

## Chapter 8

They had reserved a table for three at *Chez Matthieu*, one of the newest French Fusion restaurants in the neighborhood. Reservations had to be made at least a week in advance, and Matthieu didn't care if you were the Queen of England or a fabulous queen of the neighborhood. Patrons were never pushed out to make space for others, and they could stay for as long as they wanted, until closing time. Matthieu's fans who had been to France said it was like being in France. You couldn't ask for substitutions in the menu, which was short enough to limit your indecision. Wine pairings were made for you, and you couldn't really complain about anything. Except, perhaps, cell phones, and the lack of privacy in the small dining room. Peter sat facing the wall, between Sam and Gerald, as if they were his parents. The three pairs of legs, filling the space under the table, had a *séance* of their own.

"We came here when Sam's parents visited," said Gerald. "They liked it."

"Are they difficult to please?" said Peter.

"Not really, but they were taken to *Le Plat d'Argent* in Paris last year. They came back to San Diego comparing every French restaurant to their new standard."

Peter didn't bother to ask what he should know about *Le Plat d'Argent*. Knowing that rich Americans were taken at a restaurant made it fancy enough that he would never dream to eat there.

"And how did it compare?" he asked.

"They said *Chez Matthieu* was more like a country restaurant, with no stars in the *Michelin*. And you know how difficult the French are about awarding stars in the *Michelin*."

"Restaurants here come and go, the Michelin people rate them, but by press time the restaurant is gone or has changed chef," said Sam.

"It's the fluidity of this area," said Peter, who had no real interest in the subject. Yet, he thought, tourists still bought expensive renditions of the Golden Gate Bridge like the one he had just framed for Sam's exhibition.

"So, do you know who bought your art?" he asked.

"What?" said Sam, surprised by the change in subject.

"Sorry, I was burning to know who bought your work of art."

"Oh," said Sam, "some couple from Marin."

"That will make shipping easy," said Peter.

"I guess so," said Sam. "The gallery takes care of that anyway."

“Did you talk to them?”

“Who? The buyers? No. *Never!*”

“I'd be curious to know if they saw what I saw. The pixelized text?”

“You saw that?” said Sam, delighted that someone had noticed.

“Saw what?” said Gerald.

“If you look at the print with a magnifying glass,” said Peter, “you can see there's text printed at a microscopic level. I couldn't figure out what it said.”

“Do you have a guess?” said Sam.

“Not really, it was really small. I figured it could be some code, some message you wanted to hide in there.”

“It's the text from a novel,” said Sam.

“A novel?” said Gerald. “You don't read novels.”

“I read it in College,” said Sam. “That should give you a clue.”

“One of the assigned readings in Freshman English?” said Peter.

“It really was in a more advanced class, about LGBT authors.”

“Picture of Dorian Gray?”

“Bingo.”

“Oh good, it's copyright free,” said Gerald.

“Yes, I found it on the Internet.”

“I was just surprised,” said Peter. “It's not like you to do that kind of geeky stuff.”

“Well, it's true that there's trickery of the software to be able to blend the text into your image,” said Sam. “I found it by accident, reading the documentation. Then I thought I might want to add such a layer to my art.”

“I wonder,” said Peter, “if that means you could put another picture inside yours.”

“Of course, you can.”

“So it's a kind of... Signature?”

“Yes. I suppose I could have repeated my name all over the pixels too. Does it make a difference to the couple in Marin? I'm not sure. I think I did it for the irony.”

“It *is* ironic,” said Gerald. “They bought a rendition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* hidden inside a rendition of the Golden Gate Bridge.”

“Picture within the picture,” said Peter. He thought of his painting, the second one, which was exactly that.

“Yours is a little more explicit,” said Sam, as if reading Peter's mind.

“You mean,” said Peter, acting surprised, “my painting?”

“Yes, the one containing the other painting. The artist sublimated, melted maybe with his clothes laid in front of it, like a Dali rendition.”

“Oh, I didn't think of Dali,” said Peter.

“But don't you think you painted yourself adoring your art?”

“I don't think I intended to,” said Peter.

“Well, that was, as you know, the Dorian Gray story. He adored his picture and his picture absorbed his aging, until he stabbed it.”

“He killed the painter first,” said Peter. “I don't think I'd like to paint Dorian Gray.”

They were done with the appetizer, a mixture of saucisson and olives, and the aperitif wine. The waiter picked up the empty plates and the utensils. He came back with three new glasses and three sets of utensils for the second course.

“So you think I was inspired by Dorian Gray?” said Peter.

“No, I just like the coincidence, the convergence maybe, of Dorian Gray on both our art pieces.”

“You like to philosophize about it, I guess.”

“Well,” said Gerald, “I don't know about any of this Dorian Gray meaning stuff, but your model is pretty hot.”

“Yeah,” said Peter, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically for his taste, “I would say so.”

“I see him almost every day on my way to work,” said Gerald.

“Eye candy,” said Sam.

“As we all are definitely off his radar screen, age wise,” said Peter.

“Although what's with the blind man?” said Gerald.

“What about him?” said Peter. “You don't think he's hot enough?”

“Well,” said Gerald, “let's say I imagined the hot guy with another hot guy.”

“I don't know. He may be hot in many different ways than looks alone.”

“Gerald is very visual in his choice of hot guys,” said Sam. “He likes the firemen calendar.”

“Anyway, perhaps it's not our place to speculate about him, Max I mean,” said Peter.

“You just thought he was hot,” said Gerald, “so you painted him. End of story.”

Peter didn't feel like continuing this discussion. He didn't know why he had painted what he had painted, but he felt his work was losing its sacredness as it was deconstructed. How did he know that he had simply painted the base feelings of a gay guy desiring a younger gay guy? He had certainly not tried to paint in order to sell it or to submit it to criticism.

"I might sell it, then, before I start considering it as a simple bunch of paint strokes," he said.

"It's a great work of art," said Sam. "Don't listen to the lawyer."

The second course came, with a Petite Syrah from San Luis Obispo. They were delighted by the look of the plates, the fine flavors in each color they could mix to their liking.

"Hey, you know when I went up to the apartment to get the wine glasses?" started Gerald. "I thought you should start renting it out. You'd make good money on it, I'm sure."

"That's a good idea," added Sam. "You're not doing anything with it."

"Oh I know," said Peter. "I don't really want to bother."

"It would give you financial stability," said Gerald. "You'd get more for it than what you're paying for yours in the Mission."

"A no-brainer," said Sam.

"I'll think about it," said Peter. "It's been over a year now that Bill is gone."

"It's closer to two years, now," said Sam.

"Yeah? Well, I don't know if I could ever find the time to take care of it."

"You know, with America's Cup coming next year, you could make a big chunk of change," said Gerald.

"Put it on airbnb," said Sam. "We're seriously thinking about renting our place out, and flying away for two months."

"Where would you go?" said Peter.

"Thailand," said Sam.

"Lots of nice boys there," said Gerald.

"Plenty of inspiration," said Sam.

"And the shop?" said Peter.

"Hire some kid for the summer. Maybe put some art for sale, like images of sailboats."

"Alright, I'll think about it," said Peter.

"Yeah, think about it," said Sam.

"What about your Palm Springs place, then?" asked Peter.

“We rent it out when we don't go,” said Gerald.

“We got tired of the commute,” said Sam.

“But you fly there, right?” said Peter.

“Oh yes,” said Gerald. “The Friday night flight out, and the Monday morning flight in. We know the crew very well by now.”

“We even had the flight attendant over for dinner,” said Sam.

“You devoured him?” joked Peter.

“Not really, he had to fly back in the morning, so it was a bit dull” said Sam. “Maybe you would like him, he could be one of your models. African American, always elegant. I haven't seen his body, but one can only guess.”

“I'm not looking for a model,” said Peter.

“I know,” said Sam, “you're a neo-expressionist. You paint your emotions.”

“Perhaps,” said Peter. “Aren't you one too, Sam?”

“Yes,” said Sam, “as long as I don't have to sell. Then it's images and artifacts of the present time.”

“With irony,” added Peter.

“You have to sell to the people who will buy it,” said Gerald. “That's true even in my field. I couldn't care less about straight people divorcing, but they pay me big sums of money to get it done quietly and efficiently.”

“Yeah, I don't really see you doing legal assistance kind of things,” said Peter.

“Hey, I do *pro bono*,” said Gerald.

“He's helped the ACLU and Lambda Legal,” said Sam.

“Sorry,” said Peter, “that was a cheap shot. At the end, what we're saying is there's art that we enjoy doing, and then there's work that gets bread on the table.”

Peter took the last slice of bread from the basket, to finish the *St. Emilion* wine that accompanied the third course. While there was ample food to accompany the wine, and ample time to consume it, he felt a slight inebriation. It was OK, he didn't have to drive or operate, as they say, heavy machinery. But he wished they could be done now. He wished he could go home and start another painting, something that mixed the various impressions of the day. He wondered where Max and Andrew had dinner, and what they were up to at this time. Perhaps they were out doing the club scene, which Peter had not followed since his I-Beam days on Haight Street. Perhaps they had found an interesting movie at The Castro, who knew? Peter thought it would

have been fun to go with them instead of his current company, even if current company paid for the meal.

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Max had heard of *Chez Matthieu*, and wanted to take Andrew there, to try their luck without a reservation. Indeed Matthieu himself announced that he would not accommodate them tonight, nor next Saturday if they wanted to know. But it was Andrew's last night in San Francisco, and Max felt a pang of guilt for not having planned it.

"Sorry," he said to Andrew.

"Nothing you could have foreseen," said Andrew.

"I could have reserved," said Max, when they were back on the sidewalk.

"Bah! We'll find something else."

"Do you think," Max started, "would you mind if I asked him about the Help Wanted sign in his window?"

"No, no of course, go ahead. I can wait."

Max was back in less than a minute.

"He said I should come back when he's not so busy," Max said, brushing his hand on Andrew's, their established signal to get hold of Max's guiding elbow. "He may be a bit difficult to work with anyway."

"What makes you say that?"

"The way he responded. His tone, I guess."

"A bit French, perhaps? Like you were bothering him?"

"Exactly," said Max.

"We should go to Paris together," said Andrew.

"I don't think I can afford the airfare," said Max.

"Allow yourself to dream," said Andrew. "But perhaps this is distracting you from finding another restaurant."

"Well, in this town it seems there's a Thai restaurant on every block," said Max. "But I wanted something a bit more special tonight."

"I'll take a rain check for the fancy French restaurant. Maybe we can go to a Thai restaurant and do something special afterward."

They walked about one block to find a Thai restaurant. They shared curry and pad thai, and agreed to find a karaoke or piano bar where Andrew could sing a song or two.

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This could be the most embarrassing moment of my life.

"I didn't even know this existed," I say.

"Never too late to learn. Do you sing?" Andrew asks me. I look into his dead eyes, as if it mattered, as if we connected at a deeper level that way. But no. It's all in my head. What's in his, I wonder?

"I don't sing," I admit. "My parents didn't like to hear music. I guess I recovered from that now, I have an iPod filled with music, you know, Lady Gaga and Madonna."

The pianist is on a break now, but I think you sit around the piano if you want to sing.

"Madonna's the best," he says.

"Yeah, I agree with you on that... There's a cocktail menu, do you want me to read it?"

"Sure," he says.

He goes for a Mango Melon Martini, I'll have a Cosmo.

These are strong drinks.

The pianist is back, and Andrew asks me to get his attention. They start talking about a song called *Autumn Leaves* and what key he could sing it in, and how there may be different versions of it. Sounds like code to me, and I go to get the microphone that the pianist wants Andrew to use.

"Check, check," he says in the microphone, and we hear it all over.

*The falling leaves*

*Drift by the window...*

"Wow, that was beautiful," I tell him. He gets a kiss on the cheek. "I'm in love," I whisper to him. And I don't know why I start crying, but of course he doesn't see it, I don't even need to turn away. But I take his hand and put it on my face, so he feels it is wet with tears. He guides his mouth to my ear and whispers he loves me, so I cry even more.

He sings another song, later. I think I have lost track of time. I know I'm lightweight, I should pay attention to what I drink. All I want to do now is lay in bed.

"I've been leaning on your shoulder for a while now," I say. "I want to go to sleep."

Somehow he manages to get the waiter out with us to hail a taxi. Somehow he manages to guide us back to his room. I'm failing as a guide in a major way. Somehow we're in bed in 5 minutes without turning any lights on. This is good. This is my favorite cocoon in the whole world and I don't want to come out of it.

"Max! Wake up!" He nudges me.

"What? Why?" I say. I notice the aura of sunlight around the curtains.

"I have to catch my flight," he says.

"Won't you stay another day?" I say.

I suppose I could sabotage his departure, so he would be forced to stay. I guess I could go with him and tell the taxi driver to go to Oakland Airport instead of San Francisco. If I were God, I could set up an earthquake. But nothing feels right. I suppose we must follow our destiny.

I get a little extra sleep on his shoulder inside the cab that goes quietly in the Sunday morning absence of traffic. He talks to the driver about what type of car used to be better than what we're in, and I think the driver agrees with him.

Is this how it feels to be a zombie? Still I can be his guide, pass the security check by special permission, get him situated at the gate. Apparently he's on standby to get an upgrade. That gets you to the front of the plane with free drinks, but the thought of a drink right now makes me sick.

"I'll go get some coffee," I say. "What would you like?"

"Coffee? Sure. Black, small."

I know why I won't work at an airport coffee shop. Every day you see people leaving, and every day you see people you'll never see again.

They're already calling him for pre-boarding when I arrive. It was a long walk to the coffee, and there was a line, that's my lame excuse.

"They have plenty of coffee on the plane," he says.

They take him away from me, and I stand here with two stupid cups of coffee with their white lids on, my door prize I guess. Hundreds of people have lined up behind me, and I step aside, go to the window, watch the airplane being loaded.

*The falling leaves*

*Drift by the window...*

I don't need to stay and watch the plane to make sure it goes away. It won't change anything. I'll find my way out of here, take BART, go home, go on with my zombie life.