



*A San Francisco Café Thriller
About May '68*

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Sneak Preview

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Chapter One

Morris Kaplan, forty years of age though looking not much over thirty-five despite the thinning of hair in the region of his upper forehead (which was more than compensated for by the mass of unruly curls falling in tangles down the back of his neck), bearded out of obstinacy rather than desire, and not very caring that his blue work shirt still had a few stains from ancient meals, sat at his table in the Café Trieste sipping his second double espresso. He was mulling over an article in the crumpled copy of that morning's San Francisco Chronicle which he had found stuffed behind the pipes of the closet-like loo he visited on the stroke of ten with amazing regularity - as Yolanda, who had watched him come and go for the last fifteen years, could well attest.

What a copy of the morning paper had been doing stuffed behind the pipes was anyone's guess. Perhaps, thought Morris, some kind soul had left it there as back-up for the rather meagre supply of sandpaper-quality tissue which hung stiffly on the roller bar. But, whatever the reason (if there was a reason), Morris was happy to have found an entire copy intact without having to wait like some hungry scavenger until one of the more flush clientele had finished with the morning rag and left it behind on a table, with the remnants of their coffee and brioche,

for the likes of him. The problem was, there were too many of the likes of him hanging around these days. And too few gents who left their morning paper. So finding this one as easily as he had, without having to nearly snatch it from the hands of another bleary-eyed, print-starved vulture, was good news indeed. And if he had missed the article he was now perusing (which most people probably hadn't noticed since it was stuck under a lingerie ad on page fourteen), then he would have taken the incident as an omen of something almost pleasant - perhaps the urban equivalent of finding a four-leaf clover.

He read the article twice through before putting the paper down on the crusty table and closing his eyes. It was then he realized how much his head still hurt. For the last few years it seemed as if his head always ached in the morning. It used to be that he had only need a few sips of potent brew before that throbbing pain would subside. Then it had become a cup. Then two. Now he had to wait for a third. But cash was in short supply these days and with a good espresso reaching the price of a gallon of high-grade gasoline, it wasn't so easy to fill up anymore.

However, today it was not just a lack of caffeine that cause the ache in his head. It had more to do with the article, sitting so salaciously under the lingerie ad, headlined, in a matter-of-fact way, "Murder Victim Identified". And, as if the hundred odd words might

have contained some mysterious revelation that Morris had missed the first two times around, he opened the paper and read them again:

“The victim of last Thursday’s killing on Mullen Street in the city’s Bernal Heights district was identified yesterday as Philip Lampam. Police Lieutenant Brian Murphy, in charge of the case, says no evidence of robbery has been found, nor has any other motive been established. This is the third ostensibly random shooting in Bernal Heights so far this year where the victim has been shot at his front door. Residents of the neighbourhood are angered at the apparent inability of the police to come up with any solid leads. Lieutenant Murphy said that the investigation is continuing.”

Morris closed the paper once more and considered the notion that three people in a few short months had been shot at their front door for no good reason. The sheer irrationality was so horrific that he could hardly believe the story was relegated to page fourteen. Yet, he supposed, so many terrible acts of violence had passed under the metaphorical bridge since last Thursday, so many bludgeonings and rapes, shootings and stabbings, that a simple act of motiveless murder was starting to seem, through the eyes of the press, like little more than spitting on the sidewalk.

Of course, to be fair, last Thursday, before they had discovered the victim had a name, the story had dominated the front page, with headlines screaming “ANOTHER RANDOM KILLING IN BERNAL HEIGHTS!” and “MASKED MURDERER STRIKES AGAIN!” But over the weekend there had been an earthquake in China, and three nuns had been found half naked in the Sierra Madres after losing their way during a torrential rainstorm (they had taken cover in a mountain cave and had been attacked by a grizzly bear). So the press had decided that monumental disasters of the raging inferno variety and raw adventures with a touch of sex and violence superseded, as far as sales were concerned, the notion of a loony bumping off innocent people in the comfort of their own homes.

He caught a glance of the clock above Yolanda’s head, half hidden by the ornate bottles of Italian syrups and wines, before it and Yolanda, who was busily washing cups, disappeared behind a curtain of steam from the espresso machine as one of the new arrivals from Lombardy, who had been hired as a relief counter man, tried to foam up a pitcher of milk as the final step in constructing a near perfect cappuccino.

A brief shower that morning had driven a few extra people inside the café, so when Fredo finally arrived, Morris, who was seated toward the back, didn’t see

him at first. Then he noticed a large mass of dark, wiry hair under an Irish worker's cap bobbing up and down in the mass of people squeezed against the counter.

A confused face, sporting a modified Pancho Villa moustache and two bloodshot eyes, looked out from the crowd. A tired hand made a motion of recognition. Then, a heavy body, thickly set, plowed toward him.

"Thanks for coming," Morris said.

Fredo's dogged face was still wet from the morning rain. He shrugged and took a long drink from the white porcelain cup brimming over with foam, a goodly amount of which then stuck to his whiskers making him look even more like a haggard pooch. "What are friends for?" he mumbled. It was more a question than a reply.

"You've read it?" asked Morris pushing the Chronicle across the table. It was folded to page fourteen.

"I haven't had a chance to focus my eyes yet," said Fredo, taking another gulp of coffee before daring to lift the journal from its resting place. "I was up half the night," he said, as if he needed to explain. But he needn't have. Morris, too, had occasionally spent hours sitting at his desk, the words jammed up in his pen, as night crept on to day. "I can't seem to find an ending," he continued.

“Endings aren’t that hard,” said Morris. “You just put down your pen and stop.”

Fredo blinked his eyes and looked at Morris as if pearls of wisdom had just been cast at his feet. “Why didn’t I think of that?” he said.

Instances like this were extraordinarily frustrating for Morris. He could never tell whether Fredo had translated his sarcasm into some folksy aphorism straight out of the People’s Almanac or whether he, in his own dry way, was being flippant back.

“Anyway,” Fredo continued, putting on a brave face, “not to worry. I’ve got a teaching job next week. Things will sort themselves out then.”

It had always amazed Morris how easily Fredo overcame his writing blocks. He might reach a snag, a point where the plot hit an impasse or where a character turned cardboard, but he didn’t suffer over it long. He simply waited for an odd job to turn up, like substitute teaching, and then everything would connect. It happened all the time and it used to get Heather made as hell.

“What do you think he does in the classroom?” she shouted indignantly when Morris had once brought the subject up with her. “How on earth can he write a novel there? I’ve been teaching for twelve years and I never had an original thought in my head during

class-time. How can you with forty kids breathing down your neck, half of them zinging spit balls and the others crying bloody murder that they've been hit? I mean, really!"

Of course, Morris was a writer, too. He had one novel out entitled May 68. But it wasn't selling and he had used up his meagre advance long ago. The book, which had been a culmination of some years' work, seemed to have disappeared out of existence. It had been such disappointment to him that he didn't want to be reminded of it anymore.

Fredo, on the other hand, didn't understand his problem. "Write another book," he had told him. "But this time write something that can sell. Forget about serious political fiction. There's no market for it in America. Say what you want to say, but put it in the form of an acceptable genre."

"Like mysteries?" Morris had asked him snidely.

"Why not?"

Fredo wrote detective stories. He had created an urbane, hard drinking, smooth opposite of himself by the name of Terrance LaRue. He gave his character some interesting backgrounds and then turned him loose. It seemed to work.

So Morris had tried his hand at several genre books. His best to date, at least in his estimation, had featured

a detective who was a stumble-bum very much like himself, with a sidekick that was actually a monocled kangaroo. The problem was that in each of his attempts, somewhere down the line (usually by the third chapter), the book began to change into a story about the '60s. The characters refused to stay in their molds. They were undisciplined. They all seemed to have that anarchic flair which spoke of '68.

Therefore, in order to force himself into a disciplined mystery writer, Morris had started his own detective agency - more for research purposes than anything else. And as further inspiration he had taken to wearing a leather cap, just like the one he had seen atop the head of Bertolt Brecht in an photograph taken at the premier performance of *Arturo Ui*, his play about the Chicago gangster scene.

Morris pushed the morning paper toward Fredo. "Read the article," he said, "and tell me what you think. It's right under the pantihose ad."

It was too early for even Fredo to be turned on by long bare legs (or perhaps it was the crease in the newsprint which made the supple limbs look as if they had once been severed and then sewn, rather sloppily, back together), so he went directly to the article, trying to adjust the distance between the print and his nose so that the blurry smudges might form themselves into words. After a few minutes he put the paper back down and fumbled through his shirt

pocket for a pack of cigarettes.

“You got a smoke?” he asked, avoiding Morris’ questioning gaze.

“Yeah,” said Morris, taking a crumpled pack of Gitanes from his back pocket and handing it to Fredo. “I thought you took to calling them ‘cancer sticks’.”

Fredo withdrew a bent cigarette and smoothed it out. Then he leaned forward, allowing Morris to light him up. He inhaled deeply and, letting the smoke slowly drift out of his nostrils, said, “That was before I started again. You think it’s Philip?”

“You think it’s not?” asked Morris. He took the last of the cigarettes from the small blue pack before crushing it in his hand and tossing it into the ashtray.

“The city’s probably pissing with Philip Lampams,” said Fredo.

Morris shook his head. “I did a little detective work,” he said almost proudly. “You went to the morgue?” asked Fredo lifting his eyebrows, a sign that he found this a little hard to believe.

“I looked in the phone book,” Morris replied, deciding, belatedly, that perhaps such mundane research didn’t quite come up to Fredo’s standards for hard-boiled private eyes.

“What did you find out?”

“That there’s only one Philip Lampam listed.”

“So what does that prove?” asked Fredo taking a puff from his cigarette and a sip of cappuccino. The coffee went down the wrong pipe and the smoke got lodged in his trachea, causing him to wheeze and gasp for air.

“Are you all right?” asked Morris.

Fredo held up a finger, like a drowning swimmer sinking fast. After a series of hacking coughs, which brought the café to an abrupt silence, he finally regained his composure and nodded for Morris to continue.

“It proves the town’s not pissing with Philip Lampams,” Morris said.

Fredo shook his head. “It proves the town’s not pissing with Philip Lampams who list their number with directory information. If I were a Philip Lampam, I’d have an unlisted number too.”

“You never liked him, did you?” said Morris.

“Who did?” Fredo replied.

Morris shrugged. “He was one of us once.”

“Maybe,” said Fredo, tightening his lips. “Maybe not.”

“Anyway, we still have to find out,” Morris insisted.

“I suppose we could call Mary,” Fredo suggested. “She kept track of all the old people.”

“The phone’s over there,” said Morris pointing to a booth stuck in the corner.

“You want me to call?” asked Fredo, not taking much pleasure in the notion.

“It was your idea,” Morris replied. He didn’t like phoning Mary any more than Fredo did because she always ended up reminding him about what he wasn’t doing.

Fredo let out a sigh of resignation and got up from his chair. “You got a dime?” he asked. “I don’t have any change.”

“I’m a little short right now, Fredo,” said Morris. “They’ll give you change at the counter.” And then, as Fredo turned to go, he said, “Get me a double espresso while you’re up. OK?”

While Fredo was away on his mission, Morris found himself drifting back to those days almost two decades before - a realization that startled him since it still seemed only yesterday. There they were, as big and bold as life, sitting in the student café at San Francisco State College, dressed in their standard blue-jean uniforms - matching jackets and trousers complete with copper rivets, eating greasy fries and gagging on sugary milk shakes that Mary had

acquired for them through sources which preferred to remain anonymous. The vision was so clear, he could almost hear the rhetoric ricochet off the sticky walls like verbal swipes in a hand ball game.

Morris smiled to himself. How easy it was to make fun of them now. They were so awkward, so young and inexperienced, so callow. And the task they had set out for themselves - to stop the Vietnam War, end institutional racism and, in the process, to bring down the ruling class all in one go - now seemed so ludicrous. But then - then revolution was in the air. And they had all been infected with the spirit of May '68 and its glorious motto: "All power to the Imagination!" Besides, thought Morris, what were they to do? Sit in their classes and let it all go on?

So there they were, at the long table, listening to Philip complain that he hadn't been consulted about some action they had planned, saying that he had been sick the day of the meeting and if he had a vote it would have all been different. And Fredo - good, old Fredo - was saying that next time he should get a note from his doctor so that the revolution could be delayed till his sniffles subsided. And Philip, who by that time was beginning to foam at the mouth, was saying that participatory democracy meant that they had to wait for him - that's what it was all about. And Heather, rolling her eyes, said that the decision had been made and it was too bad. And Philip said that decision

could always be changed. And Roger said that decisions could only be changed if there was a pressing reason. And then Fredo said that he was late for class and he voted “no”. And Philip, as confused as ever, turned to Heather and said, “What’s he voting ‘no’ about? I didn’t hear anyone call the question!” And Morris remembered choking with laughter, while Heather patted him on the back and Philip stomped off, seething.

“Here’s your double espresso,” said a voice. Morris looked down at the tiny cup with the fragrant black brew and then glanced up at Fredo, the contemporary version. “It was Philip, all right,” said Fredo, sitting back down.

Morris felt his chest tighten. Having suspicions was one thing. Confirming them was quite another. “So we were mortal after all,” he said, half to himself.

Fredo perked up his ears. “What’s that supposed to mean? We all have to die sometime, Morris. Unless immortality was added to our list of ten demands.”

Taking a sip of coffee, Morris stared at his old friend. There were lines in his face he hadn’t noticed before. And, yes, even a few grey hairs. How come he hadn’t seen them till now? “Remember how it was back then, Fredo? We never really talked much about it but we were all prepared for some sort of violent end. Just thinking about revolution meant you had to

consider it. But now..."

Fredo undid the cellophane from the pack of Camels he had purchased along with the espresso and offered one to Morris. "Death is death, Morris. You think a bullet is more violent than cancer?" he asked, lighting up.

"Cancer is more understandable than what happened to Philip."

Fredo shook his head. "Not to me it isn't." Then, looking down at the table, he said, "I half expected it, you know."

"What do you mean?" asked Morris.

He hesitated a moment, flicking the tip of his cigarette into the ashtray. Then he said, "The asshole had it coming to him." He said it calmly, without much emotion.

"You don't mean that," Morris replied.

"Like hell I don't! Who do you think was responsible for me spending six months in the county clink?"

"Not Philip."

"Not Philip my ass! The little turd handed me the billiard balls, didn't he?"

"Well why the hell did you take them from him? He

didn't stick a gun to your head. Lots of people got caught with stuff when they busted us - pocket-knives, can-openers ... you could always explain having things like that in your possession. But how do you explain billiard balls?"

Fredo, who had become quite heated, suddenly stopped as if it were all coming back to him. "Imagine spending six months in jail just for attending a campus rally!" For a moment, he looked as if he was once more in San Bruno jail, digging up weeds with a shot-handled hoe.

"Well, you have to admit, it was a great way of getting us all in jail. Just declare a rally illegal and then bust everyone who attends."

"But at the Free Speech Platform in the middle of the campus?"

"Listen, Fredo, it was your idea to put up a political defence. Most of the other seven hundred of us just spent a couple of weeks in the can."

"Actually, it wasn't that bad," he said, with a slight cringe. "It sort of gave me a perspective on things."

"Perspective was in short supply back then," Morris agreed.

"What galls me," said Fredo, gritting his teeth, "is how that turkey got away scot-free!"

“You call being murdered at your front door scot-free?”

“Back then I mean ...” Fredo replied, realizing the absurdity of his remark. **“Anyway, Morris, that’s what I was trying to say. There’s a whole line-up of people who wouldn’t have minded sticking it to him!”** Then, in a more subdued voice, he continued: **“I don’t think it was a random killing.”**

Morris furrowed his brow. How could Fredo know, he wondered? Perhaps he had also gotten the phone call. He half thought of asking him, but he didn’t want to give away his cards too soon. So he simply said, “Why do you think that, Fredo?”

“Because I don’t believe in accidents, Morris. If there’s one thing that the ’60s taught us, it’s that nothing is accidental.”

“What hat are you wearing now? Theologian or detective writer?” asked Morris, feeling the growing pain in his head.

“Think about it, Morris.” Fredo was warming to the idea. **“It’s almost the perfect crime!”**

“Come on, Fredo!” Morris said with a nervous laugh. **“Are you trying to tell me that someone would bump off two innocent people in Bernal Heights just to make it look as if Philip was a random victim of insanity?”**

Fredo shook his head like a tutor who had just failed his best pupil. “Why have I spent the last month trying to teach you the rudiments of crime? I’ve told you before, Morris, you have to learn to think like a criminal if you want to understand their actions.”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” said Morris, somewhat defensively.

“But you’re not looking at it in the right way!” Fredo replied in frustration. Then, leaning forward, he said in a conspiratorial tone: “Think about it, Morris. What if you wanted to bump Philip off and you’d been waiting, patiently, fifteen years for the right opportunity. You’ve kept track of his every move. You know where he lives, where he works, what he eats for breakfast. You’re just waiting for something - you don’t know what - just something that seems right.”

He paused for a moment. There was a strange gleam in his eyes that made Morris’ head ache even more. Fredo leaned closer and continued: “Then on day you read about some nut who’s bumping people off in Bernal Heights just for jollies. He’s already shot two and everyone’s primed for a third...”

Suddenly it was quiet. The two friends just stared at each other. It was as if Fredo’s hypothesis, crazy as it was, actually began to make sense.

Then Morris said, “Do you remember a guy named

Koba from back then?” Fredo’s expression had become severe. The name had obviously conjured up something inside of him. “Sure,” he said. “How could I forget!”

“Well,” said Morris, “he’s back in town.”