

## **Chapter 1**

“Sunlight is the Shadow of God”

- Michelangelo

## 1 – It begins

Mitch Stern came to San Francisco for MacWorld at the Moscone Convention Center along with thousands of computer nerds, all fans of the resurgent Apple Computer. After spending the day in tutorials and meandering from booth to booth in the huge convention hall, chatting with many of the vendors and other attendees, Mitch decided on dinner at Chevy's just a few blocks down Mission Street.

Mitch hadn't been to San Francisco in twenty-five years, not since he married his wife. They came here for a passionate honeymoon and weren't disappointed. When they weren't making love in their hotel, they were wine tasting in the Napa Valley, hiking at Fort Cronkite, picnicking in Golden Gate Park, lounging on the Marina Green, having high tea at the Ritz Carlton hotel, high above the city on Nob Hill, or taking in shows and dancing afterwards. They walked the streets holding hands and loving one of the most romantic cities in the world.

But now, the city had changed. There were more towering hotels blocking the sunlight, imperious in their dominance of the skyline, many with an insidious, almost threatening feel to them. There were also more panhandlers. They called them homeless people here, but aside from a few who clearly needed psychological help, most looked able-bodied. You couldn't walk down the street without being accosted or having to step around groups of them lounging in the middle of the sidewalks. The smell of urine and grime was pervasive. What happened to the city he once almost knew?

His hometown of St. Louis had a poor, ghetto section, but the downtown was pristine compared to the fabled City by the Bay.

Mitch didn't usually attend conferences. He had almost stopped traveling altogether after his marriage. Margaret really didn't like to sleep alone and she made it very clear that she didn't want him to travel. So, Jim had backed off on his career and focused on his wife and family. He spent hours with the kids, helping them with homework, taking them to school, dance lessons, singing lessons and sports practices, while Margaret pursued her teaching career. Funny how he ended up raising their kids while she taught so many others. How was it she didn't have time for her own kids?

Now both kids were away at college and Margaret had decided she wanted a different life, one without Jim. He had given up so much of himself for her: his friends, his sports, his career, even the rest of his family. It seemed like a good deal at the time. They loved each other like no other couple. They danced, saw shows, had countless romantic weekends, and their sex life had not changed since their honeymoon. Lots of passion. Jim was certain they'd be caring for one another into their old age until one or the other slipped away, that while their bodies would age and wither, their love never would.

Then, last fall, Margaret went off hormone replacement therapy. She'd been on it for fifteen years, ever since her early menopause. While most women went into menopause over the course of years, Margaret's body changed in a matter of weeks. Sex became painful, and while Mitch was more than willing to make love in alternate ways, Margaret felt her body had betrayed her. She was embarrassed by her inability to perform, even though she continued to have earth-shaking orgasms through their creative lovemaking. She refused to talk to a doctor about it. It was too embarrassing. Mitch felt guilty for wanting her as much as he always had and it seemed that she felt obligated to satisfy him, but resentful too.

One day she was gone. She moved out. Mitch returned from work to a house, not a home. Everything was in disarray. Unwanted clothes and personal items were strewn throughout every room except the kids', which were completely empty. Most of their prized possessions were gone, but she had left albums and pictures of Mitch. It was as if she just wanted to forget their twenty-five years together and start over. What had he done? Why did this happen?

The quiet and emptiness of the house was oppressive.

Worse, the kids supported their Mom's decision. When he talked with his daughters, they told him they thought their Mom had been too dependent on him. They said she had never really lived on her own or made her own way and that she needed to do this. He was strong and independent and would just need to move on with his life without Margaret.

Mitch realized that young women in their late teens and early twenties were trying to break away, to be independent, but why did they feel their mothers needed the same

thing? He had put all of himself into his kids and his marriage and now it was all gone; they'd all betrayed him.

A week ago he and Margaret had met to talk about finances. Of course the conversation started with the usual recriminations. Margaret seemed to want to vilify Mitch and their life together.

"I gave up myself to be with you. All women do that. I've taken a seminar on how women mold and model themselves after their men. We all become what men want us to be. I don't want to see you. I don't have time for you in my life. I need to reconnect with myself and with my daughters."

"Are you planning to see other people?" Mitch asked apprehensively, his stomach turning at the thought of her with someone else.

"I've decided I'm done with all that, thank God! I don't need men in my life, just women friends."

Mitch was too stunned to react. Their life together had been so romantic. Even after so many years married, they still held hands when they walked down the street or saw movies together. He sent her flowers at work and brought home surprise little gifts. And their dancing! They moved together like one person. It didn't matter what move Mitch tried or how creative he was in inventing new patterns and routines, Margaret could follow him. If she was off-balance or uncomfortable, he sensed it and compensated unconsciously. Her body and his were connected in a way that each could anticipate the moves of the other. God, how he loved her!

When he did have to travel, Margaret secretly slipped little cards into his luggage, one for each night he was to be away. The first usually talked about how much she loved and missed him. With each day they became progressively suggestive, with the last one describing the physical pleasures he would experience when he returned to her and their bed.

"She was done with all that?" he asked himself, completely confused. "Could she really live without romance in her life?" He could understand her fears and embarrassment about sex, but no romance, no long walks, shows, dinners out, weekends away exploring new places? And the sex could be worked out. He was patient. After all, it could have

gone the other way. Wouldn't she have supported him if he'd had prostate problems and became impotent?

It didn't matter now. The life he'd tried to build, giving himself up to marriage and family, was gone. Could he really start over at fifty? Should he wait for her? They had needed each other for so long. Was this just a phase? Would she find herself and realize she missed what they had? Wasn't love supposed to transcend all? Didn't she believe in true love and the destiny of their being together?

He had cleaned up the house and thrown away much of the detritus that she'd left behind – fragments of their life together. He bought new pictures to cover the white spots on the walls. It was funny, he thought, years of exposure had changed the colors of the walls except where the pictures had hung. Now, there were white rectangles, surrounded by the darkness of the walls. They were like white shadows of his life.

When he came home from work, he usually fixed a quick light dinner. He was losing weight. It didn't make sense to cook for one. He'd grab a book or watch an old movie, the classics he'd neglected for years. He fell into a routine – get up, go to work, come home, eat a bit, read, go to bed. He was keeping time, waiting for his life to begin again or with luck, for the old one to resume. Some days he thought he'd be just fine. Then suddenly, he'd just burst into tears and cry uncontrollably. He never knew what would set him off. The turn of a phrase, a touching moment in a black and white film, or reaching for Margaret in the middle of the night and finding an emptiness next to him. Then the tears would stop and he'd sit there stunned, wondering where that came from.

When he received the email about the MacWorld conference, he decided that a change of scene might help. At least he wouldn't be wallowing in self-pity, doubt and despair over his future. The first day of the conference had been interesting, but he was brooding a bit and hadn't yet opened himself up to meeting other people.

Mitch walked out of the restaurant after a superb Mexican meal. You couldn't get this kind of food in the Midwest. He staggered a bit after the three margaritas he had downed over dinner. The sun was setting out to the west, but it was too low to see over the hills and the skyscrapers cast long shadows across the streets like the ominous prison bars of the old black and white films noir.

Mitch turned south down Mission Street, away from his hotel. Maybe a walk would clear his head. Within a few blocks he found himself in the Tenderloin. Young black men eyed him suspiciously and prostitutes bent over, showing their breasts and asked if he wanted a date. He knew he should turn around, head back to the hotel, but something drew him deeper into this seedy world he'd never experienced.

As he rounded a corner he thought he saw Margaret. This seemed to happen a lot since she left. He'd see someone from behind and his heart would quicken with anticipation. He'd fantasize a romantic reunion. Of course when he saw their faces, none of them were Margaret.

This woman turned and he saw that she looked remarkably like his wife did when they first met. "Wanna date?" she asked.

Mitch ignored her and continued walking.

"I can do things for you your wife never did," she purred as he passed.

Mitch thought about it. He'd been married a quarter of a century and had been faithful to his wife. He'd never been with a prostitute. If not now, when? He could use some physical contact, it had been months since anyone had been affectionate to him, let alone made love with him.

"Okay," he replied sheepishly. "But I've never done anything like this before."

"That's okay sweetie. I'll take good care of you."

She took his arm and led him around a corner into an alley. She opened the back door to an old Chevrolet Impala and said, "Hop in!" Then she slid in beside him.

"Uh, what do I do?" he asked, clearly nervous.

"Honey, it's twenty for a hand job, fifty for a blowjob, a hundred for straight, I don't do backdoor and no rough stuff."

"What's your name?" Mitch asked, hoping to know this woman, realizing that he was looking as much for intimacy as he was for sex.

"Call me anything you want and tell me what you want to do. But you do have to pay me first."

Mitch looked at her and thought about his marriage and sex life. While he and Margaret had frequent sex, and although he loved to please her orally, she had given him a blowjob only three times during their years together.

“Margaret!” he almost shouted. “I’ll call you Margaret. Margaret, I would like a blowjob!” he said laughing, trying to get caught up in the fantasy. He reached in his wallet and pulled out four twenties. “Keep the change and take a little time, please.”

Margaret took his hand and slipped it up her sheer black blouse. She was braless and her breasts were full, her left nipple hardening at his touch. She slowly unbuttoned his shirt, unzipped his pants, then began to stroke his chest. Mitch was hard and ready. She kissed his stomach, working her way down. She gently licked the sides of him then slowly took him in her mouth. Mitch almost lost it as the warmth and wetness surrounded him.

“Slow down please. It’s been a while,” he whispered huskily, overcome by sensation.

She did as he asked and Mitch began to relax. “Oh, Margaret! You don’t know how many times I fantasized about you doing this. Suck me off! Suck me off!”

Margaret complied taking him deep into her mouth.

“Margaret, why did you do it? Why did you leave me? I loved you. We should be together. You’ve walked out on our future. I’m alone. Alone. I’m going to die a broken-hearted lonely old man. Take all of me, you fucking bitch!”

Mitch forced her head down hard, causing her to gag.

“Yeah, gag. That’s nothing compared to what you did to me!” And he jammed her head down again, hitting her with open hands, grabbing her head and forcing it up and down hard. After a moment he realized what he was doing. Then he stopped and started to cry.

Margaret lifted her head, coughed, spit, and got out of the car, slamming the door. Mitch sobbed, unable to catch his breath. He felt sick. He’d never hit a woman or forced one to do anything before. Caught up in a maelstrom of emotion, disgusted with himself, and devastated again by his wife’s desertion, Mitch leaned back and sat there sobbing and exhausted, trying to regain some semblance of control.

The car door opened.

Without opening his eyes, Mitch said, “I’m really sorry Margaret. My wife just left me and I lost it.”

“I’m not Margaret. She told you no rough stuff, you bastard. Now you’ve got to pay!”

“Sure, sure. How much? I’m really sorry!”

Jane leaned over him, her face only inches away. Her dark eyes flashed as she said, ‘Everything!’”

Mitch felt a sharp pain in his chest as he searched the angry brown eyes looming above him for answers. He wanted to understand, really understand what had happened. Why had Margaret left him? Why wasn’t his love good enough for her? Why was she killing him now?

But he never got the chance.