

Chapter Twenty-One

Mick boarded the non-stop flight to San Francisco and buckled himself into the assigned aisle seat. His seatmate, an elderly gentleman dressed in suit and tie, smiled briefly and then returned to his paper back novel. Moments later, the wheels left the ground and along with them, went Mick's sense of security. It had been awhile since he had last flown and if he had his druthers, he would have been sitting on a train at that very moment but the gig required his immediate presence; he had to face his fear.

"Is there a problem, sir?" a stewardess asked.

"No, just nervous. I don't like airplanes," Mick replied.

"Can I get you anything?"

"How about a pillow?"

"OK."

"Wait," he interrupted, "what time do we get into Frisco?"

"In about three hours, that'll be seven o'clock local time."

The stewardess returned several minutes later and without averting his eyes, he grabbed the pillow while continuing to gaze out of the window. I wonder what it would feel like to touch them, he pondered, while mesmerized by the marshmallow-like clouds. They all look so clean and orderly, just like me ... yeah, right. Shit, how did my life become so fucked up? Maybe Vigo was right, leavin' New York wasn't such a bright idea.

"How's that pillow?" the stewardess asked, as she passed his seat with the refreshment cart.

"OK, thanks."

"This is the last call for drinks before we begin our food service, would you like anything?"

"Yeah, I'll have some gin, straight up," he said, while reaching into his pocket for the small wad of bills that he knew had to last until his first pay check.

As the stewardess bent forward to retrieve a small airline sized bottle of gin, Mick's attention was drawn to her well formed posterior.

"Excuse me, do I have a stain on my skirt?" she asked, sarcastically.

"Uh, no, I was just admiring ..."

"That'll be six dollars," she said, while shaking her head in apparent disgust.

Well, she does have a nice ass, he said to himself, as he took a sip of gin and leaned into the aisle to catch another glimpse, until something caught his attention. Turning to his seatmate, he asked, "Did you say somethin'?"

"Me? No, I've been trying to catch a few winks," the elderly gentleman remarked, while stifling a yawn.

"You sure, man, I thought I heard you say somethin'."

"What's wrong with you, son? I told you that I'm trying to get some sleep, not start a conversation."

"But ..."

"I may be old but I am not demented, yet," he mumbled, as he tucked his chin into his chest and slowly drifted off to sleep.

"You fucked up, old sod," a voice said in a barely audible volume.

"What, who?" Mick shouted, while quickly turning in his seat in an attempt to locate the source. Not finding one, he returned to face forward only to find the old man staring at him with an expression of fear.

"Are you on drugs, son?" the old man asked.

"Sssorry," he stuttered, "I thought I heard someone call my name." More embarrassed than worried, he released the seatbelt and headed for the restroom. It was several minutes before the vacancy panel lit and a middle aged woman exited. Seizing the opportunity, he pushed ahead of a waiting mother and ill behaved child, entered and locked the bathroom door. "Fuck me," he whispered, once seated on the commode, hanging his head. "Why

now? I can't deal with this crap now." And then, out of the constant din of the whining jet engines, the voice returned.

"You can't hide from me, old sod," it said, loud and clear.

"Who the fuck are you?" he hissed, while rotating his body in the small, confining space.

"Oi'm the one whot looks out for you," the voice crooned.

"Oh man, this can't be happenin'," he whispered, while gazing at the mirror, his facial muscles twitching.

"Oi'll be takin' over soon," the authoritative, cockney accented voice remarked.

"Leave me the hell alone," he shouted, followed by a knocking at the closed door.

"Do you need assistance, sir?" a female voice inquired.

"No, I'm OK."

He waited several minutes before opening the door, hoping to avoid eye contact with the questioning stewardess but to his dismay, her male counterpart stood just outside, arms crossed, blocking his path.

"Are you ill, sir?" the steward asked.

"No, what makes you think so?"

"The cabin stewardess heard you shouting."

"Oh yeah, that ... I stubbed my toe," he replied, feigning a smile.

The steward's gazed slowly dropped towards Mick's well worn, pointy toed Western boots, then back to his face.

"Stubbed your toe?" he said, with a tone of disbelief.

"Can I return to my seat?"

Without responding, the steward moved aside and allowed his passage.

Fastening his seatbelt, he turned towards the window to make certain that the old man was asleep and then fished in his pocket for a small vial of tranquilizers that had been prescribed by Vigo. Humph, he remarked to himself, says *do not take with alcohol*. "What the hell," he hissed under his breath, while dropping one tiny round pill into his hand and downing it with the remaining gin.

Ten minutes later, the magazine he had been reading fell from his lap; he was asleep. A violently spinning kaleidoscope of colors replaced the nothingness of initial drowsiness, adding confusion to his usual nightly phantasma. He squirmed in the seat, his hands turning white as they forcefully gripped the armrests. Faces, vaguely familiar, materialized from within the colorful ether, quickly fading, as if to avoid recognition. Then, suddenly, he was running, pursued by a terrible, malodorous beast. Gaining rapidly, its hot breath threatening to singe, Mick desperately tried to escape but his legs had leadened. And then, miraculously, he was saved, awakened by an altitude absorbing air pocket. Still groggy from the alcohol/tranquilizer combination, he released the seatbelt, attempted to rise and immediately fell back into the cushion.

"I just knew you were a druggie," the old man sneered.

A dense fog greeted Mick as he exited the terminal carrying his battered trumpet case and a small duffel bag. A line of taxicabs awaited but with his hand in his pocket, fingering the dwindling wad of bills, a bus remained his only option. After several changes, he eventually arrived at the Park Hotel on Sutter Street. Ugh, home sweet home, he said to himself, as he passed through the inexpensive hotel's front door. Why did this flop house look so familiar when I pulled that list from the internet? Well, on the other hand, at thirty-nine dollars a night, there weren't exactly a shit load of choices, even if I have to share a crapper with a bunch of strangers.

"Welcome back, sir," the desk clerk said, as Mick lowered his bags to the ground and signed the register, "your room is just off the elevator on the second floor."

"Thanks," he replied, hesitantly, as he took the room key and headed for the elevator, thinking, what the hell did he mean by 'welcome back'? Must have me confused with somebody else.

The elevator creaked and groaned as it slowly lumbered to his floor where and he exited. There was something eerily comforting about the small, musty room. Even the fraying wallpaper, with its hideous green and yellow pattern, had a friendly feeling to it. He tested the bed, paying particular

attention to the sheets, and convinced that they were no more or less soiled than he was accustomed to, stretched out on the mattress and tried for sleep. A flashing neon sign from the adjoining building proved to be a distraction. Reaching over his head, he yanked on the torn, dime store shade and five minutes later, drifted off to sleep.