

THE BAG LADY WAR

CHAPTER 1

They won't be there. Not in this deluge. Josie Winkworth struggled into her coat and rain hat, ready to grab her little wire cart and run for it the minute the rain let up. Minutes went by as she waited, knowing how risky it was to walk through the park. She looked at the clock again. *Mabel will be here for lunch at noon. I can do it if the rain will just stop. At least they won't be there to yell and throw things at me. It's my only chance 'til Sunday. Their parents probably make them go to mass and behave on the Sabbath.*

Sudden shafts of dazzling sunlight pierced the sky, and Josie was out the door. Going as fast as an eighty-two-year-old can go, she made a dash across the park to George's market, carrying her folded-up cart.

The small neighborhood park was deserted. Gang activity discouraged use of it even in the best of weather, and today it was all the more uninviting. Its well-worn paths were slimy with mud, and the soggy grass and benches left nowhere to sit. Few cars splashed by. Only the hum of traffic escaping the noise barrier along the freeway and the drone of a plane's descent into John Wayne Airport marred the serenity of this bright, freshly scrubbed morning.

With the letup in the rain, four teenaged Latinos sauntered into the park. They wore stocking caps and oversized shirts that flapped, untucked, over long baggy pants that engulfed their shoes. They stood

talking, hands in their pockets, when Josie's bright blue coat caught their attention. She had started back across the park, picking her way along the muddy path, pulling her cart full of groceries. Like junkyard dogs, the boys sprang into action.

"Hey, ol' lady!" one of them called. They ran to intercept her, kicking up muddy water and drenching the ragged bottoms of their pants legs. Josie looked up to see them coming and made a feeble attempt to run. But she was no match for them. She froze in her tracks when they fanned out to cut off her escape. Turtle-like, she seemed to shrink into her heavy coat, leaving only wisps of white hair and a pair of terrified blue eyes staring out from beneath her floppy rain hat.

"Hey, *pendeja*, I was talkin' a' you!" came the voice again as the four youths moved in to surround her. Her mouth worked as if to speak but made no sound. Again, she tried to flee, but upon finding nowhere to turn she simply stood there, a cornered mouse awaiting her fate.

Locking her pleading eyes in the grip of his piercing black ones, the shortest one danced like a determined gnat in her face. If she tried to avert her eyes, he darted around to make sure his were there, too. His acne-scarred face boasted the shadow of dark adolescent fuzz, and the silver rings that pierced his nostril and lip announced that he was not to be messed with.

"Whatta we hafta do to get'cher attention? Huh? You got no respect for the First Street Boys? Wha-at?" His pubescent voice betrayed him in several octaves, but he made up for it by spitting a frothy glob of phlegm on the toe of her shoe.

"Stupid ol' bag," he muttered, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt. "We warned you enough times. You didn' git nobody's say-so t'be here." Again he thrust his face within inches of hers, bugging his eyes out at her as he did so. Terrified, she lurched backward, stumbling over her little cart and nearly falling.

The tallest of the boys, his black hair bound pirate-style in a red and black bandana, now moved in, eyeing the little grocery cart she clung to for support.

“Whatcha got there, ol’ lady?” he drawled. “Geritol and prunes?” He lazily twirled a toothpick between his teeth while his friends laughed and high-fived each other at his joke.

Feeding on Josie’s terror, the fat, simple-looking one hiked up his sagging trousers and kicked her cart with his imitation Air Jordans. The cart caved in as though it were made of matchsticks. Encouraged by the group’s laughter, he yanked the grocery bags from the cart and whirled them around, sending their contents flying in every direction. At the same time, the fourth one of the group, a skulking youth with a tattooed scorpion clinging to his neck, snatched the worn leather purse that hung from her shoulder and danced off with it into the park.

“No!” she cried, reaching into the empty air between them. She staggered after him, calling out, “Please, no! That’s all I have!”

It became a boisterous game of Monkey in the Middle as they threw the purse back and forth over her head, luring her ever farther off the path. They laughed at her vain attempts to catch it each time it sailed by. The fat one had a hard time keeping up, encumbered by the drooping pants that shackled his stride. Stumbling over his trailing shoe-strings and blowing like a harpooned whale, he was of little help to the others. They paused at the approaching wail of a police siren, but it went on by and left them to their fun.

Gasping for breath and with rain hat askew, Josie looked around desperately for help. But at this hour, on this day that threatened more rain to follow, the park was still deserted. If anyone in the few cars that passed had seen through the trees and shrubs that screened the shortcut to the market, they would have seen only boys at play.

Tiring of the game, the pirate intercepted the flying purse and deftly removed the wallet before upending it and dumping the contents onto the muddy ground. While the others scrabbled to pick through what they might want, he helped himself to the few bills in the wallet. Outraged at its meager contents, he threw the wallet back at her, where it bounced off her chest and joined the rest of her things in the mud.

“Thirty-two bucks!” he shouted for the others to hear. “Thirty-two fuckin’ bucks! That’s all you have? Jezuz Christ, ol’ lady, if *that’s* all you have you ain’t worth *shit!* You ain’t even worth messin’ with!”

He held up the few bills for the others to see, prompting a chorus of jeers.

“Thirty-two fuckin’ bucks!” he repeated, waving the money around in disgust. “Barely enough for four Fat Charlie combos and some cigarettes. Well, thank you very much for nothin’!” He looked up to curse the tree that dripped on him from overhead, threatening to make him look uncool.

“Thinkin’ you could dis us and’ keep walkin’ in this park? he went on, brushing at his rain-spotted shirt. “How many times we tol’ you to stay outta here, anyhow? The First Street Boys say who does what aroun’ here. An’ it takes more’n these thirty-two fuckin’ bucks t’get our permission t’be here!” Again he waved the money around as proof of her deceit.

The short one crowded in on the panicked woman once more, adding in a syrupy voice that broke now and then in spite of his attempts to control it, “You go to the police an’ you be sorry, lady. Maybe you die! We been watchin’ you. We know where you live, an’ nobody’ll miss your dried up ol’ *concha*.” He pointed to the fat one, who stood panting beside him. “You tell on us, an’ we sic Gordo here on you!”

The fat one’s dull expression took on a doltish gleam.

“Yeah,” he said, his words wallowing thickly in his throat. “Gordo getchoo!”

The others laughed with him, cheering him on as he stroked the growing bulge in his pants. He had begun to drool, little trickles of saliva quivering at the edges of his meaty lips. He took a tentative step toward the woman, looking to the others for permission. But the pirate, who seemed to be in charge, had lost interest now that he had a little money.

“She’s not worth messin with,” he growled, cramming the money into his pants pocket. “Too stupid and too old.” He turned to go, wav-

ing her away in disgust. “Lucky fer you we have better things to do than mess with ol’ bags like you. Git’cher stupid shit and git the hell outta here before we turn Gordo loose on ya. He likes teachin’ people a little respect. You come aroun’ here again, there won’t be no stoppin’ ‘im.”

He waited for her to move. But Josie still stood there, frozen in place.

“Are ya *deaf*, ya stupid ol’ bitch?” he shouted, snatching the rain hat from her head, leaving her rumpled white hair to poke out in all directions. “Git your damn shit and git the fuck outta here, *now!*”

She dropped to her knees in the muddy grass and began scooping up her belongings. The fat one they called Gordo found it amusing to torment her at her work. A few shoves of his muddy shoe nearly sent her sprawling. When she was unable to get back up on her feet without crawling to a tree for support, they howled with laughter.

Tired of toying with her, and with enough money for the Hamburger Den up the street, they set off across the park, laughing and bantering in Spanish. They sailed her hat back and forth among themselves, unconcerned that their demand for respect had flown in the face of their disrespect for her.

Nylons ripped and knees bleeding, Josie dragged her lopsided grocery cart back to the security of her gated apartment complex. She met no one on the way who might have helped her, or who might have remarked on the storm or the sparkling beauty of this morning. Grateful she hadn’t wet her pants and too much of a lady to cause a scene, she wouldn’t give in to her hysteria until she got home.

Mabel Rockwell freely came and went with her gate pass to Josie’s. She wrestled her old green Buick to the curb beneath Josie’s kitchen window, and with a light step that belied the weight of eighty years of unbridled appetite, quickly made her way up the walk. The rising wind caught her graying black hair, threatening to loosen it from where it was anchored in a bun at the nape of her neck. She leaned into the

Want to read more? [Buy *The Bag Lady War!*](#)