

CHAPTER 1

Jessie Morgan rubbed her sore neck, gazing at the pastel San Francisco skyline shimmering in the golden afternoon. The burning sensation in her right arm made her think of Twisty and the wreck. She shivered, recalling her friend Betty's words: "Mean guys just get worse."

It was a clear November day, not a wisp of the city's legendary fog in sight. Except for one dark building, San Francisco's skyscrapers were white, their rose-tinted windows glittering like well-polished rhinestones. Gilt mist, backlit by the low sun, rolled through the cables of the Golden Gate Bridge. Jess got out of her VW, the chilly gusts off the Pacific making her reach for her windbreaker. She'd stopped at the vista point to absorb the moment and study her city map. A few other cars occupied the parking lot, but everyone else stayed in their vehicles. Maybe they figured they'd be blown right off this howling headland.

The city across the windswept bay was Jessie's latest adventure. This past year she'd driven alone, mostly on back roads, from Detroit to Kentucky to Key West to Montana to here, her Bug crammed with everything she owned. Along the way she'd worked seasonal jobs – race horse hot walker, waitress, fishing boat mate, bus girl, apple picker. She was out to experience everything, and it was time to live in a cosmopolitan city – far from her family. The Bay Area was a mecca for hippies, misfits, and dissenters. People from all over the world were drawn here as if pulled by a powerful magnet. San Francisco's rolling hills seemed to hum with energy.

Jess sat on a bench facing away from the wind and contemplated the orange-vermilion bridge stretched out before her, its color contrasting with the royal-blue

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Golden Gate Strait. The sky was the same shade of azure. Far below the vista point, cargo ships passed each other under the bridge. Out on the bay, further east, a dozen white sailboats leaned sharply, skimming across the water. An expansive park bordered by verdant forests occupied the city end of the bridge.

She studied her city map, holding it tight so it wouldn't blow away. The park was the Presidio, a military fort. She'd follow highway 101 through there to Divisadero, turn right, and go down to Haight. There, she'd turn left, go a few blocks to Pierce, and turn right to her friend Donna Wolf's place. They were going to share the apartment. On her first day in Key West last winter, Jess had met her on the beach. They'd been good buddies ever since. Donna and her Navy boyfriend Rich were from Omaha. Jessie hadn't seen her since leaving Key West last spring. She couldn't wait to hang out with Donna again.

Driving across the bridge, she caught glimpses of the ocean and the misty headlands, gilded by the slanting rays of the sun. From city intersections she spotted views of the bay and the flatter neighborhoods that stretched toward the ocean. Jess bounced up and down steep streets where the buildings looked old, European. The colorfully-painted Victorians stood in rows, almost touching. She caught a whiff of Thai food and noticed an Ethiopian café. Ethiopian! The bars looked interesting, too. She was glad she'd finally turned twenty-one and could go to bars. The sidewalks were full of people in T-shirts and jeans with a sweater or jacket tied around their waists.

She found Pierce and the skinny, gray Victorian. Parking half a block down, Jess grabbed her overnight bag and locked the Bug tight. The street, which ended at a park a few blocks down, was quiet as she climbed the steps and rang the doorbell labelled "Apt. B."

She heard Donna shrieking as she thumped down the stairs. The door was flung open. "Jess!"

"Donna!" They fell into a tight hug, and Jess caught the scent of coconut.

"You look great!" Donna grinned.

"So do you!" Jess hugged her again. Her friend looked the same as she had in Key West: barefoot, in T-shirt and cutoffs, her curly hair loose around her shoulders.

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The lavender, tie-dyed shirt she wore today said “Women United for Peace” and showed a clenched fist in the middle of a peace symbol.

“I can’t believe you’re finally here! Come on up.” Donna tucked her gold-brown curls behind her ears and bounded up a long flight of stairs to a half-open door toward the back.

Following her, Jess smelled something cooking. Something garlicky.

Rubbing against the door frame was the gray and black tabby Jess had taken in, down in Key West. “Ramona Magnolia!” She picked her up and cuddled her. “Thank God!” When she’d left Key West, she couldn’t figure out how to travel with the cat, who was so terrified of riding in the car she’d trembled and panted and clawed, and peed down the front of Jessie’s shirt. But here she was, purring like a little engine. “How did you get her to travel?”

“The vet said I could keep her sedated, in a carrier.” Donna reached over and pet Ramona’s head.

“I should have figured that out.” Jess stroked the short-haired kitty. “I’m sorry,” she crooned as Ramona scrunched the air with her front paws. Jess followed her friend into a cozy living room with orange shag carpet, yellow beanbag chairs, a mattress covered with pillows and an Indian print bedspread, wooden crates, and a small marble fireplace. “A fireplace!”

“Yep. It’s the back half of a flat... really a one-bedroom. It’s small but we’ll save tons of bread splitting the rent.”

“Cool.” Jess kissed Ramona’s silky head as they moved to the kitchen. It had a beat-up linoleum floor and a pegboard on the wall, from which hung spatulas, wooden spoons, graters, an antique egg beater, and two cast-iron skillets.

“I’ve gotten into cooking,” Donna said.

“And collecting?” Jess shifted Ramona higher in her arms and pressed her cheek against the cat’s cheek.

“Guilty. Flea markets. Here’s your room.”

Off the kitchen was a glassed-in porch with a twin mattress on the floor, and tall windows that could swing open. “Neat!”

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"But... we have to walk through here to go to the bathroom," Donna said.

"Cheap rent is worth it."

"Rich stays over sometimes."

"I'm not worried." Jess smiled at her.

"You can use this mattress for now. A double will fit..."

"I love it. What direction is this?" Jess pointed to the windows.

"East. Oh! Your key!" Donna went into the kitchen, came back, and put a key in Jessie's palm. "Forty-five a month, due on the first."

"Far out." Jess put Ramona down and put the key on the ring with her car keys.

The bathroom didn't have a tub. "Good shower, though," Donna said, "and plenty of hot water."

Off the living room, Donna's dark bedroom had the same orange shag as the living room. A skinny window faced the building next door, which looked close enough to touch. Two vintage floor lamps flanked a queen-sized mattress covered with a blue granny-square afghan.

"Cute," Jess said.

"I made this." Donna touched the afghan. "I've gotten into crocheting, too." She pointed at an entire wall of stacked wooden crates full of colorful skeins of yarn.

Jess laughed. "You're crazy!"

"Guilty." Donna's green ten-speed bicycle leaned against another wall. "I ride to work sometimes. You have to watch out for streetcar tracks, though. The skinny wheels can get stuck in them and dump you."

Jess flopped into the beanbag chair next to the fireplace.

"Wine?"

"Sure."

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Donna handed her an empty glass, showing her the bottle of Sebastiani Cabernet Sauvignon.

"Looks expensive."

"Not at all. It's from Sonoma." She poured the wine and made a small fire.

Jess sipped. "Nice."

Donna nodded. "California wines are the best things about living here!"

"Cool. Sonoma, you said."

"Yeah."

"My friends Liv and Pancho are there. I met them in Colorado when we were stuck in that blizzard."

"Right, you wrote me about that."

"We traveled together, and they came to Flathead Lake. They're working for Liv's cousin Delilah."

"At a place called Delilah's?"

"Yep."

"I've heard it's great. I wanna go there."

"Let's do it. You'll love 'em. Hey, have you heard of a church called the Table of Faith?"

"Nope. But you know me, not into churches."

"Same, but Liv says it's cool, helping poor people, changing the world. She thinks the leader, Jerry Owens, is a rock star." Jess lit a Benson and Hedges 100, and offered Donna one.

"Thanks, but I like Menthol, remember?"

"Oh, that's right."

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Donna got a cigarette and sat on the floor next to the fire. "I sit here when I smoke, so the stinky stuff goes up the chimney."

"Good idea." Jess joined her. "So, who lives in the front?"

"Two guys. Probably gay. They stay to themselves."

"Tell me again where you work?"

"Bechtel, a huge engineering firm downtown. I have to work tomorrow, but this weekend I want to show you the city."

"OK." Jess couldn't believe how good the wine tasted. It was dry, but not too dry – worlds beyond her usual crappy Spanada.

"Maybe we can hit some flea markets, too," Donna said, puffing on her cigarette. "So, tell me what happened with Twisty."

"Oh, my God."

Donna looked at her, waiting.

"He showed up in Montana, and, man, was he weird."

"That's nothing new..."

"Extra weird. Hyper. We were partying and he was just ... wild. He had this Cadillac convertible and he was drunk and I wanted to drive, but he wouldn't let me. Stupid me, I rode with him even though he was shit-faced. We had a wreck..."

"Holy crap!"

"We almost hit a telephone pole and the car almost rolled. I hit my head... Hard." God, that day was a blur.

"You OK?"

"I had a concussion, but I'm fine. Well, my neck is weird..." Jessie's hand automatically went to her neck, rubbing the stiff muscles.

"Damn! I KNEW that son of a bitch would screw you up. Remember that day Betty and I tried to warn you off him?"

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Jess nodded, taking a deep drag from her cigarette and remembering the last time she'd seen Twisty. He'd been handcuffed, in the back seat of a cop cruiser.

"Swear to God, you play with fire with that guy."

"You don't know the half of it."

"Give!"

"They arrested him and it turned out he was wanted in North Carolina on drug charges and for bail jumping, plus he'd skipped out on his car payments. They were looking for him and that fancy land barge."

"Jeez."

"He'd kept all that from me."

"Now you're done with him, right?"

"Right," Jess said. "He's in jail in North Carolina, and wanted me to move there. I wrote him that I wasn't coming, that I couldn't take any more of his lies."

"Good for you!"

"I need a fresh start." She pushed her hair off her face.

"Nice guys, Jess."

"Like Rich?"

"Yeah, like Rich." Donna grinned.

"How are things with him?"

"Good. The same. I love his stupid ass."

"But he's a nice guy."

"Yep."

"Why don't nice guys do it for me?" Jess tossed the rest of her cigarette into the fireplace. "How come I only like the mean ones?"

"You'll figure it out."

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"Man, I hope so." Sometimes she really wondered.

"But Montana was good?"

"The best." Jess smiled.

"How was your trip, coming down?"

"Good, but I miss the convertible." Her '65 VW convertible had broken down last summer. Now she had a Bug sedan. "I loved the Oregon Coast. How was your trip across the country?"

"Bitchin. We drove straight across, then hung out in Vegas, Death Valley, and Yosemite."

"I'd love to see Yosemite and Death Valley."

"We'll go." Donna gave her another goofy grin. "Girl, we're gonna have fun! Oh, some friends are having a brunch on Sunday, a potluck. We're invited."

"Great."

"It's a gay commune," Donna explained. "San Francisco is full of gays and radicals."

"Far out. Doesn't that drive Rich nuts?" Jess remembered him as pretty straight-laced.

"He's getting used to it. He only deals with the city on his days off."

"It'll be good to see him." Jess finished her wine. "I'm starving!"

"Me too. Fish and chips? There's a great place down the street."

"Sure! Let's go!"

CHAPTER 2

Twisty

He sat on his bunk, slouched over his letters. Each envelope was stamped “Return to Sender” in crimson ink. Shit! They were meant for Jess. Twisty got up and paced around the cell, crushing the envelopes in his hand. Why hadn’t she written? Where the fuck was she?

“Huh?” Jimmy, his cellmate, stirred in his bunk.

“Nothing, go back to sleep.”

“K.” Jimmy went back to his nap.

Twisty hadn’t seen Jess since the wreck. She’d looked dazed, sitting on the grass with a cop and staring at his Cadillac, which had been perched precariously in the barrow pit and about to roll. From the back of the cop car, Twisty had watched the ambulance pull up. An ambulance. For Jess.

She’d never come to see him. There had been one note from her, but it hadn’t said much. It would take time, but Twisty knew he’d get her back. He had to. Jess was his woman. No way would he let her go.

What the hell could he do about it from this shithole?

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First, he could get his poop in a group. He was working on it. Hell, he'd been clean for two months. At first it had been a bitch on wheels. The doctor was still talking about sending him to treatment.

He recalled how Jess had looked when they met in Kentucky a little over a year ago. Tall and lean, she was a natural beauty who didn't need makeup. Her raven-black hair and cat eyes had made him think she was Native American. No, she'd told him, she was dark Irish. His own coloring came from his Cherokee blood. Both tall and dark, they made a great-looking couple, Twisty thought. He'd never forget the first time Jess wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. He'd felt like a real man.

Twisty caught his angular image in the funky cell mirror. Man, he'd lost weight. He'd always been sharp-featured, but now he was gaunt. The food here was gross. But it was time to force himself to eat more, and start working out. That way he'd look good for Jess.

Twisty leaned against the bars, the cold metal soothing his feverishly hot face. Maybe he could pay someone to track her down. There was money in his Asheville bank account. Ma was coming to visit in a few days. They could talk about hiring someone.

The buzzer echoed off the naked concrete walls. Rec time. Good. Some air, and walking the yard track with Carl. That crazy redheaded fucker was full of good bullshit.

Maybe Carl could help get his mind off this crap.

CHAPTER 3

In the damp fog, Jess kneeled on the driver's seat and gaped at the VW's back seat. Her heart sank as she stared at the open suitcase, the clothes tossed all over. Her stereo, camera bag, and vintage fur coat were gone. The passenger door was unlocked. She was sure she'd locked it. She slumped sideways, her legs sticking out of the car. At least the windows weren't broken. The camera bag contained not only her 35mm Praktica and its lenses, it had her negatives and undeveloped film. Things she couldn't replace. Things that would be dumped in the garbage. That's what really pissed her off. Damn.

Maybe she'd just go back to bed. Screw it. Maybe this was a "welcome to the city" initiation, she thought, swallowing back the lump in her throat.

She'd call it in, but first she'd get everything else inside. Jess crawled into the back seat, gathered the clothes into her blue suitcase, latched it, and checked the trunk. That was where she kept pillowcases stuffed with clothes and bedding, when she traveled. Everything was still there.

She dragged herself back and forth, up and down the stairs, hauling everything to her room, her heart so heavy she could barely stand up straight. Donna was at work, so she had the place to herself except for Ramona, who was stretched out on her bed. Jess found the phone book, plopped onto the living room mattress, and called the cops on the black Princess phone. She recited her story three times before being told to come to the station on Fillmore and fill out paperwork.

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Jessie went back to her room and lay down, curling herself around Ramona. She felt like sucking her thumb. As if she weren't feeling strange enough, in a new city. She and San Francisco were not off to a great start.

Well, if she hated it here she could try Sonoma County. It would be fun to be near Liv and Pancho. She'd spent a night with them on her way down, and liked where they lived.

She closed her eyes, imagining her negatives and film canisters in a garbage can. The current of rage pulsing through her body was too familiar. Jess pictured it: she'd tiptoe up behind the bastard, grab him, and kick him in the balls, hard. Once he passed out, she'd retrieve her stuff, kick him a few more times for good measure, and vanish into the fog.

"Mew?" Ramona said in her delicate voice, tickling Jessie's cheek with her whiskers, licking her tears. She hadn't realized she was crying. Ramona was a softening balm, crumbling the rage into the raw hurt it really was. Jess stroked the cat's head, loving the scratchy cat-tongue kisses even though they made her cry harder.

The stolen photos were of her life since Detroit, especially Twisty and Key West and Montana. Some of the negatives had never been printed. In Key West, Twisty had given her a great deal on his camera equipment. Now what would she do? Single lens reflex cameras were expensive. She took a deep breath, missing Twisty.

What was she doing, missing that no-good, lying bastard? Jess rolled onto her back, mad at herself. How stupid could she get? God!

* * *

"Ocean Beach!" the driver called.

Determined to salvage her first day in the city, Jess had walked down to Market Street and caught the "N Judah" streetcar. Amazed that she could go to the ocean beach for a quarter, she'd gazed at sunny backyards with children riding tricycles and clotheslines full of sheets and jeans. As the streetcar made its way

toward the ocean, they'd entered a murky fog. The closer they got to the beach, the darker the fog was.

She crossed the road to the seawall and put on her sweatshirt, looking at the gnarled cypress trees silhouetted in silver fog. The sandy bluff was covered with a low, sprawling plant that had pink flowers. Mist washed over her face, cooling her skin as she studied the wild Pacific surf – white lines in the steel-gray sea. Jess wove her obsidian hair into a single braid and fastened it with a band she found in the pocket of her windbreaker. The damp, cool sand was soft on her bare feet, gulls screeching overhead as the Pacific roared, booming against the rocky cliff at the end of the beach. She walked into the shallow water and was shocked by how cold it was.

Jess wandered down the beach, swinging her bag, aware that she was walking along the edge of the continent. She felt as small as a grain of sand. It was one of her favorite feelings. Montana's landscape made her feel this way, too. At Flathead Lake, where she'd spent the past summer, it was probably snowing by now. No, thanks. She'd grown up in Detroit, where winters were long and snowy, the Great Lakes wind cutting like an icy blade.

Turning to face the water, Jess spotted two ships – dim shapes on the horizon, which was a blurry mix of pewter sky and fog. She walked the wide, long beach, emptying her mind, and when her legs got tired she sat on the sand near some suntanned hippies. The guy wore a lopsided Navy blue beret, loose marijuana-leaf print pants, and a sweatshirt that said "Drop acid, not bombs." He sat on a Mexican blanket next to some bongo drums. The three women with him sat on the sand, long skirts tucked up around their brown legs. Jess wondered if they lived on the beach, and how they got so tan in the thick fog.

"Peace," the guy said.

"Peace to you." Jess noticed that his long, black mustache curled into his mouth.

"Groovy day," he offered.

"Not really."

"Having a bumner?"

"Yep."

He came over and sat next to Jess, looking into her eyes. His long hair was almost black and he smelled like Patchouli oil and something else she couldn't identify. "What's happening?" he asked. One of the women joined them, fanning her India print Maxi skirt on the sand around herself.

"I got ripped off."

"Shit."

"I just got here yesterday."

"That sucks," the woman said, twirling her stringy brown hair around her finger.

"It really does." Jess sighed. For all she knew, they could have been the ones who stole her stuff.

"Seth." The woman nudged his shoulder.

He took a baggie from his pants pocket, broke a brownie in half, and handed it to her. "This'll help, luv."

"Thanks." Jess was game. The brownie tasted like cardboard.

"You'll love San Francisco, though," the woman was saying. "This is where it's at..."

"It's the best." Seth picked up the bongos. "In the summer I live in a hollowed-out redwood, in Marin." He smoothed his mustache and began drumming. A long-haired guy walking down the beach smiled at them, dancing to the beat.

"Most of the time we live near here," the woman said.

Jess stared at patches of sunshine opening up over the water. "Good, the fog is burning off."

"It usually does," the woman said, "depending on the time of year. This is the rainy season."

"Ah."

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"I'm April," she said.

"Jessie."

"See how fingers of mist swirl around the edges of the fog?" April asked, pointing at the sunny spots over the sea.

"Yeah."

"I dig the mist, but the fog kinda bums me out."

Jess nodded. She'd never given much thought to the difference between mist and fog.

"It's like the fog is a huge glob of mud blocking out the sun," April continued. "But mist is wispy, and golden."

"Fog is thick and dark," Jess agreed, "but you can see through the mist."

"Right on."

The other women, in low-slung floral skirts and cropped T-shirts that exposed their midriffs, picked pink flowers near the seawall and wove them into their waist-length hair.

"What kind of flowers are those?" To Jess, wildflowers blooming in November were weird.

"Ice plant."

"I've never seen it before."

"Where you from?"

"Detroit."

April nodded. "So, were you mugged?"

"No, they broke into my Bug." Jess put her head in her hands.

"They're just things," April said gently.

"I know. But... They took my camera bag, which had negatives and undeveloped film in it. Things I can't replace."

"Gotta let it go."

"I know."

"Can't let them win. Fuck them and their bad vibes."

The other two women brought flowers over, nodding to the bongo beat, their glass-bead necklaces bouncing between their full breasts.

"This is May, and this is June."

"I'm Jess. Wait. April, May, and June?"

"Yes!" They collapsed into giggle fits.

"Ridiculous!" one wheezed.

Jess laughed, too, getting off from the brownie.

May moved behind her, took out her hair tie, and combed through Jessie's almost-black hair with her fingers. "Pretty."

"Thanks." She could feel the dope working as her shoulder muscles relaxed.

"Are you, like, Indian?" May asked.

Jess shook her head. "Dark Irish."

The other women swayed to Seth's bongo rhythms as May braided Jessie's hair, weaving the flowers into it. Jess closed her eyes. She loved having her hair played with.

May tied it off. "There, you're a flower child."

"Thanks." Jessie grinned. "What's that scent you're wearing?"

"Cedar oil," April replied.

"I love it."

The women kept laughing.

"What's funny?" Jess hated to miss a joke.

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“Shrooms!” One of them managed. The three of them giggled so hard they coughed. “We ate ‘em all!”

Seth laughed as he drummed. May and June stood, tied their shirts up under their breasts, pulled their skirts down so they were hugging their hips, and danced around the beach. May played little cymbals she wore on her fingers, the curves of her bronze belly glowing in the sunshine. The women dipped and swayed in a Middle Eastern style, twitching their hips to the beat. June twirled, her arms out. She stopped and arched back, rolling her shoulders and making her coffee-colored belly ripple. As she danced, she wrapped a fringed, plum-colored scarf around her hips, her beads clicking.

“Come on!” May called.

Jess and April joined them. Meanwhile, a few people gathered to watch. Jess got into the drumbeat and did her own thing as the ocean waves whooshed.

“You’re a good dancer, chica!” May told her.

“Thanks! So are you.”

“Awww.”

“Maybe you guys can teach me how to do that,” Jess said.

“It’s belly dancing!” April smiled. “June’s the teacher.”

June nodded and arched way back again, her gorgeous belly rippling more this time.

After a while, Seth slowed his drumming. They looked at him. “We gotta go,” he said.

June groaned.

“It’s our turn to cook at the commune.”

Jessie’s legs were tired anyway. “Commune?” She sank onto the sand.

“Yeah, it’s cool.”

May dropped her finger cymbals into a fringed leather pouch. "We share everything!"

"Feeling better, Jess?" Seth grinned at her.

"You bet!" She laughed. "Thanks."

"De nada," he answered.

Jess wondered what that meant.

"Toodles!" April called. The other women waved good-bye as they started toward the seawall.

Jess smiled and waved. What a different world it was out here when the sun was shining. Shivering, she realized she was cold. She walked to the Cliff House café and warmed up with hot coffee and creamy potato soup, staring out the window at the gleaming expanse of the Pacific. A gray strip of fog lurked on the horizon.

As Jess walked back down the sand, a brisk breeze picked up and the beach turned amber in the late sun. It was cooling down. Near Judah, where a streetcar sat idle, drummers sat in a circle around a bonfire. Climbing the stairs to the seawall, Jess moved to the rhythm. What was with all the bongos here?

She sat on a bench facing the ocean, her upper right arm burning again. Shit! Jess rubbed her neck, wondering what the hell was wrong with her. Since the wreck two months ago, she'd noticed this prickling feeling. It came and went, sometimes in her hands and other times in her arms. Stretching her neck and shoulders, she remembered the note Twisty had sent from jail, begging her to come to North Carolina. *The doctor thinks the judge should send me to treatment because of the drugs*, he'd written. *I don't give a shit. I couldn't even kill myself if I wanted to, now*. She'd written back once, telling him she wouldn't be coming. *I can't help you*, she'd written. *I can't take any more of your lies. They hurt too much*. A familiar pang of guilt rushed through her and she shrugged it off. Why the hell did she feel guilty, for God's sake? Moving on was best, for both of them.

The sun went behind a patch of fog and Jess shivered. This formidable ocean was worlds apart from the calm, sunny sea she'd enjoyed last winter in Key West

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with Donna and Twisty and her other friends. That seemed like long ago, so much had happened since.

A new ocean, a new beginning. Jess was counting on it.

* * *

"I feel bad," Donna said as they lurched down Market Street in an electric Muni trolleybus. "I should have helped you bring your stuff in when you got here."

"No way, totally my fault." Jess peered out her window at the bustling street lined with stores, hotels, and theaters. Earlier it had rained, but now the sun was out. The city looked fresh and clean. They were on a whirlwind bus-and-cable-car tour of San Francisco, to get Jess oriented.

"Our neighborhood is funky," Donna was saying. "That's why the low rent."

"Right. Wow, what's that?" Jess pointed at a domed structure behind a plaza. It looked like a capitol building.

"Civic Center. City Hall. The civic center has the opera house and the main library."

Jess smiled to herself, amazed by how much her friend knew about things. A regular walking encyclopedia, Donna had taught her about the history of Key West when they lived there. They got off the bus and hustled across Market to the cable car that said "Fisherman's Wharf," hopping on as it was leaving. Donna sat on a wooden outside bench and Jess stood, hanging on. She could see everything and feel the cool breeze.

"I smell coffee," Jess said, handing the conductor her bus transfer.

"It's the Hills Brothers factory." Donna pointed toward the Bay Bridge.

Powell Street pulsed with life, musicians playing on each corner. There were more bongos. Jess stared up at the buildings around Union Square. A limousine pulled up in front of a fancy hotel as people hurried down the sidewalks, their faces a variety of colors and ethnicities. Some men wearing turbans entered the hotel;

across the street, Chinese women in embroidered silk jackets walked across Union Square under palm trees; an elderly woman with a black scarf tied over her hair was feeding clouds of pigeons.

“Ding, DING, ding!” The gripman rang the bell to warn motorists that he was coming. Tall and thin, with a goatee and rust-colored beret, he looked like a ’50s beatnik. Children on the sidewalk waved to him and he waved back, grinning.

“Is that Chinese food I smell?” Jess asked, detecting ginger.

“Probably. Chinatown is right down there.” Donna pointed to the right. “Walking on Grant is amazing. In a block, you go from Chinatown to North Beach, the Italian neighborhood.”

“It sure is compact.”

Donna nodded. “Seven miles by seven miles.”

“That’s small, right?”

Her friend nodded again. “It can’t expand because it’s surrounded by water.”

The crowd on the cable car thinned and Jess grabbed the seat next to Donna. At one intersection, she caught a gorgeous view of the city, the bay, the Bay Bridge, and low-lying ridges to the east. “Wow,” she murmured.

“I know,” Donna said.

They climbed a hill where the only flat places for the cable car to stop were in the middle of the intersections. The motorists had to wait, but no one seemed to mind. On top, the view to the north was a dramatic sweep of the cobalt bay, piers, waterfront buildings, cargo ships, ferries, sailboats, a fishing boat marina, a rocky island, and the rounded mountains beyond.

“That’s Alcatraz, straight ahead,” Donna said.

Jess grabbed the nearest pole as the car tipped over the edge and began its steep descent. She smelled something burning as the gripman controlled their speed. “Is that smell normal?”

"Yeah, the brakes are wood. They get hot and scorch."

"Wow."

"Let's get something to eat at the wharf."

"Great."

"I want to buy food to give to the panhandlers."

"Panhandlers?"

"Yeah, I give 'em food. That way they eat instead of getting drunk, or worse. Sometimes it pisses 'em off."

Donna was right: Fisherman's Wharf had plenty of panhandlers. There were also tons of street performers – jugglers, mimes, musicians. It was a Saturday and the sidewalks were crowded with sightseers, so they decided not to hang around. As they walked to Alioto's for chowder in sourdough bread bowls, Donna quickly gave away all the bananas she'd purchased. The panhandlers seemed to appreciate getting food. Jess wondered where they went at night, or when it rained.

They caught the next cable car headed back downtown. This time they transferred to the California Street car, which dove down an even steeper hill and into a canyon between the lofty skyscrapers of the Financial District. The Bay Bridge was at the foot of the street.

Jess thought the California car's mulatto gripman might be the best-looking man she'd ever seen. He had exotic, jade-colored lion eyes and a brown Afro with red streaks running through it. He also had style, ringing his bell in a unique rhythm. She watched him play it as they approached an intersection.

"They have bell ringing contests," Donna said.

"Really?"

"Yep."

Jess turned again in her seat. "Are you a bell ringing champ?" she asked him.

WEBS IN THE MIST

"Not yet," he replied in a bass voice, winking at her.

Donna took a newspaper clipping from her bag. "Two moving sales on Fulton, a block apart," she said. "We can find some things for your room."

"Sounds good." Jess glanced at the gripman just as he turned his head toward her, smiling. They locked eyes and his smile widened. She looked away, embarrassed that he'd caught her looking.

CHAPTER 4

Twisty

Carl was already speed-walking in the prison yard. The icy wind sliced through Twisty's jacket, but it was still a relief to be outdoors. Carl didn't say anything as he caught up with him, and he wondered why the hell he liked this whacked, orange-haired dude. Then again, why not?

The barrel-chested guy was built like a goddam beer keg. How anyone could keep his weight up in this shithole was beyond Twisty. Carl was solid, muscular – the type Twisty didn't want to tangle with. In here for assault and dealing hashish, Carl could be scary. But with Twisty he was mellow. Both of them were from Asheville, so they had shit to talk about – if they felt like talking. Which apparently Carl didn't today. When he did talk, Twisty had trouble hearing his low voice. He spoke too fast, too, tripping over his words. Ma would have called him "marble-mouth." Carl was weird, but interesting. Looking at him, you'd never expect that soft, mumbling voice. And he never cussed. Never. The dude was brainy in a scientific way and he seemed honest. Twisty glanced at his freckles and thick red hair. Carl was the hairiest guy he'd ever seen.

"I'm getting out, man."

"No shit?" Twisty wondered if he'd heard him right. "When?"

"Couple months."

"Lucky bastard."

Carl shrugged his beefy shoulders. "I just wanna be far from here," he said.

"I hear ya," Twisty said, his mind sprinting. What if he paid Carl to find Jess? Out west was far from here. Could Ma get his money for him? Twisty chewed on the notion.

Earlier today he'd gotten more letters back. Return to Sender. And still no word from Jess. It was freakin' him out. What the fuck? Did she think he would just let her disappear?