

1

MISSING: A teenaged girl with lanky, blonde hair and a sunburst tattoo on her cheek. The holographic posters, brighter than day itself, lit up the air on every block of Main Street. They were the first thing Rags Goldner noticed as she and her partner, Flint Sten, arrived in Canary.

The girl's name was Effie and she was sixteen.

Effie's pixelated image beamed down at Rags like a celebrity unaware that her fifteen minutes of fame were up.

Rags refused to give a damn about the missing girl who, after all, she didn't know. Nor did she know much about the town, Canary, where the driverless ShareCar she and Flint had leased for their move had brought them. But missing kids make news, and as Canary's newly imported one-and-only newspaper editor, Rags knew she'd be expected to do something about it. Which meant she wouldn't control the news hole on day one. Which meant all kinds of people would come at her to do one thing or another.

Rags hadn't been in town five minutes and already she could tell things were going to get complicated—and complicated was the very thing she and Flint were trying to get away from. *Damn all the politicians and peacekeepers and their gatekeeping bullshit*, she thought.

As the car made a final turn toward its programmed destination, Rags's twitch flared up: the muscles in her upper left cheek and the outer corner of her left eye performed an uncontrolled little dance. "Ah, crap," she said. "Turning Main Street into Times Square won't help them find the girl. What a waste. And all that light pollution." She stretched her face, willing the twitch to stop.

Flint held up his dataphone and aimed it at one of the digital

posters as they cruised by. The static image of Effie sprang into augmented-reality motion: she turned her head, blinked, and laughed.

“Stop doing that, Flint,” Rags said. “Just don’t.” *No way that girl, out there somewhere, is smiling.*

“Don’t get spun up so fast.” Flint looked over at her for the first time in hours. Their connection was like a faulty wire, fritzing on and off. “Give yourself some room to ramp up,” he said, putting his hand on top of her head in a familiar gesture: simmer down. It helped. The twitching nearly stopped. “We haven’t even come to a full stop yet. Pace yourself.”

“Well, look,” Rags said. “They’ve plastered her face everywhere. Probably been like that for weeks.”

“You think the story about this girl has gone cold, right?” Flint said. “What do you call that?”

“Beat up. I’m guessing the story’s beat up. The first thing I’m going to hear is that they want me to flog it some more. Remind me, why are we doing this?”

“Let’s not,” Flint said, looking back down at his screen. “Anyway, it was your idea.”

As the ShareCar rolled noiselessly down Main Street, Rags saw just one person hanging around the deserted downtown: a woman standing on a corner who appeared to be waiting. For what? Rags wondered. As they slowly passed by, Rags caught a dead look in the woman’s eyes. A block further on, Rags watched a man and a woman, both in shabby coats, as they appeared to argue, their faces contorted with anger. The man handed the woman a bicycle pump. She handed him in return a loaf of bread. *What kind of town is this?*

The ShareCar parked curbside at 326 Main Street. For well over a century, the little brick building, sandwiched between other little brick buildings, had housed the *Canary Courant*. A chatty little newspaper, the *Courant*, as Rags knew from her research, printed anything and everything within the bounds of what people once called ‘common decency’ about the town of Canary, a tiny hamlet in the northwestern corner of Maryland,

not far from the Pennsylvania border. The kind of town that flew under the radar for anyone who did not live there.

The fact that the *Canary Courant* was still a going concern in 2030 was astounding, even mysterious, and a key reason that Rags was here. Though perhaps not the only reason. The paper's survival was even more of a puzzle when one considered that the town itself, which had been shriveling for decades, was now skeletal. The pandemic, which everybody called 'The Big One,' had raged for nearly five years. It hollowed out an already hollowed out place, killing off over two-thirds of the elderly population living out their days in Canary. Those folks never knew what hit them—their dreams of slipping into gracious idleness on their front-porch rockers, eating breakfast on the cheap at the town diner, destroyed in an agony of fever and blood.

On Canary's rural outskirts, on their way into town, Rags had seen the crematorium, a hulking cinderblock rectangle erected for one single purpose: to incinerate the infected dead into piles of decontaminated black ash. She was sure Flint missed it—though it was very hard to miss, rising up from a flat expanse of undeveloped land—just as he'd missed seeing Effie until she pointed it out. *Like I'm his goddamn tour guide.*

Now, nearly two years after 'The Big One' had been officially declared over, Rags suspected that Canary's survivors were like a mouth full of missing teeth—families broken by a plague that took not merely the elderly but also children and their parents with a seemingly vicious and terrifyingly random determination. With an emphasis on *random*. Survivors everywhere were known as "Luckies," though Rags only ever used that term in its most ironic sense.

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