

1

Fran and Eddie's café is a shrine to the past. Formica counters, stools tipsy with age, and scarred tabletops. Nothing's changed here but the person frying eggs and flipping pancakes with a Sheetrock trowel. It used to be Fran, now it's retired cop Eddie Rimbauer, his face red from the heat. I'm dropping by, as I often do, to get coffee and a bagel to go before heading to my office. The screen door to the restaurant bangs open several times in a row. It's not quite lunchtime, but cops eat when they can, not when they should. At Fran's they can eat in peace, without being accosted by irate citizens complaining about traffic tickets they most certainly didn't deserve.

Eddie waves me over. "Just the woman I want to see." He leans across the counter, holding his trowel in the air. "Something's going on with Fran. I caught her this morning, hiding out in the back booth, crying. She thinks I didn't notice, but you can't fool an old cop. When I asked her what's wrong, she just clammed up."

Fran's had a lot to cry about in her life, but mostly she's sturdy and cheerful. Always good for a joke. The café has been her bully pulpit for decades, long before her husband, BG, was killed in the line of duty chasing a twenty-year-old armed felon who

had robbed a convenience store. It was only the second line of duty death at the Kenilworth Police Department in fifty years. A photo of him in uniform and the glass-encased American flag they handed to Fran at his funeral sit high on a shelf over the long front counter. Never one to—as she says—“play the widow card,” she’s always ready to help anyone, especially her cop customers.

“Look who’s here.” Fran’s voice reaches me from her booth in the back where she’s rolling flatware in cloth napkins.

“I thought you were retired.” I walk toward the back. From a few feet away, I can see that her face is blotchy and her eyes puffy.

“Stay home and let Eddie run this place unsupervised? I been watching that boy since he was a child. I’m not letting him out of my sight. At least I’m sitting down for a change.” Fran’s legs, swollen and riddled with varicose veins, were just about to give out when Eddie put in his papers at KPD and took over.

Fran tells me to grab a cup of coffee and sit. And while I’m at it, pour her one too. As soon as I do, Eddie joins us. “Too early in the morning for the doc to look at your ugly mug,” Fran says. “She needs more coffee first.”

This isn’t bickering. It’s love, pure and simple. It’s how they are, the two of them, a widow with bad legs and a recovered drunk, twice divorced, still mourning the only thing he had left in life, his job as a cop. I’d worried Eddie wouldn’t survive retirement, that he’d kill himself or start drinking again, but here he is, king of the café. Cops flock from all over to hear his war stories.

“Don’t you have anything else to do, Eddie? Prep work? Taste today’s soup? Wiggle the Jell-O?”

Since he’s taken over, Eddie has expanded Fran’s menu. After what we’d all been through last year, Frank and I invited Eddie

CALL ME CARMELA

and Fran to our wedding in Iowa. Eddie went crazy for the local food. Despite Fran's opposition, he put Iowa potato salad and three kinds of Jell-O on the café menu.

"How is my man Frank? Tell him I said hello. I'm going to be calling him one of these days to talk about remodeling this joint."

"Will that be before or after you call the bank for a loan?" Fran says. "I'm not fronting the money. This place is fine as it is."

"This place is older than you. It needs a total do-over. If there's any money left, you can get a facelift." He turns to me. "What's up at the PD? Cops still turning the other way when they see you coming?" Eddie swipes at the table with the corner of his apron. "I know a couple of guys who are in the middle of nasty divorces. They'd rather talk to me than a psychologist. I don't charge for my time plus I'm an expert on nasty divorces."

"Are you finished?" Fran looks disgusted. "Get back in the kitchen and make yourself useful."

"See what I got to put up with? Twenty-plus years on the job chasing crooks and directing traffic in the rain is nothing compared to working for Ms. Slave Driver over here who forgets she's not the one in charge anymore, I am." He snaps his towel against the tabletop and storms off in a mock rage.

Fran shakes her head. "He's never going to grow up. Never. Still doesn't have a life. All he did was trade his addiction to police work for an addiction to this place."

"Better than his addiction to alcohol," I say. "What's going on, Fran? Eddie said you were upset but you wouldn't say why."

"None of his business."

"Your eyes are red and your face is spotty."

"I'm old. Those are age spots."

"Those are not age spots. Talk to me, Fran."

I stretch my hands across the table. She reaches back. Hers are sandpaper-rough, the backs covered with knobby veins. I've

developed an abiding affection for Fran's tough-on-the-outside, soft-on-the-inside personality. The fortitude it took for her to keep going after BG was killed. How she honors his legacy and love for police work by mothering the cops who came after him. I have warm feelings for Eddie, too, as erratic as he can be in his still wobbly sobriety.

"It's my eighteen-year-old goddaughter, Ava Marie. She's in trouble. Things haven't been great for her at home, but, until a few days ago, I didn't know how bad. Her parents think she's gone off the rails. They had a big fight and she took off. Nobody's seen or heard from her for two days. They think she might be headed my way." Fran pulls her hands back. "This is killing me."

"Has anyone called the police?"

"They live in Moss Point on the coast. It's a little one-horse town with a one-horse sheriff. He thinks she's a runaway. Told her parents to give her a few days to get over being mad and she'll come home."

"There is no waiting period in California for reporting a missing person. He has to take the report."

"He knows that. Ava's father told him. Dan used to be a KPD cop. BG was his field training officer. The only way anybody in that two-bit agency is going to find her is if she runs in front of a patrol car. I keep thinking about that coastline, that skinny road over the mountains. What if she drives off the road? Or over a cliff? Or into the ocean?"

"Has she ever tried to kill herself?" One of my psychology journals just issued a report that teenage girls are experiencing record high levels of violence, sadness, and suicide. I keep this unhappy bit of information to myself. Statistics are about groups. Fran's goddaughter is not a number.

"Not that I know of. Except now I don't know what I don't know. She used to tell me everything until about a year ago."

CALL ME CARMELA

“What happened a year ago?”

“She was adopted. I think she started asking about her birth parents.”

“How can I help?”

“When they find her, could you talk to her?”

“Doesn’t she have a therapist?”

“Her parents tried to get her to go to counseling. She refused.”

“So why would she agree to see me?”

“I’ll tell her you are good people. She’ll listen, she trusts me. At least she used to.”

“I don’t have any experience with teenagers.”

“Not to worry. If you can help cops who don’t trust civilians and hate asking for help, you can help anybody.”