

Calvin Pompeii did not look like Calvin Pompeii, the man usually dressed in clothing that cost hundreds of dollars. He looked at himself in his rearview mirror; the Raiders bandana and sunglasses looked good; the Warriors jersey and blue jeans would complete his anonymity. He looked like any of the 50 dozen black males that hung out on Oakland street corners.

Crank poked his head in the window of the SUV. "Should I ask where you are going this time?"

"Should I ask if you want a clip full of nine millimeter unloaded into your gut?"

"I get it CP. You're the boss. But if something should happen to you, ain't nobody to fill your shoes. I know you don't answer to me, but ask yourself if this road trip is worth the risk."

"You right," Calvin said slamming the SUV into drive, "I don't answer to you."

He pulled the SUV out of the underground parking garage and headed up Market to catch the freeway to the Bay Bridge. Once across the bridge, he pulled on to the Nimitz Freeway, exiting and parking at Lake Merritt. It was an easy walk from there to Franklin, Jefferson, MLK and any number of other streets where homeless people could be found en masse.

Calvin checked his two pockets- one had his 9mm with a full magazine of semi-jacketed hollow-points, the other had a roll of \$20 bills totaling two thousand dollars. His first stop was at a homeless shelter near Franklin and 15th. He was looking for a particular someone as he stepped inside and peeled off two twenties.

"Can I help you?" asked the overweight woman at the desk.

"Lookin for a friend," Calvin replied. "You got a cat here that goes by Greasy?"

An old man with one and a half arms turned quickly and shambled up to him. "Prince Pimp!"

"Hey old timer." Calvin turned to the lady at the desk. "Zit OK if he steps out for a bit?"

"As long as he stays in my view."

"Well what can he have?"

"What?"

"Like if I brought him something. A gift. What can he have?" Calvin asked.

"Oh, tobacco is ok, no drugs or alcohol."

"Cash?"

"Cash is OK as long as he doesn't buy drugs or alcohol. It'll get him kicked out."

Calvin leaned in across the desk. "Thanks baby."

The two men stepped out to the sidewalk, staying in the view of the matronly woman. Calvin handed the \$40 to his disabled friend. "What's the word Greaser? And don't call me Pimp in front of admin, you dig?"

"Oh they don't pay attention CP. Most of the brothers in here call each other nigga or pimp or slumdog or something like that. Man, thanks for the Jacksons. I needed it."

"So what chu got?"

"Nothing like a word about 5-0 or anything. But I got a run on a new place for the teens to bed down. Some church is running a youth shelter down at Broadway and 9th where they shut down the old brewery. Lotta beds, lotta teen traffic in and out. Park a van down there, you catch some."

"You're always good for something Greaser. Who else is around?"

"No too many of your daddy's old crew around. Mallard died in his sleep a couple of months ago, Tin Can is kind of in and out, he keeps thinking he wants religion, and Eight Ball just up and left. Ain't nobody seen him for months."

Calvin peeled off another \$20 bill and handed it to the older man. "For old times."

"Thanks CP. You gonna do a walk around?"

"For a while anyway. It's been a while since I been through. Be good Greasy."

Calvin turned and headed up Franklin toward the 19th Street Bay Area Rapid Transit station. He found two men huddled under a tree with a sleeping bag across their laps. They were hiding something, it was too warm to be covered up. Calvin found out it was three bottles of wine. They didn't want to have to share. He talked to the pair for a few minutes before handing each of them a \$20 bill. He stood up to walk away, suddenly aware that he was being followed.

He walked quickly up Broadway before ducking in behind the Paramount Theater. The man following stumbled into Calvin's view. The man was carrying a knife. Calvin already had his gun out.

"Say Jim Bowie, what chu gonna do with that little thing there? Butter some toast?"

The man turned and saw Calvin's pistol, dropping the knife on the ground. "Man I wasn't gonna do nothing. I thought you was someone else man, I swear."

"Well alright. Pick up your little toy and get outta here. And next time you better think twice before you bring a toothpick to a gunfight."

"Yes, sir," the man said scrambling away. "I'm sorry."

Calvin waited for the man to fade from view, continuing on foot up Broadway.

Calvin walked the Oakland streets for nearly two hours, randomly handing out \$20 bills to whomever he felt deserved one, when he came across something he very rarely saw: a young girl, on the streets, on her own.

"Crank, what do you know when you see a girl on the street? Answer she's running from the last person she was just with- parents, boyfriend, whatever. Or she's a cop. On the street people trade for what they want or need, and those young girls always got something to trade that someone wants. Look out in the street: you see young guys, old guys, old women, but no young girls by themselves. See my point? They're worth something. They are, or maybe have, a commodity."

The girl sat by herself huddled against the side of a building. She looked cold, despite the weather, and had a busted lip. Either she had been hit in the face, or she was a part of a police operation.

"Wha's up?" Calvin said carefully as he approached.

The girl did not respond.

"You in some kind of trouble?"

Again, she failed to respond.

"I can help you. Here." Calvin said dropping a \$20 into her lap.

"I'm not for sale," the girl responded.

"I'm not buying." He dropped another \$20 into her lap, and the girl looked up to engage him.

"So what's the deal?"

"No deal. The \$40 is yours. You look like you needed it. You need to get somewhere safe?"

"You sure like to butt your nose in, don't you?"

"I been on the streets," Calvin lied. "I've been hungry and I been cold, and I been running sometimes. Now I'm in a position where I can help people, so I do." He peeled off a third \$20 and handed it to her. She took it.

"So how do I know you're not a cop?" she asked.

Calvin laughed. "I was going to say the same thing."

"Why would me being a cop bother you?"

"It wouldn't. I just don't want to waste my time if you're out here on a stake out or a string operation."

"With this?" she asked pointing at her lip.

"People put on all kinds of masks to get done what they need to do." Calvin could tell she was loosening up.

"I'm Crystal. My mom named me that because of her worship for Meth."

"Sorry to hear that. Can I sit down?"

"I guess."

"Is \$60 enough to get you where you need to go?"

"I don't know."

"Know where you're going?" Calvin asked.

"No."

"Want to tell me why you're going?"

"Everything was cool with my boyfriend. We been together 8 months, until I told him I wanted to get pregnant. He went ballistic, and started throwing things."

"And then he hit you."

Crystal nodded.

"I seen it before."

"So now what?"

"I maybe can go back to my mom's. She kicked me out when I wanted to live with Monty, but maybe she will let me come back."

"Where's that?"

Crystal glared at the stranger, Calvin.

"I know. You don't know me. So why should I be trusted. Tell you what."

He reached into his pocket and removed the 9mm, being careful to slide the magazine out of the handle and leave it in his pocket. Crystal didn't see him.

"Don't flash this around," he said handing her the pistol.

She jumped at the sight of it.

"It's OK, I keep this on me for protection. Now you are the one in the driver's seat. Keep this on you while we are talking and you'll know you can be safe."

"Really?"

He turned the barrel around to face him, handing her the butt of the gun. He knew she wasn't familiar with guns by the way she held it. "You can't keep it permanently, but you can have it as long as we are talking and stuff."

Crystal's shoulders softened. The ploy had worked. She didn't even check to see if it was loaded. "I don't think he can find me here. I hitchhiked from San Pablo, but I jumped out of the car at a stop light here in Oakland when my ride started getting touchy feely. Mom's in Fremont. Monty knows where that is. If my mom takes me back in and he shows up there, all hell's gonna break lose. But I don't know what else to do."

“Well I can give you a ride into Fremont, if you want. You can keep my pistol til we get there. I have an SUV parked a little ways away.”

Crystal gave him a blank look.

“You can keep my pistol til we get there.”

“Alright.”

“Good. I know this is the long way around, but I have to go by a place in the City first to drop some stuff off. You can wait in the truck if you don’t want to be seen. Then we’ll swing back around and head over to Fremont.”

“That’s a long ride.”

“You got somewhere else to be?”

Crystal laughed. “No. Hey have you got a cell phone so I can call my mom?”

“I do, but the battery’s dead. I forgot to put it on the charger last night.” He was glad he kept his phone on silent and blocked, but he still didn’t need it ringing, and didn’t need her using it. “I got some change for a payphone.”

“Nah, it wouldn’t matter anyway. She’s gonna be mad if I call, or if I don’t.”

They walked half a mile and Calvin spoke up. “There’s my truck.”

“Wow,” said Crystal, “that’s unconscious!”

“It is nice isn’t it?” He opened the door to let her in. The smell of the leather upholstery warmed by the sunlight made for a comforting aroma.

“What do you do for work?” Crystal asked.

“I’m self employed, in shipping.”

“Must be good business to afford this thing.”

“I guess.” Calvin reached for the stereo. “You like O.D.B.?”

“Who doesn’t?”

They both belted in, and Calvin put the SUV in drive heading for San Francisco. Crystal never knew that she wasn’t going to see her mom or boyfriend or the United States ever again.