

CHAPTER 1

Travis Carter made his way up Nob Hill on a cool but sunny afternoon in the summer of 1973. He generally avoided the trek up Taylor Street as the hill was steep at this point, but he felt that he needed the exercise. When he reached the top he turned west and made his way through the usual throng of tourists until he encountered a crowd gathered at the corner of California and Larkin. A cable car had just made its 180 degree turn at Van Ness and disgorged several passengers while others hopped on to take their places.

As the cable car pulled away with its bell clanging, Travis stepped across the street to see what the onlookers were staring at. A street mime. Not an unfamiliar sight in San Francisco, but this one seemed somehow different. It was, to be sure, a woman. The skintight leotards and black and white T-shirt could not conceal that fact even though she had vainly tried to flatten her breasts with some sort of bandage or strap. The whiteface makeup almost obliterated the feminine features of her face, though not entirely. She had outlined her eyes in black, with vertical lines over and under the lids. The lips were red, or rather purple, and suggested an androgynous creature rather than a human of either gender.

Travis moved closer into the crowd until he was shoulder-to-shoulder between two men, one white and one black. The white man, silver-haired and in his early seventies, seemed annoyed at the jostling and stepped forward and in front of Travis, who was in turn annoyed because the man was now partially blocking his view. The black man, much taller and broad-shouldered, also stepped forward and Travis' view was entirely blocked. So he stepped to his left and settled comfortably behind a man and a woman who were considerably shorter than he was.

The mime, who had been lying prone on the sidewalk for some minutes, now rose from the waist and rubbed her eyes if awaking for the first time that day. She looked around at the crowd, feigning surprise that so many people were taking an interest in her. Then she rose to her feet, yawned, and began a pantomime of performing her toilette. She turned her back to the crowd in keeping with her natural modesty and first removed an imaginary dressing gown and then donned an equally imaginary series of clothing articles; stockings, pants, waistcoat (which she apparently buttoned to the wrong holes, thus eliciting laughter as she fumbled with each button until getting it right), and finally pulled on a pair of white gloves which she was in fact already wearing. Having completed her toilette, she brought her palm to her brow and

looked first in one direction and then the other as if getting her bearings. Each supple movement, however minor, elicited laughter or chuckles of recognition.

“What the...” murmured the silver-haired man who had stepped in front of Travis. “Thief!” The man turned around and grabbed Travis by the lapels of his jacket and repeated his accusation.

“Thief! Give me back my wallet!”

Travis, startled and uncomprehending, simply shrugged his shoulders.

A policeman, who had also been watching the performance, made his way through the crowd and confronted the two men. “What’s going on here?”

“This man,” said the elderly gentleman, still clinging to Travis’ lapel, “stepped behind me while I was watching the mime and picked my pocket!”

“Let go of his jacket,” the policeman said. He was a portly figure, with pepper-and-salt hair and a slightly bored expression on his face. He turned to Travis. “Empty your pockets.”

Travis removed his billfold from his jacket and handed it to the policeman. The policeman examined it. “Your name William Travis Carter...the third?”

Travis nodded.

“Check his underwear,” the elderly man said. “That’s a trick they use.”

The policeman looked at the elderly man with disdain, then turned back to Travis. “Raise and extend your arms.”

Travis complied. “You won’t find anything officer, except some house keys and—”

“Shut up.” The policeman frisked him and found nothing but the house keys and a pocket knife, which contained a nail file, a corkscrew, a pair of scissors, and a two-inch blade. “Swiss Army knife. He could have cut your throat with this, mister.”

The elderly gentleman gasped as his hand flew to his throat.

The policeman laughed and handed the keys and pocket knife back to Travis. Then he looked around at the crowd, which was beginning to disperse. “Anybody see what happened?”

A few onlookers shook their heads.

“I did.”

They all turned in the direction of the mime.

“Watch,” she said.

They all complied.

The mime embarked upon a visual reenactment of the crime. First, she described the elderly man by passing her hands over her temples to suggest his long, silvery hair, then cupped both hands beneath an imaginary belly and walked in a circle leaning

backward as if struggling to support the weight of it. This elicited loud guffaws from the onlookers and a flush of embarrassment on the face of the elderly man.

Next, she passed her hand over her face to suggest a wholly different appearance of a second man. She puffed out her chest and stood on her toes to indicate that this man was very tall and powerfully built. After a sideways glance, she reverted to the character of the elderly man as he appeared to be enjoying the show and oblivious to all around him. Then she reassumed the persona of the tall man and looked straight ahead as if enjoying the same spectacle while stepping to her left. She wriggled her fingers and extended her hand towards the position of the elderly man and suddenly snatched it back again, tucking some unseen object into the waist band of her pants.

The crowd roared with laughter as she reverted to the persona of the elderly man, suddenly brought her hands to her breast, patted it in great agitation, grabbed an imaginary pair of lapels, and raised the alarm with a silent shout.

The policeman shook his head. “And the tall man—where did he go?”

The mime stood on her toes, placed the edge of her palm over her brow, looked first one way, then the other, and finally pointed up Larkin Street.

“Long gone, eh?” The policeman turned to the elderly man, who still looked somewhat embarrassed. “Sorry, pal. There’s nothing I can do. But if you want me to make out a report—”

The elderly man shook his head. “No, no. It’s useless. I’ll go back to my hotel and call American Express.”

“You do that, mister. Cancel your credit cards and cut your losses. And if I were you, I’d invest in a money belt. This happens a hundred times a day in San Francisco, and we can’t prevent it unless we catch the perp in the act.”

By this time the crowd had completely dispersed and the mime was left looking even more forlorn than ever. She looked at Travis, who looked back. She then reached into an imaginary pair of pockets, appeared to turn them inside out, and then, with palms turned to the sky, contorted the corners of her mouth into an expression of despair.

“No tips, eh?” Travis could barely suppress a smile; she was, after all, a comedienne.

She nodded her head, pouting.

Travis went over to her and put his arm around her shoulders. “Come on. I’ll buy you a drink.”

Her frown suddenly turned into a broad smile. She made a deep bow from the waist and with a roll of her wrists indicated that he

should lead the way.

The mime remained silent as Travis led her up Larkin Street, though he peppered her with questions about her experience and origins. Occasionally she would stop and attempt to answer his questions with the tools of her trade: her body.

He gathered from these exercises that she came from Southern California and had been in San Francisco for only a short time.

She was twenty-two and employed as a waitress at an Italian restaurant in the Castro Valley. Where was she staying?

She rented a room in the Haight.

By the time they arrived at Jackson Street, Travis felt that he could find out no more about her through pantomime and wished that she would speak.

And suddenly she did.

“That’s him!”

Travis looked to where she was pointing, which was across Jackson at the northeast corner. It was the pickpocket. He spotted the mime—who, after all, was rather conspicuous—apparently recognized Travis, and began running.

Travis ran across the street, dodged a few cars, and continued in hot pursuit. He had always been a fast runner and was gaining ground at the next corner when the man hopped on a cable car heading north. Travis leapt onto the car and pushed his way through the crowd that seemed nonplused at the reason for the chase. Some were annoyed, others seemed to think it was a movie being shot and were delighted to be a part of it.

The man hopped off the cable car at Vallejo and doubled back, weaving in and out of cars as the drivers slammed on their brakes to avoid hitting him.

Travis caught up with him in the next block and tackled him. They both tumbled to the sidewalk.

“Hey, man,” the thief said. “What you chasing me for? It wasn’t *your* wallet. What’s it to you?”

Travis responded by bending his wrist back.

“Ow! What’s wrong wid you?” Onlookers stared. “This dude’s crazy. Help!”

Travis loosened his grip and got to his feet. “Give up the wallet and—Franklin!”

The thief, slowly rising from the sidewalk and rubbing his wrist, looked hard at his pursuer. “Cap’n Carter? What on God’s green earth are you doing in San Francisco? If I’d had known it was you—”

About this time the mime appeared, a little out of breath. “Do as he says. Give up the wallet.”

The man Travis called Franklin looked at the mime, then at

Travis. “What’s this? You an undercover cop, Cap’n?”

Travis smiled. “No, Franklin. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time—or the wrong time for you.”

The mime looked at Travis. “You *know* this man?”

Travis nodded. “We were in Vietnam together. Franklin was my first sergeant. He saved my life.” He turned to the mime. “Ms...”

“Marcella.”

“Marcella, this is Sergeant Ben Franklin. Franklin, Marcella—”

“Just Marcella.”

“All right. Just Marcella.” Travis turned to Franklin again. The onlookers, thinking the whole incident had been a stunt, began to drift away. “What gives, Ben? We’re not in the army anymore. You don’t have to call me Captain. Why are you picking pockets on the streets of San Francisco? If you need money—”

“I got a general discharge, Cap’n. I—”

“Travis.”

“Okay. Travis. But it’s hard for me to say after—”

“Let’s head towards Van Ness.” Travis clapped Ben on the back. “I’m late for work and the lady—Marcella—is thirsty after all the exercise she’s had today. We all need a drink.”

Marcella did not move. “What about the wallet?”

Ben looked around as if considering another run for it.

“She’s right, Ben,” Travis said. “Better give it up. I’ll turn it in at Henry Africa’s.”

Ben looked puzzled. “Who’s Henry Africa?”

“A guy who owns a bar by the same name. It’s where I work.”

“You a bartender, Cap’n? Why ain’t you a banker or something?”

“Long story. I’ll tell you about it at Henry’s. But first the wallet.”

Ben looked around furtively. No one was paying attention to them now aside from a few tourists staring at Marcella. “All right, Cap’n. But I gotta eat.”

“We’ll take care of that. The wallet.”

Ben reluctantly pulled the wallet from beneath his shirt and Travis put it in his pocket. The three of them then walked towards Van Ness Avenue.