

## Chapter 1

I could not have saved Morgan, a friend during our gay heydays, from being murdered. Not even in our beloved San Francisco. There, too, bigotry morphed itself far more swiftly than the promises of a politician. As a lawyer, I was trained to respect all people, regardless of person, behavior, or creed. My father would believe Morgan reaped what he sowed, but the day of bowing to my father's "wisdom" had long since passed. I wanted a better answer.

Less than one week. That was all the time I'd been given to enjoy and to dread the return of my friend. I remember feeling a foreboding the day at the gym when I deduced Morgan was back in town. But my mind was fixated on the weights, my body, and the envious and salacious glances, blinding me to the forces of change.

I was ready to head to the showers, but I had only completed two sets of my last round of weights, and I had one more left. I always did three sets at a time. Besides, people were watching, and I wanted to enjoy their admiration of my body a while longer. I tried not to let on that I got pleasure from their rapt attention, but sometimes I could not help flexing a bit, making it appear

as best I could as stretching. I knew the tight wifebeater I wore was still loose enough to not be flaunting.

Normally, I was not this engrossed in my own physical appearance, but the gym really brought it out in me. My ego was encouraged down through the years by the fawning of many adoring female fans, both through high school and college. Apparently, the ego was still strong.

Women had told me that I have the bluest eyes, the most golden, smooth skin, the silkiest midnight hair, the most dazzling, whitest, brightest teeth. The sickening sweetness of it gave me a high but also left a bad pit in my stomach when I thought of how women prostrated themselves before me. I lost respect for them. Once I began a workout routine in high school, new compliments emerged: they could swing from my burly biceps; they could scrub their laundry on my six-pack abs; they could sleep soundly against my comforting shoulders. One woman told me she just could not wait to get against me in my running shorts or less. Seriously. I knew I was a sight to behold.

With this awareness beguiling me, I finished my third set, glanced around the gym, and sauntered toward the showers.

My cell phone rang. The gym frowned on patrons talking on phones while lifting, and I almost let the call go to voicemail. But I wasn't lifting anymore.

"You'll never guess who is back in town." The voice over the phone was that of one of my closer friends, Brent McAllister. He only used that tone of voice when fun trouble was brewing.

"No idea."

"I'll give you some hints." Brent's voice trilled across the line, and he paused for dramatic effect. "He moved away about ten years ago to Dallas, which would put him in his mid-40s now."

Even though the description was brief, I suspected who Brent meant, and he caught my attention. I knew someone who had moved to Dallas about a decade ago and who was several years older than me. When he had lived in San Francisco, he would hang out with our group of friends, but he tended to do his own thing. I was not entirely certain I wanted him back again. Trouble would certainly brew, but I doubted it would be fun.

I was in no mood for games. "Just tell me."

Brent harrumphed. "Well, if you won't play, then you can just find out with the rest of the gang." When he spoke that way, I could always visualize the sparkle in his

eyes. "But I know you know. I'll see you tonight." And he was off.

Even though I had plans for the evening, I took my time and soaked in the warmth of the spray. My muscles needed the soothing heat, and I enjoyed long showers. I lathered the shower gel across my chest and down my abs, breathing in the essence of aloe and mint. I loved that clean, tingling sensation.

I packed my gym attire into my duffel bag and spritzed my neck with a bit of cologne: Acqua di Gio; Armani. I had a casual dinner with friends planned for the evening. Slung the duffel bag over my left shoulder, I stepped over a bench and exited the locker room.

"See you tomorrow, Patrick?"

The shapely young blonde behind the check-in counter never missed the opportunity to engage me in conversation as I came and went during my workday routine. She was 24 to my 37. I enjoyed flirting along with her even though I had no intention of answering the questioning look in her sable eyes.

I ambled over to the counter and leaned over, supporting my upper body on elbows and forearms. "End of the week. I might be in for a short workout in the morning. You working then?"

Her eyes flicked from my face to my chest then back to my eyes. "I have the morning shift. Eight to two." She took a quick breath of me and her eyes lit up.

"Maybe I'll see you then." I stretched upright and backed toward the door, flashing my pearly whites. "Have a good weekend, if I don't."

"I will." Her eyes fluttered as she gasped for air. "You, too."

I turned around and pushed open the door. "Acqua di Gio," I called over my shoulder back to her, knowing it would cause her to flush.

I set my gym bag in the trunk and hopped into the front seat of my royal-blue Porsche 911. One of the perks of my job. I worked with a successful law firm committed to "focusing on its clients' evolving needs by building a diversified portfolio of practice strengths" in the heart of San Francisco. I had joined the firm when it was McCutchen, Doyle, Brown & Enersen, an institution that had been a pillar of San Francisco's legal community since 1883. In July 2002, when San Francisco was in a downward turn, litigation-lorewise McCutcheon had merged with corporate-savvy Bingham, and Bingham McCutchen LLP had been born. My focus was in White Collar Crime and Business Regulation so I spent a lot of time handling financial

litigation, federal and state regulatory and criminal investigation, and environmental issues.

I turned the radio to 105.3, an alternative station I liked, and mentally processed the work day as I drove. I somehow managed to avoid much of the afternoon traffic and arrived in the Bernal Heights area more quickly than usual. I rounded the corner from Coleridge Street to Fair Avenue and pulled into the driveway that led to a two-story white Colonial Revival-style house, the place where I found rest after a hard day's work. A silver Grand Marquis was already parked on the left side of the driveway, indicating that my partner, Roger, was already home.

My cell phone went off as I parked.

"Where are you? We're going to be late." Roger.

"I just pulled in."

"Oh." Roger could be impatient. "Any exciting cases today?" He could also be impetuous.

"Bribery case involving Beale air force base and a mapping agency." I struggled with the phone as I emptied the car. "I have to prove the relationship of the individuals involved is not a quid pro quo." I enjoyed throwing out legalese to Roger. Roger worked as the Front Office Manager at the Pan Pacific San Francisco Hotel.

"You know, I'll be right in, and I can tell you all about it then."

"Like I'll understand it all." His voice vanished, allowing me to disconnect and shove the phone in my pocket.

Roger Krauss and I met several years back when his marriage was on the rocks. Since I was a lawyer, and non-lawyers seem unable to distinguish between the various types of law, Roger asked if I could meet to give him some advice. We met a few times and struck up a friendship. I counseled Roger through his divorce--not officially but as a friend--and when he needed a place to live, we had become close enough that it seemed natural to have him move in with me. From that small spark, our relationship flourished.

I gathered my duffel bag and briefcase from the car and hummed softly to myself as I walked to the entryway. It was dusk in late spring, but the air was still sweet and warm. I wondered if it might be warm enough to sit outside tonight when we met up with the guys for dinner.

"Good workout?" I heard Roger call from somewhere in the back of the house.

"Not too bad." I started to take the stairs to the second floor in order to drop off the leftovers from the

day and to get situated for the evening. "Got a little tired toward the end."

Roger appeared sans shirt from the downstairs hallway, which led to the den and an office in the back. He had a good physique, even without working out. His dark blonde hair had its usual ruffled look, assuredly acquired with the use of Roffler styling mousse. "Devon called to say they'd be a little late. I told him, no problem, it's not like anyone arrives at any set time anyway." Except Roger, who always wanted to be on location early. Roger lived to organize and direct and professionally carried himself with sophistication and class. His job suited him perfectly. "Whoever gets there first just grabs a table and the rest join when they get there. Jason may or may not be coming."

We were meeting a group of our friends at Patton's for dinner and to hang out. Patton's was situated in the Castro along Market between Castro and Noe, down the street from 2223 Restaurant and Bar, well known in the area for its oversize martinis and great wine list. Patton's was in line with the other eateries where people went to see and be seen--Café Flore with its wrap-around patio, Blue, and Lime--all sporting busy outdoor seating. From our house, it could take from ten to twenty minutes to drive there, depending on traffic.



I slowed my ascent to chat for a bit. "I hope Jason does show up. He seems like he could use some friends." Jason was our dark horse. Darkly attractive and moody, he was someone you certainly would notice, but as you tried to get to know him, might get frustrated and walk away.

"I know. He seems so innocent. I just know he's going to get taken advantage of." I found Roger's assessment humorous. Even though Roger was in his thirties, he continued to look as if he had just graduated from high school. "Anyway, I'm not sure he wants to hang out with just us old couples. That's why Jeff isn't coming."

"He's just young," I said, going back to Roger's initial statements. I continued up the stairs. "I'm sure he can take care of himself. I just think he could use some friends. Friends that can bring him out a bit. Ease some of his brooding. Make him smile a bit more."

"You're good at that." Roger mumbled to himself but so that I could hear. In my mind's eye, I could see the smile reveal his dimples. I always felt he could have done well as a model, but he wanted to be more than just a pretty face.

I went into the bedroom, put my briefcase beside the bureau and set my duffel bag on the bed, still unmade from

the morning. Roger would likely bring that up. I took out my gym clothes and put them in the hamper then quickly freshened up in the master bathroom before returning to the ground floor.

"Ready to go," I announced.

"Be right there," Roger called from the back. "Your car or mine." He knew I would not be caught dead in his car for an evening out. "Just kidding." I walked out to the Porsche.

Roger opened the passenger door and stepped in. "So, any pretty, young thing try to get your number today?"

"They were looking but that's all." I laughed inside at our little game. "The cute blonde behind the counter spoke up again, as usual."

Roger chuckled and lightly slapped my arm. "She's got a thing for you. Poor little fools. If they only knew."

Roger and I had been a committed couple over three years. After his divorce from his wife was final, I proposed that we wait at least one year before tying the knot on our relationship. Roger deferred to my wisdom, in part I suspect because he thought I knew of some legal precedent, and once I felt convinced that he would not go back to his wife, I entreated that he unite with me in holy matrimony, or some reasonable facsimile of the rite. He

accepted ardently, and one month later we were hitched. A union such as ours did not require the requisite six months to plan, for which I was greatly relieved.

"You do have that machismo. That charisma." Roger lazily laid his arm out the window and watched the scenery fly by. "Women fall for me but not like they do for you. It's like you're emanating or something."

"I don't know about the machismo emanations so much. I just know what I want and don't worry about the rest. I can be decisive, which is more than most people. That's what I think people see in me that they like." I smirked, thinking again about the blonde at the gym. "Amongst other things."

"Oh, stop." Roger slapped my arm again in mock annoyance. "You're hot, and you know it. You aren't that modest." Without warning, he jabbed his arm across my field of vision. "Turn here."

"I know where we're going," I said, jerking the car around the corner and bumping the curb. I felt my face flush.

"That was smooth," Roger gibed with amusement. "So do you think we can hook Jason up with anyone?" Roger was a consummate matchmaker and meddler in other people's

affairs. "I know there's Michael, but I just don't think they'd hit it off well."

I often poked fun at Roger that he should have become a reporter for People magazine, but I surmised that his job at the hotel provided all the gossip he needed to keep him happy.

"I'm sure that's just what Jason wants, for us to meddle in his love life." I felt myself getting hot, but I kept a tight rein on my tongue. I knew Roger was just being Roger, but his humor was beginning to grate on my nerves.

"You did say you wanted to help him brood less. If we could just find him the right kind of man, that might do the trick." Roger leered with his beautiful blues.

I rolled my eyes. "Why don't we wait and let him ask first? Look, we're here." I passed Patton's and parked along the street beyond it.

We stepped out of the car and walked back toward the restaurant, quickened by the aroma of savory meats. Brent, who had called earlier, and Mark, his life partner, were already seated at a table on the sidewalk in front. Brent was an average-height, blonde-haired man with a soft physique and love handles. He was the only one of our group with a moustache, which he kept neat and closely

cropped. Mark had dark hair and a stockier build and thick legs from his avid lifting and running. Brent waved to us.

"We've only just gotten here," he said. "And how are the two of you." He and Mark both stood up, and friendly hugs and kisses were shared around.

If I had to pick a ringleader for our group, it would be Brent. He often was the one to make the final decisions to determine group activities and to select locations, and he had the quickest wit of any of us. Being that he was in public relations, the rest of us felt he was indubitably the best one to know what was going on in the area and where the action was.

"We are doing just fine," Roger responded to Brent. "Dandy, in fact."

"I'll drink to that." Mark winked and raised his glass to swallow a portion of his drink.

"What is that?" I asked as I took a seat, pointing to Mark's drink. "Is it potent? It's so dark it must be."

Brent answered for Mark. "That, my friend, is a Starry Night--Jäger and Goldschlager on the rocks. It can be as potent as you want. Mark likes it potent." Mark leered like a ghoul and nodded his head up and down as if to win a bobble-head contest. I hoped the drink was his

first, but Mark went through alcohol like a kid with his candy after trick-or-treating.

Mark was a good match for Brent. He had a good sense of humor and was incredibly observant, even though he often appeared to be unaware of what was happening around him. He was not as intelligent as Brent, but where Brent could be insensitive and cutting with words, Mark was more caring and compassionate. Many times when Brent inadvertently hurt someone's feelings, Mark would sidle up to the person and interpret Brent's words in a way that could take out the sting. I heard from Brent that Mark would calmly chastise him for the incidents later on when they were alone, sparing Brent the embarrassment of a public scolding.

"I'm having a glass of Chardonnay, in case you were interested," Brent continued.

"How many is that for you?" I asked Mark.

"Didn't Brent say we just got here?" Mark feigned offense before taking another gulp. "Or did you mean today? And it's only my second here."

I had known Brent and Mark since college. They had been three and four years behind me, respectively. Brent and I had attended Berkeley together, and Mark was at SFSU, both of which were in the Bay area. Mark would

periodically catch the BART, San Francisco's rapid transit system, over to visit us. He claimed we had better culture on our campus. Although that was true, the reality was that Brent's double degree in political science and communications was more rigorous than Mark's in journalism. It was easier for Mark to travel to Berkeley. They had a ceremony to announce their commitment to each other soon after graduation.

A twenty-something, somewhat plump Black woman with a crew cut, nose ring and short, black fingernails appeared at our table holding a notepad. "Hey, boys. What can I get you to drink?" Rolinda. Her manner was proof that appearances deceive.

Because we ate at Patton's often, we all had a passing acquaintance with Rolinda and Katerina, her lover, the owners. One or the other often waited on us personally. The name of the restaurant came from Rolinda's last name. Katerina's last name was Cvitkoviskaya. They both agreed that Katerina's last name would give the restaurant a mystique toward which they did not want to cater, even if no one could pronounce it properly. Patton sounded more American to them anyway, although given the diversity of the country, I never quite agreed with them on that.

Roger piped up first. "I'll have a gin and tonic."

"Corona," I answered to her questioning look. "You're not short-staffed tonight, are you?"

Rolinda smiled as she jotted notes into her pad after each of our responses. "No, I just want to take care of my best customers." Her full lips parted showing a double row of crooked teeth. "But if you aren't going to be nice, I'll make Katerina wait on you."

I put up my hands in defense. "Please spare us. And her."

She guffawed and slipped the pen atop her ear. "Your drinks will be out shortly."

Before Rolinda returned, two more members of our bevy arrived. Brent indicated chairs nearby.

"It is such a nice night out," Devon said as he and Heath set two chairs next to each other and sat down.

"Great idea to eat outside."

Devon and Heath were another couple with whom we often spent time. Devon had known Mark his last two years at SFSU and had connected with us through him. He tended to be in and out of relationships, getting hurt each time, but continuing to look and seek out the perfect man. Heath was the latest edition, and I had to admit that I found him overbearing and snide. I could certainly see what Devon



saw in him--all of us could--but it took more than a hard body to capture my attention.

Devon looked a good deal like Mark, but without the thick legs. I always wondered if this was what drew Devon to Mark in the first place, but as far as I knew, they had never been romantically involved. Devon was like a less-confident and less-active version of Mark. They did have different facial features--Devon had thinner eyebrows and blue eyes to Mark's brown--but from the back, I often would get them confused, unless I looked down at the butt and legs. Devon had the wider posterior and thinner legs.

Brent accepted Devon's compliment. "My call. Mark feels a bit cold, but I like it."

"I'm not cold. I feel just fine." Mark's words were slightly slurred. He stood up and started moving toward the entrance, empty glass in hand.

Roger smirked and added his observation. "I'd say the way you're guzzling down those Starry Nights, I'm sure you're all lit up." He felt neglected whenever he was left out of the conversation for too long.

Mark did not even turn his head as he went back into the restaurant, presumably to replenish his drink. "It's one of the best ways to keep warm, short of, you know."

"Don't you know it," answered Brent without blushing.

"Perhaps our little Princess isn't used to so much imbibing." Heath glared intentionally at Roger while brushing a hand through his spiked, jet black hair, but Roger ignored him.

Heath could be particularly cruel in his comments about others, but Devon was pathetically desperate for any attention at the time. Devon and Heath had only been together about one year, but Heath had joined our group a few months before that. Devon had noticed him at a bar one night when we were all out, and they had hit it off. For some reason, Heath put up with Devon's insecurities and seemed to enjoy our lively banter, so he stuck around. Within a few short months, they were a couple.

From within our group, Heath arguably looked the best in a tank top. His arms and shoulders were aesthetically defined. He claimed that his job as a personal trainer gave him plenty of time to devote to his body. He had a tight waist and toned legs, but his legs were not very big, which aggravated him greatly. He also had the unfortunate blemish of an over-sized nose. On some men, this looked good. Not on Heath. Personally, given his imperious vanity, I was surprised he had not had a nose job yet. He already had cleaned his chest and back via laser hair removal.

Rolinda arrived with my Corona and Roger's gin and tonic then proceeded to ask for Heath's and Devon's drink orders--Smith and Kearns and Midori margarita, respectively. We let her know that we would be ready to order our meals when she returned with the remaining drinks.

"So where's the other unattached?" asked Heath, looking around at all of us couples. "Jeff's at a singles' mixer."

Roger spoke up first. "He might join us. I'm sure it's hard being single around us. But you know he wouldn't go for Jeff anyway."

"Sweet on him?" Heath gibed at Roger. "You might have to clear that with Patrick, but I assume that wouldn't be too difficult, in order to keep him around."

Heath's attitude toward Roger was wearing on me. I knew Roger would simply ignore him. "Hey, Heath, lay off." Heath knew I could back up my demand. He gazed down the sidewalk as if seeking a mirage and kept quiet.

"We'll keep him around," said Roger. "Patrick wants us to take good care of him. Try to get him out of the doldrums some."

I heated up with irritation. Roger sometimes had difficulty knowing when and what to share with the group.

Not that I minded the others knowing I cared for Jason, but I felt more like a big brother to him, and that was all. Someone was bound to suggest that I had an ulterior interest.

Jason and I had stayed out late one night talking at one of our get-togethers when the rest had left. That night I felt a deep attachment to Jason that was completely non-sexual. He alluded to some intense hurts in his past, about which he was not specific, and even broke down crying a few times. I never shared with Roger that I had held Jason in my arms that night, comforting him as if he were a younger brother. Roger somehow sensed the affection I had for Jason, and not being threatened by it, saw me as a way to get Jason, for whom he held a slight fascination, to open up.

"You sweet, little thing, are you sure you want Patrick getting Jason out of the doldrums?" Heath affected concern like a simpering schoolgirl. "Could lead to competition."

"Oh stop, you, Jason is much too young. He's what-- 26? That's more than a decade younger than Patrick, and almost a decade younger than me." Roger parried and thrust, enjoying the sport. "I'd be more worried for you, Heath. Isn't Devon only 29?"

Devon countered like reading from a well-worn script. "I'm 31, but we have an open relationship. I can get together with Jason, if I want to. I know Heath's with me to stay." He turned to Heath, as if calling for backup. "Isn't that right, Heath?"

"We're over the one-year mark. Don't see myself long-term with anyone else." Heath leaned back, imperiously commanding the scene. "The short-term experience gained helps." He smirked as if deigning to instruct us all.

The openness of the relationship between Devon and Heath was a well-known attribute that was paraded in front of us every time we met. They often bragged about attending singles' events in order to adore and explore, as they put it. Devon and Heath had grown particularly tight with Jeff, our other single, to increase their opportunity to mingle, in spite of the fact that they both confessed to finding him physically repugnant. Being not in a couple, Jeff often went out with other singles, and Devon and Heath would join Jeff from time to time to try out some of his single friends.

"Anyone can join Heath and me tomorrow night, if you'd like." Devon glanced around at each of us. "We're catching a friend's jazz band at the Lucre Lounge over in

Berkeley." He received a confirming look from Heath.

"Jeff is joining us."

I chuckled internally that Devon was still enamored with the culture at Berkeley and that he had persuaded Heath. I thought Jason might find it freeing. "You should give Jason a call."

Heath smirked at Roger. "Yeah, that'd be great. I'll call right now."

Roger glanced over at me, but I just smiled and joined in the general conversation.

To my knowledge, Jason had not ended up with Heath, but I suspected that was not for lack of Heath trying. Heath was ready to bed any attractive man that breathed for the sake of gaining "experience." I knew that Heath's animosity toward Roger harbored a rebuffed proposition, although he commonly did not show it unless he himself was under strain. Roger had confided to me several months ago that Heath had come on to him. Roger had declined, citing his relationship with me. Heath, when his own pain or frustration filled up, expressed his hurt by belittling and ridiculing others. None of the group knew the story behind Heath and Roger, so they simply thought Heath disliked Roger. Since Heath disliked so many people, the explanation was easily believed.

I caught sight of Jason walking down the sidewalk toward us. "We probably need to find a new topic, gentleman, or we're going to make someone's ears burn."

Several of the group turned. Roger waved and called out. Jason raised his eyes from watching his feet and signaled back. Roger grabbed a chair for him and set it between his seat and mine.

Jason had joined our group back at the end of the fall at the behest of Brent. Brent had met Jason at a club one night when Mark had been out of town, and the two of them had gotten to know each other. Brent warned us all ahead of time that Jason was of the silent-and-depressed type and would take some time to draw out but that he would be worth the trouble. Rum and Coke, his standard drink, occasionally brought him out of his shell.

"Sit here between us, Jason," Roger offered as Jason approached. "Glad you could make it."

"Sorry I'm late." Jason sat, and his gaze skittered around our group like that of a newly caged rabbit.

Mark returned with a half-empty glass and plopped back down in his seat. Rolinda followed close behind with the rest of our drinks and began taking our food orders.

"Any of your special dishes ready?" I asked.

Due to Rolinda's upbringing in Memphis and Katerina's youth in the Ukraine, the restaurant fare was a pastiche of culinary tastes. Arguably, Patton's had some of the best barbecue dishes in town, and their Ukrainian borshch was second to none. Rolinda and Katerina had experimented with their diverse gastronomic backgrounds and had developed a few plates--barbecued Shashlyk and Lady's Finger Borshch, which combined beets and okra, as examples--that they served seasonally. For the most part they kept a rotating monthly menu with several entrees that stayed on the menu throughout the year.

"Katerina's been experimenting with a beef dish, but it's not perfected yet," said Rolinda. "I recommend the barbecued chicken tonight."

"Where is Katerina?" asked Devon while sipping at his margarita.

I could not resist the chance to poke fun. "Yes, I'm used to seeing her biting at your heels."

Rolinda guffawed and whacked my shoulder. "You know she'll nip at you for saying that. She ain't some helpless co-dependent." She continued jotting her notes. "She just left to visit her parents for the evening."

"That's brave." Devon snorted his disdain.



Rolinda grunted in agreement. "I expect her back early, in the next hour." She left to place our orders with the cook.

Though many of our coupled lesbian friends did not fit the couple stereotype, Rolinda and Katerina fit it quite well. Rolinda was the butch; Katerina, the femme. Both had sweet dispositions and charming personalities, but Rolinda was brash and could be brutish, while Katerina came across more refined and genteel, which was humorous to me since Rolinda had grown up in the South, in Tennessee, while Katerina had emigrated from the Ukraine after the Iron Curtain came down. Rolinda and Katerina had been the owners of Patton's for nearly five years, not yet half the amount of time they had been a couple.

After Rolinda and another server returned, laden with appetizers and salads, I could sense Brent tense with excitement. He waited until Rolinda had left us with our food.

"All right boys, you'll never guess who is back in town." Brent spoke cryptically as if unearthing ancient secrets. "I'll give you some hints. He moved away about ten years ago to Dallas, which would put him in his mid-40s now."

Devon slammed down his margarita glass. "Please do not say Morgan Jensen. I was thrilled when he decided to move to Dallas." He glanced around at each of us, as if checking our reaction. "Did we know anyone else who moved there? Am I just forgetting?"

I heard the sound of a utensil clinking on the sidewalk and glanced down to see what had been dropped.

"Nope, you win," teased Brent. "Morgan has moved back into the Bay Area. I spoke with him just the other day. I ran into him on my lunch break. I admit it was a bit of a shock."

I did not, in any way, believe that Brent had been shocked.

"Brent already shared this with me, so I'm going to get a refill." Mark stood up with his empty glass in hand and went into the restaurant.

"Oh, you're such a lush," Brent called flirtatiously after Mark then turned to take us into his confidence. "He is such a lush. You can't imagine how crazy he can get after several drinks." Brent scooted his chair back and bent down, momentarily disappearing under the table. He emerged holding a fork and placed it in front of Jason. "They'll get you a new one." He shifted in his seat so he could lean forward. "Anyway, Morgan told me that he just

got tired of the life out in Dallas and missed the times he had here. He looks forward to meeting up with us all again." He leaned back again as if presiding over our assembly. "Don't worry. I did not let him know of our occasional little witenagemots so we're all perfectly safe."

"Our whats? Speak the common tongue, will you?" Heath was clearly annoyed but likely not about language.

"I am not a common man, so I can hardly speak the common tongue. Can I help it if you're not educated?" Brent used the smile he reserved for the most simple of conversationalists. I noted that no one contradicted him.

Heath glared at Brent like a student to a despised professor. Devon glanced away.

"Uh, I've got to go." Jason shot up from his chair, threw a few bills on the table, and hastened down the sidewalk.

"But you hardly finished your drink," Roger called out to his retreating back. He frowned and asked, "Who's Morgan Jensen?" Morgan had been gone for years before Roger and I had met.

"Yeah, who is this Morgan person?" Heath kept glaring.

Brent happily related his tale. "Morgan was just one of the regular movers and shakers of the community back in the day."

"He's an ass." Devon attacked his drink and emptied it. He asked Mark, who was returning with full glass, "Don't you think Morgan's an ass?"

Mark flopped down and frowned. "Are you still upset with him over Ricardo? Give that up, Devon. He was no good for you anyway."

"I have given that up," said Devon. He went to guzzle more of his drink, and noticing that it was empty, grabbed Heath's with a huff. "And it wasn't just that."

"Gentlemen." Even though ten years intervened, the timbre of the voice registered in my memory. That, along with Brent's disclosure, hindered any feeling of surprise as I swiveled to see Morgan Jensen.

Morgan had joined Brent, Mark, Devon and me shortly after Brent and Mark had committed to each other. Devon was still in college, but Morgan had enjoyed our company, even though he was even several years older than me. Back then, Morgan and Brent would vie with each other for control of the group--Brent having connections, and Morgan having experience. Over time, they managed to complement each other's style, and for a number of years, before

Morgan moved away, we became one of the hottest cliques in the gay scene.

"It's been a long time since I've hung out with this group." He still had black hair, but it was graying at the roots, and he sported a thin, black moustache, clearly mimicking Clark Gable. With age and tanning, his forehead had become somewhat wrinkled, but his eyes still twinkled impishly. "And how are we all?"

Yes, I remembered Morgan had that annoying habit of speaking often in the first person plural. He had a way of including himself in everything, whether his inclusion was desired or not.

"Ha, speak of the devil," Devon burst out, dripping with sarcasm. "Brent was just telling us that you were back in the area." He clutched at Heath's Smith and Kearn's for support. "Dallas a little too hot for you?"

Morgan held out his hand to Heath. Undeniably Morgan had a regular workout routine and kept to a strict diet because he still had a solid body and carried himself with confident dignity. "I do not believe I've had the pleasure."

Devon answered for Heath. "He's already spoken for, Morgan. I see you haven't changed a bit. This is Heath

Peterson." Morgan shook Heath's hand, and Devon introduced Roger. "I think you know everyone else."

Morgan greeted Roger then turned his attention to those of us he already knew. "To answer your charming question, Devon, no, Dallas was not too hot. If you'd remembered correctly, I take regular trips to Bangkok, and I tend to like it hot." A mischievous smile tugged the corners of his lips. "I just felt it was time to come back here. For me, this place is really my home. I enjoyed Dallas, but nothing can take the place of San Francisco in my heart."

"Oh, how cliché," mumbled Devon. He finished the drink then glared at the empty glass, clearly wanting it refilled but not wanting to leave Heath alone with us--Morgan--in order to go refill it.

"Welcome back to the city," said Brent. "Have you found a place to live yet? Shacking up with anyone?"

"No, I'm still looking into that. I have a friend who lives in Palo Alto whose place I'm crashing at for the time being. Anyway, I've got to get going. If any of you are free on Saturday, I'd love to catch up. Say, eight-thirty at Elixir?"

"Isn't that a bit early for you?" Devon shifted spasmodically in his seat and lashed out unnecessarily, as

if that would hide his emotional state. "Are you no longer the night owl you used to be?"

Morgan shrugged. "Make it nine-thirty then. I want to make sure there's time to talk before the place fills up. I'd enjoy meeting anyone for dinner beforehand as well. I simply figured you'd all be fairly busy."

"Unfortunately Heath and I have plans so we can't be there." Devon's rejection came across flat. Heath smirked with pleasure. I'd play the odds that he was wrestling with accepting the offer in spite of Devon.

"Brent and I can join you," said Mark, who was slowed and slurred but not inattentive. "We haven't been to Elixir in months. We'll even meet up with you beforehand." He leaned forward as if ready to get the details then bumped his drink and leaned into Brent. "You can let Brent know where on his cell phone." Brent nodded his acquiescence.

Rolinda and the other server returned with our entrées. She asked if Morgan was planning to order, but he declined, intending to be there only a short while.

"What about you two, Patrick?" Morgan looked me over with a lascivious grin. "You still look as handsome as ever, by the way. Don't think I've forgotten you."

I had never felt any attraction for Morgan. I thought about declining, but I knew Roger would enjoy the time. "I think we can make it. We can get the details from Brent. That okay with you, Roger?"

Roger's eyes lit up. Apparently Morgan didn't threaten him. Or he knew me well enough to know I would never bite. "Sure, that would be fun. I'd enjoy hearing a bit more about your life before." He searched the distance as if trying to locate a missing friend. "We should invite Jason also."

"The more, the merrier," said Morgan. His grin underscored the delight in his eyes. "I'll see you Saturday night then. Right now, I've got to run."

Devon waited until Morgan was gone. "He should have stayed in Texas. He's going to be nothing but trouble for us."

"I hope so." Heath's wicked laugh caused me to wonder again why Devon stayed with him.

"Cool it, Devon," said Brent, his eyes sparkling. He swirled his wine. "We could do with a little more trouble around here." Brent sat back, and his mouth twitched like it did when watching a comedy. "We were quite the jet set ten years ago, if you remember. It might be nice to have some excitement again for a time."



"We have excitement," slurred Mark. He swayed in his seat as in a haze between fantasy and reality. "Just like when we were kids."

"Of course, we do, Mark." Brent leaned over and pecked him on the cheek. "Morgan will just add a little more spice, that's all. Now let's shut up and eat." He stabbed into his steak with his fork and knife. "No more talking about Morgan tonight."

Brent had that way of pronouncing finalities that we all accepted without question. He truly was the leader of our coterie, and no one seemed to mind too much. Through the years, other men had joined our group for a time, and I was sure we would make new friends in the years to come, but Brent would likely still be our director. He merely spoke the words, and we all fell in line like lemmings. If I had cared more about what we did, I might have shared an opinion or two, but I was open for whatever the group wanted to do, or in other words, what Brent decided.

Even though we were no longer discussing Morgan, I could not help but remember the others that Morgan would have known who were no longer among us. Ricardo, Devon's stolen boyfriend, had disappeared after Morgan had left, which was probably for the best. Michael, a Devon catch prior to Ricardo, had died of AIDS. Larry had succumbed to

that as well. Larry's death had hit me hard as he had been my lover at the time. Devon and I counted ourselves fortunate that we had not contracted that particular disease. Ken had been part of our group from the days of Devon and Ricardo and for several years after Morgan had moved, but he had taken a job in San Jose, and we had lost touch with him. Then there were Joe, George and Phil, all boyfriends at one time or another with Devon, although I supposed Morgan would only know Joe, who was Devon's fling when Morgan left.

Brent's sharp laughter returned me to the present. Roger smiled at me oddly, pointing out that I had not yet taken a bite of my food. I smiled back with fondness. The food was tasty enough but nothing special. I mainly appreciated the relaxed atmosphere with my good friends. We all had experienced trials and travails through which we had persevered, supported and upheld each other. I felt fortunate, knowing that not many in the world could claim such a treasure.

A shiver ran down my spine. I thought it might be the air, but the evening was pleasantly warm.