

BEACH READING



Mark Abramson

"...sunny, campy,
quick-witted gem.
A sheer delight."

—Jim Piechota
Bay Area Reporter

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Mark Abramson
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Praise for Beach Reading

Full of lively characters and wacky coincidence, this page-turning series aims to become the *Tales of the City* of the new millennium. In the popular imagination, the heyday of gay life is long gone, washed away by AIDS. But in this love song to San Francisco, Mark Abramson gives the lie to that myth, revealing the joy that still inheres to life in the City by the Bay. The quirky charm of San Francisco is alive and well, and living in the pages of *Beach Reading*. —Lewis DeSimone, author of *Chemistry*

The first entry in Mark Abramson's **Beach Reading Series** pits a brokenhearted, endearing, bar-hopping Castro hero against a seething homophobe all set against the backdrop of a colossal dance party honoring 80s-legend Sylvester. What could be more fun?!

You won't need sand and surf to enjoy this sunny, campy, quick-witted gem. A sheer delight." —Jim Piechota, *Bay Area Reporter*

Disclaimer

Despite any resemblance to living and/or historical figures, all characters mentioned or appearing in *Beach Reading* are fictitious except Sylvester, Two Tons o' Fun, former Mayor Willie Brown, Mavis, Jon Carroll, Leah Garchik, Harvey Milk, Dianne Feinstein, Dan White, Wayne Friday, Carol Doda, Jan Wahl and Dame Edna Everage, who is only partially fictitious.

Table of Contents

[Praise for *Beach Reading*](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Prologue – Start the Novel](#)

[Sneak Peek at Book 2: Cold Serial Murder](#)

[About the Author](#)

Prologue

Sunday morning in the financial district Corey Donatelli thought he saw a spaceship from the window of the limousine. It scattered shards of reflected sunlight across the Transamerica Pyramid and the book-shaped towers of the Embarcadero Center. Corey asked his uncle to have the driver stop right there on California Street where they lowered the tinted windows and looked up at an enormous mirror ball suspended from a helicopter. A biplane pulled a yellow banner across the blue sky. It read

Dance Celebrate Remember
A Tribute To Sylvester's Birthday
Moscone Center Saturday

Corey had never heard of Sylvester, but he wanted to go. Today was his birthday; this was his first trip to San Francisco and everything had been perfect so far. They had taken a long ride along the waterfront, stopped for a Bloody Mary at Fisherman's Wharf and now they were headed toward Castro Street for brunch at a place his uncle had heard about called Arts. Corey would also meet Tim Snow this morning, but unlike Tim, Corey was one of those gay men who could come to San Francisco for a visit and then go on about his life. So this isn't really Corey's story.

San Francisco dazzles most people who visit, but only some get trapped here. You might wonder if they'd turned their heads a moment sooner, like breaking their concentration away from the hypnotist's swaying bauble just in time, they might be able to go back where they came from. Tim Snow could never leave, but he enjoyed being caught here. He almost felt normal in San Francisco. He had longed to be normal ever since he was a boy and started seeing things the way his grandmother did. Tim hoped from those early inklings that clairvoyance, like his first excitement around other boys at the swimming pool, was something that would just go away if he ignored it hard enough. His grandmother had called it a gift, but it wasn't a present he'd asked for. Sometimes he tried to treat his unwanted psychic ability the way a handicapped person must learn to just get on with his life. So this is mostly Tim's story.

It is partly Artie's story, too. He and Arturo fell in love in Vietnam during the war and they got trapped in San Francisco afterward. Artie discovered a whole new life when he put on a dress and found his way to a stage in North Beach to regale the crowds of drunken tourists. After Finocchio's closed, it took him a few years to find a place on Castro Street where he fit in again.

They would all agree that if this isn't Ruth's story, she was an essential part of theirs. Ruth might have been trapped in San Francisco by the flower children in the 1960s when she was a student at Stanford. But she went back to Minnesota instead, got married and rescued her nephew Tim after his parents threw him out when they found out he was gay. Ruth always wanted to return, but she never found a good enough reason. When she came for a visit, not planning to stay, she was just in time to rescue her nephew once again.

Around the time of her divorce, Ruth sent Tim an obituary notice from the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*. A farmer near Worthington died at 102 years old. He'd lived his whole life within fifteen miles of where he was born in the same house where he died. One day when he was a young man he rode a horse across the state line into Iowa, just so he could say that he'd been someplace, but he can

right back. He knew where he belonged.

~~Tim asked her if she meant he should come back to Minnesota, but he'd missed her point entirely,~~ which was not unusual for Tim. He inherited his grandmother's gift, but he couldn't see what was right in front of him. His Aunt Ruth had to explain that Tim's vision led him here because San Francisco was where he belonged.

Chapter 1

It was 3:05pm when Tim Snow's last table showed signs they were getting ready to leave. He'd never seen these men in Arts before and he would have remembered them if they always took a limousine to brunch. Tim knew they were from out of town because one of them asked for an ashtray when they sat down. He couldn't remember a time when people still smoked in restaurants in California.

They were celebrating the youngest one's birthday and even suggested that Tim might make a good gift for the birthday boy. He'd enjoyed flirting, but was startled when the bald guy winked and said, "Meet us at The Eagle Tavern in a couple of hours. I'll make it worth your while."

"Hmmm, FBI... It looks like you're in trouble now, Tim!" Artie said when he processed the credit card behind the bar.

"Huh?" Tim usually paid little attention to his boss when he started rambling.

"Don't get too excited about handcuffs, dear. His initials spell FBI, that's all."

Tim was still smiling at the foursome and trying to accept their offer to meet them as mere flattery. He hadn't seen his tip yet. "What'd you say, Artie?"

"Nothing... hey, I knew they were running up quite a bar tab, but you sold them a bottle of our best champagne, too. Whatever you're doing, keep at it!"

"I'm not doing anything special, Artie," Tim protested. "It's the youngest one's birthday and they're visiting San Francisco for a long weekend. I offered him a slice of cake. I was going to stick a candle in it and ask Viv to play *Happy Birthday*, but she must be on another break. He declined, anyway—too many carbs, I suppose. He hardly touched his food, either. They must all be on a liquid diet."

"Hmmm... the birthday boy is a cutie, Tim."

"Never mind, Artie... you know I'm not into chicken."

"You could do worse," Artie persisted. "Besides, it might help you stop mooning over Jason if you'd get laid once in a while."

"I *do* get laid once in a while and I'm *not* mooning over Jason." Tim didn't want to talk about Jason, especially not at work. "When did you become such a matchmaker, anyway?"

"He's always trying to fix me up, too," said Jake, the other waiter. "Every time a guy comes in with a tattoo or any visible body piercing, Artie's trying to marry me off. Just because I like them on my own body, doesn't necessarily mean..."

"You better be careful, Jake," Tim interrupted. "I've heard of teenagers getting their braces stuck together when they kiss, but I'd hate for you to get your eyebrow ring tangled up in some hot stud's Prince Albert."

"Don't start with me, Tim. I'm not the one who chipped a tooth at Blow-Buddies."

"I don't want either of you two boys to start," Artie scolded. "I'm telling you Tim, I can't always arrange the schedule so that you and Jason never see each other. One of these days you'll have to work together again and you're going to have to get over this."

"Is that what you're doing? You're arranging the schedule to spare my feelings? Don't worry about me, Artie. I'm fine." Tim picked up a tray and went back to clear the glasses and coffee cups from his last table. He was feeling irritable now, but he smiled when he picked up the signed credit

card slip and found the crisp hundred-dollar bill beneath it. Tim glanced up to see two of the men standing out on the sidewalk smoking cigarettes.

“Thanks for everything,” Tim heard a shy voice behind him. It was the birthday boy coming out of the restroom. Judging from the way he walked, he’d either had too much to drink or his black leather boots were a birthday present he hadn’t broken in yet.

“Happy birthday,” Tim told him again, “and enjoy the rest of your stay in San Francisco.”

“Won’t I see you later? My uncle said you might be able to join us. I think we’re headed someplace South of Market.”

“Maybe...” Tim left it at that. He didn’t want to encourage the kid. He was cute, but much too young for Tim’s taste. Still... it had been a while. “Have fun.”

“Thanks... bye...” The boy looked back at Tim as he headed toward the door.

“Will you look at that?” Tim said to Jake, who was resetting a nearby table with a clean linen tablecloth, wine glasses and double forks for the evening dinner shift.

“What is it, Tim? Did he leave you his phone number?”

“Better!” Tim held up the hundred-dollar bill so that Jake could see it, but not the rest of the room. “They asked me to meet them later, too.”

“Are you going to? You should! That bald guy must be rich! I’d do him in a minute.”

“No, it’s the kid who was interested in me,” Tim said. “I could go South of Market, I suppose. I’m not working tonight. I was going home to pay some bills and maybe call my Aunt Ruth in Minnesota. She’s going through a messy divorce and sounds bummed out. I should do laundry, too.”

Tim continued bussing the table and spotted a note under the FBI man’s saucer. It read: *The birthday boy’s name is Corey. If you can’t join us at The Eagle, he’s in room #2553 at the Marriott Hotel on 4th Street. I will make it worth your while.* The note was signed: *Uncle Fred.*

“Jeez!” Tim said to Artie. “That’s twice he’s used the phrase ‘worth your while.’ Uncle Fred wants to hire me for his nephew’s birthday! The back pages of the gay papers are full of paid escorts. Why try to pick up a waiter?” Still, Tim was flattered. He unloaded the dirty glasses from the tray onto the bar and gave Artie the credit card slip.

“What? He hit on you and didn’t even leave a tip? That’s some nerve!” Artie placed the check on one pile and the credit card slip on another. He would take them to the office in a few minutes and balance the receipts from brunch. The end of the month was nearing and it showed by how little money the customers spent these days.

“They left a cash tip,” Tim said with a smile, but he didn’t tell Artie how much. The waiters traditionally gave the bartenders a percentage of their tips, but not when Artie was working behind the bar. As one of the owners, he wouldn’t accept them. “I didn’t mean to snap at you about Jason, Artie. I know you’re just trying to spare my feelings, but you don’t need to juggle the schedule on my account. Jason and I worked together before we slept together and there’s no reason we can’t work together again. Who knows? Maybe someday we’ll be friends.”

“‘Attaboy!” Artie resumed his motherly stance. He did feel almost parental toward his employees, especially where Tim was concerned. “You and Jason were coming at each other from different directions. That doesn’t make either of you the bad guy. You could maybe learn a thing or two from Jason, Tim.”

“I hope you’re right, Artie. I guess if I’m going to meet them I’d better stop at home and change into something more appropriate for South of Market on a Sunday afternoon.

“Maybe you’ve started learning a few things from Jason already.”

Tim walked up Castro Street to 19th, around the corner and up the hill on Collingwood. Artie and

Arturo were not only his bosses, but also his landlords. They lived on the top floor of their three-story Victorian apartment building and Tim lived on the bottom. Tim glanced at the answering machine beside his bed, but the light wasn't blinking. There were a few e-mails on his computer, but they were mostly Spam. Nothing looked urgent or even very interesting.

He slipped out of his khaki slacks and the blue knit shirt that showed off his chest so well. Tim had always kept in good shape by running, but Jason had also gotten him into the habit of working out at the gym. As much as he dreaded his gym routine some days, he had to admit it paid off if he was getting hundred-dollar bills in his tips. These days he tried to schedule his trips to the gym to avoid running into Jason, especially in the showers. Tim didn't want to be reminded of how much he missed them being naked together.

He glanced toward the overflowing hamper in the corner and tossed his work clothes onto the pile. Laundry could wait. South of Market sounded like a better idea. He pulled off his socks and stepped into the shower, turning the water up as hot as it would go. The phone rang as soon as Tim wet his hair. The telephone could wait, too.

Tim imagined the smells of maple syrup and bacon sliding off his bare skin and swirling down the drain. He soaped and rinsed his armpits left, right, again and a third time. Whether or not he ended up with Corey the birthday boy, he might meet someone on a sunny Sunday afternoon in one of the South of Market bars. Tim envisioned himself naked on a bed in a luxurious hotel room above the fog at sunset stretching to raise his arms behind his head. He didn't want to have some hot guy's tongue slide across his chest to nuzzle his armpit and gag on the deodorant Tim wore to work that morning.

He toweled off in front of the full-length mirror on the bathroom door and shook the water out of his hair. He'd meant to get it cut this week, but hadn't found the time. It was getting to the length where it started to curl around his ears. He would either have to cut it soon or endure an awkward phase for a couple of weeks. Tim thought of when Jason once told him that he liked Tim's hair long. He said it gave him something to hang onto. That did it. Jason was part of the past. Tim would get a haircut this week for sure.

He pressed the PLAY button on his answering machine, but whoever called hadn't left a message. Tim pulled on his shirt, Levi's, boots and a jacket over one shoulder and he was ready to hit the streets, the gutters, or whatever waited out there. Tim's hair still wasn't quite dry, but he pulled on a baseball cap, one that Jason had bought him on Castro Street when they first started seeing each other. It was black with the word **COLT** embroidered across the front in gold letters. Tim grabbed his keys, took one more glance in the mirror and decided that he looked just fine.

Chapter 2

Tim boarded a vintage streetcar on 17th Street outside the Twin Peaks bar. He sat in one of the single seats behind the driver and picked up a brochure that told him the St. Louis Car Company had built this vehicle in 1948 and its colors—green and cream with a black stripe—represented the Louisville Railway, although it had never actually been used in Kentucky. Tim took a deep breath and tucked the brochure in his pocket. He might read it later, but he wasn't in the mood right now. He glanced at the headline of a newspaper someone had left on the seat: *Reverend Arlo Montgomery to bring his anti-gay crusade to San Francisco*. Tim wasn't in the mood for reading the news either, and besides, he had the same paper at home on his kitchen table.

The streetcar's windows were wide open and the smells of Orphan Andy's 24-hour diner mingled with the sweet warm chocolate and almonds from the cookie store, coffee from further down the street and even popcorn from the matinee at the Castro Theatre. Some days Tim liked one smell or another, but all of them at once were overpowering. The smell of Orphan Andy's deep-fryer reminded him of the Minnesota State Fair in St. Paul. His dad took Tim and the boy next-door when they were kids and Tim remembered knowing he would be sick before he even got to the rides—the whole reason for the State Fair — but he couldn't turn down a corn-dog, funnel cake, cotton candy and a deep-fried banana.

Living in San Francisco reminded Tim of being a kid at the fair. No matter how full he was, it was hard to say no. There was always something right around the next corner that might not be good for him, but he had to try it at least once anyway.

At Church Street Tim glanced to his left toward the Safeway supermarket and thought of something Jake said earlier at work: "Whenever I don't have any luck at the bars, I head over to Safeway after-hours. You should try it, Tim. They're open all night. I just put a can of Crisco in my shopping cart and push it up and down the aisles until I meet someone. The produce section is best at that hour." The waiters at Arts sometimes teased each other, but Jake was okay, always in a good mood.

Now Tim noticed an old lady boarding the streetcar. Grocery bags in both hands weighed her down. She reminded Tim of his grandmother, who died when he was about eight years old. Tim's grandmother probably wasn't as old as this woman, but most grown-ups looked ancient to a kid that age.

Tim kept a framed picture of his grandmother next to his bed. She sat with her arm around him on a blue and green plaid blanket beside the lake in Powderhorn Park in Minneapolis. It was the Fourth of July and they were waiting to hear the Symphony play the 1812 Overture and watch fireworks from that spot. Tim had on red swim trunks and he was holding a tiny American flag. He had a bandage on the big toe of his left foot. He remembered the swim trunks, but not how he hurt his toe. His family went to Powderhorn Park every year on the Fourth until the summer he turned 16 and they threw him out, but he didn't want to think about any of that right now.

He was in San Francisco, now. More than twenty years had evaporated since that picture was taken. Nothing could pull him back there. He was happier now. Things were better here, in spite of having been dumped by Jason. He had no reason to dwell on the past. Then the streetcar lurched and the old lady lunged toward him. Tim tried to brace her fall, but she landed half-way in his lap. "Hello o-o..." she said with a giggle. "I'm so terribly sorry, young man."

“Are you all right? Let me help you... your groceries...” Tim propped her up in the single seat ahead of his. The grocery bags were intact, but oranges rolled across the floor. Other passengers reached beneath their feet to collect them and Tim put them back among the carrots, celery, and a baguette of sourdough bread.

“Thank you so much. Why, I don’t even know your name, but you’re awfully kind. I’m Vanessa Caen, no relation to Herb, though I did meet him at a party once when I was here to visit my little brother. He was a charming man, I thought... Herb Caen, I mean.”

“My name is Tim... Tim Snow. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I think so, Timothy Snow. *Tim* is short for Timothy, isn’t it? It’s very nice to meet you. I’m more embarrassed than injured, I’m sure, but my pride doesn’t take as long to heal as a broken bone would at my age. I must be more careful when riding on these streetcar contraptions or else I need to wear more sensible shoes in San Francisco.”

Tim looked down at her shoes. They were in the style of men’s wing-tips, but had heels about two inches high made of red and gold lamé with black ankle straps and tiny black bows across each toe. Everything she wore was red and gold and trimmed in black. Her red skirt showed off shapely legs for a woman her age. She wore a frilly red blouse and a gold hat over short silver curls. She might have been dressed to go dancing rather than the supermarket. Tim thought maybe she’d been to church since it was Sunday. “I hope you don’t think I make a habit of throwing myself into the arms of handsome young strangers!” she went on. “Thank you so much.”

“It’s no trouble at all, Miss Caen. How far do you have to go?”

“Mrs. Caen,” she corrected. “I’m a widow. But please call me Vanessa. I’m riding this to 8th Street. My brother Harley lives near there.”

“Harvey?” Tim asked. He was only half listening. He had his eye on a man who was boarding the streetcar. Tim thought he might have been someone he’d brought home to bed once, but that wasn’t it. He must have been a recent customer at Arts who Tim had waited on.

“No, my brother’s name is Harley—like the motorcycle—Harley Davidson, although his last name is Wagner, the same as my maiden name—Vanessa Wagner. Harley thought about changing his name to Harley Davidson, but he never got around to it. I think that would have been a bit much, don’t you? He lives on Clementina. It’s one of those little alley streets before Folsom. He hasn’t been very well, I’m afraid. That’s why I’ve come to San Francisco, to help him get used to being home from the hospital again. And you, Timothy, where are you headed?”

“I’m meeting some friends at a bar.” Tim felt a pang of guilt for lying. They weren’t friends. He didn’t even know Corey and his uncle and those other two guys. Why was he stretching the truth for this old lady? He didn’t know her either. Maybe it was because she reminded him of his grandmother. It was conceivable that he *might* run into some friends South of Market and it would be the truth. Or he might *become* friends with someone he would meet that day.

Maybe he felt guilty about going to a bar. His grandmother had probably never set foot inside a bar in her entire life and certainly not a gay bar, but this woman on the streetcar was a stranger. Where was this guilt coming from? Tim thought he must be stoned, but then he remembered he was out of grass. He’d been thinking about looking for a roach to smoke when he got out of the shower, but he knew it was no use.

“I could get off at 8th Street and help you,” Tim said, hoping to be forgiven for whatever gnawed at the guilty part of his brain. Maybe he felt guilty about sex. Not only had Corey come on to him, but the older guy, Uncle Fred, had offered Tim money. No one had ever offered Tim money for sex before. He’d never considered such a thing. It was flattering, he supposed, but really...

“That’s very kind of you, but I’m sure I’ll be fine,” the old lady named Vanessa said. “I’d hate for you to go out of your way on account of me.”

Tim wasn’t even interested in the birthday boy—Corey. The kid was cute enough, all right, but Tim was more interested in guys at least his own age or a few years older. “Don’t mention it,” he said and noticed that the old lady was still smiling at him.

He liked meeting men who wore San Francisco on their faces and in their walk. He liked the sort of men who were sure of themselves, who had been around. He admired the survivors, the men who might teach him a thing or two. In spite of his visions or maybe because of them, Tim understood since he was a little boy that there would be people waiting out there in the world to teach him things. Tim didn’t feel that he was experienced enough to be anyone else’s teacher unless they needed a lesson in how to wait tables and flirt. He could teach master classes in both of those.

Tim’s fingertips felt for the hundred-dollar bill inside his pocket. Why hadn’t he broken it at the restaurant or left it at home? He had plenty of smaller bills on his dresser. He had his MUNI pass with him, but even if he got drunk and splurged on a cab ride home from South of Market, he wouldn’t need a hundred dollars in cash.

“My brother Harley has one of those little carts on two wheels,” Vanessa said. “He told me I should take it when I go shopping. I walk by it every day, standing there in the entry beneath the coat hooks. I just don’t want to look like an old lady, you know?”

“But you...” Tim started.

“Don’t say it! I know I *am* an old lady, but I don’t want to feel like one,” she insisted. “If I allow myself to look like an old lady I’ll *feel* like one and I am determined to avoid that at all costs.”

“All I meant is that you should be more careful,” Tim said. “If you break a leg on the streetcar you won’t be much help to your brother.”

“You are not only a kind and helpful young man, but a very sensible one, too. Here... this is my stop... oh... my ankle!”

“Here, let me help you,” Tim stood up before she could. “It’s on my way, really.”

Tim gathered her grocery bags in one hand, pulled the cord with the other and managed to help her up at the same time. She leaned on his free arm, limping slightly as they exited by the front door, watched for inbound traffic on Market Street and crossed over to the curb.

Tim wasn’t familiar with Clementina Street. It wasn’t really a street at all, but one of those alleys that run haphazardly through the maze of South of Market streets. Some go straight for several blocks and others run for only a few yards, stop, and then start up again where you’d least expect them. Tim’s fingers were sore from the handles of so many grocery bags in his left hand while he helped Vanessa with his right. When they stopped at the red light at Howard Street, he readjusted his grip to get the circulation moving again. She insisted on taking one of the lighter bags in her right hand. Her body’s weight on him was barely noticeable. By the time she let go of Tim’s arm to search in her red and gold purse for keys, she seemed to be walking better, too.

“Here’s our door, Timothy,” she told him as she let go. He transferred the groceries to his other hand and flexed his left hand’s fingers a few times. The building was more modern than the Victorian on either side of it. Tim guessed it was built in the 1960s, but he didn’t know much about architecture.

He noticed a small stenciled logo on the door that faced street level and asked her, “Is this some kind of business?”

“There’s a print shop on the bottom floors,” Vanessa explained. “They use the middle floors for storage and that makes it nice and quiet on top. Harley has rented to them for years. Bill owned the building originally. Here we are, now.” The elevator was barely large enough for the two of them and

her groceries, which Tim set on the floor. She pushed a button and the elevator scraped slowly upward in its shaft.

“Bill was Harley’s... What do you call it? Husband, I guess. Harley’s a widow too, like me. Widower, I should say,” she corrected herself. “What differences do labels make, I wonder? You could call a stone a thistle or a thorn a lollipop, but a rose is a rose... How does that saying go?”

“I’m not sure I know.” Tim tried to be polite, but now he began to feel the afternoon slipping away from him. He wondered what he was doing in a noisy old elevator with this well-dressed, but peculiar old woman. The more he listened to Vanessa Caen, the less she reminded him of his grandmother.

He was curious about his grandmother because he’d inherited her gift, but she died before he understood what it meant. The gift hadn’t come with instructions and no one wanted to talk about it, if they were ashamed of her. So she remained in a photograph on a plaid blanket and he could only guess what mysteries might exist beyond that. Now he couldn’t remember whether his grandmother’s dress was red or were his swimming trunks the red in the picture? Maybe they were blue and her dress was gray. He wanted to go straight home and look at the picture again, but he was here now. The picture would wait. Even if Tim had the chance to go back to that moment in time, he might choose to know more about the little boy in the swim trunks than the old lady with her arm around him. Why was there a bandage on his toe? Did it hurt much? He could think of dozens of questions, but the elevator jerked and stopped at the top of the shaft. Tim closed his eyes to concentrate. More than twenty years had passed. The toe on that foot was inside these leather boots in San Francisco now and he knew there wasn’t even a scar left on it.

“Here we are, then. Watch your step, Timothy Snow.” Vanessa led the way into the home of her brother. “Harley knows how to make the elevator land evenly with the floor, but I haven’t learned the secret. I don’t mind stepping up or down a bit. I can take one little step. It’s better than carrying things up all those flights of stairs.”

Tim saw the coat hooks and the “old-lady” cart she mentioned earlier, so he knew that much was true, not that he had reason to doubt her. His fingers were burning and in his opinion, this was one old lady who should swallow her pride and use the darned cart, but it wasn’t his business to say so. They turned a corner into a bright room that looked like a greenhouse. It had tall windows and skylights, flowering trees and hanging plants from floor to ceiling. One wall was covered in shelves of orchids with at least half of them in full bloom.

“Just set everything down on the table there, if you don’t mind, Timothy.”

Tim relieved himself of the grocery bags and looked around. “It must be hard work taking care of all these plants.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. I’d kill them, I’m sure. Harley hires someone to come in all the time—a young fellow who lives nearby. Harley used to take care of them all by himself, but now he just admires them when he can. He must be asleep or he’d be out here to see who I’m talking to. I don’t know how to thank you enough for your help, Timothy. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“No, thanks, I...”

“Perhaps a glass of iced tea, instead. I believe you said you were on your way to meet some friends at a bar. Harley says there used to be a lot of bars for men in this neighborhood, but not so many these days. Maybe you’d like a cold beer or a drink? We have liquor too, if I can figure out how to open this cabinet.”

Tim watched Vanessa’s tiny shoes press levers near the floor in one corner of this room that opened into a kitchen. One pedal made the refrigerator door pop open, so she reached inside a grocery

bag and found a carton of milk to place on the shelf. It seemed as if she couldn't bear to have opened it by mistake, so rather than waste the motion she put the milk away. She shoved the door shut with her hip, although there must have been other things in those bags that needed to be refrigerated.

"Would you like some marijuana instead? It's medicinal! Harley has permission from his doctor to grow it. I can show you the plants."

Tim wasn't sure what to say. He wanted to smoke a joint when he left home, but he didn't have any. He already felt stoned, not like the feelings he got around precognition—that usually came to him in his dreams, anyway—but Tim had a sense that in spite of Vanessa's sickly brother, he was in a place with a lot of life in it.

Vanessa went back to work on the pedals and discovered one that turned on a ceiling fan. "Well, that's just fine," she said with a laugh. "It wasn't what I was aiming for, but I've been trying to turn on that fan for days. One of these levers opens the liquor cabinet, I'm sure of it."

"I don't need a drink," Tim said. "I could use a glass of water if it's no trouble and then I should be on my way."

"Of course, of course." She glanced up at the cupboard and back down at the mysterious pedals. She spied a clean glass resting on the dish drainer next to the sink. "Here we are. I know there's a pitcher of good cold filtered water in the refrigerator and that was this one, wasn't it?" She pressed her red and gold toe down at the same place where she started and triumphantly poured a glass of water for Tim. "Voila!"

"Thank you," Tim smiled and took a sip. It was what he needed. He could order a beer when he got to the Lone Star or the Eagle or maybe the Powerhouse. Maybe he'd have a real drink later, depending on who was working. Some bartenders made better drinks than others.

"The next time Harley is up and about, I'll ask him how to open the liquor cabinet. It's behind those mirrors by the sink. I've seen it open for parties and there's going to be one soon. I'll get you an invitation, Timothy. What a good idea! You will come, won't you? That's how I can repay you for your kindness."

"It's all right, really. It was on my way and you hurt your foot. How is your foot, now? Is it better?"

"I think so," she looked down at it as if she had forgotten. "Let me show you the deck before you go. We have the whole rooftop, right through this door. And you mustn't say no to the party." She led the way between a pair of potted Schefflera plants while she removed her hat and set it on a table inside the door.

"Maybe if I'm not working I could come by for a little while."

"This is really very nice and quite strong stuff, too." Tim didn't see her pick up the joint, but once they reached the deck, she lifted it to her lips and lit it with a small jeweled lighter. She took a hit and handed it to Tim.

"This deck is amazing!" Tim took the joint from her tiny hand. There were more trees out here, plus a fountain and a pond of fat golden koi. Vanessa sat down on a bench and patted the seat beside her.

"There's a terrific view of those hills on a clear day. Today it was clear earlier, but the fog is coming in like a big white fur piece. Look! You can see the top of that tower that looks like a ship."

Tim looked west toward Twin Peaks and Mt. Sutro and thought he must be overly stoned now. He had to be hallucinating because he thought he saw something sparkling emerge from the clouds. It looked like the biggest mirror ball he had ever seen and it was suspended from the bottom of a helicopter. The old lady saw it, too. "Look, Timothy! Isn't that pretty? They must be doing something,

gay.”

~~Tim took another hit off the joint and handed it back. He wasn't sure how Vanessa meant the word~~ *gay*, but the mirror ball was heading in the direction of Castro Street and it would soon be visible to everyone who was out and about on this Sunday afternoon. Now he saw a biplane coming out of the bank of clouds behind the helicopter. It was too far away for him to read the advertising banner, but Tim was sure he would hear all about it very soon.

Chapter 3

Stoned! Tim said goodbye to the strange old lady and she closed the door to his cage. No, it wasn't a cage, but an elevator and he felt a moment of panic as it fell. Tim had no sense of time, but he was sure he would die when it hit the bottom. He didn't know how far it was but when it landed he was alive and he couldn't remember the difference between yards and inches anyway. That started him laughing, but not until the cage door opened and he stepped out into fresh air. He was thrilled to be alive and laughing. He must be in San Francisco even though nothing looked familiar.

Tim walked down 8th Street toward Folsom. He was so stoned that it felt like his hat was squeezing his temples and he wanted to rush home and shave off all his hair. But he wasn't wearing his hat! It was his favorite baseball cap and he must have taken it off, but where and when? He didn't even know where he was or how he had gotten to this point. Did she say something about the grass being medicinal? She must have meant medical. Tim thought it was "medicinal" enough to call for a doctor. He was so lost he might as well be walking down Lake Street in Minneapolis, laughing, but he couldn't remember laughing his way down Lake Street. His hat didn't matter right now.

He needed a drink. Or did he need more water? He had been drinking water, hadn't he? Yes, it was cool and liquid and very blue... or was it the glass that was blue? Tim thought he might die of thirst and now he was standing outside a bar. Men smoked cigarettes near the doorway. Tim looked at his watch. It was just past five. There was plenty of time to do whatever he had planned, if only he could remember what it was.

"Hey, you got a light, man?" someone asked. Tim reached inside his breast pocket. Even though he didn't smoke cigarettes, he often carried a lighter or matches for a joint. His pocket felt full. There were matches, all right, and a couple of joints, too. Now he remembered when the old lady pressed them into his hand. Vanessa, that was her name, but she was nothing like his grandmother. It didn't matter now. Tim handed the matches to the scruffy man.

"Where'd you get them matches, man?" he asked Tim. "The Trench hasn't been there for at least twenty years! That place was hella wild—just up the street there." He pointed, but Tim wasn't sure where. "The Club Baths was in that gray one on the corner of 8th and Howard and the Trench yewstabe on the other side farther up towards Market." Tim was distracted when he thought he heard a helicopter again, but he couldn't see it.

"I don't know," Tim said. "Someone gave them to me, I guess. I can't remember."

"You sure don't look old enough t'have been to the Trench, man. Uncut night was my favorite—cheap beer and lots of hot sleazy guys. Man, we'd get so stoned..."

Tim shook his head at the word *stoned* and put the matches back in his pocket. He stepped through black curtains and waited for his eyes to adjust. He saw threads of red Christmas lights across the ceiling. He worked his way past pool players and found a stool at the corner of the bar. Candle wax dripped everywhere. Tim wondered why someone didn't clean it up.

Loud music enveloped him. It beat the traffic noise outside and the thwapping sound of the helicopter that reminded him of a police sweep. He no longer pictured the mirrored ball... or was it only hiding in some corner of his mind? Tim concentrated on breathing, *be-ing*, and he tried to act normal, even though he sensed that normal didn't matter much here. The bartender appeared, hairy and shirtless with a crooked smile. "...getcha, stud?" was all Tim could make out. He wanted to com

down a little, but he wasn't sure which direction that was... where *he* was. It had to be somewhere in San Francisco. He had never been this stoned in Minneapolis.

"Screwdriver," Tim said. "Please." He never drank screwdrivers, but orange juice sounded healthy, even though the drink was mostly vodka. He felt for his pocket and had another moment of panic. He'd lost the hundred-dollar bill. Hell, he couldn't even find the pocket. It had to be there... not the one with the matches. Yes, now he found it.

The bartender reached under a drawer to make change. Tim put \$90 back in his pocket and pushed the rest of the money across the bar. It was a good tip, but he thought of the old saying: *what goes around comes around*. Tim's own tips had been generous today and it was easier to leave it all than it was to count. The bartender grinned and clanged a dinner bell. Tim hated that noise. "Buy you a drink, Trench boy?" It was the man who had borrowed the matches outside.

"Thanks, no, I got one," Tim said.

"How about a shot, then?" he asked. "Tequila? Jaeger?"

"No thanks... I'm fine, really." Tim looked down and the man wasn't wearing pants. Tim was sure the man had pants on when they were outside, but now he was sitting on his pants, which were draped across his barstool. He wore shoes with Velcro straps and he was stroking himself with one hand while he held his beer in the other. That was all the man had on—a black leather jacket and tennis shoes with Velcro straps.

Tim blinked and got to his feet. "No thanks," he said again to the half-naked man. He asked the bartender, "What's the name of this bar, anyway?"

"This place is called the 'Hole in the Wall,' hon," the bartender said.

"Thanks," Tim said and walked toward the faded daylight streaking in through dirty front windows. He found a seat on the bench beside the pool table. A handsome man of about forty-five was shooting pool very poorly with a fat boy who wasn't much better at it. Now Tim remembered that he had been here once with Jason, but it was late at night. His eyes didn't need to adjust that time. They had parked Jason's car right in front, but Tim wasn't paying attention to where they were. He thought he remembered this place being further south in the Mission district. He and Jason had gone to El Rio earlier and stopped for a drink at Esta Noche, but Jason was driving. Tim never would have found the Hole in the Wall again except by accident.

He didn't want to think about Jason now. He didn't want to be here, either. He finished his screwdriver and returned the empty glass to the bar. As someone who worked in a restaurant, Tim couldn't leave an empty glass for someone to have to pick up later. He should use the toilet before he left. He didn't want to be arrested for indecent exposure between parked cars on Folsom Street in broad daylight. He entered a doorway and found the narrow room with a trough. Tim closed his eyes as he opened his fly, heard the sound as piss hit porcelain and he felt the pressure ease. He was a skydiver in freefall, nowhere near ready to pull the chute until the last drops slowed to a stop. This was almost better than sex. "Man, you must have been holding that for hours!" It was the Velcro-shoed man beside him, still with no pants. Tim spun around and headed out. He was still buttoning his fly as he reached sunlight.

It was much too bright, but Tim was relieved to be outside. He walked a block up Folsom Street and turned left toward Harrison. There was someplace he planned to go today, but he couldn't remember it now. It must not have been important. That's how things usually worked. If there was something important he would be doing it, not wandering around as stoned as this.

Then that sound returned, but Tim couldn't see the helicopter. He was on the patio of the Lone Star Saloon and he didn't remember how he got here. He was glad to see Mavis, the Tarot card reader.

in her usual spot and many large men who took up twice the space he did. Tim held a bottle of beer in his hand and raised it to his lips. Cigar smoke choked him and the cold beer soothed his throat.

Then the air was filled with sparkling light. Tim thought silver glitter was falling from the sky. Conversations stopped and the mirror ball lowered. It eclipsed the sky above the Lone Star's patio. It hovered and spun, dazzled and fanned the crowd before it lifted up again and moved on. The biplane was an after-climax and the sign was too close to read it anyway. Men went back to their talk and the drinks and their smokes. Tim heard a deep laugh and then a loud voice saying something about a party, but now he remembered he was on his way to the Eagle. He just didn't know why.

Corey... that was the boy's name. It all started coming back, but Tim was in no shape for some kind of sexual performance, even for money. He'd entertained the idea earlier, but now he was too stoned. Besides, the kid wasn't his type. He was cute and Tim was flattered, but there were plenty of guys in town who would screw for money. Tim hardly felt qualified to compete with the pros. Still, if the poor kid expected him to show up, Tim could at least buy him a birthday drink with some of that hundred dollar tip from his rich Uncle Fred.

Where was his cap? Tim saw his reflection in the window of a truck on Harrison Street. The intensity of his stoned state was abating, but he wished he had his cap. He must have dropped it when he was with the old lady. He shook his head. It was too late to go back there now. The Eagle was in sight.

Like many places in San Francisco, the Eagle Tavern reminded Tim of Jason. Tim knew better than to dwell on the past, but if he hadn't known Jason was at work at Arts right now, Tim wouldn't have gone near the Eagle. He would have avoided the Lone Star too, for fear of seeing Jason with another guy.

There had been lots of guys before Jason, but most of them were just sex. The only other one who really affected him was David Anderson back in High School and he was Tim's first. When Tim started seeing Jason the contrast between the two of them finally appeared as vast as it was. In High School he and the coach were always sneaking around and sometimes the danger of getting caught seemed like part of the excitement for Dave. With Jason, on the other hand, it felt like they were showing off. Between Dave and Tim there had been a mutual need. Between Jason and Tim there was desire and a sense of sex being downright fun.

Tim remembered how it felt to ride around in the convertible and pull up outside a bar with Jason. Swarthy bikers would get off their machines like cowboys climbing down off their horses, legs spread so wide they might be just learning to walk. Even the butchest ones would turn to look at Jason in his red Thunderbird with the top down. And they would look at Tim too, of course. On the rare occasions when the two of them had a night off together to go dancing, other guys on the dance floor stepped back to make room. It was as if there was a spotlight on the two of them when they were together.

Now that Tim was alone he felt invisible. It wasn't a lack of confidence. He liked himself. He wasn't afraid to look in the mirror on the worst mornings. The difference was... people noticed *them* when he was with Jason. People wanted to see who the lucky guy was that Jason had chosen. They wondered what Tim had that they lacked. They wanted to imagine themselves in Tim's shoes. No, when he really thought about it Tim had to admit that what they wanted was to find a way into Jason's pants.

Tim worked his way across the Eagle patio. People were lining up for a buffet, but as stoned as he was, the smell of sauerkraut didn't appeal to Tim's munchies. Some of the hotdogs on the grill were charred and shriveled. Some had broken. They reminded Tim that he should pick up condoms before heading home.

Now, he had both pot and condoms on his mental tally of things that were running low on Collingwood Street. He should find a pen and start a list, but some things you just remember. If groceries popped into his head, cream and coffee or bread and butter, English muffins and strawberry jam, those he would have to write down. Tim always forgot the basics. He could use the last coffee filter and not remember until the following morning with a hangover. The kitchen floor was always cold under his bare feet as he folded a paper towel to fit the basket of his Mr. Coffee machine. The supermarket and Walgreens were just down the street, but he would have to put on clothes to go there.

Tim remembered where he was now and worked his way across the patio. The bartender there gave him a big smile like he recognized Tim. Maybe he was a customer at Arts or... "Where's Jason?" the bartender asked. "I'm surprised he dares to let you out of his sight, Hot Stuff!"

It was just as Tim feared. He hadn't been to the Eagle in a month or two, but it was always with Jason. "He's working tonight at Arts," Tim answered. "How about a Heineken?"

"Sure... that first one's on me." The bartender set the beer in front of Tim with a wink. "So you're out on your own, huh?"

Tim smiled and winked back, reaching into the pocket of his jeans for a dollar bill, but he had to change a bigger bill to leave a tip. He tried to cross the line of men waiting for the outdoor trough and he got jostled by some drunks. One of them scowled and whined, "Hey, the line starts back there!" Tim ignored him and kept on walking.

"Hey, stud!" Someone else tugged at Tim's sleeve. It was one of those four guys from brunch. He was taller than Tim remembered. "It's about time you got here. Frederick almost gave up on you and hired someone else for Corey's birthday present."

Tim looked down at his elbow until the man let go of him. It was a move he'd seen Jason make in this kind of situation. "I'm not in the business..." Tim raised his glare from his elbow to look the guy straight in the eye, "... of being told what to do." The man shrunk back and Tim let a smile come to one corner of his mouth. If he couldn't be with Jason, maybe he could act like him, although Jason would have taken the guy up on his offer of getting paid to be a birthday present. Jason wasn't a hustler either, but he'd make sure the kid got his money's worth and Jason would enjoy the adventure. Tim was almost stoned enough to do it, too. The tightness around his head was gone. The edginess had evaporated, but his mind and body were fluid enough to still play this game. "Where is the birthday boy?" Tim asked.

"They're inside. We were shooting pool, but it was too busy. The lines for the toilet got in the way of our shots. I came out here to use this one, but it's almost as crowded. At least there's some fresh air. It smells like someone dropped a bottle of poppers by the pool table."

"They probably did." Tim smiled. Jason would be friendlier now that he had the upper hand. "My name is Tim Snow. I don't think I caught yours."

"Donald," the man said. "My partner is Jerry. We... um...do business with Frederick. Corey is his nephew."

"Seeya, Donald." Tim stepped back a moment and then let the crowd's next wave of motion carry him across the Eagle patio toward the side door. If he was going to play the part, he needed more ammunition. Tim stepped up to the main bar and held up a crisp twenty. He'd also learned from Jason how to get a busy bartender's attention without making a sound. "Do you have any chilled vodka?"

"Just Stolý."

"Great! I'll have a double shot and another Heineken." A beer bottle at his hip would look good. If he smoked, this would be the time to light up, but he was in California, anyway. The laws were so strict these days you could hardly smoke outdoors. Tim reached the wide steps at the back of the bar

time to see Corey slouched over the pool table. Frederick was shaking his finger in the boy's blank face. The other man named Jerry leaned into Corey's chest like a linebacker and hoisted him over on his shoulder. He carried the dead weight down the stairs over the heads of the crowd and out the door.

Tim saw an open bar stool and sat down to finish his beer. "So much for my new career in hustling," he laughed to himself, "and so much for my becoming just like Jason."

Tim looked up at the TV and wondered why it wasn't showing pornography, but the thought only reminded him of how stoned he was. This was a bar, not a sex club. There was a game on, but nobody was watching. A deodorant commercial showed two guys in a shower scene and then wearing towels in a locker room. The guy on the bar stool next to Tim smelled like he needed a shower too. It was time to head back toward the Castro.

Tim walked up Harrison Street toward the Lone Star, thinking he might go look for his cap at the place where that woman was staying with her brother. The address must be on the invitation she gave him, but he couldn't find that either. Damn, it was his favorite baseball cap, too. Tim turned left on 11th Street but he didn't see Clementina. Maybe it didn't run this far south. He kept walking all the way to Market Street and it seemed like hours had passed. One of the old Italian streetcars pulled to the stop at Van Ness. Tim was a runner in high school, but right now his feet were lead weights in leather boots. The light changed long before Tim got to the corner and the streetcar clanged off toward Castro Street and the end of the line.

He zipped his jacket up to his neck and stumbled toward the stairs in front of the stony fortress of the Bank of America. Tim wanted to be home or at least back in his own neighborhood, but he would wait underground away from the wind. The helicopter was still out there somewhere. Tim imagined he could hear it beyond the wisps of fog that scurried past him. Soon that cool white blanket would be pulled down from Twin Peaks across the jagged skyline of steeples and streetlamps to tuck the whole city into bed for the night.

Chapter 4

Underground, the crowd pressed onto the K-Ingleside car. Some people must have been waiting a long time. Tim wedged into a spot at the end of the car and grabbed for a place to hold on between the jeweled fingers of a middle-aged lady and the glove of a shorter man reading a Chinese newspaper. Tim noticed a girl who looked familiar. She sat beside a boy who fondled her earlobe with chubby fingers. His hairy arm was slung around her shoulder and he was pierced in so many places he reminded Tim of his co-worker Jake. Tattoos snaked between his knuckles and Tim wondered how he would ever find a job or make himself presentable on his wedding day, but it was the girl Tim really noticed.

“Beth,” Tim said under his breath. The doors closed and the streetcar jerked to a start. Passenger swore and apologized for stepped-on toes. Tim held on tight and stared at the girl. He only had two stops to go—Church and Castro. It wasn’t Beth, but she was about the same age Beth had been when they first met. Tim smiled and wondered what had become of his old friend. The girl on the streetcar had a scar from the corner of her mouth to her left ear. She didn’t look much like Beth except for the scar. Beth had straight black hair. This girl’s was curly blonde with purple streaks. It might be black naturally, but Tim didn’t think so. Besides, this girl wasn’t old enough to order a drink and Beth was closer to Tim’s age, nearing thirty by now.

The scar didn’t show very much while the girl listened to her boyfriend whisper in her ear. It was when she talked that her face formed a crease around it. When she laughed, her face became disfigured in a way that no amount of make-up could help, but at the same time her laughter made her beautiful. She was exactly like Beth.

Tim met Beth in high school after he moved in with his Aunt Ruth and Uncle Dan. He had to go to a different school than the one where all hell broke loose with the track coach. Beth had recently transferred to Edina from Chicago, so they were both new. She lived with her paternal grandmother after her mother’s boyfriend scarred Beth’s face in an attempted rape.

Tim didn’t have any physical flaws, but Beth recognized that he was scarred, too. The two friends felt familiar to each other right away. Tim’s scars weren’t apparent to anyone else except his Aunt Ruth who knew his whole story. Tim wanted to put his arms around this girl on the subway and tell her that everything would work out okay, but he just stared. Even though he was stoned he knew it was rude to stare but he couldn’t help it.

Tim remembered the tree house. That’s where he took his friend Beth. It was overgrown with vines by that time. Uncle Dan had built it for Tim’s cousin Dianne, but she was already in college. Tim and Beth would climb up there and smoke grass and let their feet dangle. They looked over the fence at the neighbors’ pool and listened to his Aunt Ruth’s ancient 8-track tapes of Neil Young or Nancy Wilson, depending on their mood.

Beth had good grass by high school standards. The first time Tim got high was in that tree house. She won his trust enough to find out why he was living with these relatives instead of his parents and she told him some of her story too, but Beth found his more interesting.

“I had a crush on him,” Tim remembered telling her. “My grades weren’t great, but I could run fast. If I wanted to get into college, it would have to be on a track and field scholarship. Besides, the coach made me feel good about myself in ways my parents never did.” Tim took another hit off the

joint at that point, but Beth didn't interrupt. When he was slow to start in again, she asked the coach's name.

"Dave... David Anderson. There must be a hundred guys in Minnesota named Dave Anderson, but anyway..." Tim handed the joint back to her. "We were at a track meet in Duluth. I twisted my ankle and he took me to a doctor and gave me a ride back to Minneapolis in his car instead of going back on the bus with the team. He had car trouble, so we stopped to eat and then he found out it would take a lot longer to fix than he thought. At least that's what he told me."

This was the point in the story when Tim's voice always faded off, not that he told it often. He didn't even think about it much anymore. The hardest time came months later in front of the school board, that panel of men his father's age, men in dark suits whose thumbs fondled their wedding bands as Tim answered questions. They agreed that Tim must be to blame. Dave Anderson was a church-going man with a beautiful wife and a perfect little daughter. He might have a drinking problem, but there was help for that. Tim Snow must have instigated this distasteful business that went on.

Beth never pressed Tim, but she didn't discourage him. "Dave and I stayed in a motel that night. He bought us some beer that we drank in front of the TV. He talked about pretending I was his kid brother or something; I don't remember. He could always talk me into anything. Anyway, that was our first time—my first time with anyone." Beth lifted the joint to her lips to relight it. It was easy to tell her about Dave because she didn't judge. She accepted the way things were, including the scar on her face. Or maybe it was because they were so stoned, just as stoned as he was today, years later on the crowded subway under Market Street.

Tim stared at the girl and remembered telling Beth, "It wasn't just sex. Dave took me fishing sometimes. My parents thought that was a great idea. My dad never had time to do things like that. Dave knows some great spots out in the woods where there aren't any people for miles around. He tried to get me interested in photography, too. He took lots of pictures of me, of the two of us sometimes. I wish I knew what happened to them. He even knew how to develop them himself in his basement, but I always had other things on my mind when we were in the darkroom."

Beth just let out a low whistle at that point and Tim grew quiet. He didn't tell Beth about the time he got a cramp in his leg and tried to stand up too quickly. He nearly knocked over a tray of chemicals but Dave held his hand on the top of Tim's head and pushed him back down. He wasn't finished yet.

"Then we started getting careless around school. I'd run an extra lap or two after the rest of the team hit the showers. They'd be on their way home, but Dave was waiting for me. It seemed almost natural to find him soaping up in the shower room and he'd wash my back. He was right out of college, not that much older than me. When we finally got caught we were parked in front of my parents' house. My mother was standing in the dark behind the curtains in the living room window and she watched me give him a simple innocent kiss goodnight. After all we got away with up until then, we got busted for a kiss!"

Tim still remembered that kiss. It was the last time he would kiss a man for a long long time. The coach went back to his wife and took a different job in a different school district. Tim went to live with his Aunt Ruth and Uncle Dan to finish high school in the suburbs where nobody knew him, either.

"Who you staring at, faggot?" The voice of the tattooed boy on the subway made Tim jump.

He didn't mean to stare at the girl. She must get more than her share of stares. The boy stood up to meet him face to face and fear crawled up Tim's back like the blade of a knife caressing his spine.

It was his own fault. He was stupid to make the girl uncomfortable and he deserved whatever came next. He braced for a blow, but he still kept on looking at the girl and he meant no harm. Thoughts of Jason flooded back to him. If Tim could muster up Jason's attitude at the Eagle he

could... “Castro Station... K-Ingleside... Outbound.” The crackle of a recorded voice broke the spell

~~Tim sidestepped the boy and leaned in close to the girl with the scarred face. “Is your name Beth?”~~

“No, my name is Amy... Do I know you?”

“I guess not,” Tim admitted. “You reminded me of a good friend I haven’t seen in a long time and it’s really nice to see you again. I mean her. It’s really nice to see *her* again, even though I know you aren’t her. It’s nice to be reminded of her. I didn’t mean to bother you... I’m sorry...”

“That’s all right.” The girl named Amy smiled the way Beth smiled. Her face became homely and beautiful at the same time. Tim wanted to touch her and hug her, but the doors were open and a crush of bodies piled off the streetcar. The boyfriend stood behind him staring at Tim like he must be insane.

“This is my stop. My name is Tim and it’s nice to meet you, Amy. Take care of yourself...”

“You too, Tim.” She shook his hand and Tim wanted to kiss her cheek on the side away from the scar, but he stepped off the streetcar just before the doors closed behind him. When he looked back at them the boy had sat down again with his arm around Beth’s shoulder but she was Amy now.

The outdoor escalator was broken, as usual. People trudged up the stairs from Harvey Milk Plaza to Castro Street. By the time he got to the stairs they were empty and Tim bounded up them two at a time.

The fog swirled around him and Tim realized that no one in San Francisco knew his story. Everyone on Castro Street must have a story of his own and Tim’s past would pale in comparison to some of them. There would always be people in the Castro who had to come even farther than he did to seek the freedom they’d always dreamed of and escape the nightmares of their pasts.

Chapter 5

Tim didn't spend a lot of time at Arts outside of working hours. The restaurant was around the corner from Tim's apartment and his bosses were also his landlords, so he saw them nearly every day. They'd invested in real estate before the Castro became trendy, gay and expensive. Since Jason and Tim were no longer sexually involved, that was one more reason to avoid the place. Tim wanted to go beyond all that and since he had to walk up that block on his way home, he thought he might as well stop by the restaurant. He barely set foot inside the door when he regretted his decision. Artie was in one of his moods.

"Don't even think about asking for next Saturday off," he started in before Tim had a chance to sit down. The place was quiet and Jason was nowhere in sight. "I don't care if it's the party of the century. You can go there afterward but I need you to work first. I'm sure it will last 'til dawn. I told Arturo we should just close for that one night, but he won't hear of it. He's convinced that some of our regulars will come in. You and I might be the only ones here, Tim. I already told Jake and Patrick that they could go. Don't give me any grief! They asked first. Jason is going, too, but he's tending bar at the party. He'll make a lot more in tips than he would here, that's for sure."

"What party?" Tim felt out of the loop. Artie wasn't exactly the go-to person to find out what was happening around town. Ever since Finocchio's closed, Artie's life revolved around Arturo and the restaurant. He had gained at least thirty pounds and retired his old act along with a wardrobe of feather boas and sequined gowns that no longer fit him.

"*What party? Where the heck have you been? You don't mean to tell me you missed that noisy helicopter flying around town all afternoon with the giant disco ball dangling from underneath it ...*"

"Oh, that," Tim said. "Yeah I saw it, but I didn't know what it was all about. I was South of Market when it came through there."

"We had customers from Marin County said it was clear up over Stinson Beach this morning. It hovered over the intersection of 18th and Castro for the longest time, just spinning away, with that little airplane dragging a banner making great big circles in the sky. You should have seen the crowd on the sidewalks. Everyone ran out of the restaurant. They didn't even care that their drinks were melting. I haven't seen anything like it since the total eclipse. You'd have thought it was the Martian landing in a UFO or the second coming of Judy Garland!"

"It hovered over the patio of the Lone Star, but I couldn't read the banner. I don't have plans for Saturday night, Artie. It's fine by me if you need me to work. Where is this party, anyway? I don't know anything about it."

"It's at the Moscone Center. Everybody's talking about it. I guess those reunions at the Trocadero have been so successful it gave them the idea to go big-time. I'm sure most of the kids your age will be there. I'm way too old for that sort of thing, but even with Jason out, I shouldn't have any trouble handling the bar by myself. Nobody will be on Castro Street, you can mark my words."

"It seems pretty quiet in here tonight, too. Where is everybody?"

"Viv asked to leave early. Her new boyfriend came by to pick her up. Maybe this will be husband number five. Or is it six? I can't keep track. It must be serious, though. You know Viv. She'll plunk out show tunes on the piano until we turn out the lights as long as there's one lonely drunk still throwing tips in the brandy snifter. Tonight she didn't have a single request during the last hour she

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