

Prologue

San Francisco, California

The present.

Rosie knew the stranger had come to kill her as soon as he walked into the circle of light cast by their fire.

They were deep in the woods of Golden Gate Park where the cops wouldn't harass them—a small colony of homeless that panhandled on Haight Street during the day and camped out in the park at night. It had been Rosie's idea to arrange their shopping carts in a circle like a wagon train, then cover them with cardboard and blankets to create a makeshift shelter. Still, she shivered in the bitter February wind as she looked up into the stranger's eyes. His killer eyes.

She'd caught a duck earlier, down by Stow Lake, and was cooking it over the flames using a coat hanger for a spit. The stranger pretended the roasting meat had drawn him, but Rosie knew better.

"Hey, there," he said. His English was good, but the burr of Mother Russia still lay thick on his tongue. "I dove a dumpster tonight and found this." He held up a pint of Wild Turkey as he came closer. "I'm willing to share for a bite of what you got cooking."

Willard, who was the default leader of their small group, put down his beer and stood up to bump fists with the man. "Bring it on, friend."

The stranger—a big, raw-boned guy, wearing a greasy brown ponytail and a tough face—sat down cross-legged, close to the fire. He grinned real wide as he handed over his offering.

Willard was a tall man with a cue ball for a head and prison scratch over every inch of his skin. Even his face was tattooed with a pair of teardrops under each eye. Yet he gave the whiskey bottle a look of childish wonder. "Man, that was some lucky dumpster."

The stranger produced another smile. "A liquor store over on Polk Street caught fire last night, and they wrecked the place putting it out. Most of the shit inside got broken, and the cops and firemen probably ripped off what didn't. Guess I got lucky, huh?"

Rosie had no doubt the burnt liquor store with its dumpster existed. Men like him usually got the details right.

He had the homeless look down, too: jeans so grimy it was hard to tell if they'd once been blue, crack pipe stuck in his coat pocket, dirt caked in the seams of his skin. His eyes, though, were all wrong. They weren't empty or beaten or lost. They were sharp, focused. The kind of mean sharp that could slide a knife across your throat without blinking, or put a bullet in your head from a rooftop two hundred yards away.

Rosie stayed silent, watching the stranger as the whiskey passed from hand to hand around the camp fire: from the transvestite hooker called Buttercup, to the one-legged man with broken teeth known as Gimpy Sam, to

Dodger, a tall, stoop-shouldered man with a head of gray dreadlocks stuffed haphazardly under a child's pink sock cap.

Not that I'm such a prize anymore, she thought. I was pretty once, though . . . But a lot of years, a lot of hard living, had come and gone since then, and now none of it mattered anymore because she was dying of the cancer that had already eaten away most of her belly like corrosive acid.

The bottle finally made its way around to Rosie. It held enough booze to give her a good buzz with some still left over for the stranger. She watched him even as she finished it all off. Might as well make him pay for the privilege of killing her.

She slipped the empty bottle into her coat pocket, telling him with her eyes to go fuck himself.

He waved a hand at the roasting meat. "Sure does smell good. What is it?"

Rosie pulled her mouth back in a smile that showed her teeth. "Fried rat."

She saw the muscle beneath his left eye jump a little, but he recovered quickly. "Mighty big rat," he said.

Buttercup giggled, then blushed and looked down, scratching at the sores on her neck, the ravages of dirty needles.

Rosie caught the disgust on the stranger's face as he looked away. *Maybe you're not so tough after all, huh, big guy?*

"Dinner's done," she said, and smiled again.

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They scarfed down the duck with some stale hamburger buns Gimpy Sam had begged from a McDonald's. Nobody had a lot to say, especially Rosie, nor did she eat much. Between the cancer and the pain meds the clinic had given her, her appetite was pretty much gone now.

It grew late. Rosie threw some fresh wood on the fire. Maybe as long as the others stayed awake, she would live.

Dodger poked at the flames with a stick, then used it to light up a crack pipe. He drew on the pipe deeply, then passed it over to Gimpy Sam.

Sam took his toke, then held the pipe out to the stranger. "Need a hit, fella? You can have one cheap."

Dodger snatched off his sock cap and whacked Sam upside the head with it. "Don't you be sellin' our crack, fool."

"Hey, now. That's okay," the stranger said. He patted his coat pocket. "I got my own, you know. For later . . ."

If Rosie hadn't already been dead certain the man was only playing a part, that stupid remark would have sealed it. In a world where you could be stabbed through the heart for a pair of old shoes, no real dooper would announce to God and everyone that he had a stash.

Dodger and Gimpy Sam stopped their squabbling long enough to exchange a pointed look and then went back to smoking their rock.

Buttercup had left earlier without even eating to take care of some private business. Now she was back with a syringe in her hand. She reclaimed her spot by the fire, scrapped the needle across a rock to knock loose the sediment, then calmly jammed it into her own neck.

Rosie saw the muscle beneath the stranger's left eye jump again, and again she had to smile. Yeah, there was tough all right, and then there was *tough*.

She pushed to her feet, her old bones creaking. "Gotta see a man about a horse," she said.

She acted like a drunken sot, weaving and muttering to herself. When she was out of the light cast by the fire, she ran.

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She heard feet pounding the path behind her. Wind roared through the treetops, and through her ears. Already she was out of breath.

She'd gotten a head start, but the killer was catching up fast. Her old legs didn't run so good any more. She could give up—what the hell, she was dying from the cancer anyway. But he wouldn't be quick about it, he'd want to make her talk first and she didn't know how much pain she could bear. Everyone had a breaking point.

The stitch in her side was already unbearable. She slowed enough to suck in a deep, ragged breath and rummage through the junk in her deep coat pockets, feeling for a small scrap of paper.

Stupid, stupid, how could you've been so stupid? You should've shredded it to bits soon as you delivered that letter, and now . . .

It was those pain meds. They fuzzed up her brain, made her so forgetful and stupid. Careless.

Got to find it, got to find that piece of paper . . . Oh, God, if he searches me after he catches me, he'll find it, and then . . .

Where was the damn thing? Whistle, apple core, cigarettes, empty booze bottle, paper . . . She crumpled it into a ball and stuffed it into her mouth.

Off to the left, she heard a branch crack.

Rosie ran.

* * *

She went flying over a tree root and hit the ground, hard. She felt the empty booze bottle smash against her belly, jagged pieces of glass digging all the way through her thick wool coat and into her flesh.

She thrust her hand into her pocket and pulled out a big shard, felt it slice her palm, felt the sting, the wet of blood, but she smiled. She could hurt him now, tit for tat. She wanted to hurt him, even if it was just a little before he did to her what he would do.

She pushed back onto her feet. Her ankle gave and she staggered into a tree. A branch slashed across her face, nearly blinding her. She blinked away tears, yet she kept running. He was close, so close. She heard his harsh breathing, the crunch of dead leaves and needles beneath his feet.

Ahead of her she saw moonlight glinting off glass. She knew where she was now—that hothouse place where they grew all those pretty flowers. She thought of it as the petticoat building because it was so white and frilly. A street ran in front of it, and there might be a car, someone to help her—

A hard arm locked around her throat, jerking her back. She felt the point of a knife slide into her neck, not far, but enough to make her blood seep out, hot

and thick. The blade slid in a little deeper. She heard his fast breathing, felt his excitement as he dug the tip in a little more.

He flipped her around to face him, held the knife under her chin. "Now, you're going to tell me where it is. And in loving fucking detail."

"I don't—What?" But she knew, oh yes, she knew what he wanted. She had to hold him off, a car could come any minute, she could yell, she could—

"Talk or I'll slit your scrawny throat like a chicken's."

He'd kill her all right, but not until after she'd told him. Then she would be nothing to him, nothing to those who'd sent him, but an old loose thread to be snipped off. She didn't want to die, not before her time . . . Now that was nearly funny, so nearly funny she laughed. Only it came out more like a whimper.

He thought he'd won. She felt him relax, heard his breathing lighten.

She stabbed the shard of glass deep into his arm.

He screamed, fell back, grabbing his arm, cursing her. She slashed out again, aiming for his eyes this time. He moved so fast his hand was a blur. She felt something slam into her chest. No, no, it was nothing. So he'd hit her, it was nothing. She was free of him, free. She'd slash his eyes out, the bastard, but to her surprise her hand wouldn't move. Run, run, then. She had to get away . . .

She reeled, staggered down the path, burst out into the road. Just a little further and then a car would come. She couldn't catch her breath. She had to rest, rest just a moment.

She looked down and stared. He'd stuck the knife in her. All the way in her, all she could see was the hilt, which meant it was deep, maybe as deep as her heart. But it didn't hurt and that made no sense, and then she realized she couldn't feel her legs anymore.

She fell onto her hands and knees. Blood dripped from her neck onto the ground in front of her. She saw his feet come up, his old scuffed boots, his stupid disguise she'd seen right through. She wanted to tell him he'd lost, that he was a fool, but the words stayed in her head.

She watched his boot come up and push against her chest. Felt the toe of it push into her neck as he flopped her over onto her back.

He squatted down beside her. "You got two choices," he said. "Tell me where it is now, and you'll die quick and easy. Make me work for it, and you'll die slow and hard."

Now that was funny. He'd already stuck a knife in her chest; she didn't have breath left for a lot of talk even if she'd been willing.

She pulled a grin out of her dying heart. "Fuck you, asshole."

She felt the fury rolling off him, the uncertainty, but it didn't touch her. She looked up at the night sky. She wanted to see the moon one last time, but the black clouds had swallowed it whole. Just one more time before she died, just once more—

"All right, you stupid old cow." His breath was hot and sour on her face. "Let's see how tough you are after I take out your eyes."

She saw him reach for the knife hilt in her chest, and she wanted to cry because she wouldn't see the moon now, not without her eyes, but just then the black clouds rolled on and she saw not one moon, but two. Two big round yellow moons just like in the movies.

No, not moons . . .

Headlights.

* * *

Screaming tires. Running footsteps.

Someone said, "Dude, she's got a knife sticking out her chest."

"Shut up, Ronnie."

"But, dude—"

"Shut up and call 911."

Something round and pale hovered above her. The moon again? No, not the moon—a face. A stranger's face, but she liked the looks of it. Getting a little soft around the jowls and going bald on top, but she saw caring there and she desperately needed someone to care.

The face said, "Help is on the way, so stay with me now, okay? Stay with me."

No, no, too dangerous. Can't stay . . .

Except she couldn't seem to move, so maybe she would stay after all. And there was something she had to tell him. She needed to make him understand.

She tried to lift her hand to pull him closer, and her chest made a funny sucking noise. It felt like she was trying to breathe under water.

"I got it back," she said, on a burst of gargled breath that sprayed a bloody mist into the air. "I got it back."

The stranger's hand wrapped around hers, warm and strong, and he leaned in closer. "You'll be okay. You're gonna be okay."

No, no, you don't understand . . .

She tried to shake her head, but it wouldn't move. She couldn't move anything and she couldn't see his face any more, because the moon was in the

way, big and bright, filling her eyes with a beautiful white light. She could hear the sirens now; she was running out of time. *The truth*. She had to make him see the truth. Had to make him see that they—

“They didn’t have to kill him,” she said on a gush of bright red blood and one last drowning breath. “He never drank from the altar of bones. I got it back.”

