

Chapter Twenty-Three

It was seven-thirty, Monday morning. Mick rolled over in bed and while resting on his elbows, peered out of the room's only window and watched as the last remnants of the early morning fog drifted skyward. Coffee, I need coffee, he thought, while scratching his head and chiding himself for having chosen lodging with a shared bathroom.

After waiting his turn outside the lavatory, arms full of toiletries, he quickly completed his ablutions, dressed and set out in search of an inexpensive breakfast. He walked a distance, finally making his way to the financial district and stopped before a small cafe. As he stood staring at the establishment's blinking neon sign, hawking a ninety-nine cent meal, he was overcome by a sense of deja vu. "There's somethin' strange about

this place but the price is right," he mumbled, while entering and taking a seat at the counter.

A comely brunette sauntered over, her chewing gum cracking as she masticated, and stood before him, glaring. "Want your usual?" she drawled.

"Whadda yah mean, my usual?" Mick asked, quizzically.

"C'mon, now, you're not gonna play that game, are you?"

"Look lady, I don't know who you think I am, but I ain't him."

"Yeah, right," she replied, with a hand on her undulating hip.

"Can I have the special?"

"If this is your way of dissing me for something you think I did, it sucks and so do you!"

"Look, all I want is a cup of coffee and something to eat."

"That isn't what you said when you were shoving your hands inside my pants."

"Huh? That's it, you're fuckin' nuts an' I'm outta here," he exclaimed, as he jumped from the stool and headed for the door.

"Whatever," she replied.

"An' I thought I was fucked up," he mumbled, as he reached the pavement. Well, there gotta be some coin jobs around here somewhere, he remarked to himself, while ducking into an office building in search of a self-serve machine.

With a coffee filled styrofoam cup and a plastic wrapped honey bun, he walked back to the hotel and stopped at the front desk. "Any messages for me?" he asked.

"I'll check," the effeminate sounding clerk cooed, "nope, not a one."

"Shit."

"Are you alone on this trip?" the clerk inquired, his head tilted to one side.

"Yeah but whadda yah mean by, 'this trip'?"

"Well, I seem to remember a male friend but, then again, it has been awhile, hasn't it?"

"Are you sure you seen me before?" he asked, while drumming his fingers on the counter, his agitation building.

"Oh yes, I never forget a handsome face."

"You know, I've been on some medications an' they've been screwing with my memory. So, when did you say I was here last?"

"I didn't," the clerk replied, while sweeping back his long red hair and slowly leaning across the counter, bringing his face closer to Mick's.

"Well, could you?"

"I would love to ..."

"Wait a frickin' minute," Mick shouted, "I just need to know when I was here last, an' that's it."

"Oh," the clerk pouted, "what a pity."

"Would it be like, too much to ask for you to check the old

register to see when I was here," Mick asked, while stifling his revulsion.

"No," the clerk answered, while batting his eyelashes, "no need to look. It was about ten or eleven months ago."

"How come you remember?"

"Because I was amused by what an odd couple you two made."

"Odd couple?"

"Your friend."

"What did he look like?"

"Unclean, not your type ... um, long hair with dread locks."

"Anything else?"

"Not really, I wasn't paying much attention to him but you on the ..."

"Yeah, thanks," Mick interrupted, "that's all I need right now." Is it possible, he wondered, as he walked to the elevator and rode to his floor, could I have been here before? Nah, how could I forget something like that? He opened the door to his room and plopped down on the bed, thinking, first the waitress and now the fag? I need to talk to someone. He sat up and reached for the phone. "Operator, I wanna make a collect call," he said.

"Where to, sir?"

"New York."

"Name and number?"

"Melanie Sands at ..."

"There's no answer, sir, do you want me to try again later?"

"What time is it there?"

"Six A.M."

"No, never mind," he said, dejectedly, while gazing at the beside clock, thinking, I've got forty minutes to find the club and meet the guys, an' I don't know dork about this town.

Following two buses and a short sprint, he found himself standing before a weather-beaten sandwich board. *Trivia*, he pondered, while reading the sign. That's a descent name for a quintet. Figures that they would list the names of all of the players except mine!

The door was locked but after banging on the glass for several minutes, a husky black man approached. "Can't you see we're closed?" he said, "what do you want?"

"I'm here to meet the guys from Trivia."

"I told you, the place is closed," he said, as he turned to walk away.

"Wait, I'm the horn player."

"Why didn't you say so the first time?" the black man retorted, while waving his hands about, "come around through the alley an' I'll let you in."

"Sorry to bother you, man," Mick said, when he had reached the battered steel door.

"You the fill in?" the black man inquired, while chewing on a cigar stub.

"Yeah, just flew in from New York."

"Yah any good?"

"I'm here, ain't I?"

"Yeah, guess they could've found a local."

"So, where do I go?"

"The bass man's eatin' in the kitchen, the others ain't here yet."

Mick lumbered into the kitchen and lowered his trumpet case to the ground. "I'm Mick, the horn player," he said, while extending his hand to the tall, bearded, black man.

"String," said the bearded man, as he briefly dislodged a large turkey leg from between his greasy lips.

"String?"

"Yeah, man, that's what they call me. Help yourself to the food; sucks but it's free an', oh yeah, if it needs cookin' you gotta do it yourself."

"That's cool, man, I'm no good without breakfast," he said, while looking askance at the two brown eggs he had just withdrawn from the ancient refrigerator. With some reluctance, he broke the eggs into a food encrusted frying pan and lit the flame.

"You think I could see the charts before the guys get here?" he asked.

"We been playin' pretty standard stuff ... should be no big deal for a blues man."

"Yeah, well, it's about makin' a good impression, me the new man an' all."

"Hey, knock yourself out," String said, while aiming his turkey leg at a battered leather portfolio.

Mick did his best to keep up with the group but as good as he was, it didn't make up for his lack of familiarity with the other musicians. On the whole, though, he thought that he had done a fair job, for a fill-in.

"That's a rap, guys," the groups leader, Chips, a short, wiry mulatto announced, following their last set.

"What happened, man, the place was empty tonight?" String asked.

"Yeah, well, maybe it was the new guy," he said, with a chuckle.

"That ain't cool," the drummer chimed in.

"Mick, man, just kiddin'" Chips shouted, "you blew some way cool riffs tonight; I might even pay you."

"Shit, I could sure use it," Mick said, while holding up a thin wad of bills and adding, "this is all I got."

"This should help some," Chips replied, as he handed Mick a twenty dollar bill.

"What the hell is this?" Mick asked, indignantly.

"Your take, man."

"Hey, I may be the new guy on the block but I ain't stupid or blind. I saw you handin' fifties to the other guys."

"Well, that's it for tonight, you bein' new an' all."

"You'd better take another look at my contract, it says equal treatment, even for a sub."

"Yeah, well, let's see how it goes."

Mick was fit to be tied but there was little he could do. He stuffed the twenty into his pocket and left for the night.