

Chapter 2

I had scheduled a meeting Friday morning with an important client enmeshed in a trade theft case. The client owned a respected fine dining establishment in the area and had fired one of her top chefs a few months ago. She claimed he had stolen some of her prize-winning recipes when he had left and was now preparing these dishes at a new restaurant. My job was to help compile the evidence and ultimately sue for damages. Since my client was a well-known face in the Bay Area, winning her case would bring continued recognition to the offices of Bingham McCutcheon, as my higher-ups liked to remind me.

My client was an exhausting woman with whom to deal. She had boundless energy and naturally expected everyone else to have the same. In addition, handling the frustration and anger of a woman with wealth can be a challenge for me. The things in life that irritated her were often things that irritated me, and if I did not purposefully divorce my feelings from hers, I could easily join in her rage at recent events. Needless to say, by the time she left shortly before lunch, I was drained. Yet half the day remained.

Roger called. "Jason's not coming tonight." I could hear his disappointment like a jilted lover.

"Roger, I'm sure Jason has other friends he spends time with, too."

Irritation crept into Roger's voice. "Patrick, you know he feels he can't connect. We should encourage him to hang out with us more."

"Jason is a young, single guy." Roger's annoyance did not bother me since I knew he had Jason's best interests in mind. "He may not want to spend all his time with older couples."

"We are not an old couple," Roger whined. "We get out there and party." His sigh was dramatic and again I felt Hollywood was missing out. "But I suppose he might want to hang out with all single boys from time to time as well."

"I'll be home early to get ready."

Roger and I spent some time relaxing before sprucing up for our nighttime activities. After showering, dressing and complimenting each other on our chic attire and subtle redolence, Roger and I climbed into my Porsche and drove to complete our clique at Quince, an elegant one-room restaurant nestled amidst the homes of Pacific Heights. Roger wanted us to be fashionably late, unusual for him, so

I drove at a moderate pace, which enabled us to join our party upon entrance rather than waiting to be seated.

"Well come, gentlemen. The waiter should be returning soon with Morgan's drink." Brent hiccupped once and let out a short giggle. "What'll you have?"

"I might want to try something new," replied Roger. He took special notice of Morgan. "A new drink to commemorate new beginnings."

"An adventuresome type." Morgan raised a nearly empty glass to acknowledge the occasion and nodded toward me. "I can see why you like him, Patrick. He must keep you on your toes. Or at least on your knees." His laugh accented his vulgarity.

Mark leaned to Roger, ignoring Morgan. "I think you would like the Buttery Nipple." He smiled like a napping baby, except his bottle did not contain milk.

"I'll bet he would." Morgan laughed even harder. "Have you given that one a try yet, Patrick?"

Fortunately, the waiter arrived at that moment with another of Morgan's Texas Teas. I worried that Morgan and alcohol would once more be a lethal combination, but at least the conversation moved away from the intimate times Roger and I shared.

"So I discovered that Megan's place is gone," Morgan said after the waiter had left with our orders. "Really too bad. I thoroughly enjoyed myself there. How long ago did that happen?"

"About eight years," said Brent with a nostalgic sigh. "That was back when we had all that strange weather and the power went out all around the city. Bit of a rough time for us." He leered impishly at Mark.

Mark took up the yarn. "Yeah, that was rough. I remember just staying inside for weeks." He mirrored Brent's lewd gaze. "Well, that was okay, but we missed going out all the time." He emptied his glass.

"I do remember hearing something about that," Morgan said. "I didn't realize it had gotten that bad."

"How was Dallas for you?" I asked. "I've heard there's a pretty good community there."

"It was fine. I certainly had my choice of nightlife, if you get my meaning." Morgan leered at us to press the point, but I knew we had all caught his meaning. "I made a lot of good friends there, but it just never felt like home for me. I only went there because my job transferred me there, but I will admit it was nice to be part of a different city scene for a time." He hummed and sipped his drink as if to express his fondness for the memories. "I

was just ready to come back. I missed the fun I had here. We had a great time back then."

Brent accidentally slopped wine on the table as he laughed. "We certainly had our share of adventures. Remember the time we snuck into that hotel and went skinny-dipping in the pool."

Morgan nodded, grinning, his eyes shining. "And then you discovered that older couple watching us and put on a real show for them." We all shared a laugh at that, including Roger, who was not there. "They were horrified. I'll never forget that."

"You were a cad then," Mark said to Brent and reached toward him under the table. "Sometimes it's amazing we've been together this long."

Brent's hand went below, and he squealed with pleasure. "Oh, come on. You loved every minute of it all. Every minute."

Our food arrived then, and all hands were up on the table again, the magic of the moment passed. Before the server left, Mark asked for another SoCo and Diet.

Brent abruptly bumped me. "Oh, Patrick. I understand you're working on a lawsuit for one Mrs. Carnahan, is that correct?" He smiled slyly as if we were partners in crime.

Brent had named the exhausting woman for whom I was developing the trade theft case. "Yes, but remember that I can't discuss any particulars. What's your interest?"

Brent feigned offense. "Au contraire, my friend. I am not interested in any particulars. I referred you." He chuckled at my surprised look.

"Gee, thanks, and I mean that both in a positive and a negative way." I glared at him with mock savagery. "She's a great client for our firm and it will speak well of me personally if I can handle the lawsuit well for her. However, I wonder if anyone would be able to handle anything properly for her." I shoved a bite into my mouth and chewed. "The woman is demanding and difficult to work with. What is your connection with her anyway?"

"I, too, have her as a client, and I agree totally with your assessment, in all aspects." Brent nodded his head. "The company I work for handles all her publicity and press releases, that sort of thing, and I head up the team that handles her account." He swirled a cube of the meat on his plate through the surrounding sauce. "You think you have it rough, try putting together a plan to handle her restaurant advertising. Think of the numerous rewrites that would involve. But when she mentioned the little incident, of which you and I are both aware," he

raised his eyebrows surreptitiously, "I could think of no one better to recommend. Besides, your law firm is so well known, it was easy to suggest. Mrs. Carnahan is very particular, you know."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"Well, enough of all that." Brent slashed with his knife to cut off the topic. "I don't want to spend this evening of celebration talking about work. We're here to catch up and remember the past. Too bad Devon didn't want to join us." He was the only other member of our current group who had been with us at the time when Morgan was around.

Roger piped in then, addressing Morgan. "Why is Devon so pissed at you?" I could sense that he was feeling a little left out, not having been part of our clan during our 20s.

Brent took the reins. "Devon is still upset with Morgan because he blames him for breaking up his relationship with Ricardo." He waved his fork in front of him to erase his statement. "Oh, too many indefinite pronouns. Devon believes Morgan enticed Ricardo, once a hot flame of Devon's, away from Devon." He used the fork as a pointer.

"Is he still bothered about that?" Morgan appeared mildly amused. "Ricardo had already lost interest in him by then. I couldn't help it if he found me more attractive and more cultured." He shifted his focus to Roger. "I'll explain. Devon and Ricardo were a somewhat serious couple for about a year. Devon was a bit possessive back then. I hope he's changed since, but I suspect not."

"Not enough, at least," interjected Mark.

"Hmm, that's a pity," said Morgan with little conviction and continued. "Ricardo started feeling a bit hemmed in and wanted to have a more open relationship, but Devon wasn't too keen on that."

Brent jabbed his fork into the air to draw our attention. "Oh, he's fine with that now. He just informed us tonight--again--that he and Heath have an open relationship," he aimed the fork at Morgan's heart, "although I would not presume that that openness would extend to you."

"Now that's just tempting." Morgan twisted his lips into a sinister grin, and his eyes glowed with evil intent. "I'm almost of a mind to stick it to him again."

I really hoped Morgan was not serious. Devon would likely murder him if he tried a move on Heath.

The server returned with Mark's new dark drink, which Mark promptly attacked.

"So you did steal his beau then." Roger stared at Morgan as if trying to read his thoughts, and Morgan blinked his eyes like he suddenly remembered that Roger was listening.

"I do apologize, but I'm afraid I am misrepresenting myself." Morgan set his utensils down and turned his focus to Roger. I was reminded how much Morgan needed to be right about everything. "Ricardo and Devon had been on the out and out for a time before I hooked up with him. Ricardo, I mean. Devon still had feelings for him, but Ricardo was definitely not interested. In Devon's mind, he felt that I had stolen Ricardo from him. It sounds like he has never forgiven me for this." He smirked.

Abruptly, Morgan broke contact with Roger and shifted in his seat, his eyes fixing on something behind Roger. "And what have we here?"

I followed the line of his stare and noticed an attractive couple being seated in a booth across the room from us. The man was tall and sturdily built and wore a black with gold and bronze stripe Zegna suit. He had rich dark, brown hair, which was graying slightly at the temples, and a strong chin and jaw line. The woman was a

few inches shorter than him and was wearing a luxurious blue matte jersey gown with a front slit and a daring neckline that modestly divulged the inner curves of her breasts. A dazzling rhinestone brooch hung from the bottom of the neckline, which clearly was drawing the attention of many of the nearby male patrons. Her blonde hair was curled and coiffed atop her head with ringlets dangling down on either side. These were people with savoir-vivre.

"She's done quite well for herself." Morgan breathed in fully and gazed lecherously at the couple. "Yes, he's quite the specimen."

Brent gazed surreptitiously, not wanting to draw attention to his stare. "The dark-haired one in the booth with the blonde? Yes, he is a cute one. No, that's not quite the right word really. Strapping? No, too adolescent. Sturdy, perhaps, but that sounds too board-like." He fluttered his hand in front of his face as if to break his own train of thought. "But it doesn't matter, you can't have him."

Morgan's forehead creased, and his mouth twisted as if he had eaten bitter herbs. He looked genuinely puzzled with Brent. "What are you talking about?"

"I'd go with sophisticated," Mark put in, slurring and focusing on his drink.

"That man is married. See the ring?" Brent swung his head around to each of us and almost tipped his glass too far in the process. "I always notice the ring. You've got to check for a ring. Spares you a lot of needless embarrassment."

Morgan shook his head. "You have no clue." He leaned away from the table, against the back of his chair. "Is this a challenge then?"

"No," hissed Brent, keeping his volume contained. "You can't pursue a married man. Do you want to get us all kicked out of here? That is definitely off-limits."

I watched Roger's gaze flit between me and Brent with apparent discomfort. I could feel the blood rush to my face, but I steeled myself to remain calm.

Mark noticed Roger's uneasiness and quickly cut in. "Your situation was a little different. You pursued Patrick, not the other way around."

Brent waved his fork to support Mark's assertion. "Oh, of course I don't mean you two. That was totally different." He glanced nervously back to the couple then fixed his attention on Roger again. "It's not like Patrick broke in on your marriage, Roger. You were practically separated already when you and he met."

Morgan used this diversion to jump up from his seat. "I'll be right back."

Brent swung his body around in his seat, accidentally dropping his emphasizing fork, but was too late to stall Morgan without making a scene. We all watched as Morgan followed the athletic-looking gentleman toward the back of the restaurant.

Brent's eyes followed Morgan, and I knew him well enough to read his horror there. "Oh, he's accosting him in the bathroom. That is so disingenuous. Are we almost done? Let's get him to the club soon, before he creates a scene."

"You were the one who wanted the excitement." Mark raised his glass as if to toast. "We're certainly going to get our share of that."

We waited in tense anticipation. No one emerged from the restrooms for several minutes.

"I'm not prepared to make enemies with the entire straight community," muttered Brent. "I say we go if he doesn't--"

Mark stopped Brent with a touch to his arm. "He's coming back," he nodded toward the back, "and the cute, married man is returning to his table unruffled. I think maybe Morgan was just teasing."

"Well, it's not funny." Brent glared at Morgan as he returned.

"Miss me?" Morgan sat back down, retrieving his napkin from the table and setting it in his lap. The smile he presented to Brent reminded me of clients I had who knew they were getting their way, in spite of fairness and equity.

"Very cute," Brent fumed. "Are we ready to move on? I'm ready to get to the club."

"The blonde is on her way over." Roger spoke in hushed tones and lowered his head as if he were announcing our doom.

Brent teetered on the verge of hysteria. "Oh, what have you done now?" His eyes darted back and forth between the approaching woman and Morgan. Although I could not see it, I suspected he clutched Mark's hand under the table. "I'm beginning to think Devon is right about you."

The blonde woman's gaze was fixed on Morgan like murder and did not waver to the left or right as she expertly weaved her way between the intervening patrons. I watched Morgan visibly blanch at her glare.

"Stay away from him." Her breasts heaved, and her eyes were pinpricks of rage. She jabbed her index finger

at Morgan, marking the place where she would spear him to his seat. "You have no right to--"

Morgan's anger flared. "Don't talk to me about rights! I can see him if I want, and you can't stop me. The law permits me. I love him, too, you know."

"Love!" The woman did the best silent scream I had ever witnessed. I could not decide, however, if she was more appalled or more horrified. "What does your kind know of love?" She dismissed us and headed back to her table, lobbing her final bolts over her shoulder. "We'll see what the law decides. Stay away!"

Roger inhaled deeply, and his eyes were aflame. I knew he was about to retort to her about her sweeping comments, but I forestalled him with a look. He pinched his mouth closed and dropped his glare to the table.

"Okay, that was enlightening," said Brent, his face reddening. He stood up, trying to ignore the quizzical stares from the curious onlookers. "Can we go now?"

Morgan cupped his forehead in his right hand. I sensed that he was trying to regain his composure. "I think that might be wise."

"Next time, perhaps you'll listen to me," muttered Brent.

Morgan lifted his head, exposing the disgust upon his face. "You know, you can just stay in your ignorance. Let's go." He hastily gathered his coat and started for the door.

Brent huffed. "Well I don't know what's got his dander up?"

"Just let him alone." I checked Brent with a glance and followed after Morgan.

Everyone arrived at Elixir without any excitement and with regained composure. Morgan appeared more relaxed, seeming to have forgotten the restaurant incident.

"Ah, it's good to be back," said Morgan, breathing in deeply. "This place still the same?"

Mark responded, having sobered for the moment. "Unless it's changed in the past few months. The decorations are more up-to-date, of course, and I think they may have repainted it since you were last here, but it's still basically the same." He stared in the direction of the bar, giving away his present thoughts. "Still boasting as San Francisco's second oldest saloon spot."

"Go up, go up." Brent pushed Mark in encouragement. "The night is still young, and we've a lot of drinking to do to catch up."

Mark leapt as a deer in heat toward the counter. "I'm there."

We grabbed a booth near the back of the night club. Mark offered to pay for our first round--tequila shots--and soon the drinking and shouting was underway. Normally, I was a rather calm social drinker, but when I liquored up around Brent and Mark, I tended to become rowdy. Of course, that was the case with all of us when we hung out together.

Around the third shot of Limoncello I could feel my senses blunting. My vision started reverberating, I felt a warm, tingling sensation in my skin, and I could tell that I was sharing personal information with less prodding than my wonted manner. I was unconcerned, though, since I knew that the next morning, no one would remember what anyone said anyway. I decided to slow down a bit, however, since I would later need to safely drive Roger and me home.

Brent was naturally a garrulous person, and when the booze started to affect him, he spoke louder and faster. Words started rapidly pouring forth, bubbling into frothy incoherence. Over the years, Mark had managed to decipher Brent's accelerated locution and so acted as translator for the rest of us. Mark, in contrast, was apt to slow down and become more contemplative with the consumption of

alcohol. His language became more deliberate but with a slurred edge. Watching the juxtaposition of the two of them--Brent breathing and speaking in quick, staccato phrases with Mark explaining in drawn out but blunted clauses--was highly comical, to say the least.

I watched Roger as he interacted more calmly with the others. He always became more relaxed when he drank, and he had an amicable and engaging manner when he stopped wondering what impression he might be making and simply made it. Over the past three years Roger had come a long way out of the shell into which he had felt shoved during his unhappy marriage--Roger's description, not mine. Smiling, I leaned back and simply enjoyed viewing his handsome face while he participated in the revelry.

"How are you doing?" Roger whispered to me when he caught me staring at him.

Feeling content, I laid my head against his shoulder and smiled. "I'm fine. Just remembering what I like about you, even though our kind isn't supposed to know anything about that."

Roger laughed and took another drink of his gin and tonic. "On the contrary, my darling. I believe she claimed it was love that we know nothing about, not just liking."

I sighed, feeling sadness in my heart. "Yes, I know. I wonder how much of the world really thinks that way."

"What does it really matter?" Roger scooted closer and draped his arm across my shoulders. "They don't know any more about love than we do. Believe me, I should know."

Brent butted in, having obviously been listening in. "Oh, do please stop bothering over what that woman said, as if she had a clue. Mark and I know what true love is, don't we, Mark? We have a very committed and loving relationship. We love on each other all the time." He and Mark kissed in the air toward each other. "Let's talk about something else. Morgan, hooking up with anyone interesting yet? You always were able to connect with someone with flair and panache." Brent sipped his Sangiovese. "Who have you found so far?"

Mark abandoned his empty shot glass and grabbed at Morgan's arm, drawling, "Yeah, tell us who've you got your eye on, besides that straight back at the restaurant."

Morgan laughed loudly and shook his head. "I see my reputation lives on." He looked around and waited until we were all giving him our full attention. "I wouldn't want to disappoint. I do have one young gentleman who has

caught my fancy. Quite a surprise really. I really did not expect to run into him again."

"Oh, do tell," prodded Brent, using his wine glass as a cue. "Is he cute?"

Morgan nodded with a gleam in his eye and leaned forward. "Yes, he's definitely a looker. Good, strong body, too. Darkly handsome, fit. But that's all I'm going to say for now. Don't want to jinx it."

"Oh, please," said Brent, "don't give us that line."

Morgan sat back and waved us off with his hands. "No, that's all for now. He's a little nervous. I'm not certain how comfortable he is with being out yet."

Mark clutched at Morgan's arm and shook it. "What, does he still live with his parents?"

"No, he's got a place of his own." Morgan extricated his arm from Mark's grip. "I think I may be his first serious love. I can remember how nervous I was with my first serious relationship."

"Oh, come on. I don't believe it," Brent blustered, slamming down his glass on the table and sloshing red wine onto his hand. He chuckled as he wiped his hand on a napkin. "You were never nervous."

Morgan puffed out his chest like a proud peacock. "Okay, maybe I wasn't all that nervous, but I have been

with many who were so I can imagine well enough what it can be like."

I picked up on Morgan's triumphant tone. "So he's pretty young, it sounds like."

Morgan smiled like a crocodile, and I could tell I had hit the mark. "He's legal, if that's what you're wondering. He's in his mid-20s, but I--" He flicked a glance toward Brent.

"You what?" I pressed.

Morgan looked around at each of us. After a moment, he burst out laughing. "I think I may have had a bit too much to drink. No, I've told more than enough for now. I'll introduce you sometime, and won't you be surprised." He downed the rest of the contents in his glass. "I've still got it."

Still chuckling to himself, Morgan stood up and ambled to the front door. "I'm going to get a little fresh air, but I'll be back."

Mark left the table to get another drink, and Roger headed to the bathroom. Brent and I were left to hold the table.

"Can you believe him?" Brent gazed in the direction Morgan had gone, shaking his head. "He's gone for years then comes back, immediately hooks up with some new, young

thing and leaves us out of it. He's great fun but a bad good friend."

Surely Brent could not be surprised. "I think he's a bit of a lone ranger. He doesn't want to stay tied down to anyone or anything."

Brent finished his wine and set the glass near the edge of the table. "He's getting too old." He fingered his moustache and seemed as if he had spoken too sharply. "To be running around with boys half his age, I mean. He's going to find himself old and alone someday."

"He doesn't look it, though, Brent. You have to admit that. He could go on this way for a while longer yet." I watched him to see if I could discern his mood. "Anyway, he's not interested in a committed relationship like we are. He wants to stay free to float about."

"Oh, I know. I just worry about him," said Brent. "Not that I need to. I just do. He was really supportive of me when I told my parents about Mark. This was before Mark and I became permanent. My parents always thought my being gay was a phase I was going through, that I'd snap out of it someday." He stared at his glass as if wondering why it was still empty. "Mark kind of dashed those hopes for them. Well, not Mark, but you know." Shaking his head, he stared straight at me, and I could see the pain

and love mingled in his eyes. "Anyway, Morgan was there for me, encouraging me to be my own man and make my own decisions. I could be whoever I chose to be, even though my parents didn't approve. It's my life. I have to live the way that's right for me."

I listened to Brent shift from past to present tense and decided to not share Mark's feelings about that time period. I remembered how Mark would get so frustrated with Morgan for stepping in to the role of Brent's consoler. Mark wanted that position, and he felt that Morgan was just trying to get together with Brent. I had to reason with Mark several times before he finally agreed to allow Brent to deal with "the parents" in his own way. Morgan was a great support, but he had a reputation for disregarding conventions and moving in on established relationships.

Mark and Roger returned together, both holding glasses containing dark liquid.

Brent jumped up from his seat. "I'm going to go check on Morgan." He hurried out of the club.

Mark glanced with irritation but continued a conversation he had been having with Roger. I saw that Roger caught the look also but wisely kept it to himself.

I considered how life was going to change given that Morgan was around again. Brent was correct in claiming we

had had more fun when Morgan was in town, but since that was around ten years ago, youth and hormones had factored in. Now that we were all either in our thirties, or upper twenties in a few cases, I wondered if we would want to be part of the wild night life again. Frankly, Roger and I were content just staying home most of the time and hanging out with friends on occasion. I suspected Morgan's arrival was going to disrupt some of the patterns into which we were growing.

Brent darted back to the table, flustered and a bit out of breath. "It's Morgan. They're going to kill him. Come on."

Without waiting for further explanation, Roger, Mark and I were immediately up out of our seats, hastening after Brent to the door. From Brent's tone, we knew Morgan had somehow stumbled into a group of gay bashers and was now their helpless victim. We all had either already experienced an attack personally or been present to keep someone else from experiencing it.

I could feel my chest tighten and my hands curl into fists with autonomic rapidity. Rage flooded me. I was stronger and more controlled than the others in the group. That meant I would be the one to confront whomever Morgan

had agitated. The others would back me up, though, and that buttressed my self-confidence.

I slammed the door out of the way and swiveled my head, desiring an outlet for my anger. Brent was rounding the edge of the restaurant to the right. I followed with the others behind me. We caught up with Brent before he crossed the parking lot.

There were five of them, and they were kicking at a body lying on the ground against a tree. I could hear their invectives. My eyes saw red. I yelled something but could not remember later what I had said. I brushed past Brent and barreled into one of the attackers, knocking him to the ground. I wanted to slam the next person against the tree, crushing his ribs until they snapped like twigs, but thought better of it and instead pushed him against the others. The kicking stopped as they tried to steady themselves.

Roger and Mark joined in and soon we chased them off.

"We'll be back to clean up the neighborhood," one of them stopped to turn and shout back at us. Roger, Mark and I started after them but quickly decided they were not worth the physical effort.

Morgan was already standing again. Brent brushed dirt off his clothes.

"Are you sure you're okay?" asked Brent, his forehead furrowed.

"Yes, I'm fine." Morgan's shoulders drooped, and he averted his gaze. "Thanks for your help." He looked directly at me but would not make eye contact. He had a cut lip, and I was sure he had bruises. Visibly shaken, he was trying hard to regain his composure. "That was sobering, literally."

I was still breathing hard, and my adrenaline level had not yet lowered. "Are you sure you're all right? Did you get a good look at any of them?"

Morgan hung his head and held out his hands in a placating manner. "Please, don't bother with them. I'm fine, really. It's my own fault. I was stupid. It was the alcohol."

"You're fault?" objected Roger. "There were five of them. Five on one. That was just plain, dumb hatred."

"I hit on one of them." Morgan ducked his head like a turtle cowering in its shell. "He led me over to the others, and I was too stupid or drunk to figure it out. I just assumed, and he was really good-looking."

"Morgan, I swear you're going to get us all killed," said Mark. I could tell his adrenaline had overridden any effects of the alcohol.

"I know," Morgan said, his head bowed. "I'm sorry. Really, I am. I've ruined the whole evening, and I just wanted us to have a fun time together, like old times."

I felt sorry for him, in spite of him. "Morgan, it's been a long time. A lot has changed since those days. I'm not so sure reliving them is what we need to be doing now."

Brent placed a hand on Morgan's shoulder. "Patrick's right, Morgan. Don't get me wrong. It's good to have you back, and I look forward to us all going out again, but I think we'd better tone it down a bit." He patted softly. "We're not in the pick-up stage anymore."

Morgan raised his head and looked around at us. "Not playing the field anymore then. I suppose it had to happen at some point. I did have fun tonight, in spite of the unpleasantness."

I finally had calmed down enough to be able to take a deeper breath. "Yeah, I've had a good time, too. It's good to have you back in town again, Morgan. Let's just try to not draw so much attention from now on."

Morgan chuckled. "But I'm starved for attention. I thought you knew that." When no one laughed with him, he held up his hand and dropped the jocular tone. "But no, I understand what you're saying. Next time we'll do something a little quieter."

I determined to keep Morgan committed to that promise. I enjoyed a little carousing every once in a while, but I was tired of evenings filled with insults and violence. I had had my share of those during my teen years. But Morgan was cocky, self-sure, and careless. If he were not careful, he would surely get one of us killed.