

ELEVEN

(Downward Mobility)

Most of the others didn't seem to give a shit how people looked at them, but even after three years on the street, Gypsy still hated begging coins from folks who pretended not to see him even as they dropped change into his hand. It was hard to say which humiliated him most; the vacant stares, the guilty glances, or the outright sneers, not that Gypsy ever let it show, of course. He'd learned that lesson the hard way within days of leaving home. Let it show, and the cash cows walked right past you, while your fellow panhandlers turned on fear exposed like sharks came to blood in the water.

He had imagined none of this on the day he'd fled his parents' house to find 'some more meaningful life,' but there was no going back now. He'd never been able to keep a job for long. Too much bullshit, too little patience. So, much as he hated sitting against this building, sticking out his hand as strangers looked away, the need to eat and feed his dog had taught him to smile at every one of them like they were long lost lovers, offering cheerful little compliments to those who gave, and to those who didn't – long as they didn't swear at him, or spit, or kick.

Then again, there were a few on any street who'd never learned to look away at all. Easy marks. You could spot 'em blocks away, and Berkeley seemed to have more of them than any city Gypsy'd lingered in so far. He watched one of them get off a bus down on the corner. Young guy, about his own age, arms around a box of something. Normally that would have knocked him right off Gypsy's radar. Hands full was the best excuse around to pass you by, but everything about this guy said, 'easy money.' Gypsy'd never seen a face so full of vulnerability, or body language that screamed, '*Please don't ask. I'll have to help you,*' more loudly. No charming smile for this one, though. This guy was a bleeder. Suffering was what made him tilt. Gypsy could tell. Christ! This guy wore so much on his face, he might as well be naked!

When the guy was close enough, Gypsy looked up wearily, and said, "Hey, bud. Any chance you'd help my dog n' me get a bite to eat?"

The guy turned uncomfortably toward him, not quite meeting Gypsy's eyes, then, sure enough, set down his box, pulled a surprising wad of change out of his pocket, and

dropped it all into Gypsy's hand. *Bonanza!* Gypsy thought gleefully. Had to be five dollars there, maybe more! To his surprise, the guy checked his other pocket too, and gave Gypsy what was there as well.

"Good lookin' dog," the guy said, suddenly meeting Gypsy's eyes, and actually smiling, if a little wanly.

"Hey, thanks!" Gypsy said, forgetting not to smile as he stashed the loot inside his jacket. There'd be meal tickets and dog food for a couple days in this chunk of change.

"His name's Shadow."

"Suits him," said the guy, turning his attention back to Gypsy's black lab.

"He's friendly.," Gypsy said. "You can pet him if you want."

The guy reached out and ruffled Shadow's head.

"I'm Gypsy," Gypsy said, reaching out to shake hands before realizing how grimy his had gotten from hours of sitting on the sidewalk.

"Joby," said the other guy, grabbing Gypsy's hand without hesitation. "Well, you guys hang in there," he offered, picking up his box of stuff, and turning to go.

"You too," said Gypsy. "Hey, thanks again, man. God bless you, man. I mean it."

Joby looked back long enough to nod and smile, then turned again to go his way, but a portly man scowling at Joby from the entrance of a convenience store said, "It's stupid to encourage them, you know."

"Pardon me?" Gypsy heard Joby say, turning to face the man.

"Thanks to people like you," the man complained, "more of those bums clutter the sidewalk outside my shop here everyday. I don't much appreciate it."

"You wouldn't. You're not hungry," Joby replied, and made to walk on.

"You think he'll spend that money on food?" the shopkeeper sneered. "You just bought that bum a beer, or a joint, more likely. Don't you get it?"

Instantly pissed, Gypsy stood up intending to go set this asshole straight, but before he'd taken three steps, Joby said angrily, "I'm not here to manage everybody else's life. What he does with that change is his responsibility. My responsibility is not to join the obscene surplus of mean-spirited tightwads ruining this whole planet!"

Whoa! Gypsy thought, coming to a halt. This was different.

“I’m not the one who’s ruining things!” the shopkeeper snapped. “My taxes pay for the sidewalk these bums sit around on all day. *I’m* productive! *I* have a *job*.”

“Lucky you,” Joby growled, and turned again to leave.

“How do you know they’re even really poor?” the shopkeeper sneered at his retreating back. “Half of them just dress up in rags and bum fortunes in spare change here every day. You must be new to Berkeley, young man, or you’d know that. Everyone else does.” He turned away and muttered scornfully, “You’re so gullible,” then disappeared into the recesses of his shop.

“Least *I* don’t believe the homeless are all *rich*,” Joby grumbled as he left.

After three years on the street, Gypsy hadn’t thought anything could still surprise him. Calling Shadow to his side, he started after Joby. “Hey, man!” he called. “Wait up!”

Joby turned around, looking tired, and a little impatient.

“Man, that was awesome!” Gypsy grinned as he caught up to Joby. “Thanks, dude! *Nobody* ever sticks up for us like that. *Nobody*.”

“That would be me,” Joby shrugged. “Nobody.”

Thinking maybe this guy wasn’t as easily read as he’d thought, Gypsy asked, “Why’d you do it, anyway? You don’t even know me.”

“You mean, tell that dickhead off?” Joby shrugged. “Wasn’t hard. Hell, I’ve been getting mad at dickheads all my life. One of the few things I do really well, it seems.”

“Why are you so down on yourself?” Gypsy asked.

“I’ve got a ways to walk still, and this is getting kind of heavy,” Joby said, nodding at the box he carried. “I should get going.” He turned and started up the street.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” Gypsy said. “I didn’ mean to dis you, man. Here, I’ll carry that for you.” He caught up to Joby again and reached to take the box.

“That’s okay,” Joby said. “I can manage.”

“You gave me some decent change back there,” Gypsy pressed. “Whatever that ass-wipe thinks, I got no problem workin’ for my daily bread.”

Joby stopped again, and turned to Gypsy with a bleak expression.

“My big nose gets me into all kinds of trouble,” Gypsy pled before Joby could speak. “But I’ll be honest; you got me pretty curious. I just wanna know why you been so cool to me when mostly people just wish I was gone.”

This had the surprising effect of making Joby look ... not guilty, exactly, but something close to it.

“You gonna let me carry that?” Gypsy pressed.

“Sure. Why not?” Joby sighed, handing him the box. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Gypsy said. The box had no top, so he figured it was okay to look. There were some pens, a coffee cup, a half-empty bottle of mouthwash, a soft pack of CDs, a few bottles of lemon iced tea and several pieces of fruit, three fantasy novels, and a mechanical monkey on a tricycle. “What is all this anyway?” he asked. “You movin’ or somethin’?”

Joby sighed again as they began to walk, and said, “It’s stuff from work. I just lost my third job in six months.”

“No way!” Gypsy said.

“Way,” Joby replied humorlessly. “At this rate, I’ll be sitting outside that asshole’s shop myself within a month.”

Gypsy stopped walking, utterly at a loss.

“Why the hell’d you give me all that change then?” Gypsy asked. “Ain’t you gonna need it?”

Joby shrugged. “I’ll go broke an hour sooner now. Doesn’t matter much to me. ‘Matter to you?”

“A lot,” Gypsy said, realizing that after all these pointless years, he’d finally stumbled into someone he might actually want to know.

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