Bleeding San Francisco

A novel by Jacques Freydont

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Prolog

In the twenty-first century, America disintegrated under the weight of philosophic enmity that pit Liberal against Conservative, white against nonwhite, and everyone against the rich. Decades of political scapegoating, intemperate debate, and the news industry's relentless focus on the drama of confrontation led to incessant communal violence in the racially mixed and regionally fractious country. The nation, armed to the teeth by dint of the Second Amendment, finally exploded .

In the west, in addition to the scourge of fraternal warfare, three successive violent earthquakes changed the geography along the whole of the San Andreas Fault, beginning in the mid-eighties of the twenty-first century. The three quakes (Richter 7.4, 8.1, and 7.7, and hundreds of attendant aftershocks) tangled the earth and water from Baja to Vancouver. It was as if the earth had tried to shake itself free of the infestation of humanity and its malice.

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Twenty thousand men-at-arms bivouacked on the mud flats outside San Francisco's Great South Wall, which was actually an impenetrable two-mile–wide sea of urban rubble that surrounded the remaining core of the city. The invaders had not seen their homes in Los Angeles for two years.

The Army of Los Angeles was assembled to capture and rebuild the California Aqueduct. After a grueling and violent march up the length of the Aqueduct to the Sacramento Delta, the ALA deviated from its mandate and laid siege to San Francisco, its eternal archenemy. For both sides, this new war fulfilled craven needs bred by centuries of contempt, derision, and poisonous myths.

The invader's grievance was that, unprovoked, San Franciscans had fought alongside the settlements of the Sacramento Delta and central California as they tried to stop LA's twenty-second century water grab. The Angelenos believed the San Franciscans had fought for spite's

sake. On the other hand, the ecology-conscious San Franciscans had considered their futile aid to the Delta settlements to be a moral obligation: to thwart the Angeleno despoilers of the Earth.

ONE

Emerald turf and pine trees once overspread the high hill, but in the time of the siege, only gray mud capped the bald rock of Lafayette Square. A destitute population, frantic for firewood, had denuded the old park during the nightmarish days of the late twenty-first century. Of all the areas in San Francisco, the Pacific Heights neighborhood had best withstood the great earthquakes, and even its old buildings remained. Since 2103, the seismically-stable granite knoll had served as San Francisco's marketplace and civic center.

On the abutting streets, drab buildings, unpainted for a hundred years, housed commercial enterprises and government offices. The People's Public Library and the People's Hospital occupied the upper stories of these bleak twentieth-century monoliths. Along Sacramento Street, shops, bars, and more bars filled the grade-level storefronts. Brick townhouses on Laguna became homes for the city's hereditary plutocracy.

The Utilities Administration had been quartered on Washington Street. There, city engineers oversaw the Altamont Pass Wind Farm, which produced electricity, and the water which flowed in from the San Joaquin Delta. But windmills and viaducts had been the first

casualties of the ALA's malevolent arrival. Since the devices' destruction at the beginning of the siege, the stupendously enlarged militia had occupied the Utilities building.

At Sacramento and Gough, a cerulean blue storefront marked the Turkish Corner, San Francisco's favorite pub. Spiritually depleted and virtually homeless revelers slept on the filthy sidewalk in front of "The Corner." Guitar music and marijuana smoke wafted through the swinging green door and out the pub's broken windows. Inside, the dingy walls were brown from years of tobacco and marijuana smoke. Nightly in this long narrow room, crowds of San Franciscan soldiers sat in candlelight, around wood tables, tête-à-tête with their women. Bachelor soldiers huddled in sullen groups. A wan young woman with matted red dreadlocks and tragic acne strummed a jazz guitar. Her heartrending tune drifted above the table talk, the clicking of glasses, and the rustling of chairs.

On the cold night in question, the exhausted, war-weary patrons occasionally stole glances at a handsome officer who sat stiffly alone in a booth meant for four. In this commoner's watering hole, plutocrats were rare and occasioned gawking. The object of the plain folks' intrigue was Todd Wentworth. Black haired, clean-shaven, twenty-five–year-old Todd stood 6'2," the smallest Wentworth male in two generations. He was trim of waist, broad of shoulder, and firm of countenance. His salient forehead, high cheeks, and jutting chin gave him the heavy-boned look common to all Wentworths. His black uniform, with gold general's epaulets, was clean and unwrinkled, rare grooming in this beleaguered and water-short town.

Todd Wentworth and his two older brothers, Thaddeus, the chancellor of San Francisco, and Thurston, reigned over virtually all aspects of the city's civic life. A fourth brother, Tagor, had been killed while fighting in King City during the Angeleno advance on the Delta. Their father and their father's father had reigned before them, and no one seemed to mind.

For three generations, San Franciscans had followed the Wentworth family. Hereditary wealth, political power, and military allegiance were enhanced by rigorous childhood training and, together, had bred an popular dynasty, revered in peace and war.

Todd sat slowly drinking the people's cheap wine. His hot black eyes avoided meeting the glances of the throng. The young man was a mystery, even to his family. When he was a child, to his mortification and the laughter of a large, adult dinner party, his mother declared that he was the only introvert ever spawned by the Wentworth clan. He caused a family outrage, when, at the age of eleven, he declared he hated hunting and threw an antique rifle over the Richmond Cliffs. Equally anomalistic was his fascination with engineering. His life's goal did not include running the city--he agreed with the prevailing opinion on that count and considered either of his brothers more capable of doing honor to that job then he. Todd aspired to run the Utilities Administration. From the age of fourteen, he had studied engineering and spent more time at the Utilities building than in school. He worked at Altamont Pass Wind Farm, first as a laborer, then as a foreman, and finally as a chief engineer. Todd saw a future wherein not only would San Francisco thrive by dint of the wind's electricity, but also export the technology--which he aimed to master. He envisioned a guild made up of his trained engineers from the settlements and city-states of northern California. He had drawn plans and diagrams for new mill designs using the scraps of civilization, the building materials of the twenty-second century. While most San Franciscans, including his own brothers, were indifferent to industrial ambitions beyond the needs of their own small duchy, Todd envisioned a renewal of civilization built on a wind-based power grid, which he would construct. He foresaw a day when men would again have the capacity to create beyond the limitations of their mere physical labor. To this end, Todd worked and studied with the dedication of an Olympian athlete.

Research came hard, for most literature on wind power was written in the twenty-first century and recorded only in now-useless electronic formats. Also, the two great libraries of San Francisco were long gone: the old public library lay inseparable from the rest of the Shambles, and the great quakes had dropped San Francisco State University into the ocean. But Todd found books in private libraries, and they provided him with a foundation of knowledge; his daily work at the Wind Farm provided him with a store of practical experience. Thus, when the Angelenos

destroyed the windmills, they also destroyed the useful life Todd Wentworth had built himself to lead.

It was not Todd's nature to mope or long for possessions lost. He understood the demands of the time, accepted his responsibilities; he donned a uniform and took up a gun and stood squarely beside his warlike brothers in front of the city walls. Todd did not make speeches like Thaddeus, nor, like Thurston, loudly lead the troops each day; but he was brave in battle and subtle in strategy. Todd did his public duty and, whenever possible, kept to himself. Occasionally, rumors arose that Todd Wentworth's self-imposed social isolation reflected distaste for combat, even a reservation about the cause. But speculation was impolite and impolitic; the wise avoided gossip about San Francisco's first family. The Wentworths were liberal rulers, but in those fearful and brutal times, the prudent dared not pique the powerful. Whether Todd was a closet proponent of appeasement could never be openly discussed--save for in the sanctum of the Wentworth mansion, the nerve center of the city.

The graffiti-covered door of the Turkish Corner swung open, and a very different kind of man entered the thick-smoked room. The newcomer, a plump man of sixty-four with a doughy face and a little round nose, was spectacularly attired in a white hemp suit, royal-blue scarf, and wide-brimmed straw hat. Upon entry, the eccentric-looking fellow stood on his toes to see over the crowd; for balance, he clutched his little fists tightly to his chest. Sniffling from the dank night's cold, he surveyed the pub with small, wide-set sapphire eyes.

Bryan Spicer had been a city councilman before the war began, when the chancellor had recessed the city council. He was well liked, serviceable, and happy to be bribed; he had profited much in life from being underestimated. He came from a patrician family, had been a wastrel son: easygoing, charming, neither bright nor ill willed. His position on the council was virtually hereditary, the place his people put their most lackluster kin. As he grew old, fat, and sedentary, he learned to use his political office to the best advantage, a sinecure that afforded income and opportunity. A pleasure-monger (although unable to keep up the pace of his the sybaritic youth), preoccupied by concerns for his own safety in this chancy world, Spicer had been a political

fixture in the city for twenty years. Despite sloth and mendacity, he was, at his roots, benign. The councilman's conniving was aimed not only at forwarding his own increase, but also the increase of friends--and they were many, as his affections were easily won. His methods were dishonest, even when truth was the easier course. But his goals were never harmful, just selfserving. Because of his office, his inclinations, and the social position of his family, Spicer was situated to act as a go-between in San Francisco's elite and its world of vice.

The newcomer nervously searched the Turkish Corner. His darting eyes fell across a darkened booth far back in the room. Squinting, he descried in the shadowed booth two women kissing. He could not make out their identities but saw that they were trim, full breasted, and wore their hair piled high, as was fashionable among the plutocracy. His small eyes lingered and sparkled as he took pleasure in this glimpse of others' intimacy. Debauchery had dulled his own sexual life, but Spicer had always enjoyed watching others at play. He usually had to pay to satisfy this thirst, so it pleased him all the more to catch a free, true-life glance.

Todd Wentworth held up his finger. He might as well have blown a trumpet, for when a Wentworth raised a hand, all San Francisco noticed. Spicer saw the gesture from the corner of his eye and quickly waddled toward the colonel's table. The perspiring councilman pushed past standing patrons with an urgency befitting a man under royal summons.

"I came immediately," he panted unconvincingly.

Wentworth gestured, and Spicer quickly sat opposite the powerful soldier. Todd said nothing and averted his large black eyes. After a moment, the councilman felt obliged to say something. Leaning forward, he said, "What a pleasure to see the soldiers have a cozy place to get some R&R." He waited for a response, but none was forthcoming. He smiled, looked at the pitcher of wine on table, licked his fat lips and declared, "The defenders of the city! Makes one proud!"

After a tolerant but rueful smile, Todd poured the older man a large glass of wine. Spicer quaffed the foul stuff, and Todd poured another. In Spicer's mind, the younger man's silence probably had to do with the great responsibility that lay on his shoulders. But perhaps . . .

"Have I done something wrong?" asked the councilman. Despite himself, he could not refrain from blathering. "You know I only wish to serve the city, as best as an old man can. I am not like my brother-in-law. I side with your family, not with my own. . . ."

Todd's serious dark eyes turned to Spicer. The councilman stopped nattering. Softly and evenly Todd Wentworth said, "I need a favor." The words cut at the proud young man.

Spicer let out his breath and wiped his lips. Slowly, a crooked smile crossed his pudgy face. He bowed. "I'm honored. Whatever I can do for you or for your family. . . ."

Todd waved his hand; Spicer fell silent. The councilman could read faces. He now gleaned that young Wentworth's distraction was not due to weightier matters, but because he was embarrassed. No outward signs of discomfiture, no blushing or wincing, betrayed the soldier, but Spicer, with his weasel-like perception, saw the tension in Wentworth's strong jaw and discerned its provocation. The young man was humiliated because he needed to ask for help. Quickly, the crooked councilman changed tactics; he fell back into his seat, flipped his long white hair over his narrow shoulder, and waited nearly a minute while Wentworth prepared himself.

The young general sighed. "I'm a small, selfish person."

"If you say so," cooed Spicer.

Wentworth's head jerked. He looked the councilman in the eye and the older man's blood ran cold. Then Todd smiled narrowly and nodded slowly. "Yes. I say so."

Again, the soldier fell silent, grew meditative. He looked around the room; he saw the weariness of the women, the fear and the determination of the men. He watched the way the two sexes comforted each other. He saw how they leaned head-to-head. He watched a woman lay a gentle hand on a husband's arm. He saw a man stroke with reverence his wife's hair and shoulder; he saw the smiles sneak through their weariness, the childlike grins of lovers at play.

Todd said to Spicer, "They have their corner of the world, their secret garden . . . I envy them."

The councilman, despite the fact that he was keeping a close, professional eye on his companion, had no idea what Wentworth meant. He glanced around the room and saw nothing unusual. Puzzled, he asked, “How can I help you to dispel these feelings of self-doubt?”

Wentworth refilled their glasses and gulped down his wine. Spicer followed suit. Todd poured another. Spicer offered a cigarette; Todd declined without gesture.

“You wouldn’t have sent for me,” said Spicer, ”unless you knew that my talent for arranging things could solve your--”

Todd laughed and blurted, “‘Talent for arranging things’?”

Spicer bowed unctuously, keeping a corner of his eye fixed on Todd. He smiled cautiously. Todd laughed, and soon Spicer, without understanding why, joined in.

Now looking more relaxed, Todd folded his large, able hands on the table and looked fixedly at Spicer. He declared, “My life is consumed with war: planning, fighting, killing.”

“For which every man, woman, and child in San Francisco is grateful. Your bravery and leadership--”

The soldier talked over the flattery. “Every night I dream about war! That’s even worse. In dreams, the blood and the carnage--” He shook his head ruefully.

“It must be terrible,” the councilman sympathized. He had always thought Todd odd; the thing with the windmills made no sense to Spicer, it was hireling work, not for the patricians. Beside, he could not imagine wanting to go to those hills, for in his own threescore years he had never found cause to venture beyond the Shambles.

“I need something for myself. A corner of life to be me in. Something! A private life.”

“Ah,” sighed Spicer, “I’m beginning to see what you mean.” He glanced around the room and nodded. He said slyly, “A woman?”

Todd gave a brittle nod. Disgusted with himself, he looked away from Spicer. But when his eyes drifted around the brown-walled room, he saw many patrons looking back at him. Mindful of his duty as a symbol of strength, he composed himself, stiffened, and folded his hands solidly on the table.

Spicier waited.

"One woman. One woman in particular," Todd mumbled.

"*One* woman?"

Todd leaned forward and hissed, "Yes, damn it. I want one woman. One!"

At this point Spicer's impulses overwhelmed his caution. "You could have any woman in San Francisco. Even the married ones. A man leading in war, after all. . . . Quite a good situation. . . ."

"I'm in love with your niece."

Spicer was stunned. They stared at each other for a silent moment. The councilman's pig eyes brightened; he sighed with untold pleasure. "My niece? Really?"

During the next silence, the old schemer savored the possibilities. Then his jaw dropped as he was struck by a frightening thought.

"Have you told your brothers?"

The soldier waved his hand. "Christ, no!" He paused, then shook his head. "She's definitely persona non gratis."

Spicer grunted thoughtfully, rubbed his little fist against his cheek. "A traitor's daughter."

"An enemy of San Francisco."

Still thoughtful, searching for the best means of exploiting his position as fulcrum in this matter, Spicer shook his head. "Such an excellent girl, too. The world is indeed out of balance."

After another silence, Todd went on, "I've dreamt about her twice."

"You have an active dream life," smirked the councilman.

"Those dreams were the only moments that I escaped the war."

"And that's why you love her? Because of your dreams?"

Now the blushing soldier shrugged, inexpressively.

Spicer grimaced. He found the young man's embarrassed longing painful to watch. The councilman pitied overly-sincere people: he thought too much seriousness missed the point of life and therefore fed its own inevitable misery. "Have you met?" he asked. "Formally met?"

"Of course," Todd muttered.

Again, a long pause ensued. Todd's mind drifted to the scene that appeared before him almost daily. One November night, in the antebellum times, he had attended a dull banquet as his family's representative. It was a lavish affair: lots of crystal and silver, fish, venison, and vegetables from around the state. After dinner, the crowd of businesspeople and bankers engaged a commercial conversation, which, though animated and joke filled, held no particular interest for Todd. He remained at the dinner table, sitting contentedly alone; as usual, he was given his space. He looked around the room, watching without judgment or interest as the normal flirtations, scheming, gossip and deal making filled the time of the other guests. Then he looked toward the end of the table. And *she* was at the end of the table, girdled by three young men of wealth and family. All were in great spirits, the haughty gallants engaged in a battle of charm before the tall, broad-shouldered and fine-skinned Irma Kout.

Todd flinched when he gazed at her. Though they had never spoken, he had known her for years, and for years, it had tweaked his heart each time he found himself in her presence. The first time was a cold day after school and Todd, then fifteen, had come by the elementary school to meet his younger brother, with whom he walked home daily. Todd waited at the school gate, blowing sharp lines of smoke in the crisp air. Then he jerked his head, struck through the heart. He saw a ten-year-old girl with long, shiny black hair and large, wide-set blue eyes, lush lashes moist with the gray Bay mists. She wore a large blue coat pulled tight around her white neck, up to her strong, broad chin. An exquisite blue vein traversed her delicate temple. Todd though it was the most beautiful face he had ever seen, with a bone structure like perfect coral. He stared as she walked through the gate and past him. He smiled to himself, anticipating how he was going to tell his brothers that he'd seen the most beautiful face on earth. But when he mentioned the child, they teased him for ogling at a little girl.

Sometimes, in the years since, Todd had passed her on the street or seen her at an event. He saw her when she was thirteen, fifteen, and on that November night. At each age, her dress and carriage had changed, but the delicate bone structure of that face was eternal. As she gained

sexual maturity, had grown to be 5'10," Todd saw the pretty little girl become a voluptuous and regal woman.

That night, as he craned over the white cloth that covered the banquet table, Todd saw that Irma was now accustomed to being the center of attention. He watched her eyes and her blithely waving hand; he watched the young men cover her in flattery and try to entice her into intimacy. She treated them with high spirits and generosity, but through her social signals, the moment was kept light. Todd knew there were no eligible suitors among this trio. Good, he thought; he wanted his beautiful little girl to marry better than a young manager or a specialist.

Despite a good fifteen feet between them, Irma felt the pull that a woman senses when a man, close by, is looking intently at her. She turned her long neck. Her light-filled sapphire eyes locked on Todd. For about seven seconds their gleaming eyes stayed together; Todd felt his the rising of his blood, his blush, his animal craving. Irma smiled as if to say, "We could be embarrassed, but let's just enjoy it. Have a good life."

Politely, she returned her attention to the young men. One by one, her suitors stole glances at Todd; their faces expressed curiosity, distaste, and jealousy. For his part, Todd accepted a waiter's offer of a strawberry dessert.

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"We've met . . . too formally," Todd finally muttered. He filled another glass for Spicer and for himself. Todd swallowed his abruptly.

Spicer's sixty-four-year-old physiological system wasn't prepared for the fast drinking in which he was engaging, and the councilman knew it. Still, he couldn't stop his drunken tongue from wagging. "We *have* got a boner, haven't we?"

"*What?*" Todd barked.

Spicer nearly choked. "You are distracted and forlorn," he sputtered. "It's good that you have contacted me. We all need help at times. So: I'll talk with Irma."

"I'm not preying on her . . . she can't think that I'm forcing myself on our prisoner. My family-- I won't . . ."