

CHAPTER ONE

It would be easy to float away in the darkness and let the current pull her under, too. She'd thought about it several times before—in her “dark times,” as her ex-husband used to call them.

Lisa's life hadn't turned out the way she'd hoped. Abusive parents, a failed marriage, the booze—so much booze—all swirled together to set her on this path. Losing her apartment finally put her out here. Now this. She thought she'd escaped, but running from her past hadn't worked. The ghosts of years past had stripped everything away. Lisa had nothing left, not even hope.

The tug of the Sacramento River on her legs was temping, and the spring snow runoff numbed Lisa's thighs as she waded out.

Lisa closed her eyes and pictured herself lying back and allowing the river to put an end to it.

“Momma?”

Lisa's eyes shot open.

Glancing over her shoulder, she spotted the faint outline of her daughter standing on the riverbank. The eight-year-old wore a thin blue t-shirt with a unicorn on the front, a threadbare pair of jeans, holding a stuffed bunny with one ear missing. The girl's face registered confusion.

“Baby, go on back to the tent,” Lisa said.

Lisa felt her daughter would be better off without her. The mother's sins cast a damning shadow. But she couldn't abandon Willow. Not like this. Lisa knew what it was like to be an orphan in an unfriendly world. The future of an eight-year-old alone in a homeless camp wasn't the life Willow deserved.

“Momma, what are you doing?”

Lisa's eyes welled. She didn't need to tell her daughter the world was a hurtful place. She'd keep the secrets and not let her know there was nothing worth living for—for now.

"I'm coming, baby."

Lisa turned and waded back toward the bank. Her daughter spent the last two years in one homeless camp or another. The tightly packed shelters made Lisa's claustrophobia itch.

Lisa reached for her daughter and grabbed her, lifting the girl into a tight hug. Tears streamed down Lisa's cheeks. Not because Lisa wanted to end her suffering. She'd considered that option before. The tears came from nearly making Willow an orphan and leaving the innocent girl behind in a homeless camp. Willow couldn't fight off the predators who lurked in the darkness—like they did tonight.

From the river's edge, the camp spread a quarter mile in either direction. There was never any official count because people came and went, died, were arrested, or simply disappeared from the camp. Lisa guessed there were over two hundred people living here in the city's forgotten shadows.

It was time to move. When the camps get too big, bad things happen, and people talk.

Lights flickered from small campfires and lanterns throughout the settlement. Lisa thought they looked like fallen stars. She hugged Willow a little closer and followed the trail back into the camp.

She unzipped the fly on their tent and scooted inside. Their belongings—a change of clothes, a towel to share, and two children's books lay on one end of the nylon dome tent. A pair of sleeping bags took up most of the space. Lisa knew they were lucky to have them—others didn't.

"All right, sweetie, let's get you settled in for the night."

Willow wiggled into her sleeping bag with her stuffed rabbit. Lisa grabbed a book, *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, one of her daughter's favorites. The eight-year-old could recite most of the story by heart.

Lisa opened the book when a loud commotion erupted outside. It wasn't uncommon in the camp. Fights over property, drugs, or imagined slights fed by drugs, alcohol, and glitchy mental health were a daily occurrence. Lisa learned the best thing to do was stay out of it and never get involved.

It sounded like the usual dust-up until the screams began.

“Stay here, Willow.”

Lisa crawled to the tent flap, zipped it open, and poked her head out.

Fire.

Flames erupted on the far side of the camp. It was always a risk in the cardboard condos and plastic tarp shelters along the riverbank. This was different. At least six structures were ablaze. People were running, backlit by the orange and yellow glow. The evening delta breeze fanned the flames, igniting another dozen tents.

The cheap nylon shelters went up like dried rice paper.

“Baby, get your shoes on.”

“What is it, Momma?”

“We need to—”

Lisa spotted two men in the chaos, both outlined by the flames behind them. They weren't running. One set the next row of tents ablaze. The second man wielded a baseball bat and swung the aluminum cylinder at anyone who came near. A sickening *tink* sound echoed among the rows of tents when he bounced the bat off a man's shoulder.

Lisa grabbed her daughter's hand, pulling her from the tent. The girl's eyes grew large when she spotted the fires.

Willow pulled away and ducked back into the tent.

“Willow Marie, don't you pull away from me. Come here. We need to get away.”

Lisa felt the heat from the fire. It was spreading fast, and the flames jumped up into the trees within the camp.

Bending into the tent, Lisa found Willow gathering her stuffed animal and the books.

“Come now, we need to—”

Tink.

Lisa fell flat on the ground. The rounded end of the baseball bat shoved at her ribs. Dazed from a blow to the head, she didn't move. Lisa registered a man's boot stepping over her.

The flames grew closer.

Willow's fear backed her into the far corner of the tent.

Lisa's ragged voice called to her daughter. "Willow. Listen. I need—I need you to run. Hide. Go to the safe place—the rock where we hide things. Stay until I come for you."

"I don't want to go. I'm scared."

"I know, baby. You have to be brave. Take Mr. Bunny and go, now."

Willow clutched her stuffed animal, the book, and stepped through the tent flap.

"Momma, you have an owie."

"I know, baby. I'll be okay."

It was a lie. Lisa knew she was far from okay. She could feel the pressure in her head building with each heartbeat.

"Go to the place we talked about, honey. Go quick."

Willow's eyes welled. She didn't budge, frozen in fear before a scream from someone nearby broke her from the trance. Another row of tents went up in flames.

"Go."

Willow hugged her bunny and trotted toward the river. Lisa lost sight of her through the smoke billowing through the camp.

She tried to get up and couldn't move her legs. She crabbed forward using her arms, inching away from the burning camp.

Her tent flashed, and the flames consumed it in seconds. The melting fabric, plastic and nylon fibers fell on her. The molten material burned through her clothing and ate into the flesh on Lisa's back.

The pain seared into her. Screams around her meant she wasn't the only one. The two arsonists headed in the same direction Willow had fled.

"Stop them," she cried. No one could hear over the chaos of the burning camp.

Lisa now wished the water had brought a calm end to everything. She didn't expect this—the fire, searing flame, and torture. Part of her believed she deserved this fate for the pain she'd caused. Willow didn't. The girl didn't understand. Now, Lisa worried about what would happen to her sweet little girl. Mr. Bunny would not be enough.

The last thought before the flames ate at her pant legs. "I've failed you."