

Chapter 2

“A work of art!” Peter thought, wondering at the same time why he would so qualify the gigantic, mostly white, digitally rendered portrait of the Golden Gate Bridge. He reminded himself not to judge. Sam stood behind the print, laid out on the living room floor where they had moved the furniture aside, waiting for a word from the frame maker.

“It’s awesome,” said Peter, aware that he couldn’t find any better quality to it. “Quite a job for me!”

“Thank you, Peter,” said Sam, “especially for doing this today, with so little time.”

“To tell you the truth,” said Peter, “business has been kinda slow these days.”

“Oh,” said Gerald from behind, “then we could negotiate a new price.”

“Gerald, go away,” said Sam. “We don’t negotiate with friends.”

“Well, then, I’ll go away,” Gerald said, jingling his car keys, and moving towards Sam to give him a quick kiss.

“I was joking,” he said as he hugged Peter. “You’re the only reliable one in this whole city.”

“Yeah, right,” said Peter.

“No, seriously,” said Gerald, “I mean it. Sam has tried others before, you know.”

Peter turned to Sam and said, “you have?”

“Oh,” said Sam, looking embarrassed, “there was a time you weren’t available.”

“And he used Anton. You know him, right?” said Gerald.

Peter crossed his index fingers and hissed.

“Yeah,” Gerald continued, “it says it all.”

“Anyway,” said Sam, “here we are, and I haven’t slept all night just to finish this, so please take it away and do a wonderful job as you always do.”

“Okay,” said Peter, “I’m going to roll it.”

Gerald closed the door behind him. They heard the garage door opening. Sam threw himself on the red couch, and closed his eyes. They heard the rumble of the car going out.

“By the way,” said Peter as he carefully rolled the heavy paper, “I haven’t found a truck yet to take it to the gallery.”

“You mean you don’t have that Mexican guy any more?” said Sam from his sleeping position.

“No,” said Peter, “Raphael had to go back to El Salvador, remember? I had asked Gerald if he could help?”

“Oh yeah,” said Sam.

“It turned out to be good for him,” said Peter. “Some of us helped him buy a truck, and he started his own business there.”

Sam didn’t respond, apparently because he had fallen asleep. Peter inserted the rolled paper into the cardboard tube he had brought with him.

“Right, then,” he said, picking up the tube and hoisting it on his shoulder. “Off to work I go. Sam?”

Sam was asleep. Peter took the tube out of the front door, careful not to knock anything while he reached for the door knob. But once he was out, he gave it a gentle pull to let it close by itself. He miscalculated and the door slammed harder than he would have liked.

Walking to his car, one he had selected from the Car Share web site for its hatchback and folding seats so it could fit the tube like a pair of skis, he wondered why the Marina district was so popular among rich people. Under the morning clouds, the tree-less and deserted street reminded him of how a city would look like after a nuclear explosion. A car rushing across the intersection confirmed his eerie feeling.

He placed his card on the windshield of the red car, which responded by unlocking the doors. He introduced the tube through the rear, and closed the hatch. “Coffee,” he thought, wondering if he should walk or drive to Chestnut Street, where he would certainly find a shop. “Drive,” he decided, given the short time he had left on his rental, “and don’t bother if you can’t park.” Arriving at the corner of the street, he saw the green short-term parking spot for people who, like him, just needed to pick up a cup, was available.

Luckily the meter had been fed generously and still had fifteen minutes in it. He remembered this coffee shop for having thought of an unlikely future in which he’d become a bohemian artist with plenty of time to lounge on the old couches and armchairs. Or sit at a table, as many already were, with a sketchbook or a computer, being creative.

He searched his pockets to figure out the amount he could spend, using it as an index to the list of coffee items displayed on the large chalk board behind the beautiful, cute young man awaiting his decision.

“Hi,” he said, still checking the board, “uh, a small coffee, the strongest you have, to go. Please.”

“Rough night?” the man said, pressing digits on the register.

Peter realized he had not shaved yet, conscious of how white his beard had become, too early in his life. He probably looked like someone who had a one-night stand from which he'd been abruptly kicked out. Or the father of a newborn after a sleepless night. He smiled. "Actually, a rough day ahead. A rough night would probably feel better."

"I know what you mean," said the young man, pushing a cardboard cup filled to the brim with hot dark liquid. "Sorry, it's a bit full; do you want me to take some of it out?"

"No, that's fine," said Peter, bringing it to his lips. "woo, it's really hot."

"Let me take some out, so you can put cream in it."

"Okay," said Peter, surrendering the too hot cup.

"I haven't seen you before. Are you new in the neighborhood?"

"No," said Peter, "I came to pick up some art to frame. My shop is in the Castro."

"Oh, nice. Where is it at?"

Peter only found a crumpled card in his back pocket. "Nineteenth Street."

"You're Peter? Nice to meet you, I'm Max."

"Nice to meet you too, Max. Sorry I got to go. I have to return my car share," Peter said, realizing that a customer behind him had captured Max's attention. He took his cup to the milk counter and quickly departed.

"Very nice indeed," he thought as he rushed back to the car. "What a beautiful boy. He should be a model. Maybe he is." He started thinking about Max sitting in front of him, naked, posing for a painting. Aroused at the idea, he calmed himself down by realizing that he had not painted in too long a time and would not be taken seriously by a model. Especially one so handsome. Especially because Peter had no money to pay for a model.

He expertly drove over the hill to the Castro, where the car was due back to its designated spot at the top of the hour. Perhaps he could go back to that café, to get a better look at the scene that was forming in his head. Or perhaps he could draw from memory, or at least, as his art teacher had told him, draw from the emotion, let it fizzle from the guts to the fingers. He remembered those words, and decided right there on the sidewalk approaching his shop, that he would paint. But first, he thought, because he had very limited time, he would make a few sketches to capture the impressions the simple encounter had made on him.

He placed the tube on the floor next to his table, and looked for the sketchpad he kept for such occasions. The blank page scared him for a moment, and he closed his eyes to see the boy again, to hear his voice, to witness the delicate hand pushing a paper cup towards him. Opening his eyes, he tentatively applied pastel strokes. It didn't look at all like the boy – the man, he tried to remind himself, as his model probably was in his early twenties. "Max," he thought,

somewhat unusual these days. Was it for Maximilian, like the Italian emperor, or German? His parents' fantasy, probably.

He needed the texture, the sensuality of paint. But the paint and the canvas were at home, in his bedroom closet, and he had no time left in his day if he wanted to deliver Sam's frame in time for the gallery opening. He dropped the sketchbook on the counter and turned to the tube.

He put classical CD's in line to play a mix of Mozart and Bach, which he called his work music, intelligently designed, as he liked to see it, to let minute muscles and nerves to perform. Due to its size, the print had to be laid on a canvas he had stretched over a solid wood structure. Paper didn't lend itself well to hanging, and Peter knew that sooner or later it would sag. Perhaps he should post a warning to call him to fix it up in a few years, he thought. He imagined that the print file on Sam's computer could be saved on a CD stored behind the frame, so it could be reprinted one day. Otherwise, this was only a very expensive poster, requiring an expensive frame not for its particular elements, but for what it represented: the Golden Gate Bridge. The image had to be somewhat more complex than what it appeared, he thought, getting a magnifying glass out of a drawer to inspect the pixels on the paper now laid on his table.

Invisible to the naked eye, the halftone Sam had used contained some kind of message, for what Peter could observe were letters of the alphabet. "Some kind of code," he said to himself, surprised that Sam would be inclined to play such trickery. He estimated there could be the equivalent of a novel microprinted on this surface, and it was unlikely that the characters could be reconstituted even with the help of a microscope. At least it wasn't that mock-Latin that graphic designers used to fill pages. Although, Peter imagined, doing so would be proper irony.

The glass had to be lifted above it with the help of a crane Peter had designed to be able to land it precisely where it needed to be. The risk was great that it could slip and break, that one of the suction handles could expire at the wrong time, and there would be no plan B. Peter imagined the space at the gallery needing to be rearranged at the last minute in the absence of the *pièce de résistance*, leaving a void in the middle of the high-ceilinged room. But the glass landed safely on top of Sam's encrypted message, and Peter started securing it to the structure. From this point on, only a rock thrown at it could ruin it, for all precautions would be taken in transporting it.

After three hours, it was ready to go. Peter realized he had forgotten to secure a truck to drive it. He closed shop and walked to the pizza place on Castro Street.

"Is Amanda here?" he asked the young woman behind the counter.

"Out doing deliveries," she said.

"But coming back here, right?" Peter asked.

"Yeah, she only had one place to go to."

"Then I'll have a slice of potato pesto."

Amanda parked her motorcycle in front of the shop when Peter had his first bite.

“Hi, Amanda,” he said as soon as she entered the shop.

“Oh, hi,” she responded.

“I was wondering if you could help me move a big frame today?”

“Today?” she said, “like, now?”

“Maybe not now, but soon? It’s for a gallery opening tonight.”

“Well, I don’t have the van today. You want to get a U-Haul or something?”

“I need arms too.”

“Let me get a friend of mine, maybe we could do that for you.” Amanda picked up her phone and searched for a phone number. “Hey, Kris babe,” she said, “yeah, freaking awesome, uh? I had a good time too. Hey, there’s a guy here who needs to move something right now, can you... Something like a big frame.” She looked at Peter and said, “How big?”

“Like four by eight, I don’t have a crate for it, but it needs a cushy ride.”

Amanda winked and continued to speak. “Yeah, I think he can help you load it. How about doing it now? Come by the pizza place, he’s right here in front of me. OK.”

“She’s coming right now,” Amanda said. “Standard fee? I’d add a generous tip for the last-minute call.”

“OK, I think I can get the artist to pay up,” said Peter. In fact, he thought, he wasn’t sure at all Sam would, skilled as he was in avoiding payments of all kinds.

“Kris is a friend of mine,” Amanda said, “and I don’t want her to be upset.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“What is it you’re working on, anyway?”

“It’s a gallery opening tonight. He finished the piece this morning, and I just finished framing it. I need some time there to hang it too.”

“She could probably help you with that. She’s got arms, that girl, like Popeye.”

The comparison made it easy to identify the woman who came to the pizza place, parking a pink van that said, “The Balloon Grrrl.”

“Hey, I’m parked in the bus zone, let’s get out of here,” she shouted to Amanda, before Peter could be introduced. He followed her to the van and hopped in.

“So where’s that thing we need to move?” she said, as she moved out of the bus zone.

“Right on nineteenth,” Peter said, attaching his seatbelt. “I’m Peter, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said, putting out a strong right hand. “How do you know Amanda?”

“Word of mouth, I guess. She does a lot of deliveries for businesses in the Castro.”

“Yeah, she’s cool, you know? With that motorcycle of hers?”

“Yeah,” said Peter, who didn’t know a thing about motorcycles. “Do you ride?”

“No, but I want to ask her to take me on the parade. That would be so cool.”

“The parade? Oh, Dykes on Bikes?”

“Yeah, you know what I mean.”

“Actually I have not been at Pride for maybe ten years.”

“No kidding? I guess it wears off, right?”

“It does. I guess with aging.”

“You’re not old.”

“Oh, thanks... It’s right there, the framing shop.”

“Cool, there’s a parking spot right in front of it.”

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“Peter!” said Sam, rushing to the door of the pink van. “I was worried!”

“Hey Sam,” said Peter, trying to stay calm. “Yes, time has a way to fly. But thank Kris for being there when I needed it. Could you pay her? Give her a good tip too.”

“What? Who’s she?”

“My savior today. It’s a hundred bucks, but make it one fifty.”

“I don’t have money on me. Why don’t you bill me for everything?”

“Sam, I have a cash flow problem, if you know what I mean. I can’t pay my suppliers if my clients don’t pay me. Oh, never mind.”

Peter and Kris unloaded the artwork from the back of the van and carried it inside the gallery, followed by Sam as if he were following a casket at a funeral.

“I can’t stay very long,” said Kris, “but if you need me I should go park the van before it gets towed away.”

“I think I’ll be fine,” said Peter. “It hangs to these hooks and then I pull from that rope over there.”

“It’s going to look the wrong way.”

“No worries. I just invert the hooks and it will twist on its own.”

“Smart. Hey, here’s my card in case you need balloons at a party, or another move, whatever.”

He walked with her back to the street, looking at what cash he had left in his wallet.

“Listen, they’re not going to pay me now, so will you take this and I’ll give you the rest tomorrow? I’m usually more reliable than that, but here’s my card, and Amanda will send the killers if I don’t pay you.”

“Yeah, I think I can trust you. Seventy-eight is a good chunk of it.”

Having emptied his wallet, Peter now wondered how he’d get back home without the exact change for the Muni bus. But he couldn’t worry about it now, as it was more important to get the art up. He saw Sam down on his knees, inspecting the frame.

“Very good job, Peter,” he said. “The glass needs to be cleaned, though.”

“Yes, I was about to do that,” Peter said, wanting to add, “go away or I’ll spray your Armani jacket with acetone.”

Apparently Sam understood he was in the way, stepping back while Peter reached around the frame to polish the glass. After a quick inspection, he found the two wires he needed to hook to the rings he had screwed to the back. “Can you hold these,” he said to Sam, giving him the hooks. Then he lifted the top of the frame and found each ring, checked the alignment of the hooks to the pulleys above, and clicked them in like a mountain climber about to start. “Uh,” he said to Sam, “come here and hold it up.”

It was a good thing, he thought, to keep Sam busy. Next he could tense up both steel wires and start pulling the heavy frame up. “Now, go see from the front if it’s level and at the right height.”

After a few attempts, Peter found near perfection. Everything was now ready for the opening.

“That’s a great job you did,” said Joyce, the gallery manager. “Do you have a card?”

Peter searched his wallet, realizing he had given his last card to Kris. “I’ll send you one,” he said, taking one of her cards as a reminder.

“Have some wine and hors d’oeuvres before the crowd arrives,” she said. Peter realized that he wasn’t dressed for a gallery opening when she stressed the last words, and should slip out soon. But why not, he thought, take advantage of the free stuff? After all, he had worked above and beyond expectations.

“How do I look?” said Sam.

“Oh, you look fabulous,” said Peter, almost automatically. “Have some wine, and relax.”

“I envy you, Peter,” said Sam, pouring himself a glass of chilled Chardonnay.

“You do? Why?”

“Your freedom, I think. It’s like nobody is telling you to do anything, you’re in control. And you’re a handy man. I’ve always admired handy men. Try this cheese, it’s so delicious.”

“Well, for being independent, I wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t asked. And that woman who delivered the frame is probably more of a handy man than I am.”

“Yes, but look at me,” said Sam. “I can’t even change a light bulb.”

“Always bringing the subject back to yourself,” thought Peter. “You could if you had to. Of course, you might be one of the few who’d be able to electrocute themselves in the process.”

“I’m hopeless, right?”

“I’m not getting there, honey. You dig your own grave. I’ve got a painting to do.”

“A painting? I didn’t know you painted!”

“Yes, you know. Remember I took Helen Dostourian’s class?”

“Oh, of course. The expressionist.”

“I know you don’t like her. But you have to admit her work is pretty good.”

“Where does she show her work, is what I want to know.”

“She’s around. I framed some of her work for a gallery last year.” Peter saw Gerald arriving behind Sam.

“This show is fantastic,” he said, taking both of Sam’s shoulders in his hands. “Great job on the big one, Peter.”

“Thanks, Gerald. I think I got my cue for my discrete exit now.”

“Oh, you can stay,” said Sam.

“Look how I’m dressed: like a starving artist. I don’t want to steal the show.”

He gathered his tools, said good-bye and good luck to everyone, and left the gallery thinking about the work he had to do at home. It had been a long day, and he felt that he had not enough energy to find what bus to take (he suddenly realized he had no money left and would need to find an ATM). Glancing at the buffet table, and the wine, he gave in to the temptation. He turned back towards the group.

“On second thoughts, I’ll stay for a while.”

“Great!” said Sam.

“I’m hungry, I hope you won’t mind my raiding the buffet...”