a corner, Ruth stopped and pointed toward the people on the level below them. "Look, Tim... over there by that beer stand. Isn't that Leonardo? Yes, and Theodore is on this side of him with his back turned toward us. We should wait for them and say hello, shouldn't we?"

"No, wait..." Tim said. "It looks like a bad time." The two men were arguing about something, but even if Ruth and Tim were closer there was so much echoing noise that they couldn't hear a word of it. "It looks like the honeymoon is definitely over."

"Oh, I guess you're right. What is that in Leonardo's back pocket?"

"Maybe keys and a handkerchief," Tim said. "It's hard to see from here. Did you bring those little binoculars?"

"My opera glasses are in my purse. Here, you take them, Tim. What's that thing that's hanging down from his belt loop?"

"I think it's a little whip. Here, let me get a better look with those. Oh, darn it! He turned away. Maybe they're into S&M now and they want everybody to know it."

"A whip? Like a riding crop?"

"No, just a little whip, more like a cat-o-nine tails. Looked like a toy."

"What would he carry that around for?" Ruth was still convinced that Marcia was the guilty party, but she wanted to know what this whip business was all about.

"I'm sure it's nothing. It was so little you couldn't really use it to beat anyone. It must be symbolic. I'm sure they keep the *big* whips in the playroom at home. Didn't Teresa say they were moving into a big place in the Mission? It's probably one of those old Victorians with space underneath for a garage and a playroom."

"Symbolic of what? What do you mean... playroom?"

"Oh, Aunt Ruth, you're such a babe in the woods. We're gonna have to enroll you in Gay 101. A playroom is a place where guys... *play*, you know? Have sex. In their case it's probably a dark dungeon full of whips and chains and mirrors and a rack and it absolutely reeks of man-sweat and Crisco."

Ruth's facial expression said that she was more perplexed than shocked, which had been Tim's intention. He thought that sometimes his aunt was almost *too* accepting of things.

"So... the little whip on his belt is just a symbol."

"Yeah, like keys and colored handkerchiefs. Leonardo is probably a top and he's into B&D, S&M, water sports..."

"B&D?"

"Bondage and discipline. S&M stands for sadism and masochism... or 'standing and modeling'; that's what guys do in the bars, usually. Artie says in the old days it meant Sears and Magnin's. The butch ones shopped at Sears and the queens went to Magnin's. Or was it Shaheen's and Macy's? I never thought of Theodore as a bottom before. I guess I never thought of him as *anything* before. Ee-ew." He handed the binoculars back to Ruth.

"Come on, Tim. We don't want them to catch us staring."

The Colorado Rockies were ahead by four points by the second inning and the Giants never stood much of a chance of catching up, but Ruth was thrilled just to be there. It was one more thing for her to love about this city. The game was so lopsided by the bottom of the seventh inning that people were leaving the stadium in droves. Tim was ready to go too, but Ruth said, "Let's stay all the way until the end. Maybe the streetcar won't be so crowded by then. Besides, we've got plenty of time before we need to be at the restaurant."

She was right. They even got seats on the streetcar and while waiting for it to pull out, Ruth noticed Leonardo and Theodore walking down the sidewalk hand in hand.

"Look, Tim. The newlyweds seem to have made up. It's still hard for me to get used to

the sight of two men holding hands in public. Isn't it dangerous in this part of town? I don't mean to sound prudish, but this isn't the Castro. There's so much testosterone in the air around the ballpark you can almost smell it, can't you?"

Tim inhaled deeply and smiled. "Sure can. But gay people are baseball fans, too. Besides, those two are awfully big guys. Anybody trying to mess with them would be taking on over a quarter ton, I'd imagine. I wouldn't do it, would you?"

"No, I certainly wouldn't."

They were home in plenty of time to get ready for work and it turned out to be a slow night at Arts, anyway. Jake and Tim waited tables and Ruth worked the bar with Artie until after the dinner rush was over. "You might as well go home, Ruth," Artie told her.

"Are you sure? I don't mind closing again, Artie, if you'd like to go."

"Nah, I've got to do payroll. I promised Arturo I'd stay and work on that tonight. It's not going to get any busier, I don't think. Look at that fog. It's so thick you can barely see across the street."

Ruth said good-night and walked back to Collingwood Street by herself. Tim's tables were all finished by shortly after ten o'clock and even Viv was ready to pack it in. There was nobody sitting around the piano. Viv asked Tim, "Where's that new Thunderbird of yours? I never even got to see it when Jason had it--only in pictures--but my second husband Boris drove a T-Bird. I always loved that old car."

"It's just up the street. I'm glad we put the top back up before all this fog came in or it would be soaked." Tim had found a parking place for the Thunderbird on Castro just above 19th Street, but he had to move it for street cleaning before the morning. "Say, where's Roy Rodgers? Do you want me to give you a lift home? If you like convertibles so much, I could put the top back down."

"It's still early. He generally comes to pick me up around eleven thirty on a weeknight, but if I know Roy, he's probably half asleep with his stocking feet up on the sofa in front of the ten o'clock news. I'll call and tell him not to bother to put his boots back on."

Tim had never known exactly where Viv and Roy lived. "I'm near the south side of the park if you want to take Lincoln Way, but it's faster to go up Market Street over Twin Peaks," she instructed. "Do you know Sloat Boulevard?"

"I think so... the one that goes by Stern Grove?"

"Yes, then keep right on going past there. I'll tell you when to turn."

Tim had thought that Viv's house was out near the zoo, but he'd only gone there on the L-Taraval, never by car. It was no wonder she didn't like to take MUNI home after work. She might have a long wait, if the trains even ran that late at night. Tim wasn't sure.

"This old car is a real beauty," Viv said, "but it sounds like you're going to need a new muffler pretty soon."

"I know." He had noticed it tonight, too. The muffler sounded worse than it did when Nick mentioned it on Monday as they were driving through Golden Gate Park. If Jason hadn't really ordered a new muffler from a dealer in L.A., Tim would have to do something about it himself soon. But that would mean that his vision of Jason in front of the fireplace had only been a normal dream.

Viv's house was one of thousands of nearly identical bungalows lined up block after block in the vast unknown commonly referred to as "The Avenues." Tim considered it a wasteland between the *real* San Francisco and the Pacific Ocean. "I love a convertible, but I'm glad I brought my coat," Viv said.

"It must be twenty degrees colder out here by the ocean." Tim pulled into the driveway and put the top up while Viv gathered up her purse, a shopping bag and a large plastic folder full of sheet music from the back seat. When he looked up toward the house he glimpsed Roy's shadow watching them from behind the curtains as Viv turned back to yell out her thanks and blow Tim a kiss.

Driving back across the city, Tim thought of Nick up north, miles away at the Russian River and Tim wondered if Nick was all alone too. Maybe it wasn't too late to give him a call when he got home, but maybe it was too early in their relationship, if he dared to call it that. They'd only just met and Tim didn't want to mess things up. Good sex didn't always lead to anything more than just that. If he'd learned nothing else from Jason, it was to take things as they come and Nick said he'd be back down to see him on the weekend.

Tim hoped in some ways that his vision of Jason wasn't just a "normal" dream, but even if the stars were out tonight, he wasn't quite sure what he would wish for.

Chapter 19

"Tim, call that guy for me, will you? I've been thinking..." It was Friday afternoon and both Ruth and Tim were getting ready to walk around the corner to Arts.

"What guy? It's almost time to go to work."

Ruth glanced at her wristwatch. "We don't have to be there for thirty-five minutes. We can walk there in two. I want you to call that policeman."

"What policeman? Why now? What's gotten into you?"

"I'm trying to make a big decision in my life and I need your help. You know... that policeman friend of yours who came by here that day to pick up the knife I found on Hancock Street. I need you to call him and see how the case is coming along. Find out if they've learned anything more about Jason's killer... or Jorge's... or that poor French boy, the student."

"I can try, but he's not my friend..."

"Will you just call him for me... please?"

Tim finished tying his shoes and went to the living room where he sat down at his desk and looked for the number. "There's no telling whether he's at the station right now."

"Didn't he give you his home number? You said he was trying to hit on you."

"He was and he did and I tore it up and I threw it away." Tim scowled as he punched in the number at Mission Station. He was surprised to get his *friend* on the line within a few moments.

Ruth sat down on the couch and grew frustrated with hearing only one end of the conversation, consisting mostly of a lot of "Mmmm" sounds and "Uh-huh" and "Sure, I see, yes, that makes sense, I guess..." She wanted Tim to hurry up and tell her everything, but she didn't want to rush him, either. There might be some small salient point he would miss if she did.

"Yeah, I hear ya. From the same set, huh? Wow, not like the ones they sell on TV, huh? Thanks, yeah... thanks a lot."

Tim finally hung up the phone and grabbed his jacket. "Come on. We'll talk on the way, although there's not much more to tell."

Ruth grabbed her own jacket and ran behind him out the apartment door and through the front gate. They were heading downhill on Collingwood while Tim talked. "The

knives weren't identical, but all three were from the same set. They were expensive chef's knives, the kind a professional would use. That's what's kind of weird, that the killer would leave them behind."

"Maybe he didn't know their value," Ruth said. "Maybe they weren't even his to begin with. Maybe they were stolen."

"That's what the police think too, Nancy Drew. There were no fingerprints anywhere except the ones that belonged there. Arturo's prints were all over his own car, of course, and some of Jorge's prints and mine."

"Is Arturo missing any knives? He's a chef."

"I don't think so. He would have mentioned it. The French boy's car was an old junker used by everyone who delivered pizza for them and it had lots of prints all over it from all the people who work there, including the dead student."

"Nothing else?" Ruth asked. "What are the police doing? There's a killer out there and they don't seem to have a clue how to stop him. You said that Jason told you in your dream that this monster would strike again."

They were passing Spike's Coffee Shop on 19th Street when Tim said, "Oh, there was one other thing."

"What? Tell me."

"They could determine from the autopsies that the killer was fairly tall. According to the knife angles, he had to be over six feet. That's what Jason was and they think Jason had just gotten out of his car when he was attacked, so he was standing up, then he tried to fight, but ran to his kitchen door and the killer chased him and stabbed him again in the back."

"Marcia could be over six feet tall in heels, couldn't she?"

"I suppose so. You still don't like her, do you?"

Ruth didn't answer, but Tim noticed her frown. They waited for a truck to pass so that they could cross Castro Street in front of Buffalo Foods and she announced, "Well honey, Sunday brunch will be my last shift at Arts. I've booked a flight back to Minneapolis next week."

"So soon? Aunt Ruth, you just got here."

"I hate to leave town before the murderer is caught, but I've nearly decided to tell Artie that I'll come back and take the job."

"Aunt Ruth, that's great news!" Tim hugged her in the middle of the intersection.

"I'm sure there's a stack of mail a mile high. I need to talk to the neighbor's boy who mows the grass and shovels the snow and write him another check. It'll take me a

while to sort through things and decide what to put in storage and what to pack, but you know, Tim, I do love it here. Since you've inherited the house and are planning to move to Hancock Street, I really like the idea of taking over your apartment--for a while anyway."

"Everyone will be so glad to hear it. We'll have a big party for you just as soon as you get back... a housewarming."

"A *little* party maybe... and no gifts, please," Ruth protested. "I've got too much stuff at is it and it will be quite an adjustment to move from that big house in Edina to your little apartment, but it will be good for me to cut back at this stage of my life. It just feels right and I'll be closer to my favorite nephew."

"Your *only* nephew. Arturo and Artie will be thrilled. We'll have a party at the restaurant."

"Don't say anything yet. I'll tell him on Sunday if I decide to take the job for sure. I'm still afraid to leave you alone in San Francisco with a killer on the loose."

"I'm not alone. I know lots of people here. And murders happen somewhere every day, Aunt Ruth."

"But not so close to home. By the way, Tim... where's your car? I thought I saw it yesterday on Castro Street."

"I gave Viv a ride home after work and then I parked in the driveway on Hancock Street and walked back to Collingwood. I never realized before I had a car what a bitch it is to find parking in this neighborhood, especially at night. It's a good thing I have Jason's driveway."

"Tim, I think you need to get used to calling it *your* driveway," Ruth said. "In spite of that vivid dream you had about Jason the other day, you need to accept the fact that he's not coming back."

"I know, Aunt Ruth, I know... I even talked to Ben this afternoon about them moving into the downstairs half where Jason lived. I meant to tell you."

"Good, honey... how did that go?"

"Well, I didn't go into any of the details about Jason's murder, but Ben knew enough about it from the papers. I told him I'd give them a good deal on the rent. There are way too many vacancies in the neighborhood these days for a new landlord like me to be greedy."

"What did he say, dear?"

"He sounded interested. He agreed that they'd like me to be near Sarah. I'm a great baby-sitter, you know. He's going to talk it over with Jane. They probably won't make any decisions until she has the new baby, but that could be any day now."

Even after the delay for calling the police, Ruth and Tim arrived at Arts in plenty of time to get set up to open. Artie was sitting at the bar talking to a stranger, a thin young black man. Tim thought he was either a salesman or a new comic wanting to sign up for a spot on Monday night. "Tim... Ruth," Artie said, "I'm glad you're here. I'd like you to meet James. He is going to start working with us tonight as a waiter. It'll be busy, judging by the reservations; so Tim... you and Jake show James the ropes as best you can."

"You bet, Artie."

They both shook his hand and Tim said, "Good to meet you, James."

Ruth greeted James and then turned to Artie to ask, "Where is Patrick? Doesn't he usually work on Friday nights?"

"Patrick is no longer with us, Ruth."

"Oh, my goodness," Ruth gasped. She still had her mind on the murders and wasn't sure what Artie meant. "What on earth happened? Don't tell me there's been another..."

"No, not that," Artie said. "We can only hope that Patrick is on his way to rehab by now."

"I'm so sorry," Ruth said, relieved that he was still alive.

"Well, we are, too. Arturo and I are just sick about it, but we've given him more than one chance to clean up his act. Last night Arturo caught him dealing in the bathroom and that was simply the last straw!"

"My goodness..." Ruth pictured a card game going on in the men's room of the restaurant. The women's bathroom certainly wasn't big enough, but maybe the men's was larger, the restaurant being on Castro Street where there were often more male customers than female. Ruth thought of her old neighbor in Edina who had a gambling problem and spent every dime he earned at the Indian casinos on the weekends. "Dan and I used to play a little four-handed pinochle with the neighbors when we were still married, but never for money."

"No, Aunt Ruth," Tim cut in, trying not to laugh. "Patrick wasn't dealing cards in the bathroom! Artie's talking about dealing drugs... crystal meth, to be exact. It's nearly an epidemic these days."

"Really? I saw something on the Discovery channel about that just recently, but they made it sound like it was a bigger problem in rural America than in the cities."

"It's everywhere," James said. "I think I saw that program, too."

"That reminds me," Ruth said, "I noticed Patrick acting a bit odd the other night. He was searching through the silverware racks at the waiters' station. I asked him what he was looking for and he said something about a Cadillac. Isn't that strange? Well, the only drugs I know anything about are marijuana and alcohol."

"Tina is some bad stuff," James said and Ruth remembered someone talking about a girl named Tina just recently. It was Patrick; that was who it was. He'd asked some customers if they were looking for someone named Tina and they all went out to the sidewalk. Ruth began to realize that the Tina they were talking about wasn't a girl after all.

That night at Arts was busy. Teresa came in for an early dinner with her ex-husband, Lenny. She still had to struggle to remember to call him "Leonardo." After dinner they were having a drink at Ruth's end of the bar when Marcia came by and ordered a tall Long Island Iced Tea. Ruth still didn't trust her, but she tried not to let it show as she made the drink and set it down on a serviette. "Teresa, have you been introduced to Marcia?"

Teresa laughed and said to Ruth, "Not formally, but sort of... At least, I met her former self. We're still neighbors in the same building, after all."

"Hello again, Teresa," Marcia set her purse on the bar and rummaged through it for her wallet. Ruth thought how easy it would be to carry a large knife inside that purse.

Marcia set a twenty on the bar and Teresa reached over to shake hands. "Hey there, Marcia! You're even prettier as a girl than you were as a boy, in my humble opinion. Arturo told me about how you scared old Ruthie here half to death on Castro Street the other day. Anyway, welcome to the fairer sex!"

"Thanks, Teresa," Marcia said. "I'm on my way to a meeting of a support group at the LGBT Center down on Market Street. That's for Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender... what a mouthful! I'm one of the Ts in the LGBT, I guess. Anyway, I'm a little nervous."

"I'm sure you'll do just fine, dear," Teresa assured her.

Marcia's purse still sat on the bar, wide-open, and Ruth tried to get a glimpse inside, but from this angle, other than the wallet, it appeared empty. *Marcia wouldn't need tampons, after all, but why would anyone carry such a big purse for only a wallet?* Ruth pretended to wipe up a tiny spill with a bar towel and bumped the purse enough to make it fall over toward her. She hoped that a large chef's knife would clatter out onto the bar, but there was nothing.

"Clumsy me!" Ruth set the purse back upright and got a feel for its weight. It wasn't heavy now, but it was sturdy enough to hold a meat cleaver if necessary and large enough that a flexible riding crop could easily be folded in half to fit inside.

"I'm one of the newer members, even though none of the others have had the surgery yet," Marcia explained, holding two well-manicured and brightly polished fingers in the motion of a pair of scissors. "I'll be their inspiration, I hope. What a responsibility!"

Teresa slapped Marcia on the back and said, "Give 'em hell, girlfriend!"

Soon after Marcia left for her meeting, Teresa got up from the bar to go to the ladies room. Ruth remembered Theodore and Leonardo's tiff at the ballpark and finally had a chance to ask, "Where's Theodore tonight? I never see you two apart. I hope everything is all right."

"He's fine. His parents are in town. They're fundamentalists from Nashville on their way to a big meeting of the Christian Coalition down in San Diego. They're staying at the Hyatt Regency tonight and they invited Theodore to meet them for dinner. We didn't think it was the right time for them to meet *me* quite yet."

"But you're married," Ruth said. "What better time?"

"We may or may not be married in the eyes of California law, but we'll never be married as far as they're concerned."

"And you're interrupting your second honeymoon just for their sake," Ruth said. "That's thoughtful of you both, I suppose."

"Oh, the honeymoon, anniversary, whatever..." Leonardo said. "Yes, married life sure has its ups and downs."

"Yes, indeed," Ruth said. "Leonardo, I couldn't help noticing before you sat down. What's that little black thing hanging from your belt loop?"

"It's just a leather key strap. Some guys wear them around their necks like a lanyard," Leonardo reached back to untangle it and set it on the bar to demonstrate. "I loop this part through the inside of my wallet like so... then I fold it over and secure it by wrapping this end through my belt loop so that everything stays safe and sound. I had my wallet stolen once and I've been afraid of pickpockets ever since... especially in crowds. It's too long, really. I could use a shorter one. The end hangs out, but at least no one can grab it without me knowing."

"Oh. Is that all it is?" Ruth asked. "We thought it was a whip."

"A whip? Who's 'we'? Why would I be carrying a--"

"Tim thought it was symbolic... for some reason."

"Symbolic of what?" Leonardo asked.

"I don't remember it all. He said something about shopping. I know he was just trying to get a rise out of me with his gay jargon, but I didn't give him the satisfaction. He rattled off a bunch of initials... "B" and "D" and "S" and something-or-other. Some of them stood for dirty words, but others were just the initials of department stores and businesses. "S" was for Sears or Saks or Sotheby's, but I forgot the other one. Maybe I have it backward. Maybe the "S" went last, like something-or-other *and* Saks. Maybe it was "W" and "S". Does that ring a bell? Where is Tim, anyway?"

"Water sports?" Leonardo offered in a nasal voice while he made a face.

"Like scuba diving?" Ruth asked. "No, it wasn't an 'S' and a 'D'. I know! It must have been 'W/S' for Williams Sonoma!."

"They sell kitchenware," Leonardo shook his head at the turn of this conversation.

"Like knives!" Ruth shouted.

"What on earth could any of those things have to do with Theodore and me? We have plenty of kitchenware, but we're not like those men who give in to their basic rutting instincts. We find those forms of physical expression distasteful, to say the least."

"Of course you do," Ruth said, thinking that some of Theodore's fundamentalist upbringing must have rubbed off on them both.

"Our relationship is on a much higher plane than *some* men I know." He looked around the room to find an example, but none of the waiters was nearby. "Why, our lovemaking is like a spiritual experience. It's almost tantric! What does any of this have to do with my belt loop?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid," Ruth frowned. "Absolutely nothing and it doesn't get us any closer to solving the murders, darn it! Now I'm not even sure Williams Sonoma was it, either. Where is Tim? He must be in the kitchen or I'd ask him right this minute."

"Did I overhear you two discussing honeymoons?" Viv was on her break and sat down at the bar to join their conversation. "I adore honeymoons. They're better than marriages, any day of the week."

"You know, Vivian... I think I've heard my nephew Tim say the very same thing," Ruth laughed, "but one of these days he's going to settle down and be content because of it."

Leonardo said, "Before we were living together, I never realized how jealous and insecure Theodore could be. He accuses me of flirting with guys when I'm not even aware of them. It's absolutely ridiculous!"

"A little jealousy can be romantic," Ruth said. "At least you know he's still crazy about you, right?"

Viv took a sip of the white wine spritzer Ruth had made for her, pulled out a compact and wiped the lipstick from her teeth with a cocktail napkin. "Honey, I know what

you mean. My Roy is the most jealous man I've ever married. He told me once that he'd have to kill any man that tried anything with me."

"You don't think he was serious, do you Viv?"

"No, of course not, but can you imagine? Such a way to talk! And I'm always flirting with everybody," Viv admitted, batting her false eyelashes. "After all, I'm in show business; it comes with the territory... and flirting? Well, that's just my nature."

James, the new waiter was working out fine. Tim and Jake both agreed that he'd be a good addition to the place. He was bright, quick, and charming. Tim felt worn out by the time his last table cleared around 11 p.m. and he could hardly wait to go home. He was just about to say goodnight when Nick walked in the front door.

"What a sight for sore eyes," Tim said. "I didn't expect to see you until tomorrow."

"I wasn't sure if I'd be able to drive down tonight, but I worked my ass off to finish a project in Napa today," Nick said. "Then I drove back to Monte Rio to shower and change and pack a few things for the weekend and here I am! I couldn't wait until tomorrow to see you. I have the whole weekend free, but now that my grandmother lives in Alameda instead of just around the corner on Hancock Street, I don't have a place to stay in the city anymore. I guess I'm homeless."

"I don't think you need to worry about that," Tim put his arms around Nick and kissed him right in front of the whole crowd at Arts. "I have an idea for something you can do to earn your keep. Where'd you park?"

"At your new place on Hancock Street."

"Well, we're going around the corner in the opposite direction... to my old place, where my bed is. Come with me, stud!" Tim took Nick by the hand and opened the front door of Arts. "Good-night, Artie. Good-night, Aunt Ruth. See-ya, James. Jake, good-night!"

Ruth stayed until closing time to help Artie. The bar was busy right up until last call. Even Viv stayed until the end, eyeing her overflowing tip jar and stuffing the larger bills into her bra. Roy Rodgers with a "d" came in about 1 a.m. to see if she was ready for a ride home. He sat at Artie's end of the bar to wait and Ruth gave him a long hard look. She couldn't imagine Roy killing anyone, but she was also glad that he no longer stared at her the way he did when they first met. Maybe she reminded him of someone he knew in the past.

Chapter 20

On Friday evening Nick had spent a half hour circling the Castro in search of parking before he gave up and pulled his truck in behind the Thunderbird in the driveway on Hancock Street. Tim had already planned to take Saturday off to spend time with Nick and Artie agreed. He thought it would be nice to give James, the new waiter, a chance to jump in feet first.

Tim also wanted to spend some time at the house he inherited from Jason. He and Nick walked over from Collingwood after a late breakfast. Tim spent most of the afternoon sorting through Jason's belongings. He wanted to keep a few pictures to remember his ex-boyfriend, but there were more things that he would sell or donate to the Community Thrift store.

"I think you and Jason were pretty close to the same size," he said to Nick. "His clothes are all too big for me, but if there's anything you'd like..."

"I've never owned much leather," Nick said, lifting Jason's chaps out of the closet and holding them up to his waist. "Do you think it suits me?"

"Go ahead and try them on, but don't blame me if I get all turned on and have to ravage you. We might not get another lick of work done today."

Nick zipped up Jason's chaps and Tim went into the kitchen to grab a couple of beers. When he came back, Nick was pulling on a pair of Jason's boots that fit him perfectly. Tim peeled off his own sweaty T-shirt and before he knew it they were on top of Jason's bed and Tim was naked. He was also more turned on than ever. It had been months since he'd had sex in this bed and when he looked up at Nick all thoughts of Jason slipped from his mind.

Afterward, Tim said, "That was more like what I meant when I mentioned you earning your keep, not helping me sort through Jason's belongings."

"I don't mind... either way."

"Well, I appreciate not having to go through this stuff alone." He still hadn't told Nick about Jason appearing to him in a dream the other day. Now he wasn't sure whether he ever would. "I'm getting hungry, Nick. How about you?"

"Sure. How about if I go grab us something to eat and bring it back here?" Nick offered. "I could pick up some sushi. Or pizza. Or would you rather go out to eat?"

"I could eat anything," Tim said, turning the water on in the bathroom and plugging the drain, "but let's stay in. Surprise me. I'm going to have a soak in the tub until you get back. I think what this place needs is a Jacuzzi hot tub and new decks upstairs and down and definitely a new paint job and a vegetable garden..."

"I could help you with the garden," Nick said, "and I'll enjoy the hot tub with you... but all in good time. What's the rush? You have a bath and I'll be back with dinner before you know it."

Teresa was also taking a bath. She was lounging in the tub in her top floor apartment on Collingwood Street when the telephone rang. Like Tim, she was no fan of cell phones, but she had grown so fond of long baths since her divorce that she'd had a phone installed in the bathroom. She answered, "Back-stage, Big Al's!"

It was her downstairs neighbor Ben. "Teresa, are you busy? I need a huge favor."

"Sure, Ben, what is it?"

"Jane is going into labor. She's early or we would have made better plans. I've got to drive her to the hospital and nobody else in the building is home. They must all be at work or something. Can you watch Sarah for a few hours?"

"Sure, hon. Bring her on up. My door's always open. I'd love to keep an eye on the little one for you. I'm just having a bath, but I'm not planning to go anywhere tonight."

Teresa took several more minutes to soak in the tub, but the water was starting cool down now anyway. By the time she finished blow-drying her hair she had forgotten all about Ben's phone call. She came out of the bathroom tying her terrycloth robe and noticed that her apartment door was not only unlocked, but standing wide open. She suddenly remembered the phone call about the little girl and yelled out, "Sarah? Where are you, sweetheart?"

There was not a sound. Teresa spotted an open coloring book and a box of crayons on her kitchen table. She grabbed her keys and ran barefoot down the stairs, still calling, "Sarah... where are you?" all the way down to the gate. There was no one on the sidewalk, either. She climbed back up the stairs to the second floor, heard music playing and knocked on Marcia's door. "Hey, Marcia... have you seen little Sarah lately?"

"No, but I just got home a few minutes ago. There was a sale at Neiman Marcus and I've been out shopping most of the afternoon. Why do you ask?"

"Ben called and said Jane was going into labor. I was in the tub. You didn't see anyone else in the building, did you?" Teresa asked.

"Yeah, there was some guy on the sidewalk trying to see into the window of Tim's apartment, said he was looking for him. I told him if Tim wasn't home or at work he must be over on Hancock Street. I heard he's moving to his old boyfriend's place, the one that got killed."

"What did this guy look like?"

"Tall, older, a decent looking guy. He seemed nice enough. I was just getting out of a cab with all my packages and he offered to help me carry them upstairs. I couldn't have made it all in one trip and the cab driver was no help. I figured if he was a friend of Tim's he must be all right. What about Sarah?"

"When Ben called I was in the tub and I completely forgot that he said he was bringing Sarah upstairs for me to keep an eye on her while he took Jane to the hospital. It looks like she's having the baby early. Now Sarah's missing and I'm really worried. You didn't catch this tall fella's name, did you?"

"No, sorry. I gather that Tim sometimes likes older guys, but this one looked a lot older... to be Tim's date, I mean... he had to be twice Tim's age. He was kinda charming, though. He had on a cowboy hat and boots, but he would have been over six feet tall even without them."

"Oh, now I don't know what I should do. Maybe Sarah fussed so much about being left behind that they changed their minds and took her along to the hospital. I sure hope so."

"They must have," Marcia tried to reassure her as Teresa climbed the rest of the stairs to her own apartment. They both felt uneasy about what was going on. Teresa felt guilty that she'd agreed to watch the little girl and now she couldn't find her. Marcia felt even worse for letting a stranger into their building and not seeing him leave again. If the safety of their building was invaded, she would feel responsible for letting it happen.

The Saturday dinner shift at Arts was starting out slow and from the meager list of reservations, it didn't look like it was going to get much better. Artie was sitting at the bar eating a plate of Arturo's famous chicken-fried steak smothered in gravy--one of his favorite specials--while Ruth handled the bar. Viv had nearly finished her version of a medley of Beatles tunes that ended her first set. No one was sitting around the piano or singing along. Ruth found herself absentmindedly humming *Hey Jude* and staring across the room at her. Viv was dressed all in yellow tonight. She wore mustard-colored slacks and a pale yellow lace-up blouse that Viv had attempted to cinch in at the waist to accent her already abundant cleavage. It had short lacy sleeves.

"Bo Peep," Ruth said under her breath. *That's where I've seen that blouse before. It was the top of Viv's costume from last Halloween. She added a blue skirt and a floppy suede hat and that long staff for herding her lost sheep. That's where I saw the riding crop, too. It was in a picture of Vivian and Jason that someone took right here at Arts that night when Jason was dressed in all his leather. It was one of the photographs I pinned to the bulletin board the morning of Jason's memorial gathering. Jason was holding the riding crop, pretending to threaten Viv with it. They were posing that way for the camera.*

Ruth had Viv's white wine spritzer ready for her when she sat down at the bar for her break. Viv complained, "Isn't this something? Some nights you can barely get in the door and tonight I haven't even made five bucks in tips so far. That's just the nature of the business, I guess."

Ruth said, "Viv, I couldn't help noticing your blouse and it reminded me of something I saw at the memorial for Jason. Did you happen to see that photograph of you and him together? I guess it was taken on Halloween when he was all dressed up in his black leather outfit with that whip-thing in his hand?"

"Oh, yes! Jason looked so big and mean and scary and I was just cowering there in my 'Little Bo Peep' costume. That was the cutest picture," Viv said. "Arturo snapped it. I must have asked him a thousand times if he would get me a copy, but he kept forgetting. I've been bugging him about it for months and I told him when my birthday came around that I was still waiting for it. He felt so bad about forgetting that he finally had it blown up and framed for me as a birthday present. I brought it home and hung it up in the hallway in my house just a couple of nights before poor Jason was killed. You should see all the photographs I have in the hallway. It's a regular gallery of pictures of me with everyone famous who's ever sung along at my piano and some not so famous, but just people who like me... my fans, you know. Sometimes tourists want to have their picture taken with me and they'll send me a copy when they get home to wherever it is they came from. I hardly remember some of them..."

"Viv," Ruth interrupted. "I remember the picture. And I'd really love to see your house sometime, but..."

"I've never seen your house either," Artie piped up. "In all this time you've worked for us, we've never gotten around to seeing where you live. I guess with our busy schedules here, that isn't surprising."

"Maybe we'll have a little party when Roy is finished with the remodeling and have everyone come out all at once. We could have a barbecue in the back yard, but not during the foggy season. We should wait until it's..."

"But Viv... I was just trying to figure out something else, too. Have you and Roy ordered any pizza lately? You know... for delivery?"

"Why, yes... it was the day Roy finished painting the kitchen. How did you know? I'm not much of a cook, anyway. My last husband Walter was a chef, but Roy practically lives on take-out food and Stouffer's microwave dinners on the nights I'm at Arts, since I get a meal here at work before I start my shift. He's not hard to please when it comes to food. Half the time he'll just fix himself a bowl of cold cereal and call that his dinner. No wonder he never gets fat. I sure didn't feel like cooking at home that night with those paint fumes in the kitchen, so we ordered a pizza." Viv paused to think for a moment.

"I used to love pizza," Artie said, "but it doesn't love me!"

Ruth glared at Artie and silently willed him to stop interrupting, but she didn't want Viv to suspect anything and stop talking. "So you ordered a pizza that night?"

"That's right," Viv went on. "And now I remember the darling boy who brought it, too. He had the cutest accent and I was practicing my French with him while Roy went to look for his wallet in the other room. I only know a few phrases. My first husband took me to Paris on our honeymoon."

"Did Roy pay the boy himself?" Ruth asked.

"Why, no..." Viv took a sip of her white wine spritzer and thought hard to remember. "He practically *threw* his wallet at me and mumbled something or other like he was furious at me for not reason at all! I don't know what sets him off sometimes. His wallet fell off the coffee table and landed on the floor with the money falling out. Then he stormed off in a huff."

"He left the house?"

"Yes, well he went as far as the garage, anyway. I didn't hear the car start up until a little while later, though; right after the pizza delivery boy had gone."

"Roy drove away in the Cadillac?"

"Yes, I thought about it later and all I could imagine was that Roy got mad at me for flirting with the French boy. I heard the garage door open and the Cadillac revving up and then he just took off with the tires squealing, laying rubber on the street. I meant to scold him about it later... what would the neighbors think? Our block is pretty quiet nowadays. There was a problem a while back when my next-door neighbor's teenage boy got mixed up with one of those Chinese gangs, but he's off in the juvenile system now and things are back to normal. We don't take kindly to noise. There are a lot of retired people on our block."

Ruth was ready to scream. "But Viv... about that night when Roy took off..."

"Oh, that. I kinda forgot all about it all until later. By the time Roy came home I'd had all the pizza I wanted, anyway and I was half asleep in bed with the TV on. I left the pizza out on the kitchen table for him, but it was cold by then. I told him he could eat cold pizza or he could heat it up. I didn't care. There was someone I wanted to see on *The Tonight Show that night*, but I'd slept right through that part and missed it. I know, it was Kathy Bates. I've always liked her ever since she won the Oscar for *Misery*, you know. I think I went to see that with my fourth husband Sid, but I never did read the book. I meant to, but Stephen King's books are so darned long, you know. Why does he have to waste thirty pages getting to the next minute of the story? I get impatient!"

"Viv, you didn't ever happen to have any interaction with Arturo's nephew Jorge... did you?" Ruth asked as pieces of the puzzle fell into place in her mind. She was trying to change the direction of conversation, but at the same time keep Viv talking. "I mean... outside of working here together?"

"The busboy?" Viv asked. "Why, no, I didn't even think the kid spoke English, not up until that one night."

"Which night was that?"

"It was shortly after Jason died. I was coming down with the worst cold and it was such a slow night anyway... not much busier than this one. Arturo asked the boy to take Arturo's car and give me a ride home. Did you know Jorge, Ruth?"

"No, I never met him. I'd just arrived in town about that time. What happened that night?"

"Nothing. I mean... he gave me a ride home, but you know what the funny thing was? Jorge's English was just fine. He only pretended not to understand people when they asked him to do things he didn't want to do. We chatted all the way back to my house and we sat in the driveway and he spilled his whole life story to me. He wasn't happy working here, but he couldn't find a decent job without even a high school diploma and he had a girlfriend in town he was crazy about and..."

"Viv! Wait a minute. Didn't I hear Tim say that he gave you a ride home the other night too?" Ruth asked.

"Yes, it was just a couple of nights ago. I've always loved convertibles and my second husband Boris drove a T-Bird a lot like that one. Jason was always so proud of his car, but I never had the chance to go for a ride in it while he was alive. Tim's such a sweetheart, though; he drove me all the way home from work. It was foggy out where I live, so when we stopped in my driveway he put the top up. He was so proud of how he'd finally figured out how to put the top up all by himself, so I just waited there in the passenger's seat and watched him while he showed off how to press the buttons and latch the thing. He's such a dear boy..."

Ruth didn't listen to any more of what Viv had to say. She grabbed the phone and called Tim's apartment on Collingwood Street. It rang until the machine clicked on. If he couldn't answer the phone it might already be too late. She called Teresa's number and heard her pick up on the first ring. "Ben, is that you?"

"No, it's Ruth. What's going on over there? Have you seen Tim?"

"No, I haven't seen Tim, but I'm a nervous wreck. Little Sarah is missing! Ben asked me to watch her, 'cause he was taking Jane to the hospital, but by the time I got out of the tub she was missing. Her crayons are still on my kitchen table. Marcia said some tall guy in a cowboy hat was looking for Tim and she told him Tim was probably over on Hancock Street..."

"I'll talk to you later, Teresa." Ruth hung up the phone and grabbed her purse.

"What's going on?" Artie asked.

"Artie, I've got to go!" Ruth ran out the door of the restaurant. Tim had mentioned wanting to get started on sorting through Jason's old things, so he must be on Hancock

Street and the killer would know exactly where the house was because he'd already been there once before when he killed Jason. Ruth headed north on Castro Street as fast as she could go through the pedestrian traffic and never looked back.

Chapter 21

When Nick Musgrove left Tim he was feeling good. The house on Hancock Street brought back some of his favorite memories of when he was a boy and came down to San Francisco to stay with his grandparents. Nick's grandfather had been gone for years now, but his widow, Nick's grandmother Amanda, was still sharp as a bee sting and she was still writing. While she had never known great fame, she had loyal readers around the world including many gay friends and fans. There was no drama about Nick being gay except for some bad choices in men that he'd made in the past. At least he'd been spared the ordeals of so many who were ostracized from their families.

Now the house on Hancock Street belonged to Tim Snow, this new man in his life. Nick whistled as he walked past a florist stand on 18th Street. He stopped and considered buying Tim a big bouquet of flowers, but that seemed downright foolish when he owned a nursery and might have grown some of these flowers himself. He eyed the prices anyway and saw no reason to buy them back for twice what he'd sold them for.

Nick was a practical man. This new *thing* with Tim Snow wasn't going to change that about him. He wouldn't let it. It was really good, though; he had to admit. The sex was great, but it wasn't just that. Tim had a silly streak that balanced Nick's serious nature and Tim was smart, too. He was playful, enjoying sex as much as Nick did and they could still carry on a conversation afterward, beforehand and sometimes even during.

Nick crossed Castro at 18th Street and turned left. He didn't know what to buy for dinner and became distracted by the merchandise in the windows along the way. He thought about picking up a new toy for Tim, but decided it would be more fun to shop for one together... later. The Chinese take-out place had a crowd in the doorway, so Nick ruled that out. All his favorite Chinese places had disappeared in the past few years, most of them turning into Thai restaurants. The neighborhood had sure been through a lot of changes since he was a kid.

As Nick stared at a pair of leather handcuffs in the store window, an old Cadillac was going down 19th Street with a little girl in the back seat. Nick thought about buying a T-shirt with the COLT logo on the pocket. He remembered that Tim had a baseball cap with COLT across the front.

Tim's Aunt Ruth was running down the opposite side of Castro Street while Nick's mind returned to thoughts of food. He could stop at Arts and pick up two dinners to go, but Tim would probably like something else for a change. He could eat Arturo's cooking at work anytime. The Sausage Factory was across from where Nick stood now. Pasta might be just the ticket, with salad and French bread on the side. He headed back to the corner and waited in front of Harvey's for the light to change.

Ruth's mind was spinning with bits and pieces. As she ran she heard Vivian's voice replaying in her head, "Honey, I know what you mean. My Roy is the most jealous man I've ever married. He told me once that he'd have to kill any man that tried anything with me!"

Ruth was frantic and tried to remember what Tim told her about his dream. Jason said something about more bodies, more victims, but who and where? The only ones she knew about were Jason and Jorge and the French boy trying to pay for school by delivering pizzas. Roy must have killed Jason because he saw that picture of him with the riding crop standing over Vivian. Ruth didn't know whether Roy thought Jason was actually trying to threaten his wife or if their playfulness was a threat to him.

Then the crazy cowboy killed Jorge after he gave Vivian a ride home in Arturo's car. He probably watched her flirting with the boy in the driveway and waited and bided his time. It wasn't until later when he got the chance to follow the poor kid, get him alone and kill him in the corner of the Costco parking lot and then leave Arturo's car on Castro Street where someone was sure to find the body in the trunk eventually.

The French student's only mistake was in trying to humor the horny American lady who mangled a few phrases in his native language. He'd probably thought he could get a bigger tip if he played along with her.

And then Tim had given her a ride home and Roy watched from the window as Tim showed Vivian how to put the top up on the convertible. Ruth ran past the Midnight Sun and darted in front of a jeep trying to turn off Hartford Street outside Moby Dick. Her mind raced much faster than her feet could.

Ruth prayed that Nick was there with Tim. As crazy as Roy was, he couldn't overpower the two of them together, not two grown men... not unless he managed to separate them, somehow... or take one of them by surprise. Roy didn't even know that Nick was there... or did he? If only Tim were working tonight he'd have been safe at the restaurant. No one would dare to attack him there.

She should have figured it all out sooner, but it wasn't until she saw Vivian in that yellow lace-up blouse that the pieces began to fit. Ruth barely knew that horrid cowboy, but now she remembered the way he ogled her the first night they met. He looked like a lecherous creep, not a homicidal maniac, but there was no one else it could be. She would never forgive herself if anything happened to Tim.

Nick was in the back room of the Sausage Factory, sipping a glass of beer, waiting for his order and gazing at the songs on the juke box. Yes, he was a practical man and he was falling in love, but there was no way he wouldn't be practical about this new thing with a guy named Tim Snow from Minnesota. He loved the way Tim smiled up at him in the dim light of the television screen last night when they had a porn movie playing and neither of them were even watching it, but looking at each other.

Ruth ran uphill on Noe Street and was blocked by a moving van as it tried to maneuver around parked cars on the steep corner of Hancock. She thought of

crawling under it, but the driver saw her and backed up just enough to let her get by. The taillights and chrome of Vivian's old Cadillac stuck out of the driveway behind Nick's truck and the red Thunderbird. The windows of the Cadillac were part-way open. "Hi, Aunt Ruth," a child's voice came from inside. Little Sarah was alone in the back seat. "Where's Uncle Tim? Where's the big man?"

"Sarah, what are you doing out here, honey?" Ruth tried not to let the panic come through in her voice. The little girl seemed okay for the moment and Ruth didn't want to frighten her.

"The big man is buying me ice cream! He said we had to stop at Uncle Tim's new house first and then we're gonna get ice cream and take a ride in his car to meet a nice lady someplace out by the ocean. Where is my ice cream? Where's Uncle Tim? I wanna go home!"

Ruth forced a smile to her lips and said, "Honey, we'll take you home soon, all right?"

"Where's my ice cream?"

"Just wait right here like a good little girl... No... better yet, go wait in Uncle Tim's car, the red one. Let's play hide and seek with Uncle Tim. You hide in the back seat on the floor and you have to be quiet. I'll make sure Uncle Tim buys you all the ice cream you want, but don't let him hear you. Make him look for you *really* hard. Do you understand, Sarah? Be a good girl, now. Go and hide from Uncle Tim!"

What an incredibly stupid woman Viv was, Ruth thought to herself. She'd admitted that she told Roy how she regretted not having children when she was younger.

Ruth tried to remember what else Viv told her. "He said to me, 'you may be too old to have children, but I'm not. Just look at Larry King! He's older than I am with two little boys... and what about Willie Brown? He fathered a child well into his sixties.'" Roy hadn't actually said he would father a child, though; he'd simply meant that he would steal one for her.

Tim had considered it the height of decadence when Jason had cable television installed in the bathroom, but right now he was enjoying a soak in the tub and flipping through channels with the remote. He found a tribute to Larry King where they showed an old interview with Dolly Parton. Tim heard the front door open. "Nick?" he yelled. "I'm in the bathtub!"

Tim thought he might have lost track of time; he couldn't believe Nick was back with dinner so soon. "What did you do, forget your wallet? Take some money from mine. It's in my pants on the floor beside the bed. Or I might have left it on the mantle in the living room beside my keys."

Tim grabbed one of Jason's enormous bath towels from a neat stack on a chrome rack above the toilet. Larry King asked Dolly Parton what she thought about being on Mr. Blackwell's *worst dressed* list and she answered with a laugh, "I told him I'm glad you came out of your closet long enough to have a look into mine!"

Tim laughed too as he stepped out of the bathroom and into the hallway. "Don't you love Dolly Parton, Nick?"

But it wasn't Nick. It was Viv's husband, Roy Rodgers with a "d" coming toward Tim with a large gleaming chef's knife in his hand. His eyes were wide and furious and he was clearly insane. "You stay away from her!"

"Roy! What the hell are you doing here?"

"What do you think, you son of a bitch? If I have to kill you all, I'll keep you and everyone else away from my horny wife!"

"I'm gay, you moron! I'm not interested in your stupid wife, you dumb-ass cowboy!"

"Everyone's after my wife! It's just like in Portland. They all wanted her and she let them, but this time it's different. This time I'll let *her* live and I'll keep a closer eye on her. This time I'll kill everyone who comes near her."

"You're a fuckin' nut case!" Tim stood there naked with only the towel that he'd slid down now from his head to around his shoulders. He tried to look for something else to use as a weapon, but he hardly dared take his eyes off the cowboy. Tim slid the towel down his back as if to wrap it around his waist, but he needed to get it in front of him. The knife could probably cut right through it, but it was better than nothing. Jason always bought the thickest, most expensive bath towels they made and maybe if Tim was lucky...

Larry King Live had cut to a commercial for a noisy police drama. As Ruth reached the front door she heard angry men's voices over the sound of car crashes and police sirens. She didn't know how much was real and how much was on television. She spotted the fireplace poker where Tim had left it on the hearth the other day just before he had his dream of Jason. Adrenalin surged through her body as Ruth Taylor grabbed the rusty tool, ran down the hallway and rammed the fireplace poker into the center of the cowboy's back.

Tim watched a bright red rose of blood spread across the white front of Roy's shirt while his eyes and mouth opened wide and he dropped the knife. Tim's fingers snatched at the handle and grabbed it in mid-air as Roy fell forward and slid to the floor. The point of the knife stuck out through Roy's back below the handle of the fireplace poker that was still inside him. Roy Rodgers with a "d" died only a few yards from the spot where he had killed Jason.

"Tim! Are you all right?" Ruth gasped.

Tim still held the towel in front of him with one hand. "I think so, thanks to you." He wrapped the towel around his waist and looked down at his naked body, splattered with the dead cowboy's blood. Nick walked in the front door whistling and carrying a large paper bag full of Italian food from the Sausage Factory on Castro Street.

Chapter 22

Nick couldn't move. He stared at the bloody scene for a matter of seconds that felt as if time had stopped. It was something out of a movie, but it was real. It was Tim, standing there naked and covered in blood! Ruth looked to be holding him up with a stained bath towel and Nick didn't know who all the blood or the body on the floor belonged to.

If only he hadn't wasted time gazing into store windows on Castro Street, if only he had insisted on going out for dinner, if only... something--anything--had been different! Nick was overcome with guilt until Tim opened his mouth to speak. "Nick, thank God you're back. You're safe."

"I'm safe? Why wouldn't I be? You're the one who's covered in blood!"

"I thought maybe he'd gotten to you first."

Nick dropped the paper bag and ran toward Tim. Ruth stepped aside to let the men embrace. She cleared her throat until they remembered she was still there.

"Tim, you'd better get cleaned up," she said. "You too, Nick--you've got blood all over you now--and someone call the police, would you? My cell phone is here in my purse. I'll go get Sarah out of the Thunderbird."

"Sarah? What's she doing--" Tim stroked Nick's hair.

"It's a long story. Oh, wait... before I get her, find an old blanket or something to cover up that damned cowboy first. And go wash the blood off yourselves. There's no reason that little girl needs a sight like this seared into her memory, especially not in the place that's going to be her new home."

Sarah must have grown tired of waiting for Tim to find her. She'd also forgotten about the tall stranger's promise of ice cream. When Ruth carried the little girl inside, she yawned and promptly fell asleep on the living room couch. Tim rinsed off the blood of Roy Rodgers with a "d" and pulled on his jeans while Nick found a clean T-shirt. Now Tim covered the sleeping little girl with the afghan on Jason's couch. "Aunt Ruth, how did you know to come here when you did? How did you figure out it was Roy? How did you know he would come after me next? Why would he think I was interested in Viv?"

"He was insane! The only reason I figured it out was that Vivian wore her yellow blouse to work today. I'd seen it in that picture from the Halloween party at Arts... the one with Vivian in her Little Bo Peep costume and Jason in all his leather. It finally dawned on me that it was also where I'd seen the riding crop you mentioned in your dream. Jason was holding it over her in the photograph. Remember at the memorial when I helped you with those pictures on the bulletin board?"

"What dream?" Nick asked. "What photograph?"

Tim looked up at him and said, "It's a long story, man. I'll tell you all about it later, okay?"

"Nevermind." Nick wrapped his arms around Tim. "All that matters is that we're all safe and the cowboy will never hurt anyone again."

The police questioned Tim and Ruth, of course, but their stories added up. Once the body was removed from Hancock Street, the police went over to Arts to break the news to Vivian that she was a widow once again. Their questioning of Viv lasted much longer.

"Vivacious Vivian" always prided herself on being in show business, but she didn't need to be an actress to give the officers a performance that made them feel sorry for her. "All I knew was that Roy was widowed, same as me. He was such a sensitive soul, but so devoted to me and he was such a tease, you know? He told me a ridiculous story about how he'd caught his ex-wife with another man and killed them both!"

The handsome police detective had to wait for her to sob into her handkerchief and lean into his broad shoulder before she could go on. "He told me he buried their bodies in the back yard before he sold the house in Portland. He said it wasn't until later on that he realized what a mistake he'd made. He missed her terribly and he made up his mind right then and there not to make the same mistake again."

The policeman was trying to take notes, but Vivian kept grabbing hold of his big strong uniformed arm for reinforcement whenever she burst into tears. "My Roy was always such a joker! Who would ever believe a wild story like that?" The police nearly had to carry her out of the restaurant in tears. They drove her home, gave her something to help her sleep and finally put her to bed. They arranged to come back the next day with more questions after she'd calmed down and to have a look around in the daylight.

On Wednesday morning, Ruth's last day in San Francisco for a while, she and Tim were sitting at the glass-topped table on his patio. "Should I make another pot of coffee?"

"Not on my account," Ruth said, "unless you want some more."

"No! No more coffee ever!" Tim feigned outrage. "I've never drunk so much coffee in my life as I have during this visit of yours the last few weeks. From now on I'm going

to start out with a pitcher of Bloody Marys for breakfast seven days a week, just like Teresa."

"Oh, she's not that bad," Ruth laughed. Everything that blossomed was in full bloom now. Ruth inhaled a deep breath of the fragrant jasmine that vined up the wall above her head. "It's so lovely here that I hate to leave, but I have to go back and decide what to do about the house. I'd love to sell it, but not with the economy in the tank. Maybe once Barack Obama gets all settled into the White House he'll be able to turn things around."

"You're more hopeful than I am, but any change has to be an improvement, I guess. I don't know why anyone would want to be President. What a horrible job to take on these days with war and recession and global warming..."

"Let's not focus on the negatives, Tim."

"You're right. Let's look at the future. Next time you come to San Francisco this place will be your apartment. I'll be all moved in over on Hancock Street with Ben and Jane and the kids living downstairs, instead of above me."

"Did she have her baby?" Ruth stood and pressed a fingertip into the soil of a clay pot. "With so much happening, I forgot to ask... this begonia needs watering, dear."

"I'll give them all a good soaking when I get back from driving you to the airport. Yes, his name is Samuel Timothy Larson. Samuel after Jane's father and Timothy after me."

"Another magic child for you to spoil."

"I'll do my best."

Tim hefted Ruth's suitcases into the back seat of the Thunderbird outside his apartment on Collingwood Street. He would miss this place, he knew, but it was time to move on. The neighbors in this building that Art and Artie owned were like family, like the family he never felt in his own home growing up. The only thing that consoled him about moving out was knowing that his Aunt Ruth would be moving in, taking his place.

"Just think, Aunt Ruth, when you come back we'll only be a few blocks apart instead of 2,000 miles."

"I'll be close enough to keep an eye on you, young man."

"As if I needed keeping an eye on." Tim drove down Castro Street so that Ruth could wave one last goodbye to Arts, even though the place wasn't even open yet. Then he turned left on 18th Street in front of Harvey's and kept on going west on upper Market

Street. They were soon climbing into an area of houses crowded onto narrow roads, modern apartment buildings jutting out between painted-lady Victorians.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Take a wild guess," Tim said as he glanced at his watch. "Don't worry. We have plenty of time. You won't miss your flight."

"I have no idea where we're going."

"You should have been the one to inherit your mother's so-called gift instead of me, Aunt Ruth. You were her daughter. It almost never works for me except in my dreams and then I don't know what they're supposed to mean until it's too late."

"I should have figured out your dream a lot sooner. That monster could have killed you! I'm just so glad that you're safe and well."

"You got there just in time."

"Sometimes a little team work is called for. Let's not talk about the past any more, shall we? Let's think about the future."

"Yes, when you come back we'll be co-workers at Arts and we'll both be making a fortune in tips."

"I wouldn't mind filling in from time to time. It's not the money that concerns me. It's just nice to be somewhere I feel needed. What do you call this neighborhood?"

"Twin Peaks. It's the highest place in the city. Speaking of which, I wish I'd brought a joint. The last time I was here I was with Jason and we were both so high! It was one night shortly after we met. We could only see a sprinkling of lights through the fog, but it was moving fast, so the view kept changing. I also remember that he had the top down and I thought I would freeze to death."

"I'm sure you'll miss Jason, dear, but you know he must have cared for you more than you thought or he wouldn't have remembered you so generously in his will. In a way he's still watching out for you. Try to think of him that way if you can."

"I know you're right." Tim pulled the Thunderbird to a stop at the edge of the parking lot and set the brake. They both got out to get a better look.

"Tim, this view is incredible!"

"I know. I'll bet we can see Minnesota from here."

"I've never seen the city from this angle before. Now I know what they say about something that takes your breath away. The beauty of it makes me gasp!"

"It's really something, isn't it? A lot of times it's too foggy to see anything, but today is perfect. Hey, this reminds me of that day we went to the top of Telegraph Hill."

Remember when we ran into Roy and Viv parked in the Cadillac up there and they were making out like a couple of teenagers?"

"Of course I do. Why do you ask?"

"I was talking to Artie yesterday. He said the police came by again to see him and Arturo and filled them in on some more of Roy's story. Remember when Viv told us they'd been shopping that day for new bathroom rugs and shower curtains? He was painting her pink bathroom a different color, remember?"

"Yes?"

"When they found the French boy, the kid who was delivering pizzas, he was wrapped in pink plastic... It turned out to be Viv's old shower curtains. Roy was using them as a drop cloth to cover the roses when he painted the outside of her house."

Ruth took Tim's arm and gasped again, but this time it had nothing to do with the view. "That poor boy!"

She stepped back to the car and Tim asked, "Do you want to leave already? We just got here."

"No, I don't ever want to leave. I'm getting my opera glasses out of my bag. I want to find Arts and the apartment building where I'm going to be living when I come back. And I want to see your new house on Hancock Street."

"I think there's a tree in the way. See where Dolores Park is from here?" Tim pointed.

"Yes, I see." She raised the opera glasses to her eyes. "Oh look how beautiful the big rainbow flag is unfurled in the breeze and there's the Castro Theatre. It must be spectacular up here at night. Now where's Arts?"

"I can tell without the binoculars that all you're gonna be able to see is the roof of the building." Tim pointed. "See where the B of A is on the corner? That's 18th and Castro, so it's just about half way up the block from there on the same side. Oh, those roofs all look the same anyway. Let me see those glasses."

"What else did the police tell Arturo and Artie?"

"These binoculars are really strong. There's Teresa, naked in her living room window. Geez, put some clothes on, Teresa!"

"She is not!"

"Kidding! What else? Oh, Artie said they dug up the roses beside Viv's house and found a PG&E repairman who had been missing since right after Roy moved in. And they got Roy's former address in Portland and dug up two more bodies there. One was his former wife and the other was a man, still unidentified. Maybe she *was* having an affair. Or maybe Roy was just imagining that one, too. But get this! Arturo says the police went over the whole case with them, to try to fill in more of the pieces and they

even showed him and Artie a picture of Roy's first wife, the one he buried outside the house in Portland. She looked just like you!"

Ruth felt a chill. "That must be why he was staring at me so intently that night we first met in the restaurant." She opened the passenger door of the Thunderbird and climbed in. "I feel a little sorry for Vivian, you know? We killed her husband and the whole time she had no idea he was a murderer."

"I wouldn't worry about Viv, Aunt Ruth. She'll bounce right back and find another husband. She always does. Walter, the one before Roy, was a chef. That must have been where all the knives came from. She wouldn't notice them missing. I don't think she's ever so much as boiled an egg."

"She did say that she ate dinner at Arts every night she worked and Roy was awfully thin."

"Viv is taking a leave of absence from the restaurant. She told Arturo and Artie she was going back to Paris where she spent her first honeymoon. She said she wanted to brush up on her French. Jake figures she can probably get a job there pretty easy. He said there must be a little bistro on the left bank that needs someone who looks like an old drag queen and can torture them with show tunes on the piano!"

"Jake never liked her, did he?"

"She wasn't easy to like when you had to work with her all the time."

Ruth laughed and looked at her watch. "As much as I hate to leave all this, I think now we'd better get me to the airport or I'll miss my flight."

Tim drove down from Twin Peaks on a circuitous route that had Ruth completely turned around. "Where are you taking me now?" she asked.

"To the airport."

"I'm glad you know the way, dear. I'm lost." They rounded another bend and once again the view of downtown San Francisco spread out before them. "There are so many parts of this beautiful city I have yet to explore, but first I need to go back and tie up loose ends. As much as I hate to leave, I know I must."

"Don't worry, Aunt Ruth, I'll get you to your flight in plenty of time and before you know it you'll be back here where we both belong."

When Tim got back from the airport he watered the plants on his patio, took the bedding off the couch and did a load of laundry. Then he drove over to Dolores Park, where he'd been headed with his Aunt Ruth on her first day in town. He parked the Thunderbird in the shade of the magnolia trees along 20th Street and found a grassy

spot to gaze out at the panorama of downtown and the arches of the Bay Bridge standing tall above the waters of the bay like a distant roller coaster.

Tim spread an old blanket on the ground, kicked off his shoes and socks, peeled off his T-shirt, and lit a joint. His head was filled with thoughts of Nick, of course, and of his Aunt Ruth's visit but today more than ever his thoughts turned to Jason. The ice cream vendor's bells floated across the air and Tim determined that the time had come to do what he had been meaning to do all along.

He carried his backpack to the statue near the 19th Street footbridge. This was the time, all right, and this was as good a place as any. Red geraniums and blue cosmos poked their heads through the high wrought iron fence surrounding the statue where the plaque read:

MIGUEL HIDALGO Y COSTILLA

Father of Mexican Independence

1753-1811

Tim did some arithmetic in his head. *This statue was built to remember a man who only lived to be... let's see... fifty-eight years old. That was quite a few years older than Jason and a whole lot older than I am now, but still... Senor Costilla didn't live to be an old man either.*

Tim unzipped his backpack and lifted out the box containing Jason's ashes. Some of them caught on the breeze but most settled deep among the flowers, the color of sand filtering down through the red and blue and green into bare black earth below. Jason had always loved this park. *He would like this spot just fine*, Tim thought as he closed his eyes tight and shook out the last of Jason's earthly remains.

On his way back to his blanket Tim bought an ice cream bar from the vendor. He had the munchies now and a peace of mind that had been missing for a long time, since even before Jason's murder.

Tim had tonight off. Today was as good a time as any to start packing up his old life on Collingwood Street and get ready to move. He left Dolores Park and stopped by his new home on Hancock Street where he spotted a yellow note stuck to the front door. It was a notice from UPS that they had tried to deliver a package for Jason Oliver from *Classic Ford Auto Parts* in Los Angeles, California. They would make a second delivery attempt tomorrow between 9 a.m. and 12 noon. Tim would make sure to be *home* to accept the new muffler for the Thunderbird. It was Tim's car now.

A sneak peek at Chapter 1
from
Mark Abramson's
Russian River Rat

Book 3 of the Beach Reading series

Chapter 1

Tim Snow awoke to the smell of bacon and the sound of crisp raindrops bouncing off the skylight over Nick's bed. It took him a few seconds to remember he was in Monte Rio. The last few days had been perfect, but he had to go back to San Francisco today. His Aunt Ruth was arriving this weekend and he wanted to be there to welcome her. He stretched out his arms and rolled onto the other side of the bed where he could see the backside of Nick. His broad shoulders moved over the stove and he was naked but for an apron and wooly gray socks with red heels, his straight blonde hair tied back in a pony tail.

Tim plumped up the pillows for a better view and pulled the covers around him. Nick must have heard the bedsprings creak because he turned around and blew Tim a kiss. "Good morning, handsome."

Tim smiled and yawned and returned the kiss. "What's cooking? Mmmm... nice outfit."

"Don't want to get hot grease on the family jewels." Nick turned off the stove and poured Tim a mug of coffee. "How did you sleep, Snowman? No crazy dreams?"

"Come back to bed and I'll tell you all about them." Tim pulled the covers back far enough for Nick to climb in and position himself half on top and half beside him. "Let that coffee cool off a little while I warm you up."

Nick's house had been built as a vacation cottage in the 1930s and modernized over the years. He'd added a carport under a new deck that wrapped around two sides and overlooked the Russian River. He'd also modernized the kitchen and installed a more efficient wood stove in one corner of the living room. It still had its original knotty-pine walls that reminded Tim of a cabin where he'd spent a childhood weekend beside a Minnesota lake.

"I thought I wore you out last night," Nick nuzzled into Tim's ear.

"We nearly wore each other out, but this is my last morning here. I have to go back to the city today." Tim reached around the back of Nick's head and pulled him closer, releasing his ponytail at the same time. "I love your hair long and loose like some wild jungle cat."

"Gr...Arrr..." Nick growled and shook his hair all around the two of them. "I'm as hungry as a lion. How about you?"

"Starved!"

"Don't move. We can have breakfast in bed. It seems too early for rain, but I love that sound on the skylight."

"Me, too. I could get used to this, you know... I could really get used to this." Tim had grown so used to quickies lately that he sometimes wondered if he'd ever be comfortable spending whole nights with a man again. The only ones he'd really slept with since the end of the Jason affair were Corey and Jean-Yves and they seemed like a lifetime ago. Now he'd spent three whole nights in Nick's bed and three whole days together with hardly an awkward moment between them and the sex was phenomenal.

"I could get used to it too, Snowman," Nick said as he kissed him again and got out of bed to dish up the French toast and bacon."

"Hurry back! I'm getting lonesome!"

"I'm right here."

Ruth Taylor drove her Prius hybrid straight through from Denver to San Francisco on the last long leg of her move. She'd intended to get a room in Reno but only stopped for gas and to check on Bartholomew. The cat opened one eye and glared at her from his carrying case on the back seat. "I know you're mad at me, Bart, but you'll get over it when you see your new home," she said without trying to pet him. She stepped inside the mini-mart to pay for the gas and bought another candy bar. It wasn't even good chocolate, but it would do.

The movers had finished unloading her belongings on Collingwood Street several hours before Ruth crossed the Bay Bridge and collapsed on top of the bare mattress. When she awoke a few hours later amid piles of boxes she was proud to think she'd driven two thousand miles from Minnesota all by herself. Her face was all puffy and it took ten minutes to find her toothbrush, but she was finally here in Tim's old apartment--her new home--and that was all that mattered.

Ruth's first impulse was to call her nephew and tell him she made it, but she couldn't risk waking him. He probably worked at Arts last night and would be a grouch when he first got up. There would be time to catch up later, plenty of time for everything now that she was here. Ruth poured a mug of coffee and sat down at the glass-topped table on the little brick patio. She let her shoulders sag, stretched out her legs and wiggled her fingers and toes. It was time to let go of the tension of the long drive, the stress of her divorce, all the packing and moving. It was time to settle in to the laid-back pace of California and begin her new life.

A cat's cry came from behind a stack of boxes in the kitchen and a big furry tabby ambled out the back door to settle between Ruth's bare feet. She bent to pick him up and he overflowed her lap. "Did you sleep well, baby? I'll bet you were glad to get out of that nasty old back seat of the car, weren't you? Welcome to California and don't get any clever ideas about climbing over that wall. I can see the wheels in your little mind spinning already."

The cat jumped down and stretched its claws into the dirt where Tim's cherry tomatoes had given up the ghost. Ruth was glad to see the rest of the plants thriving and none of the vines looked strong enough to provide Bartholomew an escape route.

Ruth carried her second cup of coffee to the living room and sat down in her grandmother's wooden rocker. It wasn't easy to sort through her sprawling suburban home to pick and choose which of her belongings would fit in a city apartment, but the rocking chair made the cut. She intended to leave it to Tim some day, since it wasn't the sort of thing her daughter Dianne would like. Dianne's taste in decorating was downright tacky, but Tim was someone who could appreciate a family heirloom. Ruth sometimes wondered whether all gay men were as refined as Tim or if she was just lucky to have such a sensitive nephew.

Ruth opened the BAY AREA section of the Chronicle and saw a cartoon she didn't quite understand and a half page of angry letters to the editor. She flipped to another page and noticed a small headline:

"BODY FOUND IN RUSSIAN RIVER -

Unidentified Man found near Forestville thought to be 3rd Drowning Victim this Season." Ruth pondered this news for a moment. Tim must be at the Russian River right now if he was still up at Nick's place in Monte Rio. She read on: **"Canoeists find body of nude male near Hacienda Bridge..."**

She scratched the cat behind the ears and said, "Well, Bart, I wonder how far Monte Rio is from Forestville. I've never heard of this Hacienda Bridge. It sounds Spanish. I hope Tim comes home soon. I can hardly wait to see him." Ruth yawned and closed her eyes as the Chronicle fell from her lap onto the floor and she drifted off to a dreamless sleep.

To Be Continued...

About the Author

Like Tim Snow, Mark Abramson grew up in Minnesota and also worked for a time as a waiter in the Castro, but is better known as a bartender and producer of events such as "Men Behind Bars" and big dance parties on the San Francisco piers, "Pier Pressure" and "High Tea." He also had an Aunt Ruth Taylor, but his maternal grandmother was not a psychic. His other grandmother might have been, but she died before he was born. And his mother doesn't drink at all, unfortunately.

Mark Abramson's writing has appeared in the gay press as far back as *Christopher Street* magazine, *Gay Sunshine*, *Mouth of the Dragon* and *Fag Rag* and more recently in the Lethe Press anthology *Charmed Lives: Gay Spirit in Storytelling*. In addition to the Beach Reading series, he is working on his Castro Street diaries which recount true tales of life before AIDS in the great gay Mecca with friends such as John Preston, Rita Rockett, Randy Shilts and Al Parker.

More to Come from

Lethe Press

The Beach Reading Series

Beach Reading

Cold Serial Murder

Russian River Rat

Snowman

Wedding Season

Neutriva Dreams

Love Rules

Seersucker

Praise for *Beach Reading*

"I just finished reading Mark Abramson's *Beach Reading* and the only word I can think of to describe it is 'WOW!' It's a short book--only 193 pages--and each of those pages is a pleasure... *Beach Reading* is a 'love song to San Francisco' and I felt like singing along as I read it. It seems that city on the bay has been the center of gay life forever and after reading this you will understand why."

--Amos Lassen, *Eureka Pride*

"The first installment... is a tale firmly invested in San Francisco's gay culture, and has a charm because of this that is evident from the first lively page to the defiant last."

--Steve Williams, *Suite 101*

"Abramson's first in a series of books to come, this charming tale takes place in that shining homo beacon in the bay--San Francisco. Whether it's celebrating disco queernery, battling homophobia or getting over that pesky ex, this book's got you covered. And who ever said that protests were unflattering? Provocative yet short, its title says it all--only wait much longer and it may be more like Subway Reading."

--Brandon Aultman, *HX Magazine*