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## FIVE YEARS LATER

From our window table at a trendy waterfront eatery in the People's Republic of Berkeley, Jan and I commanded a postcard vista of where Tony Bennett left his heart. Piped music spared us Mr. Bennett's signature song, but not *Dock of the Bay*. San Francisco Bay sparkled despite washy late summer sunshine. A fog bank glowered on the horizon, held in abeyance by the famous red steel guardian at her gate.

Settling into velvety, overstuffed armchairs under a canopy of Boston ferns, and surrounded by enough stained glass to compete with a European cathedral, we projected a studied *image*. Our makeup was meticulously applied to look as though we weren't wearing any. Chic, sleek, blunt-cut coifs, hers long and naturally ash blonde, mine a short "naturally enhanced" red, were designed to look oh, so casual. After all, we were on a mission.

Jan's Brooks Brothers jacket draped gracefully on her tall frame while my Armani tested its button's tensile strength across my unfashionable boobs. We both wore *de rigueur* Gap khakis. Chunky gold bracelets, rings, Rolexes, and loop earrings—no *démodé* dangles or diamonds—along with Fendi bags and Ralph Lauren turtlenecks completed our ensembles. I sported my favorite red Converse hightops for a touch of whimsy.

Jan's tall, slim, blondness contrasted with my short, chunky, perkiness, saving us from Tweedledee and Tweedledum-dom. Cute enough to draw looks, but not so done up as to telegraph "gals on prowl." Even though we were. If, that is, one could call two aging broads out trolling for triceps *cute*. And since I seem to operate on an ecologically correct catch-and-release system, one might wonder why I even bother baiting up.

As we sipped cheap complimentary champagne between forays to an overpriced buffet, a boat peeled off from the winged flotilla plying the bay, sailed toward the guest dock, executed a smart turn, dropped its sails, and coasted gently alongside the restaurant's courtesy dock. Two windbreaker-clad men bounded from her decks, tied the boat, and strode up the ramp towards us.

"Well lookee here," I drawled, "fleet's in." I hummed a couple of bars of "It's Raining Men."

"Hetta Coffey, you are not," Jan whispered as the mariners neared, "going to use your 'Hi there, sailor, new in town? Wanna buy me a drink?' line, are you?"

"Why not? It worked fine in that Greek dive on the Houston ship channel."

"Don't remind me. It's a freakin' miracle we haven't spent the last ten years rolling grape leaves into dolmas in some leaky cargo ship's galley."

"*Au contraire*, y'all. You would be. I, at least, had the good sense to pick up the captain instead of the cook. You are, at times, far too plebeian. Hush, here they come."

Seemingly studying my newspaper and ignoring the newcomers, my legendary crawdad vision raked the men as they chose a table next to us and ordered coffee. They turned down the free champagne.

It was too much to bear. Looking over my rumpled *San Francisco Examiner*, I said, "Hi there, sailors. New in town? Wanna give *us* that champagne?"

"Sure," the tall one said, dazzling me with a show of perfect teeth set in a fashionably tanned face. Ruffled, grayish blonde, razor-cut hair and Ralph Lauren shirt bespoke "man with a job." *Hmmmm*.

His shorter, nerdier looking companion called the waitress back and waved his hand in our direction. "Please give our champagne to the ladies."

*Tres charmant. Double hmmmm*. "Y'all are too kind," I cooed, letting my on again, off again Texas drawl transform the word *too* into two syllables. Jan gave me a sour look and buried her head in the Business Section. Or Bidness Section, as we say back home.

The men went to the sumptuous spread and returned with heaping plates of salmon pâté, quiche Lorraine, croissants and tiny red potatoes stuffed with caviar and sour cream. Jan stared at their plates. "Shit," she mouthed, "gay."

I always say if one can't have love, then settle for knowledge. While my new friends, Joe and John, munched on brunch, they graciously answered my barrage of questions about boats and sailing. Finally feeling I had garnered all the men had to offer, I left them to their quiche and turned my attention on two women who had taken a table on the other side of us. I like to think of myself as a keen observer of humankind.

"Will you *puhleeze* quit ogling and pestering people?" Jan hissed, mistaking my sentience for snoopiness.

I forgave her her misconceptions and continued to snoo...observe.

Sheathed in spandex that left no doubt as to their cellulite free status, the aerobically buffed women passed on the buffet and champagne, opting for dry English muffins and decaffeinated coffee. The chef was obviously out of tofu. Why bother going to brunch? But I knew the answer. Brunch lures singles like chum entices piranhas, Berkeley is prime fishing ground and these two had all the proper tackle. That superior specimens such as these were reduced to using my own angling tactics was a lit-tle disheartening.

Joe and John finished brunch, said good-bye, left arm-in-arm and raised their sails.

Buffed Buns next to me sighed as she watched them flutter away. "I'm seriously thinking of moving back to Arizona," she told Titanium Thighs. "I mean, I love the Bay Area and my job, but my bio-timer? At least there are real men in Tucson."

Her friend nodded, took a dainty nibble of naked muffin while managing to flex a bicep. "There are men here, too, but they're all gay or married."

"Or both," I interjected. The women eyed Jan and me with distrust and lowered their voices, obviously wishing to continue their conversation in private. I grabbed the paper and sulked. People are so touchy these days.

The spandex twins departed, prompting our waitress to look hopefully in our direction, sigh, and uncork another bottle. As she filled my glass, I was on the very

verge of asking for the check when, in a tidal wave of white water, a large powerboat entered the channel and bore down upon us.

"I hope that sucker has brakes," I said, striving for nonchalance while mentally judging the distance to the nearest emergency exit.

Jan looked up and eeked in alarm, but sat her ground.

The waitress grumbled, "Idiots at the helm," and hustled off to safety behind the bar.

Although tempted to follow her, we were held in thrall, gaping as the boat suddenly turned and was washed against the dock by her own wake, a tsunami that sent several tons of water crashing against the building's pilings. The restaurant swayed slightly, or maybe it was the effects of free champers catching up with me.

"Cradle robbers," Jan pronounced as we watched three men—one stout, one tall and lanky, one medium—and three very attractive women a couple of decades their juniors reel towards us on the wave-pitched landing. They took the table recently abandoned by the treadmill twins.

The tallest man, a Nordic type with that big boned, square shouldered look I love, had his arm slung casually around a stunning brunette who couldn't have been a day over twenty-five. The other two men, my piercing peripheral vision confirmed, were also fortyish. They, too, sported twenty types. And all six wore red windbreakers embroidered with the name of the boat: *Sea Cock*.

"Oh, my ears and whiskers, Miz Alice," I whispered, twitching my nose as I pictured White Rabbit would, "do you suppose there's truth in advertising? And there, my dear girl, is why you and I are eating brunch with each other. The men we should be with want twenty-year-olds. Maybe we should start looking for a couple of seventy-year-olds."

"Hush, they'll hear you," Jan whispered. Then she added, "Besides, the septuagenarians want duagenarians, too."

"I don't think there's such a word as duagen—hey, the chubby, windburned guy in the middle is staring at you. Don't look."

She never listens. Her cherry cheeked admirer gave Jan a wide smile and bid us good morning. We nodded and lifted our glasses. I bestowed the sextet with a recently bleached smile of my own, hoping I didn't have spinach quiche or caviar stuck to my dazzling dentistry. Evidently not, for after a few pleasantries were exchanged, we were invited to join their table. A couple of the women didn't seem all that pleased, but Jan swears I could talk myself past a White House marine.

The waitress returned to take their orders, noted our change of locale, sighed, and with her flair for the obvious, asked if, by some *wild* chance Jan and I would care for another glass of champagne.

Lars Jenkins, Jan's hefty admirer, made introductions. I quickly dismissed the women and concentrated on Lars's brother, Tall Nordic Bob, and Garrison, the owner of *Sea Cock*.

Bob, after complaining about the prices, rudely ignored my witty badinage, preferring to converse quietly with his nestling. Too quietly, even though my acute auditory antennae were aimed in their direction. He had pulled off his *Sea Cock* jacket to reveal a truly ugly, polyester print shirt. For shame: poly-ugly on a guy who could wear almost anything and look good. I could forgive the shirt, but not his

blatant disregard for my precious self. But so what? Who needed the badly clad Viking cheapskate? And who dressed this guy? The Salvation Army?

I turned my attention to the more receptive and nattily attired Garrison, who at least had a boat and supported the cotton industry.

An hour later, when our newfound friends made a splashy departure, I proffered my American Express Platinum to our long-suffering waitress. She grabbed it, rushing away to tabulate before we changed our minds.

“My stars, Miz Jan, that was purely depressing. Here we have three perfectly good men who are chronologically, geographically and heterosexually suitable for us thirty-somethings, glommed up by Campfire Girls.”

“I never saw any Campfire Girls who looked like that. Let’s face it, we ain’t spring chickens any more,” Jan said, “and you are swiftly taking leave of thirty~~anything~~.” This from a thirty-five-year-old. The young can be so cruel.

The waitress returned with my charge slip, I signed my name and then, as she hovered, I started to write in the tip, stopped, and squinted at her nametag. “Nicole,” I asked, “how old do you think I am?”

Nicole looked at the ballpoint pen poised above the tip line, then at me. “For . . . uh, . . . thirty, uh, one?”

I shot Jan a self-satisfied grin and wrote a gratuity generous enough to win a smile and a topped off champagne glass.

“Shameless bribery,” Jan huffed.

I sat back, watched *Sea Cock* power out of sight, and took the sip of champagne that tipped me into stage two inebriation: Socratic.

“Dog years,” I slurred.

Jan sighed. After over fifteen years of friendship, she knew whatever fell out of my mouth next could range from abjectly stupid to moderately brilliant. I could tell from the look on her face she was not going to encourage either. But, of course, that didn’t stop me.

“Men 'n' dawgs. Dogs ain’t worth a diddlydamn until they’re five, and men ‘til they’re fifty. Canine maturity must have something to do with getting their pockets picked at an early age. And they skip the infernal midlife crisis stuff. Must be why dogs don’t buy corvettes and yachts.”

Jan giggled at my convoluted conjecture, we clinked glasses, and another profundity effervesced as I squinted in the direction of the departed *Sea Cock*. “Buy it and they will come,” I whispered.

“What?”

“Remember that movie? Where Kevin “the hunk” Costner builds a baseball diamond in a cornfield? Buy it and they will come,” I repeated. “If we had a boat, Miz Jan, we could get men.”