

Reunion at the Wetside
by Alec Clayton

Excerpt from chapter one
In Barney's Pub

Jim Bright was the last person in the world Alex expected to see sashaying up to the bar in Barney's Pub, the most notorious gay bar in Wetside, Washington. Jim had been Mister Everything in high school almost fifty years ago—all-conference quarterback for the Jefferson High School Golden Wave, track star (holder of the state record in the mile. 4:28), class president (unopposed), voted most handsome and most likely to succeed (both in and out of bed was the popular quip at the time).

If a murder mystery were to be set in Wetside the murder would have to take place under the bare red bulb in the well at the entrance to Barney's. On a rainy night. Picture a black body as two-dimensional as a paper doll face down in black black water, the blood like an oil slick as bright as neon.

Inside are plush leather booths and an antique redwood bar salvaged from a nineteenth century saloon in San Francisco and hauled north on a flatbed trailer. Behind the bar hangs a huge, ornately framed mirror, pitted and distorted. A profusion of flower pots hangs from heavy wooden beams above the bar, doubled by the mirror. Music comes from a 1950s-style jukebox loaded with 45-rpm singles from that era—rockabilly from the old Sun studios, Carl Perkins, Elvis, Jerry Lee—plus lots of Broadway show tunes and a smattering of Fats Domino and Little Richard, and the undisputable local favorite, “Louie Louie” by the Kingsmen. Lounging against the back wall are cardboard figures of Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Elvis in a gold lamé suit, Rock Hudson and Doris Day. There are no beer ads or commercial messages of any kind, but on the night when Jim Bright showed up there was a single political poster featuring a pop art portrait of Barack Obama. It hung over the booth where Alex was seated.

Calling Barney's a gay bar is something of a stretch, even if they do have drag shows once a week. It would be more accurate to call it a bohemian bar, a hangout for artsy types. Alex Martin was not a lesbian and never had been, unless you count a bit of experimenting back in college and that one summer when she and Mary Elizabeth Lucious shared a cabin at Camp Butterfly, which if you asked Mary Elizabeth about, she'd deny on a stack of bibles. Sometimes Alex wished she was a lesbian. Or black, or Native; anything but white. She liked her self: her looks and her mind, but she was not proud of being a member of the privileged and exploitive class. She frequented Barney's because that's where the most interesting people hung out.

It was a week before the 2008 presidential election when she first spotted Jim Bright in Barney's. He was wearing a Ron Paul button and she was wearing a Barack Obama button. He was drinking Budweiser and she was drinking a Black Butte Porter. She thought she recognized him as her old school chum, but she wasn't sure it was really him.

She would have been mortified if she'd spoken to him and he'd turned out to be someone else.

She screwed up her courage and approached him.

“Hi. Mind if I join you?”

Her voice trembled ever so slightly, but he didn’t seem to notice. He said, “Not at all. My name’s Jim.”

“Hi, Jim. I’m Alex.”

“I love that name. The first girl I ever loved was named Alex.”

Alex tried her best to keep from audibly gasping. If this guy was, indeed, Jim Bright, he had certainly never told her she was the first girl he ever loved. She slithered onto the stool next to him in what she intended to be a rather provocative manner, crossing her long legs so that a lot of thigh showed. She had always been proud of her legs. Muscular calves and thighs, lengthy but not too thin. Definitely her best feature. At five-foot-eleven she was pretty damn tall for a woman. Gargantuan and terribly sensitive about it in her youth, but comfortable with her size now that taller women are more common and are looked up to (figuratively and literally). Look at how tall the hot super models are. And if she was not as thin as she once was she was no fatty either. Solid, that’s the word, with ample hips and small breasts that were still fairly firm. Her hair was short. She had high cheek bones and a strong jaw. She wore glasses and tasteful but moderate jewelry. That night she was wearing coral colored lipstick and just a touch of eye liner.

Jim said, “I grew up in Wetside, but I’ve been gone for over thirty years. I retired a few years back, and then my wife died.”

It was becoming clear that he didn’t know her and hadn’t an inkling that she knew him.

Insulted, she thought, how could he not remember me? Could Batman forget Robin? They had been that close at one time, not lovers but best friends.

She told him she was sorry to hear about his wife.

“Yeah, thank you. After Nancy passed I kind of got homesick. So here I am starting life all over again back where I came from.”

“Starting over must be tough.”

“It is. I loved her till the day she died, but I don’t think she ever loved me. Oh, she pretended for a while, but I could tell. She ripped my heart apart, but I’m coping OK now. Besides, I understand. She fell in love with a chimp, and how do you compete with that?”

That had to be a slip of the tongue.

“A chimp? Do you mean a like a chump or . . . or a jerk?”

“No. I mean a chimp. A chimpanzee, a big, ugly hairy chimpanzee named Manlow. You see . . .”

He stopped to take a deep breath and for just a second she thought she detected a glint of something mad in his eye. Was he mad? This gorgeous hunk of man? Could it be he was completely bonkers? He let out a big, melodramatic sigh and then said, "This may be a little shocking, but I might as well just come right out with it. My wife was a sex performer. A stripper, a porn star, a really high class exotic dancer. And when I say high class, I mean it. She didn't dance in sleazy strip joints. Oh no. She danced in places where the cover charge was a week's pay for me and the cheapest drinks were twenty or thirty bucks. She performed her very unique act in very private clubs where the wine started at \$500 a bottle and the exclusive clientele were flown in on private jets. And what was her very unique act? You guessed it. Sex with a chimp. And she liked it. I swear she did. Hellfire, she loved it. Manlow had what I didn't have. To be more accurate, he had a lot more of what I had just a little of, if you know what I mean. Oh sure, she said I was out of my mind when I accused her of being in love with the damn animal, but she was."

Alex was flabbergasted. How could she possibly, possibly respond? She turned to stone right there on her barstool. Lot's wife in Barney's Pub. She felt as if she couldn't even lift her drink to take a swig or make a move toward getting away from him, which she felt like she ought to do. Fast. Like a trapped animal she stared at him. She could not have been more astounded if his face had just metamorphosed into that of some kind of monster primate.

It was too much for Alex. Way, way too much. She stammered, "I'm sorry. I can't, uh, I can't do this. I got to go." And she quickly stood up, and leaving a full beer stein on the bar she spun around and headed to the door as quickly as those long legs of hers would carry her, and that was when he shouted: "Hey Slugger, come back here. God! You're just as gullible as ever. You were always quick to believe any cockamamie story I told you."

That stopped her in her tracks! Slugger! No one had called her that since eighth grade when she outshone most of the boys at baseball.

She said, "I wasn't really going to leave. Heck, I knew it was you all along. God, it's good to see you after all this time," and she settled back on her barstool and they talked for hours, reminiscing over old times and arguing politics. She couldn't believe he was actually going to vote for Ron Paul.