

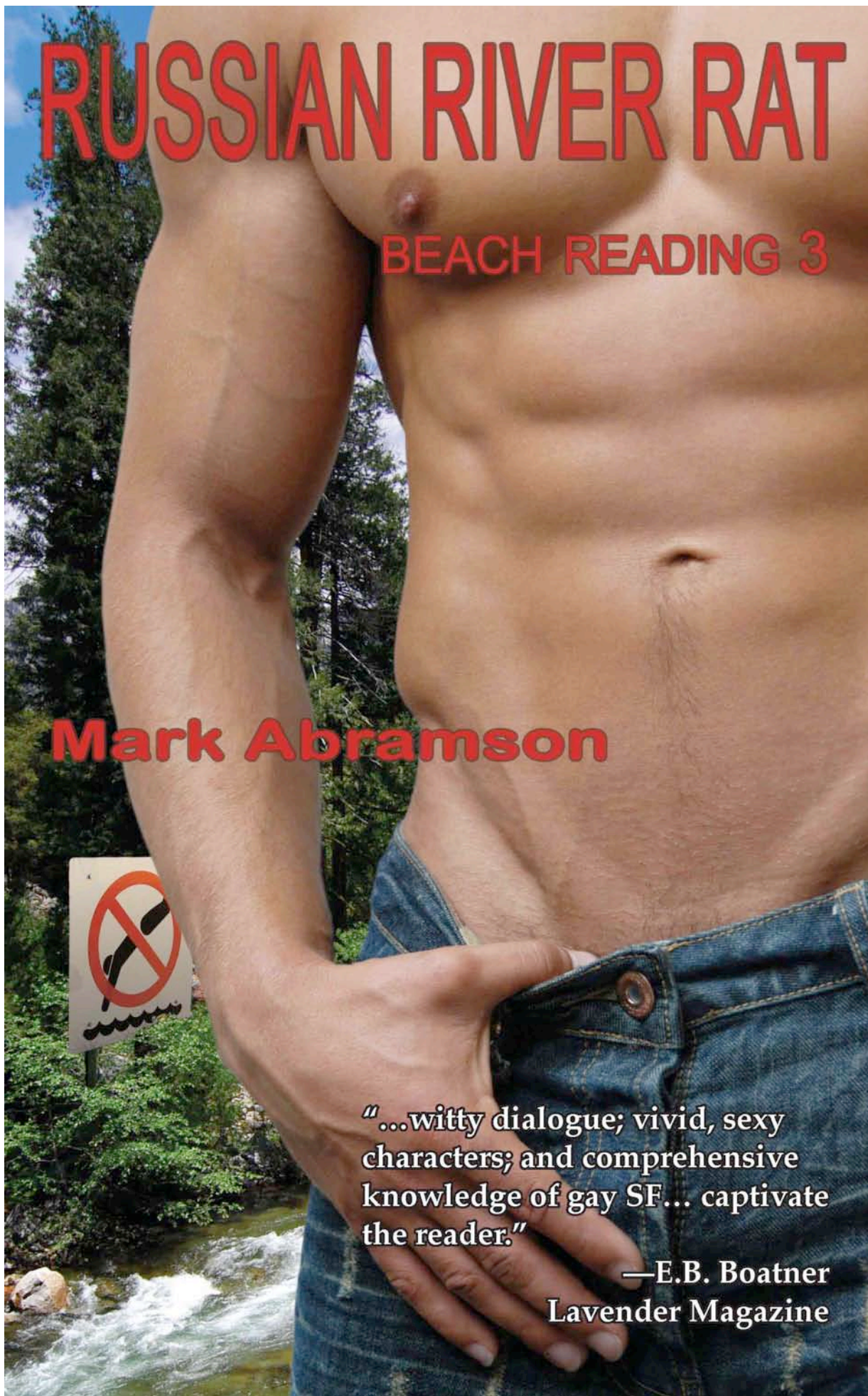
RUSSIAN RIVER RAT

BEACH READING 3

Mark Abramson

"...witty dialogue; vivid, sexy characters; and comprehensive knowledge of gay SF... captivate the reader."

—E.B. Boatner
Lavender Magazine



RUSSIAN RIVER RAT

Book Three in the Beach Reading Series

Praise for *Beach Reading*, Books One and Two

“Bret Harte—the writer, not the wrestler—helped found the literary convention of local color while living on the California coast. 150 years later, Mark Abramson—the writer, not the producer—makes his own contribution to that rich tradition by applying his verbal pointillé to San Francisco. In this first novel of an upcoming series, lovelorn Tim Snow becomes collateral damage after the collision of politics and partying... and love’s rôle in both. Clever and sexy with a ton of heart (and Harte).”

—*Instinct Magazine*

It’s been a while since Armistead Maupin delighted readers by the Bay with his serialized *Tales of the City*, but fans of this type of light confectionary fiction will not be disappointed by Mark Abramson’s first two entries in his *Beach Reading* series. Equally San Francisco-centric, these volumes feature main character Tim Snow, a waiter at Castro Street’s Arts Restaurant, his bosses Artie and Arturo... lots of San Francisco name-dropping, quirky characters and the kind of you’ve-got-to-be-kidding coincidence that happens only in fiction.

—Jerry L. Wheeler
Out Front Colorado

more...

"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, New York

"I just received *Cold Serial Murder*, the second book in Mark Abramson's series on gay life. I could not wait to get started reading it so I took yesterday afternoon off, turned off the phone and sat down in my favorite chair to lose myself in it. From the get go let me say that it is not only as good as *Beach Reading*, it is even better. Mark Abramson knows how to tell a story and he does so with a lot of references to gay life today. Abramson is the kind of guy I could fall in love with if his writing is anything like him. He creates real characters—we all know someone like the guys in the book and we get the sense that we are not just reading a book but that we are participating in the experience that we read about."

—Amos Lassen, *Eureka Pride*

In this second of his "Beach Reading" series of light thrillers, Abramson further develops the likeable and relatable characters he introduced in that enjoyable first book (same name as the series), and again provides a story that perfectly captures the cohesive spirit of the Castro community. While mystery purists may prefer a few more "red herrings" to complicate the solving of the crime, the author obviously intends for the series to entertain rather than challenge, and it succeeds wonderfully on that level. A clang from a streetcar, and five golden stars out of five!

—Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*

RUSSIAN RIVER RAT

ALSO BY MARK ABRAMSON

Beach Reading

Cold Serial Murder

Russian River Rat

BOOK 3
IN THE
BEACH READING SERIES

Mark Abramson



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Despite any resemblance to living and/or historical figures, all characters appearing or mentioned in *Russian River Rat* are fictional except: Marlana, Karen Black, Miguel Hidalgo, Ellen DeGeneres, Tennessee Williams, Suze Orman, Tony Bennett, William Faulkner, Donna Sachet, Diana Ross, Matthew McConaughey, Judy Garland, Loyce Houlton, Harvey Milk, Norma Shearer, Lena Horne, Halle Berry, Bob Hope, Michael Jackson, Joan Crawford, Lawrence Welk, Paulette Goddard, Jo Ann Castle, K.C. Dare, Michael Tilson Thomas, Goldblatt, Ryan White, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Bernard, Shelley Winters, Charles Pierce, Bette Davis, Anne Murray, Lucille Ball, Tegan and Sarah, Liza Minnelli, Sal Castaneda, Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys, Anna Nicole Smith, Steve Paulson, Rosie O'Donnell, Gustav Mahler, Rachel Maddow, Lily Tomlin, Rock Hudson, Rupert Everett, Liberace, Elton John, Jake Gyllenhaal, Ruta Lee, John Goodman, Margaret Hamilton and Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones.

Chapter 1

Tim Snow woke to the smell of bacon and the sound of crisp raindrops bouncing off the skylight over Nick's bed. He yawned, stretching out his arms, and slid over to the empty side of the bed, from where he could see a near-naked Nick working at the stove. Tim smiled at the apron strings highlighting Nick's bare ass, at the pair of gray woolly socks with red heels.

Tim plumped up the pillows behind his head and pulled the covers up to his neck. Nick must have heard the bedsprings creak because he turned around, the ponytail of straight blonde hair bouncing, and blew Tim a kiss. "Good morning, handsome."

Tim smiled before returning the kiss. "What's cooking? Mmmm... nice outfit."

Nick tugged at the front of the apron. "Don't want to get hot grease on the family jewels." He then turned off the stove and poured Tim a mug of coffee. "How did you sleep, Snowman? Any crazy dreams?"

"Come back to bed, and I'll tell you about them." Tim pulled the covers 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 a Monte Rio vacation cottage in the 1930s modernized over the years. He'd added a carport under

a new deck that wrapped around two sides and overlooked the Russian River. The kitchen had been refurbished, and a more efficient wood-burning stove installed in one corner of the living room. He'd kept the knotty pine walls that reminded Tim of the cabins he'd once visited besides a Minnesota lake.

"I thought I wore you out last night." Nick nuzzled into Tim's ear.

"I know, 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."

Nick growled and shook his hair in both their faces. "I'm as hungry as a lion. How about you?"

"Starved."

"Don't move. We can have breakfast in bed." Nick went back to the stove. "It seems early for rain. I guess summer's officially over. I love that sound on the skylight, though."

"Me, too. I could get used to this, you know. I could really get used to this." It had been too long since Tim had felt so welcome in another man's bed. So welcome, he didn't want to ever leave it.

Ruth Taylor poured herself a mug of fresh coffee and sat down at the glass-topped table on the little brick patio of her new apartment. 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, two thousand miles, from Minneapolis, the stress of her divorce, all the packing and moving. It was time to settle in to the laid-back pace of San Francisco and begin her new life.

The movers had finished unloading her household at Collingwood Street several hours before she'd crossed the Bay Bridge. She had collapsed atop the bare mattress. She tisked at her puffy reflection in the mirror and had to hunt through too many boxes to find her toothbrush. At least she knew the

layout of the apartment well from her last visit; her nephew Tim had rented the place before her.

A cat's cry came from behind a stack of boxes in the kitchen, and her 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. 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 that the rest of the plants still thrived and that none of the vines looked strong enough to provide Bartholomew an escape route.

Ruth carried her coffee to the living room and sat down in her grandmother's wooden rocker. It hadn't been 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. Ruth considered Dianne's decorating taste downright tacky; Tim would appreciate a family heirloom.

With a foot she stroked the bare floorboards. Arturo and Artie, her landlords and Tim's employers and friends—no, she needed to think of them as her friends, too, now—had promised to have the old oak floors refinished once Tim got his things moved out. She had asked them not to fuss, but Arturo had been insistent. "This place was built before the 1906 earthquake, and the floors haven't been touched in over a hundred years. There's no time like the present."

Artie had added, "Besides, we like to fuss over you, Ruth. We want you to stay for a good long time."

A fresh coat of white paint made the place seem larger than she remembered it. She loved the beamed ceilings and the built-in bookcases across from the bay window where she'd slept on Tim's couch this summer.

So much had happened since Ruth first arrived in San Francisco for a brief visit, what with the murders and all, that it was hard to put everything into perspective. After all those miles alone on the road, she was thrilled to be back in the city and convinced that she had made the right decision.

Ruth heard a knock on the door. She left the chain in place as she opened it a crack, until she saw who it was. "Teresa!"

"I thought I heard your voice out back," her neighbor said. "When'd you get in, Ruth?"

"Wait, let me unlatch this thing..." Ruth fiddled with the chain and opened the door wide to give Teresa a hug. "Come in. Come in. I arrived in the middle of the night, and I passed out cold. You must have heard me talking to the cat."

"Shucks, I was hoping you'd brought back a man with you." Teresa laughed. "Here I pictured some big, strong, tanned, strapping corn farmer wearing bib overalls and holding a pitchfork."

"No such luck, Teresa. How're things with you?"

"There's nothing much going on in the dating department lately. I get myself all dolled up and go out with the girls now and then, but I never meet a decent fella. Whatever it is I'm serving up, they musta already had for leftovers yesterday."

"Now, Teresa... it can't all that bad. Maybe you and I should go out together sometime. I'm single too, you know. Come in for a cup of coffee, won't you?"

"Don't mind if I do. I can't believe you've unpacked already and got the coffeepot going. I was gonna invite you up to my place for some," Teresa said as she shut the door behind her. "Here's your morning paper, Ruthie."

"I'm glad Tim didn't have the paper stopped." Ruth tucked the *Chronicle* under her arm and Teresa followed her back to the kitchen.

"There's talk about the *Chronicle* going under, so you might as well enjoy it while you can."

"I hope not. I just have to do the crossword puzzle every day," Ruth said. She found a mug and rinsed it clean in the sink. "Cream and sugar?"

"No, thanks, just strong and black is how I like it," Teresa answered. "One of the gals at work says that about her men, but I'd be better off wishing for 'straight' and black. Did you meet that new waiter at Arts? What a cutie-pie!"

"You mean James? Yes, he started before I left town," Ruth said. "He's very good-looking... but he's not straight, is he?"

"No, of course not, but he's strong and black and absolutely gorgeous!" Teresa laughed again. "I was in there for dinner last night with some friends, and he waited on us. What a charmer! I have former students nearly his age, but I'm not too old to look, am I?"

"Of course not. I've always thought window-shopping was one of life's harmless little pleasures." She handed Teresa her coffee. They both walked out on to the patio. "How is Tim? I'm dying to call, but I don't want to wake him. He probably worked at Arts last night."

"No, he was off last night. I don't think he's even in town. He's been spending every spare minute with Nick, you know."

Ruth smiled. "He told me on the phone that things were going well."

"You've never seen such love birds, Ruth. I thought Teddy and Lenny were thick, but Tim and Nick are both on cloud nine these days. I think they're up at Nick's place at the Russian River this week. Artie mentioned it last night at the bar. Tim went up there for his days off, but he planned to be back in town this afternoon so he could be here when you got in. He'll be sorry he didn't have things all ready for you."

"What's to get ready? The place is spic and span. There's no problem."

"Artie said you called from Salt Lake City, so we figured you had at least another day on the road."

"I planned to spend the night in Reno, but I stopped for gas and then I kept right on driving. My adrenalin must have kicked in; I was so excited. I only got a few hours sleep this morning, and I'm not even tired."

"You made good time, girl."

They heard a meow as Ruth's cat stuck his head out the back door.

"Teresa, I'd like you to meet Bartholomew."

"What a big, healthy-looking guy!" Teresa bent to give the cat a gentle scratch between the ears.

"He's a Minnesota cat who is going to spend the first winter of his life without snow, and I dare say he won't miss it one bit."

Teresa lifted her head at a distant sound. "Is that my phone ringing? It must be mine."

"You don't have a cellphone?"

Teresa shook her head. "Only for gentleman callers." She sighed. "My kitchen window is open, and Marcia is out of town. Nobody would dare call Arturo and Artie on a morning when they can sleep in. Ben and Jane are all moved into the downstairs of Tim's house on Hancock Street now, you know."

"How are they doing with the new baby... and little Sarah?" Ruth asked.

"Just fine... both kids as pretty as a picture," Teresa said. "I'd better go upstairs and make sure that wasn't my mother calling from Seattle. I think she's starting to lose it lately. Thanks for the coffee, Ruth, and welcome back to San Francisco. It's gonna be just swell to have you living here in the building full time. You come up a little later for something stronger than coffee. My door is always open, you know."

"Thanks, Teresa," Ruth said as they walked to the door. "You're more than welcome to coffee anytime, too. I guess I'll have a go at some of these boxes before I run out of steam. I'm probably going to need to sleep for a week. Bye, now."

But as she shut the front door, Ruth felt exhaustion roll over her like a heat wave. She didn't want to bother with all the boxes that were her old life. She carried the *Chronicle* from the kitchen to the living room, sat down in her antique rocker and put her bare feet on the footstool. The front-page section had nothing but politics and bad news so she set it aside. She

reached out for her coffee, but remembered she'd left it on the kitchen counter. She looked around for the end table she always kept beside the chair, but saw it wasn't at its usual spot but in the corner under a pile of boxes. Then she remembered she wasn't in Edina anymore.

She flipped the pages of the *Chronicle*, and noticed a small headline:

*BODY FOUND IN RUSSIAN RIVER—
Unidentified Man found near Forestville thought to be Third
Drowning Victim this Season.*

Tim must be at the Russian River right now if he was still up at Nick's place. Wasn't that in Monte Rio? She tried to remember what Tim had told her, but she didn't know the area at all. She read on: *Canoeists find body of nude male near Hacienda Bridge...*

Bartholomew came to visit her, and she scratched the cat behind the ears. "Well, Bart, I wonder how far Forestville is from where Nick lives. Hacienda Bridge sounds Spanish, doesn't it? Hacienda isn't a Russian word, that's for sure." Ruth yawned. "I hope Tim comes home soon. I can hardly wait to see him." Ruth closed her eyes and let the *Chronicle* fall from her lap onto the floor.

Chapter 2

Last night had been about passion; both men regretted the distance that would separate them again. The morning had been more playful with breakfast in bed, feeding each other berries, licking fingers sticky with juice and maple syrup. Tim didn't know which he preferred, this morning's fun or the intensity of the night before, but he hoped he'd never have to choose.

"I don't want to go back to the city today, but Aunt Ruth gets in from Minnesota this weekend." Tim hated whining—he'd never listen when anyone *else* talked that way—but he trusted that Nick would understand. He cleared his throat and tried to lower his voice an octave. "She's driven all the way across country alone, and I can't wait to see her. I have to work tonight at Arts and pull a double tomorrow. Sunday brunch and dinner."

"I don't want you to leave either. It's a good thing we both have our work to keep us busy or we'd spend all our time in bed."

"Bed sounds better than work any day." Tim rested his head on Nick's chest.

"But I need to get caught up with my business after I took these days off to spend with you."

"It's really coming down hard outside. How can you garden in the rain?"

"Business slows down a little this time of year, but there's plenty of work inside during the winter, and I have year-round clients like banks and wineries. Did you ever notice how perfect the plants in a bank lobby are? There's never a dead leaf or a wilted flower."

"No, never noticed." Tim admitted.

Nick tweaked one of Tim's nipples. "You would if they weren't perfect and they wouldn't be perfect if the banks didn't hire someone to make sure they were."

"I think most of the plants in bank lobbies in Minnesota are plastic."

"Tim, Tim," Nick scolded. "Never trust your money to a place with plastic plants. Or any of your other business either. Plastic is for credit cards. Besides, California is where things grow all year around."

"I'll keep that in mind." Tim kissed Nick again and slid a hand down Nick's body. "I like things that grow."

Nick shook his head. "I have to take a shower. I'm sticky and these sheets are going in the washer before I leave the house." Nick pulled off his socks and grabbed a towel from a stack in the corner. He grinned, "Wanna' join me in the shower? Save water..."

Tim grinned and nodded. "Good idea."

The rain was so heavy Tim could barely see the taillights of Nick's truck, but it let up as they rounded the bend near Northwood Lodge on River Road. Once they reached Guerneville it nearly stopped altogether, but a tanker truck got between them, and there was no place to pass. It didn't matter. Nick had said, "If we get separated, just watch for the Rohnert Park exit south of Santa Rosa."

By the time Tim turned south onto Highway 101, it was sunny again with clear skies above as he drove through Santa Rosa. Tim found the exit where he saw Nick's truck waiting for him on the shoulder below the freeway. Tim gave a tap on the horn as he came down the ramp.

A few minutes later both vehicles pulled into the driveway beside a big sign that matched the logo on the side of Nick's truck.

Tim looked around at the large retail garden store with rows of greenhouses behind it. "Wow," he said, as he climbed out of the Thunderbird. "This is quite a set-up. You never told me you were rich."

Nick laughed. "The bank still owns most of it, but I'm doing all right."

"Still, I'm impressed. Give me the grand tour, okay?"

"You bet, babe. Right this way." Nick led Tim around to the side of the main building and turned off the alarm with a few touches on a keypad inside the door. "What do you want to see first? Annuals, perennials, orchids?"

"Whatever you think is best this time of year." Tim had intended on stopping by 18th Street in the Castro to buy his aunt flowers. "I had no idea you ran all this by yourself."

"I told you I have help, didn't I? They don't come in until ten on weekends. We still have time to fool around. If you want."

"You never get enough, do you?" Tim protested weakly. "I'm just amazed at the size of your... operation."

"You'll get used to it." Nick grinned. "Besides, I won't see you again until next weekend and today is Saturday, so I'll be all alone for six long lonely days and nights in the country. Let me show you the potting shed."

"I'll bet you say that to all the boys." Tim laughed and followed Nick through rows of flats of roses under lines of irrigation.

The white windows were so dripping wet that Tim wondered if the glass was frosted with steam or tinted. The heavy, humid air of the nursery, redolent with the scent of rich soil and growing things, triggered a memory from Tim's childhood.

He caught a whiff of cigarette smoke and couldn't imagine where it came from. Maybe it was an olfactory memory or

precognition—funny how smells could remind him of places, people or things. Pipe tobacco made him think of rain, not being out in it, but being inside a warm room with raindrops on the roof and a roaring fire and chocolate and brandy. Cigar smoke was a turn-on for some guys. Tim had just glanced at an article the other day about cigars, bears and leather, but he didn't quite get it... to each his own. Cigarette smoke was obnoxious unless... in his memory, Tim flipped through an old-fashioned Rolodex of Odorama "scratch and sniff" cards. Cigarette smoke in small doses—distant infinitesimal doses—piqued his sense of smell in a pleasant way like eucalyptus leaves or manure on a Minnesota farmer's field before the rains came and brought all the rankness back again.

The smells in the nursery made him horny and judging from the looks of the *potting shed*, with its handy benches, sink, paper towels and a drawer full of condoms and sundries, Nick had used it for this purpose before.

As if he read Tim's mind, Nick said, "I can't remember the last time I brought anyone back here." And he slid the lock shut on the door.

Twenty minutes later they heard a car pull up. "That must be Jenny," Nick said as he reached for a paper towel. "Don't call her that, though. She thinks Jen sounds more butch. And try to get that grin off your face and look respectable."

Tim laughed and pulled up his jeans as they headed back into the store.

Nick said, "Hey, kid! I'd like you to meet Tim Snow from San Francisco. Tim, this is my right hand woman, Jen Armstrong."

"Hi, Tim." She brushed the palm of her right hand across her Levis and thrust it toward him. Tim noticed that her hair was almost the same blonde color as Nick's was, but she wore it in a short pixie cut.

"Armstrong..." Tim smiled and they shook hands. "Does your family have anything to do with that redwood park north of Guerneville?"

"Yeah, my relatives must have planted those trees a few thousand years ago. Rumor has it we'll be seeing a lot more of you from now on."

Tim blushed. "I hope so. Nick never told me about all these greenhouses, though. I thought he just had a little landscaping business."

Jen smirked. "You have to drag things out of Nick, you know. He's full of deep dark secrets."

Tim said, "You're a man with a past, huh? I suppose you had a tortured childhood I don't know about... or an ex-lover with a sordid story."

"The second one." Nick put his arms around Tim and looked deep into his eyes, "But he's in prison now, where he belongs."

"You're kidding, right?" Tim stiffened.

"I don't have anything to be ashamed of except for being young and gullible. Once." Nick took Tim's face in his hands and kissed him on the lips.

As Nick and Jen helped pick flowers for Aunt Ruth, Tim struggled not to ask for more details on his boyfriend's mysterious ex. Nick must have noticed, because on their walk to Tim's Thunderbird he said, "Go on, you want to ask."

"What was his name?"

"Larry." Nick stared off at the greenhouse windows a moment. The glass reflected ominous rainclouds instead of daylight.

"And he's really in prison?"

Nick nodded. "Forgery, burglary, embezzlement, extortion, fraud, grand larceny, racketeering, armed robbery, and vandalism—but it was that ounce of grass that really got him in trouble."

Tim's eyes widened. How many times had he walked around with nearly an ounce on him? There might even be a

joint in the glove compartment of the car right now.

"I'm joking. I don't think he ever got busted for vandalism. I just tacked that on for good measure. Tell Aunt Ruth the flowers are from the both of us, okay? I want her to like me."

"I'm sure she does. I know I do."

By the time Tim crossed the Marin/Sonoma county line, the sun had begun to break through the dark clouds. Tim could still smell the redwoods and the rain, as well as the scent of Nick around the collar of his t-shirt. Driving back home, he felt torn—his love for San Francisco warring with the fresh feelings for Nick. Tim found himself daydreaming about living life in the country. He could rent out both floors of the duplex and move in with Nick. Maybe get a waiter's job at a resort during the summer season or at one of the little restaurants in town that stayed open year round. He could always work part-time for Nick; he was willing to learn the greenhouse business. He'd miss the Castro, that's for sure.

The road signs for *San Francisco* and the rainbow tunnel brought him back to earth. When the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge came into view like an ageless vista on a postcard, Tim felt his chest swell. How he loved the city. Nick would be down next weekend. There would be plenty of time for him then.

He moved into the southbound left lane across the bridge, amid the roar and rumble of Saturday traffic. While the rest of the country was cooling down into autumn and winter, San Francisco found itself in a stretch of hot days. In Minnesota, the locals referred to it as an Indian Summer, but Tim thought of this as the weather they deserved after surviving the chilly nights of June and July.

Right now the blazing sun was downright hot. Traffic stalled to a halt in the middle of the bridge so Tim pulled his t-shirt over his head and tucked it under the seat. He thought it might be nice to drive down Castro Street bare-chested with the top down, just to see if he spotted anyone he knew, and so they could see him looking his best.

Chapter 3

Tim pulled the Thunderbird into the driveway of his new home on Hancock Street. His downstairs neighbor/tenant Ben stood on a stepladder pulling dead blossoms off the geraniums in the window boxes. "Hey, Tim," Ben yelled. "Welcome back! How was the river?"

"Hiya, Ben." Tim waved with his free hand while he closed the trunk. "I had a great time. How's everything here?"

"Not bad. Jane and I have our hands full with two little ones. The baby's colicky and Sarah misses you. She keeps asking when your Aunt Ruth is coming back to town. They're over at Dolores Park right now."

"Aunt Ruth is due in today. If she stuck to her schedule she should have got to Reno by last night and left from there this morning." Tim picked up his things from the driveway and set them down again outside the door, feeling for the keys in the pocket of his worn jeans. "Unless she's having a lucky streak at the craps table."

"That's great. Sarah will be happy to see you both." He came down from the stepladder and held the door for Tim.

"Thanks, Ben. Tell Sarah I'll see her soon."

Tim arranged the multi-colored dahlias, irises, roses and lilies in a big blue vase that had belonged to his late, first love in San Francisco, Jason. Ruth might have packed a vase, but

Tim figured it would be buried in a box somewhere, and an arrangement of flowers, rather than a bunch wrapped in a cone of paper, was a better gift. He added enough water to cover the stems, carried the vase downstairs and wedged the bouquet into the space behind the passenger seat. He drove the few blocks to his old apartment on Collingwood Street slowly, especially going uphill, and was lucky enough to find a parking space on that block.

Tim still had keys to his old apartment. He fumbled with them, while carrying the full vase, when Marcia—an upstairs neighbor who once was a boy named Malcolm—arrived at the front gate and let him inside. Tim was used to seeing Marcia dressed to the nines in designer fashions, but this morning she was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, hardly any make-up and her hair was covered in a dusty stocking cap. He must have caught her on an off-day.

“Tim, what gorgeous flowers. Are they for me? You shouldn’t have.”

“Sorry, not this time, Marcia. My Aunt Ruth is due back in town today. They’re a little welcome home present from Nick and me.”

“Tell her I said hello. I hope she’s not afraid of me anymore.”

“Sure, Marcia.” Last summer, his aunt had briefly thought Marcia was a serial killer stalking the Castro.

Tim planned on leaving the flowers on the kitchen counter with a note, but when he opened the door, the smell of brewed coffee surprised him. Between boxes piled high everywhere and the flower arrangement in his arms, Tim could hardly see where he was stepping. As he set the vase down on the living room floor, the sight of his aunt in her rocking chair, blinking away sleep, startled him.

She gave him a wide smile. “Tim!” She nearly toppled the chair rising to give him a hug.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Ruth. I didn't mean to wake you. I didn't expect you in until late this afternoon. What time did you leave Reno?"

"I never stayed there. Bart and I drove straight through from Salt Lake City. I was so wired on coffee and wanting to get here that I couldn't sleep anyway." She bent down and touched a few petals. "What gorgeous flowers."

"They're from Nick, really. You won't believe the place he has. He grew all these in his greenhouse."

"Bring them into the kitchen, honey."

"You have to see his place. What a week."

"Tell me all about it. You look like someone in love; you're absolutely radiant."

More boxes were piled in the kitchen. Tim added more water to the vase, and then set it on the counter. "He has greenhouses full of flowers and plants. He runs a whole big nursery business up there," Tim gushed. "I thought he just did gardening for a few rich people."

"Would there have been anything wrong with that?"

"No way. I'm just surprised, that's all. He lives in a little cottage way up high above the Russian River—"

"Monte Rio?"

Tim nodded. "Kinda small, like a vacation house, but nice."

"What have you two been doing the last few days?" she asked.

Tim blushed at the thought of what they'd mostly been doing.

"Outside of the bedroom, I mean," his aunt quickly added.

"One day we went for a long drive on some winding back roads north and east of Santa Rosa. We went clear up into the wine country and stopped for lunch and did a little wine-tasting. I forgot I bought a case. It's still in the back of the car. I should have brought in a bottle for you." Tim went to the coffee pot. "Can I?"

"I made it earlier when I first woke up. Teresa stopped down and we had some, but let's make a fresh pot." She poured the dark coffee down the drain. "Tell me more about your visit with Nick."

"We drove up the coast to Timber Cove Inn, and drank Irish coffees and watched the waves crashing on the rocks. It's beautiful there. They have a big Bufano sculpture outside, and on the inside near the bar there's a fireplace big enough you can stand up inside it. You'd love the views. I'll take up you there sometime in the Thunderbird on a sunny day with the top down. We could drive up Highway One the whole coast."

"That would be fun, dear." She stifled a yawn. "Sorry."

"You must be beat. I should go and let you sleep some more."

"Not at all." She pushed him into a chair. "You stay right here and keep me company for a while. There'll be plenty of time for me to catch up on my sleep later."

Tim smiled. He wanted nothing more than to ramble on and on about the past week. He knew he must sound like a lovesick teen, but telling his aunt about Nick lifted his spirits. "Last night we watched the sunset from Jenner, and then ate dinner at a great restaurant in Duncan Mills. This morning Nick brought me breakfast in bed, and we listened to the rain on the skylight in his bedroom. It was wonderful!"

"Breakfast in bed. How romantic!"

A loud "meow" came from the bedroom down the hall.

"Bartholomew," Tim called. "Come here, old boy."

"He's part of the reason I drove straight through from Salt Lake," Ruth said as Tim picked up the big gray tabby and rubbed its belly. "I don't think Bartholomew could have taken one more night in a strange motel room. He's mad at me as it is for taking him away from the only home he's ever known."

"He'll adjust to California living in no time," Tim said. "Don't you remember me, Bart? Man, you've gotten so fat!"

"He'll be happy to spend his first winter without snow, I'll bet."

"You know it snows in San Francisco sometimes, too."

"A few flakes of white stuff every decade can hardly compare to the weeks of howling blizzards and sub-zero temperatures that we're used to. Are you such a California boy that you've forgotten all about them?"

"I've tried to block those miserable winters from my mind," Tim said. "I'm just glad you're finally here to stay."

"Me too, honey." She smiled, knowing how typical it was for her nephew to block anything from his mind that didn't fit into his fantasies of a perfect world. He was a lot like his mother in that regard, although her idea of a perfect world was very different from Tim's.

"Last night after dinner we drove into Guerneville and shot a few games of pool at the Rainbow Cattle Company."

"Rainbow what?" Ruth asked.

"The Rainbow Cattle Company. It's a gay bar right downtown in the middle of the main street in Guerneville."

"For a moment, I pictured you and Nick playing pool while surrounded by cows." Ruth laughed. "Sorry. Go on." She poured him a mug of steaming hot coffee.

"There's something about a small town gay bar, you know? I guess you wouldn't." He took a long sip. "Jason took me to the Rainbow once a couple of years ago. Must have been on a weekend during the height of the resort season. Or a holiday. I don't remember. But Nick and I went midweek and the place wasn't crammed with tourists and city people. Let's just say that small town gay bars have a charm all their own. They're different from the bars in the Castro, that's for sure—more like some of the bars south of Market or maybe the Tenderloin. The guys are grittier. More real."

"So that's where Nick hangs out?"

"I don't think so. The bartender didn't treat him like he was a regular, and he only knew a few of the other guys there. I don't think Nick is much of a bar person."

"I like him more all the time."

"Weren't you everybody's favorite bartender on Castro Street this summer?"

"Don't change the subject. I want to hear about you and Nick."

Tim wasn't sure how much she really wanted to know and how much of her asking was Midwestern politeness. "Besides all the time we spent in bed... he's a lot of fun to be with."

"Sex isn't everything."

"No, but it's something. I mean, it's *really* something. I love his long hair, and I love staring up into his eyes while my head is nestled in that spot above his hip bones and running my fingers through the soft blonde hairs on his stomach and his chest—"

"I think we have a winner, here."

"—and I love the way he laughs and the way he makes me laugh." Tim sighed. "He might be perfect, except for his ex..."

"At nearly forty, the man's entitled to a few exes. You certainly didn't think you were Nick's first boyfriend, did you?"

"No, of course not..." Tim worried that his aunt might think less of Nick knowing that he dated someone who ended up a criminal.

"What's wrong?"

"His ex. He's in prison."

Aunt Ruth's eyebrows rose. "For what?"

"I'm not exactly sure. At first I thought he was joking."

"You don't think Nick is in any kind of trouble, do you?"

Tim shrugged. "I hope not. He seems almost too good to be true."

"Some fellows are, but I believe in princes," said Aunt Ruth.

"Do you need help unpacking anything?"

"No, dear—not today—I have all the time in the world." Ruth changed the subject. "I thought I'd go to Arts this evening and see what Arturo is cooking," she said.

"I'm working the dinner shift tonight and a double tomorrow, brunch and dinner."

"I've yet to go to the supermarket. Artie left me a basket of fresh fruit on the kitchen counter and some sandwiches and potato salad in the refrigerator. Wasn't that sweet of him? Are you hungry?"

"No thanks, I had a big breakfast with Nick, remember?"

"In bed... how could I forget? You run along and thanks again for the flowers."

"Thank Nick."

"I will do that when I see him. Tell everyone at Arts that I'm back in town, and ask Arturo to save me something wonderful to eat. I'll be starving for a good meal by then."

"I'll see you tonight, Aunt Ruth."

"With bells on..."

Tim was almost out the door when his aunt yelled, "Tim, do you happen to know where Forestville is? There's a bridge near there, I believe."

"Sure. Well, sort of." Tim stepped back into the kitchen. "I probably drove over it this morning. There are lots of little towns and bridges along the river. Why?"

Ruth covered a yawn with her hand. "There was something in this morning's *Chronicle* about a drowning..."

"You're not playing detective again," Tim scolded. "Remember the fine mess you got us into last time you were in town."

"I did not," she protested and gave him a peck on the cheek. "See you later, dear. Thanks for keeping up with the paper, by the way. I'll switch the utility bills over to my name this week. I'm sure the dead body was no one we know, anyway..."

Chapter 4

Ruth dozed again after Tim left, and when she woke it was already dark outside. It might have been the middle of the night; she couldn't read her watch without her glasses. She dangled her fingers on the floor beside the bed, searching for... shoes, yes, and her glasses inside one of them.

"Aaah, it's only seven. The days just get shorter and shorter this time of year, don't they? They'll still be serving dinner at Arts. I have plenty of time for a little soak in the tub."

In the months since her divorce, Ruth caught herself talking to no one. She worried senility might be setting in, despite her age. Thank goodness for the cat; she could always pretend she was talking to him. "Isn't that right, Bartholomew? There's plenty of time for a nice hot bath and then we'll try to find something not too wrinkled to wear to dinner."

The cat opened one lazy eye at the sound of her voice, jumped from the bed onto the floor and ambled down the hallway toward the kitchen and his water dish.

Ruth knew it would take time for her body's internal clock to adjust, not only to the change in time zones but the lack of sleep. On the last leg of her long drive she had only stopped to buy gas, use the rest room, and fuel her body with more coffee. Bartholomew's litter box had made the entire trip on

the floor in the back seat. Now it was in the corner of the patio under an enormous planter of impatiens. She followed after the cat and opened the back door for him. "One of these days, Bart, we're going to ask Arturo about installing your own little flap to get in and out of here all by yourself, aren't we?"

From the sidewalk on Castro Street, Ruth peeked in Art's front window and saw every table filled. She spotted a waiter she didn't recognize, who could only be James, whom Teresa had mentioned. There was also someone new behind the bar, a slim young man with broad shoulders, reddish crew-cut and dimples. A couple of guys left their barstools, slipping into their leather jackets. No one appeared to be waiting for their seats, so Ruth opened the front door and headed in that direction.

Artie was just coming out of the men's room when he spotted her. "Ruth Taylor is in the house!" Everyone in the restaurant must have heard him; they all turned and stared at her. Artie came running toward her now, and Arturo stepped out of the kitchen and started clapping. Enough customers recognized her from bartending shifts last summer that they joined in and pretty soon total strangers added to the applause. Ruth felt her face turn red, and tears ran down her cheeks. "Thank you so much. Thank you everyone. It's just great to be back, but please sit down. Please! Thank you so much!"

Arturo and Artie crowded to either side of her with hugs and kisses while people settled back to their dinners. "Welcome home, Ruth," Artie told her, then turned to the redhead behind the bar and said, "Scott, fix the lady a drink and put it on my tab. What will it be, Ruth? Goodness, you haven't even met Scott yet. Isn't he a doll? Scott, this is our beloved Ruth Taylor."

"How do you do, Scott?" Ruth shook hands with the young man.

"I know what she wants," Artie said. "Make her a Bombay martini straight up with olives and you might as well make

me one too, while you're at it... and then you're fired! With Ruth back in town, we won't need you anymore."

Ruth dabbed at her eyes with a cocktail napkin. "Don't worry, Scott. I'm sure Artie's only kidding about your being fired."

"I hope so." Scott's dimples deepened when smiled. "I've heard a lot about you, Miss Taylor, and if it's all true I'll be lucky to have any shifts here at all when you take over."

"Take over? I wouldn't worry about that, my dear, and please call me Ruth."

"Tim told us you were coming in to dinner, Ruth," Arturo said, "and we couldn't be happier. We had Maine lobsters flown in today. I saved one for you if you want it. Otherwise there's fresh poached salmon with hollandaise sauce or stuffed pork chops. I have to get back to the kitchen, so how do you feel about that lobster? Do you want me to hold it for you?"

"Arturo, it sounds delicious, and I'm sure it is, but I think I'd prefer the salmon," she said. "We get lobster flown into Minnesota, too, and I can get pork chops anywhere. I know your sage stuffing is something special, but I haven't had fresh salmon in ages."

"Salmon it is, then!" Arturo rubbed Ruth's shoulder. "Excuse me while I get back to work."

She sat down at one of the two vacant bar stools and noticed that Scott was busy too, taking care of the entire bar by himself plus making drinks for the waiters. "It's good to see the place so busy, Artie."

"Yes it is," Artie said, starting to sit down beside her. "I'd love to join you, but I'd better get back to work too, unless you want to jump right in?"

"Not on my first night back in town." Ruth laughed. "And not when there's fresh salmon on the menu. You go ahead and get back there, Artie. I'll be fine." Other customers were already lined up to shake her hand or give her a peck on the cheek and welcome her back. She took a sip of her martini, dabbed at her eyes once more and relaxed. Even though she was embarrassed by all the fuss, she really was glad to be

back at Arts, back in San Francisco, and especially to be near her nephew again.

With Artie behind the bar things were back to normal in no time. Ruth gazed around the room and noticed several faces she knew. As she smiled at customers she recognized they give her a wave and shout, "Good to see you." Then she noticed a banner strung across the back of the room that said 'WELCOME BACK RUTH' surrounded by balloons and rainbow flags. "Artie!" she yelled. "I just saw the sign. You shouldn't have!"

"Why not?" Artie topped off her martini from a silver cocktail shaker and added the rest to his own drink. "We would have hired the gay marching band, but they were already booked for tonight."

Ruth laughed and started getting misty again. She caught Scott's eye when he made change for the customer beside her and said to him, "I had no idea they were planning anything like this. Did you?"

"They've talked about you ever since I started working here, but Arturo put the sign up just before the dinner rush started."

More customers came by to give Ruth a hug. She knew most of their names, and when she didn't, she called them by what they drank. "Oh, JB water with a twist, right? How are you? Daniel—that's right, forgive me—how's your mother getting along after her surgery?"

Then she noticed a dark-haired man alone at a table in the corner nearest the kitchen. There was something so familiar about him; Ruth was sure she must have seen him before. He wore a dark suit with a bow tie and he was exceptionally handsome. No, not a suit but a tuxedo.

Scott returned to her end of the bar to ask, "Are you about ready for another martini there, ma'am?"

"No thank you. Artie already topped me off. Two can be dangerous, especially on an empty stomach. I'll probably have a glass of wine with dinner later."

"Bombay martinis are big tonight. They must be ordering them in your honor. At least I can offer you what's left in the shaker," Scott said, pouring until her empty stemmed glass was half-full again. "It's just getting watered down, anyway."

"Thank you." Scott was not only cute, but he was charming, too. "Scott, may I ask you something?"

"Sure." He smiled. "What would you like to know, Miss Taylor. I mean, Ruth?"

"Do you know who that handsome man is?" She pointed discretely at the fellow sitting alone. "See the one I mean? He's in a tuxedo eating dinner all by himself over there in the corner?"

"Sure, that's Phil."

"Phil?" Ruth thought hard, but the name didn't ring a bell, despite his familiar face. As he moved his knife and fork she could tell that his muscles were firm and taut under his expensive clothing.

"Phil's the piano player. He's on his dinner break right now. He started work at five. I would have thought you'd have known him from when you were here before."

"No, there was a woman named Vivian who played the piano here then."

"Well, he's pretty well-known around here." Scott wiped down the bar. "He has quite a following; for some reason the bear crowd seems to love him. Or maybe they just come in for Arturo's hearty portions."

Scott's mention of bears reminded Ruth of Teresa's ex-husband Leonardo, and she finally recalled where she'd seen Phil. One night this past summer, when Ruth was behind the bar, Leonardo and his new husband, Theodore, had been showing her pictures of where they'd met. Some event that featured wild animals... what was it they called that? "Scott, what's that big function they have every year at the Russian River? It's something like 'cowardly lions' or 'lazy leopards,' but those aren't right. Browsing bears? Burrowing bears?"

He chuckled. "You must mean Lazy Bear Weekend."

"That's it." It had been Lazy Bear Weekend when Leonardo had met Theodore. Ruth had seen pictures of Phil, as the naked piano player at their elaborate dinner party in a campground.

Ruth finished off her martini. "I saw pictures of Phil from someone's trip to Lazy Bear Weekend at the river." She chewed an olive. "Maybe you know Theodore—"

"Oh sure. And Leo-*nar*-do," Scott stretched out the name. Ruth laughed. So she wasn't the only one who thought the couple a bit pretentious.

"Phil is quite the hustler." Scott said. "I'm surprised he has time to do this restaurant gig, but he sure packs them in. His tips must be phenomenal."

"So he's a real go-getter?"

"No, Ruth." Scott picked up a newspaper someone had left on the bar—the *Bay Area Reporter*, Ruth saw—and started leafing through it. "See, this is his ad. He's a different sort of hustler." He pointed to what she first thought was the crowded Want Ads section, but then she saw several photos of almost nude men.

"My goodness. How do you know this is Phil's picture? This photograph doesn't even show his face."

"It's common knowledge," Scott said. "Besides, I was at a party once where he was the hired entertainment. He does a lot of that sort of thing. That's his picture, all right."

Ruth had always thought so many of the gay men in the Castro must read the *B.A.R.* for the columnists like Friedman, Marcus, and Donna Sachet.

Scott leaned in close to Ruth's cheek. "Honestly, I think he likes working here because of your nephew."

Ruth stared at Phil, who had finished eating, and was heading back to the piano bench. As he did, he walked behind her nephew and purposely bumped up against him. Tim nearly dropped the tray of empty glasses he was carrying back to the bar. Ruth noticed a flash of fury play across her nephew's face before he forced a smile.

Now that summer evening's conversation came back to her.

Jake looked at the album over Theodore's shoulder and nodded. "I know that guy. 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! It would have packed the place."

"He wasn't totally naked," Theodore argued. "He had on a collar and bow tie and cuffs with gold cufflinks and black dress shoes and socks with those old-fashioned garters men use to wear in the 40's."

"That's right, but he took all that off afterward," Leonardo said. "For dessert they popped the champagne corks and everyone gathered around to lick whipped cream and fresh strawberries right off the pianist!"

"Would you like to eat here at the bar?" Scott asked. Ruth looked down at the newspaper ad in front of her. *Hot, Hung & Horny. Italian/German. Strictly Top. Outcalls only. Into most scenes ~ Just Ask. Available Afternoons/ Late Nights.*

"No thank you, Scott," Ruth said. "As much as I enjoy your company, I believe that table in the back corner is empty now. That is Tim's section, isn't it? I'd hate to be responsible for congesting the bar. And I think I'd like to have dinner near the piano. That way I can hear the music and keep an eye on everything that's going on."

Chapter 5

Tim lay in a hospital bed. He opened his eyes and noticed the overpowering scent of flowers. Then he heard Jason whispering to him, "Lie still. Don't move or they'll catch on."

Tim forced his eyes to look to the left as far as he could without moving his head. The flower arrangement he'd brought to his Aunt Ruth stood among dozens of others on tables, platforms and funeral biers all around them. Tim heard voices and closed his eyes before the people moved close enough to stare down at him.

He realized then that he was sharing a coffin, not a bed, with Jason beside him. That made sense, since Jason was dead. Still, Tim had never seen a double-wide coffin before. Perhaps they made them for really fat people. There was a program the other night on the Discovery Channel about a guy who hadn't left his house in years because he couldn't fit through the door. Or was he too heavy for his legs to carry him anymore? Maybe that was it. Tim wasn't sure.

Tim was about to ask Jason whether he'd seen the television show, but now they were seated in the red Thunderbird, Tim behind the wheel, Jason in the passenger seat. Jason was yelling, "Tim, pull over! It isn't safe. Don't drive! Don't drive anymore until it's safe. You're gonna get hurt if you do. Don't say I didn't warn you!"

Tim stopped and began to parallel park on 18th Street between two liquor trucks delivering cases of booze to the Badlands and Harvey's. "Why are you stopping here?" The voice was different but still familiar. Tim turned and saw that Nick had taken Jason's place in the passenger seat. "I thought you wanted to go to Safeway. You know it'll cost twice as much at Delano's."

"I don't care," Tim said. "I'm tired of driving." He didn't know what they were planning to buy, and it didn't matter. He wasn't hungry anyway. Then he thought of the right words to say to make the problem go away, the magic words that must have solved a million arguments in all sorts of relationships. "Let's go out to dinner instead. I'll buy."

"Okay."

"We can stop and have a drink at the Edge first. How's that sound?"

Tim didn't recognize the restaurant, but they had a window table with a votive candle between them, nearly melted away. The table rocked from side to side, and Tim realized they were on a boat in San Francisco Bay. Tables around them held other diners, other candles. Some were people Tim knew, customers at Arts, guys he saw at the gym, on Castro sidewalks, with their dogs in Dolores Park. He heard his Aunt Ruth laughing nearby, but he couldn't see her. The boat was sailing on the far side of Alcatraz. A lighthouse beacon swept over them slowly as they headed north toward the dark silhouette of Angel Island. The light was so faint that Tim could only make out Nick's smiling face across from him and Nick's hands on the table, one on either side of the flickering candle holding Tim's hands and caressing each of his fingers.

Though the dream ended on a happy note, when Tim woke his heart raced with a panicked beat. He hadn't had a dream of Jason in ages... not since his late boyfriend had warned Tim that his killer needed to be stopped before more men were killed. Tim had been having such dreams since he was a little boy when his psychic grandmother died, and they

didn't always come true. Some dreams were just dreams. He could usually tell the difference between premonition and fantasy, nightmare and nocturnal emission. A cold prickle of longing and fear crept up his spine.

Thanks a lot, Jason. You could at least stick around long enough to explain.

Tim reached across the bed for Nick, but then he remembered he was in his own bed, and Nick was at the river. It was almost four in the morning, and he fell back to sleep.

The next time Tim looked at the clock he groaned. 8:30 A.M. He had to work a double at Arts today, and didn't need the dream haunting him.

Did Jason mean that something was wrong with the Thunderbird? Tim had already replaced the muffler, and that hadn't been unsafe, just noisy. What else would he drive? Sometimes Arturo asked one of the employees to make a Costco run, but Arturo had just bought a brand new car, so that couldn't be it. Maybe Nick's truck wasn't safe? But why would Jason warn him about that? Tim had never been behind the wheel of Nick's truck.

Tim reached toward the messy pile of money on the dresser, his tips from Saturday night. He'd been thinking about buying a king-size bed. It would be perfect for when Nick was in town. He counted over two-hundred dollars. "I should put some really good sheets on my shopping list, too."

The dream grew more distant as Tim turned the shower knobs and steam filled the bathroom. He thought about Nick as he soaped up. A cold shower might have been a better idea.

While Tim pulled on his shorts and socks, the clock in the bedroom jumped to 8:50. Nick was planning to work today, wasn't he? Tim thought he should be up and getting ready by now. He punched in the number in Monte Rio, and it rang six times with no answer. Maybe he'd already left for the nursery.

Tim was just about to hang up when he heard Nick's voice. "Hello."

"Hey, stud," Tim said. "Did I wake you?"

"Snowman." Nick used Tim's favorite nickname. "I was just in the shower. Thinking of you."

"Same here... I just got out."

"Great! Are you still naked or am I supposed to ask what you're wearing? This *is* an obscene phone call, right?"

"Oh, that might be fun but I'd rather have the real thing. Besides, I have to leave for work in a minute."

"That's right, poor baby... you've got to pull a double today. How was last night? Did your Aunt Ruth get in?"

"Yeah, she arrived a day early. She was so excited to get here she drove straight through from Salt Lake City. She went nuts over the flowers—said to say thank you. Last night the restaurant was packed when she came in, and everyone gave her a standing ovation."

"Nice."

"She acted embarrassed, but I know she loved it. We stayed busy all night, and I made over two-hundred bucks in tips. I've been thinking about shopping for a new bed."

"That sounds like fun. Can I come along, and we'll test drive a few?"

"You'd better believe it! Maybe we could try to get 86'd from Macy's furniture department."

"I doubt it." Nick laughed. "The last time I was there the salesman was cruising me so hard! If he's still working there, I'll bet we could get naked and go at it and he'd just wanna watch."

"Or join in!" Tim laughed. "How's the nursery? Did you get caught up yet after playing hooky with me all last week?"

"Not quite, Snowman. I'm heading over there as soon as I get dressed. Jen's got the day off, and Kent is down with some bug."

"Kent?" Tim fought back a pang of insecurity at the sound of another man's name. Then he mentally kicked himself for it.

"One of my employees. You'll meet him."

"Uh-huh." Tim felt stupid for the way his stomach was acting all jumpy. "Well, I just thought I'd give a call."

"I'm glad you did. I miss you too. Hey, I just remembered, I might not be able to come down this weekend."

"What do you mean? Work?" Now Tim felt physically ill.

"No, it's my cousin Nate from New Orleans. I haven't seen him since we were kids. He wrote me a letter, but it got mixed in with a pile of bills and invoices at the office."

"Yeah?"

"I hope I haven't thrown off any plans."

"Plans? What plans? Saturday night in the Castro?" Tim was determined to pretend that Nick's not coming down was no big deal. "If I wasn't working I'd just be home watching Lawrence Welk on PBS. I think they're doing their big patriotic special this weekend—the Lennon Sisters in red, white and blue sequins with hooker hair singing the Battle Hymn of the Republic and Jo Ann Castle doing a Dixieland version of Yankee Doodle Dandy on the piano."

"It sounds like you've already seen it." Nick laughed again. "Is it a rerun?"

"Yeah, Nick, they all are." Tim thought it was just like Nick not to know that Lawrence Welk had been dead for years.

"Well, anyway... I just found Nate's letter, and I don't know what he wants, but he wrote that he was driving across country, and he plans to stop and see me. He should have been here by now. Maybe he had car trouble."

Car trouble. Tim felt a chill. Jason's warning. "Nick, that reminds me of something; you haven't had any trouble with your truck lately, have you?"

"No, why?"

"Just a silly dream I had..." Maybe someday he'd sit Nick down, and they'd have a long talk about Tim's psychic

affliction and hope that Nick didn't run for the hills. But not now, not over the phone.

"Well, I'll try to call you, but I'll probably be busy with Nate this weekend, maybe take a drive or something, show him around the wine country. There've been a lot of changes since we were kids. You take care and say hi to your Aunt Ruth for me. I'm glad she liked the flowers."

"Couldn't you bring him down?" Tim scrambled for a reprieve from this bad news, a last gasp attempt to see Nick sooner. "Won't your cousin want to see San Francisco? One of the spare rooms is still full of boxes, but I could fix up a bed for him in the smaller bedroom..."

"I don't think so. I don't think he'd like the city at all. I haven't seen him in years, but he's as straight as they come. N.O.P.D."

"A cop?"

"Narcotics."

Tim considered his stash of pot. Maybe it was for the best. "I'd better get to work."

"Me too, Snowman. Are you sure we couldn't turn this into one of *those* phone calls? I'm still picturing you naked."

"I'm wearing white jockey shorts and black socks, okay? But I can't go to work like this, and I'm gonna be late if I don't..."

"Okay, okay, just leave me with *that* image. White jockey shorts and... are they cotton or synthetic?"

"The shorts?"

"No, the socks."

"They're burlap, okay? Geez, what a pervert!"

Nick laughed. "I can't wait to see you, Tim. Work hard. Make big tips. I'll talk to you soon."

Tim tried to smile as he hung up the phone, but he felt awful. Here he was in San Francisco, home of one of the largest populations of gay men in the world. He was living in the heart of the Castro district, and he had to get involved with someone nearly two hours away. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He reached into the dresser for a t-shirt. The first one he grabbed—*WARNING! ~ NEXT MOOD SWING ~ 5 MINUTES!*—was an old one Jason had given him as a gag gift one year for his birthday. Tim dropped it back in the drawer like it was burning his fingers and found a plain white one. Tomorrow he would do a load of laundry. That shirt reminded him that if Jason were here right now he'd probably tell Tim to "stop acting like a girl and grow up." Tim finished getting dressed, grabbed the kitchen trash and left by way of the back door.

The back stairs was where he'd first laid eyes on Nick: a pair of muscular legs coming down the steps, legs so tanned that the hair was sun-bleached white against hard brown calves. Nick was carrying a cardboard box with his grandmother's old typewriter on top of it. What a great day that turned out to be.

Now Tim heard another voice as he rounded the back of the house. Sarah was on the bench beside the driveway, singing a lullaby to her Raggedy Ann doll. "Uncle Tim, Uncle Tim!" The doll she had been cradling so gently one minute was on its head in the dirt the next. "Daddy told me you were home. I missed you."

"It's the Magic Child!" Tim sat down on the bench and let her jump up into his arms. "I missed you too, Sarah. If anyone can cheer me up, it's you."

"Why are you sad?"

"I'm not really sad, honey. Just a little disappointed, that's all."

"Auntie Ruth, Auntie Ruth!" Sarah leapt from Tim's lap and bolted down the driveway. Tim looked up to see his aunt coming down the block. She was dressed in blue sweats and white sneakers. Sarah leapt into an embrace. "Uncle Tim is sad, and I'm trying to cheer him up, but now you're here too so you can help me."

Ruth kissed her on the cheek and set her back down. "You've grown a foot since I've been gone. Why is Uncle

Tim sad, Sarah?" His aunt looked up at him. "What's wrong, Tim?"

"Nothing, really, I just got off the phone with Nick, and he can't come down this weekend. What are you up to?"

"I came out for a walk on such a lovely morning and thought if I timed things right I might be able to accompany my favorite nephew when he heads to work on Castro Street."

Before Tim could respond, Sarah jumped up again and yelled, "Grandpa!" A late-model cobalt blue Jaguar turned into the driveway, and a handsome gentleman stepped out of the car. Again the little girl ran to someone who smothered her with kisses.

"Hello, my little angel," the man said, laughing. "I wasn't sure I could find the place until I saw your red hair shining in the sun. Aren't you going to introduce me to your friends?"

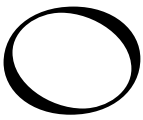
"Sure, Grandpa. This is Uncle Tim, and this is Aunt Ruth. This is my grandpa!" Sarah beamed.

The man set Sarah back down and shook hands with Tim first, since he was closer. "I'm Sam Connor, Jane's dad." His grip was firm. "I've been out of town on business for a few weeks, but I thought it was high time I came to see this little angel and meet my new grandson."

Tim noticed that, as Ruth stepped forward to take Sam's hand, his aunt blushed a little. "What a pleasure to meet you as well."

Sam cradled her hand in both of his. "Believe me Ruth, the pleasure is all mine."

Chapter 6

 n their walk to Castro Street, Ruth wanted to find out what was bothering Tim, but it was hard for her to focus. When Sam held her hands just now she felt a thrill she hadn't known in years. *Why couldn't I have put on a touch of lipstick before leaving the apartment? And I'm in sweat clothes! Now I'm just being foolish. I've never worn lipstick to go for a morning run in my entire life, and I'm certainly not going to start now. But what a charming gentleman.*

When they reached the corner, a shiny silver convertible passed by, honking before it turned onto Castro Street. "Hey Tim," the driver yelled out. To Ruth he was just another bald man in sunglasses. The passenger wore a baseball cap and waved. Tim waved back.

"Who were they?" Ruth asked.

"A couple of notorious drag queens."

"Now, Tim, I may not know everything about gay life in the Castro, but I know a drag queen when I see one, and those two were both dressed as men."

"K.C. Dare was driving and that was Donna Sachet in the passenger's seat. Trust me; they're drag queens. They just don't happen to be in drag right now. You wouldn't know them as the same two people."

"I'll have to take your word for it," Ruth said. A few steps later, she added, "That's quite impressive, you know."

"What is?"

"That you know those two guys—the drag queens. I mean, you recognized them when they're not even wearing any women's clothing."

Her nephew smiled. "*Everything* is drag, Aunt Ruth. You're dressed as a jogger this morning. That's your drag. And I'm in my waiter drag because I'm on my way to work. What's really more impressive is that *they* know *me*."

"Who doesn't know you? That's one of the things I love about the Castro. People know each other. You told me when I came to visit last summer that it was like a small town, and I feel like I want to get to know everyone."

"You will eventually, working behind the bar at Arts. Next time there's a big function at the Edge I'll take you over there and maybe you'll get to meet all the drag queens. Donna and K.C. and Goldblatt and Bernard. Bernard is an undertaker, so he really knows make-up!"

Ruth laughed, unsure of whether Tim was joking. "Still, that says something to me that you recognized them out of drag."

"All it says is that I've been in San Francisco a lo-o-ong time!"

Ruth wanted to ask Tim about other things. That article in the *Chronicle* about the body they found in the Russian River kept irritating the back of her mind. Tim had to have heard something about it when he was up there this past week. Then there was Phil, the new piano player at Arts. Ruth wondered what was going on between her nephew and him. Or was Scott exaggerating? Ruth could have sworn that Phil had purposefully bumped into Tim, but why would he do something so childish if he was truly attracted to him? This morning she wasn't sure if she trusted her eyes or her memory.

Sarah had said Tim needed cheering, but he had seemed reluctant to talk about it. Had it been one of those dreams?

Ruth's mother considered her dreams to be almost as important as what she saw in waking life. Ruth didn't like to dwell on things she couldn't understand, but she'd acknowledged long ago that her mother's uncanny abilities must have skipped a generation and resurfaced in Tim.

Ruth never seemed to dream at all or if she did she rarely remembered them. She'd been alarmed last summer when Tim told her about his dream of Jason dressed up in his leather outfit, holding the bullwhip in his hand. That one had turned out to be important, if only she could have figured out what it meant a whole lot sooner.

A neighbor on Hancock Street out washing his car nearly splashed them with the garden hose. "Sorry! Did I get you?"

"No harm done," Ruth assured him.

"Are you the folks moving into Karl's old place?" he asked. "I mean, Jason's old place?"

"Not me," Ruth said. "My nephew here—Tim is."

"Howdy." Tim managed a smile and lifted one hand to wave.

"I knew Karl for years," the man said, but didn't introduce himself. "Didn't get to know Jason that well, but it was a shame what happened. Did they ever catch the guy?"

Tim leaned toward his aunt and muttered, "Didn't he read the papers? What does he mean, 'catch the guy'? We sliced him up with a knife and the fireplace poker."

The neighbor had looked away to turn off the nozzle and now he started rubbing down the roof of his car with a chamois. "How is the old lady? Does she still live upstairs?"

Tim shook his head. "She's fine, thanks for asking. Her grandson told me she moved to Alameda to be closer to her son and daughter-in-law."

"Good to hear. I like her books," the guy said. "I've read them all, I reckon. She can spin a good yarn, all right."

"We'd better be going or you'll be late for work." Ruth directed her comment toward the neighbor as much as to Tim.

...

Ruth started thinking of how Tim's mother, Ruth's sister Betty, had done everything she could to discourage their mother from spending time with her grandson. It was easier for Betty to ignore their mother's visions or Tim's dreams or anything else that didn't fit neatly into her view of the way the world should be.

If Tim was starting to have more frequent dreams again, Ruth didn't want to discourage him, but she wasn't sure what to do. If he wanted to talk about them, she was there to listen, but she didn't want to influence him by planting seeds of worry in his brain. He'd already had a hard enough time growing up gay with a religious fanatic for a mother, not to mention Betty's drinking.

"Nick might not be able to come down this weekend." Ruth jumped. She hadn't said a word after they walked past that annoying Tim's neighbor. Had he read her mind?

"What did you say, dear?"

"You were asking me about Nick. Weren't you? I'm angrier at myself than anything. I don't want to feel all weird and possessive about him. It's just that we had such a good time together, and the more I get, the more I want. It's not like we made plans to do something special this weekend or anything."

"Tim, you know that old saying about absence making the heart growing fonder, don't you?"

"I don't think my heart can grow much fonder, Aunt Ruth. And I know my libido hasn't been so charged up since I was a teenager."

"Is that all that's the matter?" She rubbed his shoulder. "Then there's nothing wrong at all between you two, is there?"

"He told me some long-lost cousin of his named Nate was coming to visit from New Orleans. When I suggested bringing Nate down with him, Nick wouldn't even consider it." Tim pounded his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "I thought Nick was out to his family, but this guy sounds pretty

straight. He's a narcotics cop. Nick didn't even sound like *he* wanted to see his cousin very much."

"I'm sure Nick would rather be with you, dear."

"All the way back yesterday I was thinking about what a great time we had and how I didn't want to leave the river. And then I got to the Golden Gate Bridge and took one look at the city, and I was just fine, knowing I could come back to my regular old life in the Castro, meeting lots of hot guys all the time, being single and free. Nick was fun and everything, but that was then and this was now. I'd see him again soon... on the weekend. Everything in moderation, you know? My life was all perfect, and everything was in balance yesterday. And then this morning Nick says he's not coming down and I go nuts. I started missing him so bad. I'm such a jerk, sometimes. And a fool."

"You're just examining your emotions. Some people block them off entirely. This is healthy."

"It doesn't feel healthy to me. And when he told me there's some guy named Kent that he's got working for him in the nursery business..."

"And?"

"I was just kinda surprised that there's some guy Nick works with every day, and he never mentioned him until today on the phone."

"Timothy Snow, you cannot be jealous of every man Nick knows or has on staff."

"I know. You're right." Tim shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just acting like a fool again."

"Look at all the men you meet every week at Arts," Ruth said. "Nick's out there all alone in the redwoods, and you're working right in the heart of the Castro. I notice how you guys check each other out constantly. It's like you all have eyes in the backs of your heads if a good-looking man walks into the restaurant. If Nick thought the way you do, he wouldn't let you out of his sight. You have to learn to trust each other."

"I know you're right, Aunt Ruth. Thanks for trying to talk some sense into me."

"Speaking of Arts..." Ruth was hesitant to broach the subject, but this was as good a time as any. "Phil, the new piano player..."

"What about him?"

Ruth sensed tension in Tim's stride. She imagined that the temperature dropped a few degrees when a cloud blocked the sun for a moment and a shadow passed over Tim's face.

"Well, he sure lends an air of class to the place, doesn't he?" Ruth asked. "Vivian's style was more like a honky-tonk saloon piano player, but Phil seems subtle and sophisticated. And he's so handsome, don't you think?"

"I suppose so."

"Tim, I know it's none of my business, but..."

"But what?"

"Well, Scott suggested that you had some sort of history with Phil."

"Scott said that, did he?" Tim huffed.

"He only mentioned it in passing. It was no big deal."

"History is right. *Ancient* history."

"What happened between you two?"

"Aunt Ruth, you know I love you dearly, but it's none of Scott's business, and it's not something I want to discuss right now with you or anyone else." Tim had stopped dead in his tracks in front of the smoke shop on 18th Street.

Chapter 7

Tim thought back to when he first met Phil. It had been about the time when his hot affair with Jason had cooled to a low simmer. On Tim's birthday, Jason offered him an all-expense-paid weekend at the Russian River. Tim had figured that Jason did so out of guilt, since they hadn't had sex with each other in a couple of weeks.

Jason had rented a cabin not far outside of the town of Guerneville. They both got the weekend off from Arts together, something that hardly ever happened. Jason told Tim he was lucky he booked it so far in advance because that weekend was the Lazy Bear thing, and every hotel room and resort was filled to capacity. The bars were packed too, but then bears take up a lot of room.

Tim had never been into bears. To each his own—that was Tim's opinion on the subject, not that anyone asked for it. He figured he'd enjoy the sun and order anything on the menu at the best restaurants in Sonoma County, as long as Jason was paying.

They had gone dancing that Saturday night, and Tim had hoped Jason might be in the mood for sharing one of the beds in their two-bedroom cabin later on. Tim would have been happy to do it anywhere with Jason—the cabin, the car, the riverbank or right there on the dance floor.

Then he saw Phil. It must have been nearly midnight. Tim couldn't tell if the tan, muscular, okay, perhaps the most stunning man Tim had seen on the dance floor, or anywhere else in a long time, had come alone. Phil had peeled off his t-shirt and stuck it through the belt loop of his jeans. Tim watched the muscles of his back as Phil raised his arms and then turned around. He looked right into Tim's eyes and smiled.

Tim had hoped no one noticed his jaw drop. He'd hoped he didn't look as stupefied as he felt. Tim stared at Phil's wide dark nipples on a hairy chest, black hair in perfect swirls, none of this shaved and waxed stubble some guys sported lately. This was a man!

Ruth said, "I'm sorry, Tim. I didn't mean to bring up a sore subject."

"Sore! Sore? It was one of the most humiliating experiences of my life. Artie and Arturo don't even know about it—if they did, they'd never have hired him at the restaurant. Bad enough he filled in while Viv was on her honeymoon, but now we have to work in the same place *full time*. I'm no prude, but I don't know why he even works at the damned restaurant when he has such a lucrative side job. Maybe it's just to torture me..."

"That's fine, dear." Ruth interrupted his tirade. "I won't mention it again." They arrived at Arts, and Ruth decided to stop in to say hello, even though the place wasn't open yet. "Just remember I'm here for you if you ever want to talk about anything, honey."

"I know, and I appreciate it, Aunt Ruth," Tim said. "I really do. Maybe someday I'll tell you all about it. *Maybe*, but don't hold your breath."

Chapter 8

“**R**uthie, how are you?” Artie emerged from the kitchen after Tim used his keys to open the front door. “Are you ready to come to work yet? It’s going to be a busy brunch. Reservations are coming in fast.”

Ruth glanced down at the reservation book on the bar. “Won’t Scott be here?”

“He’s a damned good bartender, but folks have heard you’re back in town, and they’re asking when you’ll be on duty. We need to sit down and work you into the schedule. Are you coming in for brunch today?” The phone rang again and Artie went to answer it before she had a chance to respond.

Ruth’s index finger scanned down the page of reservations until one name stuck out: *Connor*. It was a party of five at one. It would be too much of a coincidence if this weren’t Sam. The other four must be his daughter Jane plus her husband Ben and the two little ones.

“What do you think, Ruth?” Artie asked again.

“Hmmm?”

Artie persisted. “We were talking about your coming back to work, Ruth.”

“Sorry Artie. I seem to be a little hazy today. I’m still not adjusted to California time. Work... yes... well, I’ll have to let you know, Artie. I’m on my way to the supermarket to pick

up a few things, and then I'll go home and change." *Change into something more presentable for Sam*, she thought. "I'll come back and have a bite around one or so, if you can fit me in for brunch."

"We can always fit you in, Ruth," Artie said. "Don't you worry a bit."

"I could even eat at the bar, if nothing else is open. I hate to take up a table when you're busy," she said.

"And the schedule?"

"We can talk about that later. I have to find something to wear to brunch. I'll see you then. Goodbye."

She rushed out the door with a wave and onto Castro Street where young couples walked by pushing strollers, pulling dogs or both at the same time. Most of the couples were both male, though a mixed pair reminded Ruth of when the term "mixed marriage" referred to a couple where one was Catholic and the other was Lutheran or maybe they came from different racial backgrounds, but in San Francisco in this early part of the twenty-first century the term meant something else. Ruth smiled and looked at her watch. 9:37. She had more than three hours to kill before she'd see Sam again. It wouldn't take half that time to get ready, even if she fussed. And she intended to.

"Hi, Miss Taylor!" It was Scott the bartender on his way to work. "I mean, Ruth. Sorry. Are you okay? You looked like you were lost or something."

Ruth looked at his smiling face. *He's even better looking in the daylight*, she thought to herself. *His feathered hair is almost the same shade of golden red as little Sarah's, and it glistens in the sun. How do these gay boys do it?* "I'm fine, Scott. I guess I was daydreaming a little. Maybe I'm still on Minnesota time. I'm not sure what it is..."

"Well, I'm running late for work. I should be helping Artie get the bar ready. Will we see you later?"

"Why, yes." Ruth grinned. "In fact, I'm planning to come in for brunch this afternoon. I'll see you then, okay?"

Ruth walked uphill on Castro Street and crossed at 19th toward the produce market. Most of the neighborhood shops were getting ready to open for business at this hour just as Arts was. She hated to give up her parking spot on Collingwood, but she needed to put gas in the car before she went to the supermarket. The needle had been stuck on "E" by the time the city lights came into view on the last leg of her trip. Her ex-husband Dan complained that Ruth could run a car on nothing but fumes and that she always left the tank empty for him. She wondered how much he paid for gas these days to run around with some mini-skirted young trollop in his new sports car.

Why am I even thinking about Dan? Maybe it's because I've just met a new man and a much nicer one, no doubt. Dan has some new young bimbo to complain about now, and I have a fresh new life in San Francisco. Poor Dan. I'm the lucky one.

Ruth was sure she remembered driving past a gas station somewhere on Market Street. She found it and killed some time looking at breath mints, candy bars and maps inside the little office. When she'd finally parked in the lot below Delano's Supermarket on 18th Street, she looked at her watch again. It was just past ten. She should have gone to the Safeway on Church and Market if she wanted to waste time. It was the size of a football field. No matter.

She pushed her cart through the deli section and stopped to pick out some delicious-looking cheeses. They were an extravagance, but she didn't care. Next there were a dozen shapes and sizes of sourdough bread to choose from.

She turned her cart down the second aisle and saw her upstairs neighbor thumping a melon. "Teresa," Ruth said, glad to see a familiar face.

"Hiya, Ruthie! How's it goin'?"

"Fine." Ruth eyed Teresa's nearly full grocery cart. "It looks like you're stocking up. That's what I need to do, even though half of my kitchen is still in boxes."

Teresa sighed. "I can't carry all this home. I'd better put these bottles of wine back and make another trip down here later. I don't know what I was thinking."

"I've got my car downstairs. I'll give you a lift."

"My lucky day!" Teresa smiled and reached for a heavy bag of potatoes.

Ruth picked up a bag of potatoes, too. Then she started to reach for a bag of onions too, but she didn't need onions today. Further down the aisle were berries, ripe avocados and mangoes, papayas and artichokes. Even when she could get these things back home, they would cost a fortune. In California, nothing was ever out of season.

Ruth left her cart and wandered into the wine section. It wouldn't hurt to have a couple of bottles of cold Chardonnay in the refrigerator, just in case. She might want to invite someone in for a glass of wine. Her mind turned to Sam again. She imagined inviting him in for the first time—not right away, of course—but after she'd unpacked and found a place for everything, pictures hung and candle wicks waiting to be caressed into life by the touch of a wooden match. She wondered if Sam liked beer on a hot day. Ruth liked a beer now and then, but Sam seemed more like a Scotch drinker. Only time would tell.

The two women were right outside the apartment building in Ruth's Prius. "I might as well drop you at the door, Teresa. By the time I find another parking spot we might be further away than we were at the store."

"No, don't think that way. Go around the block one more time, Ruthie. I feel lucky today. Something will open up. You'll see."

Ruth turned left at 20th and Collingwood and left again onto Castro Street. Then she got around to asking the question that had been on her mind since she ran into Teresa in the produce aisle. "You don't happen to know Jane's father, do you?"

"Sam?"

Ruth nodded.

"Sure, I met him at the Christmas party at Arts. They throw a big bash every year for all their employees and tenants, family and friends and their most loyal customers. Arturo puts out quite a spread and Artie tends bar. You won't go away hungry, but Artie isn't the fastest bartender in the world, you know—"

"But you've met Sam."

"Yes. He's quite the silver fox, isn't he?"

"I thought so, too."

"Oh, look! There's a place opening up right in front of our door. I told you so. This is a lucky day."

"You don't happen to know any more about him, do you? I mean, I didn't see a wedding ring." Ruth pulled into the spot and set the brake.

"Ruthie, you sly gal. You just got here. How did you happen to run across Sam already?"

"On Hancock Street, just this morning. He was on his way to meet his new grandson for the first time. You know, Ben and Jane named the new baby Samuel Timothy after his grandfather and my nephew Tim, of course." Ruth popped the trunk open.

"No, I hadn't heard. Well, isn't that nice. I'm sure Tim is pleased, too."

They both took two trips from the trunk of the car to set their groceries down in the front hallway with the gate propped open, but Ruth persisted, "And, what about Sam?"

"Widowed. I believe he lost his wife some time ago. I know he lives down in Hillsborough, and he travels a lot. I think he deals in antiques or imports or something. Thanks again for the lift. You're a lifesaver, Ruth. Do you want to come up for a Bloody Mary?"

"Next time. I've got all this food to put away. Then I have to find something to wear to a very special brunch at Arts. Samuel Connor is going to see me again a whole lot sooner than he thought."

Ruth had barely started to unpack all her clothes. She found her trusty standby, a basic black cocktail dress, but she didn't feel like black, not today. She picked up another one in red that could have been cut from the same pattern. It wasn't harlot red, but a little darker. Ruth liked to think of it as the color of black cherries just before they're ripe, but she had no idea if that was right. She'd never watched a cherry tree ripen. It didn't matter. She held the dress up in front of her and looked in the mirror. Yes, with the right shoes and a touch of lipstick she would sparkle in this one.

Ruth was sipping a mimosa at the bar when she caught a glimpse of Sarah's hair outside the window. She must be running ahead of the rest of the family. Ruth opened the door to Arts restaurant and knelt down to the little girl's level. "Hello, sweetheart."

"Aunt Ruth, you look so pretty. You're all dressed up."

"Thank you." She gave the child a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"She sure is." Sam Connor's wingtip shoes appeared in front of Ruth, and she looked up at him. "Pretty, I mean." Then Jane appeared with the baby, and Ben was right behind her toting a diaper bag patterned with pictures of storks and flowers.

Sam helped Ruth to her feet and she blushed, trying to act surprised to see him. "Thank you, Sam. How nice to run into you again today."

"The pleasure is mine, Ruth. Won't you join us? Ben called to reserve a large round table in Tim's section."

"I'd love to." Ruth could hardly believe how brazen she felt. *It must be a full moon*, she told herself, *or Teresa was right. It's a very lucky day.*

Chapter 9

Tim couldn't help but notice how attentive his Aunt Ruth was toward Sarah's grandfather. He caught bits and pieces of their conversation over brunch. Sam told Ruth about his import business and asked about her move. She filled him in on the madman who committed the murders in San Francisco last summer without going into too many details. This young family at the table now lived in the apartment where Jason was stabbed and where she and Tim had the last run-in, so to speak, with his killer.

Ruth noticed Sam's hands, how masculine they were. He was right handed, and he didn't wear any jewelry except a gold watch. His nails were professionally manicured, she thought, but these hands were also capable of strong work. She touched his hand from time to time in conversation.

Tim poured coffee for the grown-ups after their meal. "How do you like having a little brother, Sarah?"

"He's boring. He just eats and sleeps and cries sometimes. He's no fun to play with. He doesn't talk or anything."

Ruth laughed. "Someday soon he'll learn to talk and then you'll wish your little brother didn't talk so much."

As they got up to leave Sam said, "Ruth, it's so lucky that we ran into each other twice this morning."

"Yes, Sam, isn't it lucky? My new neighbor Teresa said this morning that it feels like a lucky day."

"Are you a fan of the symphony, Ruth? I have two tickets for Thursday if you can join me. Michael Tilson Thomas is conducting, mostly Mozart and Mahler."

"I'd love it!"

"Wonderful! How about if we grab a bite first? You're living in Tim's old apartment on Collingwood, right? ... downstairs from where the kids used to live? How about if I pick you up at a quarter to six?"

"That sounds delightful, Sam." Ruth smiled as a foghorn moaned somewhere across the bay. Dinner and the symphony really did sound delightful, but mostly it would give her a chance to spend time alone with Sam. "I'll see you Thursday, then."

In the far distant reaches of her mind Ruth remembered a wise woman telling her that luck is what you make it. Maybe it was her grandmother, but it was more likely her own mother, the only other member of the family like Tim, so in touch with her dreams.

Ruth walked back inside and sat down at the bar in a daze. Artie set a Bloody Mary down in front of her. "Can you drink this for me, Ruthie? I made it by mistake, and I hate to see good vodka go to waste. It's Ketel One."

"I don't need any more to drink today, Artie, but just this once. People have been shoving drinks at me since the minute I got back to San Francisco."

"So you've run into Teresa, have you?"

"Oh, yes..." Ruth took a sip of the Bloody Mary, "...this is delicious, Artie."

"Good. Drink up and we can talk about the schedule."

"Bribery by Bloody Mary, I knew it."

"Your fans want to see you again, Ruth."

"Well Artie, I'm not available this Thursday, that's for sure."

Chapter 10

Ruth spent days unpacking boxes and nighttimes dreaming about them. She dreamt she was buried under mountains of cardboard, strapping tape and shipping labels. Ruth rarely remembered her dreams, but since she'd moved into Tim's apartment she chalked it up to the power of suggestion. Maybe some of his—or her mother's—psychic powers remained in Tim's old room and rubbed off on Ruth.

Sometimes she spotted a familiar face through the boxes. In her nightmares it was Roy Rodgers, the crazed cowboy who tried to kill Tim last summer. Tim hadn't mentioned Roy since Ruth returned from Minnesota, but she still thought about him often. She and Tim were responsible for ending Roy's life, after all, and it hardly fazed her at the time. It all seemed like a bad dream now, the lives Roy had taken, the senselessness of it all.

In other dreams Ruth saw a man falling from an old stone bridge, his body floating up to the surface, but his face was too distorted by the rippling river's water to make out its features. Ruth's heart pounded, and her breath came in quick short gasps while she stared at the light from the clock. She'd saved the article about the body in the Russian River. She kept meaning to ask Tim if he'd heard about it, but there was always something else on her mind when she saw him. There was a new face in her dreams now, too—a handsome face, an

older face. "Ah... Sam," Ruth murmured and hugged herself. She could hardly wait for Thursday to come.

Tim came by on Wednesday morning to set up Ruth's computer.

"Would you like a cup of coffee, dear? I've finally got the kitchen organized. It wasn't easy finding room for everything."

"No thanks. I had some at home. You didn't bring along all your kitchen gadgets, did you? I warned you about storage space."

"No. The Salvation Army was happy to take my bread machine that I only used once and that old Hobart juicer that weighed a ton. Remember when you were in high school, and we went on our carrot juice kick?"

"Oh, yeah... I remember. Uncle Dan thought we were nuts, especially that night we had colds, and you slipped a shot of bourbon into both our glasses."

"And we both got a good night's sleep that night." Ruth laughed. "Even with booze in our carrot juice, you and I always ate a healthier diet than Dan. He was *Mister Meat-And-Potatoes* when we got married. Then he got adventurous enough to try pizza, as long as it didn't have anything exotic on it, like mushrooms. I can't imagine what he eats these days... at least it's none of my concern anymore."

Tim pulled the computer monitor out of its box and tossed the Styrofoam popcorn that spilled out back inside. "I can't believe you saved the box this came in. You're going to have to learn to throw things away, Aunt Ruth."

"It was torture to decide what to keep and what I could part with. I found wedding presents still in their original packaging. How many soup tureens did they think a bride needed in those days? The worst part was going through my books. I'll have to rent some storage space. The bookshelves in the hallway are filled already, and I'm trying to save the built-in ones in the living room for photographs and mementos.

They're not exactly priceless antiques, but you know how I am."

"Yes I do. Where do you want this computer? There are phone jacks in nearly every room. You should just buy a new laptop that wouldn't take up so much space."

"I don't need a new laptop, Tim. Hey, at least I'm twenty-first-century enough to have a cell phone, unlike some people I know."

"I don't *need* a cell phone. I don't want to be on anyone's leash. I don't even like to talk on the regular phone that much. Besides, I have an answering machine, and I also have a computer where people can send me an e-mail. And I'm on Facebook and MySpace, so people can leave me a damn message on either one!" Tim stopped himself just in time, before he mentioned dudesurfer.com and all the other gay "dating" sites where he also had profiles.

Ruth knew better than to argue with Tim when his stubborn streak flared up. It wasn't often, but she knew she might as well drop the subject. Negotiation was out of the question. Ruth wondered whether Nick had witnessed that side of her nephew yet. She thought not. "The boys," as she liked to think of them, were still in their honeymoon stage.

"I thought the best place might be over there in the corner of the living room. That way I can face the keyboard and still look out the bay window if the screen's to one side a bit."

Tim set the heavy monitor on the table. "Like so?"

"That's good for now. I can adjust it later. What do you hear from Nick lately?"

"Nothing. He's busy with his cousin. He has my number. He can call me when he's good and ready."

"I see." Ruth was in a happy mood, and if Tim wanted to get testy over an innocent mention of Nick, she'd let that subject drop, too. She still wanted to find out the story with the piano player, Phil, but this wasn't the time for that either.

Tim was silent on his hands and knees in the corner. Even if he was sulking now, Ruth still wanted to have a civil conversation with him. "You know, Tim... I think I was lucky

to have met Sam when I did. I have a funny feeling... maybe you can chalk it up to my woman's intuition, but I think he's pretty special. I'm glad I went back into Arts on Sunday when I did."

"I'll bet," Tim said and seemed to brighten a little now that the subject had veered away from him and Nick. "You two sure were tight at brunch the other day. When are you gonna see him again?"

"I thought I told you he invited me to the symphony on Thursday. Gosh, that's tomorrow already."

"You probably did. I'm sorry, Aunt Ruth. I've been so preoccupied waiting for Nick to call that I wasn't paying attention. It looks like you'll get laid again before I do."

"Tim! What a way to talk! Sam is a gentleman, and I intend to behave like a lady on Thursday as always."

"Aw... what fun is that?" Tim teased. "Come to think of it, though... he's the one who'd better behave. If he doesn't treat you right, you just let me know, and I'll sic a gay posse on him so fast he won't know what hit him."

"I'm sure you don't need to worry," Ruth said, laughing. "I hardly know anything about Sam, but I always try to find the best in people. I'm looking forward to a very pleasant evening."

Tim was on his hands and knees in the corner of the living room. "I think there's a phone jack down in this corner. I hope it still works. Hey, what the heck is this?"

"What did you find, honey?"

He pulled out a dusty pill bottle and said, "A relic from the past... it was wedged in behind the radiator. No *Good Housekeeping* awards for me, but I'm surprised the painters didn't find it." He tossed the plastic bottle in the wicker wastebasket beside Ruth's office chair. "I almost forgot I was going to call my friend Rene and see if he can fit you in. You still want your hair done before your big date with Sam, don't you?"

"I suppose so."

"Where's a phone that works?"

"There's one on the wall in the kitchen... or you can use my cell, but isn't it a little late to make an appointment for tomorrow? He must be booked up if he's as good as you say."

"In this town, it's not what you know, but who you know, Aunt Ruth. Besides, I introduced him to his newest boyfriend, and they're still going at it—breaking up and making up. Rene loves the drama. He owes me big time!"

When Tim left the room, Ruth glanced at the waste basket and picked out the bottle he'd tossed in there. The date on the torn label showed a prescription that was several years old. She read the small type: "Walgreens... Castro Street... San Francisco... Timothy Snow... Dr. Lionel Andrews... Take two capsules by mouth..." She shook the bottle. It was dusty, but it still had pills inside. She wondered why Tim never finished them.

Tim bounded back down the hallway with a big smile on his face and handed her a slip of paper from her kitchen notepad. "You're all set. I told you I could get you in! He'll do something *fabulous* with that mousy old brown color and make you look ten years younger."

"Well, that's tempting, but I *am* your aunt, Tim. People might mistake me for your sister."

"So what's wrong with that? Here's the address, and I even drew you a map. You know your way around Union Square, don't you? The appointment is for one o'clock sharp. Don't be late or there'll be hell to pay."

"I wouldn't think of being late! Thank you, sweetheart. You're probably right... I'll feel a lot better about seeing Sam with my hair freshly done, but I don't want anything outlandish. You trust this guy, don't you?" She was still holding the bottle, but let her hand rest between the couch cushions beside her.

"Don't worry. He does all the rock stars—purple, orange, green—your hair will look just like the gay flag by the time he's done."

"Tim!"

"Would I lead you wrong, Aunt Ruth?" Tim sat down beside her on the couch and gave her a hug. "Rene is very 'high society.' He does all the old ladies from Russian Hill to Presidio Terrace. If you're not careful he'll have you looking just like Dianne Feinstein back in her big bow days when her hair never moved! Arturo and Artie have a picture of her in the middle of them from when they first bought the restaurant. I think Gavin Newsom must have found a can of shellac she left behind in the mayor's office years ago!"

Ruth smiled and held up the dusty pill bottle. "Speaking of things left behind... I noticed you threw these away, but there were still some pills inside. They're nearly ten years old. What were they for?"

"Oh, Aunt Ruthie..." Tim hadn't called her 'Aunt Ruthie' since he was a little boy in Minneapolis, long before his parents threw him out, and he went to live with her, but it felt okay at the moment. "Just throw them away. They're for HIV, but they were like poison to me. There are much better drugs out there now."

Ruth felt like she'd been slapped across the face.

Tim Snow had no idea of his effect on people, especially those who cared about him. Arturo and Artie considered him part of their extended family, since he'd been one of their tenants on Collingwood Street for as long as he'd worked at the restaurant. To Ruth he *was* family, of course. And now Nick Musgrove, as solid a man as there was, fell under Tim's spell.

Tim couldn't imagine that his grandmother's "gift" was free-floating all around him like the fog that crept in from the coast on summer nights. Maybe it wasn't *really*, but everybody seemed to be having prophetic dreams these days. Maybe Ruth's were caused by something she ate. Maybe Nick only dreamed about Tim because he turned him on so much.

Nick had been single for a long time, busy with the nursery and content with a vacation fling now and then or with an occasional visitor to the Russian River. Liaisons always felt

safer when at least one of the participants was far from home with little chance of any sticky emotional entanglements.

Now Nick was tempted to call and tell Tim that he'd changed his mind about the weekend. After Tim's recent stay in Monte Rio, Nick's bed felt huge and empty when he slept alone. Being with Tim reminded Nick of something he'd lost touch with a long time ago. Now the soothing trickle of the Russian River below his deck annoyed him. Making his bed was a chore. He'd rather be anywhere with Tim than stuck up north with the nursery and his employees. He hoped they didn't notice if he was quieter at work these days. Tim's answering machine clicked on after the fourth ring. Nick waited until he heard Tim's voice. "Hey, this is Tim. I can't come to the phone right now. Wait for the beep. If you want a call back, you better leave me your number and don't mumble."

Nick didn't leave a message, and the next several times he tried to call, he made it a point to hang up when the fourth ring started. He tried to write an e-mail:

Tim—Just thinking of you. Those three days together were great, huh?

Nick hit DELETE instead of SEND. If that was the best he could do, why bother? Most nights Nick loved coming home to his place above the river after a hard day's work. He even loved being alone, sitting on the deck with a joint and a beer. But now that Tim had spent time here the cabin felt so empty. And now that winter was coming it felt cramped at the same time. Nick couldn't relax, couldn't concentrate.

It wasn't only his libido. Missing Tim meant missing more than sex. He missed sleeping with him and waking up naked beside each other. The silly grins and warm touches were as important as their raw sexual romps both in and out of bed. Like someone who is too tired to sleep, Nick was almost too frustrated to masturbate.

His cousin Nate should have been here by now. Where the hell was he? Nick hadn't seen Nate since they were kids, and they weren't close. They went swimming in the river and

sometimes slept over, but Nate was straight, even then. Nick remembered puberty like an old black and white movie. Some boys his age liked to mess around back then, but as far as Nick knew they all grew up, got married, had kids and got fat. The one time he went to a class reunion, he barely recognized most of them. Nate was straighter than most. Even back then, he had the temperament of a bully. Nick wondered if he'd changed much, now that he was a cop.

He never should have told Tim he wasn't coming down to the city this weekend. He could leave a note on the door telling Nate to call him at Tim's when he showed up. Or he could leave a message at the nursery saying he'd be back Sunday night or Monday. Or he could pretend he never got Nate's letter. It was lost for a few days; maybe it should have stayed lost.

Nick sat alone on his deck each evening and spun the possibilities through his brain until he reached for the phone and set it down again. He didn't want Tim to hear the frustration in his voice. Their relationship, for whatever duration or purpose, was steaming hot, but still too new for Nick to let on that he could be vulnerable.

"Tim, why didn't you tell me you have AIDS?" Ruth looked at the young man in front of her as if he were a stranger. Her mind reeled, and she could hardly breathe. She couldn't have felt closer to him if she were his own mother, and now she discovered he'd kept this horrible secret from her. She gasped and let big silent tears slide down her cheeks. "How long have you been sick? Why have you been hiding this from me?"

"Don't cry, Aunt Ruth. I'm fine." He put his arms around her. "I'm just fine, now."

"There isn't any cure for AIDS, Tim. How can you announce to me that you have a terminal disease and that you're fine... *now*?" She wanted to scream as her shock grew from disbelief to anger. "Why would you keep something like this from me? I love you!"

"I love you, too... You know that," he said. "Let's just calm way down here, please. Let me find you a handkerchief."

"I don't need a damned handkerchief! I need you to level with me!"

Tim spied a box of Kleenex sticking out of the top of a box marked BATHROOM. "Here, dry your eyes and take a deep breath before you hyperventilate."

He took her hand, and they sat close together on the couch. "I never told you because I didn't want you to worry. I'm doing really well these days. I'm doing so well I rarely think about being positive. That's all I am. I don't have AIDS. I am just HIV positive, like almost everyone I know and nearly everyone you know, too!"

"Who do I know?" Ruth asked in disbelief.

"Artie is HIV positive, for one!" Tim said it as if he were defending himself against a false accusation by implicating someone else. "He has been for years. You should see the medicine cabinet in their bathroom. I told Artie that must be part of the reason he gave up drag. There wasn't room on the shelves for his make-up and all of the drugs, too." Tim tried to laugh, but Ruth cut him off.

"This isn't something to joke about." Ruth felt her anger rise again. She told herself that anger was better than sadness and loss. At least anger had a chance at being directed somewhere useful. She was angry now, not so much at the nephew she treasured, but at this awful news.

"That's where you're wrong, Aunt Ruth. You're dead wrong about that. After all the wakes and memorials and burials and scatterings of ashes we *have to* joke about it. Our friends who have died would want it that way. If you don't laugh death right in the face now and then, there's nothing else to do but go stark raving mad."

"Who else, Tim?" She figured she might as well hear it now. "Who else have I met?"

"Who else what?" Tim asked. "Oh, you mean... who else is positive?"

"Yes... is Nick?"

Tim swallowed and looked away. He let his gaze move to the box that still held the hard drive of Ruth's computer and then to the window and out past the panes of glass to the trees across the street and the neighbors' window boxes along Collingwood. He wondered how many hundreds or thousands of times he had stared out this window when he lived here alone before his Aunt Ruth came, before he even knew Nick. Tim whispered, "Yes, of course he is."

Ruth cringed.

"But Nick is in even better shape than I am. He's on the cocktail, and he's doing fine with it."

"Who else do I know?"

"Let's see, you know Jake, the waiter with all the tattoos and the pierced... everything. Patrick is too, but he could have gotten it from a needle just as easily as from sex. He was shooting up crystal meth for a long time. Jason was positive, too."

"Is that where you got it, Tim? From Jason?"

"I don't know. If we hadn't known Karl was infected, Jason could have just as easily gotten it from me. What difference does it make?"

"The date on that pill bottle was several years ago. That means you must have known for a long time. You must have some idea who did this to you!"

"Nobody did anything to me, damnit! We all did it to each other. It only takes one slip, one broken condom... one careless night. When are people going to stop looking for someone to blame? Kids like Ryan White got AIDS from blood transfusions. Who is there to blame for that? Doctors didn't know any better then. I was only eighteen when I got to San Francisco. I was right out of High School. Everyone talks about safe sex, but it doesn't always happen. People get loaded and forget what they're doing sometimes. It could have been any number of people in those first few months after I arrived. I was like a kid in a candy store in my late teens and early twenties. I could have even gotten it in Minneapolis. There were a couple of other guys besides Dave Anderson."

Ruth frowned at the sound of the name. She thought she had erased that period of time from her memory—Tim in high school, his parents finding out about the scandal with the track coach, throwing him out of their house—but it all flooded back now. Tim had no choice but to move in with her and her husband, and she was thrilled to take him in. That was the good part, but still... “What about Phil, that piano player at Arts?”

Tim’s shoulders stiffened. “I don’t know. If anyone should have been infected, it would be Phil, statistically, considering his sideline of work, but he’s probably too careful. It might cut into his business, so I doubt it. Theodore is positive. Leonardo isn’t.”

“That means that Teresa has probably never been in any danger of catching it.”

“Ha! Not from Leonardo, anyway... not from what she’s let slip about the last few years of her marriage... I mean... Leonardo? They weren’t exactly steaming up the windows. I doubt she was in any danger of catching anything from him, even if he had been HIV positive.”

“Isn’t Leonardo afraid?”

“They’re probably very careful, Aunt Ruth. I’m sure he gets tested regularly, and I’m even more certain that they practice safe sex,” Tim said. “God, I don’t even want to think about those two!”

“What about safe sex?” Ruth asked.

“Ugh, I don’t want to think about the two of them having sex at all. It’s just that they must have each gained a hundred pounds since they got married and moved in together. It reminds me of that old Charles Pierce joke: ‘How do you make love to Shelley Winters? Roll her in flour and look for a wet spot.’” Tim laughed.

Ruth glared at Tim and even though her tears were still flowing, she laughed too. “Tim, you shouldn’t speak ill of the dead. Shelley Winters was a wonderful actress. That’s an awful thing to say!”

"I know." He grinned. "But I finally got you to stop blubbering."

"Look for a wet spot?" Ruth coughed to keep from laughing again. "Who is Charles Pierce?"

"He was a famous drag queen. Artie has an old videotape of him. We should borrow it and watch sometime. Charles Pierce is dead now, too. He was famous for his Bette Davis impression. Artie knew him back in the day. He said Charles was a really nice guy."

"Did Charles Pierce die from AIDS, Tim?"

"No, Aunt Ruth," Tim said. He stood up from the couch but left the Kleenex box beside her in case she needed it again. "Charles Pierce lived a long and healthy life. Some gay people die of other things besides AIDS, you know. Look at Jason. He had HIV but ended up getting murdered. He should have lived to a ripe old age. He was doing fine on the new drugs."

"You said Artie was positive, too. How's he doing?"

"Fine now, at least as far as his HIV is concerned. He's still a frustrated performer, though. He wants to fit into his dresses again and pull old Artie Glamour back out of the closet. He says it's either that or become a professional patient for the rest of his life."

Tim went back to unpacking the computer. "Do you want the printer over here or on that side?"

"To the left, I think," she said and blew her nose. "Tim... what was it you were you saying about Nick having cocktails?"

"Not cocktails... *the* cocktail... singular. It's a combination of drugs that keep the disease from multiplying. They call them protease inhibitors. Nick's t-cells are nearly a thousand, and his viral load has been undetectable for years."

"What about you, Tim?" Ruth stared at the bottle that Tim had called *poison* and imagined a skull and crossbones on the label. "Are you taking a cocktail? It sounds like a drink."

"No, not right now. I was, but my doctor put me on a drug holiday."

"Is that why I never saw you taking any pills here when I visited you this summer? All I ever saw was vitamins."

"Yeah, I'm a stickler about supplements," he said. "Nutrition and exercise... those are the big things."

"I don't see you running as often as you used to, Tim."

"I know... I'm not as disciplined as I should be. I go through phases. I'll get back into it again. My doctor wants me to. I go in for blood tests every three months nowadays. As long as I stay over 750 t-cells—I was at 825 last count—and my viral load remains undetectable, he says I can stay off the cocktail for at least a year."

"When is the year up?"

"Christmas... then we'll see." He gave her an optimistic smile, hoping his aunt would return it. "He might put me back on something then. I trust my doctor, Aunt Ruth. That's important, too."

"Cocktails, holidays..." She stared at the dusty bottle in the palm of her hand and tried to remember how it got there. "Christmas will be here before you know it, honey. Is your doctor now the same one who prescribed these pills? Lionel Andrews?"

"No, Dr. Andrews died. He had full-blown AIDS. His disease had already progressed too far by the time the new drugs came along. He was a nice guy, too."

Chapter 11

That week while Ruth settled into Tim's old apartment on Collingwood Street, Nick rearranged the middle greenhouse. He woke up earlier each morning, bolted down a cup of coffee and skipped breakfast or stopped at Pat's in Guerneville for bacon and eggs on his way to work. If he couldn't focus on projects at home, he could take out some of his frustrations at the nursery.

By the time his employees arrived, Nick was usually in the midst of it. One morning when he heard the side door open he yelled, "Hey Jen! You wanna help me move these flats of geraniums into the next greenhouse? Then we'll get those bags of fertilizer up off the floor before the mice get into them."

"I'm sorry I lost the letter, damnit!"

"What?"

"I said I was sorry the day you found it, and I'll say it again, but how many times do you want me to friggin' apologize?"

"What are you talking about? What letter?"

"That stupid letter from your damned cousin! If I hadn't gotten it mixed up with a pile of other mail you might have seen him by now, and you wouldn't be acting like this! I didn't know! Just have Kent handle all the mail from now on.

I'd rather do the grunt work, anyway! I didn't list secretarial skills on my resume when you hired me!"

"My cousin hasn't shown up anyway. Letter or no letter. And I'm acting like what?"

"Like a jerk. *Move the geraniums! Get the fertilizer off the floor!*"

"Jenny, you always help out with this stuff. Kent threw his back out last time. Why does that make me a jerk?"

"You didn't say *please!*"

"Oh, Jeez, Jen... please! I'm really sorry. I'm just going through a little frustration right now, but it will pass. What's gotten into *you*?"

"I'm having my period, dammit!"

"Do you need some time off, Jen?"

"No! I've worked through it lots of times. It's just that for a dyke, it feels like such a huge waste of time. Even if I met someone and settled down and grew up to be in one of those relationships where we wanted to raise a slew of kids, we'll either adopt them or *she* can have them. They ain't comin' outta me!"

"I thought you were still seeing what's-her-name?"

"Sherry... no, she took a job in San Diego. She's getting back together with Carla, the woman she dumped when she moved to Santa Rosa to be closer to me."

"I'm sorry, Jen."

"She was too old for me, I guess. She was an Anne Murray dyke, and I'm into Tegan and Sara."

"Who?"

"Nevermind! What's up with you and Tim?"

"Nothing... I mean... Tim's fine. I'm fine. Maybe we're moving too fast, that's all. I don't know. I didn't mean to take it out on you, though. Have I really been acting like a jerk?"

"No more than usual. What, can't a girl kid? Shit, between having my period and the fact that I tried to drown my sorrows last night with a bottle of wine, I'm a little hungover, too. It'll pass. I'm sorry. I have no reason to take my shit out on you, either. Let's move those geraniums, boss."

"In a minute. First I'm gonna call Tim and tell him I changed my mind. To hell with my cousin." Nick didn't think he'd been behaving differently, but if Jen noticed anything he'd said or done, he didn't want to be that kind of boss. Waiting around for Nate was a dumb idea. Maybe he should forget about being so damned strong and allow himself what he really wanted. He should drive down to the city this weekend after all. He picked up his phone and punched in Tim's number. Still no answer, but this time Nick left a message.

Ruth could hardly sleep. She tossed and turned as much as she did on her last night in Minnesota before heading west. She would have been nervous about her upcoming date with Sam, but now she was worried about Tim. She wanted to believe his reassurances, but she couldn't help worry.

She made up her mind about one thing. Now that her computer was set up, she would research everything she could about AIDS and these drug *cocktails* Tim mentioned. Ruth believed that knowledge was the best way to counter fear. When she finally gave up on sleep, she pulled on her robe, walked to the kitchen and pushed open the back door. The sky had begun to turn light. Bartholomew scurried out between her legs and scratched at the soil under a begonia.

"Well, good morning to you too, Bart." Ruth left him outside and turned on the coffee maker before she plodded back to the shower. She needed something to clear out the cobwebs. Her next chore would be to sort through all her clothes again. The dress she had confidently picked out yesterday for her date with Sam tonight seemed totally wrong this morning. At this rate it was going to be a hell of a day.

If she were in Edina she would simply run to the mall and pick out a new dress. She almost told herself, "If I were back *home* in Edina..." but she wasn't about to start thinking *that* kind of nonsense. Ruth Taylor was not the sort of person to indulge in homesickness. This was home now. She pulled out a peach-colored short-sleeved frock she'd worn to an outdoor

wedding in St. Louis Park last summer. She held the scalloped collar to her neck and frowned into the mirror. Even with a diamond necklace, it wasn't dressy enough.

She really *did* want to be here in San Francisco. She needed a new start in life. She also thought Tim needed her a little bit, too—in a healthy way—considering he was so estranged from his parents. She lifted her little black cocktail dress out of a box and gave it a twirl. It seemed like the one garment she could always count on. What a funny word! That was the trouble with the black dress; it was a *garment*... not a *gown*.

Whether or not she ever saw Sam Connor again after tonight, she was going to make the best of things. Ruth couldn't remember the last time she'd been on an honest-to-goodness date. She stared at herself in the full-length mirror in the hallway. That was one good thing about moving into a gay man's apartment; there was no shortage of mirrors. Ruth couldn't imagine that they had always been there. The place was built before the earthquake of 1906. Tim must have installed this one and left it behind when he moved out.

Ruth moved in closer to her reflection. The trouble wasn't the dress, but her hair. Tim was right about that. It was the same style and color she'd worn for years. Her complexion looked downright sallow. She didn't have time to get a suntan, but it was a darned good thing she was getting her hair done this afternoon. Tim had made her an appointment with his friend Rene who would... how did Tim put it? "...do something fabulous with that mousy old brown." It did look mousy, didn't it?

Ruth spent the rest of the morning unpacking and arranging clothes, shoes, handbags and accessories. There wasn't much closet space, but she'd known enough to have two dressers, a vanity and an oak armoire moved from Edina.

Tim also warned her not to be late. Now, why would he say such a thing? He knew his Aunt Ruth well enough to know that Ruth Bergman Taylor was always punctual. Her appointment was at 1 P.M so she plopped a deep-brimmed

straw hat over her 'mousy old' self and left the apartment on Collingwood just past twelve. She hated to give up her non-metered parking space around the corner on 20th Street, but she drove to the address on Sutter and pulled into the Union Square parking garage at 12:27. She didn't want to be early, either, so she stopped at the nearest Starbucks and sipped a cardboard cup of latte while she stared out the window at the hairdos of everyone who passed by on the sidewalk and glanced at the minute hand on her watch every thirty seconds.

Ruth assumed by his name that Rene must be French, so she was surprised to see that he was African-American. She later found out he was mostly Cajun, born and raised in New Orleans. Ruth wondered how he happened to become a hairdresser when he might have become a famous basketball player or a jazz musician or a... try as she might to avoid them, her liberal Midwestern mindset led her thoughts through a whole slew of stereotypes. He was also quite thin and Ruth wondered whether he had AIDS or was HIV positive. Now that she knew about Tim, she wanted to learn all she could, but, 'Are you so thin because you have HIV?' was hardly a question one could ask a stranger.

"Right this way, Miss Taylor," Rene said with a forced smile as he looked down his nose at her straw hat.

"Please... call me Ruth."

"All right, Miss Ruth." Rene led her down the hallway beneath a row of crystal chandeliers past a polished marble wall toward the interior of his shop with a view of construction cranes building what appeared to be a new monolithic hotel or office building. "Give Mai Ling your little jacket," he gestured toward the young Asian woman standing beside the chair, "and then you set yourself down and make yourself right at home and let's have a good look at what it is we've got to deal with."

Rene delicately lifted the straw hat from Ruth's head as soon as she sat down. "You're not planning on wearing this

here hat tonight, are you?" He grimaced and wrinkled up his nose as if something smelled bad.

"Why, no..."

"Thank the *Lord* for that little bit of good news!" He held the hat gingerly between his thumb and index finger, dangling it over the trashcan as he patted the top of Ruth's head with his other hand. Mai Ling snatched the hat out of its mid-air freefall and hooked it on the coat tree next to Ruth's jacket.

"So... Miss Thing tells me she's treating you to this makeover and that you've got a hot date tonight for a concert with Mister Millionaire, so she says you're supposed to get the royal treatment."

"Miss thing?" Ruth asked.

"That would be your nephew, honey. Everybody is Miss somebody or other to me in this business," he explained as he circled her chair. "It doesn't matter to me if they've been married ten times and collected on every divorce; they're 'Miss this' or 'Miss that.'"

"I'm quite recently divorced," Ruth admitted. She was beginning to regret this already.

"Well anyway, Miss Timmy says you're supposed to get the royal treatment, not that all of my customers don't, but in your case that would mean color, cut, set, style, manicure, and pedicure." He lowered his voice to a whisper and asked, "You don't need a bikini wax today... do you?"

"I don't believe so," Ruth whispered and shook her head.

"Good. Mai Ling here will be doing your nails, so you just kick your shoes off and relax, now, honey."

"Gosh, I feel like Cinderella getting ready for the ball."

"Then I'd better make like a fairy, honey, because I don't play any step-sister parts with *ugly* in the job description. I can be as glamorous as the next queen, but I am nobody's step-momma, neither!" He laughed. "I guess Mai Ling here could be one of them little mice that gets turned into footmen."

"Aah..." Ruth sighed as Mai Ling started to massage her feet.

"You like?" Mai Ling asked.

"I like it very much, Mai Ling."

"When she's through with you, your feet'll feel so pretty you'll wish you had yourself some glass slippers to show them off. Now then, Miss Ruth... what is your natural hair color?"

"This is my natural color," Ruth protested. "Well, it's pretty close to it. I've always just tried to cover up any gray."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not kidding. Why do you ask?" She didn't think Tim would send her somewhere only to be insulted, but Rene was getting her back up now... if only her feet didn't feel so good. Whatever Mai Ling was doing was brilliant!

"I guess it's not all that bad, really. It's a wee bit mousy, maybe."

"That's exactly what Tim called it... mousy... how funny."

"It's no laughing matter. Some serious highlights are in order here... unless you want to just go all out and be a total Lucille Ball redhead." Rene grinned so that his entire face lit up. "That might be fun!"

"No! I don't want to look like I've gone through some huge transformation and be unrecognizable."

"It's Miss Timmy's money, honey." Rene's smile faded. "But it's your hair. We want you to look your best for that fat cat from down Hillsborough way. You want to *feel* good too when your new beau comes to call..."

"I barely know the man, really. He seems awfully nice..."

"He's got a nice fat bank account, honey, you mark my words. You can't go wrong there! Do you know Hillsborough?"

"Well, I graduated from Stanford," Ruth explained. "That's down on the peninsula."

"I know where Stanford is."

"It seems like that was all a lifetime ago," she quickly added. Now Ruth felt as if she were the one who was being insulting by putting on airs, and she didn't mean to at all.

"Hmm... Stanford... So Miss Timmy's Aunt Ruth is no dummy, either. You just leave everything to me, and you'll be the belle of the ball when I'm finished working my magic on you." His long fingers massaged her scalp under the warm water and felt almost as soothing as Mai Ling's hands on Ruth's feet. She moaned with pleasure and closed her eyes to enjoy the sensations.

Ruth paged through a magazine during the times she waited between steps of the process. Mai Ling brought her a cup of soothing tea that made her realize how much sleep she'd missed. Ruth could hear Rene laughing with another client in a nearby room from time to time. Now she hoped there'd be time for an hour's nap when she got home.

When Rene was finished, Ruth looked at herself in the mirror and gave her head a shake. She had to admit that her hairdo and the subtle color were a vast improvement. As eccentric as Rene was, he knew what he was doing. He had trimmed just enough to give her hair some extra body and frame her face. She would definitely come to see him again.

Mai Ling handed Ruth her purse and jacket as well as a shopping bag with Rene's logo in large bold letters. She glanced inside to see that her loathsome straw hat was safely hidden from view. She reached for the clasp on her purse to open it, but Rene stopped her. "No—no—no! Miss Timmy has this all taken care of; I told you that. I would never hear the end of it if I took a dime of your money, Miss Ruth." Rene lowered his voice to a whisper and added, "Besides, he introduced me to my current husband. I owe him big time!"

Funny, that was just what Tim had said, too.

When Ruth got home she was too excited to take a nap. She calmed her nerves with a relaxing soak in the bathtub, careful to keep her new hairdo above water. Then she put on the subtlest bit of make-up and her sleeveless turquoise

dress with a Mexican silver necklace, turquoise earrings and a silvery jacket.

Now she still had an hour before Sam was due. The apartment looked respectable, not that they would spend any time there. She wondered if she should invite him in when he arrived or ask him in for a nightcap later. She could offer to show him what little she'd done with the place since Tim moved out. She could use a chilled martini on the patio right about now, but a nice cold glass of chardonnay was just what she needed to take the edge off in the meantime.

Ruth brought her wine to the living room, sat down at her computer and checked her e-mail. It was full of nothing. She switched over to her main page and punched in AIDS. Hundreds of sites full of information were at her disposal now, but where to begin? She was overwhelmed at first, but scrolled down through the first few pages. Ruth randomly clicked on something that brought up a photograph of a young boy named Ryan White. Hadn't Tim mentioned that name? He was only a teenager when he died, and he reminded her of Tim at that age when he came to live with her in high school. Ruth started to read about Ryan White, a teenager from Kokomo, Indiana. She thought it might be easier to understand something as vast as AIDS by putting a human face to it... any face besides her nephew's.

Chapter 12

Tim refused to call Nick. He wanted nothing more in the world than to hear Nick's voice, but this was a matter of principle. It was Nick's turn to call and that was that.

Nick must be too busy, though, so Tim tried to keep busy, too. He dragged his sorry ass to the gym every morning. He worked on fixing up his place, made countless trips to Cliff's for little things like light bulbs, dimmer switches... anything for an excuse to run an errand. He watched porn and tried not to think about Nick. He stared at the phone, and it smirked back at him in stony plastic silence.

Tim wasn't sure of anything now. His paranoia played out all sorts of possibilities in his head. Maybe Nick's so-called *cousin* was really an old boyfriend returning to his life for a rendezvous and a fresh start. Maybe Nate was Nick's ex-lover... just out of prison. Nick had called him by name, though. Lenny? Leroy? Larry? But then why would Nick have said that his cousin was a cop? Every possibility played across Tim's warped imagination, even the most improbable ones. He was a mess!

Ruth had heard of Jardinière, but this was her first time there. The hostess led them to a table on the upper level where they could look down at the bar. Sam suggested martinis; that

was a good start. Ruth had been craving one for the past hour and the first sip soothed and relaxed her. She'd made up her mind to enjoy this evening with Sam, whether it was their one and only date or the first of many.

Ruth wouldn't admit to being nervous. Sam's frequent smiles gave her a thrill and the touch of his hand made her feel secure. He treated her like a real catch. She knew she was far from a girl, but Sam made her feel ageless and desirable, like he was the lucky one to have found such a gem. He made her feel young, even though she was well over forty. Hah! She would love to have Sam think that! She was well over fifty now, too.

"If you've never been here before, let me order one of my favorite appetizers for us, unless you see something special you like."

"Whatever you say, Sam." Ruth's fingernail fondled the edge of the menu, but she hadn't begun to focus on it.

"Here we are." Sam looked up as their waiter reappeared. "Let's have the Maine scallops to start. We're not in a big rush, but we should keep in mind that we have tickets to the symphony."

Ruth would have been content to let Sam order everything, since he knew the menu, but she didn't want him to think she couldn't make a simple decision. She chose Alaskan halibut for dinner. Sam wavered for a while and decided on rack of lamb. He also ordered a bottle of Austrian Riesling. "The owners of this winery in the Kremstal Region are old friends of mine. I think you'll like it," he said while their waiter poured Ruth's glass.

"I'm sure it'll be perfect."

"Have you been to our local wine country in northern California, Ruth?"

"When I was in college at Stanford I remember driving up to the Russian River and..." Ruth stopped long enough for Sam to ask if anything was wrong.

"No, everything is lovely, Sam. I just remembered something about the Russian River that I saw in the papers.

I keep meaning to ask Tim... and then I had that dream last night about the river, you see... oh, where was I? Yes, I remember a wine-tasting room somewhere in Napa Valley. Or was it Sonoma? My college days seem like another lifetime."

"Well, it's a wonderful way to while away a sunny afternoon," Sam said. "Maybe you'll join me some time. I have friends with vineyards in this country, too. We wouldn't need to go all the way to Austria for a grand tour. Cheers!"

Ruth raised her glass and took a sip. "Delicious." The wine was what she meant, but she also thought an invitation to the wine country sounded like a nice idea.

"I have some good friends near Innsbruck, too. That's another place I'd love to take you sometime." Sam smiled again and Ruth wondered whether he was moving awfully fast or if this was just his way of being charming? He was attentive all evening, asking just the right questions... about her years at Stanford, her nephew Tim and just enough about her marriage to firmly establish that she was over it.

Ruth wanted to know more about Sam's business, but he downplayed talk about himself. "What I do, Ruth, is import a lot of dusty old antiques and sell them to a lot of dusty old people who have more money than they could ever spend in this lifetime."

"I'm sure it's fascinating, Sam. I know it's none of my business, but now that you know about my divorce I should confess that I've heard you're a widower... I'm so sorry."

"It was a long time ago. I'm surprised you knew."

"My neighbor, Teresa mentioned it... the teacher upstairs?" Ruth added, by way of explanation. "Your daughter and son-in-law used to live below Teresa on Collingwood Street—between her apartment and Tim's."

"Oh, yes, Teresa... she's a bit larger than life, isn't she? I met her at the Christmas party at Arts last year. Well, back to your question... Jane's mother was nothing like her, that's for sure."

Ruth was confused. "Jane's mother was nothing like Teresa?"

"No, that's not what I meant." Sam laughed and realized what he'd said. "I liked Teresa. It's just that she's a bit of a character. What I meant to say was that Jane is nothing like her mother."

"I still don't understand. Jane's a delightful girl and those little grandchildren of yours are angels."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more."

"I'm sorry if I brought up a painful subject."

"Listen, Ruth... you really do delight me. You are so guileless. If first impressions are any indication, I think I could grow very fond of you, so I may as well tell you the whole story and get it out of the way."

Ruth felt her face begin to flush, but the waiter arrived with their appetizers. When he left again, Ruth picked up a fork and encouraged Sam to go on with his story. "Please, do..."

"As I said, it was a long time ago. I was in Austria packing up the relics of a decaying castle in the Alps. There was little worth preserving but the library. A client in Miami wanted the room dismantled and shipped to the Florida Keys where he built a new home. It had marble floors and beamed ceilings, hand-carved gargoyles curled around doorways and windows. The project took weeks."

"I knew your job was more interesting than you let on," Ruth said. "Go on..."

"Well, Jane's mother... my late wife... thought she would surprise me with a visit. She flew to Vienna and hired a private plane to bring her to a tiny landing strip near the village where I was staying. My wife, the pilot and one other passenger died when the plane crashed. They should have known better than to fly in that weather."

"How terrible! I'm so sorry." She touched his hand.

Sam took Ruth's hand in his and continued. "I was shocked and saddened at first, of course. Later on I learned that she was coming to surprise me with divorce papers. The other passenger was her lawyer. She had a lover waiting at their hotel in Vienna."

"Oh, Sam..."

"I learned a lot from that experience, Ruth. I never knew she was unhappy. I suppose I was distant, caught up in my work, but she seemed content. She was always busy with her charity work and planning parties. She could make an entire day out of having her hair and nails done."

Ruth touched her fingernails to her new hairdo with a pang of guilt, but Sam didn't notice. "I made my mind up then and there that I would never make the same mistake. Do you like to travel, Ruth?"

"Yes, I do... very much."

"That's good to know, Ruth. Shall I order another bottle of wine?"

"Not for me," she said. "I don't want to fall asleep at the symphony."

"Now, enough about me," Sam insisted. "I want to know more about you, Ruth. I understand you had some harried adventures here in San Francisco this past summer?"

"I didn't want to go into it at brunch on Sunday. Jane and Ben are raising their family in the same house where so much happened," Ruth said. "It's like Tim says, though, if anyone can counter the negative past in that place it will be Sarah, the magic child. That's what Tim calls your granddaughter. And her baby brother is as innocent as a lamb."

Sam glanced at his watch and said, "I hate to interrupt, but I have to make a quick call. It will only take a couple of minutes, I promise. I told a client in Chicago I'd call him by 9:30 Central Time. I don't want to disrupt the atmosphere in here with a lousy business call. Will you excuse me if I step outside?"

"Of course, Sam..."

"How about sorbet for dessert? I'll tell the waiter on my way."

"That sounds nice." Ruth wasn't sleepy anymore. She thought if this were a Chinese restaurant she might snap open a fortune cookie that would predict travel to exotic distant places.

Ruth waved to the waiter and asked him to bring back the wine list. "I think a bottle of champagne might be nice." She opened the heavy bound book and glanced down at the list of prices. Their nearly empty bottle of Austrian Riesling was \$250.

Sam returned at the same time the waiter arrived with coffee and dessert. As Sam added cream to his coffee he said, "I'm sorry for the interruption, Ruth. Where were we?"

"No trouble at all, Sam," she said. "It all started with Jorge's disappearance. No, come to think of it, we didn't even know about that until Jason was murdered. I'd have to go back to the first day when I arrived in San Francisco to visit Tim..."

As it turned out, Sam did order a bottle of champagne. They missed the Mozart, but caught most of the Mahler.

Chapter 13

Tim was *over* Arts by Friday. Tonight would be his seventh shift in a row—eighth, counting the double he worked last Sunday—all so that he could take the next three days off to spend with Nick, who wouldn't even be here. Damn Nick! Damn Nick's damned cousin! Damn falling in love with someone who lived out of town!

Now Tim had to get through one more night at work and then fill up three days in which he had planned for love and lust and romance but now had nothing of the kind in store. It was only Friday morning, and Tim was disgusted with his bad luck and disgusted with himself. He put on the coffee and picked up the Miracle Duster he'd ordered one stoned night from an infomercial on TV. In the back of his mind its very name sounded like something more fun than it was. Then he saw them on sale at Walgreens for less than he'd paid by mail order. Oh well... it worked, anyway.

Tim swept it across the television screen to charge up the static electricity while Sal the traffic guy talked about a non-injury accident between a camper and a produce truck just west of Potrero Hill. Sal looked as if his shirt collar was too tight, and Tim wondered whether the lack of oxygen made him forget to put his microphone on.

Tim dusted shelves and picture frames, window sills and end tables. The Miracle Duster picked up microscopic bits of dust and dirt and hair and... what did they always say? Dust was primarily made up of human skin cells. That was it. The only human skin Tim wanted was Nick's—his broad chest, his muscular arms, his long lean legs, his firm round ass and the "family jewels," as Nick had referred to them.

Tim watered all the indoor plants and changed the sheets on his bed again, not that it mattered. Steve the weatherman came on while Tim spritzed the sliding glass doors with window cleaner. "Highs in the seventies with a thick fog layer on the coast, but the weekend should be warmer..." Tim thought Steve the weatherman was kind of sexy in that friendly, jolly, straight guy sort of way. It was too early in the morning to think about sex, though. Who was he kidding? It was never too early!

Tim wondered which people on television were gay in real life. He wondered how long it would take before everyone could just be who they were without risking their jobs—or their ratings. Would the cute ones turn out to be the gay ones? It seemed like women celebrities were far ahead of men in terms of coming out of the closet. There were already Ellen and Rosie, Rachel Maddow and Suze Orman, but what about Lily Tomlin? Was she in or out these days, or was she stuck in an era where it would remain assumed but unspoken?

Tim thought of guys like Anderson Cooper compared to Rock Hudson, both of them hot in different ways. Or Rupert Everett compared to Liberace or Elton John in his early days compared to Elton John now. What did it matter? The cutest ones were probably straight through and through, and even if Tim's favorite fantasy heartthrobs, Jake Gyllenhall and Matthew McConaughey were lined up right here, right now, and fighting over him, Tim would rather have Nick.

Tim held the empty cardboard spool from the roll of paper towels in the palm of his hand and stared at it for a moment before he tossed it into the trash. He'd done enough housecleaning for now. No one was going to see it, anyway.

He was tempted to call his Aunt Ruth, but she was probably recovering from her date with Sam. He didn't want to wake her, and he didn't want to bring her down with his bad mood. Tim figured she would be on cloud nine if everything went well last night.

Tim rolled a joint and grabbed the keys to the Thunderbird off his dresser. He took a couple of deep hits and hardly remembered leaving his driveway, but now he was headed west, driving the same route he took on the day he first met Nick—Castro onto Divisadero, Fell Street to JFK Drive through Golden Gate Park to the beach.

Wisps of fog came toward him through the trees and turned into clumps of fluffy white as Tim got nearer to the ocean. Steve the weatherman was right about the fog on the coast. Now Tim thought about Phil again and the night they first met. Maybe he'd been dreaming about him last night, too—not a psychic dream, just a memory dream about Tim's ill-fated birthday weekend at the Russian River with Jason.

On the dance floor, this vision came closer. He must know Jason. That was it. Everyone knew Jason. The sexy stranger was coming over to dance with Jason, and he would ignore Tim. But now it was the three of them dancing together, Tim included... arms, shoulders, heads touching... hands touching bare chests, palms groping asses, fingertips tugging at taut nipples and lips touching lips. This godlike man was kissing Tim in the middle of the dance floor while Jason watched and smiled and then headed toward the bar.

"My name's Phil," he spoke in Tim's ear as they left the dance floor and ambled off in Jason's direction. "You're Tim, right?"

Tim nodded and kept walking. He couldn't believe this guy—Phil—he had a name now—was following Tim to the bar. Jason bought a round of drinks for the three of them and shook hands with Phil. Would they really have a three-way? Tim wondered if something other than grass was in that pipe he'd smoked with Jason in the car outside. Phil and Jason would end

up together. That was it. That much was a given. It was Tim's birthday, and the closest he would come to getting laid would be to listen to Jason and Phil through the thin wall from the next room.

Maybe they'd all go back to the cabin and Tim would at least get a chance to see Phil naked. There was only one bathroom. Or maybe Phil would spend the night, and Tim would see him in the morning. Weren't people more apt to spend the whole night in the country where they might have to drive miles home after sex?

But Phil spoke to Tim, not Jason. He gave Tim a wicked grin and said, "So... happy birthday, Tim! Have you had your spanking yet?"

Tim laughed and shook his head and hoped it was dark enough at the bar that his red face wouldn't show. "What brings you here, Phil? Did you know it was Lazy Bear Weekend? I sure didn't. You're hairy but you sure don't look like most of these guys. Do you consider yourself a bear?" Tim could hear his own voice babbling and tried to stop.

"I don't know... whatever... I work out... I mean, I'm working this weekend, or I was, earlier..."

Some drag queen down the bar screamed with laughter that drowned out Phil's words. Tim asked, "Sorry... what did you say?"

"I came up here to work. I play the piano and... um... some guy hired me to play for his dinner party. It was wild, too. It was in a campground, not far from here, right on the river."

"A dinner party? You mean, like a cook-out with live music?"

"No, it was a full-fledged formal dinner... crystal stemware, linen napkins, candlelight and a baby grand."

"No shit? Some queens must have more money than they know what to do with. Who was this guy?" Tim didn't know where he got the nerve to even talk to this beautiful man, but the conversation continued as their eyes moved over each other's bodies.

"He's hired me before in the city," Phil answered and stopped talking when the raucous laughter started again.

Tim wondered at people who were rich enough to keep piano players on call like chauffeurs. He couldn't imagine anyone rich enough for a live-in pianist... unless he doubled as a chauffeur... or something else, maybe. Tim noticed Phil's hand on his drink; the muscles seemed to start from the tips of his long, strong fingers and throb under the skin with the slightest movement. They were fine hands, nails trimmed and filed to perfection, sensitive fingertips and smooth as glass. Tim looked around for Jason, but he'd disappeared.

Phil leaned in closer. "Where's your friend? Jason, was it?"

"Yeah... I don't know where he went."

Then Jason was back. He handed Tim his car keys and said, "Here, Tim. You're okay to drive, right?"

"What, you wanna go already?" Tim asked.

"No, you can stay here... just so long as you're okay to drive. I met someone who's staying at the Triple R. He invited me back to his place. Happy birthday! It was nice to meet you, Phil." Jason brushed Tim's lips with a dry kiss and he was off.

Tim wanted to be hurt and angry but now his emotions were confused. Jason left him alone on his birthday, but here was this unbearably perfect fantasy-man coming onto him. And Tim had the keys to Jason's red Thunderbird parked right outside and a place just out of town where he could invite Phil to come with him. It wasn't a three-way, and it wasn't going to be Tim listening to someone else make love on the other side of a knotty pine wall at the edge of a redwood forest. It would be him and Phil alone and it would be hot!

Tim tried to shake the memory of Phil from his head and kept driving. He needed to be at the ocean today. He didn't care if it got cold. He wasn't sunbathing. He just needed to stand near enough to the waves to feel small again. The smaller he felt, the more his problems would shrivel and the past would fade away, at least compared to the larger scheme

of things. He only had to stand near enough to hear them crash and feel their salty spray on his face.

Maybe someday he would sell the duplex on Hancock Street and buy a little house out in the avenues. He'd find one hardly bigger than those earthquake cottages they built after the "big one" in '06 with a postage stamp of a lawn and a tiny window for a planter box of petunias. He might learn enough Chinese to greet his new neighbors... who probably didn't speak it themselves anymore, but might remember their grandparents who did. He took another hit off the joint. No way was he learning Chinese! Maybe he'd bring them some cookies instead. Maybe he'd bake them himself with pot inside.

At the ocean, Tim turned left instead of right and pulled into a parking spot that faced west. It was crisp enough to need a jacket. He pulled the collar up and found a scarf in the trunk. A long lonely walk along the sea wall above the Pacific was just what he needed before he drove home.

That night Tim didn't want to bring his bad mood to work so he left a little early and took a long walk around Dolores Park. He sat on the bench at 20th and Church, the uppermost corner of the park, and looked out over the city. The sun set so early these days that the afternoons were hardly worth noticing. Still, he loved it here. The towers of the Embarcadero Center would soon be outlined in white lights for the holidays. The Bay Bridge always looked like it was decked out for Christmas. Was that snow on Mt. Diablo already or just clouds? Tim smelled a fireplace burning.

In Minnesota this time of year people might already be bundled up like Eskimos. If he walked around Loring Park in the winter he wouldn't stop to sit on a bench if the wind was blowing... if he could even find a bench under the snow. Tim remembered walking home through Loring Park one night when the lake was frozen over and covered with snow. He didn't realize he'd walked right across the middle of the lake

until he reached the other side. Maybe that was how Jesus did it.

Tim checked his watch and headed toward the footbridge at 19th and Church. He had plenty of time, but he might as well be early as late. The smell of someone's dinner made him hungry... pot roast with onions cooking. He didn't like to eat a big meal before work, but he might have a bite of whatever Arturo had on special tonight or at least a cup of soup.

If he hadn't been in such a bad mood he wouldn't have left home so early. If he hadn't gone for a walk he might have been home when Nick called. If any number of factors had been different things might have turned out so much better, but that would have been another tale. Tim was a lousy psychic, especially when it came to foreseeing the pitfalls in his own life.

A part of Ruth looked forward to seeing her old friends at Arts, but as she got ready for work she replayed the evening with Sam in her mind. Just as she pulled on her jacket to leave, the doorbell rang. Ruth pressed the button on the intercom. "Who is it?"

A voice crackled, "Delivery for Miss Taylor."

Ruth buzzed the gate and opened her apartment door to see a brawny boy bound up from the landing with a vase of long-stemmed yellow roses. She set them in the kitchen sink to add water and read the card: *Dear Ruth, Thanks for a lovely evening. I will think of you in my travels, and I promise to call as soon as I get back. Warmest regards, Sam.*

Ruth whistled as she placed the roses on her bedside table and took one long deep breath before she headed out the door on her way to Arts.

She couldn't help but hum along to Phil's piano while she worked that night. She was tempted to burst into song whenever a favorite came up, but she controlled herself. Dan had always told her to cut out the lullabies when Dianne was a baby or they would give her nightmares. To hell with Dan,

Ruth thought, but she wanted to keep her customers at the bar, after all.

It turned out to be a busy Friday night at Arts. Jake noticed that Tim was getting behind and offered to help. "Are you okay, Tim?"

"Of course I'm okay; I'm stoned. I don't need any help, but thanks, Jake." Tim hated to think that anyone noticed when he did something wrong, but the night did feel a little off-kilter. He brought the wrong food to one of his tables, something he never did. Then he brought cups of clam chowder to two guys who had ordered salads. They were cute guys, too, and Tim was intimidated by them. They were so focused on each other that they started eating the soup. Tim looked at their order slip and saw his mistake: "Sld - 2 - OV/ Thou." Two salads, one with the house dressing, Arturo's famous tangy vinaigrette and the other with thousand island. Tim made the salads and brought them out after the sexy lovebirds had finished their soup, as if everyone got soup automatically, but he hated making mistakes like that.

Then there was an incident with Phil, the piano player, which wasn't Tim's fault at all, but he overreacted to it. Tim had worked stoned lots of times without making mistakes, but tonight was different. Was he too stoned, maybe? He'd worked his entire shift on automatic pilot lots of times too, but tonight it was malfunctioning.

Tim always tried to keep his distance from Phil, even though his section abutted the little stage that held Phil and the piano. Phil kept a glass of Diet Coke at the far left end of the keyboard. Tim hated the idea that he had to keep an eye on it, but he made sure that whenever it was empty he replaced it with a full one. At least they didn't have to speak to each other that way.

Tim hated Phil. No... if only it were that clear and simple. Tim didn't hate anyone. It was just that anger was easier to deal with than pain, so he stayed angry at Phil, who had once hurt him very badly. They still had to work together and that

was that. Tim couldn't afford not to work, even though he owned Jason's old house on Hancock Street free and clear. There were taxes and repairs, and Tim's day-to-day living expenses to consider, or Tim would have quit his job at Arts the day they hired Phil to work there full-time.

At 10:30 or thereabouts... for sure by 11 P.M., when Tim saw that Phil's glass was empty he brought it to the bar and reminded Artie, or whoever was on duty—his Aunt Ruth, tonight—that it was *that time*; Phil would want a shot of vodka in his Diet Coke from now on. Belvedere.

The better Tim knew these patterns, the fewer words would need to be spoken, and he could pretend that the sexy man at the piano was not the same man Tim wanted to hate.

"Hey Tim, this is rum, not vodka," Phil said at the end of a soulful version of "Am I Blue?" Someone had requested the song and put a ten in Phil's tip jar.

"What?"

"It's rum. In my drink. I don't drink rum and coke. You know that. I only drink vodka. Belvedere."

"It is not rum. It's vodka, damnit! I watched her make it," Tim lied. He hadn't really watched his Aunt Ruth make the drink, but she wasn't as apt to make a mistake as he was tonight. And then, before he could stop himself, Tim said out loud, "What a jerk!"

"Who are you calling a jerk, buddy?"

"I'm not your buddy."

"Taste this if you don't believe me."

"Asshole!" Tim regretted the word as soon as he said it, but there it was in the air between them... "ass-hole"... two loud syllables floating above the piano like a sour note.

"I could drink that cheap well rum on the house, but I pay for Belvedere. You know that. The bartenders always run a tab, and I get a discount, but still I pay good money."

"Everything's all about money to you, isn't it! You don't do anything without seeing the dollar signs attached."

"Are you still pissed off about that time up at the Russian River? That was like... two years ago! When are you gonna

get over yourself, Tim? Or are you always so utterly lacking in charm?"

"You're the charming one, Phil. How could I ever come close? Why would I even bother to try competing with the master?"

"One of these days someone is going to teach you a lesson, and you'll learn not to be so... so... I don't know... I don't know what it's going to take to teach you, either, but you'll learn. You're not always the number one victim on everyone's agenda, you know. Don't flatter yourself. Sometimes there's more going on than in your own little selfish worldview of things, Tim. And I can get my own damned drink. It's time for my break, anyway."

"Good!"

Phil flipped the switch that turned on the canned music and headed toward the bar. Arturo had installed the latest program he downloaded through a computer to play any style of music imaginable. It came from tiny speakers hidden all around the dining room, built into wall sconces and ceiling fixtures. Both Arturo and Artie were old-fashioned in many ways, but nothing was too good for the restaurant. Tim thought it sounded like the music his Aunt Ruth listened to in her car, something like Peter Nero or Ferrante and Teicher.

The food was ready for two of his tables at once, so Jake helped him carry it out from the kitchen. Tim only mixed up two plates. Then he picked up the melting glass on the edge of the piano and tasted it while he heard his Aunt Ruth at the bar, "I'm so sorry, Phil." She laughed. "What a silly mistake."

Tim tasted Phil's drink.

It *was* rum.

When the dinner shift slowed down Tim remembered to ask his Aunt Ruth how her date went, trying not to let on that he was embarrassed and in a bad mood. He tried to act happy for her. "Jardinière—not too shabby! If you marry Sam will I become an heiress?"

"Tim, you've already got a nice inheritance from Jason. Besides, it's far too early to talk about marriage. Sam and I had our first wonderful evening together, that's all."

"So then... you're planning to see him again?"

"Yes, but not for a couple of weeks... he flew to Chicago this morning to meet with a client and then he's going to Germany for a few days, but he promised to call me as soon as he gets back. He sent me flowers this afternoon, yellow roses, with the nicest card. Wasn't that sweet?"

"I'll say," Tim agreed. "I'm the one dating the man who grows flowers, and you're getting them delivered."

"Have you heard from Nick, sweetie?"

"He left a message on my machine yesterday, but it didn't say much... just that he'd called and his cousin still hadn't showed up."

"Did you call him back?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He didn't ask me to. And I don't want him to think I've got nothing better to do than sit around here pining away for him."

"Oh, Tim..." Ruth regretted having asked about Nick in the first place. "I'm sorry, honey. I'm sure he's busy."

"If his stupid cousin is that important, well... I don't know what to think. I've got customers waiting..."

It was just past 9 P.M. when Theodore and Leonardo came into the restaurant. All heads turned to see the tall, broad-shouldered young man they had with them. He towered over the bear couple as they crossed the room to a table in Tim's section. "Timothy Snow, I'd like you to meet my nephew, Craig Blume." Theodore's voice was loud enough for everyone in the restaurant to hear, but they were already staring. "Craig is visiting us from L.A. this weekend. He's an art student at UCLA and a star athlete in track and field."

"Nice to meet you, Craig. I ran track in high school," Tim said when he shook hands with the boy. He hadn't meant to

turn the subject toward himself, so he quickly added, "Maybe you could have an art show here at Arts sometime."

"I don't think so... I sculpt marble... big pieces."

"Oh, I see." Tim rarely noticed younger men, but this kid was gorgeous. Even Phil flubbed a couple of notes on the piano when Craig took off his jacket. He was used to being the center of attention at Arts, and this boy's physique under a pale green polo shirt was enough to make Phil stop and stare.

The more Craig drank, the more he flirted with Tim, whose earlier foul mood was lighter than it had been all day. He thought it was cute when Craig pulled out a credit card and said, "My treat. It's the least I can do for my uncles when they give me a place to stay in San Francisco."

"I think we should show Craig some more of the Castro," Leonardo said. "Will you join us, Tim? We'll buy you a drink at the Midnight Sun."

"Thanks, I might as well. It's Jake's night to close, and you're my last table. I'll get my jacket and meet you around the corner." Tim figured his options were to meet them or go home to bed alone. He almost said, "I have nothing better to do," but that would have come out sounding rude. Ruth was so busy that she barely had time to say goodnight. Tim slid his arms into his jacket sleeves on his way out the door and yelled to her, "I'm gonna go have a drink with the guys, Aunt Ruth. Have a good night. I'll talk to you later."

Ten minutes later Nick walked into the restaurant. Ruth knew Tim would be elated to see him. "Nick, what a nice surprise! I'm sorry you just missed Tim."

"Just my luck, and I found parking right out front. I'll go and swing by his house, then."

"I don't think he was heading straight home, dear. He said something about going for a drink somewhere, but I couldn't exactly hear. He wasn't expecting you..."

"I didn't plan to come down, but I changed my mind. I left him a message late this afternoon, but he must have already left for work."

"Gosh, Nick, I know he'll be thrilled that you're here. Scott, did you hear Tim say what he was doing?"

Scott looked up from the drinks he was making. "I didn't hear *where* he said, Ruth... something about meeting someone for a drink. I'd bet on the Edge or Moby's, though... maybe 440."

"I'm sure he's somewhere in the neighborhood, Nick," Ruth said. "He wouldn't have taken the car if he was going to be out drinking."

"Thanks, Ruth," Nick said. "It's good to see you, too. Don't worry... I'll find him."

Chapter 14

Ruth and Scott had another rush at the bar after Nick left. When she got caught up again, a customer hollered, "Hey Ruth! Who was that number Tim left with? He was gorgeous!"

Before she could answer, someone else at the bar slurred, "Yeah, but at that age they're just like puppies. You gotta' train 'em to do everything! The next time I bring one home from the pound, I want him already housebroken!"

Ruth smiled politely, but she barely knew these men. *Who do they think they are to talk like that? Do they even know Tim... or Nick? Are they even aware that Tim is my nephew?* Ruth tried not to let them get her dander up. They were only drunk and trying to be clever. They hadn't meant any harm.

Then she felt a tinge of fear about the future. How might she feel about Sam on some distant day down the road... and vice versa? Was she too old to adjust to a new man in her life? Human beings weren't pets. They couldn't be so easily trained with bribery or punishment, and they couldn't be ignored. And they came with so much history, especially when they got to be Sam's age... or hers.

On the other hand, Ruth couldn't imagine a time when she might take Sam for granted. *What on earth am I saying? I mustn't rush things.* Ruth was glad when James came up to the bar to place an order and distract her from her thoughts.

...

Nick began his search at Harvey's on the corner of 18th and Castro Streets and worked his way through the neighborhood clockwise. His bed had felt so empty all week that all he wanted tonight was to find Tim, crawl into bed on Hancock Street and spend the night in each other's arms. Nick didn't have to go inside the bar. He could see through the windows that Tim wasn't there so he moved on. The Badlands had a line out front, and Nick wasn't about to stand in line except as a last resort. If he didn't find Tim anywhere else he could come back here.

At the Edge, Nick worked his way through the crowd to the video games in the back, but there wasn't a soul he knew. He waited a couple of minutes in case Tim was in the locked toilet, but when the door opened a pair of guys in leather stumbled out together, apparently having just finished something, and Nick knew he was wasting his time here.

Nick crossed 18th Street to where the Pendulum had stood for years, the only African-American gay bar in the city. Lately, it seemed to have been closed for years. As a businessman himself, Nick couldn't understand why anyone would buy a place, put all the employees out of their jobs, remodel it and then let it stand empty.

Nick spent so little time in bars in the Castro; he didn't realize at first that the old Pendulum was open again. The sign on the awning said Toad Hall, which Nick remembered as a bar on Castro Street when he was a kid, now swallowed up by the ever-expanding Walgreens. Nick looked in the window where waterfalls changed colors behind glass above the back bar. The old interior was gone. A muscular young doorman asked Nick for his ID, so he fished his driver's license out of his wallet, even though Nick was nearly old enough to be this kid's father. The crowd inside was young, too, but Tim might be among them. Nick worked his way to the patio where throngs of twenty-somethings smoked cigarettes as if they would live forever. No, Tim wouldn't be out there. The smoke would get to him.

...

Leonardo and Theodore bought drinks for Tim and Craig at the Midnight Sun, but it was too crowded for the bear couple to stay. Craig insisted that he wasn't ready to go yet, that he could find his way back to their place, that he'd be just fine on his own, not to worry...

Tim and Craig worked their way through the crowd toward the wall across from the bar. Tim noticed when the bartender asked Craig for his ID and wondered whether he should have carded him earlier at Arts. He had to be twenty-one, didn't he? Tim couldn't imagine that "Teddy and Lenny" would bring their underage nephew into a bar. When the bartender was satisfied with Craig's driver's license, Tim relaxed.

Most of the guys in the bar were laughing at an ancient video of John Goodman in drag as Anna Nicole Smith. It must have been from *Saturday Night Live*. Was this the anniversary of her death or something? Then the VJ segued into a Michael Jackson video, and Tim loosened up a little more, but he still wished he had a joint. Craig was leaning on him now, and Tim realized the kid must be getting drunk. *Craig couldn't be that much younger than Corey was... man... that was a while ago.*

Other people in the Midnight Sun stared at them as Craig pulled Tim closer. Craig nuzzled at Tim's neck, and the video changed from Michael Jackson to fast dance music, some girl in pink leather with half-naked boys backing her up. Tim had never heard this song before.

Nick remembered when he was a kid; coming into the city to visit his grandparents, the Castro had a carnival atmosphere all year round. Even as a boy he noticed the sexy bare-chested men soaking up the sunshine on every corner whenever they could. The colorful drag queens bent down to tease him, and he thought of them like circus clowns. Nick couldn't imagine back then what might happen on these sidewalks after the sun went down.

It was nighttime now, and Nick walked on past the panhandlers on Walgreens' corner. He stopped in front of Q-Bar on Castro. Tim never came here... or did he? Nick hadn't been inside this place in years, not since it was the Castro Station. It seemed a lot bigger then. Now it was congested with a young clientele, very mixed in terms of gender and varied fashion-senses or lack thereof. A room in front was set aside for cigarette smokers. They seemed to overflow the space, coughing their nicotine fixes out onto the sidewalk. Nick entered the bar by way of the hallway where stale cologne seemed to seep from the coffin-like upholstery. No, Tim wouldn't be in here either.

Nick walked through the 440, up the steps to the back bar. He thought Tim might be here—hadn't Scott suggested it? But there was no sign of him. Nick asked one of the bartenders downstairs if he knew Tim Snow. "Tim the waiter? From Arts? Sure, I know him, but I haven't seen him in here tonight... sorry."

Nick crossed Market and then Castro Street, headed toward downtown. How far should he go, he wondered? There were gay bars and restaurants all the way to Church Street and beyond, but he didn't think Tim would consider Marlana's or Martuni's as within walking distance. Nick peered into the place where the Detour used to be. It bore no resemblance to a leather bar anymore. Now it was called Trigger, and it was at least twice as big as the old place, with chandeliers, mirror balls and a projected aquarium on one brick wall, but no sign of Tim. The Café had a long line outside, another place Nick might come back to if all else failed.

Tim wasn't at the Twin Peaks either. He wasn't at the Mix—Nick walked all the way to the top of the steps on the patio—nor at the Men's Room, now renamed Last Call. Nick noticed the new sign, but it looked the same inside, the beautiful curved wooden ceiling. It screamed "cozy" and "romantic" at the same time, and Nick was glad to see they'd

kept the old framed poster of Queen Victoria above the bar with the slogan "Even a queen can get the clap."

At Moby Dick on 18th and Noe, Nick ran into a couple of guys he recognized from the Russian River. "Hey, Nick!" one of them called out to him. "How's it going? Buy you a drink?"

"No thanks, Randy. I'm looking for someone. You remember Tim? The guy I was with at the Rainbow last week? Have you seen him tonight?"

"Sure, you introduced us. We had dinner at Arts tonight, too. Tim was our waiter and we met his Aunt Ruth behind the bar, but that was a couple of hours ago. He's not in here."

The only place left was the Midnight Sun. Nick worked his way through the crowd far enough to see a tall, well-built guy making out with someone about Tim's size. He could only see him from the back, but it *was* Tim. It had to be.

Nick froze in his tracks. This was the last thing he expected to find on a night when all he wanted was to see Tim, to hold him, to get naked together and spend the night in each other's arms. It seemed right now that someone else had beaten him to it, and Nick was devastated. The tall young man had his arms around Tim, his hands firmly planted on Tim's ass, and the two of them were standing there, only a few feet away, mouth-to-mouth in a passionate lip-lock.

Nick felt as if his knees would give way. He turned around and walked out of the Midnight Sun and back down the street to Moby's. "Hey, Randy... I changed my mind about that drink... in fact, let me buy you guys one."

"Listen, Craig," Tim protested. "I'm flattered, really. You're way cute, and there must be dozens of guys who would love to take you home with them tonight, but not me. I'm really tired, and I'm seeing someone kinda special these days." Tim laughed as he pushed the boy away, but as he thought of Nick he felt the old longing return. *Damn that stupid cousin from New Orleans.*

"Come on, Tim," Craig whined. "My uncles already left, and I don't know how to get back to where they live. Besides, you're the one that I want. Come on..."

"Craig, you're loaded. What did you have... two martinis before dinner and then wine and now scotch? I'll bet you're not used to drinking like this."

"I usually just drink beer at the bars in L.A."

"Come on... walk me to my car and I'll drive you. I've only been to their house once, but I'm pretty sure I can find it again. It's way the hell out in the Mission, almost Bernal Heights if I remember right."

"But I wanna be with you, Tim. Take me to your place. Take me to bed."

Tim took Craig's half-empty drink out of his hand and set it down on a table. "You don't need any more of that. What you need is some fresh air. Maybe I'll even put the top down. That might help sober you up and keep me awake."

Tim drove south past Army Street and took a left, then up and down the narrow hilly streets of Bernal Heights to find the house he was looking for. Craig let loose with the contents of his stomach. Tim slammed on the brakes, but it was too late. The viscous liquid already covered the passenger door, inside and out, the front of Craig's shirt and pants and shoes... even the floor mats. Craig's head lolled over the side of the car as he spit and coughed.

Someone had left the outdoor lights blazing from the front of the house, so at least Tim could see, but as he tried to get Craig out of the car and up the stairs, he was nearly dead weight by this time. Craig stumbled and fell, cursing loudly enough that Theodore and Leonardo both came running out in their robes and slippers to hurry him inside before the neighbors could see.

It was well past midnight when Tim got home to Hancock Street. He pulled the Thunderbird into the driveway as far as the garden hose, turned on the spigot and walked around to the passenger side to pull out the floor mats and wash off Craig's vomit as best he could. Tim was tired, and he supposed

it could have waited until morning, but he didn't want the combination of Craig's stomach acids plus Dewar's White Label scotch to take the paint off Jason's old pride and joy.

Poor drunken kid, Tim thought. His first night in the Castro, and he could have had almost anyone he wanted, but he picks the wrong guy and gets so drunk he makes himself sick.

Tim pondered what Jason would have done in this situation, but he already knew. Jason would have brought the kid back here, let him pass out for a while or maybe try to sober him up with coffee. Jason would have taken Craig to bed sooner or later. He wouldn't have wasted time pining for someone a couple of hours away. *A bird in the hand...*

Tim started to climb the stairs but stopped short when he spied a piece of paper sticking halfway out of his mailbox. It was a note from Nick! He tugged it and sat down on the stairs to read:

Dear Tim,

I guess you didn't get my message that I was coming down tonight. I feel kind of foolish writing this, but I thought you should know why I fell out of sight. I ran into you at the Midnight Sun, but you were already spoken for, so I left, had a couple of drinks and came back here. I don't know what I was thinking.

I'm old enough to know better than to expect you to wait around for me to show up now and then. I shouldn't have hoped in the short time we've known each other that your feelings for me would be as strong as mine are for you. We sure had some fun though, didn't we? I'll always remember the good times and maybe I'll see you around.

Nick

"Damnit, Nick," Tim said out loud. "Nothing happened!" Tears rolled down his face so hard Tim could hardly get his key in the door. He pictured Nick driving north on 101 all the

way back to Monte Rio at this hour of the night after a couple of drinks. Maybe he could catch him. Tim ran to the phone, punched in Nick's number and waited to leave a message:

"Nick! It's me, Tim. Nothing happened with that kid. He was just drunk. I told him about you and nothing happened. You've got to believe me. I would never hurt you intentionally. Call me, Nick. Call me the minute you get this. Please! I'll wait up."

Tim started to read Nick's note again and stopped at the first line: *I guess you didn't get my message*. What message? Tim ran into the bedroom and saw the light on his old answering machine. Nick's voice sounded cheerful then, not like the tone of the note in Tim's hand:

"Hey, Snowman... sorry I missed you, but it's early. Maybe you'll still get this before you leave for work. I've been missing you so much I can't get any work done around here, and I still haven't heard from Nate, so I'm driving down tonight, after all. I'll stop in at Arts if I get into the city in time and wait for you to get off work. Can't wait to see you, man..."

Tim waited until 1 A.M. and tried calling Nick again. He tried calling every fifteen minutes until 3 A.M. when he fell asleep on the couch in his living room. The television set was advertising some exercise equipment that would give him a body to die for in twenty minutes a day *and* still fit under his bed.

Chapter 15

Ruth's first night back at work at Arts had been so busy that she wanted nothing more on Saturday morning than to sleep in late. She was glad she hadn't agreed to work Saturday nights as well. Friday evenings and Sunday brunches would be plenty for the time being. And she was just around the corner if they needed her, in case there was ever some kind of emergency.

Bartholomew kneaded his paws into Ruth's neck and armpit, wanting to go outside. "All right, Bart, give me a minute. What time is it, anyway?" She yawned and pushed the cat back onto the bed to scratch his belly, but he wasn't having it. "Ten o'clock already? Okay, okay, I'm coming..."

Ruth left the back door open while she put on the coffee and then went to fetch the *Chronicle* from the front step. She was surprised at how thin it was. Even the Sunday papers were thinner than they used to be. Ruth was used to dividing those into two piles. One pile was advertisements. The other was news, sports, magazine supplements and the op-ed pages. It never failed that the two piles were nearly the same size. Ah well, if they didn't sell all those ads, Ruth figured the paper would cost about twenty bucks. But *this*, the Saturday edition, was almost weightless nowadays.

Ruth sipped her coffee as she flipped through the slim news section and was just starting to work on the *New York Times* crossword puzzle when the telephone rang. "Hello?"

"Ruth, it's Sam. Are you okay? I hope I didn't wake you." She heard a screech and another noise that sounded like gibberish in a foreign language. "Are you there, Ruth?"

"Sam! How lovely to hear your voice. Yes, I'm fine. I'm right here... But it sounds like you're half-way around the world."

"I hope I didn't wake you..."

Ruth was wide awake now. "No, not at all, I'm just having coffee and reading the paper... doing the crossword, actually. It sounds like someone is speaking French. Where are you?"

"I'm still in Chicago. It's just a bad connection. There's a lot of noise. I'm at O'Hare, waiting to board my flight to Munich. I thought it would be nice to hear your voice once more before I leave the country."

"And I'm delighted to hear yours, Sam. I'm so glad you called. The flowers are absolutely beautiful. Thank you so much. How did you know I loved yellow roses?"

"It was just a lucky guess."

Ruth still held the pen in her hand and was doodling across a picture in the paper as she talked. "I had a lovely evening with you, Sam, and I am so looking forward to seeing you when you get home."

"No more than I am... they're calling my flight now, Ruth, so I'd better be going, but I'll be back in no time."

"Have a safe trip, Sam. And thanks so much for calling. You've brightened my day."

Ruth hung up the telephone, inhaled the roses and smiled. Then she looked down at the newspaper and her smile faded. She'd been doodling all the while she was on the phone with Sam. It was a police artist's sketch of a bald man, and she'd been giving him hair. She drew the hair a little longer and the face began to look familiar. It was just below the fold on the front of the Bay Area section. Ruth spread out the paper and skimmed the article:

Sonoma County authorities seek information... Caucasian male, 5'11" 185 pounds, aged 35-45... 3rd Russian River drowning victim this season... NO DIVING signs vandalized...

This had to be the same drowning victim Ruth read about on the day she arrived. She thought back to the first time she met Tim's new boyfriend Nick Musgrove. It was when Ruth was visiting Tim in San Francisco this past summer, shortly before she went back to Minnesota to tie up all the loose ends for her move. Tim and Nick had only met the day before and spent their first night together here in this, Tim's old apartment.

Ruth remembered she heard voices in the garden early in the morning and came out to find the two of them there—her nephew and his handsome blonde friend. From that first moment Ruth could imagine the two of them together forever, as if they were already smiling into one another's eyes in a picture frame on the mantel.

Ruth always swore that she hadn't inherited any of her mother's psychic gifts. They had skipped a generation and landed squarely on Tim's shoulders, for which Ruth was grateful and relieved. He was better able to handle them than she would have been, but still... there were times when Ruth simply *knew* she was right about something.

The man in the newspaper sketch was totally bald, but Ruth had scribbled shoulder-length hair onto him until he looked an awful lot like Nick Musgrove. He could easily pass as Nick's brother... or his cousin. And if Nick's cousin was the drowning victim in this morning's *Chronicle* that would explain why he hadn't shown up yet. Ruth looked up at the clock on the kitchen wall. It was nearly 10:30. She needed to talk to Tim as soon as possible. She hated to wake the boys, but she would have to risk it.

"Hi, this is Tim. I can't come to the phone right now, but please leave a..." Ruth started to set the phone back down, but paused. Maybe they were in the shower. He mentioned

that they sometimes showered together... to save water. Or maybe they had gone out to breakfast. "...of the tone and I'll get back to you as soon as I can, I promise... unless you're trying to sell me something, in which case you must have the wrong number."

"Tim, it's your Aunt Ruth. Call me as soon as you get this. Whatever you do, don't let Nick see this morning's *Chronicle*. I'm afraid it will come as a terrible shock."

Ruth had no way of knowing that Tim was barreling up Highway 101 at the moment. Tim knew that if Nick was too hurt and upset to return his calls, the only thing to do was to speak to him in person. In person was better, anyway. He would find Nick and explain what happened, and they would have sex and everything would be fine again. At least he hoped so. Tim didn't have to work until Tuesday. Good sex could solve just about anything.

Tim made it through Santa Rosa in record time. Traffic was light this morning on River Road, too. It was off-season for the resorts, and the air was filled with the smells of wood-burning stoves and damp redwoods. Tim slowed the Thunderbird to the speed limit through Guerneville's Main Street and noticed a few guys hanging out in front of the Rainbow Cattle Company smoking cigarettes, but no one he recognized.

He drove on to Monte Rio and turned up the steep hill to Nick's house, but the truck wasn't there. Tim got the Thunderbird turned around and drove through the streets of the little town looking for a public phone or an open place of business. Didn't anybody use pay phones anymore? He might have to break down and get a damn cell phone one of these days, after all. Lights were on at the laundromat and there was a phone inside, so Tim tried to call Nick, first at home, then on Nick's cell phone and finally at the greenhouse.

When someone finally picked up the phone at the nursery, Tim blurted out, "Hello, is Nick there please?"

"No, he isn't. He's out of town for the weekend." Tim recognized Jenny's voice.

"Oh... Jennifer... Jen, sorry... good... it's Tim Snow."

"Oh, hi... I thought maybe this was finally going to be Nick's cousin calling..."

"You remember me, don't you?"

"Sure," she said, "but I thought Nick was spending the weekend in San Francisco with you. Is there some kind of trouble? Didn't he make it?"

"He made it down to the city, all right. I guess you could say we got our wires crossed. It's a long story."

"Well, I don't know where his cousin is either. It's Kent's first day back, and he just told me the cousin stopped by here the last day Kent worked and..."

Tim didn't care about Nick's stupid cousin; he wanted Nick! On the other hand, he wanted to stay on Jen's good side and keep her talking. "So the long-lost cousin finally showed up after all? And Nick still went down to the city?"

"Nick didn't know. Kent was out sick with the swine flu since that day. It was over a week ago, that same day you and Nick were off wine-tasting. I was in back when Nick's cousin Nate came in, so I didn't see him. Kent just told me about it this morning."

"Uh-huh..."

"Yeah, Kent told Nate that he should stop by the Rainbow Cattle Company and ask around. He thought you guys might both have been there if Nick wasn't here and he wasn't at home. Imagine sending a straight cop from New Orleans into a gay bar..."

"It probably wasn't his first time. Listen, Jen, I need to get a hold of Nick. I'm in Monte Rio at the laundromat. I just drove up to his house and he's not there. Do you have any idea where he is? I have to talk to him, Jen. I really need to see him."

"Well, if he's not with you, I imagine he could be at his parents' place in Alameda."

"Alameda! Damn, why didn't I think of that?"

"I'm sure he planned to stay with you though, but he mentioned stopping to see them this weekend, too... something about his grandmother."

"Can you give me their number?"

"I'm not supposed to—"

"Jenny, it's Tim, for God's sake!" he pleaded.

"Well, I guess it's all right... hold on. It must be here someplace. I'll have to look for it. It's not like I would ever call him there unless it was an emergency."

"This is an emergency as far as I'm concerned. Don't worry. If he gives you any trouble I'll swear I held a gun to your head."

"All right, just hold on. It might take me a while... Kent, do you know where Nick keeps that other list of personal phone numbers? I thought they were..."

A teenage kid stood in the doorway of the laundromat with his portable radio loud enough to rattle the windows. Tim screamed at him, "Hey! Do you mind?" and pointed to the phone in his hand. The kid gave Tim the finger and stepped back out to the sidewalk, the noise fading as he walked away.

Tim jotted down the number Jen gave him, and then realized he needed more coins to call Alameda. The change machine was broken, but a couple of elderly ladies doing their wash were each willing to give Tim four quarters for a dollar. They told him that he was their hero for chasing away the hooligan with the radio, at least for the time being.

Still no luck... no answer at Nick's parents' house, and there was no answering machine. "Goddamnit, Nick!" He would just have to keep trying.

Chapter 16

At first Ruth was annoyed when she didn't hear back from Tim. Now she started to worry. If Ruth was good at anything, it was worrying. *Where could Tim possibly be?* She was sure he and Nick must have gone out to breakfast someplace in the neighborhood. She glanced at her watch. It was getting to be more like time for brunch—a late brunch... somewhere *outside* of the neighborhood. They each had their own set of wheels, now, so they could have gone anywhere. She just hoped Tim checked his answering machine the minute he got home. *What if Nick was standing right there with him when he did? He would hear her voice warning Tim not to let him see the newspaper.*

The only sensible thing to do was to run over to Hancock Street right now. She wrote a quick note:

*Tim—I've been trying to reach you. It's very important.
Please call me the minute you get home.*

Love, Aunt Ruth

She tore the note off the pad, grabbed her purse and stuck the note inside. Then she picked up her keys and dashed down the stairs to the gate.

Tim was exhausted, physically and emotionally. He'd hardly slept at all last night, and he was no closer to finding Nick now than when he left home. Ever since he cursed into the pay phone, the two elderly ladies in the Laundromat had been staring at him.

Tim got back in his car and drove to Guerneville. If he headed back to San Francisco now, Nick would probably be on his way north. They could cross paths on Highway 101 and not even see each other. Tim tried to remember one of the few sensible things his crazy mother had instilled in him: *If you're lost, stay in one place, and we will come and find you.*

Nick had never met Tim's mother, and Tim was determined to keep it that way, but he decided to stay put. Maybe Nick's parents had instilled different rules to live by. Maybe Nick's father had taught him how to hunt. *Oh, if only Nick was hunting for me, instead of angry and hurt and who-knows-what-all-else...*

Tim checked into a room at the Triple-R Resort. He had to regroup and unwind and get a grip. His room was directly across from the bar. He only had to walk outdoors, and it was about ten steps to the nearest bar stool. It would be convenient if things got any worse and he needed to drown his sorrows.

Tim knew it didn't do any good to blame himself, but it was hard not to. Now he wished he possessed his grandmother's entire "gift" and knew how to make use of it. He'd be willing to try any trick to find out where Nick was. He decided to walk over to Pat's on Main Street for a huge breakfast. He hated to order decaf, but he needed to sleep after this. Maybe he would even be able to dream something useful, and the sooner he got around to it the better.

Back at the room, stuffed on pancakes, Tim got undressed and made a couple of phone calls. First he called the greenhouse to tell Jenny where he was, just in case she heard from Nick. Then he called his Aunt Ruth.

"Tim, where have you been? Did you just get home and get my note? I hope Nick didn't hear my message about his cousin on your answering machine."

"What message? I haven't seen Nick. I'm in Guerneville."

"Guerneville? I thought you and Nick went out for breakfast. What do you mean you haven't seen him? He came into the restaurant last night right after you left. What are you doing in Guerneville?"

"Last night got all messed up! It's a long story. I went to the Midnight Sun and that boy—Theodore's nephew—was so drunk he started kissing on me, and Nick must have walked in and seen us and... I'm sorry, but it wasn't my fault. I was totally innocent."

"Oh, Tim..."

"Nothing happened with that kid! I can see how it might have looked, but Nick has just got to believe me. And besides, he was the one who didn't want to come down this weekend because of his damned cousin! How was I to know he changed his mind at the last minute? I mean... he sent me an e-mail, and he left a message, but I left for work early, so I didn't know. Then later that night he left me a note at the house that basically said goodbye and it was nice knowing me. I've just got to see him and hold him and explain to him that nothing was the way it looked..."

"I'm sure you two can work things out, Tim, but I'm afraid he's also going to be even more upset about his cousin."

"What about his cousin?"

"Do you have the *Saturday Chronicle*?"

"Hold on a second. I think I saw one on the bar. I'll go get it..."

Tim pulled his jeans back on and walked barefoot and bare-chested across to the bar, grabbed the Bay Area section and headed back to his room.

Someone yelled, "Hey! That's my paper! I'm not done with that."

"I'll bring it right back," Tim hollered, but he'd already given his door a shove, and it closed before the man heard him.

"Look at that police sketch on the front page. I think that's Nick's cousin."

"Holy shit... I'll bet you're right! He's kinda hot! They could be twins if Nate had hair or if Nick shaved his head."

"That's what I thought, too. But if Nick's cousin is dead..."

"That would explain why he hasn't shown up... duh!" Tim finished her sentence for her.

"Tim, when are you coming home?"

"Not until I find Nick. I left a message at the nursery, and I've called his parents' house in Alameda, but they don't answer. There's no sense heading back if he's on his way here. I'm not scheduled to work at Arts until Tuesday. I checked into a room at the Triple R if you need to reach me. Do you have a pen? Take down the number. Call me if you hear anything, but right now I've got to get some sleep."

"I sure will, honey. Get some rest." Ruth wasn't comfortable discussing the mystery of her nephew's psychic abilities. She'd felt the same way growing up when their mother spoke of things that she and Betty couldn't begin to understand. Ruth knew that when Tim mentioned sleep, he might intend more than just getting some rest for his body. Sometimes his dreams held the answers to his problems.

Tim opened his door a crack to see if anyone was sitting at the end of the bar before he dashed back with the newspaper. "Sorry about that," he told the bartender, "I didn't realize anyone was reading it."

"Don't worry about it. He found another one. Keep it."

"Thanks." Tim took the paper back to his room and flipped through it. Sometimes they printed related stories on the same page. There was another one about a break-in at the Highway Department's construction site just south of Sebastopol. *The thief or thieves stole an enormous stash of Red Cross du Pont dynamite, yards of detonation cord and enough blasting caps that the Department of Homeland Security has been informed of the theft.*

Tim knew exactly where that construction site was, just down the road from the nursery. Nick drove right by there on his way to work whenever he took Highway 116. Tim drifted off to sleep until about 5 P.M.. He expected to dream about Nick or his dead cousin or dynamite and terrorists, but if he had any dreams he couldn't remember them. It felt more like a coma than a nap, the sort of daytime sleep that was hard to shake off.

After his nap, Tim felt disoriented in a strange place. He showered and the events of the past twenty-four hours crept into his brain with a woozy kind of wakefulness. He walked back over to Main Street to see if anything was happening at this hour on a Saturday. He took the alley short-cut to the back door of the Rainbow Cattle Company. Someone sat in a car with the windows wide open, the radio blasting a country oldies station. Tim could hear the disc jockey's voice, "Next up: Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys with their hit, *Take Me Back to Tulsa*."

Inside the bar it was fairly quiet. Tim recognized the bartender from the last time he was here. "Hi, how about a Bud? Do you remember me?" Tim smoothed a wrinkled twenty across the bar. "I was in here the other night with Nick Musgrove..."

"Sure... it's Tim, isn't it?"

"Right," Tim extended his hand. "You're better with names than me."

"Charlie."

"Charlie... that's right, sorry..." They shook hands. "Say, you haven't seen Nick today, have you?" Tim thought Nick might have driven back through town while he was napping.

"I haven't seen Nick since that night you two were in here playing pool. No, wait... I lied. He stopped in one evening, didn't even stay for a beer, said he was looking around for his cousin. Nick used to be a regular customer on the weekends,

but now he's always taking off to the city. I guess married life agrees with him." Charlie grinned and gave Tim a wink.

A stranger stepped up and slid into the bar stool beside Tim, who hardly noticed the man until he said, "What a coincidence. I'm looking for Nick Musgrove, too. Name's Fred..." His rolled up sleeves revealed crude tattoos on both arms. He stuck out his right hand toward Tim.

"Hi, I'm Tim Snow. Where do you know Nick from?"

"You could say I'm an old friend of the family. Buy you a beer, Tim?"

"No thanks... I just got one."

"You feel like shooting some pool?"

"Okay..." Tim was in no mood to play pool, but he was curious about this guy who claimed to know Nick. Aside from the tattoos, his skin was ghostly white. Most people in a resort area had some color in their cheeks. Some kept a year-round tan, though it was apt to fade by spring. Right now it was too close to the end of the summer for anyone to be so pale. "You live around here, Fred?"

"Nope, not lately."

Tim got solids on the break and then picked off three more balls before he missed a tough bank shot. "How long have you known Nick?" Tim asked as Fred chalked up his cue stick.

"We go way back... Damn!" Fred said, missing an easy shot. "...back when him and Larry were first together, getting the business off the ground."

"I heard Nick mention Larry," Tim said, and picked off three more solids and scratched on the cue ball, "but that was way before my time."

"Oh, yeah?" Fred was missing the easiest shots in the world. He didn't seem to be paying attention to the game. "What did Nick mention?"

"Just that Larry's in prison somewhere." Tim wasn't a great pool player by any means, but he was lucky sometimes, like now.

"That so?" Fred asked and Tim sank the eight ball to win the game.

"That's what Nick told me. How come you're looking for Nick, anyway, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I've got a little present for him, that's all."

"A present from you?"

"Yeah, from both me and Larry, I guess you could say. How about another game of pool, Tim?" Fred asked.

"Okay, I guess so." Tim thought this guy was weird, and he didn't much care for him, but he had nothing else to do. Furthermore, he thought he might learn something more about Nick's past.

"Let's make it interesting this time," Fred said with a crooked grin. It reminded Tim of a dirty white picket fence... with pickets missing. "Whaddaya say to twenty bucks?"

"I never play for money."

"How about for our next drinks, then?"

"Well, okay," Tim said.

"Where do *you* know Nick from, Tim?" Fred racked up the balls.

"We were..." Tim paused, "...seeing each other for a while."

"You both live here in town?"

"No." Tim began to wonder if Fred knew Nick, why wouldn't he have known that Nick didn't live in Guerneville? This time Tim got one stripe on the break and missed the next ball. "I live in San Francisco. Nick lives in Monte Rio, a few miles out toward the coast."

"Right... I knew that... of course he does."

Tim hadn't seen the next part coming, but it was as slick a con-game as they come. Fred made shots like Tim had only seen on television. He ran the table on his first turn and turned back to Tim with another grin. "I guess you're buying."

"What are you drinking, Fred?" Tim pulled out another twenty. He was a good sport.

"The bartender knows what I drink... Long Island iced tea... top-shelf..."

Tim felt foolish to be hustled for such an expensive drink, but he put his money on the bar and signaled Charlie for another beer. Fred said, "I'm going to step out, have a smoke and make a phone call. Watch that drink for me, will you?"

"I'll guard it with my life," Tim said with a smirk.

"Tim Snow... what a coincidence!" Tim turned to see Phil, the piano player from Arts, with an older man who wore heavy gold bracelets and brought with him a sickening cloud of cologne. Phil was the last person Tim wanted to see. He should have known he'd run into him again at the Russian River. It was bound to happen sooner or later, since the bad blood between him and Phil stemmed from something that happened there. It was a long time ago, but for Tim, the humiliation was still so bitter that it could have been yesterday.

"Hello, Phil..."

The older man tossed a fifty onto the bar, told Phil to order him *the same* and headed toward the toilet.

"What brings you here, Tim?" Phil asked. "Where's your boyfriend? What's his name? Nick? And who was that young cutie you were waiting on at work last night? He was really something! Did you catch up with them later? I noticed you two booked out of there together awfully fast."

Tim didn't want to talk to Phil, and he *sure* didn't want to talk about Theodore's nephew, Craig! Fred came back and reached between them for his Long Island iced tea. "Excuse me, fellas... well, who do we have here? Is this the mysterious Nicholas Musgrove at last?" Fred smiled his gap-toothed smile at Phil.

"No," Tim said. "This is Phil. Phil, Fred. You two should get to know each other. You might have a lot in common. Excuse me..."

Tim walked out the back door of the bar again, down the alley and back to the Triple R while he thought some more about the night he first met Phil, when the red Thunderbird convertible still belonged to Jason who had handed Tim the

car keys before they left the dance floor, and Jason took off with some trick he'd just met.

Tim drove Phil back to the two-bedroom cabin Jason rented for Tim's birthday weekend. They didn't bother to put their shirts back on. It was a hot night, and they were still sweaty from dancing. Once they got moving the night air on their bare skin felt good with the top down. Tim drove slowly, carefully. He'd heard about the cops up here who loved to catch gay guys leaving the bars—breathalyzer tests beside the road, then off to the Santa Rosa jail, expensive lawyers, big money to get out of some really dumb trouble.

The Thunderbird glided down River Road, and Tim leaned his head back, almost afraid to look at this gorgeous man beside him. This couldn't be happening. Tim glanced over for a glimpse, and Phil slid his hand up Tim's thigh. Tim looked up instead, tried to take in the sky. He'd forgotten how many stars you could see outside of the city. Tonight the Milky Way looked pure white, flowing liquid, creamy. Tim took a deep breath, and the air was so thick with the smell of summer he could hardly take it in.

The whole night was like a dream, not one of his crazy psychic dreams he couldn't understand. It was more like a wet dream. Phil was right out of a movie... a porn movie... or more like he'd just stepped off the pages of a magazine, all glossy and slick and perfectly lit on the dance floor earlier. Even here in the car with the stars shining down through gaps in the redwood trees, their light coming from millions of miles away.

Tim didn't turn on the lights in the cabin, but let the night's glow reach in through the open windows. He led the way to the bedroom where he'd thought he would sleep alone tonight on his birthday. It was silent here and dark enough that it took a while for their eyes to adjust. They peeled off their boots and socks and stood face to face for one deep rough kiss before Phil turned him around. Tim could smell Phil's hot sweet breath on the back of his neck, heard the sound of his belt unbuckling, the thud as it hit the floor with his jeans, felt their sweat-streaked

nakedness come together across the bed—two men on white sheets on an old bed in a rented cabin in the ancient redwoods on a night when no wind was blowing at all.

Tim shook his head to stop the memory. He didn't want to think about Phil. As soon as Tim got back to his room at the Triple R he tried calling Nick again, but there was still no answer at his parents' house in Alameda. He felt dirty and took another shower. While the water streamed down his back, he thought about what had just happened tonight: *Why did Fred ask if Phil was Nick? They looked nothing alike. If Fred was an old friend of the family, how could he mistake a dark swarthy Italian like Phil for blue-eyed, blonde-haired Nick?* Tim didn't much care who Fred was anymore, and he sure didn't care about Phil. He loathed Phil. All he cared about now was reaching Nick, touching him, holding him and talking everything out.

Chapter 17

This time when Tim woke up it was daylight of a brand new day, and he wondered where the hell he was. He'd been dreaming but he couldn't tell if they were visions or just regular run-of-the-mill dreams. He saw rippling water and smooth white stones, a stream of blue-black running water and then Nick's face surfaced; his long blonde hair swirled around his head and floated. The water was deep, a bottomless river, moving past Tim's sight.

Then Nick's face vanished, and the long blonde hair freed itself like tresses fallen from the barber's scissors. The hair floated away, and the face reappeared but bald, and the eyes were different. Tim had stared into Nick's eyes long enough to know them well. The water was still and stagnant now. The bald man resembled Nick, but when the face broke the surface, the shiny scalp reflected moonlight, and the eyes were glassy—the eyes of a corpse.

Tim blinked and looked around the strange room. He focused on a window, a desk, the black screen of a television in one corner. Tim remembered checking in at this room at the Triple R Resort in Guerneville, just across from the bar. He was an hour and a half from home, and who knew how far from Nick? A fire in the wood-burning stove would feel good, if only he had the motivation to light it. He saw his breath above the bed. If he stayed on here, he would light the stove,

but for now he left the warm blankets, took six steps to the toilet and reached for the thermostat on his way. He cranked up the heat as far as it would go.

If he could reach Nick he would convince him to talk. If Nick's parents answered, Tim wouldn't know what to say. They must have seen the papers by now. If Tim's Aunt Ruth was right, the family must be in shock. Tim's dream arranged itself in his consciousness. Even if it was one of *those* dreams, his psychic dreams, what good would it do? What did it matter now?

Talking to Nick was his major concern. Tim would apologize about Craig, that boy at the Midnight Sun, and he would make Nick believe him. As the hot shower warmed him up, Tim pictured every love story from the best years of Hollywood. He and Nick—in black and white—would rush into each other's arms while the music swelled. Tim tried to imagine whether his apartment or Nick's cabin provided the better backdrop for their dramatic reunion. Either place would do. He just knew that the black and white picture would burst into Technicolor with a crescendo of tympani and violins and trumpets when they kissed.

"Hello, Musgrove residence." At last, a female voice with an accent on the other end of the phone.

"Hello, is Nick there?"

"No, *señor*. Nobody here. I am the housekeeper."

"Oh... hello, my name is Tim Snow, and I'm a friend of Nick's. I really need to reach him. It's an emergency," Tim hated how his voice went into a soprano's range and took on a pleading tone. "Can you tell me where he is?... or when he'll be back?"

"The whole family is gone, *señor*. I only come on the weekend. There is a note. Hold on, *por favor*... I go get it." She set down the phone, and Tim heard a dog's bark echo down an empty hallway. "Yes, here it is, *señor*. Mrs. Musgrove says there was a death in the family. They flew to New Orleans for the funeral. They will return later in the week."

"Did she leave a phone number in New Orleans?"

"No, *señor*. I'm sorry."

"That's okay. Thanks, anyway... *gracias*."

There was no sense in lighting the wood stove now. Tim turned off the thermostat, tossed his things in a backpack and paid his bill. He put the top down, rolled up the car windows and turned on the heater. All he wanted now was to be home. His dreams flooded back... Nick's face underwater turning into his cousin's dead face. Tim dreaded an hour and a half on the road in the old red Thunderbird. He wanted to click his heels together three times like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Or he'd be happy to ride on the back of Margaret Hamilton's broomstick.

Tim turned down Main Street and passed the Rainbow Cattle Company on his left. That guy named Fred was on the sidewalk out in front. He looked even paler and more disheveled in the daylight. Fred was smoking a cigarette and shouting into a cell phone. Tim could hear his voice, but he couldn't make out the words. Tim wondered why people who talk with their hands do so even more when they're on the telephone. The ashes from Fred's cigarette scattered across the sidewalk.

Someone pulled out of a parking space, and Tim thought about stopping. He might see if he could learn anything else from that *old friend of the family*. Tim wondered if Fred knew about the funeral in New Orleans. Maybe he was on the phone right now making arrangements to go there and join them. No... he was just a two-bit hustler. Whatever Fred's story was, Tim just wanted to be home.

Traffic was heavy on River Road, and it was slow going until he got on Highway 101 just north of Santa Rosa. Tim breezed through the city and noticed the signs for Rohnert Park up ahead. Maybe Jen would have heard from Nick. Tim decided to make one more stop at the nursery. At least he could tell Jen that he was going home.

She was on a tall stool behind the cash register, reading, when Tim walked in. She jumped and shoved her magazine below the counter. "Tim, you startled me!"

"Sorry, Jen... I'm on my way back to San Francisco. I reached someone at Nick's parents' house. The whole family went to New Orleans for a funeral—Nick, too.

"I know, Tim. I just talked to him a few minutes ago."

"You did? You talked to Nick? Did you tell him I was looking for him?"

"I told him that you called from Monte Rio and again from the Triple R."

"What did he say? Did you give him the phone number?"

"No... um..." she hesitated. "He sounded... well, Tim... he just sounded so awfully... tired. I tried to give him your number at the Triple R, but he said there was no need... said he wouldn't use it anyway... I'm sorry, Tim."

Tim couldn't believe his rotten luck. If only he'd gotten to the nursery a few minutes earlier, he could have been standing here when Nick called. He could have grabbed that phone out of Jen's hand and made Nick listen to him, convince him it was all a big misunderstanding!

Maybe it was better not to care, not to get involved. *Keep things free and easy...* that was the way it was with most guys. Hadn't Jason tried to teach him that? All that ever came of caring too much was hurting each other's feelings over the stupidest things.

"What else did he say, Jen?" Tim had come too far to be dissuaded by a second-hand remark from Nick's employee. Maybe she misunderstood him. Maybe Nick didn't mean it the way it sounded. "Did he tell you when he's coming back? Did he leave you a phone number in New Orleans?"

"His cousin's funeral is Monday morning. That's tomorrow." She pointed at the calendar beside the cash register as if Tim didn't know what day it was. "He asked if Kent and I could handle the business ourselves for a while. He wants to stay on and visit some old friends in New Orleans. I told him

we'd do our best. I told him to take it easy and try to enjoy himself. He sounded so tired, Tim. I'm worried about him. I didn't know he and his cousin were that close."

"Did he leave a telephone number?"

"Tim, I promised I wouldn't call him unless we had an absolute emergency!"

"Jenny, this *is* an emergency, damnit! I did something that hurt him, and I have to talk to him and explain. Won't you please give it to me?"

"I don't know, Tim." Jenny let a little whine crawl into her voice. Tim didn't have anything against her, but that voice reminded him of every whiney person he'd ever disliked in his life. It also reminded Tim of the way he must sound right now.

"I'll owe you big time, Jen!" He tried to force a smile and sound enthusiastic. Otherwise, he was tempted to wring her scrawny neck.

"Oh... okay. Maybe you can cheer him up. It's in the office. I left the door open. You can use the phone on Nick's desk. The number is on the notepad right on top."

"Thanks, Jen. I really appreciate it."

Tim sat down at Nick's desk and took a deep breath. He had never been alone here before. He could almost smell Nick, and it lifted his spirits to see a small, framed photograph of the two of them on Nick's desk. It must have been taken at Arts, but Tim didn't remember... they smiled into the camera cheek to cheek. He wanted a copy for his refrigerator, or better yet framed beside his bed. Tim heard someone pick up the phone in New Orleans. It was another maid, this time with a southern accent. Yes, Nick was there. Hold on.

It seemed to take forever till Tim heard the voice he wanted to hear. "Hello?"

"Nick! Oh, thank God! I'm in your office. I was on my way back to the city but I stopped in here to see if I could find out anything, and Jenny let me use the phone." Tim was so relieved to reach Nick that he talked twice as fast as normal. "Nothing happened with that kid, Nick. He was just drunk.

You've got to believe me! I'm so sorry for how it must have looked. He was Theodore's nephew. I drove him back to their place, and he threw up all over my car. Then I went home and I got your note and..."

"Tim, hold on a minute." Nick stopped him. "Slow down... Listen... I've been doing a lot of thinking. Maybe we've been going at this a little too fast. Maybe you need some space. I know I do..."

"No!" Tim hated that word. "I already have way too much space as it is, and we're not going fast enough, as far as I'm concerned."

"Maybe it's just me, then, but I don't want to tie you down." Tim wondered why Nick was talking so slowly. He was there for a funeral, but still...

"You can tie me down any time you want to, Nick." Tim tried to laugh, but he couldn't get his voice to go there. "I meant that figuratively, but..."

"Tim, I have a lot of family stuff to deal with right now." Nick wasn't laughing. He sounded terrible and Jenny was right; he sounded tired. "My grandmother is here and both my parents too, and I've got cousins and aunts and uncles in New Orleans that I haven't seen in years and..."

"I know. I mean... I can imagine... Nick, I'm sorry about your cousin, Nate. Do they think he took a dive off that bridge into too shallow water?"

"They might think that," Nick said, "but naked? Why would he dive off the bridge naked at night? We used to swim there all the time when we were kids. He knew better than to dive from that bridge. People break their necks that way. I think he was dead before he hit the water, but his body was cremated, so..."

Tim was so glad to hear Nick's voice that he pretended to be interested in Nick's cousin, just to keep him talking. "Gee, Nick, why would anyone want to...?"

"I don't know, Tim. Nate and his partner pulled off a big drug bust in the French Quarter just before he left for California on vacation... to see me."

"Wow!"

"Listen, Tim, we'll talk again sometime, okay? I have old friends here I want to look up. I'm going to stay on awhile after the funeral. I know the work at the nursery will get backed up, and I'll be really busy when I get home, but... we'll talk, okay? That's all I can promise."

"Nick, you've got to believe me, how sorry I am about your cousin and... you know... that boy and everything," Tim pleaded. "You know I'm not into chicken."

"That kid at the Midnight Sun was right out of an Abercrombie & Fitch catalogue, Tim. I can see why you'd be tempted. I would be, too. Besides, you never promised me anything. I never asked you to. It was a shock to see that, but I wouldn't want to hold you back. You live in the Castro, after all. Go for it. You shouldn't need to deprive yourself for the sake of my feelings..."

"Nick, he was Teddy's nephew," Tim interrupted, as if that would automatically rule him out. "He was up from L.A. to visit. He was only in town for the weekend. They came in for dinner, and I ran into them at the Midnight Sun afterwards." Tim stretched the truth a little; they'd invited him to join them for a drink after dinner, but Nick didn't need to know that. "Nothing happened between us."

"Like I said, Tim... we'll talk, okay? I've got to go now. Maybe I'll call you in a few days, Snowman. Goodbye."

"Bye, Nick." Tim copied down the New Orleans number and stuck it in his pocket. He thanked Jen again for the use of the phone on his way back out to the parking lot.

"At least he called me 'Snowman' again," Tim said out loud as he turned the key to start the Thunderbird and head back to the city.

Chapter 18

Ruth carried her coffee and the Sunday paper out to the patio. There was still a good hour before she had to get ready for work. As much as she enjoyed Arts, the staff, the good-natured banter with customers and catching up on the neighborhood gossip, on days like today she'd just as soon sleep late and stay home with the cat.

"Ouch! Damnit!" Ruth heard Teresa on the other side of the brick wall and then a crash of breaking glass in the recycling bin.

"Are you all right?" Ruth blurted out and hoped that Teresa hadn't heard her. She didn't feel like interacting with anyone this morning but it was too late; the words were already out of her mouth.

"Ruthie, I didn't know you were there. I must be making enough of a racket to raise the dead. Sorry I startled you. I'm fine. I just dropped a bottle on my bare toe. Say... I sure hope I didn't wake you up last night when I came in."

"Why no, I..."

"Didn't you hear me yelling? My damned keys must have fallen out of my purse in the cab. Well, I'd had a few cocktails, you know. I couldn't get in! Arturo was home, but I had a hell of a time waking him up."

"You should have rung my buzzer, Teresa."

"Your living room lights weren't on, so I figured you must be in bed with Sam."

"In bed with...?" Ruth bristled. "Sam just happens to be out of the country right now, and I was probably curled up in bed—alone, thank you very much—with my book. Are you sure you're all right now, Teresa?"

"I'm fine. It's just my toe... and I have a touch of a hangover, but that will pass. Aren't you working down at Arts today?"

"Yes, I have to get ready soon, but I was enjoying a few minutes on the terrace first."

"Well, you have a nice day, Ruthie."

Tim made good time driving back to the city and stopped at Hancock Street just long enough to bring in the mail and drop off his bag. He needed a Bloody Mary and some solid food. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten and more to the point, he needed the sympathetic ear of his Aunt Ruth. It was also time to bring her up to date on the Nick situation.

Ruth was full of questions as soon as he walked in the door of the restaurant. "Tim, when did you get back? How are you? You look exhausted. What's going on? Have you talked to Nick yet?"

"First I need a Bloody Mary." He leaned across the bar to give her a peck on the cheek. "I just talked to Nick this morning... briefly... in New Orleans. His cousin's funeral is tomorrow, and then Nick is staying on for a few days to visit some old friends."

"How did he sound?" Ruth asked while she mixed Tim's drink. "More important, what did he say? Did you two patch things up?"

"He said we'll talk when he gets back. He didn't say when, exactly, just that we'll talk. I guess that's the best I could hope for. He sounded tired, mostly."

"He's been through a lot, dear. He's not only dealing with the death of his cousin, but this whole misunderstanding between you two. Give him some time, sweetheart."

"That was another thing, Aunt Ruth. He said that his cousin never would have been stupid enough to dive from that bridge into shallow water. People break their necks that way. Nick said that when they were kids Nate used to come to visit from New Orleans every summer, and they used to swim there all the time. Nate would have known better."

"What was Nick implying?"

"He thinks his cousin was dead before he hit the water. Nick also said that Nate was naked, and it was at night time. Why would anybody be diving from that bridge naked... much less in the dark?"

"Did they do an autopsy? If he drowned there should have been water in his lungs."

"No, the Sonoma County medical examiner released the body to the Louisiana authorities because he was a policeman there. The local coroner here was glad to have one less case file and figured they'd do the autopsy in New Orleans. The authorities there had their hands full, figured all the paperwork was in order and released the body to the family for cremation."

Ruth felt a prickly sensation down the back of her neck. She had felt the same thing when she read the two articles in the *Chronicle*.

Tim took a sip of his drink. "Mmmm, perfect. I need food, too. I'm starving. Maybe an omelet. I'll eat here at the bar if that's okay."

"Sure, honey, I'll ask one of the waiters to put in an order for you. What kind of omelet?"

"Spinach and sour cream—yes, iron!" Tim flexed his bicep and frowned. "I've got to get back to the gym in a hurry—with whole wheat toast."

"That sounds healthy."

"How about you, Aunt Ruth? Have you heard from Sam yet?"

"He called me from the airport in Chicago before he left for Germany. He said he just wanted to hear my voice, and it was so nice to hear his. I thought I already told you that."

"Maybe you did. Things have been so crazy."

"It must be a full moon," Jake, one of Tim's co-workers, chimed in. "Can I get two Salty Dogs and a Mimosa, Ruth? I don't know where Artie ran off to."

"He's in the kitchen," Ruth answered and started to make the drinks for Jake to take to his customers. "And Tim wants an omelet."

"I heard him. I already wrote it down."

"I think you're right about the full moon, Jake. Teresa lost her keys in a taxicab last night and had to wake Arturo to let her in."

"I'll bet she was loaded," Jake said. "That woman can drink anyone under the table. She reminds me of my Aunt Gladys. One time in Vegas she got so drunk she looked up at the flashing lights on the slot machine, and she thought it was sunshine through stained glass windows. She thought the whole casino had turned into a cathedral while she sat there holding her roll of nickels. It was a religious experience!"

"Did she quit drinking?" Tim asked.

"Not exactly... she didn't quit gambling, either, but she never touched Jack Daniels before breakfast again."

Tim inhaled his omelet and walked home for a nap, but he couldn't fall asleep. He was almost afraid to sleep for fear of what dreams might come. He took another shower and decided he was tired of his own company and tired of Castro Street. Sunday afternoon was a good time to escape to South of Market and see what was happening down there. As it turned out, Tim would have all of Monday to regret his decision.

Early Monday morning Tim awoke to find a warm body beside him in his bed. He thought it was Nick at first until he slid his hand down the hairless chest. Whoever this was, he tensed at being touched and then went back to snoring. Tim opened one eye until the room came into focus and he saw toes sticking out from the foot of the bed. This guy was taller than Nick, too. Tim lifted his hand from the young man's smooth

chest—a *very* young man, he now noticed—and wondered what the hell was going on in his life.

Where was Nick? Oh, yeah... funeral... New Orleans... dead cousin... Nate, the cop... family matters....

Bits and pieces surfaced in Tim's brain, but still nothing to explain how this tall child landed in his bed on Hancock Street. He remembered seeing his Aunt Ruth at Arts and having an omelet before he headed south of Market where the Sunday crowds got to be too much, but there was a big gap in his memory after that.

Tim's eyes scanned the floor... no condom wrappers. That drawer of the bedside table wasn't even opened. Since he and Nick were both HIV positive and healthy, they didn't worry about infecting each other, but Tim hoped he would have been careful with a stranger. He reached down to feel if he was sticky anywhere. Negative. When he stood up to drag himself to the bathroom he realized the extent of his hangover. Each and every hair on his head ached separately.

Tim flipped on the light and switched it off again. He could use his own bathroom in the dark. His eyes stung and he didn't want to see his face in the mirror. *But who the hell is this kid in my bed?*

Tim peeked into the bedroom again and tried to remember, but he had no recollection of seeing this tall young stranger before in his life. He had no recollection of anything. Tim went to the kitchen to put on the coffee. It was a struggle to get the paper filter into the holder, and when he scooped the grounds out of the canister he spilled half of them on the countertop the first time. He couldn't remember that last time he was so shaky.

Teresa would suggest a hair of the dog about now. If Tim still lived on Collingwood Street he might run upstairs and ask her to make him a Bloody Mary. She would have let him hide out until he could reconstruct the night before. This was almost enough to make him quit drinking. Well, at least for this morning.

"Tim..." he heard someone call his name. How did beanpole boy know his name when Tim remembered nothing? He looked up from the coffee maker to see a very well-endowed young man standing naked in the doorway.

"How old are you?" was the first thing that popped out of Tim's mouth.

"24."

"Don't lie to me!"

"Oh, okay, I'm almost 18, but I've got an ID that says I'm 24. I stole it from my brother. We look alike and we're about the same size."

"How tall are you?" Tim was bewildered that this creature was standing here in his house and that he couldn't remember him. That enormous *thing* hanging between his legs should have been easy to remember.

"Six five."

"Okay..." Tim said. "Now, here comes the good part. Who the hell are you and what are you doing in my house?"

"My name's Joey," the boy said. "Man, I knew you were messed up last night, but I didn't think you were that far gone. You passed out before we even got around to doing anything."

"Thank God for that," Tim said under his breath. He wondered if Joey was the kid's real name, but it would have to do for now. "Where did I meet you, Joey?"

"On 18th Street... you were coming out of the Midnight Sun, and I was trying to bum a smoke from someone..."

"Not the Midnight Sun, again," Tim said. "I will never set foot in there again as long as I live and if I..."

"You said you were fresh out of smokes," Joey interrupted, "and then I asked you what time it was, but you weren't wearing a watch and then I asked you to buy me a drink but you just kept walking. I followed you into Moby's 'cause I knew they'd serve me. The bartender already carded me earlier. You said you were on your way home, and I said that was cool and could I come along, but all you wanted to do

was talk about some guy named Nick. Hey, do you have a cigarette?"

"No, I don't smoke." Tim shook his head. "Neither should you."

The smell of fresh-brewed coffee drifted in from the kitchen and more of Sunday's misadventures started coming back now. There was still a big gap between South of Market and hitting the Castro bars, but Tim remembered himself in the crosswalk of 18th and Hartford where some tall kid was hassling him. He missed Nick so much by that time of night that it made him mad, and the angrier he got, the drunker he got. The more frustrated he was, the less he cared that he'd already had too much to drink.

Obviously... Nick didn't care either. Nick would rather be off in New Orleans at his stupid cousin's funeral than here in San Francisco with him, so why should Tim care about Nick? If his stupid cousin was so stupid that he got himself tossed off a bridge naked into shallow water in the middle of the night, then that was just... stupid! Tim could act stupid too if he wanted to. He'd show 'em!

And now it was the morning after and here was this very tall stranger in his house, and Tim really felt... stupid. "Where do you live, Joey?"

"Well... I *was* staying with some friends over in North Beach, but I kind of got kicked out. My stuff is still over there, though. I gotta go get it as soon as I find a place. How about if I bring it over here for a while? You got plenty of room..."

"NO!" Tim shouted, forgetting how much it would hurt to shout. Why did he ask? He didn't want to hear about someone else's messed up life when he had his own. Well, it never hurt to be polite. "Do you want a cup of coffee?... Joey?"

"Yeah, with sugar."

Tim poured them each a cup and watched Joey stir several spoonfuls of sugar into his. The kid, still naked, spun a kitchen chair around and straddled it backwards as if he were trying to be modest. Then he slid forward in the chair until the slats reminded Tim of a glory hole. He watched Joey blow on the

coffee until he could take a couple of sips and then he added more sugar. "I'm not even queer," he said. "I just like to make a few easy bucks now and then. I used'ta have a girlfriend and stuff. It's a full ten inches hard. I get lots of offers, but I don't do nothin' with guys except let'm blow me. I can shoot it off three, four times a day... sometimes more..."

"How lucky for you...do you want to take a shower before you go?"

"Yeah, man, that'd be great."

"That's a clean towel on the hook inside the door."

"Then you can do me, okay?"

Tim just shook his head. As soon as he heard the water running, Tim went back to the bedroom and found his wallet on the floor. His credit cards and driver's license were intact, but it was empty of cash. He tried to remember how much he took with him on Sunday, but it was no use. He looked through Joey's pockets, but they were empty, too. Then Tim spotted a pair of boots in the corner. Nearly two-hundred bucks was stuffed deep into one of the toes. Tim looked at where he stashed his tips in the back of a drawer of socks and underwear. There were still several twenties and some smaller bills under a heavy bowl of coins. At least the kid didn't go through his dresser.

Tim tugged the sheets off the bed. He thought he might burn them and remake the bed with clean linens if his head ever stopped pounding. When Joey came out of the bathroom, Tim was sitting on the side of the bed holding his wallet in his hand. "Tell me something, Joey. How much money did you take?"

"Only what we agreed on..."

"How much?"

"Fifty bucks... that's five dollars an inch." Joey tossed the towel over his shoulder and stroked himself. "You want it now? I can get it up."

"No, I don't think so, Joey." Tim reached behind him and then held out the money he'd found in Joey's boot. "If you

only charge fifty, why was there almost two hundred bucks in your boot?"

"Gimme that!" The boy lunged. Tim threw the money up in the air and jumped to one side before Joey could attack him. The bills spread everywhere and settled onto the bare mattress while Joey grabbed for them.

"Where did you get all that money?" Tim stood so that his body blocked the doorway and demanded an answer.

"It's none of your business, but I turned a couple of tricks yesterday before I met you. One was a regular over by Polk Street and then I met this old guy on Van Ness." Joey snatched up the money and reached for his clothes. "He was lots older than you. He said I could come back any time, and he was good, too. He took his teeth out and everything. I just shut my eyes and pretended it was my old girlfriend."

"Your old girlfriend didn't have any teeth?"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. Geez, I hate a smartass!"

"Just get dressed, Joey—if that's your real name—and get the hell out of my house!" Tim's headache was worse than ever, but he didn't care any more. He hated hustlers, and he hated himself for feeling that way. He was a sexually liberated guy, after all. To each his own, Tim wanted to say, but he just couldn't. Prostitution was a victimless crime until someone got hurt. What was he thinking? This kid wasn't even a serious hustler. He was just a street punk with a big dick who knew how to make some easy money with it now and then.

The boy tucked himself into his jeans, pulled his t-shirt over his head and slid his feet into his socks and boots like he was used to getting dressed in a hurry. He threw his jacket over one shoulder and headed for the stairs.

"Yuppie faggot!" Joey yelled back at Tim and slammed the door behind him.

Tim ran to the window and watched the kid turn right on Hancock, headed back toward Castro Street. Tim didn't know why he was so angry. At least his car was still parked in the

driveway, where it belonged. It was his own fault he'd gotten drunk enough to bring home an underage hustler.

"Fifty dollars is a small price to pay for a valuable lesson." Tim could hear his Aunt Ruth's voice in his head, even though he would never tell her about this adventure... or anyone else, most likely.

Chapter 19

Now it was Tim's turn to take a shower—long and hot. As the water ran down his back he thought of Jake's Aunt Gladys and her religious experience in Las Vegas. It scared him that he didn't remember big parts of yesterday, especially bringing home that young hustler. Tim felt poisoned, as if someone had slipped something into his drink. There was a time a while back he'd heard about that sort of thing happening in the Castro bars, but not lately. The "date-rape drug," they called it, but he couldn't make any sense of that. No one ever needed to drug Tim to coax him into sex.

Tim pulled on a pair of shorts and went into the guest room. This was the duplex Tim inherited after Jason's murder. The upper unit where Tim lived now was where Nick's grandparents had lived for many years. And this was the room where Nick used to sleep when he visited them while he was growing up. Tim wished he had known Nick when he was a boy. They could have been best friends and grown up together, with Nick as the big brother Tim never had, someone to guide him through puberty, through all the mysterious changes of his body, and they could have been lovers even then, growing up.

Tim intended to paint this room, but not today. Damn, he missed Nick!

It was still cool outside, but the sun was bright, and Tim felt guilty for wasting the day indoors with a hangover. He tossed a beach towel and a paperback into his backpack and headed out. He wanted to go to the beach, but he didn't trust himself to drive with the shakes. He walked to the Noe Hill Market for a bottle of orange juice and an apple and then ambled down 19th Street to Dolores Park. By the time he crossed the footbridge he knew he would live.

Lots of other people must have had the same idea. It was Monday, but they couldn't all be waiters, bartenders, hairdressers and tourists, could they? Tim usually recognized someone he knew, but not today. Some were the early retired, men on disability with HIV. They were the ones who waited for years for an opportunistic infection to take hold, but with the current drugs they might have a chance at a normal life.

The park was serene as Tim spread his towel and pulled his t-shirt over his head. The noise of a helicopter filled the air as it came into view high over the palm trees on Dolores Street. Tim watched it bank above the park and then head north where a plume of thick black smoke snaked out of the Tenderloin. Tim kicked off his shoes, took a sip of juice and reached into his backpack for the Altoids box. If anything could take the teeth out of his hangover, a couple of hits of good grass might do the trick. Tim took a deep toke off a joint; then he found a pen and paper and wrote:

Dear Nick,

I miss you.

I got way too drunk last night! Nothing happened this time either, but you wouldn't know if you just walked in. I'll never set foot in the Midnight Sun again, that's for sure. I know... "Never say never"... and it's not the bar's fault. The Edge makes stronger drinks. Hell, my Aunt Ruth pours stronger drinks than they do at the Sun...

Tim crumpled up that sheet of paper and started over:

Dear Nick,

I miss you.

If only you were here, last night wouldn't have happened. Or if I could be in New Orleans with you, but that's not my fault, either. It was that drunken nephew of Theodore's from L.A. I keep looking for someone to blame like this is a fault-finding mission. I must be stoned. Oh, right. I AM stoned.

Anyway...I miss you.

Maybe we were going too fast, but it felt so good, you know? It felt so right ever since the first time we were together, and it seems like there's never enough time to be with you, even when things are going fine... especially then.

Tim took another hit off the pipe and another swig of juice. More sirens screamed in the distance but the helicopter had disappeared, and the thick black smoke in the Tenderloin was only a wisp of white now.

I miss you, Nick.

I drank way too much last night. Again, that's not your fault, but when I'm with you I'm satisfied with a couple of tokes of your Humboldt weed and a beer or two. I know it's corny, but I get high on that wicked smile of yours when I know you're horny for me, and you're just as happy to be hanging out together as I am.

Damn, I miss you.

I woke up this morning to a big surprise. I thought you were there, like you just showed up in my bed during the night, and I was so glad. But it wasn't you, of course. It was a teenage hustler with a 10-inch dick who ripped me off for at least fifty bucks. He said he was straight. What's worse is I don't even know how much money he took because I can't remember what I had with me or how much I spent earlier.

I miss you.

I drove back from the river Sunday morning and had breakfast at Arts. I remember that much. Then I went south of Market. The Eagle patio was packed with some benefit. I saw some customers I knew from Arts. Then I went to the Lone Star after that and ran into Teddy—I mean Theodore. He said Leonardo was home in bed with the swine flu. I forgot about that part until right now. That's scary stuff. People our age are dying from it. He asked about you and I told him you were out of town.

Jeez, I miss you.

If you were here, you wouldn't have let me drive like that. I was so relieved to see the car in the driveway this morning. I don't remember coming home from South of Market or going back out again. I can't believe I let that kid follow me home. I mean, nothing happened between us, I'm sure. He said so. He said he was straight, too. Did I mention that? He was an all-purpose hustler, just out for some quick cash.

I'm in Dolores Park. It's a beautiful day and I'm stoned, and I'm not going to drink today. I might never drink again. I'll go to Safeway later and stock up on food and stay in tonight and watch television. If there's nothing good I can watch an old movie. I found another box of VHS tapes in the basement, every movie Bette Davis was in, from 'Cabin in the Cotton' through 'The Whales of August' in chronological order. They must have been Karl's.

Tomorrow I'll start painting the guest room. I was thinking of you sleeping there, how I wish we could have been kids together... buddies... like brothers. You must have been so cute. Maybe time isn't the way it seems, but it would have been great to know you then.

I miss you, Nick.

Yes, tomorrow I will paint all day until it's time to go to work. Then on Wednesday I will paint all day and on Thursday I will do the same. I should finish easy by Friday.

*I hope you'll be back here this weekend, and I can see you
before you have to go up north.*

Love,

Tim

Tim walked over to the statue of Miguel Hidalgo Y Costilla. He stood near the footbridge where he had once scattered Jason's ashes among the yellow daisies and red cosmos. He held his letter to Nick by the corner and pulled out his lighter. The ashes of paper flaked away until the flame reached his fingertips. Nick would never believe that he didn't have sex with Joey.

The ice cream vendor's bells reached Tim's ear and brought another craving to mind. Munchies. Tim craved something cold, sweet and creamy, richer than anything he could buy at the little white cart that was down by the children's' playground. He strapped both arms through his backpack and walked across the park to the Bi-Rite Creamery. He needed salted almond in a sugar cone. On a hot day the line would be a mile long, but it wasn't too bad right now. Sun worshippers must be more plentiful than stoners on Mondays.

Tim finished his ice cream by the time he'd walked to Mission Street. Each block of this neighborhood had produce stands with their brightly-colored bounty pouring out onto the sidewalks. Tim picked out a bunch of bananas, tomatoes and oranges. In the back of the store, the butcher displayed cuts of meat with signs in Spanish. Tim could only guess what part of which animal some of them came from, but he was sure that their cost was a fraction of supermarket prices. He bought some pork chops and a pound of hamburger. He would wonder later, when he got them home, whether they were really pork and beef.

Back out on the sidewalk, Tim heard someone call his name. It was his friend from work. "Hey, Jake! What are you doing here?"

"I just live a couple of blocks from here."

"Oh yeah. I forgot."

"I like to stop by the Mission Cultural Center on the first Monday of the month to see if my dentist is there."

"The what? Where?"

"The dirty bookstore." Jake pointed toward Mission News. "My dentist. He's so hot. I've run into him there a few times."

"You're having sex with your dentist through a glory hole?"

"Only the first time. We've gotten to the point in our relationship where we go into the same booth together now."

"Why not take him back to your apartment? Or his? Next time you're in his chair you could make a date to go someplace else."

"Oh no, he's not *gay*. He's married with kids. They live in the Richmond, upstairs from his clinic... second generation. My family has been going to his father since I was a kid. His wife is the hygienist."

"Wow, don't you think she suspects anything? Doesn't it bother you?"

"Why should it? I'm not gonna blow his *cover*, just his cock. I don't want to marry him."

"I guess not," Tim said. "Seeya at work."

Tim watched Jake cross Mission Street toward Thrift Town and head east down 17th Street. Then Tim looked up and remembered when the building had huge letters on the roof: "17 REASONS WHY" spelled out across the skeleton of a billboard. He never knew what the seventeen reasons were or what the question was.

Seventeen reasons for what?

Why seventeen?

Why not?

The sign was gone now. A real billboard was in its place, but as often as Tim had looked at it, he still couldn't remember what it advertised. The old one was more effective and far more interesting, even though no one knew what it meant. It had gone the way of the litter of Doggie Diner heads that were once spread out across San Francisco. Now there was only one left on Sloat Boulevard out near the zoo. Tim missed the quirky things. He arrived in San Francisco too late for Pam Pam's or Zim's or Clown Alley or the original Mel's Drive-In, but Artie spoke so longingly about those long-gone restaurants and the City of Paris department store that Tim felt as if he missed them, too. Mostly he just missed Nick.

Tim crossed Dolores Park above the tennis courts on his way to Hancock Street and home. He thought about Jake and his dentist, and Tim had to admit there were all kinds of relationships in the world, ranging from anonymous sex to couples who seemed fused at the hip for eternity and everything in between.

Every human body and mind has its own needs, its own comfort level and degree of willingness to make a commitment. Straight men were no different, were they? Some only wanted a good blow job now and then, something they maybe couldn't get at home. The only difference with gay men was that they could have as much sex as they wanted, as often as they liked, with as many willing partners as they could find. Who wouldn't want that? Tim was still stoned. He watched a shirtless tennis player jump and spin, as sexy as all get-out.

With so many kinds of people in the world, it was a wonder that any two individuals ever settled down, especially two gay men. But God, he missed Nick right now!

Chapter 20

Tim kept a low profile all that week, not drinking, not smoking much pot, hitting the gym three days and making real headway on the apartment. Ruth didn't forget about her nephew, but her thoughts were also on Sam these days, and she wondered when he would return from his long trip.

On Friday, Artie warned Ruth he'd be late to work. Scott was on a week's vacation, so Ruth had to set up the bar, something she was quite capable of handling all by herself by now, *thank you very much*.

Artie had several prospective tenants lined up to see the vacant apartment on Collingwood Street, Ben and Jane's old place. All Ruth cared about was that they weren't clompers and stompers, especially on mornings when she wanted to sleep in. She wasn't really worried. For as old as the building was, it wasn't noisy. She'd rarely heard a sound from upstairs, even when little Sarah ran around and dropped her dolls on the floor. Besides that, Ruth thought she'd be spending a lot more time down in Hillsborough soon.

She was surprised to see Artie walk in the door only a few minutes after she opened. "Artie, I thought you were going to be late. I hope you didn't rush down here on my account. I do know how to set up the bar by myself, you know."

"Well, I didn't know how long it would take. I put it on Craigslist and said I'd show the place from noon to five, but you know how that goes. I didn't think I'd get a big response on a Friday afternoon, but I thought for a while it might take all night."

"How did it go? Did you find the perfect tenants?"

"I think so. They're a sweet young gay couple. One is a MUNI driver, and the other is a mailman. Talk about job security. I interviewed a couple of young dykes I liked. They loved the place, but it was too small for them, and they had a good-sized dog. It's just as well. With Teresa upstairs, you in Tim's old place and Malcolm defecting from the male gender to become Marcia, it would have left Arturo and me as the only men in the building." Artie laughed.

"That's wonderful news. When will I get to meet them?"

"They're going to stop in sometime. I told them to introduce themselves to the lady bartender if I'm not here. I want them to meet Arturo for his final say-so, but I have a good feeling about them. They're decent kids."

"It will be nice having new neighbors in the building," Ruth said, hoping she was right.

"You wouldn't believe some of the others who came to look at the place. One prissy queen acted like she was renting a suite at the Ritz Carlton. She wanted the whole place repainted, as if we hadn't just done that. And then she wanted to talk me down on the price, which is very reasonable for this neighborhood."

"I'm sure it is."

"Another one poked around in all the cupboards. He looked inside the oven, and he must have opened the refrigerator door at least eight times. I told him there was nothing in there, and it's not as if he was a big eater! He was skinny as a rail. Must have been speeding his tits off!"

"Oh, my." Ruth smiled and nodded as Artie counted his opening bank into the rear cash register.

"I had a pot of coffee on, but one lady asked me for a cup of herbal tea, instead. Can you imagine? She could see that

the kitchen was bare. Where do people get the idea that the world revolves around them? Really!"

"I'm glad you've found some nice new tenants, Artie. Did you tell them about the rest of us? The other tenants?"

"Yes, I told them Arturo and I live on the top floor with Teresa next-door. I warned them that she might be noisy when she's drinking and that's most of the time, but at least she goes to bed early. I mentioned that Marcia used to be a boy and neither one of them batted an eyelash. That was another good sign, I thought. Besides, Marcia's out of town half the time, and when she is home she's quiet as a mouse. You're the only one I told them they'd have to worry about with your wild parties and strange men coming and going at all hours of the day and night."

"Ha-ha-ha. Very funny."

"What have you been doing with yourself all week, Ruth?"

"Nothing much. Puttering around the apartment, mostly, you know, settling in," Ruth said, but the truth was she'd spent hours at the public library and on the Internet researching HIV and AIDS, determined to find out all she could about that horrible virus and the effects it'd had in the past couple of decades not only on this neighborhood, but the world. "I don't mean to change the subject, but how is Tim? I haven't seen him since last Sunday, and we haven't even talked on the phone in a couple of days."

"He's fine. He's been coming into work at the last minute, though. He said he's working hard on the house, fixing up the guest room. He seems to be on a roll with it."

"That's good to hear."

"Oh, and another thing..." Artie said, and then paused.

"What is it?"

"Well, I noticed that he hasn't been drinking this week. It's not that he drank a lot, but—you know our policy, we trust our employees. As long as you do your job, the rest is none of our business. If things get out of control, then we have

to step in like we did with Patrick, but that was when he got mixed up with that awful crystal meth."

"Yes, I barely knew Patrick, but I remember the incident."

"Well, Tim has never had any problem as far as I could tell," Artie said. "He's always happy to join in when somebody buys a round of drinks, and he'll usually sit down at the end of his shift, have a drink or maybe a shot of something if it's been a rough night—unless he's got a date waiting for him."

"He's like the rest of us in that way, I suppose," Ruth agreed.

"Not this week, though. He comes in and does his job and goes straight home afterward. He never mentions Nick, and he seems a little down, but maybe he just wants to get his house together."

"That must be it," Ruth said. Maybe Artie was right. Maybe Tim was just getting his apartment in shape before Nick got back to town. Maybe they had talked over the phone and everything was fine, but she still wondered. "By the way, where's Phil tonight? He's usually here by now, isn't he?"

"He asked for the weekend off, said something about a sick relative up north."

"Does he have a car?"

"Oh yes, I guess so. He must have."

"Hmm, I see." Ruth didn't think a *sick relative* sounded like a real excuse for anything, but maybe Tim's mysterious animosity toward Phil was just rubbing off on her.

"Ruthie, since it's so quiet out here, I want to go tell Arturo about the new tenants. Just holler at me in the kitchen if you get busy, okay?"

Ruth knew that Arturo's approval of the new tenants was a mere formality. He trusted Artie with any tenant decisions just as he trusted Artie to handle the personnel for the bar and restaurant. Artie had always been more of a "people" person while Arturo liked to stay in the background.

The after-work crowd soon filled up the bar stools, but Ruth could handle it. She looked up at one point and saw an

elderly lady dressed all in black with a silver-handled cane. She didn't appear to need the cane, but she carried it like part of a costume. She sat on the last stool in the front corner against the wall, from where she surveyed the room.

Ruth placed a cocktail napkin down between them. "Hello, what can I get for you?"

"Do you have any rye whiskey?" the old lady asked. "I'd like a rye Manhattan on the rocks, please. Not too sweet."

"Coming right up."

"And also," the old lady looked around the room, "could you point out the young man named Timothy Snow?"

Ruth nearly dropped the sweet vermouth. "Tim?" Ruth checked her watch. "He should be here any minute. He's never late to work, although he's cutting it close."

"Punctuality is an important virtue. It says a great deal about a person's character."

"I can assure you that Tim is virtuous," Ruth said, feeling defensive for her nephew. *Where was he, anyway? And who was this woman asking questions about him?* Tim was due to start work at five, and it was past that now, although nobody was waiting for dinner this early. Ruth hadn't seen the other waiters either, and she wasn't sure whether Jake or James was on the schedule tonight with Tim. "I meant to say that he's a young man of fine character, but you'll forgive me for being biased. I am his aunt, you see. My name is Ruth Taylor."

"I hoped you might be." The old lady gave Ruth a weak smile.

Ruth wiped her fingers on a bar towel and extended her hand, but at that moment the front door burst open and Jake flew in. He had a dozen rings in each ear and a new gold stud through his left eyebrow. Ruth hoped the old lady didn't think this was Tim.

"Hi, Ruth, how are you? I hope I'm not late." Jake stopped cold and turned to the old lady. "Oh, my God. You're Amanda Musgrove, aren't you? I'm a huge fan. I've just started re-reading *Three French Coins*. It's here in my backpack, somewhere. Would you autograph it for me, please?"

Ruth piped up, "This is Jake. He's one of the other waiters."

"How do you do, Jake," the old lady said. "I thought perhaps you were a salesman from the Sarah Coventry Jewelry company. I certainly hope your family owns stock."

Jake was oblivious to her remark as he searched his bag for the tattered paperback. "Here's the book," Jake said, handing it to her with a pen.

"Hmmm." Mrs. Musgrove took the book and frowned. "If you'd had a hardcover copy I might have looked for a fountain pen from my purse, but I guess this old Bic will do for a paperback. How did you recognize me, young man? My photograph never appears on the covers of my books."

"I saw that interview you did on TV last year when *Esmeralda's Dilemma* came out. I bought that one in hardcover, but I don't have it with me."

"What a dreadful interview that was. They might have assigned it to someone who had read the book. I wondered if that imbecile had ever read any book. I have never been subjected to such insipid questions." She signed the paperback with a flourish and handed it back to Jake. "I'm glad to hear you bought the hardcover of that one, by the way. I'd be happy to autograph it for you another time."

"Thanks, Mrs. Musgrove. I thought that interviewer was awful, too," Jake said. "But you were great! I kept hoping you'd tell him off. That would have been funny."

Mrs. Musgrove responded with a sniff.

"I wanted to go back and re-read this one because it was where you introduced Detective Blake. It's out of print now, so I was lucky to find a paperback copy." Jake glanced at his watch. "Excuse me, please. I have to get to work."

Jake started toward the kitchen and turned back. "Oh, Ruth, Tim called to say he's running late. He asked me to set up both our tables. It was an honor to meet you, Mrs. Musgrove."

...

So this was Nick's grandmother. Ruth finally had a chance to shake hands with the old woman. It was bad enough that Ruth didn't recognize her and Jake did, but even worse that Tim was late to work today, of all days. Ruth served her other customers and returned to the lady. "I was sorry to hear about your loss, Mrs. Musgrove. Did you go to New Orleans for the funeral of...?"

"Nathan, the deceased—he was a distant relation, the grandson of my late husband's brother. I barely remember him, but I understand that he and Nicholas were friendly when they were boys. My husband and I traveled so much then." She looked down and fussed with her purse, but Ruth didn't interrupt. She hardly knew what else to say if that nephew of hers didn't get his butt in here to work *yesterday*.

"Yes, I went along with the rest of the family. The Musgroves are a huge clan in the South. I am merely related by marriage, but after having lived a long life and achieving some small fame as a writer, they've adopted this old Yankee girl as if I were their matriarch."

"I'm sure they admire you, Mrs. Musgrove," Ruth said with a cheery smile.

"I'd prefer that you call me Amanda, and I'll call you Ruth, if you don't mind. Why, even the former Governor of Mississippi likes to call me 'Cousin Amanda.' I won't have this bejeweled Jake on a first-name basis, but you and I are adults, and we have a great deal in common, I believe. By the way, I'm not wearing mourning clothes, if that's what you thought. I always dress in black."

"Oh," Ruth was taken aback by the old lady's frankness. "Was there a particular reason you wanted to see Tim?"

"Because of my grandson, of course. Nicholas is very dear to me, and I was happy to spend some time with him in New Orleans, but he seemed overly distraught over his cousin's death. I heard that Nathan was on his way to pay Nick a visit, but it still didn't make sense. They hadn't seen each other in years. Nicholas was suffering, but it had nothing to do with

mourning Nathan. He was upset about something else entirely, and I finally got it out of him. Nick is quite smitten with your nephew. He may be stubborn and headstrong, but aside from all that, my grandson is an extremely sensitive man."

"You could just as well be describing Tim," Ruth said.

"Nicholas is also quite practical," she added, as if that made all the difference in the world. "I like to think he might have inherited that virtuous trait from me."

"That's one way in which Tim is very different." Ruth sighed. "Sometimes I doubt he knows the meaning of the word. Oh, good. Here he comes, now."

Tim rushed in the door and leaned across the bar to give his aunt a peck on the cheek. "Hi, Aunt Ruth... I'm sorry I'm late. I finished painting the ceiling in the guest room. Is Jake here? He said he'd cover for me." Tim looked down at his hands and scraped a chip of green paint off his right thumbnail.

"Yes, Jake is here," Ruth said. "There's someone else here, too. This lady came to meet you, Tim. Amanda, I'd like to introduce my nephew, Timothy Snow. Tim, this is Nick's grandmother, Mrs. Amanda Musgrove."

"Oh," Tim said, startled. He wasn't sure how he'd pictured his first meeting with any of Nick's family, but this wasn't it. Maybe he'd never pictured meeting them at all, as if he and Nick could exist in a vacuum, just the two of them in one big bed with a crackling fire in the woodstove and a bottle of wine.

Well, Nick had met Tim's Aunt Ruth, so this was bound to happen, too. If he and Nick got back together, Tim would eventually have to meet his mother and father as well. Thank goodness Nick was an only child, like Tim. Were he and Nick going to stay together? They'd never seemed farther apart than they were right now.

"How do you do, Mrs. Musgrove? I'm very happy to meet you." Hadn't Nick said she was a writer? Yes, a mystery writer. And Tim hadn't bothered to read any of her books. What did he know about mysteries? The only books he'd read

lately were in that box Arturo gave him. They were by gay writers from the last couple of decades, not some old woman who looked like she belonged in a sepia print in an oval frame. Tim hoped he could get through this without insulting her or embarrassing himself.

"How do you do, young man? Late to work, I see."

"I'm never late... not usually, I mean. And I called ahead. Jake owed me one, anyway. It's not as if I..." Tim had a terrible thought. "Mrs. Musgrove, is Nick all right? Nothing's happened to him, has it?"

She looked Tim up and down without a word. When she broke the tense silence, she still didn't answer his question. "Your aunt makes an excellent Manhattan. I think I'll have another, if I may. Nick's mother, my daughter-in-law, is doing some early Christmas shopping, and she'll be picking me up here soon, but I think I should have time for one more."

"Of course," Ruth said.

Tim smiled, yet inside he cringed at the thought that he might have to meet Nick's mother *and* grandmother on the same day, with Nick not even there to introduce them. And he was *late* to work. Tim looked down and noticed a spot on his shirt.

"My grandson has told me a great deal about you, young man." Mrs. Musgrove turned back to face Tim again. Nick never sounded like he was scared of her; Tim wondered why he was so shaky.

"I-I don't know what to say," Tim stammered. "I'm hoping to see him as soon as I can. We have to get some things straightened out. Do you know when he's coming home?"

"I happen to know that he has a flight on United Airlines arriving tomorrow morning at about 10.A.M. If I were you, I should meet him at the airport with a smile and a box of chocolates. Don't bring him flowers. He grows them, you know. That would be a bit 'coals to Newcastle,' wouldn't it?"

"Thanks a lot for the advice," Tim said.

"You're welcome, Timothy. Now, you had better get to work, hadn't you? Your aunt and I have matters to discuss."

Tim couldn't hear their conversation, but all he cared to know was that Nick would be home tomorrow. He might have protested if he'd overheard his Aunt Ruth call him impractical, even though it was true.

It was one of those nights at work where the hours dragged by. But no matter how difficult the customers were, Tim thought about tomorrow and kept telling himself that everything would be okay soon.

When Ruth had a lull behind the bar, Amanda Musgrove caught her attention. "I know you're awfully busy dear, but my grandson told me while we were in New Orleans about your involvement with catching a serial killer here in the neighborhood."

"Why, yes." The whole sordid affair had only happened a few months ago while Ruth was here on a summer vacation to visit Tim. Now that it was fall, those days felt like ancient history."

"You know I'm a mystery writer, Ruth, so I'm always curious to hear about real-life stories from people who were there at the time. Eyewitness accounts can be so much richer than anything you read in the papers."

"I suppose that's true." Ruth was very fond of Nick, and she knew that Tim was desperate to patch things up with him again. If getting to know Nick's grandmother would help, the least she could do was try. So between serving drinks to other customers, Ruth told the old lady the whole story from the day she arrived in San Francisco when Tim found Jason's bloodied body through all the other murders until the day that Ruth buried the fireplace poker in the killer cowboy's back. Ruth made a drink for herself before she got to that part and then she had to back up her story because she forgot to tell about finding the knife.

When Amanda Musgrove pulled a small notebook out of her big black purse and scribbled some notes, Ruth felt almost like a celebrity. Then Nick's mother arrived in a great hurry. She and Ruth got a brief introduction, Amanda bid her thanks and adieu, and the two Mrs. Musgroves were off.

Tim came up to the bar with a tray of empty glasses and a large drink order just after they left. Artie was on a break, so his Aunt Ruth made his drinks. "Is Nick's grandmother gone already?"

"Yes, Nick's mother came to get her."

"I'm sorry I didn't get to meet her." That was a lie. Tim was sorry he didn't *see* her, but after the grilling Nick's grandmother gave him, *meeting* the mother could wait.

"I barely met her either. She said she was double-parked and had trouble finding the place, so she was in a big hurry. She was tiny. Slight and fair. It's apparent where Nick got his blonde hair and beautiful eyes. He must have gotten his height from his father's side."

"I hope you had a nice visit with the older Mrs. Musgrove, anyway." Tim was glad his Aunt Ruth was there to make small talk with the old lady. She was always so much better at those things than he was.

"Well, yes, when I had time. She wanted to know about the murders this summer, and we'd just begun to discuss Nick's cousin's death when we ran out of time."

"She didn't like me very much, but maybe you should invite her to tea or something. You can catch each other up on all the grisly details."

"She's a stern woman, Tim, but she has nothing against you," Ruth insisted. "And I don't know about tea, but I'll be seeing her again very soon. We've already planned on it."

A dark car waited in the shadows on the main street of Guerneville, California that night. The driver turned the engine on every half-hour or so for heat and to keep the battery charged. He fiddled with the radio knobs and waited. There was no hurry. He'd waited so long already that he'd grown used to waiting.

Men stumbled in and out of the Rainbow Cattle Company on Main Street, mostly locals this time of year. Rain fell hard through the redwood trees for miles around. This storm had come in from the northwest, lashed the beaches up and down

the coast from Mendocino to Jenner-by-the-Sea. Rain poured down like nails through redwood needles and every now and then the wind picked up. That was the dangerous time. Even a light breeze could knock loose one of the dead hanging branches caught up high in the old-growth trees. Widow-makers, the old timers called them when they pummeled down like cannon balls. They could crash through a skylight easily or put a big dent in the hood of a car. They could break a man's neck if he was unlucky or foolish enough to be out for a walk in the woods on a night like this.

The driver flipped on the windshield wipers whenever headlights showed a car pull up and park on Main Street. He was waiting for someone in particular, but he hadn't had any luck so far. He'd made mistakes, and he would no doubt make more. Some were a while ago and some were recent. None of that mattered to him. People got hurt. He didn't feel guilty. People should look out for themselves. He did.

Chapter 21

Tim sat down at his computer before he went to bed and did some research on New Orleans, so it was no wonder he dreamed about it that night. His Aunt Ruth would have called it “research” but to Tim he was just poking around, trying to keep himself from exploring the old gay sites like *dudesurfer.com*, the only one he still had a membership for.

Tim had never been to New Orleans and hoped that someday Nick might take him and show him around. He read that *a recent poll of major US cities ranked New Orleans, the city of Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner, second only to San Francisco in terms of gay friendliness, food and dining*. That made sense to Tim, especially the gay friendliness, not so much the dining, but he didn’t often “dine” outside of the Castro.

He read on...

In the same poll New Orleans was voted last in safety and cleanliness and near the bottom as a family vacation destination. New Orleans lies geographically just beneath the Bible belt, in the moist, fragrant crotch of the country. The fundamentalist form of Christianity that pervades so much of middle-America takes a distant backseat in New Orleans to Voodoo and the Catholic Church, which are not mutually exclusive. Maybe that fact—and racism—were

some of the reasons that the only things more shocking than the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 were the governmental blunders that followed. "At least 1,500 people died in Louisiana and some are still unaccounted for, but the dead won't stay buried in the soft sand, damp silt and organic soils, called 'marsh' in New Orleans."

That line gave him a chill, but the next part was even creepier:

Large parts of St. Bernard, Jefferson and Orleans parishes are below sea level and sinking. Since the earliest of times, cemeteries were built aboveground, and New Orleans is one of the oldest cities in America. To save space, tombs are used again and again in these 'cities of the dead.' Loved ones place the deceased's remains in a family tomb where the hot climate makes them decompose quickly. In a year or two, the bones can be swept into a communal pit to make way for the next occupant."

Nate Musgrove's body had been cremated, so only his ashes were placed in the Musgrove tomb. Tim figured that must have saved one major step.

One of the web-sites showed pictures of ferns growing from the cracks and chinks even high up the sides of the old mausoleums where bones turned to dust lie in growing piles from one generation to the next. Tim read how some of the newer cemeteries out Metairie way had separate buildings just for cremains and looked at pictures of the above-ground graves with small metal vents in their sides to... let the fresh air in, or to let the spirits out? Who knew?

Here the birthdates and death dates were mostly twentieth century. It was hard to find any before the 1940s. This was where Nick stopped again on his last day in New Orleans to wander among the marble slabs and little death houses to say one last goodbye to his cousin, whose death was still a mystery, and to say goodbye to New Orleans, too.

Nick hadn't been here in years, and would have had no idea how many more years it might be before he returned.

It had rained hard that morning, but the sun shone down in golden rays through the breaking black clouds. It lit the garish plastic flowers people had left against the gray tombs of their loved ones. The air seemed even thicker in the cities of the dead than it did outside their stone walls. Rainwater formed pools and puddles between the rows of death where plaster angels kept watch.

Nick was about to turn and leave when a stranger stepped out from between the crypts. Even though the rain had stopped, he wore a large hat and carried an umbrella that shaded his face. "You're Nick Musgrove, right? From San Francisco?"

Nick jumped. "That's my name, but I don't actually live in the city. I have a place up north... Monte Rio on the Russian River."

"San Francisco is where your heart is, though... am I right?"

"Who are you? Tony Bennett?" Nick tried to make a joke, but the man didn't smile or extend his hand.

"The name is Oliver. Jason Oliver."

"I feel like I ought to know that name. You seem familiar, but I can't place you. Have we met before?"

"Only in passing, but that doesn't matter now. These cemeteries can be dangerous, even in the daytime. You shouldn't be here alone. Besides, you need to go home."

"My flight leaves early tomorrow morning."

"Good." The man tipped his hat and disappeared between the tombs.

Tim's dreams were wild all night long. He tossed and turned, got up for a drink of water and went to the bathroom again. He remembered he'd been dreaming about Nick in a cemetery in New Orleans and then Jason showed up. Tim's sleep patterns might have changed because he hadn't had a drink all week, but tonight he thought it had more to do with knowing Nick was coming home tomorrow.

When Tim had asked him, Nick had denied knowing Jason back then. They might have “crossed paths,” but nothing more, no sexual encounters. Tim always wondered, but maybe Nick was telling the truth. Maybe this was more than just a dream.

Jason was the first man Tim loved in San Francisco. Jason was the one who taught him so much about life. And Jason was the man who left Tim the red Thunderbird in his will plus this house and everything in it. Even after their affair was over, Jason was a man who looked out for Tim and maybe, Tim wanted to believe, *just maybe* Jason still watched over him in death.

Tim hadn’t even smoked pot lately. Well, not much. He’d had his first drink all week when he got off work. He felt that he deserved it, after having come under the scrutiny of Nick’s grandmother and barely missed meeting Nick’s mother, too.

Now he dreamed that Nick was boarding an airplane. He stowed his carry-on in the overhead bin and took his seat on the aisle surrounded by strangers. Music played in the background as Nick buckled his seatbelt and picked up the in-flight magazine. Tim knew the song; he just couldn’t think of its name. The lyrics had to do with changing your mind and being so in love you couldn’t get out. He remembered now... he’d stopped at the Edge for one more drink after he left work. They were playing oldies. Tim knew that song. *Emotional Rescue* by the Rolling Stones.

In Tim’s dream the song was as loud and clear as if he had on headphones. And now he did. He was in the cockpit, in the pilot’s seat. “There’s no one left to fly the plane.” Tim heard a voice in his head. It was Karen Black as Nancy Pryor in *Airport 75*, a flight attendant back when people called them stewardesses. Tim had run across the movie the other night in a box of old VHS tapes Jason left in the basement.

The plane accelerated, but lost altitude at the same time. Tim looked at the control panel, but he didn’t have a clue. He was above a freeway filled with cars and trucks and motor homes. The ground came closer and drivers swerved off the

road to get out of the way, some rolling over each other as they burst into flame. Tim pressed a lever and the enormous plane set down on the freeway, smooth as glass... but it still moved faster. Where were the brakes? How did the flaps come down? Which button was he supposed to push? An overpass loomed at the bottom of the hill. Even if the body of the plane fit under it, the wings would shear off.

Tim woke up shaking and turned on the television, but he couldn't find any news about a plane crash. He turned on the computer to look at the headlines. Nothing. Maybe it was just a regular nightmare like normal people have. Maybe it had no meaning, but didn't he always know? He could usually tell whether they came from that part of his brain that held his grandmother's "gift." Maybe it was something he ate. Or maybe this dream was about a far distant future or past or maybe it was someone else's problem. Even so, Tim decided he wouldn't fly again for a long time. Once Nick was home, Tim wouldn't let him fly either. He'd tie him down if he had to. Come to think of it, that might be a nice switch in their sex lives.

Thinking of Nick made him horny again, but it would only be a few more hours now. Tim put on the coffee, took a long shower and dressed in jeans and a pale blue t-shirt. Nick liked that shade of blue on Tim. Then he drove around looking for someplace to buy chocolates. What had Nick's grandmother said about charcoal and castles? He'd meant to Google that, but it was too late now.

Tim figured there must be racks of Ghirardelli chocolates near the sourdough bread at the overpriced airport gift shops. He glanced at his watch as if he could speed up time by wishing for it to go faster. Then he glanced at the speedometer and let up on the gas. The last thing he needed was a speeding ticket.

Tim still wasn't used to having a car. He'd spent years walking, running and riding public transportation. There was another great view over every hill in San Francisco. After

Tim grew familiar with Eureka Valley he discovered other San Francisco neighborhoods. He liked to climb onto a bus he didn't know just to see where it took him and then find his way home on foot. He didn't care much for the major bus lines crowded with tourists, the homeless and commuters, dead-faced and unaware. He liked the odd routes, the ones that ran only every half-hour or so, snaking a path up into a crevasse of toy houses to the top of another vista. They were the buses that carried little old ladies home from the hairdresser or the grocery store. The driver often knew them by name and dropped them off in front of their doors.

San Francisco was a great place to explore without a car, but Tim was glad to have one at a time like this. He parked as close to the terminal as he could. He didn't want to waste any time. Shuttles glided by on their overhead tracks like they were straight out of the *Jetsons* cartoon show. Tim raced into the terminal, bought the first box of chocolates he saw and stared up at the arrivals screen outside the security checkpoint. United flight 1233 from New Orleans to SFO was arriving at 9:51 a.m. That must be it. He was just in time.

Tim spotted a drunken woman with a hurricane glass who wore strands of beads, even though Mardi Gras was a long ways off. She must have been celebrating all night. Tim was surprised they'd let her on the plane, but her husband seemed to be holding her upright. A group of college-aged kids in t-shirts from bars on Bourbon Street carried shopping bags with pictures of hot sauce, spices and crawfish. Tim's heart raced. This had to be Nick's flight.

More shopping bags advertised Café du Monde and Pat O'Brien's. A young mother tried to quiet a screaming child by feeding him pralines. The sugar rush would only make things worse, Tim thought. He was glad he didn't have kids. He'd give that one a valium! Within a few minutes the crowd had passed by, and there was still no sign of Nick.

Tim went to the United counter and waited to speak to an agent, a cute redhead about his own age. Tim's 'gay-dar'

kicked in, along with an automatic smile. He could always flirt, even when his heart wasn't in it.

"Hello. How may I help you?"

"Hi... I was supposed to meet someone on a flight from New Orleans around ten o'clock. Is there any way that you could find out whether he was booked on this one that just landed?"

"What's the name?" The agent smiled back at Tim.

"Nicholas Musgrove," Tim said.

"M-U-S-G-R-O-V-E?"

"Yes, have you ever heard of Amanda Musgrove, the mystery writer?"

"Oh yes, I love her books!"

"Nick is her grandson," Tim said. He was never above a little name-dropping either, if he thought it would help. "She told me yesterday that Nick was coming in around ten o'clock and that I should bring him chocolates." Tim held up the box.

"His name isn't listed here, sorry."

"Is there another United flight from New Orleans?"

The redhead shook his head. "Are you sure it was SFO? There's a flight into Oakland through Denver at 9:46. Might your friend have been on that one? It was right on time... no, I take that back. It was early."

"Damn! Of course he could. His family lives in Alameda. Oakland would be the closest airport. I never thought of that. They went to a funeral in New Orleans, and he stayed on a few days afterward. Of course he'd be flying back through Oakland, the same way they went. And I'm way too late to meet him there. Geez, I'm so stupid!"

"Yes, here he is—Nicholas Musgrove—on the passenger manifest. United Flight 718 had a layover in Denver and landed in Oakland already. I'm really sorry." The agent smiled up sheepishly at Tim.

"That's okay. It's my own fault. Thanks for trying to help. I can't seem to pass up an opportunity to mess things up lately. You want a chocolate truffle?"

"Thanks, I'll save it for my break," he smiled and reached into the box. He knew how to flirt, too. "My name is Peter. Well, you probably already guessed that, since it's on my name tag, but anyway. Please tell Mrs. Musgrove she has a fan here at the United Airlines counter. And good luck finding your friend."

Tim looked around for a pay phone. Maybe now that Nick was back he'd have his cell phone turned back on. Didn't they make pay phones anymore? Not even for airports? Tim felt his blood boil up like he was about to have a panic attack. Then he stopped in his tracks and took a deep breath. His psychic ability was generally useless while he was awake, but he closed his eyes and pictured Nick and *knew* what he would be doing right now. Nick would have retrieved his luggage and caught a cab to Alameda by now where he'd left his truck at his parents' house. He would run in to take a leak, give his mother and grandmother a peck on the cheek, turn down their offer of coffee and/or breakfast, wave goodbye to his dad on the recliner and hit the road. He would be headed up Highway 101 to the Russian River as soon as he could. He'd told Tim on the phone from New Orleans that there was a lot of work to do when he got back, and Nick was always practical.

To hell with practical! Tim would drive north too, through the city, across the Golden Gate and all the way to Monte Rio. He was tired of telephones, misunderstandings, mistakes and mix-ups. He had to see Nick in person. That was the only way to patch things up between them. Tim didn't even stop at his house. He had a jacket and his backpack with his gym gear in the car. Anything else he needed he would buy.

The fog was thick on the Golden Gate Bridge, and Tim was cold with the top down, but once he came through the rainbow tunnel, the sunshine felt warm and everything would be fine. Tim longed for the day when he could drive to the Russian River and think only about the good times he and Nick would have once he got there. He could hardly wait

until this whole misunderstanding about Theodore's nephew, Craig, was long-forgotten.

In the back of Tim's mind, the river was still associated with trips that he and Jason took together, especially that weekend of his birthday when he first met Phil. That was the time he wanted to forget the most.

Tim could hardly believe his good luck that Phil was spending the night of his birthday with him instead of with Jason. He almost forgot how he was supposed to be mad at Jason for leaving him alone. Phil was amazing, and Tim was surprised with himself that he was able to let go and enjoy the sex so much. He might have been intimidated by someone he considered so far out of his league. Maybe it was the pot. He and Phil smoked a joint together too, as soon as they got back to the cabin. And they each opened a beer, but the bottles were still half full the next morning, one on each of the bedside tables, warm and flat.

They slept late and then had another go at it, foreplay to mutual orgasm without the greasy acrobatics of last night. Then they showered, and Tim offered Phil a ride somewhere, wherever he was staying or just back into town, but Phil said he wanted to walk; it wasn't far, and it was such a nice morning for it. He left Tim his business card—his name spelled out on a piano keyboard; it didn't mention his other, more lucrative business. And Phil already knew where Tim worked; they'd talked about it last night—where Tim and Jason knew each other from—but Tim never got around to asking whether Jason knew Phil before.

Tim remained in a state of woozy satisfaction all morning, even after Phil left. In the depths of his subconscious mind he stood in front of an enormous Wurlitzer jukebox. The columns of colors bubbled up like those old-fashioned candle-shaped Christmas tree lights. Tim stood on his tiptoes to drop a handful of coins into the slot. Then he pressed the buttons to play Diana Ross singing "Love Hangover" over and over and over again.

Tim took the Rohnert Park exit and drove by the nursery, just in case, but Nick's truck wasn't there, so he got right back on the freeway. When he finally reached the steep, narrow road to Nick's house in Monte Rio, the truck wasn't there yet either, but Tim would wait. It couldn't be long now. He set the parking brake on the Thunderbird and reached for the Altoids box in his backpack. He had just lit the joint when Nick's truck pulled up and parked behind the Thunderbird.

"Snowman!" Nick yelled and climbed down from the cab.

"Nick, I went to meet you at the airport in San Francisco. I didn't know you were flying into Oakland. Your grandmother said I should bring you some choc—"

Nick put his hand over Tim's mouth. "Hold on a minute. Whoa, there'll be plenty of time to talk." Nick took his hand from Tim's mouth and put his lips there. Then he wrapped his arms around him, moved his mouth to Tim's ear and closed his teeth on flesh just enough to make Tim wince. Nick whispered, "Help me carry the groceries inside. Then bed. Then talk."

Tim didn't say another word, as much as he wanted to. They stashed the perishables in the refrigerator and Nick said, "Come on. The rest can wait. I can't."

The two of them tore off their clothes and devoured each other. There would be plenty of time to talk about everything later.

Chapter 22

Ruth thought over the events of the night before while her coffee brewed. They came to mind backward and out of order. She and Artie had talked about Mrs. Musgrove while they balanced their registers and restocked the bar. Artie was thrilled that a *celebrity* had stopped in, even though he wasn't much of a reader. "Arturo should have met her," he told Ruth. "He's a big fan of her books. He reads everything."

"She'll be back, Artie. I'd be surprised if you hadn't seen her around before. You probably just didn't know who she was."

"I doubt it."

"Well, she lived on Hancock Street until this past summer—in the upstairs unit—the same place Tim lives now. She mentioned that she and her husband had been married over fifty years. They might even have come into the restaurant together.

"No, I would have spotted a woman like her," Artie disagreed. "I do remember hearing about some friends of Karl's parents who lived upstairs there when Jason had the place."

"They're the ones, all right," Ruth said.

"She must have seen a lot of changes in all these years. This was just a working-class neighborhood back then, mostly

Irish. The gays didn't start taking over until the early '70s. Let's see, the Summer of Love was back in '67, wasn't it?"

"That was just before my time, but when I was at Stanford we used to drive up to the city on weekends, and we could still see hippies on Haight Street. I don't remember coming to the Castro district at all."

"You probably wouldn't have. The gays took a while to spill over the hill and glitter-fy this old part of town. And I'm sure a lot of them got sidetracked on the paths through Buena Vista Park on their way." Artie laughed.

"Weren't you and Arturo here then?"

"No, we were still in Vietnam." Artie's laugh disappeared in an instant.

"I'm sorry, I must have forgotten." Ruth felt guilty, as if she'd brought up a sore subject, but she was awfully tired.

"I wish I could forget."

"I just hope that someday Tim might find the kind of happiness you and Arturo have together, Artie."

"I suppose he might, but married life isn't for everyone, you know. Sometimes I think the only reason Arturo and I are still together is that we have so much history. It would be hard to explain to someone who hadn't been through the war and then AIDS." Artie's voice trailed off. "Maybe Tim will settle down, and maybe he won't. It's not in everyone's make-up."

Ruth tried to bring the conversation back to the present. "Well, Artie... Mrs. Musgrove—Amanda—was here to check up on Tim because Nick is quite taken with him, according to her. She said it all came out while they were in New Orleans for that funeral. *And* she wanted to know my take on the murders here last summer. We were just getting started when her daughter-in-law came to pick her up. That was Nick's mother, the little blonde woman."

"I didn't see her either," Artie said.

"Amanda Musgrove wants to talk with me some more. I imagine she might want to use some of my impressions on that whole Roy Rodgers business in one of her plots. Wouldn't

that be exciting, Artie? Anyway, she'll be back. She said she would. And we exchanged phone numbers, too."

Ruth replayed the conversation in her head as she poured a cup of coffee and sat down with the *Chronicle* crossword puzzle. Whether or not Tim was one to settle down, Ruth wondered if *she* would. She felt settled here in Tim's old apartment, of course, or at least comfortable, but not permanent. Her thoughts drifted to Sam, somewhere off in Germany, and she looked forward to seeing him again any day now. What a charming man.

Ruth decided that a brisk walk this morning might do her a world of good. She also had a check to deposit from some of the furniture she'd left on consignment in Edina, so she pulled on her slacks and a sweatshirt and covered her head with a bandana. It was warm enough today that she didn't need a jacket just to walk down to the Bank of America at 18th and Castro. She thought she might walk over to Tim's place, too.

Ruth saw Teresa struggling with her keys at the front gate with her groceries piled high in a two-wheeled cart. She pressed the buzzer for her and said, "Teresa, did you finally buy a new cart?"

"Yes, I took your advice, Ruthie. I got a good one this time. Where are you off to? Do you have time for a Bloody Mary?"

"Thanks, Teresa, but I have to stop at the bank and then I thought I might walk over to Tim's place and see what's going on. We were so busy last night at Arts I hardly had time to talk to him."

"Well, have fun," Teresa said, "and I love your babushka, honey."

"My what?"

"That handkerchief on your head... you'd better be careful wearing that in this neighborhood, though. People will think you're into something kinky." Teresa laughed. "But I think that's only when they wear them in their back pockets. You're probably safe with it on your head like that."

"What on earth? It's just that my hair was such a mess. I don't even know where this came from. It's not mine. It just showed up in my laundry. Maybe it was in the dryer or maybe Tim left it behind. What do you mean? What's kinky about it?"

"You'll have to ask Tim about it," Teresa said in a stage whisper. "It's some kind of color code the gay boys use. Red, yellow, blue... they each have a meaning, depending on whether they're on the left or the right. You don't see them so much in the Castro anymore, but I think they still wear them South of Market. Lenny tried to explain it all to me once, but I wasn't paying much attention. What do I care?"

"I had no idea," Ruth said, bewildered. "It might belong to anyone who uses the laundry room in our building. I *will* have to ask Tim sometime. Maybe he just bought a red one to go with his red car."

Ten minutes later she was on Hancock Street. Tim's car wasn't in the driveway, but Ruth heard voices from the back of the house so she continued down the driveway. There was Sarah, chattering away with her dolls all seated around a card table. They were obviously having a tea party. "Hello, Sarah. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Sarah knocked one of the dolls off its chair, and it landed on its head in the dirt as she jumped up. "Auntie Ruth! Auntie Ruth! How are you, Auntie Ruth?"

"I'm fine, Sarah," Ruth picked up the little girl and kissed her cheek. "How are you, dear? I didn't mean to intrude on your tea party."

"That's okay," Sarah whispered. "I only play with them when I don't have real people to play with. Don't tell them that, though."

"Of course not, dear, it will be our secret," Ruth whispered back. "Sarah, I was hoping to run into Tim this morning, but his car is gone. Have you seen him today?"

"Yes, I saw Uncle Tim this morning, and he was happy again. Last week he was sad, but today he went to pick up Uncle Nick from a big silver airplane. They're gonna be

boyfriends again. And Grandpa called Mommy, and he's coming home tomorrow, and he's bringing me a present, and now everybody's gonna be happy again."

"Of course they will," Ruth said. "Everybody will be happy to see your grandpa, Sarah. I knew that."

Tim dreamed he was a barefoot boy of six. It was Saturday morning in South Minneapolis, and he was on the living room floor watching cartoons on TV, a bowl of cereal between his tanned legs in summer shorts. The fair and innocent Nell was tied to the railroad tracks while the useless Dudley Do-Right was off somewhere on the other side of the mountain. A fuse had been lit, and Tim could hear it sizzle. Dynamite. A railroad bridge. An anvil. He'd watched the Brendan Fraser movie the other night when there was nothing else on TV, but this cartoon also combined elements of the Roadrunner and Betty Boop, Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck and Goofy—all the classics. Goofy bore a striking resemblance to that guy named Fred who'd beat Tim so badly in the pool game at the Rainbow Cattle Company the other night. The next thing Tim knew, his parents' living room was gone. Tim was inside the television set. He was the one who was tied to the railroad tracks. He looked up at the handlebar moustache of Snidely Whiplash and recognized the face of Phil for just a second before he awoke to the smell of a wood-burning stove and remembered where he was: in Nick's bed in Monte Rio.

Tim opened his eyes to the dim light of late afternoon. The last rays of sun filtered through silhouettes of redwood trees outside the bedroom window. Tim yawned and tried to bring his hand to his mouth, but it wouldn't move. His gaze moved up the length of his arm and focused on his hand. Both wrists were tied to the bedposts with wide bands of leather, and he heard a wicked laugh. This was no dream.

Ruth thought Tim might be home any minute, and she didn't want to be standing in the driveway when he and Nick returned from the airport. She walked down 18th Street and

stopped at the ATM to deposit the check and heard a trio of middle-aged lesbians greet her at the corner. She recognized them from having been in for dinner at Arts last night. Ruth caught a glimpse of her reflection. Sam would be home tomorrow, and she was a mess, out in public with her hair in a... what was it Teresa had called it? A babushka? It was a kerchief to Ruth, but it obviously meant something different on Castro Street. *Oh, my!* She pulled it off with one finger and gave her head a quick shake, ran a hand through her hair and stuffed the square of red patterned fabric in her back pocket. "Oh, no!" she said out loud. "That's even worse!"

She shoved the handkerchief inside her bra and noticed the lesbians still smiling at her. Maybe they were waiting for the bus. Ruth tried to smile back. Sam would be home tomorrow, and she was already nervous. Why hadn't he called to let her know? He must have wanted to surprise her. How lucky that she had run into Sarah. Tim was right; that little girl really was a magical child. Ruth thought of Tim's friend, Rene, and wondered if he could squeeze her in on such short notice.

Ruth didn't want to run into anyone else she knew on Castro Street, so she crossed toward Harvey's and darted past the Badlands, turned left at the Edge and ran all the way up Collingwood to her gate. She called Rene the minute she got home.

"You're in luck, Miss Ruth," Rene told her on the phone. "I have a cancellation this afternoon at 6:30 sharp. Mai Ling has to leave early for a birthday party over in Chinatown, though, so I hope your nails don't need doing, 'cause she can't."

Ruth glanced down at her hands. The disinfectant they used in the sinks at Arts didn't make her hands look any younger, but her nails were strong. She could polish them herself.

"No, that's okay," she said. "I just need a little trim. Oh, who am I kidding? My hair is a total mess. Tim is preoccupied with his boyfriend, Sam is coming home tomorrow and I'm a wreck. I need you to work your magic on me, Rene. I'm desperate!"

She was embarrassed that she'd blurted out so much. It wasn't like Ruth to lose control, but a good hairdresser was as valuable as a therapist, she'd always thought. She didn't need a therapist at the moment, but she could use a confidante and what better friend could any modern woman have than a gay man? Tim was the closest person in her life in San Francisco, but he didn't count. He was too busy lately with his traumas over Nick.

There was Sam, of course. She adored him, but he wasn't someone to whom she could confess her insecurities. Rene took her little outburst in stride, thank heaven.

"Now, don't you worry your pretty little head, Miss Ruth. That's why I've been put here on God's green earth, honey, to work my magic. Now don't be late, you hear?"

"I wouldn't dream of it, Rene," Ruth assured him. "Thanks so much."

She was lucky to get Rene's last appointment of the day so that he could give her his undivided attention. She began to relax as soon as she sat down in his chair. "So tell me, Miss Ruth... how was your big first date with the Hillsborough honcho?"

"We had a wonderful evening." Ruth smiled as she remembered it as if it happened yesterday. "A lovely dinner at a restaurant called *Jardinière* and then we caught half of the symphony concert."

"*Jardinière*! My-my-my! So, are things getting serious now?"

"Sam is in Europe on business right now, but he's coming home tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, huh? Now, I know it's none of my business, Miss Ruth, but that didn't exactly answer my question. You just say so if I step out of line," he quickly added.

"No, it's quite all right." Ruth was enjoying the attention of his questions. She liked Rene, and this reminded her of when she got ready for her first date with Sam a few weeks ago. "Did I tell you he called me from Chicago? And he sent

me the most beautiful roses. I don't know what time he gets home tomorrow, but I'm sure I'll see him soon... That's part of the reason I needed to see you first. I was feeling a little mousy again, you know?"

"You'll be just fine when I'm through with you, Miss Ruth," he spun her chair around. "He'll want to take one look and sweep you right off your pretty little feet."

"That might be very nice, Rene."

"And how about that sexy nephew of yours. What's up with him these days? I haven't seen Miss Timmy in a month of Sundays."

"Tim has been busy..." Ruth paused. She knew that her nephew referred to Rene as a 'friend,' but she didn't know how close a friend. She didn't want to say anything that Tim wouldn't want known. "He's working his shifts at Arts, of course, and he spends a lot of time redoing his new apartment. He inherited a duplex, you know."

"Yes, Miss Jason's place on Hancock Street. I heard all about that."

Ruth smiled to think of Tim's very masculine former boyfriend referred to as 'Miss Jason,' but she went on, "Tim's been seeing a lot of Nick Musgrove too, of course, but that's had its rocky moments."

"No!" Rene stepped back.

"Do you know Nick?"

"I reckon so, if he's the only one around, but I didn't know those two had hooked up. Nicky has the famous grandma?"

"Why yes, Amanda Musgrove is a mystery writer. Are you a fan of hers?"

"No, I'm not big on blood and murder or cops and private eyes." Rene shook his head. "Give me a good old love story any day or a movie star's biography. Now, there's a good read. I just finished one on Judy Garland. Did you know that her daddy was as gay as a picnic basket? Poor Liza, she must have inherited it..."

Ruth laughed. "How do you know Nick Musgrove then?"

"We met in New Orleans," Rene answered. "I only met Nick Musgrove once at a party, but I knew his ex. He was from down there, too, and the only words to describe that man I can't use in the presence of a lady!"

"I see," Ruth said, although she didn't. If anything, she was more curious. "What was Nick's ex's name? Where is he now?"

"His name is Larry—I've blanked on his last name now—and he's still in Lompoc Prison down the coast here, as far as I know. I don't like to gossip, but I for one was sure glad to hear it when they ran him in. When I met Nick that year it was Mardi Gras time, and he seemed nice enough. He was downright charming, to tell the truth and so good-looking. Does he still have that gorgeous long blonde hair?"

"Yes he does."

"Good, good. Not too many men can pull off a look like that. I just don't know what he saw in that Larry bastard. Pardon my French."

"Of course," Ruth said. "What is this Larry person in prison for, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I'm not sure what all he finally got sent up for, Miss Ruth. I heard about some forged checks or something. Back in New Orleans he was a pretty big drug dealer. Nasty stuff, too. He stepped on it so much his customers didn't know what they were buying. He could have gone up for murder for the people that died from some of that shit he was spreading around, but a dead junkie can't press charges, can he?"

Ruth liked Nick, at least what she knew of him, and this news was unsettling. "Rene, I'm so sorry to hear that. How did Nick get involved with such a person?"

"It was a long time ago, and I don't know the whole story. I think Nick was visiting his relatives in New Orleans when he met Larry. After things got too hot, and Larry quit the drug scene, the two of them moved back to California and started the nursery business up north together. Nick had the know-how, and Larry had the money to back him. Nick might not even have known how dirty that money was."

"I'd like to think he didn't know."

"Well, Miss Ruth, I hear a lot from this very chair where you're sitting if I keep my mouth shut and my ears open, but I'm not one to gossip, like I said."

"I suppose you do hear a lot of things," Ruth said to be agreeable. She didn't want to seem nosey or do anything to make Rene clam up, but then she didn't think there was much danger of that. "I'm mainly concerned about my nephew's happiness."

"Of course you are, Miss Ruth. Now I don't know that Nick was to blame for any of Larry's troubles. He could have gone to his folks in the first place, I suppose. They would have helped set him up in the nursery, but I imagine he wanted to do it on his own. He was young and probably wanted to prove something to his folks. He was also in love, and you know how they always say love is blind?"

"That's so true—"

"Well, there's some folks ought to get themselves a seeing-eye dog."

Ruth laughed and watched Rene in the mirror as he worked. Had he lost weight? He didn't have much weight to lose. Ruth tried to remember the list of people Tim had named off who had AIDS—or were merely HIV positive, as he had insisted. In Ruth's circle of suburban lady friends back home in Minnesota, a question like "Have you lost weight?" would be music to their ears. In San Francisco, Ruth wasn't so sure it would be taken as a compliment, especially among the gays, so she kept her mouth shut.

Rene turned Ruth's chair around and held up a hand mirror so that she could see. "How's the length in back for you?"

"Just fine."

"Nick's folks ended up smoothing things over, once that SOB was off to the slammer. I don't like to gossip, but from what I hear they wouldn't let anything happen to Nick. They're an old southern family, and they're tight like people from down south are, you know?"

"I don't think people from the south have any monopoly on family values, Rene."

"Why, no, Miss Ruth. I didn't mean anything of the sort."

"No, I'm sure you didn't." She took a deep breath and relaxed. Now that Rene had worked his magic, and Ruth's hair was done, everything else would be just fine.

Chapter 23

Tim's first reaction was to try to escape. How could he have let someone tie him up... naked... and not remember any of it? This was no dream. Then he heard something, a quiet motion in the room, and his eyes came into focus in the dim light.

Nick smiled down at him, his fingers splayed across Tim's chest. Nick's robe fell open as he climbed into bed on top of him. "Hey, Snowman."

"Nick. I thought—"

"You fell asleep so hard, man! Sometimes I think I could do almost anything I want with you, and you wouldn't even know it. I could have just left you tied up spread-eagle to the bed and gone into town."

"I know you like to play around with holding me down and stuff, but I've never really been tied up before. If you want to get serious about bondage, well..."

"Well what?"

"We could talk about it. I'd be willing to try all sorts of things with you, Nick."

"That's good to know. But you're not really tied down, you know. Relax."

Tim stopped straining and once there was enough slack in the belt around his wrist it slipped right out. Nick helped him loosen the other one but still held Tim down with the weight

of his body and kissed him. "I love watching you sleep. It gives me time to think about things."

"Like what?"

"Like how much I like having you here. Like how trusting you are... too much for your own good, sometimes. And you don't know me as well as you think. If I really tied you down it wouldn't be to go into town and leave you here."

"No?"

"Of course not, silly. What if the house caught fire or something? The reason I'd tie you down so you couldn't move would be to keep you here. It wouldn't be so that I could walk away. It would be to make you entirely dependent on me, so I'd have to feed you and bathe you and take care of you."

"Feeding me sounds kind of nice. I'm getting a little hungry."

"And it would prove to me how much you trust me..." Nick's voiced trailed off, and he stared deep into Tim's eyes, smiling. Then he moved in closer and they kissed, long and deep. Tim remembered how insistent Nick was earlier that they *not* talk. Now that Nick was talking, Tim didn't want to say too much. He reached up and pulled Nick's ponytail loose so that his hair fell down around them and they kissed again. "But I do trust you, Nick. I couldn't imagine not..."

"Shhh. We'll talk later."

"That's what you always say..." Tim weakly protested. Then Nick's robe fell onto the floor as he lifted Tim's knees and pushed them up over his shoulders. Tim had nothing more to say.

"If you're hungry, I picked up fresh salmon steaks at the Guerneville Safeway." It was twenty minutes later, and they were both in the shower.

"That sounds great."

"Good, come on." Nick tossed him a dry towel. "You can open a bottle of wine and help me with a salad." Nick pulled on a pair of undershorts and woolly socks as soon as he'd dried off. "And light the candles?"

"Sure, Nick. Whatever you say." Tim dried off and picked up Nick's robe from the bedroom floor. If he wasn't going to wear it, Tim would. He moved quietly, cleared and set the table, lit the candles. He could hear Nick humming as he cooked, and the wood-burning stove cast a warm pink glow in the cabin.

Over dinner, Tim told Nick about the work he'd done on Hancock Street. "I'm almost finished painting the guest room. I think about you sleeping in there when you were a kid. I can almost picture you in a single bed in pajamas that have pictures of cactus plants and donkeys and sombreros on them."

Nick raised his wine glass to Tim's and took a sip. "Here's to pajamas."

Tim laughed and said, "I haven't owned pajamas in years."

"Did you have pajamas like those when you were a kid, Snowman?"

"I guess I must have."

"I thought you were from Minnesota. That pattern sounds kinda Mexican."

"Anything to keep warm, you know. Did you have pajamas like those too?"

"No, mine had cowboy hats and spurs and wagon wheels. Mine were a lot more butch than yours. The cactus might have been the same. Saguaro? I don't remember. What else have you been doing while I was in New Orleans?"

"The first weekend you were gone I came up here to look for you because I wanted to explain everything and..." Tim stopped himself. He wanted to keep things light, not open up old wounds. "And I ran into Phil at the bar, that asshole jerk."

"The piano player from Arts? What did he ever do to you?"

"It's a long story. There was another guy at the Rainbow that night, too—said he was looking for you. He said he was

a friend of yours, but then he thought Phil was you, and you don't look anything like Phil."

"Who was this guy?"

"I don't know. He hustled me at pool, and I should have seen it coming. He was really pale with lots of tats... cheap ink, really ugly. I think he said his name was Fred. He claimed to be an old friend of yours. No. 'An old friend of the family' was how he put it."

Nick reached for Tim's bare foot under the table and lifted it into his lap. "I don't think I know anyone named Fred, Snowman." Nick massaged the sole of Tim's foot and squeezed each toe until he moaned. "I don't think I want to."

"Tell me about New Orleans, Nick. What was it like?"

"Fine, for a visit... hot and steamy like it is here at the river in the summertime, but even more humid. And instead of the smell of the redwoods you can just smell booze and the river smells and Creole cooking everywhere."

"What did you do there? Besides the funeral, I mean."

"After my parents and my grandmother went home to Alameda, I stayed on a few days with some old friends. They live in the quarter on Dauphine. It was nice to see them, but you can only stumble down Bourbon Street drunk so many times before you feel like your soul is slipping away. And the music and the tourists and all the street vendors hawking their stuff. It's just so loud."

"Your soul? It sounds so alive and... I don't know, stimulating. I'll bet I'd love it there. I've never been."

"I'm sure it's different for people who live there and have jobs to go to. It'd be like any other touristy spot, like working in a restaurant at Fisherman's Wharf, I suppose."

"Or on Castro Street?" Tim asked.

"Sort of... maybe... I don't know, Snowman. You'd know better than me. Even Castro Street seems a little more real than the French Quarter. New Orleans has a longer history with even more ghosts."

"Take me there sometime, Nick. Would you? Will you?"

"Sure, Snowman, but don't expect to feel stimulated. It's more like the opposite. Sedated, maybe. They don't call it 'The Big Easy' for nothing. Hey, did you get enough to eat?"

"Yeah, the salmon was great. And I ate too much bread. I'm stuffed."

"Good, me too. Now I'm tired. Let's go back to bed."

This time they just slept, curled together in a sweaty jumble of arms and legs and flesh against flesh.

They slept in late on Sunday morning, too. When Tim came to he sat up quietly so as not to disturb Nick, whose long blonde hair was spread across the pillow. Tim listened to the soft, deep breathing and was careful to disentangle himself. Tim headed for the bathroom first and then to the kitchen. He meant to put on the coffee, since he knew Nick would want a cup when he woke up, but he couldn't find any in the cupboard. Tim poured himself a glass of juice instead, put another log on top of last night's embers in the wood-burning stove, and sat down on the couch.

Tim was so relieved that things were back to normal he could almost imagine living here. He fantasized about renting out the upper flat on Hancock Street and moving to Monte Rio. With the rent from both units he would hardly need to work. He could pick up some seasonal shifts waiting tables at a resort or help Nick part-time in the nursery business. That would mean moving out of San Francisco, though. That part was tough.

The one thing Tim couldn't imagine was going back to the way things were, only seeing each other on weekends or when Nick's schedule allowed them a few days together. Tim sighed and pulled his feet up under him, tugged an afghan across his bare legs and reached for a magazine.

"Good morning, Snowman. How long have you been up?" Nick stuck his head around the corner.

"Hey, Nick, not long, maybe half an hour. You were so sound asleep I didn't want to wake you. I was gonna make coffee, but I couldn't find any."

"Damn it! I knew there was something else I needed when I stopped at Safeway yesterday. I'll get dressed and go get some, or would you rather just go out for brunch?"

Tim looked up at Nick standing naked in the doorway, his long hair hanging loose and straight back past his shoulders, the muscles of his arms and chest flexing as he yawned and stretched his hands above his head. Tim thought he had never seen a sexier man. They had spent less than twenty-four hours together in this cabin, and Tim just wanted to stay here forever. He stood up from the couch and crossed the room to put his arms around him. "I've got an idea, Nick... you just woke up. I'll drive to the store for coffee. You stay here and get started on breakfast? What else do we need?"

Nick kissed him and sighed. "Nothing. I bought eggs and bacon and bread and potatoes. Maybe you could see if they have a nice melon." He grabbed Tim's ass with both hands. "Like one of these."

Tim laughed and broke away to pull on his clothes. "Sure... this is California. You can get anything here... any time of year. You've got my car penned in, though. I got here first yesterday, remember?"

"Take my truck, then. Do you know how to drive a stick shift?"

"Of course I do," Tim said, although he wouldn't have admitted it if he didn't.

"My keys are on the counter. I could make pancakes. How does that sound? Instead of a melon, pick up some fresh berries and a bottle of maple syrup. Do you need money?"

"No, I've got it." Tim pulled on his jacket and reached for the door.

"Wait a minute. Come here."

Tim, fully clothed, walked back to Nick, still naked, and put his arms around him. "What is it? Did you think of something else we forgot?"

"Just one more kiss before you go." They kissed passionately between words. "Now... drive carefully, but hurry back... okay?"

Tim climbed behind the wheel of the truck and thought for a minute. This was only Sunday. He wasn't due back at work until Tuesday. That meant they could spend the rest of today together, and if he could talk Nick into taking Monday off they could head to a beach near Jenner or take a drive up the coast to Timber Cove Inn, or they could drive down the coast to Bodega Bay or they could just stay in bed.

When Tim turned the key in the ignition the radio came on. Nick usually left it on an independent station that kept him informed about the local news and weather, tides at Jenner and a fishing report from Bodega Bay. It also played oldies music. Tim heard a couple of lines about dreaming, and he recognized the song—*Emotional Rescue* by the Rolling Stones—but Tim didn't have time to think about that.

The truck picked up speed going down the hill. Tim pressed the brake, but his foot hit the floor with a thud. He tried to pump it, but it wouldn't catch hold. The people who lived at the bottom of the hill had kids who sometimes played in the road. Nick always watched out for them. Tim started to panic as the truck seemed to leave the ground and fly, and the only thing he could think to do was blast the horn.

Nick finished the orange juice and turned on the radio on the kitchen shelf. It was set to the same station he usually played in the truck. Nick heard Mick Jagger sing "mine, mine, mine," but the Rolling Stones were drowned out by the blast from the truck's horn and then the sickening sound of the crash. Nick pulled on his jeans and boots, grabbed his cell phone and ran down the hill to find out what had happened, but he already knew it was going to be horrible.

Chapter 24

Ruth was grateful for her sturdy umbrella on her walk to Arts that morning. According to the local TV weather report these rainstorms were backed up clear across the Pacific to Hawaii with no end in sight. It wasn't as bad as dealing with the snow back in Minnesota, but it was a far cry from any fantasies she might have had of sunny California. Ruth was careful descending the steep grade of Collingwood and had to walk in the middle of the street to avoid the pond where the sewer grate had flooded over at 19th and Castro.

In spite of the nasty weather it turned out to be a busy brunch. Ruth and Artie were swamped at the bar, and James and Jake had all their tables filled within half an hour after they opened the front door. Just before noon, a couple of young men came in, shook themselves off and found an open stool where one of them sat down. Ruth poured another pot of water into the coffee maker and noticed them out of the corner of her eye. One might be Italian, she thought, and his partner was a redhead who reminded her of a smaller version of her co-worker, Scott. The redhead ordered two Bloody Marys and asked, "Are you Ruth?"

"Why yes." She made their drinks and was sure that she'd never seen either of them before, "but I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage."

The darker man stepped forward with a twenty-dollar bill and held out his hand to shake hers. "I'm Tony and this is Jeff. We're your new upstairs neighbors. Artie told us to come and introduce ourselves to the lady bartender."

"Oh, how nice to meet you." Ruth smiled and shook hands with both of them. "Tony, Jeff... now which of you is the postman?"

"I am," Jeff the redhead answered.

"And that would make you the MUNI driver, is that right, Tony?"

"Yeah, that's right. Gee, what else did Artie tell you about us?"

"That's about it and just... that he liked you both. I'm sorry it's so busy I don't have a chance to visit with you better. We should get acquainted soon. I'm sure Teresa will want to have us all up for drinks. Have you met her yet?"

"Artie told us about her," Tony said. "She sounds like a lot of fun."

"She's quite a character, all right." Ruth smiled. "How soon are you moving in?"

Jeff said, "Next weekend the movers will bring all the big stuff. This is our first apartment together so we have lots of duplicates. Do you need a toaster?"

"No thanks." Ruth laughed. "I have more 'stuff' than I need already. I recently moved here from Minnesota myself. Artie! Look who's here!"

Artie looked up from the waiters' station. "Hello, boys! I see you've met Ruth. Put their next round on my tab, Ruthie. I don't want them blowing all their rent in here."

"Thanks, Artie," Tony said. "Say, we also heard from some other friends that we should check out the piano player. Where is he?"

"Gosh, I'm not sure," Ruth said. "Phil is usually here on Sundays, but he must have called in sick again. Artie said something about a sick relative up north, but that was the other night. It's funny; I've been so busy I didn't even notice he wasn't here until you mentioned him."

A table for two opened near the window, and Tony and Jeff took it. Ruth kept an eye on them until they finished their drinks and then sent another pair over with James. When he told them the drinks were on the house they smiled up at Ruth and waved. They were such a cute couple, Ruth thought. She noticed how they touched each other as they ate. They seemed lost in each other's eyes and appeared to really listen when the other one talked. There was a lot of laughter between them, too. Ruth also thought about Tim and Nick and hoped they were as happy together as these two boys. Then her thoughts turned to Sam. He should be on his way home by now. Ruth glanced in the mirror and touched her hair. She was so glad she'd been able to see Rene before Sam saw her.

Ruth was blissfully unaware of her nephew's injuries all morning. The rain poured down, and the waterlogged crowds kept piling in from Castro Street for brunch, drinks, and a respite from the weather. Ruth's new neighbors moved back to the bar after they ate, but she still had little time to visit. Artie had gone to help Arturo with some crisis in the kitchen. The bar stools were full and both waiters kept her busy with orders for their tables. Ruth did her best to keep up, but people would just have to be patient. At least they were indoors where it was warm and dry.

It was nearly one o'clock when the rain let up, and so did the crowds. Ruth looked out and saw a ray of sunshine sparkle on the wet pavement of Castro Street. People walked by with their umbrellas under their arms and the hoods of their raincoats pulled back. Ruth and Artie got caught up behind the bar, and no one was waiting for a table. "Artie, what a morning! This was busier than most nights I've worked."

"Yes, the rain drives them in like rats, sometimes. You never know, though. There's no predicting what these queens will do. Some days it can work the opposite way if they're afraid of their hairdos getting wet."

Ruth touched her new hairdo again and glanced in the mirror. She could hardly wait to see Sam. "I just had mine done yesterday."

"I noticed. Your hair looks very nice today, dear."

"Well, thanks, you know Sam is due back in town."

"Oh, is he? No wonder you have such a sunny disposition, even on a nasty day."

"Thank you, Artie. Where's Phil today? Is he still out of town? I noticed we're listening to recorded music."

"I know it, and it pisses me off. I usually try to get a substitute, like one of the students from the music school, but I didn't have time. I was sure he'd be here this morning, but he said it was a family crisis. He's been taking a lot of time off lately, and I suspect he has other, more lucrative business lined up."

"Playing the piano?" Ruth asked.

"No, dear, the organ. The portable one, the one he carries with him everywhere... between his legs!"

Ruth was sorry she'd asked.

"We're lucky to get him to work here at all. He does draw the crowds into Arts, though. Not that we needed them today."

"I never saw it so busy for brunch, Artie," Ruth said, "and *now* look. It's dead."

"I know. Excuse me." Artie stepped away to answer the phone at his end of the bar.

Ruth always swore she didn't have a psychic bone in her body, and she was just as glad. All that mystical stuff she'd grown up around was far too esoteric for a practical gal from the Midwest. Ruth's mother Lana took it in stride when they were kids growing up. She always dealt with her mysterious gift as gracefully as she danced, as good-naturedly as she'd raised her two daughters, Ruth and Tim's mother, Betty. If all that crazy perception had skipped a generation and taken a hold on Tim, Ruth could only wish him well. She didn't envy him for it. She only hoped he would grow to be as strong as his grandmother was.

"Yes, Nick, she's right here," Artie said into the phone, "hold on and I'll get her."

Ruth didn't have an ounce of clairvoyance, but something—maybe it was the look on Artie's face when he handed her the phone—told her this was very bad news.

Chapter 25

Traffic was light on the Golden Gate Bridge. Ruth thought she'd make good time until she got past Sausalito, and the rain started again. It slashed across the windshield in sheets, and the wipers flapped like toys. She slowed from 70 to 60 to 50 to 45. Ahead, red dots of tail lights and brake lights flickered in and out of sight, and Ruth realized she didn't know where she was going.

She'd been in such a hurry that the last words she'd said on the phone were, "I'll be right there, Nick." Now she remembered that she should have asked for directions. How many hospitals could there be in Sebastopol? Where *was* Sebastopol?

She hadn't been thinking; that was the problem. Ruth pulled the car onto the shoulder at the Marin/Sonoma County line. She wasn't the only one. Other cars were stopped there too, motors running, upturned faces trapped inside while they waited for the deluge to let up. Visibility was zero, but a huge semi-truck loaded with lumber roared past—inches away—and splashed an extra sheet of water across Ruth's windshield. She found a map of northern California in the glove box and fought back tears. *What use will I be to those boys until I get a hold of myself? And I don't need to cause another accident with my careless driving.*

The man behind the hospital desk yawned up at her. She was tense from the news of Tim's accident and frantic from the drive. Now this stranger yawned in her face, and she wanted to scream and slap him and tell him to wake up. Then Nick came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, "Tim is okay, Ruth. He's going to be all right. It could have been a lot worse. I'm glad you're here, though."

"Nick, what happened?"

"Like I told you on the phone, he crashed my truck on the driveway. It's pretty steep. Someone must have tampered with the brakes. Tim was going to go to the store, but he ended up wrapped around a tree instead. He broke some ribs, his collarbone, his left leg in two places, and he has a mild concussion."

"Oh my God! How can you tell me all that and still say Tim is okay?"

"Maybe not now, but in time. He's going to be all right."

"Why was Tim driving your truck in the first place? What's the matter with his car?"

"He got to my house before me, and I had him penned in. It only made sense."

Ruth stepped away from Nick and had a moment of clarity. "In other words, whoever tampered with the brakes was out to get you, not Tim, am I right?"

Nick nodded.

"And the same person killed your cousin from New Orleans."

Nick shuddered. "Now that you put it that way, I suppose it's true. That was probably meant for me too, Ruth. I'm sorry. Let's sit down."

Ruth remembered the morning this past summer when she and Tim waited in a hospital for news of Jason. That seemed like a lifetime ago. She had been the calm, consoling one that day, and she preferred being in that role. As much as she wanted to lash out at someone right now, this wasn't Nick's fault. Ruth did sit down, and when she finally spoke again she said, "Nick. I think we should have a talk with your

grandmother. She's a very astute old woman, and she ought to be told about what's going on. For your own safety, you might want to spend some time with your family."

"My grandmother? I just spent time with her in New Orleans. Well, I guess I could go and visit my family again. It might be safer for Tim and me if I were away from here, but I'm not leaving him until he wakes up."

Nick wanted to take Ruth's advice, but he knew he wouldn't. Jenny and Kent had done their best to keep on top of the business while he was away. Now the holiday orders were coming in, plus they still had the year-round contracts to maintain and all the work in the greenhouses. There was no way Nick could get away now, and he wouldn't leave Tim's side for any longer than he had to. "I'll have to think about it," he told Ruth.

On Monday morning Tim was moved from ICU to a private room. As much as Nick tried to assure Ruth that the injuries were minor, he was sick with worry and guilt. He sat for hours beside Tim's battered body, listened to his shallow breathing and the steady blips of the monitors. Sometimes he imagined that Tim's bruises had darkened and spread.

Ruth checked into a nearby motel. It was close enough to walk back and forth to the hospital where she spent days and nights watching Nick watching Tim. Sometimes they sat on opposite sides of the bed and one or the other of them held Tim's hand, careful not to bump the IV tubes between his knuckles. Ruth wondered what Tim was dreaming now. Sometimes he moaned a little and seemed to blink his eyes, but he hadn't been fully conscious ever since before the paramedics pulled his battered body from the wreckage of Nick's truck on Sunday morning.

"You must be exhausted, Nick," Ruth said. "Don't you want to go home for a while and get some sleep? I'll be right here. I promise to call you if there's any change."

"Thanks, Ruth, but I-I don't know."

"He's going to be all right. The doctor said they're keeping him sedated, but none of his injuries are life-threatening."

"Thank God for that."

"If it had been you in that truck, instead of Tim..." Ruth stopped herself. She didn't want it to come out wrong, but it was too late.

"What? If it had been me, Tim would be fine right now? Is that what you meant to say, Ruth? Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I feel bad enough as it is?"

"Nick, that's not fair! And it won't do Tim any good for the two of us to snipe at each other. I'm sorry, but that wasn't what I meant to say at all. Tim is going to be fine... in time. What I meant was that if you were the one in this hospital bed, Tim would be sitting here worried sick with tears in his eyes and big bags under them from lack of sleep. If you were the one in that bed, Tim would be even more miserable than he is now."

"I know." Nick stared at Tim's unshaven face as if he could will it to move. "I'm so sorry. Maybe I do need some sleep."

"Tim is young and healthy, all things considered. He's going to be fine."

"By the way, he told me that you and he had a talk about HIV and AIDS. At least we're both doing fine in that regard."

"Thank God and modern medicine," Ruth said. "I've been studying up about it, you know. So many people out there don't realize how far we've come since AIDS was a death sentence. Nick, I still want you to be careful, and it's not AIDS I'm worried about. I don't think Tim could handle it if anything happened to you. Who do you think—*why* do you think someone has it in for you. Or your cousin?"

"I don't know, Ruth. Honest. I thought it had to do with Nate being a policeman and the drug bust in New Orleans. Now I'm not so sure. Maybe it's because of something closer to home."

"Like what? Do you have any enemies? Does Tim?"

"I don't know." Nick thought back to New Orleans. He saw lots of people he didn't know at the funeral and afterward. Almost any one of them might be a suspect. But it still seemed that his cousin Nate was the logical one to have enemies, being in the narcotics division and all. Nick thought further back in his own life. He'd made some foolish mistakes when he was young, but who didn't? "I honestly don't know."

"Just watch your back, honey. Okay?"

"I will. I promise," Nick said as he leaned over Tim's still body and kissed his cheek. "Maybe I should try to get some rest. Call me if there is any change at all, will you?"

"I promise I will. I have your numbers in my cell phone. You get out of here and get some rest. At least get some fresh air."

Nick gave Ruth a hug and walked out to the parking lot. He was startled for a moment to see the red Thunderbird parked there. He'd forgotten he drove it into town when he followed the ambulance on Sunday morning. Tim's car was his sole means of transportation for now. As much as he needed sleep, Nick headed toward the nursery first. He had to see how Jenny and Kent were doing.

Ruth's cell phone rang. It wasn't as if it would wake up Tim, but she jumped to grab it from her purse on the windowsill before it could ring a second time. The purse fell open and scattered nickels, pens and pencils across the floor. She dropped the phone and picked it up again. "Hello?"

"Ruth, dear... are you there?"

"Sam. Where are you?"

She stuck her toe under Tim's hospital bed to kick a roll of breath mints. "It's so good to hear your voice. Yes, Tim will be all right in time. I'm glad you're home safe and sound. No, we don't know. It's a long story, but... yes, it's Palm Drive Hospital. I don't even know if there's another hospital in Sebastopol. I'm sure they'll move him someplace closer to home as soon as he's better."

Ruth caught some movement at the doorway out of the corner of her eye. She saw a pair of tall legs in blue jeans,

but the face was hidden behind a bouquet of flowers. A voice behind the flowers said, "Hello! Is this Tim Snow's room?"

"Yes it is," Ruth answered and then said into the phone, "Are you at home, Sam? There's so much I want to talk with you about, but someone's here with flowers for Tim. I'll call you back in a few minutes, okay?"

Ruth dropped her cell phone back into her purse. "What beautiful flowers. Who on earth?" Ruth's initial pleasure at the flower arrangement was dampened by the realization that it was Phil, the piano player carrying it. From what she'd heard, she knew that Tim didn't like Phil, but she didn't know why. "You're the last person I expected to see here."

"Where should I put them?"

Ruth stepped back to let Phil and the flowers get past her in the small hospital room. "Maybe you could set them on the window ledge. Are they from you?"

"They're from Arturo and Artie, plus Tim's co-workers and some of the customers chipped in. Half of Castro Street, really. Everybody is so worried about Tim. Just tell him they're from the whole gang, okay?"

"I'll tell him when he wakes up. The flowers are lovely, but what brings you to Sebastopol? You didn't come all the way up here just to deliver these to Tim, did you?"

"I have a... a client in Santa Rosa. I volunteered to drop off the flowers on my way, as long as I had to drive up here today anyway. Arturo and Artie didn't want to trust some local florist they don't even know."

"They could have just called Nick's nursery."

"Oh, I wouldn't know. Where is Nick, by the way? I was hoping to meet him."

"You've never met Nick?"

"I don't think so. I knew Jason when he and Tim were together, but Nick and I have never been... introduced, you know?"

"No, I didn't know. Nick just left. I'm surprised you didn't bump into him on your way in here, but I guess... if you don't know him..." Ruth stood between Phil and Tim, instinctively

wanting to protect her nephew, even from someone who was bringing flowers. "Nick has been at Tim's side every minute since the accident. He's exhausted, and I finally talked him into getting some rest."

"How is Tim?" Phil peered beyond Ruth's shoulder toward the sleeping body on the bed.

"He's going to be fine," Ruth said again, trying to convince herself as much as to answer Phil's question. "He has several broken bones, but nothing more serious. It'll be a long recovery, but he'll be just fine."

"I'm really sorry I missed Nick," Phil repeated.

"Why? You just said you'd never even met him."

"Oh, you know, for Arturo and Artie's sake. You know how romantic they are. They asked me to give both Tim and Nick their regards. Oh, and they sent their love to you too, of course."

"I see," Ruth said, although she wasn't sure if she should buy any of this.

"No... no... make it stop..." Tim murmured.

Ruth lunged for the call button to get the nurse and put one hand on Tim's arm. "What is it, Tim? Make what stop?"

"Keep him away from me. Someone has to stop him. Where's Nick? He's not safe."

"Nick just left, Tim, but he can't have gotten far." Ruth reached for her phone again to try calling Nick this time.

"Tell him to go to the nursery right away..."

Tim's eyes were wide open, but Ruth didn't think he was really awake. He was delirious. "Don't you want him to come here, Tim?"

"No... tell him to stay away from the nursery. It's not safe!"

The nurse arrived, a heavy middle-aged woman who walked as if her feet were sore. "What seems to be the trouble here?"

"He woke up," Ruth said. "He started to talk, but he doesn't make any sense. 'Go to the nursery... stay away from the nursery'... I don't know what to think."

The nurse checked Tim's IV tubes and took his blood pressure, but Tim was quiet, and his eyes were closed now, as if the outburst had never happened. After the nurse left the room Ruth looked around and realized that Phil was gone, too. And she noticed that some of the flowers he'd brought were already wilted. And the flowers were wrapped in plastic.

Ruth had been watching TV just the other night when a husband brought home a bouquet of flowers for his wife. It was their anniversary, and the flowers were wrapped in this same kind of plastic. The wife thought he was being romantic, and she went to get a vase full of water, but he took the plastic off the flowers and smothered her with it, the poor thing.

Ruth had promised Nick she would call if there was any change. Tim had woken up and said a few words. But then he'd slipped right back into his coma. If Tim was right back where he was before, had there really been any change? Ruth was at a loss what to do. She knew that Tim's psychic visions sometimes came to him in his sleep, and they could be important, but "Go to the nursery," followed by "Stay away..." What was she supposed to make of that? Tim looked like he was sleeping peacefully now. She wished she could grab him, shake him awake and get a definite answer, but the only thing she could think to do was keep her promise to call Nick.

Chapter 26

Nick's employees were hard at work. Jennifer Armstrong's day had started out with a call from her mechanic in Santa Rosa. She was in a foul mood when she found out how much it would cost to fix her car. Then she had to call Kent and ask for a ride into work again. They'd both been working too much, and they tried not to complain, even to each other, but things were nearing a breaking point. It was time for Nick, the boss, to get back to the nursery and take up some of the slack.

Jen worked in the last greenhouse this morning, all the way in the back. She started by taking an inventory of the stacks of wreath forms. Soon she would wrap them in the fresh evergreen boughs that covered the table beside her and decorate them with ribbons and ornaments. Jen took a deep breath and considered that there might be something to that New Age nonsense called aromatherapy after all. Christmas was her favorite season, and this was a job she loved, making dozens of wreaths to sell in the store and to deliver to homes and businesses across Sonoma and Napa counties.

She jotted down some figures on a notepad and grimaced with a cramp. Damn, her period was due now, too! The phone rang and Jen didn't even hear the car drive up outside. There was a telephone extension right beside her, so she picked up and heard a woman's voice.

"Nick? Hello, is Nick Musgrove there please?"

"No, he isn't. Would you like to leave him a message?"

"I thought this was his cell phone number, but they're all so close... only a digit off."

"This is the nursery. Would you like to leave him a message?" Jen repeated.

"Well, maybe, oh, gosh I'm not sure. I promised to call if there was any change. This is Ruth Taylor. I'm sorry. I should have explained right away. I'm Tim Snow's aunt, and I'm here in Sebastopol at the hospital. Nick just left, and I promised him I'd call if there was any change in Tim's condition—"

"Nick hasn't been here in quite a while, but I'd be happy to tell him you called."

"What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Jen."

"Jen, I'm afraid there might not be time to leave a message. My nephew Tim has these dreams sometimes, you see, and—oh, I don't want you to think I'm some crazy person on the line. You've just got to believe me. You simply must. I'm afraid there might be some trouble on its way there right now. Are you alone?"

"No, Kent should be around here someplace."

"Who's that?"

"He works here, too."

"Is he someone you trust, dear?"

"Of course I do." Jen was about ready to hang up on this woman, but something in her voice sounded too sincere.

"I don't want to alarm you. It may mean nothing, but sometimes Tim's dreams have a way of—oh, there isn't time to explain, but you should check on Kent. I think you should stick very close together."

"Well, I can go see what he's doing, I suppose."

"Please do, Jen. And when you see Nick, please do have him call me right away. Thank you so much. Goodbye."

Jen set down the phone and took another deep breath of evergreen. Yes, she loved Christmas almost enough to sweep away all her problems. Then she noticed another smell that

had nothing to do with Christmas or the nursery. It struck a memory sense, too, but the memory had to do with a different time of year, and something wasn't quite right about it. It reminded her of the Fourth of July—that was it, fireworks, the smell of a burning fuse just before it went off. Gunpowder and maybe a trace of gasoline. As Jen walked through the greenhouses from the back to the front, the smell grew stronger.

Kent sorted through the mail that had been piling up while Nick was gone. It was a huge job he'd put off for much too long. He made four tall stacks—bills, orders, payments and miscellaneous. He wouldn't throw anything away, not even the obvious junk mail. That would be for Nick to decide when he got back.

From the office it was easy to hear tires on the gravel driveway unless it was pouring rain. Kent heard the car drive up and was relieved at the sound. It must mean Nick was returning to work at last. Kent was nearly finished sorting the mail, so the timing couldn't be more perfect. When he heard the front door open, Kent yelled, "Hey there! Is that our wayward wanderer finally back?"

No answer. It must be a customer after all, so Kent said, "I'll be with you in a minute. Have a look around, okay?" The store was one of those places that most people liked to browse. Sometimes the longer you left them alone, the more they bought. A customer might come in for a packet of vegetable seeds and leave with a shopping cart filled with blooming plants and potting soil, fertilizer, clay pots and sundries.

Most of the greenhouses were open to the public and customers liked to wander. Rows of seedlings filled one of them. Another area was set aside to house dormant orchids. Nick said that the women who could afford to put their furs in summer storage were of the same mindset as people who stored their orchids when they were out of bloom.

Several minutes passed without another sound, and Kent nearly forgot about the customer. The phone rang once, but

Jen must have picked it up in the back. Kent placed the last envelope on the order pile and raised his arms to stretch. He heard footsteps outside the office door and remembered there was someone there. "Did you find what you were looking for?" Kent yawned and looked up to see a man standing in the open office doorway holding a gun.

"Keep your hands in the air and don't move!" The gun was level with Kent's head. His mind was spinning. Why would anyone hold up the place on a Monday morning? They hadn't even made a sale yet today. There was the bank deposit from the weekend, but most of that was in checks and credit card slips. Kent didn't have the combination to the drop safe, anyway. Was there was enough money in the cash register to satisfy a robber?

The stranger came behind Kent and covered his mouth with a wide band of silver duct tape, then used the same tape to bind his hands to the arms of the chair. "You are one sorry son of a bitch, Nick Musgrove!"

Kent could only squirm in his seat. The man set the gun down and taped Kent's feet together. "I missed you the first time when I threw your damned cousin off that bridge and then your boyfriend got in the truck after I fixed your brakes. You know what they say, though. The third time's the charm!"

Kent's eyes were fixed on the gun in the middle of the desk. If only he could reach it, move it, *will* it to point away from him and toward this madman. Kent noticed an envelope on top of the "in" pile. It was thick, a bank statement for an entire month of business at the nursery. Kent had left it on top so that Nick would see it first. It moved.

Below it were several bills, some payments and a couple of slick catalogues. Maybe it was the thud of the gun when it landed so close to them or a few seconds later when the madman slammed his hip against the desk to tape Kent's feet together. Something started the motion and one pile touched the next pile. By the time the bank statement hit the floor all of Kent's careful work was sliding away. Here he was facing

a crazed killer, and all he could think about was his careful morning's work being ruined and having to start all over again. At least it distracted him from that single dark eye inside the barrel of the gun.

"All these years you've been living high on the hog with your fancy nursery, Mr. Musgrove. I bet you forgot all about poor Larry down in Lompoc. I bet you forgot how this business of yours got off the ground."

Kent's eyes grew wider, and he shook his head, but he couldn't move.

"But you paid Larry back with a nice little present before he got sent up, didn't you? You gave him a real nice present, and he passed it along to me. Now you can afford all the best doctors and carry on with your new boyfriend while Larry rots in prison with AIDS. But you don't care, do you, Mr. Musgrove?"

Kent watched this lunatic who ranted at him because he thought he'd finally found the man he wanted to exact his revenge upon. "I'm not Nick Musgrove, you asshole!" was what he wanted to say first. And then something about how AIDS doesn't necessarily kill people anymore. Kent was HIV negative, but he knew what some of his friends had gone through. He would never wish AIDS on anyone, but he might make an exception for this fool.

"This place is gonna blow sky high, Musgrove. I've planted enough dynamite and poured enough gasoline that they're gonna see this place blow for miles around. It'll be the best blow job you ever had—better than from your little waiter boyfriend down in Frisco—the one that wrapped your truck around a redwood tree. Pity. That was meant for you, too, you know." He stood across the desk from Kent now, holding the gun in his hand again and waving it back and forth as he talked and more of the mail slid onto the floor.

Jen silently appeared in the doorway, and Kent held his breath. Her bad mood was back now, Christmas or no Christmas. She'd been working too hard. Her hormones were way out of whack, and it had nothing to do with Christmas.

Tim's crazy-sounding aunt on the phone had been right all along, and Jen recognized this guy, too. He was the one who had stopped in here looking for Nick that day when he'd taken off and gone running around the wine country with Tim. That was weeks ago, but Jen remembered the deathly pale skin, the beady eyes and the bad tattoos.

Jen was pissed off. She picked up a heavy spade from the rack, didn't make a sound, just lifted it high in the air and pictured the sign that said *Test Your Strength* on the midway at the Santa Rosa fair. She and Sherry had spent the better part of an afternoon there last summer, long before they broke up. Jen even won her a big stuffed bear throwing baseballs at bowling pins. Jen was sure she was strong enough to make the bell ring right now by bringing the sledge hammer down hard on top of this damned fool's bony head.

BAM!

The man slumped to the floor, and Jen started to reach for the gun but she smelled that odor again. Gunpowder and gasoline, only stronger now. Jen wondered how Tim's aunt had known to call when she did.

Cheap tattoos were like the ones Jen had seen on prisoners on TV. And what did she mean on the phone about Tim's dreams? At least the tattooed man's beady eyes were closed now, and he didn't look so tough curled up in a ball on the floor of the office, surrounded by envelopes of every shape and size. Jen hated men like him, little sneaky ones that always had something to prove. She wanted to kick him with her boot, just to see if he moved, but that smell overpowered everything now. She could almost hear a fuse sputtering nearby. It was time to get the hell out of there! Jen went to work on Kent's bonds with a pair of garden shears.

Nick waited at the red light and rubbed his eyes. He did feel guilty. It was clear now that the truck "accident" was meant for him, not Tim. And so was his cousin Nate's murder. He might as well call it that, even though the authorities didn't. They still listed it as an accidental drowning, like so

many others in the Russian River over the years. Nate knew better than to dive off a bridge into shallow water, but the body had been cremated, so it was too late to prove anything. When Nick pointed out that Nathan Musgrove was on the narcotics squad of the NOPD, the local authorities were even more determined that his death—even if it wasn't an accident—was somehow outside of their jurisdiction. They had enough trouble dealing with the marijuana farmers in their own backyards. With proof of the disabled brakes on Nick's truck they would have to listen now.

Nick just couldn't understand why. He knew that each of these fates—or something worse—was intended for him, but he wasn't aware of having any enemies. Or did someone just want him out of the way?

Nick felt guilty about his employees, too. It was time to advertise for seasonal help. He usually hired a couple of college kids part-time to do odd jobs and deliveries during the holidays. He would need them more than ever now, what with Tim in his life. Nick shuddered to think of him lying there unconscious in that hospital bed. Nick felt responsible for making sure that Tim had everything he needed from now on.

Nick pulled Tim's red Thunderbird into the driveway of the nursery, and saw Kent's truck parked out front. It was almost identical to Nick's, the one that sat in the junk yard now—totaled—right down to the nursery logo on the driver's side door. It had commercial plates too, so Kent could park in yellow zones to make deliveries. Nick didn't see Jen's car, but that wasn't unusual. She sometimes parked in back. Nick noticed one other car he didn't recognize, probably a customer.

The front door opened, and Kent and Jen bounded down the steps. She screamed, "Nick, turn around! Don't stop!" She yanked open the door of Tim's convertible, pulled the passenger seat down and climbed in the back all in one swift motion. Kent got in front, still rubbing his wrists to get the sensation back in them.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Just get back up on the main road as fast as you can!" Kent yelled as the first explosion rocked the ground beneath them like an earthquake. The cloudy sky above the farthest greenhouse, the one where Jenny had been working, lit up with balls of fire, huge chunks of greenery and broken glass.

Jenny said, "It was that creepy guy! I recognized him from when he came here looking for you, but you were with Tim. Remember that day you guys were touring the wineries? He came here looking for you, and I told him to ask around at the Rainbow Cattle Company. He must have found your cousin there instead." She pulled her cell phone out of the breast pocket of her bib overalls and punched in 9-1-1.

"So he killed Nate, thinking he was me?" Nick asked, although he already knew. "Then he nearly killed Tim, and now he was coming after me again?"

Three more explosions came in rapid-fire succession from back to front, blowing the walls and windows out of each greenhouse and then the front of the building, the office and the retail store. Nick, Kent and Jen sat in Tim's car and watched from the frontage road as Nick's business and all of their jobs flew apart in smoke and flame and bits of debris. Jen sighed and sat back in the car, "Tim's Aunt Ruth called, Nick. She said you should give her a call as soon as you get a chance."

The sky was full of balls of fire as chunks of greenery and shards of broken clay and glass tumbled down through the smoke all around them. Something landed on the hood of Tim's car with a thud and bounced off. Jen saw it and shivered—part of a tattooed forearm, charred and bloody. "Nick, let's get out of here!"

Nick had seen it, too. He stepped on the gas, and they headed for higher ground as the sirens of fire trucks grew louder and closer.

Chapter 27

It was a rainy December Saturday when Sam took Ruth and his granddaughter Sarah to the Opera House for a matinee performance of San Francisco Ballet's *Nutcracker*. The three of them had an entire private box in the dress circle. It was just like Sam to be so extravagant, Ruth thought. She hated to see the spare seats go to waste and would have run outside and dragged some people in off the sidewalk to join them, but there wasn't time. Instead, she took off her coat and made sure that little Sarah could see. Ruth delved into her copy of the program. The overture was about to begin.

"I haven't seen *The Nutcracker* in years," Ruth said. "I think the last time must have been when the kids were little. I remember taking Tim and my daughter Dianne to Northrup Auditorium to see Loyce Houlton's dance troupe. Dianne was bored to tears, but Tim loved it. Oh, this is so exciting, Sam!"

Ruth delved into her copy of the program as the last members of the audience filled in the orchestra seats below them.

"Look, Sam, it says the very first production of *The Nutcracker* in the United States was done right here in San Francisco in 1944 on a budget of \$1,000. Did you know that it started here in San Francisco?"

Sam loved to see Ruth's childlike enthusiasm when she was excited about something. "Yes, dear, I believe I read that someplace, but I'll bet Sarah didn't. That was long before you were born. That was even before I was born. Did you know that, honey?"

His granddaughter looked up at Sam and smiled, but just then the house lights began to dim. Sarah said, "Grandpa, it's starting. Ask me later, okay?"

The three of them were transported to a land of lush music, lithe, athletic dancers in tights and tutus and sugarplum fairies, and they were nowhere near Castro Street.

Afterward, they drove back to the neighborhood to drop off Sarah on Hancock. Ruth was still bubbling with enthusiasm. "I loved the music and the costumes, especially Madame Bonbonniere. She reminded me of some of the drag queens I've seen on Castro Street, and I think the Rat King was my favorite. Wasn't that fun, Sarah?" But the little girl in the back seat was sound asleep.

After Ruth and Sam placed their orders at Farallon, he told her more about his business, and she told him more about her life. Sam talked about his travels—business trips to Europe several times a year—as if it were a confession he needed to make. It was, in a way. He seemed to be asking for her permission and at the same time getting a sense of whether she might like to come along.

Ruth confessed more about her background, her wealthy father, Lars, and her loving but *unusual* mother, Lana, the psychic. When the subject of Tim's mother, Betty—Ruth's only sibling—came up, Ruth spoke of her in the past tense. The childhood Betty was so much nicer than the hysterical woman she grew to become.

"Oh, yes, she's still alive," Ruth answered Sam when he asked the obvious question, "and I still try to reach out to her as best I can. I never forget her birthday. Birthdays were wonderful times when we were girls. I already sent her a Christmas card this year. I always do. She has a religious

affliction, I guess you might call it, and it's only made worse by her drinking."

"What about Tim?" Sam asked, as much to change the subject as out of concern, not for his past but for the present. "How is his recovery from the accident? Does he need anything?"

"He's going to be fine. He's finally home from the hospital, and Nick is there with him. Tim's left leg is still in a cast, and his ribs are bandaged up. He looked like a black and blue mummy, but bruises fade in time. He has a lot of healing to do, but thank God for Nick. He's strong. Much stronger than I am. Physically, at least. Poor Nick. His business suffered devastating damage, you know."

"Yes, I'm sure it did. Does he plan to rebuild there?"

"He will in time, when the insurance comes through. He told me that he hopes this is the rainiest season the Russian River has ever had. I think he was joking, but when he talked about the ashes and broken bits of glass and debris everywhere, I can imagine how he wishes it would all just get washed away down the river and out to the sea."

When their entrees arrived, Ruth asked, "What did you order, Sam?"

"A steak."

"How unoriginal, dear, but just like a man. Let me have a taste, just a tiny bite... no, not so big."

Sam meant to move his fork to her plate but she guided his arm toward her mouth. "Mmmm, it's delicious. Here, try a taste of this swordfish. I need to learn to cook seafood for you. It's healthier than red meat. I'm pretty good with freshwater fish—perch and walleye, lake trout. It can't be that much different. I'll bet Arturo could teach me a few things."

"I'm sure I'd be happy to try anything you do for me, Ruth, in the kitchen or anywhere else."

Ruth winked at him and said, "Some people just have a way with fish, I think. I have a lot to learn."

Sam smiled and steered the conversation back to Nick's nursery. "It's lucky that no one was hurt."

"Except the perpetrator, of course. He was blown to smithereens."

"What will Nick's employees do without jobs?"

"He has his year-round clients to see to. I guess Kent can take care of most of them. Bank lobbies and tasting rooms. Nick already rented a temporary space for Jenny to work out of, filling the holiday orders. She's also going to housesit for him while he spends most of the winter in the city to take care of Tim. That will save her some money on rent. Nick feels terribly responsible for Tim now, of course."

"So the man who was after Nick was killed in the explosion, but wasn't there someone else involved? Someone else who put him up to this?" Sam asked. "Is Nick still in danger?"

"I don't think so. His old *friend* Larry down in Lompoc Prison died last week."

"Of natural causes?"

"Well, he had AIDS. And Tim insists that it's not a death sentence any more, but maybe prisoners don't get the same care as people on the outside."

"I see..."

"We'll never know about all that goes on inside a place like that."

"Are you about to start campaigning for prison reform, my dear?"

"Someone should. Those places are so overcrowded with that three-strikes law in place. They're full of petty offenders like pot growers. It's ridiculous. They should legalize marijuana, tax it, let everyone who was arrested on pot charges out of prison, and the state of California wouldn't be in this terrible financial shape. They don't have room to keep the violent criminals off our streets and think of the money it costs the taxpayers. It's obscene."

"Oh-oh, here it comes."

"No, I'm not going to start on that crusade, Sam. I'm not looking for a new cause. It's enough for me to worry about the people I love and care about... but another thing... it's

unbelievable to me that Larry or this Fred guy could be so vindictive as to blame their illnesses on someone who had no intention of..." Ruth drifted off and took another sip of her wine while Sam waited for her to speak her mind.

"Well, all I mean, is that Nick is a terrific guy, and I'm so happy for Tim that they've found each other." Ruth took another bite of her swordfish and smiled. "Next Sunday is the Christmas party at Arts. I can bring a guest. Will you come with me? I'll work the bar for the brunch shift, but not in the evening. I think the party starts at five. Tim says they do it every year for the staff and the regulars. They invite their tenants on Collingwood, too. Ben and Jane will be there if they can get a sitter. Even though they've moved to Hancock Street, Arturo and Artie still consider them part of the family. I'm looking forward to my first Christmas party in San Francisco, but it would be so much more fun if you were there."

"I would love to come as your date."

"Wonderful."

"And Ruth, I need to ask you a favor in return."

"Anything."

"There's one holiday party I go to every year, and this time I'd like you to come along as *my* date."

"I'd love to, Sam. When is it? I'll look at my schedule."

"It's on Boxing Day. They celebrate it more in England than we do here. It's the day after Christmas, December 26th."

"Yes, I've heard of Boxing Day, Sam," Ruth was already thinking about what to wear to a party where she would meet some of Sam's friends. "Is the party at one of your neighbors in Hillsborough?"

"No, it's not." Sam took a sip of wine and kept Ruth waiting. "It's in London. I've already reserved the Davies Suite at Claridge's with a private butler."

"Oh, Sam..." Ruth was flabbergasted, but she was already trying to imagine how to work things out so that she could say yes.

"We can spend Christmas Eve here, but we'd have to get a flight out on Christmas Day. It was easier when the Concorde was still flying... and so much faster. I thought we'd spend the rest of the week in London, maybe catch some shows and then go to Paris for New Year's Eve. Or if you'd rather be traditional, we could fly back to New York for New Year's Eve in Times Square."

"I've never been to Times Square for New Year's Eve, Sam."

"It's awfully crowded, but if that's what you'd like—"

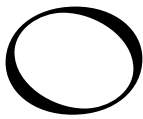
"No, no, Paris is fine. The whole thing sounds fantastic, but..."

"But what? Please don't say no right away. Think about it. There's plenty of time for you to decide."

"I'll have to make sure that Arturo and Artie can get along without me and that Tim doesn't need me, but it sounds wonderful, Sam. Can I let you know in a week?"

"The sooner the better, darling." He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. He knew Ruth well enough to know that she would have to make up her own mind. It was all up to her now. As much as Sam wanted to give her the Christmas gift of a wonderful trip, he wouldn't say another word about it until she did.

Chapter 28

 On the following Sunday morning Ruth ran her finger down the open page of the reservation book. Business would be slow today, and that suited her fine. Most of the regulars must be saving themselves for the Christmas party that evening. During brunch, she and Artie kept up behind the bar with no trouble at all. They didn't both need to be there. Ruth noticed something different about Artie this morning. He seemed... *perkier* than usual. He moved faster and Ruth thought... but did she dare to ask the question? "Artie, have you lost weight?"

"Bless you, woman. Someone's finally noticed! I've been dieting for weeks—starving myself—no desserts, no fried foods, hardly any bread, filling up on goddamn salads until I turn green. Even Arturo hasn't noticed. Thank you, Ruthie."

"I'm sure he has."

"Well, he hasn't said a word."

"But Arturo sees you every day. It's harder for him to tell, but you really look terrific, Artie."

"You're so sweet, Ruthie," Artie said. "That reminds me... Scott will work the party with me tonight. We'll close from four to five o'clock to get things set up and then let in the invited guests only. I've hired someone to work the door. Once everyone's inside and has gotten a drink or two and something to eat, I need to ask a little favor from you."

"What is it, Artie?"

"Well, I wondered if you'd mind jumping behind the bar again for just a little while. I've... um... made some plans. I have to help Arturo with something in the kitchen. It's kind of a surprise, you see. I shouldn't need you for more than about half an hour."

"Sure, Artie. I invited Sam, but his daughter and son-in-law will be here, too, so it's not as if I'd be abandoning him. That reminds me of something, too." Ruth had been dreaming of Sam's offer. It seemed too good to be true, and she wondered if her entire evening with Sam had been part of the same dream, *The Nutcracker* ballet and dinner at Farallon, the invitation to London and Paris. When she told Artie the whole story it didn't sound quite so far-fetched any more. "... but I'll only go if it's okay with you and Arturo and if I'm sure that Tim will be all right without me."

"Ruth, you silly woman. Only a fool would pass up an offer like that. Don't tell me you have any doubts. Tim will be fine. He has that hunky Nick back in town this winter to care for him. Arturo and I would sooner close the place down and board up the doors and windows than let you miss out on this trip. It sounds so romantic. A suite at Claridge's. You have to go, Ruth."

"I haven't even told Tim yet," Ruth confessed, "but I will, and I have to let Sam know my answer just as soon as possible so he confirm our flights."

Ruth put a RESERVED sign on one of the large round tables. Then she walked home through the raindrops to Collingwood Street.

While Ruth took a quick shower she wondered what the inside of a hotel suite in London would look like. She wondered if the knobs for hot and cold water were on the opposite sides. Did the water run the wrong way down the drain? No, that was Australia. At five sharp her doorbell rang, and there was Sam in a gray pinstripe suit and red tie, with a corsage for Ruth made of red roses with silver ribbons.

"Thank you, Sam. Where's your car?"

"I found parking at the corner down by Collingwood Park," he said as he pinned the corsage to Ruth's collar.

"Good, we can walk to Arts. Is it still raining? I'll grab an umbrella."

Arts was already jumping when Ruth and Sam arrived. Ruth was glad she'd reserved a big table for them. There'd be plenty of room for Sam's daughter Jane with Ben and the grandkids, who arrived momentarily, plus Nick and Tim, if he was up for it, and anyone else who dropped by.

Phil was already at the piano playing Christmas carols. Arturo was setting out a buffet along the wall behind him. Jake came over to take their drink order, but Ruth declined. "I'll have something after a while. Artie asked me to fill in for him a little later, and I want to be alert. Do you know what he has in mind?"

"All I know is that the office is off-limits. He's got something up his sleeve, some big surprise for the party. He told all of us that if anyone even peeked in there it would cost them their job!"

"I wonder what it is," Ruth said. Then she looked around and saw Teresa with a group of her friends and fellow teachers from Harvey Milk School at a table near the front of the room. The new tenants, Tony and Jeff, were at the next table and their across-the-hall neighbor Marcia, formerly known as Malcolm, was sitting with them. That made up all of the current residents of the building on Collingwood Street. Ruth said to Sam, "It looks like the whole family is here now, except for Tim and Nick."

They heard some commotion at the front door, and Ruth was surprised to see Nick's grandmother, Amanda Musgrove. Nick held open the door for her, and she held it for him to push Tim through in his wheelchair. "Amanda!" Ruth shouted and waved to her. "Come and join us. Now it really is a family affair."

Nick helped Tim with his jacket and once everyone was seated, Sam asked, "How are you feeling, Tim?"

"Not too bad, Sam, all things considered. It sure is good to get out of the house for a change."

Nick said, "He gets around on crutches pretty well at home, don't you, Snowman? But I didn't want him to slip on the wet sidewalk and break his good leg. Besides, as long as he's in the wheelchair I have him right where I want him."

"Nick has a bondage fetish, you know," Tim said matter-of-factly, hoping someone would be shocked, but no one took him seriously.

Arturo came over to their table, wiping his hands on his apron. He shook hands with Sam and Ben and gave Nick, Tim, and the ladies each a peck on the cheek. "It's good to see you out among the living, Tim," Arturo said. "We've all missed you."

Tim smiled and then scowled when he noticed Phil at the piano. "I see Phil is still packing them in."

"Aw," Arturo said. "I don't know what you've got against Phil. He's not a bad guy."

Ruth remembered something she'd meant to bring up for a long time. "Arturo, I forgot all about those flowers you sent to Tim when he was in the hospital in Sebastopol. I meant to thank you for him, but there was so much going on at the time with our worry over Tim and then the greenhouse explosion."

"We sent flowers to the house, not the hospital," Arturo said.

"What? Are you sure?" she asked. "But Phil delivered them personally."

"I remember discussing it with Artie," he insisted. "In fact, we had an argument about it. I said there was no sense in sending flowers all the way from San Francisco to Sonoma County when Nick has a nursery right there. Artie finally agreed with me. Besides, we figured we might as well wait until Tim was home and wide awake enough to enjoy them."

"They came just the other day, Arturo," Tim said. "They're beautiful. Thank you both so much. Nick put them on the table right beside my bed... *our* bed nowadays, I meant to say." He grinned at Nick.

Jake came to their table with their drinks as Ruth said, "This is all so strange. Phil delivered the flowers to the hospital himself. Why would he tell me they came from the restaurant? He said he had a client in Santa Rosa, and the hospital was on his way, so he volunteered to drop them off."

Arturo said, "He may have had a *client*, but the only person Phil saw there regularly was his grandmother. She was in a nursing home in Santa Rosa with Alzheimer's. Sometimes she knew him and sometimes she didn't, but he'd go up and play the piano for her in the lounge. She died a few weeks ago, but he still stops in there and plays for the other residents. They grew very fond of him. He'll drive up on a weekday when he's off from here. He gets them to sing along at the piano, and they have a grand time. I guess weekdays and weekends don't make too much difference when you're in a home."

Ruth said, "I could just picture that everyone had chipped in to buy those flowers for Tim, like Phil told me."

"He must have bought them himself," Arturo said.

"Maybe he was trying to ease his guilty conscience," Tim piped up.

"Come to think of it, they were a little wilted," Ruth said.

"Maybe the flowers were meant for Phil's grandmother," Amanda Musgrove said and the table grew quiet.

They all sat back and listened to the piano music and the tinkling of glasses and laughter around the room. Ruth broke the silence at their table, "Tim, I think you might have been judging Phil too harshly."

"I know nothing," Tim protested. "I was on morphine. I don't remember anything about any flowers. I don't even remember that hospital. The last thing I remember was

leaving Nick's that morning and putting the key to his truck in the ignition."

"That's probably just as well, dear," Ruth said.

Jake said, "It sounds like Phil's ready to star in a remake of that old movie about the hooker with the heart of gold. Let's see... typecasting would make him the *gay* hooker, of course, with a heart of black leather, I suppose. Who was that actress? Norma Shearer?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," Tim said with a scowl.

Jake turned to the other waiter and asked, "Hey James, who played the hooker with the heart of gold in that movie?"

"What movie? Halle Berry?"

"No, it was an old movie."

"How should I know? Was it Lena Horne?"

"No, she wasn't African-American. Don't you know any white actresses?"

"No, not really—and that's okay, Jake, you can say 'black' around me, just not 'colored.' I still don't know what movie you're talking about, though."

Tim stared across the room at Phil in his tuxedo and once again he was lost in his thoughts.

The next morning after their night together, shortly after Phil said goodbye to Tim, Jason returned to the cabin. Tim and Jason had talked about renting a canoe that day to paddle up to the old gay nude beach near Wohler Bridge. They'd done it once before and ended up sore and sunburned, but it was worth it to be able to make love so far from civilization. At least Tim thought so. Jason suggested they spend their last hours by the pool at the Triple R instead and Tim agreed to that plan.

Enough of the bears had checked out after Lazy-Bear Weekend that Tim and Jason found a pair of lounge chairs together beside the pool. Tim knew he should forget his fantasy of building a life with Jason. Jason would never be tied down again, even though he loved Tim in his own way. Jason would always play the field.

Tim had even thought that morning that Phil might be the one to help him put things in perspective and accept the way things were with Jason. Someone, probably Jake, had once told him, "The best way to get over your old lover is to get under a new one."

Jason ordered margaritas, and the two of them floated on rubber rafts in the water. Jason pushed Tim off a couple of times and their play became friendly, full of laughter and groping, almost sexual, but Jason wasn't serious about it. Tim was confused enough about his feelings. When Tim thought about it later, he might have found out the whole truth right then and there, but Jason waited until the drive back home to the city.

Jane piped up, "Was it Joan Crawford, maybe? There was a late movie on TV one night when I was pregnant with the baby. I was half-asleep, but I think it was Joan Crawford, and I'm pretty sure she was supposed to be a prostitute."

Jake said, "No, Joan Crawford never had a heart of anything but steel. Maybe Paulette Goddard."

They were almost through Santa Rosa, heading south on Highway 101. Jason had his left hand on the wheel and reached over with his right hand to tousle Tim's hair. "So, how did you like your birthday present, kid?"

"What present?" Was he supposed to have found a gift hidden in his clothes back at the cabin? Or did Jason just mean the weekend? That must be it. Jason had spent some serious money on the cabin, nearly all of Tim's drinks and meals that included two incredible dinners the past two nights. He may not have spent as much as that guy Phil told him about, the one who threw a fancy formal dinner in a campground, but Jason had spent a lot. He hadn't hauled in a baby grand piano and hired a hot guy to play it for his guests. Boy, that must have been some dinner party! Jason wouldn't have thought of doing something like that... or would he?

"What present?" Tim asked again. "You mean the weekend? It was great."

"That guy named Phil, you goofball. I hired him for your birthday present."

"You... hired someone... to fuck me?"

"Well, it was your birthday and I figured—"

"I can't believe this! You hired him?"

"I know what a horn dog you are, and I figured since I haven't been giving it to you very much lately, you ought to..."

"You really hired that man to—"

"You wear me out. I'm getting too old to keep up with you. But I figured after you've had me, anyone else would be a disappointment unless he was..."

"Jason, you fucking asshole!"

"I figured the next best thing to me would be if I hired a real stud. I hope he was worth it, 'cause he wasn't cheap, you know."

"I'm only twenty-nine for Chrissake! I can still pick up guys on my own."

"Was he good?"

"I can't believe you think you're so hot that nobody else can compare but a hired escort!"

"I was just teasing about that part. I'm sorry. You're really pissed off, aren't you?! I didn't do it to piss you off, man—"

"It might have been different if I knew you hired him. I might have been able to go along with the idea, but the way you did it! This is so demeaning!"

"Jeez, I thought it would be fun for you. I'm sorry you're making such a big deal out of it. It was big, wasn't it? I mean—"

"Fuck you! I thought he really liked me." Tim felt a tear burn down his right cheek. As much as it stung, he refused to touch it, refused to let Jason see him wipe his eyes, refused to acknowledge how upset he was. He held his fists in his lap and didn't say another word all the way back to the city. He refused

to give Jason the satisfaction of knowing how much he had hurt him.

Tim wanted never to speak to Jason again, but they still had to work together. He could hardly refuse to order drinks for his customers when he and Jason were on the same shift at Arts. The next time that happened, Jason made enough of an apology to rekindle some sort of speaking arrangement with Tim, and they were very slowly, gradually becoming friends again when Jason was murdered.

Of course they hadn't known then that Phil would one day take over for Viv as the full-time piano player at Arts. Ruth watched her nephew's eyes flash in anger toward Phil across the room. Then they softened. Tim may have inherited all the psychic powers in the family, but Ruth still liked to pride herself that she could read him like a book. Right now she wasn't sure what he was thinking, though.

A couple of weeks later, Tim ran into Phil on the patio of the Eagle Tavern and Phil tried to talk to him. "I would have done it for nothing, Tim," he said. If this was an apology, Phil couldn't have chosen his next words in a worse way. "I thought you were really hot, too. Some guys just lay there and make me do all the work, but you really got into it."

"I didn't know you were being paid for it," Tim spat back at him. "How was I supposed to know you were just doing your job?"

"There's nothing wrong with enjoying your work, is there?" Phil asked. "Tell you what. Next time it's on the house."

That remark had only made matters worse. "Fuck you, Phil," Tim had told him. "There won't be any next time."

Tim looked around at the people at their table—Nick's grandmother and Ben and Jane and their kids and his Aunt Ruth and Sam Connor. Tim's eyes finally landed on the handsome man sitting next to him. Who cared about Phil?

Nick was right here with his smiling face and his sexy hands and the strong arms that helped him into the wheelchair this evening and held him close in bed on Collingwood Street every night since he got home from the hospital. Tim reached over and grabbed Nick's thigh and Nick squeezed Tim's hand under the table. Tim felt like he was surrounded by all the people he loved. No, Tim really didn't care about Phil at all anymore.

Ruth was sorry she'd mentioned the flowers and decided to change the subject. "Tim, I have some wonderful news. I need to discuss it with you, though, before I can make up my mind. Sam invited me on a trip over the holidays to spend Boxing Day in London, and then we'll fly on to Paris for New Years Eve. I told him I'd love to go, but first I have to make sure you can get along without me."

Tim's jaw dropped, and Nick spoke for him, "Need you? Tim's got me. I mean, he'll always need you Ruth, but I'm here to take care of Tim now. You *have* to go. You can't pass up an opportunity like this."

"Of course not, Aunt Ruth," Tim said. "You know very well I'd be the first to go and leave you behind. Are you kidding? I wouldn't care if you had two broken legs and were all alone in an iron lung, if I had a chance at a trip like that. Don't be silly! You and Sam have got to go! Nick is taking good care of me."

"I hoped you'd say that. Sometimes I feel more like Auntie Mame than Aunt Ruth." Ruth thought of what she'd just said and her smile vanished. "Oh, I didn't mean that. I was thinking of how happy Auntie Mame was when she went off to Europe with Beauregard Burnside and then he went and ruined their whole trip by falling off an Alp!"

They all laughed and Ruth turned to Sam. "You don't plan on doing any skiing or mountain-climbing when we're over there, do you?"

"No, no Alps for me, I promise. I haven't been skiing since I banged up my knee a couple of years ago in Tahoe."

"Good," Ruth said.

Artie hollered from the bar, "Ruth! Oh, Ruthie! It's that time! Could you come back here and relieve me now, please?"

Ruth excused herself from the table, and Artie disappeared into the office. Scott and Ruth had a minor rush behind the bar but they soon caught up.

Jake came back to their table and said, "Mrs. Musgrove, I just bought your newest book in hardcover. I couldn't wait for the paperback. Would you autograph this one for me? It's in my backpack in the kitchen, but I have time. I could get it right now."

Amanda Musgrove reached into her purse and said, "Well, since you bought it in hardcover, I'll find a fountain pen. Yes, I'd be delighted to autograph it, Jake, but there's no hurry, is there? First, how about a rye Manhattan? I'm glad to see Ruth behind the bar; she knows just how I like them. Is that a new piercing in your eyebrow since I saw you last, Jake?"

"Yes, Mrs. Musgrove, it's a real ruby. I thought it would be a nice touch, since I didn't have anything red to wear for the Christmas party."

"It's a lovely stone, Jake. Run and get my drink now, dear."

No one had seen Arturo for some time when he appeared without his apron, stepped onto the stage beside the piano and announced into the microphone, "Ladies and Gentlemen, may I have your attention, please? Artie and I want to welcome you all to our annual Christmas party at Arts."

Everyone applauded and cheered and whistled. Ruth turned to Scott and asked, "Where is Artie anyway?"

"I don't know where he went," Scott said. "I haven't seen him since you came back here to give him a break."

"He told me he needed to help Arturo in the kitchen, but the buffet is all set out already, unless they're planning a special desert or something."

Arturo went on, "As many of you know, most years at our Christmas party we have a surprise visit at about this

time in the evening from Jolly Old Saint Nick, but this year we decided that maybe you were all a little old for that, so instead, I'd like you to please give a warm welcome to our very own Artie Glamour as Mrs. Claus!"

The office door burst open and out came Artie in full face make-up dressed in red with white fur trim and a mile of white marabou feathers behind him. He climbed onto the stage, took a bow, and sat down on the barstool beside the piano. The crowd gave him a standing ovation before he could utter a word. It reminded Ruth of how they cheered for her the first night she walked into Arts after she'd come back from Minnesota. Ruth looked around at the smiling faces and felt all the love in this room. She knew now, if there had ever been a doubt, that she made the right decision when she moved to San Francisco.

When everyone sat down and the room grew quiet again, Artie turned to Phil and nodded. Phil played a few bars of introduction and Artie sang "Santa Baby."

Ruth saw someone else coming out of the back room too, just after Artie started to sing. Ruth waved and whispered loudly to her hairdresser, "Rene! What are you doing here? Can I get you a drink?"

"I don't mind if I do, Miss Ruth." Rene sat down at the bar. "I could use a lovely libation about now. How about some Hennessy with a Coke back?"

"I didn't even see you come in."

"I just had to deliver Miss Artie's wig for her, you know, and I thought I might as well check and make sure your new do is holding up all right."

"Just fine, I think." Ruth touched her hair and turned around for a glance in the mirror behind the bar. "It's so nice to see you outside of your salon, Rene."

"Artie and I go way back, you know. And she insisted that I sit and keep her company and fuss over her until she went out on stage. It's been a long time. That poor old queen was a nervous wreck."

"You wouldn't know it now."

"You sure wouldn't. Miss Artie's a pro!"

"Santa baby, and hurry down the chimney tonight..."

Tim still had to admit that Phil was handsome and that he and Artie made quite a pair on stage together. At least Phil had enough sense of humor to play along with Artie's act. Tim decided it was time to let go of his anger toward Phil. He had Nick now, right here beside him. Here, not in New Orleans, not at the Russian River, not where Jason was, in his dreams or his memory or in some irretrievable past, but here in San Francisco right now.

Tim knew it was time to forgive Phil, just the way he had learned to forgive Jason once. Jason had hurt Tim badly when they stopped sleeping together. It wasn't Phil's fault that Jason hired him, and Tim thought Phil was interested. Phil wasn't even faking it that night. He offered Tim another night at no charge, after all—he must have liked it. Tim was too stubborn and hurt to take him up on it, of course. Lots of guys would have.

Yes, Tim would forgive Phil. They had to work together, after all.

Funny, that was just what Tim had said to Artie about Jason once, when Artie was trying to arrange the schedules so they never ran into each other, "Jason and I still have to work together, after all."

Come to think of it, Jason was the one that Tim was still a little pissed off at, and he was dead. Oh well...

Nick was here, and, as far as Tim was concerned, he would stay beside him. Nick beside Tim and Tim beside Nick with all the other people they loved and cared about circling in some kind of crazy orbit around them for as long as possible. Tim's psychic ability might be useless in his waking life, but he could predict keeping this man beside him forever and ever. That's what he wanted, but for the time being he'd just have to be satisfied with living in the present, this rainy evening on Castro Street.

Arturo came behind the bar and put his arm around Ruth. Hardly anyone ordered drinks during Artie's performance. Ruth whispered, "Arturo, he's amazing. I've only seen pictures of Artie in drag in old photograph albums, but he can really sing. You must be so proud of him."

Arturo said, "Oh, he can sing all right. You should hear him in the shower. Ask Teresa sometime. It's lucky for you that you're on the ground floor."

Ruth gave Arturo's hand a squeeze and asked, "Does this remind you of the old days at... what was the name of that club? Gepetto's? No, Pinocchio's?"

"It was Finocchio's, Ruth," Arturo said. "Sure, this reminds me of those days, but it reminds me even more of when Artie and I first met in Vietnam. You should have seen Artie perform for the troops that year when Ruta Lee sprained her ankle on the USO tour, and Artie had to go on in her place and sing *Sisters* with Bob Hope."

"Now you're pulling my leg, Arturo," Ruth protested, but she secretly hoped that what he was telling her about Artie and Bob Hope might have been true.

By the time the party was winding down, Artie had joined their table and Ruth was back at Sam's side with Tim, Nick and Amanda Musgrove. Jane and Ben said their goodbyes after Artie's performance, since their babysitter had to be home early. Ruth was still gushing over Artie's outfit, his make-up, his singing voice and his stage presence ad nauseam. Tim glanced at his watch and tried to stifle a yawn, but Nick caught it. "Are you ready to go home, Snowman?"

"No, I'm fine," Tim said, but he yawned again, even bigger this time. "I'm ready whenever you are, Nick, but what about your grandmother?"

Amanda Musgrove snapped her sleek black cell phone shut and dropped it into her purse. "That was your mother, Nicholas. She should be here in about twenty minutes to drive me home, so you boys needn't worry about me. Run along..."

Tim whispered to Nick, "Shouldn't we wait?"

Amanda turned back to Ruth, Sam and Artie. "My daughter-in-law—Nick's mother—for all her faults, is an excellent driver and she's quite punctual, as a rule. And if she's not, I'll have time for another drink and continue to enjoy the good company here.

Nick whispered into Tim's ear, "You don't want to meet my mother tonight. She might be an hour or more."

"I'll have to meet her sooner or later, won't I?"

"Maybe I'll get her to invite you over to their house in Alameda for dinner sometime. You could meet both my mom and dad at once."

"I didn't say I wanted to go *that* far, Nick. This way would be a lot more casual."

"And when do I get to meet your parents, Tim? Do I have to fly all the way to Minneapolis to ask for your father's blessing before I sweep you off your feet?"

"Never mind."

They said their goodbyes and Nick pushed Tim's wheelchair toward the door. It would be a very long time before either of them dealt with one another's mothers, and when that time came it would happen in a most peculiar way.

Amanda Musgrove turned back toward the table and said, "Well, Ruth, it turns out your nephew and my grandson didn't need us after all. The killer is dead, and it looks as if those boys will do well enough on their own together."

"Yes, everything worked out fine this time," Ruth smiled and squeezed Sam's hand under the table as she watched her nephew and his handsome lover laugh and make their way out into the rainy night on Castro Street. "Maybe next time there's trouble it won't be so serious, and we can be of more help to them."

"I'll drink to that, Ruth." Amanda raised her glass. "Merry Christmas and let's drink to next time. May all our adventures be safer, but always enjoyable, especially your upcoming holiday trip with Sam."

"I'll drink to that!" Sam raised his glass and gave Ruth a kiss.

"Cheers!" Ruth took Sam's hand, "To exciting new adventures and the happiest of holidays to everyone."

Nick pushed Tim in his wheelchair out the door of Arts Restaurant and onto the Castro Street sidewalk. "Damn, I told you not to eat so much. If Artie lost forty-five pounds you must have gained ten tonight. And I've still got to get you up all those stairs."

"No backseat driving. Shut up and push. No, wait. It's starting to rain again. Help me with my umbrella, Nick. Now push. No, wait. Kiss me first."

"Merry Christmas, Snowman."

"Merry Christmas, Nick."

A sneak peek at
Chapter 1

from

Mark Abramson's

Snowman

Book 4 of the Beach Reading series

Nick Musgrove woke up alone in his bed on Sunday morning and missed Tim Snow. Even after all these years of living alone, he'd grown comfortable with waking up beside Tim all winter in San Francisco. Nick looked around the bedroom of his little house in Monte Rio, California, and the first thing his eyes landed on was a picture of the two of them.

Someone Tim knew had snapped it at the Triple-R Resort last summer, arm in arm, cheek to cheek and bare-chested beside the pool on a perfect afternoon. They both got copies, and Tim bought identical chrome frames at Cliff's that they kept on the tables beside their beds. Nick picked up his, blew the dust off it and smiled. The cleaning lady would come on Monday afternoon. If Tim were here, he would have kept the dust off it.

The break was Tim's idea. Nick just went along with it. Sort of. It was Tim who thought they each needed some time alone, now that he was able to take care of himself again, but by now it had been a full week since they'd even spoken. That was the longest time they'd been apart since when Tim was in the hospital last winter after the "accident" with Nick's truck.

Tim encouraged him to get back to work and rebuild the nursery. When the insurance money came through, Nick realized he could make the place exactly how he'd always dreamed it should be. He'd spent this week making plans and

dealing with contractors, but without Tim around his heart wasn't in it.

Nick rose, stretched his long limbs and put the coffee on. By the time he finished his shower, he decided that one week of separation was plenty, no matter what Tim thought. Nick threw a few things in a bag, poured the fresh pot of coffee into a Thermos and hit the road. The coffee was all gone before the Golden Gate Bridge came into view.

Tim's tenants, Ben and Jane Larson, had a blue Chevrolet that stood in the driveway on Hancock Street, but there was no sign of Tim's red Thunderbird. Nick thought that must mean he was well enough to be up and about. Maybe he'd just gone shopping at Safeway. Nick pulled his truck into the driveway and sat there for a moment. He had keys to Tim's flat, but he felt a little strange using them when Tim wasn't home. It was one thing to let himself in the way he had all winter, when Tim was lying there waiting for him. This was different. He did have to use the bathroom, though, so he decided... what the hell.

On his way out of the apartment, Nick glanced in at Tim's neatly made bed and saw that the picture in the chrome frame was missing. He could only wonder what that meant. He locked the door again and went down the front stairs.

"Is that you, Tim?" Jane called out from her front door. "I thought you were going for longer than just one night... Oh! Hello, Nick. I thought Tim was back from his trip already. How are you?"

"Hi, Jane. Back from what trip? Did Tim tell you where he was going?"

"Jane "Won't you come in, Nick? How about a cup of coffee?"

"No thanks, I've had plenty of coffee already. I drank a whole Thermos full on the way down here this morning."

"Come in anyway. Sit down. I'm having some. How about a danish?"

"Well, okay, I guess I could have one more cup, too." Nick considered that if there was bad news, he might want to be sitting down.

"Have you talked to Tim lately?" Jane asked.

"No, not this week. He said he wanted a little break..."

"Have you tried calling him?"

"Sure, I've tried. All I get is his answering machine. He never answers the cell phone I bought him, either. It was just last week he started in talking about us having some 'space,' and then he drove back to the city and said not to call him until he called me. God, I hate that word! I don't feel like we need any *space* from each other." Nick took a sip of coffee and added creamer. "What did he tell you, Jane?"

"He basically said the same thing, Nick, but he made it sound more like it was your idea. He said he was afraid of being a burden, and he didn't want you to get sick of taking care of him and..."

"That's ridiculous! I love taking care of him. It makes me feel needed."

"Well, you know Tim." Jane offered a weak smile. "At least you know him a lot better than I do."

"I'm not so sure, Jane. Sometimes I think I do, until he says something silly like that. I would have been happy to push him down to City Hall in his wheelchair and get married if they still granted licenses to gay couples. I could have sworn 'for better or worse, in sickness and in health' and all the rest of that stuff, and I would have meant every word of it!"

"Why don't you and Tim get married anyway, Nick?" Jane asked. "You could elope to Iowa and then fly back and celebrate at the restaurant with all your friends and families. What a great excuse for a party!"

"I think you've been living in the Castro too long."

"Arturo and Artie had a little commitment ceremony, you know, but they hardly told anyone about it until later. They didn't want a big fuss, I guess."

"Tim and I talked about doing something like that, but you know how he is. He didn't want to be in a wheelchair for the pictures."

Jane laughed out loud. "He's just as vain as he is paranoid."

"You know him better than you think. But where did he go on this trip? Did he tell you?"

"He said he wasn't even sure where he was going, just that he needed to get away," Jane said as she picked up her crying baby. Samuel Timothy Larson was named after Jane's father Sam, with whom Ruth was now practically living, and Tim, the kids' upstairs built-in babysitter.

"He talked about taking a long drive down the coast... maybe L.A. Why don't you swing by Collingwood, Nick? Ask Tim's aunt. I'll bet she would know. He wouldn't leave town without checking in with her first."

"Good idea. Thanks, Jane. And thanks for the coffee."

Nick pulled his new truck onto Collingwood Street just as a car vacated a parking spot near Arturo and Artie's building. Ruth lived on the ground floor in Tim's old apartment. The driver of the other car honked and waved. It was Teresa, Ruth's neighbor from the top floor.

Nick was just about to press Ruth's doorbell when Arturo arrived at the gate, out of breath. "Nick, you're just the man I needed to run into."

"Hi, Arturo. I was looking for Aunt Ruth, actually. I wanted to ask if she knew where Tim was."

"Ruth isn't home," Arturo said. "I need to get hold of her too, though. I've got a huge mess on my hands."

"Where is she? What's wrong?"

"I need your help at the restaurant. We can talk on the way. Artie threw his back out trying to lift a beer keg last night, so he's upstairs in bed with a heating pad and a bottle of Vicodin. Brunch is going to be busy today, and Scott will have to tend bar by himself if I can't get a hold of Ruth. She's

not due back until tomorrow night, but Scott had to close by himself last night, so I know he'll be tired."

"Where is she? How do you know she's not home? I need to ask if she knows where Tim is."

"She's been down at Sam's place in Hillsborough all week. Artie said Tim came by yesterday looking for her, too."

"Well, what do you need me for, Arturo? I don't know anything about the bar business, except how to order a drink. I don't know how to make them all."

"I didn't mean I wanted you to tend bar. I need a strong man with a good back, though. Late last night the toilet in the women's room backed up. I got hold of a plumber to come in, but it was two in the morning. I went home at 2:30 and left him there, still working. You can imagine what he's going to charge me for coming in at that hour."

"Did he get it fixed?" Nick asked.

"I sure hope so, but I just checked my messages, and he said the snake wouldn't do it. They had to tear up the floor to get at the problem. The plumbing in that building is so old I'm sure it's pre-earthquake and I mean '06 not '89. He said they had to tear up linoleum and tile and the sub-flooring under that, all the way from the toilet out into the hallway. The pipes were backed up in every direction, but worst toward the building in back on Hartford Street. I can't imagine how bad the place is going to smell this morning!"

Nick was fond of Tim's bosses, who were also Ruth's landlords, but he wasn't sure about getting involved in this mess that Arturo described at the restaurant. He just wanted to find out where Tim was and be on his way to find him. "Sure, I'll help you, Arturo." Nick heard the words escape from his lips before he could stop them.

"I knew you would, and I promise I'll make it up to you somehow, believe me."

Arturo turned on all the lights and the exhaust fans as soon as they set foot inside. He opened the windows and put two bar stools blocking the opened front door with the

CLOSED sign to discourage any customers from thinking they were open.

"It doesn't smell so bad."

"I guess not. Maybe a little. What do you really think, though? Could you eat here?"

"It hardly smells at all, Arturo," Nick said. "I don't think anyone would notice it unless you told them, especially after we air it out good. Let's go look at the damage, though."

The bathrooms were in the hallway between the swinging doors to the kitchen on the right and the stage on the left. The ladies' room door was propped open, and there was a pile of damp rubble and broken bits of tile and linoleum from the toilet bowl all the way down the hall to the emergency exit in the back of the building.

"Do you have a shovel, Arturo?" Nick asked. "If not, I have some tools locked up in the back of my truck. I could go back to Collingwood Street and see if I have something."

"There's a shovel in the closet off the kitchen," Arturo said. "And there should be some work gloves on the shelf inside the back door. Grab a pair for me, too, please. We can use those empty liquor boxes beside the dumpster; line them with heavy-duty trash bags. I meant to have the busboy break them down last night, but I'm glad I let him go straight home. We all put in a big night."

Between Nick and Arturo, they filled several boxes with debris. Nick pulled his long blonde hair away from his face into a ponytail and hoisted the heavy boxes onto his broad shoulders, one after another. He carried them out through the kitchen door to the dumpster in the alley behind the restaurant.

Nick felt sweat trickle down his back and knew he'd need another shower before continuing his search for Tim. He figured he'd go back to Tim's apartment and let himself in again. He was used to Tim's shower by now—even had his own toothbrush in the rack beside the bathroom sink—but he still felt funny about using his key when Tim wasn't home.

Nick threw box after box of debris over the side of the dumpster. "Aw, shit!" he yelled out loud when a black glob of something gelatinous landed on one of his shoes. This was not how he'd envisioned spending his Sunday morning in San Francisco.

"Are you all right, Nick?" he heard Arturo yell from inside.

"Yeah, I'm fine. You owe me a shoe shine, that's all."

Nick was glad to help out, but he wished he had his work clothes with him. This was a dirtier job than he'd ever imagined. Nick looked down into the dumpster and gasped. The last box of debris had broken open and sliding down the pile of muck was a plastic bag with a human hand poking out of it.

"Arturo!" Nick stopped what he was doing. "I think you'd better come here and have a look at something..."

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.