

# THE POTRERO COMPLEX by Amy L. Bernstein

## EXCERPT

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.

And yet, even in a near ghost town like Canary, in a still-brittle economy, in a world where print media was a rare novelty, the ink-on-paper edition of the *Canary Courant* lived on, as quirky and creaky as Miss Havisham in the attic, each folded issue tossed at sunrise every Wednesday and every other Sunday into doorways and onto walkways by a young father and son living on gig income.

Rags deliberately suppressed her own journalistic instincts when it came to figuring out how this newspaper managed to keep going years past its natural expiration date. Turning a blind eye to its improbable existence was both expedient and convenient for her. She knew that income from print ads—about as old-fashioned as you could get—

was the sole reason the paper was able to keep going. It surely wasn't due to subscription revenue. But she didn't know why anyone would buy print ads in a tiny newspaper serving a dying community in a digital world. There'd be time, she figured, to get to the bottom of that.

The main thing was that this improbable job as the *Canary Courant's* editor came her way at a time when she and Flint were looking for an escape hatch that would take them away from the exhausting hysteria and suffocating autocracy that made post-pandemic, big-city living unbearable in countless ways. They came to Canary in search of a simpler life—though Rags, if pressed, could not readily have defined what that would look like. *Freedom from fear? Freedom to forget?* She kept these notions to herself because she did not think Flint would admit to any of it—let alone acknowledge the possibility.

Rags had worried before they arrived that an out-of-the-way place like Canary might have borne an influx of people seeking—or imagining—that this place would prove to be some kind of oasis. But from the little she'd seen so far, there was nothing oasis-like about this town. The garish and intrusive billboards of the missing Effie radiated an anxious *thrum*, nothing like a small-town welcome.

Rags and Flint left the ShareCar with programmed instructions to continue on and wait for them at the house they were renting a few blocks from Canary's minuscule town center. The entire move, including Rags's new job, had been planned remotely, so this was their first time actually in Canary. In the grand scheme of things, given the terrifying and unpredictable upheavals they'd already lived through, moving hundreds of miles away to a new place sight unseen didn't feel at all risky.

From the outside, the newspaper office mimicked the virtual reality images Rags had already seen online. A plate-glass window with old-fashioned gold lettering rimmed in black spelled out *Canary Courant. Since 1910*. Rags doubted there was anything very "current" about it; the very name advertised its status as a relic with a pretentious echo of French. Rags wondered who else knew that *courant* in French had more than one meaning— not just "current" but also "ordinary." Someone must have had the lettering on the window repainted many times over the years—and who even knew how to do that sort of thing, anymore?—but this was a line item Rags wasn't going to worry about. She was here on purpose yet still felt faintly ridiculous about the whole thing.

All this ye-oldy feel-good yester-year crap, she thought. Some kind of amusement park for blinkered folks. A post-apocalyptic Disneyworld? Or maybe Westworld—a place where you could trick yourself into relaxing, just for a moment.

Yet here she was, along with her IT-guru partner Flint, a software developer steeped in AI arcana, who was definitely not the ye-oldy type. Fitting in, for both of them, was beside the point. Rags figured they'd both settle for some kind of new equilibrium. She waved her dataphone in front of the digi-lock and the heavy front door swung open. The newspaper office was a step up from the threshold because, Rags learned later, the floor had been reinforced

a century ago to support the heavy metal printing presses that used to take up a third of the space with their loud, clackety racket.

As Rags entered the square-shaped newsroom, the old floor creaking, a woman likely more than twice Rags's age—a surprise in and of itself, in this day and age—stood up quickly from a battered wooden desk, her chair scraping against the floor. Rags knew only her first name, Merry. She was tall with broad shoulders, like a swimmer, dressed in loose-fitting wrinkled clothes, her hair silver-gray and so long it touched her buttocks.

“You're here,” Merry said with a slightly accusatory edge that did not escape Rag's notice, as though she'd been doing something she shouldn't.

“Yup,” Rags said as she scanned the room. She made a quick mental list of all the things she intended to change. Rags hated clutter the way healthy people hate cancer: it was offensive, invasive, and should be eliminated quickly and surgically. The heavy furniture would have to go, and the old-fashioned filing cabinets, and the shelf of tacky journalism awards—the fake-gold winged angels, the stupid quill pens mounted on blocks of glass. Rags guessed that most if not all of the people who'd won those awards were long dead, one way or another. She'd call someone as soon as possible to haul all this crap away. The place looked like a mausoleum, for chrissakes. And that told her all she needed to know about Merry, who radiated the territorial energy of a fox guarding its cubs.

“I've got tomorrow's front page made up on screen,” Merry said, standing rigidly by her desk. “I suppose you want to see it.” Rags saw Flint make a tiny, familiar gesture: flicking on his ear discs (he'd insisted on upgrading from old-school earbuds), so he could drown out the voices around him and listen to the soundtrack of his choice. With this personal sound cushion enveloping him, Flint glided around the room like a restless ghost, ignoring the two women, fingering every piece of tech there was, and there wasn't much. Rags turned her attention to Merry—watching her watching Flint, to see how much this invasion of Merry's claimed space unsettled her. Rags didn't bother to introduce them, as Flint wasn't likely to visit the newsroom again.

“Is it all about the missing girl?” Rags asked.

“Is there another big story in town I've missed?” Merry asked, her blue-gray eyes staring icily at Rags. “Because if so, be my guest. You've got two whole hours until we send the file to the printers.” Merry stepped away from her desk, as if inviting Rags to step in. Rags read the gesture as it was intended: *What the f\*\*k do you know?*

Well, this wasn't going to be pretty. In that moment, Rags had to admit to herself that while she thought she longed to live in a place where she could pursue small stories of no consequence, instead of big ones that traded in life and death, she was never going to check her personality at the door. She wouldn't look for trouble, but she wouldn't back away from a fight, either, especially if she knew going into it that she had the upper hand. She was editor-in-chief, after all, not Merry—a holdover from a previous regime with an ill-defined job, as far as Rags knew.

Rags sat down at a battered desk nearly identical to Merry's and began opening drawers, which contained random bits of long-obsolete office junk: Post-It notes, ballpoint pens, paperclips, a box of peppermint Tic-Tacs. Rags popped a Tic-Tac in her mouth and bit down hard; it was stale and tasteless.

"That's Freddy's desk," Merry said. "You mean it was," Rags said.

"For a long time, yeah. He was a damn good copy editor.

Nothing got past Freddy. That's what everybody said."

"Except The Big One, I'm guessing," Rags said, without an ounce of sympathy. "Snuck right up on him."

"Yeah, it did," Merry said flatly, turning back to her screen.

"So what's your plan, Polly?"

"Don't call me Polly. Call me Rags."

"I was told the new editor-in-chief is named Polly," Merry said, as if trying to catch Rags in a lie. "I wasn't told anything about somebody named Rags."

"Yet here I am," Rags said, rising from Freddy's chair. She stood behind Merry and looked at the screen. "How many stories on this girl, Effie, have you run this month, Merry?"

"We try to post something every week." "Why?" Rags asked.

"Why? Because we're trying to flush out new leads, Pol—

Rags."

"Are there any?" Rags asked, scrolling around the digital home page of the *Courant*. Merry hovered over her, as though she feared Rags would break something.

"Not in over a week," Merry said.

"So it's a beat-up story but you keep milking it for, what, sympathy?"

"No!" Merry said, turning red. "You don't have any children, do you? Because if you did, you'd—"

"Bury it," Rags said.

"You want me to bury the lead story? And replace it with what?" Merry's cheeks flushed. She bit her lower lip. Rags noted how little it would take to get her really and truly riled up.

By this point, Flint had found an ancient PC from 2010 sitting on a dusty windowsill and he was taking it apart, down to the motherboard and its old components. Rags knew he was going to wait her out, and this would keep him happily occupied until she was good and ready to leave. He was patient in this type of situation, which Rags appreciated; his tolerance of her own need to press on, push hard, was essential to balancing them out. Maybe here, finally, she'd find a way to press less, though the situation was not promising in that respect.

Rags touched Merry's screen to scroll through the pages of the main news well. It was only a couple of pages long before you hit sports, the crossword (unkillable), and then those unaccountably robust print ads listing everything from flying lessons to bizarre personals. She told Merry to make the lead a story she'd spotted about a leaking septic

tank and to bury the Effie story right before the sports section. The need for the switch was obvious. The Effie story had had its day, and anything that remotely threatened public health, like a septic tank problem, belonged well above the fold. It was a thin fold, in any case, despite the ads.

“And when the next kid goes missing, you want us to bury that too?” Merry asked.

“What do you mean, the next kid?” Rags asked. “It’s going to happen,” Merry said, biting her lip. “You don’t know that.”

“You don’t know *anything*,” Merry said.

“Then tell me, Merry. Tell me what I don’t know.”

Rags could see Merry’s chest rising and falling, as if she was struggling to hold something in. But Merry said nothing.

“Switch the stories,” Rags said. There was no way she’d back down and let Merry have her way. And besides, if there was nothing new to report on the Effie case, then there really wasn’t a compelling reason to give the story the banner headline for the week. Rags had no qualms about her decision. “Flint, let’s go find our new home.”

Flint had his head deep inside the guts of the old PC he’d found. She called to him again. He straightened up, dusted off his hands, and followed Rags out without a word to Merry, leaving the deconstructed computer in bits and pieces on the desk.