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The Other Woman

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Deja Ann Gworek

June 2012

Thesis Committee:  
Susan Straight, Chairperson  
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Goldberry Long

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The Thesis of Deja Ann Gworek is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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To family who are friends and friends who are family

## **Presidio of San Francisco, June 1994**

It would be so much easier to convince him their marriage was over with a gun or a knife or any number of other weapons readily available on the Presidio—things a career Army man like Jack would understand. Not cheap words on recycled paper slipped between faux-silk bed sheets he brought back from Saudi Arabia last week—the latest gift in a long string charting his back-to-back TDYs to Germany, Alaska and the Middle East, many of which, Alyssa found out, he actually *volunteered* for over the last three years since he came home from Desert Storm.

In many ways, though, knowing that his retreat away from her is actually happening (that it isn't a by-product of paranoia or self-indulgence) is a relief. No more days of pretending. No more nights of lifting his arm onto her waist, tightening his limp grip, pressing her back into his chest, feeling the way their bodies *should* fit together like puzzle pieces, when he was likely wishing he was somewhere else.

She reaches for the letter under her pillow, where she's been keeping it more and more these days. She finds solace in how he might see it, peel it out of her fingers, the flap only partially sealed like she doesn't want him to read it or hasn't fully committed to it, even though the idea of leaving has been skimming the surface of her mind for so long she can't remember its absence. His infidelity (which, granted, may not be entirely accurate, but there's no other word for the way she feels about his relationship with the Army) angers her less than the fact that they are becoming one more failed Army marriage.

She supposes she should be grateful. At least they haven't become the ultimate cliché: she as the naïve wife dutifully raising their son on the home front, living in ignorance and he as the broken veteran playing out the aftereffects of the Gulf War as a series of affairs with faceless women he doesn't even really want—if only it were that simple. If it was an actual affair, she'd get over it, chalk it up to them getting married too young and him having a mid-life crisis. Even when Jack's here he chooses to spend his short down-time having beers with the same men he spent a twelve-hour shift splicing wires with.

Normally when Jack leaves in the middle of the night for an emergency call from the Com Center like tonight, she lies awake listening for the voice from the Golden Gate Bridge, begging suicides to re-consider. Eight years ago she found comfort in the idea of strangers caring for one another. Even if Jack *is* right and the loudspeaker was installed to limit the liability of the city, just because there is a practical reason, doesn't extinguish the idea of people doing good: offering up their nights and weekends for a higher purpose. Like her work with the Family Support Group.

Helena told her many years ago, living with someone who would have a high security clearance would drive her crazy. But Jack wasn't in the field. He had a desk job. He was—for the most part—safe. Not like Max who chose to go into ordnances, making bombs for a living.

She hasn't thought about him in months. Strange. And now she hears it. His name. From someone else's lips. Maybe the voice on the bridge? She sits up, listening intently.



*Max.*

There it is again. But she only catches the end, the hissing of that last syllable, like a tendril of the past threading through space and time, looping round and under to tie a knot in her heart.

In her worst nightmares—the ones she still has, in spite of his absence (or maybe because of it)—her brother perches on the red steel cliff, ready to dive no matter the cost. He looks over at her to make sure she's watching. She runs, desperate to stop him. But he changes. It isn't Max's face. It isn't anyone she knows. She holds out her hand. The phantom turns away, standing up, a body disproportionately tall, its head among the long red cables swinging from one beam to the next, outgrowing the bridge, outgrowing the world. She's calling his name, telling him to stop. But when he speaks, the voice isn't what she expects. It sounds young like Aidan, her son. She wakes up then in a sweat, freezing, and she reaches for Jack but he's not there.

She's lost count of the number of spouses she's counseled over the years through divorce or death, spouses who have had similar nightmares. She initially started offering her counsel at Jack's request but ever since she took over their unit's Family Support Group, she's felt better. It lessened her long-standing need for a degree or a career, one that might actually evolve into a new life. She doesn't consider catering a career because it was a means to an end. A paycheck. A little bit to push them just over the poverty line in one of the world's most expensive cities where they live on an enlisted soldier's pay. Food was the great equalizer. Whether a birthday party, wedding or funeral, food had the power to transform people—to make reconnect them. Every family except hers.

*Max.*

Even if it is a mistake, the voice has done its work. Suddenly she misses her brother with an intensity she hasn't allowed herself in a year. She considers the very real possibility of visiting him. Of telling Jack, she'd like to go up to see him, alone. Taking the opportunity to try it out—being on her own away from him. Starting small. Reconnecting with her brother. Three years of separation—and three thousand miles—is long enough. She feels much better at the thought, at the decision. Suddenly she can't wait for Jack to get back. Letter or not, she will go see her brother. She will make amends with him and get his input about her plans. He'll help her, support her. For once, she will need him instead of him needing her.

The front door shuts. She stuffs the envelope back under the mattress.

Beyond the foot of the bed, Jack parts the curtains with a swift slice of the hand. Just enough for streetlights to reach inside. He has on nothing but boxers too loose on his hips. She's surprised at how skinny he looks until he turns. His arms and legs fill in, all smooth muscle and thick bone. Even at forty-four he is still the boy she fell in love with when she was just twelve. There's still that.

"Have you spoken to Max?" she asks.

He moves to the small wooden chest at the foot of their bed, his face half-hidden in shadow from the streetlight. He turns to sit down on the chest, wadding up his shirt in one fist.

The longer he waits to answer, the more anxious she becomes.

Stretching it taut, fist-to-fist, he tugs the shirt over. Dog tags clink-clink against his chest. “I’ve already told you. He’ll reach out when he’s ready.”

She shivers. Not an answer she expects from the man who has never been a careful manipulator or tongue-tied.

“I know,” she says. “That’s why I’m asking.” They both know her brother will contact Jack first. It’s more than a matter of historical fact; it’s about their friendship, the way Max and Jack have been brothers from the moment they met, bound by an invisible cord she could never see, let alone touch; one knotted with kinship as boys, as men, as soldiers, borne out of blood spilled rather than blood shared.

“Jack?” she says when he doesn’t respond. And she feels time compress into a single, intense desire, an overwhelming need to see his face when he answers. To know what he’s been hiding.

Her vision blurs and doubles.

Then there is the warmth of the bed beneath her.

And, in the same second, there is the freezing air seeping past her fingers at the window. This other woman stares into Jack’s face, which strikes her as pensive and withdrawn. He seems startled by her sudden appearance.

“Maybe Max isn’t ready,” he says, standing up.

Dizzy, the other woman leans against the window. The husband steps toward her.

Alyssa is shocked into silence. This is how encountering a burglar would be. She doesn’t know who that other woman is, even if the other woman looks just like her.

Alyssa wants to tell the other woman to leave, but she knows if she does, that Jack would

see her in both places too, the other woman scrutinizing them as she is now. For him, the shock would be too much. He'd kill her or he'd flee. Either way he'd be gone. He'd go far. He'd go permanently. Alyssa would be left even more alone than she already is and this prospect frightens her beyond whatever the other woman might mean.

The other woman smells smoke—menthols—through the glass. The scent tugs her around, away from the husband's reach, away from Alyssa in bed.

The street should be empty this early but it isn't. Max leans up against Jack's red Camaro, half-dressed in desert BDUs. Both men wore them when they deployed three years earlier for Desert Storm. Max looks up, catching her eye, his black curls writhing in the wind, his narrow, smooth baby-face, rigid and defiant. He tosses the butt, his boot grinding it into her driveway and turns to leave.

The other woman feels the snap of her neck and she's pulled back. An icy rush of air and she and Alyssa are one.

Alyssa now sees Jack at the window where the other woman just stood. Alyssa falls back against the cool pillow. She is feverish, nauseous.

He turns to her. "What?" he says. "What were you looking at?"

"Max," she says. Her voice matches the one she heard, except it isn't hers. This voice belongs to the Other Woman. She can't stop shaking. The room spins. She hears Jack yank the curtains closed.

"I'll see what he wants," Jack says.

Only she has the impression he already knows. Like he can't get out of the room fast enough. The last thing she hears before she loses consciousness is his footsteps on the stairs.

### **Presidio of San Francisco, November 1991**

Ever since his unit came back from the Gulf, Max had ignored dinner invitation after dinner invitation, subsisting, Alyssa imagined, on Burger King and canned chicken noodle soup. She knew Max would avoid the chow hall with too many fellow soldiers' eyes and ears, preferring solitude over camaraderie. Jack said Max needed time to decompress. He mentioned seeing Max at the gym now and again. At least there was that. In the end, she'd had to settle for bits from Jack's exchanges with Max, though none really sufficed.

This was the part she hated when they deployed. Not only did you worry and wait while they were gone, but you worried and waited even more when they got back, *if* they got back. To speak, reach out, adjust. Sometimes it never happened. Sometimes they changed, irrevocably, within and without. And there was always that possibility. Not that you would know. Not unless something horrible happened.

The base curled around her, an intricate relief of red roofs and eucalyptus trees. Highway 101 wrapped along the skyline, funneling traffic across the Golden Gate Bridge. In the distance, the thin sandy lip of Crissy Field stretched back into the bay to the marina. The fog hovered, ready to advance.

She can't remember where Jack and their son Aidan were, but she remembers their absence keenly. It bothers her less that she can't remember where they were than it does knowing she was glad they were gone.

There were few simple pleasures she took anymore over silence, dirty hands and a cloudless day in San Francisco.

Max stood in her enclosed whitewashed porch. He must have been standing there a long time, unwilling to press the doorbell or use his key. She'd been pruning roses, their thorny necks shredding her hands as she clipped and untangled the dead. She carried the stalks to the trash bins near the front of the house. Over the fence, she saw his silver Toyota truck on the far side of the street and her heart skipped.

*Finally*, she thought, feeling the warm buzz of relief. For weeks she waited for him to come by—weeks that somehow became months. When she opened the door, his fatigues looked too small, shrunken maybe. Then she hugged him. She heard his heart pumping low and steady as a drill and she realized it was his body that was different. No longer the delicate-boned bird of their youth, his arms and legs were bulky, his waist solid as a stone pillar. He had always been a full head taller than she, even three fingers taller than Jack. But his height coupled with his new weight made him look massive, especially in her tiny porch. It disturbed her.

"Who are you and what happened to my brother?" she said.

His face remained impassive. She wondered if he heard her. Awkward moments followed where he removed his hat, crumpling it in his hands. Then with two steps he ducked under the low beam of the door and passed her to go inside. The brother she knew

would've tossed back a smart-ass crack point-blank but instead he surveyed the empty house in silence until she shut the door.

"Jack or Aidan here?" he finally asked his voice low and pinched.

"No. It's Monday."

He nodded as if that made sense though his green eyes didn't seem convinced.

"That coffee I smell?"

She nodded; relieved at knowing at least their mutual love of coffee hadn't disappeared. "Can't let good coffee go to waste," she said and took his hand, sweaty in hers. He tried to wiggle out of it, but she held firm, tugging him into the kitchen. The Arabic coffee had been his gift to her. He called it "Coffee to Fall in Love With." He said it was one of the only things that had got him through the six months he'd spent in the deserts of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait so he brought it back for her. She resented the implication: that she and Jack needed some aphrodisiac, that *Max* was the one to supply it.

Even if that was the intention, it hadn't worked. *Disgusting*, Jack said. *Tastes like ass*. Except she had the feeling it was because of Max that he'd said so. Jack often told her Max knew nothing about love or sacrifice. Being single made him selfish. Being gay made him even more selfish. Or so he said. But Alyssa didn't believe it.

In the kitchen, she looked for the disembodied Einstein face grinning across one side of his cup. She'd given the mug to him for Christmas when Max first enlisted. It was her only commentary on his choice to follow Jack rather than go to college and become a pharmacist. She never agreed with it, but he knew that and did it anyway. He left it here

because of the fear of theft. Roommates “borrowed” things and didn’t bring them back. Not that it was any safer in her house. She suspected it was up in Aidan’s room gathering dust or growing mold. He began to covet it when Max was away and she was grateful she didn’t have to see it in the cabinet, unused, week after week.

Max leaned past her and grabbed Jack’s mug. A chipped camouflage one with the stenciled black letters “ARMY” partially peeled away. She felt out of place and in the way. Her face burned.

His expression softened a bit and he smiled. “It’s okay, Lysy. It’s just a cup.” He pressed the mug into her hands. “So aren’t you going to get me up to speed?”

She didn’t want to account for the months of his absence—that seemed too painful a place to start—so she began with that morning, not an hour before he arrived, when clipboard-wielding inspectors cited her again for the lawn. For that tiny square plot piece of shit in front of their house. It wasn’t even hers. No matter how hard she tried to get that grass the “right” shade of green, it wasn’t good enough. She laughed and he smiled. The frustrations of living on base. They’d been joking about them for years, not that anything would ever come of it. She didn’t know what shade would be right and she didn’t think they knew either. It was a question of interpretation, of a deliberate you-should-know-what-color-and-if-you-don’t-we-aren’t-going-to-tell-you vagueness that seemed to define so much of their daily life. But, she emphasized, smiling—knowing her brother would love this last part—instead of taking the citation, politely, as she always had, she demanded they show her an example. She pointed to the square patches with their varying degrees of green, up and down the street. They looked confused, like no one



had ever asked them before and left perturbed. She knew Jack would get an earful but she didn't care. She was tired of having no other way than to get it consistently and utterly *wrong*.

She took a deep breath, realizing she hadn't let him say a word the entire time. "Sorry for being such a chatterbox," she said. "I guess you can tell how much I missed you."

He blew on his coffee and sipped it before setting it down. Then he looked at her as if he was seeing her for the first time. He shook his head and gave her a hug, his arms swiftly losing their stiffness to settle around her. "It's been eight years," he said in her ear. Then he held her at arms' length. "Maybe it's time to move off-post."

"What a great idea!" she said. "But where? Outside those gates you need to be a lottery winner to afford housing. Unless you want Jack to commute from across the Bay and I already know what he's going to say to that—"

"You could come with me," he said as if it was a natural solution. He rubbed her shoulders.

She didn't immediately answer and he dropped his hands, grabbed his coffee and walked past her, out through the open back door.

"What?" she finally said in his absence. "Where are you going?"

He stood between the wands of lavender swaying in the wind. Layers of bright pink and royal purple hydrangeas stretched along half the fence line where she'd been working in the rose bed. When she caught up to him, the wind grabbed her skirt, whipping her legs until they stung. Silence folded in on itself, one invisible layer on top

another. His eyes stayed on the bay. She imagined he was watching the boats, jet skis and tankers in the distance. She wondered whether she'd heard him right but was too afraid to ask. So she stood there, silent, all the while hating herself for relying on the one and only thing the Army taught her how to do. Waiting.

“You’re lucky,” he finally said.

“How so?” she said.

“To have this.”

He said it with a quiet, icy sincerity that felt like a slap in the face. He, more than anyone, knew how hard she'd worked over the last twenty years to earn a decent house. All the parties she had to cater, the way she made herself indispensable to officer's wives, the way she brought brownies and cookies and hor d'oeuvres to so many offices, she was often cooking in month long stretches, seven days a week, twelve hours a day, never saying no to anyone about anything. And it isn't even fancy like the officer's quarters, just better than other enlisted family housing. Better than food stamps and torn wallpaper and the scent and sound of family or pets, one packed on top of another as they'd been at Fort Bragg, five years earlier, before she begged Jack to ask to be re-assigned here, so they could be close to her brother again.

“You’re lucky too,” she said.

“Am I?” He laughed, rubbing his forehead with one hand. He squeezed his temples and then put his hands on his hips, turning to face her with a half-smile. “Clearly you need to spend a night in the barracks.”

The sun burnt a hole through the fog. A dull orange brightening into the pure pulsating white of noon. She rubbed the old lipstick stain on the rim of her cup. Rubbed and rubbed, hard as she could until her thumb ached and still the tiny specks of dull scarlet remained. She refused to point out how he was still alive and intact. How at least he had come home with all appendages attached. She thought of the many funerals she'd attended, how she hadn't seen him at any, how disgusting the color black had become. She'd wanted to burn the one dress she reserved for those days, burn it as she'd seen protesters burning the flag as Jack and Max fought in someone else's war for someone else's oil. It's black lace sleeves were good for any kind of day—hot or cold, rainy or sunny. The practicality of it was both a blessing and a curse. She thought of forgiveness and his self-imposed exile and how selfish he was being. And how one day she would have to wear black for him too.

When she didn't answer, he said, "I guess that's a no." He paused. "See, I've been thinking a lot about family. I wonder about my luck. I know I could never have a place like this when I have a family of my own. Not unless I get out. And I thought you might like to go with me. You and Aidan."

"Why would I do that, Max?"

"You and I, we've played this Army game enough. It's Jack's, not ours. Besides there's life on the other side. Don't you want to be happy?"

"I never said I wasn't," she said.

He trailed along the fence, to the other side, and turned round to come back, treading along the edge of her massacred garden, surveying it. She put a hand on his back

and rubbed it in circles the way their mother once did so many years ago, before she moved back to England after their father disappeared. “You know happiness is here. You just have to take it.”

He turned to face her, his expression hardening. “In what form? A woman, wife and mother of my child, no doubt.”

She felt goosebumps. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Sure you do. I know you, Alyssa. You’ve always supported me, but you also don’t want to rock the boat.”

“Your love life has nothing to do with me. And you have nothing to do with my love life. Remember. We agreed.”

“We agreed,” he said, though it didn’t sound like agreement to her. “You know I honestly thought Clinton would be the one to do it, to give us a shot at a real life. Then he had to go and start all this DADT nonsense.”

“I’m sure he has his reasons,” Alyssa said.

“He’s not gay. That’s his reason. He has no idea the kind of life he’s forcing us to lead.”

“Nobody’s forcing you to do anything, Max. If you don’t want to stay in then get out. Come out. Whatever. But I can’t go with you. I can’t.”

She imagined Sally Biggs, their nosy neighbor, her big Dumbo ear pressed up against the fence and how Alyssa will explain this away.

He kicked at the roses, unearthing one. “Your voice is always in the back of my head, nagging. Just like when we were kids.”

She didn't know what he wanted her to say. "I'm sorry." Though she wasn't entirely sure what she was sorry for. "I know certain parts of your life have been hard. And maybe I'm not as happy as I could be. But I'm happy enough. We've built a good life here. Aidan doesn't deserve to grow up without a father around. Hell, he isn't around much as it is."

"He'd have me."

"You aren't his father."

He took particular offence at this.

"You are the best uncle on this planet, but you aren't his father. Believe me, you don't want to be. You'll have kids of your own one day."

"One day," he said bitterly.

The word settled into the darkest canyon of her heart, taking root.

"One day I won't be here anymore," he said. He stopped, waiting for her to call his bluff, but she wouldn't, no matter how much of a verbal mine field he was intent on lying between them.

"One day will come sooner than you think. Have faith."

Maybe she said it too lightly. Maybe not lightly enough. Who knew when his mood darkened, when he seemed to change right before her eyes into someone she didn't recognize. "You're a liar, just like the rest of them." He threw the rest of his coffee out across the grass.

"Max," she said. She grabbed the mug. "I'm not playing anymore. I'm going inside." She could feel his pain. It was palpable and raw but it wasn't hers. She didn't

want it. She already had enough of her own. They all had given up pieces of themselves to be here. She had barely graduated high school and when she started taking classes at the university, Jack was transferred so she had to give it up. She figured out quickly the Army came first. Not just in his life but hers too. Any degree or career she wanted would have to be secondary to his. Then she got pregnant with Aidan and slid into the mold of so many other Army wives. It was enough. She loved Jack and Aidan needed her. It was easy to become one of the many, to let go of the romance of single parenthood and become someone she would have likely despised had she not married Jack.

“I’m not going to hide it anymore,” he said. “I’m coming out. You should too. Of course you won’t. You’ve perfected the art of denial. I thought our mother had it down, but you’ve surpassed even her. Congratulations.”

She felt her stomach turn and she pressed her palm to it, feeling sick. “I—” She stopped, taking a deep breath. “There’ll be consequences if you come out, Max. Think about it—”

“And you don’t think there already aren’t?”

“What happened over there?” she asked.

“Everything has to do with war, doesn’t it? That’s the only reason we do anything. Feel anything.”

She turned to go back into the house, feeling the wet grass clinging to her ankles, scratching.

“Maybe something did happen in the Gulf,” he yelled after her. “Would that make it better? Would that be a good enough reason? Is there such a thing as a good enough reason?”

She turned to look him, blurred through her tears. “Just tell me what happened.”

“Why? So you can try to fix it. I don’t need you to fix it.”

But she did. Still, he couldn’t understand. “Why did you come then?”

“I thought my sister would have my back. But you don’t and I could give a shit what any of these motherfuckers think.”

She didn’t believe it and she knew from his face, neither did he. Whether he liked it or not, the Army had become as much his life as it had hers. “Have you talked to Jack?”

“Why?”

“Because I think he can help give you perspective on this.”

“I don’t need any brain washing.”

“We’ll always be family, Max. Please don’t mistake what I’m saying. But you need to find someone you care about and make your own life with them. I have mine.”

“I’m not mistaking anything,” he said coldly. “You’ve made your position pretty clear.”

“I want you to be happy. To have whatever it is you’re looking for, I’m just not sure if you really know what that is.” She hesitated. “Or if you understand the cost.”

“To me or to you?”

She felt her legs go weak. “He’ll want to help you,” she said. “Please talk to him. Please. Before you make a move. Before you decide to tell others or whatever it is you want to do.”

A flash of something, not pain but something else filled his eyes. Hate, maybe. Jealousy. Disgust. Something vile and black.

“You have no fucking idea what he wants,” he said.

She remembers wishing then that he hadn’t come over, that he hadn’t told her any of this. She remembers standing there and looking at him like she might a stranger’s child having a tantrum in the far corner of a store. Far away. Disconnected. It could’ve been on the news, happening to some other woman standing in a backyard. Poor woman. Poor stupid woman. She should have known better than to try to put herself in the position of trying to stop Max from getting what he wanted—to stop him from hurting himself.

She started to walk back to the house, watching him through the glass of her back door. In that darkly shaded, mirror world, his body lost definition until it was a silhouette. He leaned back against the white, flaking fence and she had the worst feeling. She imagined his weight tipping it back, falling down the cliff on the other side. It was old, broken; slats missing. She’d begged Jack for the last two years to replace it, but there was never enough time or money.

“Max!” she yelled, and then she couldn’t think of what to say. If she told him what to do, he’d do the opposite. That’s how her brother was.

“Yeah, I know,” he yelled back. “I’m outta here.” To her relief, he stomped past her towards the side gate.



“Fine!” she heard herself say. “Go!”

But she has no memory of watching him step through. Even now, three years later, when she’s in that place, not quite awake, not quite asleep, when she can feel her body wanting to split in two, wanting to become something more than what it is, she can still see him, his hand on the gate and his back to her, leaving but never quite gone.

The next day she went to his barracks to apologize but when she arrived, there was nothing there. Blank dirty walls. White sheets and an ugly shit-brown blanket folded tightly around the mattress. Chipped pine dresser. A trash can full of cigarette butts and beer cans.

In the hallway, she grabbed another soldier, a new recruit who was walking through. He must’ve thought she was crazy. She asked him about Sergeant Eaves and the soldier said he was in the crew who had volunteered for a transfer to Fort Greeley, Alaska to work nukes.

“When will he be back?” she said stupidly.

“Lady, he’s gone.”

She remembers the way he said it, like it was a blessing, an opportunity, but all she could think about was how far north Alaska was. “I’m fine,” she told him. “I’m sorry. It’s just a shock.”

He shrugged. “You know, ma’am, sometimes it’s better that way.”

Max was impulsive, but this reckless behavior and manipulation was unprecedented. She realized he must’ve put in for the transfer months ago. Maybe he

knew what her answer would be before he even got there. Then she wondered how much Jack knew and for how long. She confronted the terrible possibility that this was a calculated move, one of too many she'd watch Max perform over the years, though to what purpose she remained unsure. She began to doubt his confession, or rather his motivation for it. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed likely there was much more he hadn't told her, though she began thinking it was for the best. Maybe that was what he figured out, in the end. She loved him, but her love had its limits.

The careful equilibrium of their marriage depended on Jack knowing more about Max than she. Except this time he feigned innocence and she found it difficult to believe that Max wouldn't have said anything at all. If only to punish her. She prepared for the worst, but it never came. Jack didn't seem to care.

"So what did he tell you?" she asked.

He cocked his head and touched her shoulder. "He just said it was time for him to move on."

"That's it."

"That's it."

She shrugged off his hand, too furious to speak.

"He'll be fine. I have buddies up at Greeley. They'll keep an eye on him." He stopped, though she could tell he had more on his mind. "You know, he's old enough to take care of himself. Let him. Let him make his decisions. You've made yours."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He shook his head. “You need everyone to weigh in. He’s not like that. He’s smarter than either one of us.”

“Book smart isn’t street smart.”

“He’s fought in a fucking war, Alyssa. If that doesn’t make him street smart, I don’t know what does.” Jack took a deep breath and turned to leave. “He’s always been this way. Flighty. You just didn’t want to see it.”

“I think we should fly up and talk to him.”

Jack looked disgusted. “He’ll be fine. He’s better off.”

“Better off?” she said, incredulous.

“I’m not flying up there and neither are you.”

“I’m not one of your troops. I don’t take orders from you.”

“You’re just going to make it worse for him. Having his big sister chase him up there. Do you know how that’s going to seem to the guys? He’s already got enough trouble. Let him start over.”

She wondered for the first time in a long time how much Jack knew about the men Max was seeing off-base. “What are you talking about? Where is this coming from?”

“You encouraged him.”

“Of course I did. What do you want me to do? Ignore him?”

“Goddamnit, Alyssa. You have to trust me. I know what he needs. And it isn’t somebody telling him it’s okay to be running around chasing guys when it can end his career. Maybe even his life.”

He had a point. But she tried calling Max once or twice during the day. After a week of no one picking up the phone, she tried all times day and night. Leaving messages. Writing letters. One time, another male voice answered the phone and she thought she dialed it wrong, but she asked the young man to repeat it back and it was correct. She tried imagining what it might be like there, how cold and dark it was getting. How cold and dark it stayed.

“Is my brother Sergeant Eaves there?” she asked.

“No brothers here,” he said with a slight accent. “Just us boys.”

“Who are you?”

He laughed. “Who are you?”

“I’m his sister.”

“I would hope so if he’s your brother. Who is he, by the way?”

She drew in a deep breath. “His name is Max Eaves. He’s a Staff Sergeant.”

“I know plenty of Maxes but none of them have a sister that sounds as sexy as you.”

She was disgusted by his half-hearted attempt to flirt with her. “My husband thinks so too.”

“Well whenever you’re done with him, I’ll volunteer to be next.”

“So why don’t you give me your name. Spell it clearly so I know who to ask for.”

“Private Oscar Colbert,” he said and then proceeded to spell Private as Privy, interchanging other letters though she made them out clear enough.

“Well now that I have your name, *Privy* Colbert, how about you help me out?”

“I did. I gave you my name and number.”

“Okay, then how about *I* help *you* out?” she says, slowly, waiting for his brain to catch up.

“That sounds like fun.”

“It will be. I’m going to hang up and call your CO to have a chat about your unhelpfulness and sexual harassment. How’s that sound?”

“Fuck, lady, seriously?”

“So have you seen my brother, Sergeant Eaves?” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said quietly.

“So where is he?”

“I don’t know, ma’am.”

“But you’ll tell him I called and you’ll ask him to call me back, right?”

“Of course, ma’am. Thank you,” he mumbles. “Have a nice day. Er. Bye.”

But Max never called back. So she sent him an email, her first, with Aidan’s help, from a computer Jack had built from harvested parts of others from the Com Center where he was a communications manager. It was in the garage until Aidan became obsessed with it the month before and moved it to build it in his room.

The next day Max sent an email back telling her that he didn’t see what all the fuss was about, that he was fine. He wrote:

*Aidan can come visit me anytime. I’ll teach him all the stuff he can’t do there. Hunting, fishing, hiking. All that wilderness shit Charlie tried to teach us when we were kids and you hated.*

*This is just greener pastures for me. A strategic career move I needed to take. Jack may want to stay there for as long as he can, but I don’t. I*

*don't want to be bored and restless. I need change. I tried to tell you but you didn't want to listen.*

*The Army was going to move me somewhere eventually and I wanted a say. I've got buddies here. Good men. Plus they're letting me play with new stuff. It's pretty cool. Can't talk about it, but it's better than other places they could send me. I'm not alone. Isn't that what you wanted?*

She was flabbergasted that he sounded so happy. The more she thought about it, the angrier she became until early the next morning, before dawn, when she heard Aidan slip out the front door for his morning run, she went into his room and typed a reply:

*Don't come home.*

She sat staring at the blank screen after she pressed "Send." Shaking.

She wished she hadn't, but there was no way to get it back. It was gone. He was gone. There was no turning back time, no way to fix it. In many ways, it was like he died. She remembers sobbing as quietly as she could that morning, sitting in her son's chair. She didn't want him to find her that way but she couldn't move, not for a long time. Not until Jack came in and led her out. Not until he put his arms around her. She doesn't remember how long they stayed that way. But from then on, time seemed to become endless and expendable—gushing past her through a newly opened artery.

#### **Presidio of San Francisco, June 1994**

Jack stumbles, half-awake and barefoot, across his porch, one ear listening for an intruder, one hand reaching for the gun on his side that isn't there.

Thirty-six hours. That's how long he's been awake, fatigue clawing at his brain. Only to come home and chase phantoms in his front lawn.

*Fucking fantastic.*

No moon, no stars. Streetlights emit dull haloes of light. Cars crouch along each side of the street. Somewhere a car door slams. But the moment he steps off his porch, a switch flips on and adrenaline surges; his body crackles like the transformer twenty feet in front of him.

He can't get the image of his wife out of his mind. How she looked *right through him*. Then she was gone. He can't account for the loss of time, for the way she seemed to pop in and out. It's different than the other blackouts he's had. When they happened, he woke up, so he knew he'd lost consciousness. But now, he was awake the whole time. There wasn't even any dizziness or pain. He should talk to his CO about going to a shrink. He knows it. But he can't. Who knows what they would do. Maybe kick him out. He'd seen them kick out guys for less. Even after a tour in Vietnam and two tours in the Gulf, they'd still just give him a sheet of paper saying he did a decent job. *Thank you for your service* written on what may as well have been toilet paper. Wouldn't amount to shit. Jobs for vets like him didn't exist. Not unless you were an officer with a degree under your belt or a cripple. Besides, he'd have to start a whole new life, one foreign as the moon.

The cigarette butt looks like a smashed worm on the pavement. His toes ache from the cold, from the shoes he forgot. Icy fingers on his arms, legs, piercing his thin shirt and boxers. Thousands of men stationed at the Presidio, half or more probably smoked, but when he kneels down to pick it up, he catches a whiff and knows instantly it isn't a cigarette at all.

He pinches the roach, undecided about what to do with it. He can't take it inside and put it in his trash. He can't dump it in someone else's lawn or trash. Both were too risky. When he hears footsteps behind him, he shoves it deep into his pocket, ready to punch whichever idiot newbie was smoking up on his front lawn. A hand catches his fist, holding it firm, locking his elbow and shoulder in place. "What the fuck—"

"Nice welcome home," Max says. He lets go.

Somehow Jack isn't surprised. In fact, he's partially relieved. "You deserve it, asshole."

"Where's the love, bro?" His curly black hair matted to his forehead, curls forming upside down question marks. He grins and slides on top of the hood of Jack's car. "But I guess you're right. I deserve it." The nearest streetlight draws a long shadow across his face.

"So what's going on? What are you doing here?" Jack asks.

Max shrugs. He pulls out a small bag of weed and rolling paper. "Thought you could use one of these."

"Put that shit away." Jack tries to snatch it off the cold metal but Max is too fast. The joint's already between his lips.

"Who made you Dolly the Prude?" He lights it, the end glowing. "Go ahead and take it then."

Max holds it out. The smoke teases Jack's nose for all the wrong reasons. Jack doesn't want to want it, but he does. An old bad habit only Max knew about. He glares at Max.



“Go ahead, Jack. I dare you.”

Jack tucks his hands under his arms. “I’m too old for this shit. *We’re* too old. I’m going back to bed. You want to piss your career good-bye, go ahead. You didn’t need to fly down here to do it in my front lawn.”

“C’mon.” Max takes a long drag. “For old times’ sake. All the good boys and girls of the Army are asleep and those who aren’t are at their posts. Wifey isn’t going to catch you. It’s just you and me, *amigo*.”

Only it isn’t.

Alyssa was awake, even at the window, but he doesn’t want to tell Max this, how close to the precipice of their undoing they are. Jack glances up at the empty window. A horrible feeling sinks in. She knew he was here and she wanted to avoid him. Still doing some crazy female dick-dance with him, asking him questions she already knows the answer to and then seeing if she can trip him up.

Jack crosses his arms, feeling foolish. He leans against the car, not wanting to admit Max’s childish attempt to entice him is working. After the night he’s already, had the smoke does its work quickly. He slips into the warm haziness of not caring. Part of him even thinks, *what the hell*, even though he knows better. It wasn’t so long ago that they would turn a blind eye to such things. Sure drugs were illegal, but if you showed up and did your job, if you *seemed* sober, that was enough. Before random piss tests became the norm and accountability rose to the top of evaluations. Before Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. Before the Gulf War. Before Aidan. Now rules exist out of habit rather than reason. For good or for bad, Jack normally finds peace in the Army’s policies and procedures. He

likes that there are boundaries, that not everything is as immutable as it once seemed when he was younger. Without hierarchies, there would be chaos. They could never take on an enemy and win. And Max had benefited from those hierarchies too. He was the one who came home with a Bronze Star from the Gulf War. But that had been it. Max hadn't made rank while Jack was now two stripes ahead of him.

"See, this is why you need one. Because you're getting all serious and shit. I know that face. That isn't the Jack *I* knew. Isn't close to the best version of Jack I've ever known. You're just old because you want to be. So don't be."

Jack grunts—almost a laugh—in spite of himself. Max has an odd logic that's difficult to ignore. "You know I'd be destroying federal property, right?" Jack says.

"Is that right?"

"They own my ass, so yeah. Yours too."

Max smiles, his whole body relaxed on the front of Jack's Camaro. "Doesn't have to be that way."

Jack shakes his head, leaning against his car. "What way, then?" He's tempted to tell him to get off so he doesn't scratch the paint, but Max looks like he owns it. Like he owns the world. Jack is surprised at his confidence, at how much less like a boy and more like a man he finally appears.

Max leans forward, lowering his voice. "I'm done. Getting out. Got a project with some guys. Thought you might be interested."

"You're never going to make it as a civilian. You don't have it in you." The thought of Max on the outside, without all the nets to catch him is ludicrous. Beyond that,

Jack can't imagine living a different life. Even when Alyssa mentions it half-heartedly, testing the waters, it's never felt right. "A new euphemism for drugs?"

Max shakes his head. "I need your help, old man. You're the only one I trust. We could make a shitload of money. Get out of the business of almost getting killed."

He's serious, Jack thinks. Shit. "I'd have to talk to Alyssa." He hates how it comes out like a flimsy excuse. He wants to mean it, except the prospect of telling Alyssa anything about this night makes him grimace.

They stand in awkward silence. Max's leg starts to shake.

Jack looks up at the window, like he expects to see her there. But she's not. Thank god.

"I came here to talk to you. Not Alyssa. She can't know about this," Max says.

"How do you suppose I do that? She's going to know when I retire."

"So what? I'm just supposed to disappear with you doing some project you still haven't told me about?"

Max's face hardens. It seems effortless as a smile, except Jack can tell Max isn't joking anymore. Something smells, Jack thinks. He wonders how he can get Max to tell him more about this project and why he's really here without agreeing to do anything. At least not yet.

"Like I said Jack. She can't know anything about us."

"Us? There is no us," Jack says. "And there's no way I'm joining something you can't even tell me about."

"Yes, you can. You will. Or I'll do a lot more than smoke a joint on your lawn."

Jack stops. “Threats? Seriously? You never grow up. Always wanting to give a big middle finger to the Man even though he’s your bread and butter. I know you’re up to something crazy and I’m not getting involved. Not me, Alyssa or Aidan. That’s why you came, right?” But even as he asks, Jack realizes how unlikely that is. How all of this is part of a larger lie. One Max has no intention of telling him about. He suspects it involves Alyssa and the thought of that, of her betrayal, makes him sick. But Max doesn’t look guilty. He doesn’t look scared. Jack can feel his stare, how it spreads across Jack’s body.

“The truth is that you don’t belong here anymore. You haven’t for awhile. You know it. That’s why you left, wasn’t it?” Jack turns to head back inside but Max grabs his arm, his hand hot and sweaty, despite the cold. Jack doesn’t resist. Nose-to-nose, Jack can’t help but see how much pain is inside Max’s eyes. How much of himself Jack sees inside that pain. He shares this with Max. This burden of a lingering desire that has never quite disappeared between them.

“I left because I wasn’t happy here anymore. I used to think watching you and Alyssa be happy would be enough, but it wasn’t. It isn’t.” Max pauses. Tears fill his eyes. “Are you happy, Jack?”

Max’s hand bites into him like handcuffs. The more Jack struggles to free his hand, the tighter Max’s gets. “What do you care? You left.”

“Are you?”

“Sure, we’re happy,” he mutters.

Max drops his arm. “That’s not what I asked.”

“Whatever it is you think I’m going to say, I won’t.” The last time they were this close to each other was long before they both enlisted in the military, just before Jack proposed to Alyssa. Max was furious.

“Even if you won’t be honest with me, you need to be honest with my sister. She deserves better. I told her not to marry you.”

“I know. She told me.”

“And did she tell you why?” Max takes another step closer, like some crazy drill sergeant from basic hoping he’d show fear. But Max was a scrawny kid in basic; scrawny and scared. He needed Jack then. Desperately needed him. Especially when Marty Patterson (who they called Motormouth) would call Max “faggot.” Jack remembers how their bunk mates would look at him, waiting for his reaction. How he knew, even then, whatever action he took would define him. He wanted to pummel that kid, that big fat moron who lied about his age to get in a year early, to get away from his psycho parents. He remembers, before then, bailing Max out when he would steal or lie or destroy school property. He remembers defending him, even to Helena, because despite how much she adored him, she had her limits too. Jack realized Max did it deliberately. He was the Boy Who Cried Wolf and when he cried, it wasn’t because he was afraid, it was because he was desperate for the Wolf to actually return. For the Wolf to be Jack.

“She doesn’t have to tell me you’re selfish. I already know. Which is why we aren’t friends anymore,” Jack says.

“We were never friends.”

Jack's surprised at how such a simple declaration can wound him. How Jack feels it as surely as if Max shattered his ribs and kicked loose his heart.

Max touches Jack's cheek, running a finger along his hairline, over the tip of his ear to the back of his head. He leans in, pressing his lips to Jack's. Something deep inside him alights. But it burns fast, too fast and then that place inside him is darker than it's ever been. Many things have crawled there to die. So many people. Buried and left behind. He can't go back. He doesn't want to taste the salt on Max's lips. They bring him back away from the boys they once were into the men they must pretend to be. Jack doesn't want to feel the emptiness he knows will replace the salt, blood and tears once Max is gone. And Max would always leave. That's what he did. That's who he was.

Max pulls back, eyes closed. "I knew it," he whispers.

"Knew what?" Jack says. "You don't know shit." Any other words that might have been said are washed away by the flood of anger and shame Jack feels. His hands rise, shoving Max back as hard as he can.

A porch creaks. Jack feels sick. "Who's there?"

Max freezes and then his head swivels towards the sound. "What? Where?" He looks surprised, maybe even scared.

"Whoever you are, get your spying ass out here," Jack says. Except there's only one person he can think it can be. "Alyssa?" He hears footsteps.

"Don't you talk to my sister like that," Max says.

Jack digs his boot into the pavement. He feels the roach in his pocket. His hand curls around it, making a fist.

“Get off my property,” Jack says, turning to walk back inside. He’ll find her and he’ll explain. Whatever it takes. He’ll make it right. “Don’t come back. Ever.”

Max frowns. “What?”

“All you do is fuck things up. Your life. My life. My marriage.”

“It’s always been doomed. Look at you, Jack. You don’t even know who you really are.”

“Shut up. You’re nothing but a damn liar fag. You’re nothing.”

Nothing. It sticks in his head, his throat, and his heart. He needs to bleed it out. Out of himself. Out of Max. But Max doesn’t even seem to hear him. He just keeps going, on and on like he’s on some stage doing a soliloquy of the final act. Grand standing.

“You know it. Alyssa knows it. Hell, even Aidan knows it. The Army doesn’t own you, Jack. I do. I own you—”

Jack pulls back his arm and swings it hard against Max’s jaw, feeling the hollow hinge near his ear give way, the bones rattling to break. *Dumbass motherfucker, I’m not your toy. Not your boy. Not your anything. Not yours.* Max recovers from the blow and spits blood into the grass. He rubs his cheek and looks behind Jack. He smiles, bleeding. An ugly, odd happiness dancing in his eyes. Jack realizes this is all a game to him. This is payback. Just like everything in his life. Max has never taken a thing seriously. Not even someone else’s career.

He hits Max again and again. He can't even feel his hands or his legs. In some ways, he's not really there. He's somewhere else, overseas, in someone's war, doing his job. Fighting for his life.

"Jack!"

He hears Alyssa calling to him from the oldest of dreams, the ones he used to have in his tent in the Gulf. *Jack*, she would say. *Come home*. But he can't because he doesn't know what home is. He doesn't know who she is or who Max is.

"Oh my god. Jesus, Jack. Stop! What are you doing? Stop. STOP!"

Her hysteria is like a drug. Nails dig into his arm. She tries to pull his arm away, to shove him down and back but she is tiny, weak. Insignificant. And he has a job to do. *Kill the enemy*. He swats her away, his hand tangling in her loose, thick black hair. "Jack! JACK!" He looks up at the moon, because the voice is coming from above him now. It isn't until he sees her face, that same ghostly face he saw upstairs standing at the window that he pauses. He tries to take a breath, to turn the world back right side up again. The sky, the trees all spin. A kaleidoscope of darkness streaked with thin white lights. She doesn't even seem to be real. He puts his hand out to touch her arm, to pull her away from Max. She pushes it back. He sucks in air and stumbles back, falling on his butt.

He turns to watch the woman in front of him, leaning over Max. Also his wife.

The shock of her is enough to separate him from his anger. He connects Max's blood on his hands with Alyssa's hysterical questions and Max's silence—the weight of it growing with every second, with the idea that Jack may have killed him—a man he has loved far longer than he wants to admit. His hand swells, throbs. He doesn't dare walk



over to where Alyssa sits with Max. He can see Max is awake and alert. Relief quickly twists back into anger.

“What?” he says. “What the fuck are you doing to my head? Both of you. You did this together, didn’t you? Some sick joke to get back at me.”

Alyssa turns. “What are you talking about? Are you crazy?” She falters, losing the words. Such a hateful face. He’s never seen such hatred before. It makes him wish he could take Max’s place, but the wish lasts only briefly, for a moment, until Max opens his mouth again.

“It’s fine,” Max mumbles. “I’m fine. Get off me. I’m not your goddamned child, Alyssa.” He’s flailing his arms and legs, pissed that she’s trying to tend to him.

Jack turns away, feeling his lungs contract, like he can’t get enough air.

“What happened?” But she asks it without conviction. “What did you do?”

He doesn’t know who she’s asking. And he doesn’t care. He needs to get away.

Jack wanders inside. The dark living room contorting around his vision. He leans against the door, waiting for her pounding and yelling to start and praying all the while that she won’t. He can’t stand to wake up Aidan, and then he wonders how he could’ve slept through the noise they’d made. Unless he had on his headphones.

Oh god. Jack can’t fathom what his son will think. But as he passes Aidan’s door, it hasn’t opened—the same sliver of white light at the bottom that Jack’s seen every night for the past six months lining the bottom. Tomorrow he’ll have to explain. To Alyssa. Aidan. His CO. His hand throbs. It’s probably broken. No doubt, Jack will be blamed. They may even come arrest him. Unless he turns himself in. But that would be stupid,

wouldn't it? He might lose a stripe. His job. Be moved. They might kick him out. Every step presents a new possibility, some worse than others. But on the inside of all of them, deep down, he can't get Max's face out of his head. How resigned he looked, how tranquil. Like violence was what he expected from Jack all along.

"Are you okay?"

Alyssa stands at the edge of their bedroom. Did she pass him? He shakes his head against her image: arms wrapped around herself like she's freezing.

"What happened, Jack? What—"

"Don't talk to me," he says. "Don't you say a word." Tears blur his eyes. He shakes his head until they recede. He passes her, crawling into the shower, twisting the nozzle. The hot water runs, scalding him. He prays it'll run forever. Even when it burns, he doesn't move. One long continuous stream of rage pours over him, stinging his eyes, his cheeks, his lips, his arms, his legs, running over and through him, pooling under him. He stays until it runs cold, until he has no choice but to crawl back out again.

Alyssa senses her husband before she sees him. His shudder and quake and then the way the bed caves under his heavy, cold frame as he climbs into bed. She still feels heaviness in her limbs, an un-realness left over from the odd feeling of being in two places at once. But the second time, things were less clear. It felt more like a bad dream. One she has had and can dismiss. One she had to forget. Max smoking. Jack yelling. The other woman stepping between them. Then nothing. She doesn't want to know the rest,

not after seeing how angry Jack was and feeling afraid of him. Then after his shower, the anger gave way to a sadness that seemed to emanate from his every pore.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. He’s crying. Her heart breaks for him, for what it must take for the strongest man she’s ever known to come to her and weep. The other woman has created a fissure in her and it scares her. Losing Jack scares her more. He grounds them, even when he’s gone, when he’s not physically there. That he will come back is her center of gravity. It’s the only way she knows how to define home.

“It’s okay,” she says.

He pushes her away, turning on his side. “Just leave me alone.”

But she can tell he needs her. For the first time in a long time—really needs her. It’s as steady as white noise in the back of her mind. She pulls up the sheets and blankets and piles them on top of him. Then. She presses herself against him, wrapping her arms around his neck and draping her leg over his, willing warmth into his body from hers. His eyes are closed.

She kisses the back of his neck. His ear. He rolls back over on his back. She straddles him.

“You’re so cold. I can warm you up,” she whispers in his ear.

He’s pawing at her nightgown, slipping it off. Pulling his boxers off. He seems delirious. Kissing her. Holding onto her. She isn’t about to break whatever spell he’s under. It seems not so long ago they were wild with love and hormones and liked to experiment in different positions, rooms, wherever, whenever, though if she really thinks about it, those times were before Aidan. Before obligations, sleepless nights and

deployments. Aidan wasn't a surprise. She'd already decided even before she lost her virginity to Jack that she wanted to have a child with him. She knew Jack loved both of them, that when he was confronted with the choice he would have to make between them, her only advantage was to give him what she knew he always wanted: a family. But the fact of her pregnancy happening so easily, so effortlessly, took her breath away. The only thing she didn't count on was Max. How, despite his pain at Jack's choosing her over him, he would still love her. That love would always be at the root of his forgiveness.

And then, thereafter, all she had were miscarriages. She knew she was being punished. They all were. Even as they each moved on with their lives, fulfilling the traditional roles society—especially the Army—demanded. This pain, the loss she never realized she might feel, like her anger, has become a noose around her throat. She feels it now as he pulls out of her and lays back, exhausted. It was like her body had given up, and as a result so had his. She always thought she was born to be a wife and mother, that there was nothing else she could ever want more and yet now, she realizes how wrong she's been. How wrong they've all been.

*I pull the letter out from the mattress beneath her breast. I want to yell: Get that monster out of your bed! But I know Alyssa won't listen. She's been gobsmacked again.*

*I walk downstairs. Flip the dial on the stove. It coughs, once, twice. Then the sickening smell of gas fills the kitchen. I hold out Max's lighter. The ripple and rise of flames: a blue crown. It consumes the letter quickly. I toss the ashes outside. The only place I know she'll never find them. The wind takes them, sweeping them up and away. I*

*imagine they'll settle along the rust-red rafters for a time. Then cling to a wall of poppies. Maybe even melt into the dark waters of the Bay.*

*Outside, Max curls himself in a ball in the back seat of his car. He's finally stopped bleeding. After I climb into the driver's side, I cannot look at his face. It brings tears to my eyes. His pain. Not just the bruises but what I cannot see. It makes me want to go back inside, flip the dial on again. Let their castle fill with gas. Burn it all down.*

*I know my existence is tenuous. I feel like a shadow of the sleeping Alyssa—an incomplete version of her not quite fully formed. If I could cut the cord, I would, but I don't know how this works, why it's happened. Nor do I know when she'll pull me back inside her again. It's already happened once. It will happen again.*

*"Let me take you to a hospital," I say. It's the least I can do.*

*"No."*

*The absolute least. "You're in pain."*

*"I'll live."*

*I reach out to touch his face. His has always been a beautiful, delicate face. Prettier than mine. High cheekbones, long eyelashes. A natural pout. I wonder how he'll heal, if he'll ever look the same again. The right side of his face is so swollen, his eye has disappeared. His eyelids are pressed tight like a pair of pursed lips. His cheek is full and dark blue. He has two cuts, one over his eye and one on the side near his hair line.*

*"Please," I beg. "I don't have much time. Let me take you."*

*His voice is low but firm. "Stay here with him where you belong. I won't blame you."*

*Yes he will. So will I. "I don't belong here."*

*"I've always known who comes first." He tries to push himself up to open the door but he can't get a grip. His eyes close. He turns pale.*

*"If you did, you wouldn't say something like that to me." I start the car.*

*"He'll never forgive you if you leave with me."*

*I think about telling him about Alyssa who is still sleeping in bed with Jack, but I realize Max needs me to choose him over Jack just as Jack chose me over him. "I don't need his forgiveness or his permission," I say.*

*He slides back down into the backseat. "We'll see."*

*I bite my tongue. "Where are we going?"*

*"We have to head south to Bakersfield and then east into the mountains."*

*We've haven't been there since we were kids. "Why? Why do you want to go back there?"*

*"I've been staying there since I left Greeley."*

*I know that isn't the whole story and I consider the possibility that my impulsive big brother isn't so impulsive anymore. That he has planned this all along. "There's got to be a better place," I say. "One that's closer."*

*He's amused by my aversion. I watch him smirk through the rearview mirror. "I need a medic and there's one there waiting for me. They don't have any phones so I can't call. We'll just have to go. You can drop me off and leave, if you want."*

*Just like that we're going back to a place I swore I'd never return to. Because the last time we were there someone died. Jack's father. It was my idea to bury him in the*

*forest floor. We drive for an hour, passing one hospital after another. I want to turn off but I don't because as much as I want to help him, I know hospitals can invite questions I'm not ready to answer. Not until I figure out what happened.*

*Behind us, the cityscape shrinks and the Pacific Ocean gives way to canyons that feel like roller coasters. The sky lightens and the world seems to pulse with it. Past San Jose, the buildings evaporate into farmland and the sun casts its golden net across the valleys and hills before us. A patchwork of crops with tall poles of irrigation bent over and multiplied an acre deep. They look like skinny giraffes. Several hours later, grass rises up to wave the longest of good-byes and then the desert encroaches. Mountains cut jagged lines across the sky. The lowest of them are bald and tan.*

*"So what's going on?" I ask as we leave Bakersfield. "Why did you come down here?" The further away we get, the more I feel myself slipping back into old habits, into wanting to be the siblings we were before Jack. I want to know Max's secrets, for him to want to confide in me the way he once did. I want him to tell me why he showed up at Alyssa's house. Why he kissed Jack. Whether he really came for Jack or for me because I don't believe any of it.*

*But his voice has become even, unreadable, like Jack's when I ask him questions about when he's going to retire. "Aidan told me you were having trouble. I thought I could help. Then things got out of control."*

*"Just the way you like them."*

*"That's not fair. I didn't come down here to make trouble. He's worried about you. So am I."*

*I'm not sure how much of this I believe. I want to but I can't because I know Max as well as I know myself. "I'm not the one who just got his jaw busted. Maybe you should worry about yourself."*

*"Aren't you going to ask why? Or you already know and you're actually driving me somewhere to finish the job Jack started."*

*"I guess I should be pissed, but you're just being you. Jack on the other hand..."*

*I let the rest fall away. I didn't want to think about it because I didn't want to consider what part of me has known for some time now that Jack might be gay.*

*He tries to laugh but ends up groaning. "Yeah, right, so what?" He mimics my voice.*

*"I was going to leave him. I was." These are my words, not Alyssa's. No doubt that's where Max's disbelief arises: out of looking at me and seeing her, a problem I can't correct without creating so many others.*

*"Sure," he says.*

*I grip the steering wheel with both hands to steady myself. The car wants to go its own way because the road is slippery from a rainstorm. "We've been done for awhile now, even if he didn't want to admit it. You just gave me a reason."*

*"You didn't have one?"*

*"Oh I had plenty, but none of them were enough."*

*"I guess you should thank me then."*

*I laugh. "Thanks for being such an asshole."*



*He laughs too. "My pleasure." Then he's silent for a long time and I wonder if he's fallen asleep until he says: "You know you'll go back."*

*"I won't. I hate him. For what he did to you. For pretending to love me for so long when clearly he had other things he wanted more."*

*"Look at me, Lysy," Max says. "He doesn't want me."*

*"Then what does he want?"*

*"How the fuck should I know? I hate him. I don't want to know what he wants. I don't care anymore."*

*"You can't hate anyone. It isn't in your blood."*

*"We share the same blood."*

*He hiccups and I realize he's trying not to sob. His mood swing catches me off guard. Instead of the pity I should feel, there's a hot flash of familiar anger. A resurrection of our old roles when he would do something wrong on purpose and be incapable of dealing with the consequences. But he would this time. I would make Max fix this. Even if it meant making him go back with me to face Jack.*

*"Stop it," I say. "Just stop it. You don't get to be the martyr here."*

*"What if he'd done this to you?"*

*The thought hasn't occurred to me before and I refuse it now. Jack may be a lot of things but he wouldn't hurt his family. Not intentionally. Not unless he was provoked.*

*"You were fucking with him, Max. What did you expect?" Though deep down, I would like to think my brother doesn't deserve this.*

*Huge sequoias thicken alongside the road and I turn off, driving through the pullout, between the trees and parking in a narrow space behind some bushes. The wind brushes through the trees until they shiver. High above us the sky is more white than blue. We've been driving for hours but the mid-day sun seems too early still. It hides behind the thick entanglement of branches.*

*"Looks the same," I say, though it's been two decades since I've thought of this place and how Jack's grandfather is buried in the ground behind the cabin.*

*Max pushes past me, intent on hobbling on his own. A river runs several hundred feet beyond us; its waters oddly violent, though shallow. Max splashes across. He tried to drown me here once when I was nine and he was thirteen. During our first trip "on the run." It was all in good fun, he said. But it wasn't. Not for me. It was cold and I can still feel the water in my nose and lungs, how it rattled my brain. I can feel him wanting me to know the lengths he'd go to protect anything he felt was his. Like Jack. What he would do if I ever tried to take it from him. And yet I had. I did it anyway. I took Jack and we both knew I would. It was almost like he wanted to punish me for what I had not yet done but what he knew I would do. The idea of him as seer gives me chills. I consider turning back.*

*He turns, his voice back to normal, his swollen lip and right side pulsing with pain, the ridge rising to curl his lip up into an unnatural smile. I realize it's the only thing about my brother I still recognize, the way he can be both enemy and friend at the same time. The way you can feel loved and loathed and still follow him anywhere. He is some incarnation of a king and I feel like Morgan le Fay. There are worse things we could be. I*

*couldn't imagine being Guinevere and being corrupted by beauty the way my mother was.*

*"Are you coming or what?"*

### **High Sierras, 1969**

On the third trip our father made us take in as many years, Neil Armstrong stuck his flag in the moon and Charlie's easy-chair drinking started to sound a lot less like gibberish and a lot more like a manifesto. Or at least it would if our house was in fact bugged the way Charlie insisted. Max and I thought he was full of shit. We knew how pissed he was that his government buddies put Neil up there; buddies who, like him, didn't really exist and never would in the eyes of the world. Civil service workers were nobodies. They were desk jockeys, unimportant and invisible, especially molecular biologists like Charlie whose field wasn't even officially recognized.

Working at Ames wasn't just a job for Charlie, it was a calling, a full-fledged fantasy come true. He was a believer in Good versus Evil (and not the religious kind, much to our mother Helena's chagrin). Couple that with an inflatable ego and you get a middle-aged man with a hero complex living in a dream that probably should've died at the age of forty but persisted, growing ever stronger at the age of forty-three. I'm almost certain I perpetuated the problem. I was obsessed with comic books, and Charlie and I would have long conversations about which secret identity we would choose and why. It was our thing. Max would sit nearby and roll his eyes, his lap heavy with history books laden with a different brand of truth. Where our heroes were empty and flat, his were

legendary (or so he would say). The real deal. It didn't matter that so many of them hadn't technically shaped the world, but had chopped it up into itty-bitty pieces. Max didn't seem to care. He was fascinated with anyone, living or dead, who rejected government-issued ideals.

Living or not, all of these heroes were no more than two-dimensional creations, which suited Charlie just fine. You were right or wrong. But the more I watched Charlie fall on one side, the more I felt better about living in the no-man's-land of in-between. I hated how Charlie's visions crippled him. I hated being afraid. Charlie would never admit to it, but his fear was infectious. He wasn't just afraid of invisible spies, he was especially afraid of being average. He felt the pressure to be powerful and brilliant but was all too willing to conform and he hated himself for it. Alcohol didn't have the effect he (or we) hoped when he binged on gin. Instead of calming him down, it made him frenetic. He developed an itch to run away. Except he knew he couldn't really run away. He loved his work too much. And his boss was always telling him how much they needed him, how much his contributions meant to the American way of life.

Deep down, I think he liked the idea of men in suits, much nicer suits than the one he could afford on his salary, appearing out of nowhere to haul him away. Deep down he was disappointed that nobody seemed to notice when he was gone for a few days. When he got back, all they said was, "We're glad you're spending so much time with your family. You should do it more often." He wasn't even important enough to be arrested or kidnapped or tortured a little bit. Charlie was brilliant but his brilliance was a cage he couldn't see. Max and I struggled to get out and Helena wanted to lock herself inside

with him. Where we saw impotence, she saw restraint. Where we saw crazy paranoia, she saw cautiousness in the face of naked truth. I blamed love. Max blamed sex. He said a woman's knickers were like a mouse trap. You want the cheese so much you'll sacrifice your neck just for a taste.

"Gross," I said.

"My neck's too precious," he said. "Besides I'm lactose intolerant."

And I admit: I was a sucker for his jokes. He had a way of making everything seem much less fucked up than it actually was.

This trip wasn't any different than the other two. Charlie came home one day and said, "Let's go" and we went. Just like that. Max didn't even fight with him this time, which was suspicious in and of itself. My brother hated these trips even more than me. We had few friends but the few we'd been able to cultivate at the private Catholic prison Helena called a school would feel insulted that we hadn't had the decency to tell them we were going. There was the tiniest part of me, this little voice that asked: What if Charlie was right to be concerned about our well-being? What if the secrets he kept were only important as they existed as a test? A way for his bosses to know his loyalty. Helena once said, you could always tell a secret but once it was told, there was no way of reeling it back in. It was out there, flapping in the wind, naked and vulnerable. I didn't like that kind of absoluteness.

We'd been driving for close to eight hours, stopping twice for gas and once for Max and I to pee on the backside of a casino because we drank too much Coke when we left, knowing we wouldn't be sleeping any time soon. I figured we had to be close to the

California border, if not over it. Charlie was like a homing pigeon. He returned to the same campsite he'd taken us the last two times even though it made more sense to choose some place new (if, in fact, he was trying to hide from people looking for him, the way he claimed). But we didn't quite make it because we ran out of gas. The VW bus sputtered to a stop in the middle of the highway and all hell broke loose.

The moment Charlie started cussing, I knew Max was going to disappear. He hated it when our parents fought, but he hated it even more when they made up. A heavy silence would descend—a quiet contentment which would always exclude Max and I.

The woods were thick along either side of the narrow highway; wet with the afterbirth of a storm. Trees sagged all around us, dripping with it. Max and I were the only things dry. He started sliding along the edge of the road in the mud, scrambling to get as far away as possible. He headed straight down but when I looked, there was nothing but trees disappearing into a thick layer of dead leaves and darkness. I could barely see the sun.

Max walked quickly as the world darkened. I stopped and yelled at him to stop but he left and I decided Good Riddance. He was acting too much like Charlie lately. Not thinking, not caring about anything but himself. Just getting in over his head and then expecting everyone to fall in line. Well, I wasn't falling in his line. I was going to make my own.

I heard a loud THWACK in the distance. An ominous, sharp sound repeated over and over. An ax chopping something I hoped was wood. It echoed through the trees, marking time in a timeless place. The wind rifled through the redwood branches and the

thwack-thwack continued slow and steady. I smelled a fire. The air seemed to grow colder. Standing still, my body shook. Walking was better. I kept thinking how idiotic it was for my brother to leave me here, how much trouble he'd be in once we got back and I started to wish I'd fallen in line. Just a little. Not that I would ever admit it to him. The thwacking stopped. So did I. I turned around, heading back towards what I hoped was our VW bus. Only every direction looked the same. I ran into a tree. A slight trickle of blood ran down my forehead. I tasted blood and cursed Max. Cursed him to hell and then signed myself because even though I'd started to doubt God, I wasn't quite through with Him yet.

"Crap." I hated to call for him. "Max!"

It wasn't long before I heard a loud scratching and the shuffling of leaves. Two figures altered the darkness in front of me.

I rushed him and slammed my fist against his chest, except a hand grabbed my wrist, holding it just above and the chest I thought I was about to beat wasn't my brother's but another boy's. He was shirtless and smelled like pinecones. His hand was so strong that I couldn't wrench my wrist free. The more I struggled, the tighter he held.

"C'mon now. Don't be like that," Max said.

"Let me go!"

He did. "Hold up," the shadow said. "No need for violence." Then a boy as tall as Max flicked on a lighter and his face glowed next to Max's. "Not yet." He smiled, amused and clearly trying to scare me. Everything about him was solid and muscular,

even his face. He sounded old, but I suspected from how he acted he couldn't be much older than my brother.

"You're a jerk," I said.

"You don't know me."

"I know enough."

The sight of him lodged in my chest. Strong, square jaw, blonde hair sticking up with sweat and dirt.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked him. "You should put a shirt on."

"You aren't my mother."

"Where is she then?"

"Dead."

That stopped me. He turned away and started to walk back. Max scowled and then hopped to follow him.

"Are you coming or what?"

We followed the slight flicker of the boy's lighter through a narrow path until we reached a stream. It was shallow, but swift. The water soaked my feet until my toes were numb. I thought maybe they were trying to lose me again, but when they moved too far ahead, Max stopped like he was waiting for me. I expected it to get darker the deeper we went, but instead the air lightened, giving way to the darkest shade of blue. Moonlight filtered down onto a clearing beyond the last row of trees. Not far up, a long, rectangular cabin was set against the hills. A half-moon pulsed white, cradled in the sky. Small



windows glowed along the cabin's side. My brother hurried ahead with the bare-chested boy who carried his ax over his right shoulder as easily as a coat.

The air grew colder as we walked. I wasn't used to it but didn't want to complain, especially since Max seemed fine. They stopped at the edge of the driveway where the old gargantuan carcass of a CAT tractor rested. Max leaned over to whisper something to the boy, the shadow of his head merging with the boy's until I couldn't differentiate them. He looked back at me and smiled the way I'd seen Helena smile a thousand times when she was putting a bug in Charlie's ear about me. The I'm-going-to-get-you-in-trouble-and-you-can't-stop-me look.

I wondered what trouble Max thought he could get me in since I didn't know this boy and didn't care what he thought. "Where are we going?" I demanded.

"Sssshh," the boy said. He whirled around putting his finger to his mouth.

"No," I said, louder. I was glad it was still too dark so they couldn't see how bright red my face must've been. "Max, you better tell me where we are and who this is."

The boy walked up to me and clamped his hand over my mouth. I tried to claw it off but he was much stronger than I. Probably stronger than Max. "You really are something," he said and I tried to bite him. When that failed I licked his palm. Instead of pulling his hand off and wiping it in disgust the way I imagined he would, he cocked his head and turned to Max. "You weren't kidding about her."

Max walked up to us and put his hand on the boy's arm as if to tell him to stop. "I told you, Jack," he whispered. "You said you had to see it for yourself."

The boy named Jack stepped up to me, until he was looking down. I didn't move. Damn him, he wasn't going to intimidate me.

"A day with my grandfather will get that out of her," he said.

Max laughed. I could tell he didn't like that idea, which made it all the more appealing to me. "I doubt it," he said, "She's the type who likes to be punished. Can't hold a secret to save her life. Watch, if we go back she'll blab everything to Mom and Dad. Everything. Then she knows they'll never punish me so she'll take it. And she likes it."

"I can keep a secret. When I want," I said. "Or not. You both should be arrested for kidnapping."

I waited for them to tell me they were sorry but instead they laughed. "Kidnapping?" Jack said. "Is that what you think this is? Get out. Go. I didn't want you here in the first place. Your brother just said you were interesting. For a child."

"I'm not a child," I said.

"Okay, a baby," Max said. "Always following me around like a lost puppy dog. I could tell you were ready to start crying back there. I knew we had to swoop in and save you."

He'd been cruel to me before—he was my brother after all—but this was different. This wasn't him play-acting, this was really, truly him and he was turning on me.

"Max," Jack said, as if telling him to back off and I smiled.

Jack took a step toward me and took my hand. Where mine was frozen, his was warm, tingling. He leaned close to me, whispering into my ear: “C’mon, now. We were just joking. We didn’t mean to scare you.”

I turned my head and he didn’t move away. Our lips pressed together. I felt Max suck in his breath and I loved that he was so enraged. I remembered all the times I’d snuck peeks of my mother’s soap operas, how they kissed, mouth half open, tongue to tongue. I kissed Jack so hard I thought he might fall over, but instead he stayed, his feet locked, and I felt his mouth move open as he kissed me back. That’s when I tried to step back, to get out of his arms. I didn’t think about what he might do.

“Child my ass,” Jack said when I stepped back. “Are you sure she’s only twelve?”

I felt dizzy. My chest hurt. I didn’t know why I’d done it. A perfect stranger, old as my brother, but there it was. And Max was gone.

“Max!” I yelled.

“Don’t worry,” Jack said. “He’ll be back. He always comes back.”

But that wasn’t what I was worried about. In the dim light, I turned to see the look on Jack’s face. The smugness. And I knew it wasn’t Max who’d been playing me, but him—this boy who wasn’t really a boy at all.

### **High Sierras, June 1994**

*It’s late afternoon and the sun has begun its descent. A single narrow gravel road loops in front of the cabin but the road dead-ends at the edge of the trees. I always wondered how old man Gibbs drove in and out from here but when I asked Jack once, he*

*said he didn't. The old man never drove anywhere. He walked. He made Jack walk. He said there was no place worth going if you couldn't reach it with the two legs God gave us.*

*How little this place has changed. Max hums a song. I can't remember the words, but the song is familiar. The sight of the cabin, so untouched by time, makes me sick. Max tries to hobble forward, wheezing, one hand pasted to his chest, holding in his ribs, the other leaning on my shoulder.*

*"Why here?"*

*"I've been coming here for years. Cities give me hives."*

*"And Alaska isn't rural enough for you?"*

*He frowns. "They're all a bunch of homophobic, NRA fanatics."*

*"I'm sure not all of them are."*

*He considers this for a few minutes. "No, they are. If they aren't that then they're misogynists. You live with a misogynist. Doesn't that bug you?"*

*I laugh. "That's rich coming from you."*

*"I don't hate women."*

*"No, you just want to compete with them."*

*He turns to me. "Let's get something straight. I'm not a cross-dresser or a trannie or a woman trapped in a man's body. I'm a dude. I like to have sex with other dudes. That's it."*

*"What about love?" a voice asks on the other side. Max limps over to hug the man who spoke.*

*“I gave up on love so long ago it’s like a dinosaur. Extinct.”*

*“You must be the medic,” I say, though I’m surprised at his abrupt entrance. He doesn’t look like a medic. He looks like he’s a part of the forest, like he’s been here for years and years and we’re intruding on him. Max doesn’t introduce us so I introduce myself. He has shoulder-length bronze hair and large sepia eyes that make me think of Tarzan rather than a doctor. The only problem is the bits of gray at his temples and above his ears. His boyhood has long since expired. He wouldn’t be swinging amongst the trees, especially not in the black wet suit he has on. A small wood kayak lies in the leaves near where he stood. He is tall and thin, more bones than man but his grip is surprisingly strong.*

*“You aren’t what I expected either,” Xavier says. Max sinks onto a huge boulder.*

*“Meaning?”*

*“Meaning maybe we shouldn’t expect anything at all. Maybe we should just approach one another with the understanding that we’ll ask questions first before we judge.”*

*“I shudder to think of the stories Max has told you.”*

*“Oh there’s so much. I haven’t decided yet what I believe. I guess I’ll have to wait and see now that you’re here. In the flesh.”*

*Max looks up at this. “Shut up, you liar. I’ve not told you squat about her.”*

*Xavier considers this, his eyes never leaving mine. “But I’ve seen a picture. That was enough.”*

*I laugh. "Maybe you should focus your analysis on your patient instead of on me."*

*"I thought you were indestructible, old man," Xavier says.*

*"I am. Most days," Max says. "But I think I might have a hangnail that needs treating." He holds out his hand with a limp wrist like a king would offer a ring expecting a kiss. Only Max has no ring and he's the sorriest looking king I've ever seen. In fact I can't recall him indulging in such a flagrant gay stereotype before.*

*"Tone it down," I say. "The fact that you're actually hurt means you don't need to play the part of the drama queen."*

*Xavier walks back to examine Max's face. Fingers press lightly mapping the broken blood vessels swelling his face. Max seems oblivious to it. He stares at the cabin, his expression fixed. In the daylight, there is no escaping the damage Jack has done.*

*Xavier checks Max's chest, ears, mouth. He does it quickly, but thoroughly. "Jesus, Max. My diagnosis is you got the shit beat out of you. You need rest and to not run into someone's fist again. Nothing looks broken. But it's going to hurt for awhile."*

*"I can't imagine a world where it wouldn't. I heal quickly. I'll be fine."*

*"You don't seem surprised," I wonder aloud to Xavier.*

*"If there's one thing the last five years have taught me, it's that Max likes to be loved or hated. No in-between. Hell, I almost killed him when I met him in the Gulf."*

*"Except I saved your ass so you owe me."*

*"Well, yes there was that."*

*"What happened?" I ask.*

*Max waits for Xavier to answer but he just pinches the bridge of his nose, like he can't stand the question. "I fucked up. Big time." He says it with such seriousness, I'm taken aback. He turns to pick up his kayak. "Tylenol in the cabinet above the stove. Take three and lie down. I'll be back soon."*

*The cabin is long and thin with two windows on either side of the front door. It sits up on a foundation with an enclosed porch and is built out of wood from the trees surrounding us. It has a chimney out of which smoke from the wood-burning stove once surged a long never-ending funnel into the sky. Now the place looks dark and empty. The same as when we left after burying Jack's grandfather about fifteen minutes from here. I avoid looking in that direction. Max walks round the side of the cabin.*

*"What's with him? What happened?"*

*Max tells me how he met Xavier during one of his tours in Desert Storm. Xavier was off-duty one night and a group on patrol were hit hard by insurgents. Xavier hadn't been sleeping so he grabbed some meds from the cabinet. "Conked him out," Max says. Xavier wasn't supposed to be on-duty but they needed him back. They needed as many people as they could get. Max went to get him but he was so out of it. "I asked him if he was okay, even though I could tell he wasn't. He said he was. Nicked an artery of a guy on the table." Max says the soldier probably would've died anyway, but Xavier took the blame. They charged him with negligence and dereliction of duty. They couldn't make a drug charge stick. If they had, Max says, they probably would've sent him to Leavenworth. "Instead they kicked him out, dishonorable discharge and all that bullshit.*

*Fucked him over good. He's a good medic. Could've been a great doctor. One mistake and he's done. I make a mistake and they give me a fucking medal. Worthless bastards."*

*"Sounds about right," I say.*

*Instead of walking up the steps to the cabin, he veers to the right to walk around the side.*

*"Where are you going?" I ask. "Aren't we going in?"*

*"Hell no. That place gives me the creeps."*

*Behind the cabin is a geodesic dome. I've only seen them in magazines. It's a few hundred feet behind, its triangles warping the light. Weeds have grown up tall around its white fiberglass skin. I look up and try to imagine how it must look from the sky, from where I hear birds nesting above.*

*"Who built this?"*

*"We did. But it's temporary."*

*"You and Xavier?"*

*"And a couple of other guys."*

*"You have quite the harem, then," I say.*

*He turns to look at me with disgust. "Uh, no."*

*"What then?"*

*"We're buddies. That's it. We have a common purpose and we've helped each other out. But we're all very different. Xavier, especially."*

*That last bit is for my benefit, but I don't want it. I'm swearing off men for now.*

*"We?"*



*"Yeah, you'll meet the rest soon enough. Right now I need to call Aidan," Max mumbles as we reach the front door of the dome.*

*"What? Why?"*

*"Don't freak out."*

*"What did you do?" I say, grabbing his arm.*

*He yanks it back and opens the front door. "He contacted me."*

*"Why?" We step inside.*

*"He asked me not to say."*

*I don't believe him. He picks up what could've been a cell phone except it's much bigger, much thicker and much uglier than any cell phone I've ever seen.*

*"He would've told me," I whisper, even though I know very well he probably wouldn't. But Aidan's own silence and secret-keeping disturbs me in an unexpected way. I realize I've never thought of him as capable of doing something so manipulative. I should've, but I hadn't. Just as I hadn't thought Max would come out and kiss Jack.*

*"We didn't tell anything to Charlie and Helena."*

*"Jack and I are different."*

*He snickers, holding the phone to his ear. "Clearly."*

*"You are unbelievable." I walk out of the dome and back around the cabin towards the car as quickly as I can.*

*Max hurries up behind me. "He's an adult, Alyssa. Ask him yourself."*

*I stop and shove him hard in the chest. He coughs, doubling-over.*

*Good, you son-of-a-bitch. “He’s seventeen and a long way from being responsible enough to be an adult!”*

*“Wake up! Jesus. Stop being such a control freak. He’s not some little kid who needs to do what his mommy tells him anymore.”*

*“Meaning what? He’s going to do what you tell him to do? And what is that? What’s going on here? Who’s Xavier? What are you planning?”*

*“I don’t have to tell you shit. You don’t need to be here. Just go back. Live in your world of denial. Be the good wifey and mommy. Be happy. Go ahead. I dare you.” For the first time I feel scared.*

*“You better tell me, Max. Or you’re going to be feeling a lot worse in a minute.”*

*“I said leave, goddamnit!”*

*A group of birds high in the trees crash through the branches, twirling into tornado winding up through the narrow passage and out. I follow, rising up. The trees around me fade from extraordinary giants into ordinary furniture of Aidan’s bedroom. This time there is no tender pull, no easing back in. It’s the snap of someone’s fingers. It’s hitting the waters of the Bay chest first, the water as still and strong as a brick wall. It’s someone stealing that last excruciatingly long breath. But it isn’t who I expect. It isn’t the other Alyssa, or at least not entirely. It’s Max. It’s as if his wishing me away has made it so. Like the universe, in its infinite idiocy, is actually listening.*

## **Presidio of San Francisco, June 1994**

*The enemy within.*

Jack hasn't thought of the phrase since he left his grandfather's cabin twenty-six years ago. But now it sticks in his head as he walks across Pershing Square and into the Administration building. The sound climbs in frequency and strength, the voice mocking Jack, pitch perfect and perched on fundamental religious ideals borne out of his grandfather's service in World War I, the ugliest war, he said, that the world had seen or ever would see. Of course he was wrong. He was wrong about so much it makes Jack's head throb.

But Jack can still picture the old man clearly, despite two decades of separation. What he'd say to Jack. The kind of beating that would follow. But those horrible memories aren't what's stayed with Jack over the years. No. Instead, it's the pieces of his grandfather that catch his eye in others around the city: the grey beard of a homeless man, coiled and wiry, hiding a long, sad face; the yellowed teeth of the hookers working a few blocks up from the gate; the tall, thin frame of a preacher standing on top his overturned shopping cart, proclaiming the need to subsist off the purity of the land. Everything else about the old man Jack called Pops was just voice. The voice of reckoning, of judgment, of unending power.

His boots reverberate on the polished marble floor of the front entryway, one after another, a seamless rhythm he wishes would overtake that old man's voice and smash it into the ground, deep, as deep as he can, far deeper than he expects his grandfather's grave to be. No one, not Jack, not Jack's father, not even his mother—who shared nothing from what Jack can remember with the beast who sired her—could talk above him and all of them had lived for a short time together in the cabin. His mother dying

when she wandered outside. Hypothermia. Jack remembers her as white, diaphanous. Pale skin, blonde hair, pink lips. And then his father disappeared a year later, running off like some coward in the night to make a new life, his long auburn ponytail swinging from one side to the next like a horse galloping away.

He's come to see his commander, Kruger. To file a report about Max. His conscience demands it, even though there is a piece of him that knows once he walks through the doors of his CO's office, there's no undoing whatever he says and does. There's no way to interpret how Kruger will act. Jack knows there are gay soldiers all around him. He's never cared. If they showed up, did their jobs and gave 150% when they were on duty, he didn't care who they fucked. It wasn't his fight. But not everyone had the same opinion. Even though he lived in the Mecca of gay life: San Francisco, the fact that this might work against him, was foremost on his mind. But what he worried more than reporting what happened is having to explain why he was here reporting it. He's never been a snitch. Jack knows how to keep a secret. He knows what will happen if he doesn't. But he's less worried about Max or even himself than he is Alyssa and Aidan. If he gets dishonorably discharged, what then? He didn't want any other life. The idea of it—even as a possibility—petrified him.

Huge portraits of the Presidio commanders line the walls in golden frames, larger than life. Their eyes are blank, their expressions serene despite the things he expects they must have seen. He wades through the ghosts of history, the myths that seem more real than reality itself. They've attached themselves one after another to the phrase as it roots in his mind. One long ribbon of examples, how history has proven time and time again

that those who are close to you, those who you count on, those you let past your borders are the most apt to turn on you, to hurt you, to surprise you with vengeance or blood or tears. The Trojan Horse. Julius Caesar. The Fifth Column. The Third Reich. The Ku Klux Klan. Pearl Harbor. The Red Scare. Vietnam.

*You are the enemy.*

His hand throbs, shooting pain up and down until his head buzzes with it as he reaches the end of the lobby. It hangs at his side, close to his pant leg, praying the cuff buries it in shadow. A secretary sits at the front desk, her fingers typing away, dark hair swept back into a tight bun. She stops to look at him and stands to salute. He raises his hand to salute back. His bad hand. She frowns. He tries to smile an apology, embarrassed, but the smile feels lopsided. She starts to ask, are you okay, but before she can get the words out, he points to the men's room and ducks inside.

All of it, his grandfather said over and over again, Jack's fault. *It's all your fault.*

*You are the enemy. Look at yourself.*

He splashes cool water on his face and lets it run over his broken hand. It looks worse now than it did last night—a grotesque lump of purples fading to blues, reds and browns where the capillaries broke open. His eyes are blood-shot dots. He rubs his face. He should have shaved. Max shaved. He shouldn't remember that, but he does. How smooth Max's face was. How wet his hair was. How his breath was sweet from the weed. How Jack could taste it and then time disappeared and suddenly Max was burping blood.

Jack vomits in the sink, rinses out his mouth and stares hard until he no longer sees the Jack he's seen in the mirror every morning. He sees a man who has a duty and

who won't let anyone take away what he's spent a lifetime to create. Max will do the same. He knows it. It isn't a question of if, but when. He'll be at his commander's office as fast as he can book a flight back to Fort Greeley. Hell, maybe Max won't even wait. Maybe he'll march right into the Inspector General's office here. Even though you aren't supposed to circumvent your chain-of-command. Max has never played by the rules, but that would be his undoing.

"It isn't your fault," he tells the man in the mirror, but he can see the man doesn't believe Jack.

The pretty brunette still frowns at him as he passes. This time he does not smile. He doesn't even try. Instead he straightens his back and walks past her with the same purposeful stride for which he's become known in his office. One that leads him to his commander's door, where he will be greeted with a smile and a slap on the back, one that once they do away with the obligatory questions about families and jokes about becoming old men, will allow Jack to tell his version of events without his integrity being questioned, even if the charges he levels against a fellow soldier—that of assault and unwanted homosexual advances, trespassing and dereliction of duty—could be the end of him, his marriage—the destruction of everything he knows.

Max said he would call Aidan when he arrived, but it's already been a week since his flight would've landed in San Francisco and Aidan hasn't heard a peep. He's starting to worry. Max's clear-cut instructions are still indelible in his mind: *Get the supplies.*

*Wait for my call. Don't tell anyone I'm here. I'll tell them when we're ready. Can you do that for me, buddy?*

Of course, he can. He wants to do more. In fact, Aidan would prefer never telling his parents. They wouldn't like the fact that he's been exchanging emails with Max for the better part of nine months. Or that he hasn't applied to colleges the way they agreed he would. He can't tell them how his grades have begun to slip, how he stays up all night, online chatting with the only friends he has—virtual ones—because the prep school he's been attending is filled with the children of rich potheads and politicians, all of whom have no clue about the Real World. He knows he could've gotten a scholarship. He could've graduated valedictorian, but he doesn't want that. He doesn't know what he wants, but it isn't this: mind-numbing drills, ridiculous rules and hypocritical leaders. It isn't test-taking, formula-spewing, fill-in-the-blank education.

His dad says Max is a bad seed, a troublemaker. Aidan knows they were once more than brothers. He knows that Max is the smartest person Aidan has ever known. One way or another his dad is lying. He just expects Aidan to do what he says without an explanation. That may have worked when he was ten. Not now. Now Aidan deserves more. Max told Aidan he deserves more.

He pages Max again, typing in the number of the pay phone in Pershing Square. Aidan already has most of the things Max emailed him to scavenge. The tool chest he stole from the hangar, the chemicals from the supply closet, and the clocks he pilfered out of several of the billeting rooms. He's still missing pipes and caps.

Aidan figured his dad would have some in their garage so he looked through it last night, right after his dad left and his mom went to bed, but he couldn't find any. He couldn't very well ask Jack either. Then he went out, walking down the street, checking around each of the duplexes of their neighbors to see if someone might have left anything out. He was glad to get out of the house, even if he wasn't supposed to. Once he saw that look in his mom's eye, the way she sank into herself when his dad got the call to go in, he knew the end of their marriage was coming even if his dad didn't. After she shut her door, he snuck back downstairs. He knew he was taking a huge risk. His mom was notorious for poking her head in (the whole "my rules, my house" thing he couldn't wait to get rid of). But if she had, Aidan didn't hear about it. He crawled back into his bed just after sunrise, exhausted. Slept for a couple of hours and then left again. The last place he can think of to get the pipes Max needs—the short PVC pipes that are the ends nobody ever wants—would be to pilfer some from inside the Officers' Club, where they've been remodeling. It's just down the road. As soon as Max calls back, he'll head there and then meet Max.

Aidan doesn't like payphones. He always thinks of convicts and prostitutes using them but he can't call Max from home or school. He tucks the shopping list into his back pocket. It isn't long before he recognizes his dad's gait. He stands up, leaning forward, feeling his hands start to twitch. His old man walks like every step is a declaration of war, like he's never off-duty, even when he is. He's not alone. An officer walks alongside him nodding his head as his dad talks. Aidan shrinks back against the building except it's too late. Of all the places on the Presidio his dad could be today, here was the furthest from



Aidan's mind. And yet here he is. His dad speeds up his walk, leaving the officer to stand alone in the middle of the parking lot, his hat pulled down to shadow his face, his uniform one of so many roaming the parking lot, the building, the streets. Aidan can't place him though his dad is clearly agitated that Aidan has seen the two of them.

"What are you doing here?" his dad says. "Why aren't you in school?"

The hair on the back of Aidan's neck stands up. "Spring break, sir. Remember?"

"Right, yes," his dad says. "So what are you doing here then?"

"I was just out running some errands," Aidan says.

"Why?"

"For Mom." It isn't like his dad would know any better. Part of him wants his dad to know how he's helping Max, that he's doing more with his life than getting good grades and looking forward to someone else's ideal of a successful future. Except Aidan knows how his dad feels about obeying the rules, respecting the Army's laws and restrictions. Aidan is pretty sure his dad would kick him out, maybe even have him arrested. Even though his dad would say he was doing it because he loved Aidan (and he probably was), his dad wasn't one to find conflict in anything he did as long as it was protocol—it was the *right* thing to do.

But instead of his dad asking Aidan anymore or challenging the boy's lie, his dad just looks down to the asphalt and then back at the officer whose patience is waning.

"You know I didn't have a choice," his dad says. "I want you to know that."

"What are you talking about?"

“Don’t play games with me, boy.” Clearly his dad expects him to know something he doesn’t. Aidan feels his stomach clench and he wonders if his dad knows what he’s been doing all along. Maybe Max told him. Maybe they had another fight about it.

Aidan swallows hard. “I’m not playing games. I just don’t understand what you’re talking about. I’m running errands. What choice? What’s going on?”

Aidan wishes he could see behind his dad’s mirrored sunglasses. Since he can’t and isn’t sure what to say next, he puts his hand on his dad’s shoulder, the way Aidan used to watch Max do. His uncle had a way of defusing his father, no one—not even his mother—could explain. Their friendship was a safety net. Max has been searching for a friend like that his whole life and he hasn’t found one. Only Poppy. But they weren’t exactly friends. He loved her. They had sex. But she made it clear they weren’t serious: they weren’t a couple. He cared less about being seen with her at school than he did about being able to pick up the phone and call her when crazy shit like this happened.

His dad looks over at the officer again and shakes his head. “I’m sorry, son. I’ll explain later.”

It’s the first apology Aidan has heard come out of his dad’s mouth. He isn’t even sure what his dad is apologizing for. “Dad, what’s going on?”

“Sergeant Gibbs,” the man says. “We need to get going. I have to get this report filed today. The sooner, the better, right?”

His dad nods. “Aidan, you remember my commander, Lieutenant Colonel Kruger, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Aidan says, even though he doesn’t. He holds out his hand to shake the older man’s hand and then tries not to flinch when he crushes Aidan’s hand.

“Not a bad grip, there, Aidan.”

*Don’t sound so surprised, you prick.* “Thank you, sir.”

“We’ve both had better days, son. Your dad’s a strong man. He always does the right thing, even when it’s hard. Take a lesson. Don’t ever flinch.”

Aidan isn’t sure how to answer, but he tries to follow along. “I will, sir. I do.”

“Mistakes happen. People do things, crazy things. Sometimes it’s not even their fault. They’re just sick, right, Jack?”

Jack nods. “I’m not sure it’s a sickness, sir.”

“Sure it is. Homosexuality makes you do crazy things. And you aren’t responsible for others’ bad behavior, even your own family’s. Regardless of the reason for what Sergeant Eaves did, he knows that too.” The lieutenant colonel puts a hand on his dad’s shoulder and squeezes. His dad’s face is pinched with pain.

“What?” Aidan asks. “What did Max do?”

His dad is silent this time.

“It’ll be fine, Jack. You’ll see. We’re going to take care of you. You and your family.”

“Thank you, Colonel.” He nods to the officer, who seems far too pleased with himself and on the verge of continuing on his diatribe, though Aidan’s confusion has begun to blister.

“Dad?”

“Go home, Aidan. I’ll see you there soon. Tell your mother—just tell her to wait for me there. I’ll be back soon to explain.”

The two men turn and walk quickly towards a white truck with government plates. When his dad pulls himself into the truck, Aidan watches the way he hugs his hand to his chest like it’s broken. He walks towards them as the engine turns over, sounding as loud as a jet. It looks like some fake prosthetic hand, bulbous and twice its size, tight inside his wrist cuff, unmoving. His dad looks away from him as they leave.

Aidan watches the truck disappear. The wind carries the strong scent of redwood from across the parking lot. Normally he loves the smell but today it makes him feel sick. If he had a car, he could’ve followed. If he wasn’t still waiting for Max’s call, he probably would’ve walked. Now it seems more important than ever for him to talk to Max. He pages him again. And again. And again. Realizing his fingers quiver as he presses the metal squares of the pay phone, depressing them and wishing there would be a voice on the other end of the line. He leans against the glass, closing his eyes, frustrated.

He slams his fist against the side of the payphone. The pain is intense and he immediately regrets it. People stare. He feels like he’s in someone else’s head. Maybe in someone else’s nightmare. All eyes are on him. He doesn’t belong here. He shouldn’t be here. Max or no Max. Still he waits next to the pay phone, willing it to ring. He needs answers. But all he can see are the questions surrounding him, the weight of the base as they continue to stare, to whisper amongst themselves. He can think of nothing worse than being the object of their attention, of one of them walking over and telling him he

doesn't belong here. Because he already knows it. It's one of too many reasons why he needs to leave this place, why he reached out to Max. And yet now the only place he can go, the only thing he can do, is go home, empty-handed.

### **Mountain View, 1969**

I tore apart my room, determined to rid it of Anne of Green Gables and Jane Eyre in favor of Audrey Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe. In my dresser were drawers filled with old clothes Helena had made me over the years. She had sewn all the time before Charlie took the job at Ames. She did it when we were still on the cusp of poverty. I remembered sitting next to her on the couch picking out patterns in the Sears catalog. It had been just the two of us. That had been before Charlie made his big leap from corporate to government. Now Helena shopped in the department stores like all the other women she played bridge with. She carved days out of it, bringing home frozen dinners and going to church to gab with her friends in between prayers and candles. She brought home beautifully-wrapped packages, so pleased with her selections, with being a "choosy shopper," and being able finally, *finally* to give the appearance of us being a normal middle-class family.

Too often I wished I could pick out what I wanted to wear myself. She still thought of me as a child, no matter what I did. A child to be dealt with, a child to be clothed and fed. But I missed those sewing days. I missed not having to worry about what I said and did, what people thought or didn't think. Always being on guard. Afraid.

The fabric of my old dress had tiny purple flowers and ivy stalks interweaving to make a seamless pattern, of which there is no end and no beginning. It was cool and soft and smooth still after all these years, but at least two sizes too small for me. I pressed it in my hands, running my finger along the seams. I wished Helena taught me how to sew so I could make money of my own. I wished she'd want to talk to me about what other mothers talked to their daughters about. She wasn't even sure what she was missing but there seemed to be a secret language others had that she didn't. One that had the girls talking about bleeding and tampons, babies and boys.

Max flung open my door and saw me clutching my dress. He leaned against the door, amused, one hand in his pocket and his hair a black bush of frizzy curls. He had on jeans and a belt with a huge silver buckle. His shirt looked like someone sprayed colors all over it. He was attempting to be casual but when I pointed into my mouth to tell him what I thought about his new clothes, he shifted uncomfortably, like his clothes were making him itch.

"C'mon, you were the one who said you'd seen enough of me in black!" he said.

True. "I don't have time for you right now. I'm busy."

"I thought you hated those."

"I did. I'm getting rid of them."

Sometime last year, I entered what my mother disgustingly called my "tomboy" stage. I took scissors to my hair, slicing off the longest sections that I hated because they always hung like a wet towel. I wished they would curl naturally like Max's. I started stealing Max's old shorts and t-shirts. Max had been the one who suggested it. I was

ashamed of those dresses, at how they had seemed then to be so beautiful and yet now were so plain Jane. I wondered how long it would take for my hair to grow back out. I willed it to grow.

“There’s a rally today. A protest. You want to go with me?”

Every day there were protests, but I had no desire to join the insanity. Charlie said we might get hurt. I watched the news. It was one of the few times I believed he wasn’t over exaggerating.

“Too dangerous, Max. Helena isn’t going to let you go.”

He huffed like that was stupid. “I’m sixteen. I can make my own decisions. Besides, it’s important. Haven’t you been watching what’s going on in the world?”

“Yeah, so?”

“There are more important things than kissing boys, Lysy.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said. We hadn’t talked about my kissing Jack since it happened. In fact, for weeks now he’d pretended it hadn’t happened and I wondered why he was bringing it up now. “Besides, then you’d have to tell her about what you’ve been doing all along with him too.”

His face froze. “I’m allowed to have friends.”

I turned away from him and flung open my tiny closet door. “Right,” I said. “Makes sense. I’m sure all those crazy people at the protests will be dying to make more friends like you.”

I stuffed the dress back into the drawer and slammed it shut. An army of Barbies stood at attention lining one entire shelf. My collection wasn’t complete by any means,

but it wasn't even necessarily a collection I had wanted. Max started it when he brought one home from a garage sale when I was seven. We used to canvas the neighborhood and buy up any people had out with the loose change I took out of Helena's penny jar. Max had this crazy idea that maybe one day they'd make us rich. But I never really liked playing with them. They were so static and their faces gave me the creeps. Max would come into the room and make a show out of it. He liked dressing them up. Now all I could think about is how stupid it would look for Jack to see them. How it would be another reminder of our age difference. I grabbed two at a time, pitched them into the middle of the room to make a pyre.

"Maybe we should just tell Helena and Charlie about him," I said. "Have them meet, you know. It would give us a reason to go back."

"Like they're going to care. If anything they'll keep us away from there. They don't want us to have any friends."

"You're so depressing."

"No, I'm just a realist."

"Whatever."

He pointed at the array of arms and legs, my little pile of bodies heaped on the floor. "I thought you liked those." His voice was low and sharp.

"Go ahead and take them, if you want them," I said.

"Why would I? They're yours."

"Whatever you say."



“You know that kiss doesn’t change anything,” he said icily. “I know him better than *you* do and—”

I whirled around, a Barbie in each fist. “Why do you always do this?”

“Do what?”

“Want to have what’s mine and then when I try to give it to you, you pretend like you don’t.”

He looked shocked. “He’s not yours, you idiot. He’s not a pet. He’s my friend and—”

I whirled back around and dug in with an even more ferocious eye. “You don’t have any friends.”

His face twisted and I could tell I hurt him. Worse than I intended. I bit my lip and said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. Besides I shouldn’t talk.”

“You don’t seem to care about having them.”

“I have you.”

“I can’t believe you kissed him,” he said.

“So what.”

“So what?”

“That’s what I said. So what.”

“So fucking what,” he said again, louder, punching my pillow.

Suddenly I heard a loud ripping sound behind me.

Max was tearing down our collage of magazine pictures that covered most of the wall above my bed. It had been a project we had started when we first decided to run

away from our parents. We had taken them from waiting rooms, off the cable car when we rode up and down the hillsides of San Francisco, out of people's trailers at the campsites we visited. Anywhere and everywhere we could find them. LIFE and Time were most places. Every once in awhile we'd find MAD or Teen but I didn't like those as much as I did Redbook and McCall's. We had poured through them and cut out the pictures of men and women we could picture in a new life. Max liked the cartoons. He hated me cutting out pictures of real people. He said they weren't real, but I didn't care. They could've been. We also found pictures of houses and cars. Max cut out the pictures of strange structures: cabins, domes, igloos, and tents. I liked tall skyscrapers that must have had penthouses and houses sandwiched so tight together you just had to have a barbecue with your neighbors every week. Max cut out farms, especially the more trees and animals they had. These became maps of our lives—one we lived that no one knew, one we wished we could have, one we told others we had and one we imagined we might have not so far in the future together once Max graduated and I left with him to escape this crazy place. Our parents had no idea this was in the works, but we'd steadily been planning it for the last year. Except Max was supposed to be learning a trade or working something out to find a job to support us and instead he'd been screwing around the way he always did, unreliable as always.

“What are you doing?” I yelled at him.

He kept tearing and pulling and stripping the pictures off. Bits of them stayed up on the walls while other bits floated down onto my bed and the floor. I ran over and pulled on his leg. “Stop it, Max! Cut it out! This isn't your room!”

“This is what you want, right? Tear it all down. Start over. Have better stuff. Out with the old, in with the new, right?” The more he talked the more violently he ripped at the pictures, shredding them in his hands. “I’m just here to help. You want it all down, I’ll tear it down. Let’s go. C’mon.” It was like he wasn’t even there and I had to stand and watch him do it. A quiet calm settled between us as he let the last bits fall out of his hands. He turned to me, his eyes filled with tears. “Happy now?”

I knew better than to show him how hurt I was. Sure he’d done crazy things before but never to intentionally hurt me. Maybe we were supposed to fight with each other the way I heard other siblings did. Maybe we were supposed to even hate each other, but I couldn’t imagine that. Not now. Not ever. And yet here it was.

“I don’t want to fight with you,” I said. “I hate it when we fight.”

“Me too.” Max sat down on the bed amidst the torn bits and put his arm around me. He looked across at our reflection in the mirror. “Good god, you’re growing up.”

I smiled. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“I don’t know. It’s not. It’s just—I’m not used to seeing you as a girl. It’s weird.” He combed his fingers through my hair.

I punched his arm. “Well I’m not used to seeing you as an idiot, but take a look around you.”

He smiled. “I guess we’ve got quite a mess to clean up.” It was the closest thing to an apology I knew I’d get.

“I’m sorry,” I said, staring at the pile of Barbies.

“You’re right. They’re old. I thought you liked them.”

“I thought *you* liked them,” I said. But instead of him laughing as he should’ve, he just stared into space. I waved my hand in front of his eyes. “Weren’t you going out? To some protest or something?”

He smiled. “Nah. I’m not the protest type. Too much work and you know me and work.” I was relieved. I’d seen people on the television at protests before and I didn’t want Max to get shot or maced or arrested.

“When do you think we’ll go back?” I asked him.

“How should I know? Maybe we never will.”

#### **Presidio of San Francisco, June 1994**

A smell Alyssa can’t identify persists as she walks through the house in search of the letter that should have been in her mattress. She considers for a moment the possibility that Jack found it, that the letter was the reason for him leaving so abruptly this morning. But no, it couldn’t be. If it was, he would’ve said something.

Outside, she stamps the roach she found in Jack’s pocket deep into the soil where she hopes it will decompose over the next few months (or years). The scent of it recalled the previous night, creating a state of mild euphoria all day. She tried burning candle after candle to rid the lingering stench of weed Max left burning in their driveway. It seems to have infiltrated the house, her mind, to have twisted it inside out. Her head hurts from it, from the nightmare of the other woman.

Her block is oddly silent for a late Sunday morning. The sky is clear and the sun so bright it hurts her eyes. She stares up and down the streets. There are only two people

who could've taken the letter: Jack or Aidan. Inside the house, she searches everywhere, the thought of either of them finding it making her ill. When she reaches Aidan's room she can't remember if she heard him leave or not so she knocks. No answer. She opens it, feeling guilty for invading his space. Even though it's her house, this still feels like his space, like she's somehow trespassing.

The room—or what passes as Aidan's tiny eight-by-eight piece of messy real estate—looks like a grenade went off inside it. The remnants of his boyhood cover the floor. A few bits are on the desk and bed. Hardly anything survived on the walls except for the New Kids on the Block whose corner hangs detached with what appears to be gum holding it more than a bit crookedly to the wall.

What's worse is how Jack left this morning in such a hurry after the previous night's events. She wasn't sure what that meant. If he was running away from her or had something to do at work again. The former seemed more likely but before she over-reacts she decides to search Aidan's room.

What an idiot, she thinks to herself. What a horrible wife I am. It's no wonder he wants to be at work. She's heard for years about this from the other Army wives. She isn't even sure why she wrote it. It just made her feel better. Putting her thoughts on paper. Except she's never been one to keep a diary. That seems too self-indulgent and too childish. Besides, she wasn't seriously going to hand it over. Not really. Things look much different with the night stretching on endlessly before you than they do in the day. It was more a threat, she thinks, and not even a threat to Jack. A threat to herself. Something had to change or else.

Decaying banana peels, string cheese wrappers and a half-empty beef jerky bag lie next to Aidan's computer. A stack of hand-crushed Coke cans in his trash. The off-white polo and black slacks that serve as his school uniform are in a pile underneath the AC/DC and Metallica t-shirts she has no recollection of buying him. She thought they were past hand-me-downs and Goodwill treasures. Thick used paperbacks with covers showcasing all manner of aliens, starships and alternate universes stacked nearly as high as his desk, precarious, ready to fall over into the corner. This wasn't the boy she raised; not the Aidan who sat in this room when they first arrived—sat in it empty for two days—before he decided how to arrange it, and then taking his time over the next week, putting each thing in place, unpacking each box with the slow methodical nature that made her look impulsive.

As she searches, her hand brushes against the computer screen. His computer awakens to life. She looks at the screen, searching for a way to turn it back off until she see Max's name. An email dated two days ago. A list of things he wanted Aidan to pick up. She's stunned, her body turning cold, despite the warm air billowing in through the window: Aidan knew Max was coming down. They had planned it. Aidan was helping Max to put together things he told Aidan "were going to help them in their mission," though there was no mention of what.

Mission. She wonders if Max was here last night not for Jack but for Aidan. She doesn't want to believe either of them have been lying to her, especially not about Max, but it also explains quite a bit about his sudden appearance.

All of a sudden she feels dampness on her arms. The air seems to materialize, buzzing black specks, deepening, darkening. Her heart starts to pound in her ears. She turns, expecting to see Aidan or Jack or whoever else might be talking but the room is empty. She hears birds crying, the low rustle of leaves. In the distance people are talking but she can't understand them. She is in two places again.

Max is yelling at her, telling her to leave. She feels the other woman again and sits down on Aidan's bed. The world is doubled. Two doors. Two mirrors on the wall. Two computers. Two desks. Two stacks of laundry he's neglected for the last two weeks. She cannot tell which one is real and which one isn't. They appear equal to her—identical in every way. She is trapped by this understanding, by the awful notion that it might not be her who is splitting in two, but the world itself.

She hears cars. Through the window, she can see a line of cars slow as they approach her house, pulling up, one after another to form a long line along the curb.

A heavy rapping on her door: shots of impatience. She smooths the old red sweater she threw on. Voices float up like mischievous ghosts. High-pitched, see-saw laughter reminiscent of earlier days.

She hurries downstairs. The women of her Family Support Group have arrived en masse, shuffling through the porch with low chatter, casseroles and baskets of bread. Two-by-two they stand together on her porch. When Alyssa opens the door, she tries her best to look happy to see them. Not surprised. Not scared.

They smile, one after another, like a series of light bulbs clicking on, bright, blank, and empty.

“You look like you could use a good chat,” Charlotte says.

She is Jack’s boss’ wife—Mrs. K, as the kids at school like to call her. She doesn’t like being the Principal but she does it anyway. Her forty-year-old cheek presses against Alyssa’s until her thick make-up starts flaking off. Charlotte’s wig of black, stringy hair accentuates deep valleys under her cheeks. Chemo has slimmed her down, her body—absent both breasts—is lost in the gray pantsuit she’s wearing with matching heels. Alyssa feels severely underdressed.

The wood floors creak as more women file inside, many of whom Alyssa doesn’t really know. She smoothes her sweaty hands on her khaki pants and runs a hand through her limp, undone hair and then begins to shake each of the women’s hands as they reach out to her.

Alyssa is surprised when Sally Biggs walks inside, her 200-lb body preceded by a cane. For most of the last eight years as neighbors, Alyssa has watched Sally rule their block with an iron tongue, half-intrigued, half-disgusted. She can be a powerful ally but Alyssa knows Sally has distaste for this group of women, but Sally’s never told her why. Sally embraces her without actually touching her. A phantom kiss and pat on the back. A strong look of reproach, her blond hair tightly curled and bouncing as she passes, layers of costume jewelry rising and falling as she huffs and puffs to the front room.

“Honey, it’s going to be okay,” she says, her voice more gentle than Alyssa has ever heard it. Sally lumbers through, following the others into Alyssa’s living room. Several more pass across the doorway in a blur. Just as Alyssa’s ready to shut it, Nancy Sanders hops up the last few steps in Levis and a scarlet silk blouse that matches her



lipstick. Though the eldest in the group, her quiet sophistication is the kind of relaxed, unabashed confidence Alyssa admires most. Her previous two marriages were a sore source of controversy she quickly and deftly quelled as soon as it began. Nancy is less a participant than observer, sitting thoughtfully, ever mindful of Charlotte's husband's rank in the room.

Nancy presses her hand into Alyssa's, squeezing it with an intimacy Alyssa isn't sure how to interpret. "I know we probably should've called first but I also know what you would've said. You're one of those strong, stoic types I envy."

Alyssa is at a loss as to what to say. Nancy wraps one arm around Alyssa's shoulder and pulls her into the living room and onto their couch, which has begun to sink in the middle. Alyssa feels a deep shame as Nancy sits awkwardly in the center while the rest all stand around the couch, waiting. They remind Alyssa of a bunch of buzzards ready to peck a dead rat.

"So this is rather unexpected and I appreciate all of you coming over but I'm not sure where to start," Alyssa says, desperate to break the silence.

"How about with some iced tea, dear," Sally says. "Some of us are ready to melt all over your carpet." Alyssa nods, chagrined at ignoring such a small but significant aspect of hospitality and stands up. Nancy moves to follow but Alyssa holds her firmly down.

"I can do this." There's no sense in over-reacting. It doesn't help anyone. They all know this. They know even when soldiers are missing there's always a chance of them being found. Even if they're wounded, there's always a chance of recovery. Alyssa stares

at the various casseroles and cakes she'd never be able to stomach in a crisis. There is some arbitrary, vague understanding that the Army has a contingency for everything, that having a group surround you so you aren't alone will make you less lonely. Except the opposite happens for Alyssa. She hears Helena's voice, the one that always came at her like an open palm across her face: *Some things must be endured. There is no fix. Time does not heal all wounds. Other people can't help you which is why we keep it to ourselves.*

She doesn't want to believe this anymore. Inside the kitchen she takes a deep breath to steady her hand as she pulls a huge jar of iced tea she made yesterday. The worst thing would be for them to know just how fractured her marriage is, how little Jack has told her, how little she really *wants* to know.

When she brings out the glasses, the room is buzzing with low voices. Charlotte sits in Jack's favorite recliner, a despicable piece of furniture Alyssa is even more embarrassed about than the couch. The group of staff sergeant wives hovers around her like ladies-in-waiting. Her shoes are off, legs folded beneath her. Sally pouts at the edge of the room, tugging on a chair from the dining room table to join Nancy and a couple of newly commissioned officer's wives who look bothered at having had to come.

"Alyssa," Charlotte says, leaning forward. "We aren't here to judge, you know."

"Of course not," Alyssa says.

"Whatever else happens, you know Jack did the right thing. And you know, we'll do whatever we can to help you."

"I'm not sure I understand. Help me with what?"

Charlotte's smile fades a little. The value of her wisdom is diminished if Alyssa feigns ignorance. It takes Charlotte a minute to recover but she when does, her façade slips a bit more.

“Jack went to Abe this morning about your brother. About what happened last night. Weren't you here?”

“Of course I was here at home.” Alyssa says, waving her hand a bit too vehemently. “It just wasn't a big deal. They're like brothers, always fighting. Jack over-reacted but you know how he is. He's a good man. A good soldier. It's something personal that doesn't require the base's attention. I'm sure Jack went to Abe for friendly advice, not formally.”

Sally looks pained, and Alyssa can see from her expression, Alyssa is missing something. They've come here on a mission of their own. Alyssa is surprised and horrified all at once. As the head of the FSG, it's her job to pull the group together, not Charlotte's. The only reason why she would breach protocol and do such a thing was if the problem was Alyssa. She waits for Sally to say something, but she only looks down into her iced tea like she might divine an answer from the ice cubes. Alyssa catches Nancy's eye as the older woman slightly shakes her head. She has known these three women for a long time, longer than most. It was Charlotte who got Alyssa her first catering gig and gave Aidan his first mowing job six years ago when she knew no one. Though stubbornly ignorant, Sally has always invited Alyssa to go to church with her, and even when Alyssa would refuse, she would insist she would pray for Jack, for her, for Max, for all of them. Nancy helped her to settle in when she first moved here and Jack

was sent TDY to Japan for three weeks. She pulled strings to get Aidan into the best prep school in the city, where her own son graduated before joining the Air Force Academy. They have always had her best interests at heart.

“It sounded pretty formal to me,” Charlotte says, crossing her arms.

“Well, that’s ridiculous. Max is just like Jack. He takes his duties seriously and he would never jeopardize them,” Alyssa says, stirring her tea into a whirlpool.

“C’mon, Alyssa, you don’t need to put on a face for us. Just tell us what happened,” one of the women says.

Alyssa wants to know who this woman is and why she’s even here. She’s short and has zits and looks like she isn’t old enough to be a wife. “Child bride” comes to mind. Its one thing for women she knows—women she respects—come here to slap her wrist, but a stranger, and one so young and inexperienced, is intolerable. “I don’t have to tell you anything,” she says.

“Calm down, Alyssa. We aren’t here to fight.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Ladies,” Nancy says in her best placating voice. “You know what’s going to be the next step, right? Abe’s going to have to call up to Greeley to talk to Max’s supervisor. There’s going to be a report, whether you like it or not. They’ll have to take action.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Alyssa snaps. “But we’re jumping the gun.”

“Do you know where Max is?” Sally says. “Is he at the hospital? He looked pretty bad.”

Alyssa narrows her eyes. No one else seems to notice Sally’s slip except Alyssa.

“So you let him leave hurt,” says another woman with lacquered red hair sitting near Charlotte. What a twit, Alyssa says. Just like her majesty, Charlotte.

“He’s fine,” she says. “He’s fine. I know he is.”

“How do you know?”

Alyssa hesitates, a blurry image of Max in the forest coming to mind. “I just know.”

“Girls, I think Alyssa has a lot to process. Let’s give her some breathing room, shall we?” Nancy says.

“I agree with Nancy,” Sally says.

“Right,” Alyssa says, standing up. “Excuse me.”

Alyssa walks to her downstairs bathroom, her ears buzzing. The women’s chatter grows faint, as if she’s entered a tunnel and the women are suddenly miles behind her. Black specks float in front of her. A warning of what’s to come. But they’re not real. She’s had enough migraines to recognize these as floaters—a normal symptom. A brief source of comfort.

The pain spike driving through her right temple feels much more real and much less normal. It sharpens with every step until she reaches the tiny bathroom. Her stomach heaves. She shoves the door closed, flipping the lock, and turns to grip the sink. The world seems to tilt.

Alyssa reaches for the sink handle. Cold water gushes into the porcelain bowl. The bathroom walls seem to shrink. She can’t breathe. The linoleum floor feels like it’s disappeared.

She tries to concentrate on a black sickle-shaped scar at the sink bottom, now underwater. The bowl fills. Someone forgot and left the plunger in. How stupid, she thinks. But that's as far as her mind can go. Logic fails her when she needs it the most. She can't think. She can't move. Any movement is exquisite.

Her vision blurs and doubles again:

There is the water splashing onto Alyssa's feet; having risen up over the rim and run across the Formica counter.

In the same moment, there is a shock of cold. The other woman's hand plunges inside the water to yank out the plug. The bowl drains and the other woman studies Alyssa as she steps back from the puddle. Their features—everything from face to head to body, even clothes—are physically identical. This seems miraculous to the other woman. A gift. She has her own body. The other woman waits for Alyssa to look up before she speaks.

Alyssa closes her eyes, unwilling to look up. She bites her tongue against the scream in her throat. She tastes blood. Bile.

"Alyssa," the other woman says.

Alyssa doesn't know what to say. She realizes she could dismiss the other woman's first appearance as an accident, some kind of cosmic mistake. But twice is significant. She remembers Charlie telling her many years ago that the universe doesn't fuck up in the same way twice. It invents new, insane ways to torture us on an evolving, unique basis. "I—" Alyssa stops to let out the breath she'd been holding. "I don't know what to call you." The other woman's face strikes Alyssa as calm, almost amused. Alyssa

is pissed. *That* face, the one the other woman so readily wears, is too much like Max's face. Too cavalier. "You don't belong here," Alyssa says. "Why can't you leave us alone?"

"I could say the same thing to you," the other woman says. She sees Alyssa's face harden at the insinuation that she has more of a right to be here than Alyssa. She can tell Alyssa knows they are equal. And this reoccurrence, or whatever people might call it, suggests purpose. But the reason or root is less important to the other woman than the opportunity such a reoccurrence presents. The other woman puts her hand on Alyssa's arm. A tangibility test proving the other woman's physical occupation of the same world as Alyssa; one test of so many to come.

Alyssa is surprised not only at the warmth of the other woman's hand, but at the way the hairs on Alyssa's arm immediately stand up. The idea of sharing the same skin, the same touch, as this other woman is revolting. Alyssa feels gooseflesh rise all over her body.

"Don't," Alyssa says. "Don't touch me." The other woman lifts her hand up in mock surrender but the feeling of it remains long after. Her hand—this *intruder's* hand—is real. There's no mistaking that. It's as much flesh and blood as Alyssa's. "I don't know why you're here," Alyssa says. "But I want you to leave."

The other woman turns around to open the bathroom door. She flips the lock and grabs the doorknob.

Alyssa puts her palm flat against the door to prevent the other woman from opening it. "What are you doing?"

The other woman rolls her eyes, already tired of Alyssa's indecisiveness. "You told me to leave, so I am. I don't want to be here any more than you do. I have places to be."

"You can't go out there. Not with all those women. Let me get them out first."

The other woman can't stand how much fear is in Alyssa's eyes. The same fear that's been there for years. "Jack's the one who started these dominoes and he's the one who's going to have to clean up the mess. And these women are just more dominoes. They've already acted as your judge and jury. I expect when you walk back out there, they'll be happy to take on the role of executioner." She cocks her head. "And you'll let them, won't you? Why do you give a fuck what they think anyway? Why don't you want to ask Jack why he went straight to Kruger to rat out Max?"

"He didn't rat out Max. Max did that all on his own. And Max isn't the only one who's going to lose. If Jack went there, I know he'll want Kruger to know everything."

"I know. He's just that dumb."

"You say dumb. I say honorable. Brave. It's better than sneaking off in the night after trying to ruin my marriage, the way Max did." Alyssa rubs her eyes. It's difficult for Alyssa to look at the other woman, to see what other people must see when they look at Alyssa. "I know what'll happen if I don't stand up for Jack. They'll probably still go after him but at least he'll have one person there with him."

"Just leave it alone. If you want to help, get Jack to go back and tell Kruger he made it up. Do something to fix it. Don't help him cover it up."

"I won't."



“Jack. He was in fine form. Did quite the number on Max.”

Alyssa shakes her head. “He only went down because of you.”

The other woman crosses her arms, leaning against the wet counter. “No, Alyssa, he went because of Max.”

Alyssa lets her hand off the door, her legs feeling weak. She re-latches the lock and crosses the tiny room to sit on the toilet.

The other woman stares at her, surprised at how little Alyssa knows about what happened. “Didn’t he tell you?”

“That he went to his commander to report Max? Yeah, I know that.”

“He did what?”

Alyssa looks up. “Max kissed him. What was he supposed to do?”

“And your husband tried to kill Max.”

“He didn’t. He wouldn’t.” Though Alyssa remembers very clearly her husband’s swollen hand, how it was less a hand than a bear’s paw, fat and unruly. Harmless. But only because it was broken because he’d used it to beat something.

The other woman stares at Alyssa. “You weren’t there. You didn’t see what he did. You didn’t want to see what he could do. But I did.”

“And that means, what?”

“It means that you and your husband need to fix this.”

“Fix what? There’s nothing to fix. Max will be fine. He always is. This is probably what he wanted.”

The other woman scowls. “You didn’t give him a choice. None of you have ever really supported him.”

Someone’s knocking at the door.

“Alyssa!”

“It’s Nancy,” Alyssa says. She stands up and walks to the door, her body pressing against it as she yells through: “Just a minute!”

The other woman puts a hand on Alyssa’s shoulder and squeezes it so hard that Alyssa cries out. “Talk to Jack. We need to figure this out. Max isn’t going to let it go.”

Alyssa turns. “I don’t care what Max wants or what you want. Jack didn’t do anything wrong. He was defending our family.”

“You keep spouting all that army bullshit and see how far it gets you. Go out and tell your women that. Tell them you put your family above the army and see how many of them stay standing next to you.”

Alyssa reaches out to grab the other woman’s arm. “Stop,” she says. “Just stop. Please.” She feels the icy pull as soon as her hand latches onto the other woman’s arm. The other woman tries to wrench it free. Alyssa falls against the door.

Black specks again. A long, sharp stab of pain. Then the other woman and Alyssa are one.

Alyssa’s head throbs. The other woman didn’t want to leave. Alyssa knows that much. But the idea of her staying, of the damage the other woman’s presence could do to her reputation—to Jack’s career—was inconceivable. The other woman’s idea of fixing things was insane. The last thing Jack and Max needed to do was to talk to one another.

There's no apology, no amends to be made. Max broke the law. He betrayed his own sister. He betrayed their friendship, the Army code. So many transgressions. Too many for Alyssa to forgive him for this time.

"Alyssa! Open the door!"

The bathroom is a mess. It looks like it's suffered an earthquake or worse. Alyssa leans forward, looking for some sign of the other woman in her eyes. She sees nothing. A thin line of blood seeps from her nose onto her upper lip. She touches it, rubbing it between her fingers.

Nancy pounds on the door. Alyssa refuses to answer. She doesn't trust her voice, because it is the other woman's voice too. She flips on the water long enough to rinse her fingers and pulls out a Kleenex to hold at her nose. At least she has an excuse for her absence. Something to tell the women. A reason to ask them to leave. No matter what the other woman says, the opinions of those around her are too important to ignore.

But when Alyssa reaches for the doorknob, she hesitates. She has no idea what lie to give Nancy. If she does lie, she's no better than Max. That's what she admires about Jack, how he adheres to the truth, no matter the cost. But these women can't have the truth.

That's when she wonders what the other woman would do. What she would say.

"Alyssa!"

"Just get out!" Alyssa explodes. And, for just one moment maybe two, Alyssa wishes the other woman wasn't gone. She wishes it was she—Alyssa—who had been

pulled back in and that the other woman was here because Alyssa has no doubt the other woman would know exactly what to do.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” Alyssa yells through the door. She can’t bear to face Nancy, to face any of them. “Leave. I need some time. I need—” Tears fill her eyes.

Alyssa opens the door, leaning back against the counter. “I’m sorry, I just have a headache and—”

Nancy slips inside. “You’re bleeding,” Nancy finishes. “You poor dear. We’re not helping much, are we?” She looks at Alyssa sympathetically.

“I’m fine,” Alyssa says. “I’ll be fine. I just need to get all those crows out of my front living room. Not you, of course, but I just mean—”

Nancy reaches over to squeeze Alyssa’s arm. They are so close Alyssa can smell her breath. It reminds her of her mother’s, only her mother would never have been so kind.

“Thank you,” Alyssa says, touching Nancy’s hand. “And I’m sorry. I just can’t deal with this right now. I need to talk to Jack.”

“Why didn’t he tell you he was going to Abe? You know that wasn’t just friendly advice, Alyssa. You have to know that.”

Alyssa tosses the Kleenex, feeling tears cloud her eyes. “How could he not tell me what he was going to do? Going to Abe and...” she let the words go, unwilling to try to imagine what he could’ve said that would’ve made Charlotte gather her troops and rush right over.

“Maybe he didn’t intend on turning Max in. Maybe it just happened.”

“Things don’t just happen with Jack. He’s not like that. Max, yes. Jack, no.”

“People will surprise you if you let them. Jack’s back is against a wall. He’s also probably really angry. But I can see if I can get Charlotte to talk to Abe. Give you and Jack some time to talk first before this goes any further.”

Alyssa is so surprised, she doesn’t know what to say. “That would be great, Nancy. Wow. Thanks.”

“You know my best friend is gay. She’s a pilot in the Air Force and she lived in constant fear of being found out. Losing her commission. But she decided to take a chance and tell someone. Nothing came of it. But that’s a different base, different supervisors. Here they don’t seem to be so liberal, despite being near the gay Mecca of the West.”

Alyssa wipes her eyes. “You’re right. Maybe it’s not as bad as it sounds.”

“Maybe.”

“But, Alyssa—” Nancy pauses, her hand on the door, reluctant to keep going. “Ultimately everything that’s happened is Max’s bed and he needs to lie in it. The fight. Him going AWOL. Everything. I wish I knew why he was so hell-bent on destroying himself but I don’t. Neither do you. And if things really do blow up, you need to be able to walk away.”

“I can’t do that,” Alyssa says, shaking her head.

“You can. You have to.”

“What does that even mean? *Walk away.*”

Nancy takes her time in answering. “You’ll figure it out.”

“Do you think Jack will be reprimanded?”

“I don’t know,” Nancy says. “It’s odd Charlotte didn’t say anything about that.”

“First things first,” Alyssa says. “And Nancy?” Alyssa wants nothing more to tell her about the other woman, to have someone help her to figure out what’s happening. But a sinking feeling stops her and all she says is, “Never mind.”

“Are you sure? You know you can tell me anything.”

The immediacy of their intimacy doesn’t sit right. Alyssa hugs Nancy in spite of this, more for herself than Nancy. “If you can just tell the others I need them to go. I need to talk to Jack.”

Nancy nods and shuts the door behind her. She waits for the other woman to do or say something, to reappear and chastise her. But there’s nothing. No blurring. No headache. No separation. It’s almost like she’s completely gone. She should be happy and relieved—after all Alyssa still has no idea how to explain it or why it happens—but she’s less concerned with that than she is with the immediate and intense loneliness she feels. The way the other woman’s absence reflects a vacancy inside her that she never knew she had.

### **San Francisco/High Sierras, 1969**

“So you don’t want to see Jack again?” I asked Max. We were walking to school, trying to find a reason not to go.

“What’s your rush, Lysy. Trust me. You don’t want to jump on the first one who doesn’t run away from you. Besides, he’s got a crazy family. He’s probably crazy himself.”

“Then why do you keep going to see him?”

“Listen,” he said, taking my hands. “I’m just looking out for you. You know that. You’re my number-one lieutenant, remember? You can’t be getting distracted. It just messes everything up. Believe me. You don’t want to be fat and unhappy like Georgia. You kiss a boy like that again and that’s what’ll happen to you. You’ll get pregnant and your life will be over.”

The thought of babies freaked me out and he knew it. They had those big eyes that stared at you without blinking, like they can see straight through you. And they were always rubbing their body fluids all over everything. Snotty noses. Dirty diapers. Yuck. I was never having a baby. Never. Georgia was the latest scandal to hit our school, St. Catherine’s. Sixteen years old and having a baby, or so we’d heard. It wasn’t really news because everyone knew where to find Georgia after school. Behind the dumpsters with Kevin Mallory, who had graduated two years earlier and was joining the Navy. She told me once, when she bummed a piece of chewing gum to get rid of her cigarette breath, how she couldn’t bear to be away from him and how she’d hatched a plan to make sure she could stay with him. His dad was a career Navy man and Kevin was already signed up and ready to be shipped off to Vietnam sometime in the next month. I don’t think she counted on her parents wanting to give the baby up for adoption, but that’s what I had overheard Helena telling her bridge group. So instead of a wedding and a future, I

imagined Georgia bawling her pretty blue eyes out, rubbing them blood red, her body all misshapen and her hormones raging. She would've lost not only Kevin, but that rugrat too.

I wondered what would happen to her after the dust settled and she was just sixteen again. I wondered if she'd ever be the same. If anyone would want her. She was a beautiful girl, though Max said her beauty was only skin deep. I couldn't tell that. All I knew was that I envied the way everyone, boys and girls, turned their attention to her when she walked in a room. Man, that girl had power. For as selfish as she could be, walking around, sporting that invisible crown and flicking her fingers at the fourth graders who ran around her like idiotic servants.

The idea of Jack stayed under my skin, making me itchy and restless for the rest of the day. But I didn't want to be a whore. That's what our mother called Georgia. I cringed every time she said it. She was only sixteen, I wanted to tell Helena, but that didn't matter. Our mother was partial to identifying women who were less virtuous than she, which was really any other woman (or most). She saw them everywhere, hallucinating them into existence. I could tell she was worried about the "the kiss-and-tells" around Charlie's office. She called them worse things: posers, harlots, bitches. I covered my ears. Helena took liberties in language she didn't allow others, even Charlie, though most of the time it was the gin talking. Often it happened when Charlie would come home late and exhausted, too exhausted to give her the attention she needed not to assume the worst about him. I knew better. If there was one thing I knew about Charlie,



he was devoted and faithful. He wouldn't know how to cheat because he had such an enormous guilt complex.

Personally I thought most of the women in Charlie's office were fairly nice. Much nicer than Helena. But I really only saw them once a year at the annual Christmas party and they would treat me like a daughter, giving me small gifts of nail polish and lipstick, scarves and stockings. Things Helena wouldn't allow me. Betty, the front desk receptionist, was a riot. She would wear heavy make-up, what she called getting "all dolled up" and traipse around the office in black high heels, the heel as sharp and thin as a pencil, her blouse unbuttoned so the top rim of her bra would peek through and the tails tied at her waist rubbing her hands down her pencil skirt so she always looked like someone getting a big huge hug. Helena didn't have the body for such things but she still tried to wear them. Max said I had the body, but had to grow boobs first. He said I'd inherited our father's tall skinniness, the kind that allowed me (like him) to eat an entire cow and never have an extra ridge of flesh or fat on which judgments could hang.

After a month passed and there was no sign of us leaving again, I told Max we had to do something. It was clear Helena and Charlie were having troubles, though this normally never amounted to anything. Then Charlie went to work one day and he never came home. Helena called and they told her he was in meetings all day but nobody knew where he went when he left later that night. One night passed and Helena was already detailing all the painful things she was going to do to him once he got back, but then a second night passed and she was silent—just staring at the front door, drinking gin and

tonic after gin and tonic, the Seagram's sitting like a genie's bottle near her elbow on the side table, sweating under the glare of the lamp.

His office had told her not to worry; he was likely doing research in the field and Charlie's boss even went to so far as to suggest maybe Charlie needed a "break" (a break from our mother, I assumed) and asked her to stop calling. That set her completely off for hours. The idea that he would leave her was never an option. She wouldn't consider it. Not ever. And yet he did.

Occasionally she called out for Max to fetch her a fresh lime, but otherwise she ignored knocking on the door and the phone ringing. We stopped going to school. Max didn't want to leave her alone. On the third night, I woke up to her crying and Max kneeling next to her, holding her hand. He looked drunk and sad and about twice his age—the spitting image of our father except he had a full head of hair and none of the worry lines that characterized our father's obsessive work ethic.

Finally, after a week passed and Helena had hardly slept, she announced after dinner that we would be leaving to look for him. She showed us a map with all his usual haunts highlighted. The campsite near Jack's place was highlighted. Despite my concern about Charlie, I was elated at the prospect of seeing Jack again. I looked at Max and he stared down at his steak—one he had tried to barbecue but that still oozed blood across his plate. There's only two ways he knew how to cook: blackened or raw. But it was better than nothing.

When she suggested leaving to find Charlie, I could tell Max was angry. "Where, Mom?" he asked.

“Wherever we think he might be. We know where he likes to go. Who better to find him than us?”

“Alyssa has a test tomorrow.”

A complete and utter lie but I kept my mouth shut.

Helena shrugged. “So? She can make it up.”

She stubbed her last cigarette out and looked for another. Finding none, she smashed the box on the table, patting it with her hand, her eyelashes caked together and her lipstick half-eaten.

“If he comes back, great. If not, we’ll move on. We don’t need to go anywhere.”

“What if he’s hurt?” I said to Max. “Maybe he can’t come back.”

“Oh, you’d love that excuse wouldn’t you?” he said.

“That’s cruel, Max. I would not. I don’t want Daddy hurt.”

Helena glanced nervously from one of us to the other, the decision to leave seemingly based on whatever the outcome of our conversation was.

“I’m ready to go. Let’s give it a shot,” I said.

“But school,” he said. “This isn’t fair. Always pulling you out.”

I glared at him. I didn’t understand what he was doing, why he was fighting this when it was what I thought we wanted.

“I’ll survive. We have to stick together.”

“Right,” Helena said, pointing at me with a dead cigarette between her fingers.

“That’s right. The girl has more sense than any of the rest of us. We do have to stick

together. Charlie's a good man. A good father," she emphasized for Max. "You both go get ready."

She came up to me and wrapped her arms around me. "Thank you, baby."

I was startled by her warmth, by the way she held onto me. Several moments passed. I didn't want her to let go but she did and so we packed and left.

Of course Charlie wasn't any of the places he once took us, and by the end, we were back at the campsite near Jack. Helena was exhausted, but refused to give up. Max was oddly silent. After Helena passed out, I asked him about going to see Jack and he held up his hand. "No."

"That's it?"

"Yep, that's it."

"You don't get to tell me what to do. Just because you're pissed off at Charlie for making us go to all this trouble."

He slammed his notebook shut. "You think that's why I'm pissed?"

"How should I know when you won't tell me."

"News flash, little sis, Charlie's not coming back and feeding into Helena's delusions about him isn't helping. Don't you get it? You're doing exactly what he wants you to do. You're panicked and worried and you're going to search everywhere. Hell, I have no doubt he's waiting somewhere, laughing his ass off. We should be ignoring him so his fat head can deflate, so he can grow the fuck up and start acting like a real father."

"He's not like that. I know he acts weird but he wouldn't do that to us."

"You mean you."

“Or you or Helena.”

“We’re just puppets, Lysy.”

“So what? Why does it matter why he did what he did? We still need him. Family is family.”

“No, *you* need him.” He poked me in the chest. “I don’t need anybody.”

“Even Jack?”

“Fuck Jack. Fuck Charlie. Fuck all of you.”

Behind him Jack stood listening. I don’t know how long he’d been there, but it had been long enough. And I was glad he heard it himself because he never would have believed me. I could see by the look on his face, how he seemed to freeze, his face slowly registering the information, him squeezing his hands into fists. But he never moved. He didn’t say a word. And when he caught my eye, his anger seemed to shift from Max to me. I hated that look, how much Max hurt him. How much Max hurting Jack hurt me.

### **Presidio of San Francisco, June 1994**

With the Family Support Group gone, Alyssa goes through Aidan’s room more slowly, methodically. She doesn’t want to think about Jack or Max or the other woman anymore. She needs a chance to breathe. The hunt for the letter gives way into an unexpected journey through Aidan’s childhood. So many things she thought she’d forgotten come back. Aidan going through his G.I. Joe phase where he would call every soldier he met “Joe.” Even Jack. Aidan wanting to surprise Jack with a model train set-up that took up their entire living room. It didn’t matter since they had little furniture at the

time. When Jack got home from that deployment he didn't even change or shower. He sat down next to Aidan and they played all night until Aidan curled up on Jack's lap like a cat. Aidan insisting on making his own care packages for both Jack and Max, putting in toy cars, Play-Doh and dinosaurs, because those are the three things they need and don't have. Max pinning his bronze medal on Aidan.

She doesn't even realize she's crying until the tears begin to pool near the tea stain on her skirt.

"What are you doing, Mom?"

"I don't know." And she didn't anymore. The separation between what she thought she wanted and what she now understood she needed was so wide, it seemed she could never cross it.

He looks over at his computer. Its humming fills the room. "You could've just asked."

"You could've just told me."

"I'm not a kid anymore. And I knew what you'd say."

"So it isn't worth saying. I guess you get that from your dad. He doesn't feel like telling me anything either. Probably because he knows what I'll say. I never thought predictability could be bad."

"It is when someone uses it against you."

Alyssa looks across the room into her son's full-length mirror. She considers the two of them sitting on his bed, and wonders how it must seem to the other Alyssa, whether her condemnation will take on a more corporeal form. The longer she sits and

stares, the longer Aidan refuses to apologize, the more she feels she needs the other woman's strength. Her conviction.

"Someone like who?"

"I don't know. People who want change."

She stands up, unable to sit any longer. "Like Max?"

"He's only part of the equation. I would've helped them even if he wasn't involved. It just made it easier." He waits. "I just missed him so much. And I know I'm not allowed to say that, right? Because then Dad will feel guilty. But it's the truth. That should count for something."

"It counts for a lot with me. I know your Dad can be really hard. He grew up with a man who believed showing any emotion was weakness. That doesn't mean he doesn't care."

"I don't believe he would've done what he did if he did care."

"Did what?"

"Told Colonel Kruger about Max. That he's gay."

"I'm not sure that's what happened."

Max looks out the open window. "You weren't there. You didn't hear him."

"I was there last night. Max crossed a line." She starts to pace. Part of her wants to leave, the other part wants to stay. She wonders if the other woman isn't gone after all.

"Dad crosses lines all the time. So do you," Max says.

"And we pay the price."

"Do you?" His voice starts to quiver.

This room, this tiny child-like room, can't contain it, she realizes. She isn't sure how she could've missed something like this. How he could've become so distant, so angry and she didn't see it happen. "Let's take a walk," she says. "We both need some air."

They take a path she often walks when she needs to clear her head. It's automatic. He follows, his hands shoved into his pockets, staring at the ground. The afternoon sun slips through the eucalyptus trees. The trail leads into a wooded area between the housing developments. The trees stretch tall, reaching up as if they are trying to block out the sky. It makes her feel claustrophobic rather than safe today. She listens to the ships, to the voices bouncing off the bridge. He puts his hand on her arm.

"I thought he was going to work," she says, though she doesn't owe him an explanation. "I didn't know he would go to see his boss. To tell him anything."

"It's Sunday, Mom, and you aren't an idiot."

"He's always working. Always the man who has to be involved in everything."

"Except our family." The words slip out far too easily.

"Your uncle showed up last night determined to get in trouble. So he did. I think your dad is trying to fix things but he's hurting. A lot. You have no idea."

"Why? Because he's ashamed that Max is gay? He's afraid of what his buddies are going to think isn't he?"

Alyssa isn't sure anymore. It does seem disproportionate to her. Jack's reaction. How he says he doesn't care and yet he would do something almost as equally self-destructive as Max.



“I’m not sure how any of this is even possible. But I guess I thought if I read Max’s emails, some of it would make sense.” Not that he would have said as much to Aidan. But she’s out of options. If only she could talk to Max. She suspects Aidan knows where he is, but isn’t telling her.

“Tell me where Max is, Aidan. I know you know.”

“Is that what you read?”

“No but—”

“You’re such a hypocrite,” Aidan says, stopping in the path.

It takes her by surprise. “Don’t be disrespectful, Aidan. I’m sorry I breached whatever boundary you think you’re allowed, but Max can get you in a lot of trouble. You need to stay away from him.”

“He told me how you stole Jack from him. How you knew he was in love with Jack and you made sure to mess that up.”

“What?” She can’t believe what she’s hearing out of her seventeen-year-old son’s mouth. The things Max has told him.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You weren’t there, and I don’t have to justify my decisions to you or Max. I didn’t steal Jack because he was never Max’s. He’s not gay. He never has been. Never will be. No matter what Max feels about him.”

But she has her doubts now. She’s known for some time how deep bond was between Max and Jack. She knew they loved each other, even if Jack didn’t want to admit it. But she always thought it was based on their brotherhood. Max may have wanted Jack many years ago when they first met but he also respected Jack’s decision

when Jack chose Alyssa. He had said so. So what had changed? She wondered how much the other woman might know, how much of the pieces to this puzzle were buried deep inside her and how this might mean she needed the other woman much more than she realized.

“Maybe it’s because he knows you were going to leave him. Leave me. I don’t care about any of this drama. It’s yours. Leave me out of it. But accept the responsibility you have. What *you*’ve done to create this.”

“Your dad and I have our issues, but I would never really leave. I might want to, or think I want to, but thinking it and doing it are two very different things. We all can’t act on our emotions. What would happen if someone had the urge to kill and just did it? That’s how murderers are created.”

“Killers aren’t murderers.”

“What’s the difference?”

“One is doing a job, the other is doing it for pleasure. There’s a huge difference.”

“I didn’t come out here to wax philosophical about the world’s problems, I just want to know what you know. I want to know where Max is.”

“None of your goddamned business.”

She turns and slaps his face. As soon as it happens, she clamps her hand over her mouth and then reaches out to touch his cheek. He pulls away, slapping her hand away.

“I’m sorry,” she says. It’s the first time she’s ever laid a hand on him. Ever. The first time she’s ever wanted to.

He touches a droplet of blood at the corner of his lips. “Why apologize? I deserved it. But I’m still not going to tell you.”

“Aidan, I’m just... I can’t believe how disrespectful you’re being. None of this is my fault. I’m just trying to fix our family as best I can.”

“You can’t. That’s the point, Mom.”

The path ends and they are back where they started at the edge of the trees. The backyards of the houses lining Storey Avenue are littered with toys and discarded furniture, boxes and makeshift sheds. Aidan speeds up. Alyssa reaches out to grab his hand, to pull him back to her. She holds on as for as long as she can but he shakes free of her and hurries ahead.

It scares Alyssa that he is so angry. How Aidan’s anger will manifest itself given Jack’s violent attack on Max. She realizes she has no idea what Aidan is capable of doing to protect his family any more than she would know what the other woman is capable of. She struggles to keep up with her son but she’s tired. So tired. So dizzy. The ground is uneven. She stumbles. Her chest tightens. Her ankle slams against a rock. Pain radiates up her leg into her groin.

“Ouch! Aidan, wait!”

But Aidan is oblivious. Or ignoring her. Either way, he is focused on what lies ahead of them, maybe at home. He seems anxious to get there. She wonders if he’ll try to confront his father. The idea makes her feel nauseous. If he does, Alyssa doesn’t want to be there. She can’t stand to see them fight.

Aidan becomes a shadow in the growing darkness, the further ahead he gets. At some point, his voice reaches her from far away: "I'll see you back at the house!"

She's hurt that he doesn't even come back to see if she's okay. "Aidan!" But the tone is all wrong. That voice, her Mother voice, hasn't been exercised in years. He isn't a child anymore. He doesn't have to obey her. Not at seventeen. At seventeen he can choose to go anywhere and be anyone. He can choose the opposite of what she wants. And he likely would.

At seventeen Alyssa was engaged to Jack. It was the opposite of what Helena and Charlie had wanted for her. She and Jack kept it a secret from everyone, even Max. She hated keeping the news from her brother but Jack insisted. He said Max wasn't ready. Alyssa remembers wondering if Max would ever be ready to let them have a life of their own. If he would ever be ready to have his own life. Then Alyssa got pregnant. A baby created a bond between Jack and Alyssa that Max couldn't touch. The next logical step was marriage. And when Aidan arrived, Alyssa hoped Max's anger would pass. That he would be the uncle she knew he could be. And he was for awhile.

Aidan was a tiny but fierce baby. He punched at the sky for hours on his back, ready to fight the world. He hardly slept. Neither did Alyssa. Those nights were the hardest. Or at least she thought they were until now. It's hard for her to stop seeing Aidan as a baby. To see him as a man. That's part of the problem. Jack told her there would come a time when she would have to let him go.

The path winds its way up to a peak. Aidan stands on top of it. The sky is red behind him, slivers of light through the trees. He is so tall now, like Max. Tall and thin

and when he runs she sees another soldier. The opposite of what she wants for him. Not the dangerous life his father and uncle chose. Not one that is shaped by the military.

At the top, Aidan stops and stares ahead. Then he looks back. Alyssa limps up towards him. He makes no move to come back to her. As she moves up the hill, she senses the familiar blurring. This time it's not just her sight but all her senses at once. Some version of an emergent synesthesia. She feels like the world is bearing down on her all together all at once. It's a weight she cannot bear.

At the peak, when her vision doubles, Alyssa collapses on a bench.

There is an overwhelming scent of pine. It happens as the color purple. The whole world is tinged with it. A deep bruising of her vision of the world.

At the same time, the other woman smells smoke. A fire. Barbecue. Someone is charring steak. The temperature has dropped. The other woman shivers.

Alyssa watches Aidan walk towards the other woman. When he steps out from the trees where the other woman stands, he is suddenly lighter—almost violet.

The other woman beckons to Aidan. He jogs up to her, looking down at her ankle.

“How'd you beat me? I thought you were hurt?”

He looks disappointed. The other woman wonders at a boy who would leave his mother hurt in the trees. Her ankle throbs. She indulges in the pain. It'll keep her awake. Centered. Here. “Lucky for you, I'm fine.”

He looks down, chagrined. “I'm sorry, Mom.”

“Sorry is for children. You aren't a child anymore, Aidan. Stop acting like one.”

Aidan hesitates. Clearly he is unsure, and the other woman wonders what he sees when he looks at her. She looks past Aidan up the path to where Alyssa sits on the bench. The other woman cannot see Alyssa's face. She waves. The silhouette on the bench doesn't respond. If anything she is statuesque, frozen. The other woman is curious that Alyssa doesn't rush down the path to them, that she isn't going to try to stop her. She puts her arm around Aidan's shoulder.

"Dad's home," Aidan says. "I can wait out here for you to talk to him."

"No," the other woman says. "I need you in there. We need to talk about Max. To sort this mess out. Don't you think?"

Aidan looks up at the other woman, tears in his eyes. Still Alyssa's baby. Poor dumb kid.

"I really am sorry," he says.

"No sorries necessary. Just trust me. Let's go." Bright lights splash across Alyssa's porch. The other woman tugs Aidan to the other, opening it for him and then giving him a gentle push inside.

Alyssa can't help but think about how Aidan should know who his real mother is. And it isn't that other woman. Alyssa doesn't care what she does or says. Maybe they are identical but they are separate. They want different things: she wants to help Max to get Jack, even at the expense of their family, and Alyssa wants to keep her family together. There was a time when Alyssa and Aidan were very close, when they weren't just mother and son, but co-conspirators, confidantes. Particularly as Jack's rotations overseas increased. There came a time—granted a short time—when she and Aidan were even

surprised when Jack walked through the front door, when so much time had passed with them unaware, they hadn't even checked the calendar, they'd forgotten to meet him at the tarmac to pick him up. But he wasn't angry. He understood. He forgave them. The memory angers Alyssa. She didn't have anything to be forgiven for. He had chosen to leave. He had chosen the Army over them.

That's when Alyssa first knew they were in trouble. All of them. It wasn't so much that they forgot him or didn't miss him. It was deeper than that. A fundamental shift occurred without any of them knowing it. She and Aidan realized they didn't need him, that things were easier when he was gone. And this caused her pain. The idea of not needing him. She wanted to need her husband, to need him to come home. She knew he came because of her need, that if he suspected, even for a moment, that she didn't need him, that he would move on to someone else who did. Someone like Max.

Alyssa wonders if that's when Aidan started lying. If maybe he saw this shift too and that's when he reached out to Max. Maybe the other woman can help Aidan in a way Alyssa can't. She considers this. She only wants Aidan to be happy, to make the right decisions, whatever they might be. Aligning himself with Max, who has always been broken, is not the right decision. Alyssa knows that much. But Alyssa knows it won't be enough for her to tell Aidan that. Aidan needs to see it. The other woman may be able to do that, to show him what Alyssa can't.

The wind grows colder with each new gust through the trees. Alyssa wraps her sweater around her. She fights the urge to get up and follow them inside. She watches for

Aidan to emerge from the house, to walk back up the path to her. She will wait here until he does.

He will know it, Alyssa tells herself. He will come back out.

“Please, Aidan.”

But he doesn’t. And the longer she waits, the more she realizes whether he knows it or not, he’s made a choice.

Alyssa stands up from the bench, feeling the sharp edges of the curved slats as she pushes herself up. She feels less solid, less sure of herself than she ever has. Alyssa hobbles slowly down the path. The idea of Aidan seeing them together unsettles Alyssa. She isn’t sure anymore who he would choose. There is no way she can walk into that house. Not now. She presses her palms against one another, unsure of where to go. Realizing there is no other place for her to, but inside that house. And without that, maybe she shouldn’t be here at all.

Whatever happened the previous night between them, Jack cannot face sleeping in the same bed as his wife tonight, not after the day he’s had. Not knowing how angry she’ll be, how he’ll have to defend himself, how they’ll fight and she’ll cry and he’ll feel like shit even though he did the right thing—the *only* thing he could. He pulls out an extra set of blankets and a pillow from their closet. Eventually, she’ll see why he went to Colonel Kruger, how he had to say something. And he did his best to own up to his part. Kruger wouldn’t have any of it, though. If any man kissed me, Kruger said, I’d do more than punch his lights out. No worries, Jack, he said. We’ll sort this out. But then “sorting



it out” had multiple applications, many of which made Jack regret his decision. He hadn’t gone there just to get Max in trouble. Their conversation had unraveled in a way Jack didn’t expect. He admitted his “mistakes” and Max’s, giving them equal weight, but Kruger wasn’t interested in Jack’s assault. He said any man would’ve done the same thing. Except it wasn’t that simple, he wanted to tell Kruger. Jack wanted nothing more than to rewind time, to do the day over and choose staying in bed with his wife over taking steps to ruin both his and Max’s career.

*I’m an idiot, he thinks. How did I get to be such an idiot?*

He grabs the bottle of Jim Bean out of their liquor cabinet at the foot of the stairs, even as he tosses the pillow and blanket onto the couch and unscrews the cap, he knows that isn’t the whole truth. He knew going to Kruger would also force Alyssa to kick him out. And he deserves that. To be alone. He didn’t want Alyssa to forgive him because she always had. Their marriage was built on the understanding that whatever happened, there would always be a way to make it up, that every action was forgivable. And he hated that about her. Her willful naivety, even at the age of forty. There are some things that are unforgivable just as there are some actions that cannot be undone.

Whatever happens to Max, Jack will never be the same man again. Of that, he’s certain. He won’t be the same husband or father. He won’t be able to look at or touch Alyssa in the same way. Not knowing what he knows about himself, what he felt with Max, what it made him do.

“So this is how things are going to be, huh?” Alyssa says. She stands in the doorway, her hand gripping the frame. She looks different than the woman he left this

morning, the one who begged him to stay in bed with him, who kept kissing him and telling him how much she loved him. This woman's face has been transformed by anger and pain. Her hair is a mess. And yet oddly erotic. Not the same person he left this morning. Then he sees Aidan behind her, his face pale, unsure. They've already talked about him, made up their mind.

*Good*, he thinks. *Better to get it over with now*. He wants them to do their worst. He deserves it.

"I already know what's going to happen," he says.

"I'm really tired of you two thinking I'm so predictable. I'm not."

He raises a glass of whiskey to her. "Twenty-two years of marriage says otherwise. At least I've learned something."

He finishes the glass in one shot and looks past her to Aidan. "So you gave her all the gory details of this afternoon, I see. Good. I don't have to." Then he shakes his head against the way it comes out—so vicious and calculated, not the way he intended. But then nothing ever does.

"How is this my fault?"

Another glass gone. "I never said it was."

"No you didn't, but you'd like to, wouldn't you?" Alyssa says. "Everything is always everyone else's fault. Sending a seventeen-year-old to tell me you were ratting out my brother is pretty low, Jack. Even for you."

He laughs because he doesn't want to consider how much she's trying to provoke him. Until he realizes she's serious, and then he's just plain confused. "What the fuck,

Alyssa? You're like a goddamned yo-yo. Make up your mind. Love me or hate me. Flip a coin. Spin a wheel. Throw a dart. I. Don't. Care. But pick one, please. I can't stand all these faces you're wearing. It's sick."

She picks up the bottle. He doesn't try to take it back. Instead, he leans back and smiles. She shoves it back into the cabinet and marches upstairs. He's sad to see her go but he wanted her to leave. Or part of him did. He can't stand to see his image in her eyes. But he can't cry. He won't. Instead he focuses on his glass. A glass can't lie. It is what it is, through and through.

"You could've told us," Aidan says.

"There are some things I can't tell you. I can't. This was one of them."

"Only one? There's more?" Aidan walks over to sit next to him. "Besides, can't and won't are two very different things."

"I'm just trying to do what's best for both of you. She'll never understand that but maybe you will." He takes a deep breath. "Or you won't. I don't know anymore."

"Maybe Max did do something wrong. But he's also trying to do what's right too."

"Of course you would defend him. Why am I not surprised. Did you or your mother ever ask how I felt about all this?"

"I already know."

"You know. Ha. Of course you know. So you just brush it away. But when Max is hurting. Max is in trouble. Max isn't thinking..." he says, mimicking Alyssa's voice.

“You know your uncle is selfish bastard. He always has been. We just made allowances. I made allowances for your mother. For you. But not anymore.”

He closes his eyes. He just needs to sleep. Everything will be fine if he can just rest, just get rid of everything for a couple of hours.

“Then maybe we shouldn’t make allowances for you either,” Aidan says. “For you being gone all the time. Gone or mad.”

“I agree,” Alyssa says from the top of the stairs.

“Can’t I just get some sleep?” he mutters. “Is that too much to ask?”

“Yes, Jack, it is.”

“Mom, what are you doing?”

Jack’s eyes open and he sees her through a liquid haze of alcohol and tears. He doesn’t want to look at her. She reminds him so much of Max. She has no idea. That’s the problem.

“Mom?”

Aidan’s voice has a strange quiver. He should know it. He’s heard it before. In the Gulf, when they weren’t sent to a town to investigate a report of violence. There was a kid there. Younger than Aidan. Ten, maybe eleven. He knew what guns were. The boy tried to warn them, to tell them to leave, but they cut out his tongue because they knew he would betray them. If Jack could’ve caught the bastards, the things he would’ve done to them. An eye for an eye. He’s never been biblical, but that time, he wouldn’t have batted an eye at their screams. He would’ve carried them home and put them in a box. The same box he’s locked up his memories of Max.

“Mom, what the hell are you doing?”

But now, now, there's a different image of a boy. Another boy with a gun. Not like the gun he owns. His father's gun was longer. A rifle. Jack remembers he could barely hold it up. It took two of them. Jack and Max. And the kick back threw Max against the wall. They thought he broke a rib.

The memory soaks into the now so that they are somewhat interchangeable for Jack. The whiskey has snuck up on him, pulled a veil of stupid across his eyes. Or at least that's what he thinks. He rubs them but the image doesn't change: Alyssa stands in front of him holding his Ruger KP-9—the one she must have just taken out of the safe. But she wouldn't know the first thing about how to take off the safety. She wouldn't because he hadn't shown her. And yet there it is. The click of the switch, a sound he's heard so many times, waking or asleep. A sound he never thought he'd hear in his living room. His own gun pointed at him. Their son standing nearby.

“What are you doing?” he says. “Is this a joke?”

Part of him is glad she has it. Better her than him. He wishes she would just get it over with and shoot him. That he could get away from whatever hell he's stepped into—something that surpasses the hell he lived through in the Gulf. You expect a war to create monsters, for there to be heinous things, but not here, not inside his house. Max tried to tell him a long time ago that there was no difference. A house is just a house. It's four walls and a roof. If you let it be more, it becomes a cage. It has power over you. Damn that boy was smart. He probably wouldn't be surprised that his sister has a gun.

*The enemy within.*

But what surprises him most, what makes him sober up instantly isn't the gun. It's how she holds it. How much he loves her in spite of it. How she can still, after all these years, do something unexpected, and how this can take his breath away.

### **High Sierras, 1966**

Inside the tiny trailer, Helena lay all the way in the back, the paisley curtain drawn. She and Charlie weren't speaking. So Charlie was in the front seat buried underneath maps and paperwork, still trying to figure out where they should go. Max pushed down the table in the half-kitchen/half living room area just behind the driver's seat, and dumped out the supplies we would need. First he tied a string to a wood stick so it dangled in the middle of a cylindrical steel mold he'd welded at home from scraps he found near the road. He'd sworn me to secrecy since he wasn't allowed to touch Charlie's tools but I doubted it would've mattered even if Charlie did know.

Max had been having so much trouble at school that I was glad Charlie pulled us out and told us we were taking an emergency road trip. Max often came home with bruises on his ribs, a bloody nose. He always told me he was fine but he didn't look fine. He looked like he was losing weight and he was already rail thin as it was. Since we went to a parochial school, he was with the boys and I was with the girls so I had no clue what was going on, but I knew it was bad. I knew when a thirteen-year-old boy started to cry, a boy I'd never seen cry when he broke his ankle and didn't tell anyone for three weeks, that something was horribly wrong. I never knew how he walked, but he did, because he didn't want anyone to know what was happening to him, how cruel children could be.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Making a candle.”

My eyes widened. “You know how to do that?”

“Sure.”

“You know how to do everything,” I said. “When do I get to know how to do everything?”

He laughed. “Trust me. You don’t want to know everything. Then your head would explode. You only want to know just enough,” he said. “Just enough to get by.”

He set the wax in the pan on paraffin camping stove outside. My job was to stir the wax consistently so it wouldn’t burn on the bottom of the pan.

“What does F-A-G mean?” I asked.

He slapped my cheek. “Don’t you ever say that.” I started to cry. I was only nine. If I had known it was bad, I wouldn’t have said it. Except that wasn’t entirely true. I had known it was bad because it was burned into my brother’s back—literally—and still I wanted to say it. I wanted to understand it.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he said and he kissed my stinging cheek. “Maxie is very sorry. It’s just,” and he lowered his voice. “It’s just a secret, okay. You can’t tell, Mom. Pinkie swear?”

I nodded and wiped my eyes. Then we locked pinkies and I said, “I’m sorry too.”

“Don’t be. It isn’t your fault. When did you see that?”

“I don’t know.” But I did. I saw it when he changed right before we left. I snuck a peek in his room because I wanted to ask him what I should pack.

“Did it hurt?” I whispered.

He shrugged. “C’mon now, you have to concentrate. We’re doing magic, okay?”

And he made me stand on top of the seat with a wooden spoon. I felt like my favorite witch, Samantha Stephens.

“Where’s your father?” Helena’s drowsy voice called from behind the curtain.

“I don’t know,” I yelled.

“Where’s Maxie Cat?”

“Here, Mom,” he said, rolling his eyes. I knew he hated that nickname.

“What are you all doing?”

“Nothing,” I quickly yelled.

Max walked back to the curtain and poked his head inside. “Just cooking a little something,” I heard Max say. “Why don’t you go back to sleep? Here. Have some of this.”

Whenever they fought, Max handed her the Seagram’s. He called it Mother’s Milk but I wasn’t allowed to have any.

Charlie threw open the side door. “Woman, let’s go. C’mon. I’ve got a plan.”

“Whatever, Charlie. Save it. I’m busy,” Helena called from the back.

“C’mon, Helena. Please,” Charlie said, the last bit stretched into pleading.

“God,” I heard her say. “You’re damn lucky I love you, Charlie Eaves. No woman on the planet would put up with the kind of rubbish unless you were well-endowed and—”

“Woman,” he said sharply, his ears scarlet. “Shut up and come here.”



“Fine, fine. Kids, be good.”

She passed right by without a second glance. But Max was standing in front of it, his arms crossed like he didn’t want her to see.

“Momma, check it out. I’m stirring the pot,” I said, proud.

“Good for you, pumpkin,” she said, slamming the door shut.

The lake was calm outside. I wondered how long they would be gone since it was dark out, but I didn’t really have a bedtime. It was whenever I got tired and normally Max and I got tired together.

Once the wax melted, Max added the food coloring drops and poured the hot wax into the mold. It set for an hour and then the two of them did it again and again, changing colors each time so that the finished candle had layers of blues and reds, greens and yellows all bleeding into one another, inseparable—an entire day’s work.

“It’s too pretty,” I said. “I don’t want to light it.”

But Max insisted. “You don’t spend all day making something if you aren’t going to use it. That’s just stupid.”

“You sound like Dad.”

He stuck out his tongue at me. “If I dragged my wife and kids somewhere, I’d at least have the sense to know where I was going,” he said, rifling through the drawer inside the trailer where he knew the matches were hidden. “I want to show you a trick.”

He produced the matches, lighting one with the snap of his wrist. He pressed his fingers against the burning match to extinguish the flame.

“Hey, are you crazy, stop, Max,” I said. “Let’s go outside.”

He clamped his hand over my mouth. “If you don’t be quiet, you’ll have to go to bed and then you’ll never see my wick trick.” He chuckled at his joke, but I just crossed my arms and sat pretending to be uninterested.

A puddle of wax began to pool around the wick. Max dipped his finger into it. There was no way I was sticking my finger in there. I’d burnt myself once on the oven fooling around when I didn’t know it was on, the dulled patch of skin, a red aberration on my arm would be a reminder of my mistake for the rest of my life.

Max tilted the candle slightly, dribbling the liquid wax from up high into his palm.

“Ouch,” I said, rubbing my palm.

“Doesn’t hurt. Besides it’s not about pain, it’s about persistence. Faith. Haven’t you ever heard of those Firewalkers. These dudes walk across hot coals without even flinching. They believe they can do it, so they do. You have to do it to join their tribe. It’s their initiation.”

“Initiation?”

“Yeah, you know to be one of them. That would be so cool. It’s in this book I got from the library. I guess you’re too young,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

Then he offered the candle to me but fire still scared me so I shoved it away.

“Suit yourself.” His hand hovered over the flame, licking his palm. “There’s nothing like fire.”

I grabbed his hand and flipped it over, touching it. No burn, nothing. It was warm but other than that, untouched. I held it over the flame, fascinated. “What’s persistence?”

“It’s making a choice and sticking with it.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. You’re still just a baby. Don’t worry about it.”

But I was worried about it. I was worried I was missing the lesson, the something I should know. I was worried about F-A-G and Charlie not knowing where we were and Helena always calling for Max to wait on her hand and foot. I worried too much, Max always said. You’re too young to be such a worry-wort. But no one else was worried so I had to be. I thought of it as my job. Like the match. Burning.

I took out a match and tried striking it on the side, the way I watched Max do but it broke in half falling down onto the trailer floor.

“You aren’t allowed to have those,” he said. “Give ‘em back.”

“I can do it. I’m not a baby.”

“Lysy, cut it out.” He grabbed at my hand, but I was smaller and faster than he. I dropped the box to distract him and grabbed the candle. “Alyssa, stop,” he said, trying to block me. “You’re going to ruin it.”

He swiped at the candle, narrowly missing it, and my hand tipped, dumping a stream of melted wax on my leg.

“Ooww,” I howled, dropping the candle.

It rolled under the table.

“Shit!” Max said, stooping down.

Someone banging on the door. “Hey, why is this locked? What are you two doing in there?” The wax hardened on my leg hairs. I picked at it but it was already cool. It looked like a clump of fake skin.

“Cool,” I said.

“Shit,” Max said again from underneath the table.

“What in the hell is that wretched smell?” Helena said from outside.

I didn’t notice it at first, but the flame licked the curtain and was slowly quickly eating it and eating the seat below.

“Max, get out of there!” I screamed. The widening ring of fire left a black hole through which Alyssa could see her mother peering through the window. Her face was twisted by anger. I didn’t know which was worse. Staying inside to burn to death or going out to face her.

I tugged on the burning curtain and he grabbed it out of my hands, tossing it out the door. Helena stepped inside and yanked my arm so hard, I fell out the door onto the pavement.

“Max, are you alright? What was that? What happened?”

“I’m fine, Mom. Fine. It’s no big deal. I was showing Alyssa a trick and it, well, it’s fine now.”

“Alyssa,” my mother said. “I knew it. We can’t leave you alone for five minutes. Not five. You’re making your poor brother jump on top of burning curtains. He could’ve hurt himself. We all could’ve been hurt. You could’ve burned the trailer *down*.” She said it as if it had happened, as if we hadn’t stopped it in time.

“But Momma..” I said. “It was Max’s fault.”

Max looked helplessly at her, and she stared back at him, tears welling.

“I didn’t mean to mess it up. I was just trying to do it. He wouldn’t let me.”

“Mom,” Max interrupted. “That’s true. It’s my fault.”

“You need to stop protecting her, Max. I know what happened. I’m not dumb. You both think I’m stupid but I heard the whole goddamned thing, and I know who’s responsible.”

I didn’t wait to hear any more. I was so angry I kicked the tire of the trailer and stalked off.

“Alyssa, wait!” Max shouted. “I told her it was my fault. I’m the oldest. It was my doing. I can’t help it if she won’t listen.”

“Whatever,” I said, sniffing. “You blame me too. I know you do. That’s why you never let me do anything.”

“I told her it was my fault.” He didn’t finish with what he really wanted to say:  
*Even though it really was yours.*

“Go away.” I sat down at the edge of the lake, the water rolling up beneath me. He sat down next to me and put his arm around my shoulders. I picked off the rest of the wax, flicking bits of it into the water. I felt like that too much lately. Like wax. Fiery hot and oozing one moment, cool, smooth and hardened the next. But I couldn’t explain it to Max. He wouldn’t understand. Or at least I didn’t think he would until I saw the burns across Max’s palms and wrist, white bubbles that leaked when they popped. I hated to see him hurt for something I did, something I was trying to do to help him. I wished he

wouldn't have grabbed those burning curtains. I wanted the trailer to burn down. I didn't want to go back home. I didn't want him to have to face those boys again alone. I wished I could be there with him and I even considered trying to pretend to be a boy, to go there and protect him because I knew he wouldn't protect himself. If only I could. If only I was anyone else but me.

#### **Presidio of San Francisco, June 1994**

Alyssa's fighting the urge to go stand at the window of her house to watch what the other woman is doing inside when she hears Sally's van pull up. Each of Sally's four-year-old fraternal twins emerges with a heavy bag of groceries nearly bigger than the child. The woman's thick, black-dyed hair is sculpted around her face ending in jagged points sloping towards her chin. Sally hides behind thick black sunglasses that she tips down when she sees Alyssa.

"My God, what in the hell happened to you?"

The girl chews on a strand of her red hair. She drops her bag of groceries and runs to grab onto Alyssa's hand and tug her into Sally's house.

"No, Emily, let go," Alyssa says, trying not to sound too harsh. Then she turns to Sally for help.

"Emily, come now. That's not nice. Miss Alyssa doesn't need to be jerked around. She just needs—" and Sally stops, her bright red lips tipping down in an exaggerated gesture of support. "She looks like she needs a drink. Come on, then."

"No, Sally. That's alright. I don't need a drink."

“After the day you’ve had, I imagine you need several. It’s the least I can do. Come on.”

“Why not?” the boy says and Alyssa can’t get over how eerily he sounds like an adult.

“See! Eric agrees. You can’t say no to a little boy, you know.” She taps the boy on the top of the head with one of her long manicured nails, the studs on each tip flashing gold in the sunlight. “Now go into the house with your sister.”

As soon as they disappear through the doorway, Sally turns and says, “Okay, give.”

“I know you mean well, but I’m really, well, never mind. You’re right. I could use a drink.” Alyssa isn’t entirely sure this is the best idea. She doesn’t drink during the day. She hardly drinks occasionally (at parties, mostly) at night.

“You know me, I have my own clock. It’s called ‘survival’ and since there’s no preschool today, I’m going to need something to survive Tweedledum and Tweedledee.”

“I can’t stay long.” Or maybe she’ll have to. She can’t imagine having to sleep on Sally’s couch with its fruit juice stains and candy wrapper littered cushions.

“I have some juicy news for you.”

“And it’s not about me?”

“Bite your tongue.”

While Sally disappears into the kitchen to make the Blood Marys, Alyssa takes the opportunity to snoop around Sally’s house. Though it’s identical in structure and layout to Alyssa’s, it seems like a completely different world. Where Alyssa has always

been mindful of two boys in her home and selected colors and patterns that tended to be neutral, not too masculine, not too feminine, Sally's house is a cornucopia of femininity. If Alyssa hadn't met her husband Bill, if they hadn't had numerous barbecues, celebrated birthdays, attended the same base social events, if Jack hadn't played golf with Bill and his side of the marriage hadn't filtered over to Alyssa, she would've guessed Sally was a widow or a single mother—there was no other explanation for the white carpet, the pastel walls, the flower-covered chairs and tablecloths and bedspreads. It was like stepping into a manufactured Garden of Eden, except Adam had long since been expelled and Eve was content to lounge as long as she could, alone.

“So have you talked to Jack yet?” she asks. “I saw him come home about an hour ago. He didn't look like he was in the mood to chat. He nearly ran over my leprechaun in the front. You should tell him to be more careful. You know, in your own way. But he can't be destroying other people's things...”

On and on she blathers. Alyssa grips her Bloody Mary with both hands, taking a sip. The shock of fiery peppers scalds her throat. Her nose burns. But she keeps sipping. The more she drinks, the more the initial burning evens out until she can't stop herself. Pretty soon it's nearly gone and Sally's looking at her like she's a closet alcoholic. The vodka unmoors Alyssa. When Sally motions that she can make Alyssa another, Alyssa waves her hand. “That's quite enough. Thanks. It was just too good. You should help me cater sometime.”

Sally smiles, very pleased with herself.

“So there's something you wanted to tell me?”



Sally nods her head, content in knowing she'll have a new role in Alyssa's life.

"So do you remember Adrienne Jackson?"

"Who?"

"The wife of the First Sergeant."

"What about her?"

"Well I guess she's been a busy little bee. Pollinating some young privates."

Alyssa rolls her eyes, feeling the vodka spreading through her limbs. "How do you know?"

"The little nit told me. She thought I'd be sympathetic for some dumb reason. Or maybe she wanted to be caught. How should I know?"

"I didn't know you two were friends."

Sally smiles. "We aren't. I guess she thought we were. But I've never forgiven her husband for passing Bill up for that promotion. He'll never fight for himself. I have to fight for him. So that's what I'm doing. Just protecting my own." She pauses. "You'd do the same I know. We have that in common, that's how I knew you'd be just as happy me to find out they're getting shipped off. Maybe her husband's finally going to ship her out."

Alyssa sets down her glass, feeling dizzy again. "I don't understand, Sally. Why are you telling me this?"

Sally's smile falters and she reaches out to pat one of Alyssa's hands. "Because unlike Adrienne, you are a friend. At least I hope we are."

"Meaning what?"

“Meaning there are so many rumors out there, so many things. Things that will rise up, burst and then wither until they’re forgotten.”

She stands up, gripping the couch, feeling the slipcover slip beneath her fingers. “But honestly, I don’t care what other people think.”

“Sure you do.”

“No, I don’t.”

She has a picture in her mind: the other Alyssa with Jack and Aidan, how much better of a life they might have with *her*.

“Are you okay? Maybe I should help you home?”

“I’m fine.”

“Mommy, mommy!” Eric comes racing in, hands flailing, mud covering most of him so he looks like a guerilla emerging from the jungle. “What are you still doing here?” He cocks his head at Alyssa and says, “You just left. What are you still doing here? I don’t like you. Go away.” He rubs his eyes and Sally stares at him, unsure of what to say. “Eric Michael you will apologize to Mrs. Gibbs right now!”

“No!” He stamps his foot. “I saw you. I saw you. I saw you!” He runs from the room dramatically and Sally turns to Alyssa.

“I’m so sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten into him.”

Alyssa does. It’s the other woman. But when Alyssa walks over to the window and peers out, her car is gone. The relaxed feeling she had before disappears and she is suddenly all too aware of the mistake she’s made. How she may have misjudged the other woman. Where would she go? What if she didn’t come back?

“Sally, thanks for the chat and the Bloody Mary, but I have to go back to the house. You understand.”

“I can come with you. Be moral support.” The way she says it, Alyssa is surprised at how genuine she sounds, how Sally really thinks she’s being a friend.

“Tell you what, I’ll call you if I need to talk. You’re close, right? I promise.”

Sally nods, but she also looks hurt.

“I appreciate you sticking up for me, Sally. I know we’re supposed to do it in the FSG but it doesn’t always work that way does it.”

Sally shakes her head.

“At least you and I know we’ve got each other. That’s something,” Alyssa says.

Sally raises her glass. “You know where to find me.”

Alyssa nods and hurries out the front door. Sally must have made the Blood Mary strong because she trips on the stoop on the way out and all of a sudden she feels a child under each arm, grinning up at her with Sally behind shouting orders.

“Say I was going to ask you something,” Sally says as they reach Alyssa’s front door.

“Uh, yeah.” She looks at the front door, praying that Eric was in fact telling the truth. The door remains half-open, revealing a slice of the room and no one inside. She isn’t sure she should take the chance. “Well, aren’t you going to invite me inside?”

“Sure.”

Sally pokes her head through the front door. “I know what you said, but I also watched how much your hand was shaking.”

Alyssa is both reluctant and grateful. The truth is that she's relieved to have someone walk inside with her. Someone who is an outsider and yet on her side. "Okay, come in," Alyssa stammers. Sally grins as wide as she can, taking Alyssa's arm. And Alyssa realizes the woman, in her own tiny way, feels as if she's exercising some type of invisible power. Alyssa has spent most of her time the last four years having Sally as a neighbor, trying to keep her out of her house, not inviting her in. Alyssa isn't even sure why she ever did such a thing.

"Did you see those MPs last night?" Sally asks.

A bad feeling starts to come over Alyssa. "When?"

"I guess about dusk. I don't know. I wonder now if they weren't here to pick up one of your boys." It seems to Alyssa that Sally already knows the answer, that somehow this is a test.

"I've never known a base to send out MPs to collect someone unless they're up for capital murder or something crazy like that. Have you talked to them?"

"No." Alyssa sits down on her couch. The twins start circling her and then the dining room table, drawing an imaginary figure eight.

"I would if I were you. I'd chat their little ears off if I thought I could get some info about someone I loved. Now do you mind if I use your bathroom?" Sally says.

"Nature's calling!"

Sally walks back without waiting for an answer. Alyssa considers the possibilities for the MPs, but Sally's right, it doesn't make sense. If Jack only went this morning to talk to his CO, they must be here for another reason.

“You left the light on. Did you know that?” Sally says, turning to face Alyssa as she stuck her hand onto the wall switch and flicked it off.

“Remember, we need to conserve. Part of the base rules.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I forgot.”

Sally puts on her best sympathetic best friend look and rushes over to sit down on the couch next to Alyssa while her girls take rotations picking up and moving various items around the front room.

“That’s okay. I won’t tell. You know we need to stick together, right? We’re like family.”

“I know,” Alyssa says, weakly. “I appreciate your support, Sally. Truly. I’ll call you once I talk to Jack.”

“Speaking of which, where is he?”

“I don’t know. You said he was home, right?”

“Oh yeah, I saw him walk inside.”

“I’m sure he’s in the garage or upstairs.” Alyssa doesn’t want to consider the idea that Jack and Aidan left with the other woman but she has to. They all left together. But where?

Sally waves as she leaves. “Call me!”

As soon as the front door shuts, Alyssa calls out, “Jack!”

No answer.

“Aidan?”

No answer.

Of course they went with her. But where, she wonders. And why. She has no idea. No clue. She looks around the room, upstairs, everywhere for anything that might tell her where they went.

The only thing she sees is their safe is open. The \$5K in cash she's been squirreling away from her catering jobs is still in the safe (for emergencies) but Jack's Ruger is missing.

She's debating whether to call the police when the doorbell rings. Alyssa waits, hoping it's just a missionary selling God who will leave.

The doorbell rings again. And again. Two short blasts in quick succession.

Neither Jack nor Aidan would ring the doorbell. Jack's red Camaro is still in the driveway. She takes a deep breath and unbolts the door.

Two MPs stand outside, their figures dark silhouettes against the hazy morning sky.

"Can I help you?" she says. Her stomach tightens. She can still feel the lingering effects of the vodka, though they do nothing to calm her heart. Alyssa takes a deep breath, pressing a hand to her stomach. Panic would get her nowhere.

The one with the name tag Elliott talks first. She has a round face and wide brown eyes that scrutinize Alyssa even before anything is said. Tall and thin, even behind the standard-issue uniform and beret, Alyssa is taken aback by her beauty, by the purity of it. In the absence of make-up, a scowl barely hidden, her jaw set—Alyssa has the oddest feeling she's trying to make herself seem ugly. Alyssa can't fathom this. Unfortunately

her anger doesn't diminish it; if anything, it emphasizes it. Her lips become fuller, blood-filled, her cheeks naturally rosy and her hazel eyes, as speckled and wide as an owl's.

"Is Sergeant Gibbs available?" she says.

"Not right now. He should be home any minute. What's going on?"

Elliott glances at her partner, a shorter, stout young man named Graham who wrings his beret. He says, somewhat sheepishly, "May we come inside?"

Graham is sweating profusely, his hand sliding across hers in a hot, wet panic. Disgusting. Like a dog's wet tongue.

She wipes her hand on her sweatshirt, suddenly embarrassed by how old it is, how it makes her feel poor and cheap and dirty.

He turns a bit to the side, to face Elliott, and Alyssa sees the Fort Greeley patch. Same MPs Sally spoke of which is, Alyssa thinks, odd timing. She suddenly wonders if someone from the FSG didn't call them. She knows she should invite them inside but she can't seem to get her body to move; her fingers are locked on the door edge and her feet are weighted to the floor. "I'm sorry, but what do you need?"

"We have a few questions," Elliott says. "It's important."

She feels sick. "What's going on?"

"We really need to talk to your husband," Graham says.

Alyssa feels the panic of anger and frustration in her chest. They won't tell her anything unless he's here, even if it's about her own brother because she's an outsider who has to play by the rules without having any power. The absence of a uniform had reduced her to nothing but a road block. "I can try paging him."

Graham glances at Elliott and then puts his arms behind his back, thrusting his chest forward. “We already paged him.”

Alyssa can feel her weight shift until she’s leaning against the door, clinging to it for support. This must have to do with Max but they are far too polite given the circumstances of Max’s arrival, the fight and Jack’s subsequent report.

“Are you here about my husband’s report?” They look confused.

“What report?”

“Never mind.”

Graham looks to Elliott and nods. “Okay, Mrs. Gibbs. Let’s see if we can help each other out. May we come in?”

Alyssa hesitates, but in the end, she pushes the door open, feeling her hand shake against it. She leads them into the front living room in a daze.

Graham sits in the recliner while Elliott stands next to the couch.

“Please have a seat,” Alyssa says.

Elliott politely declines. “I’ve sat enough in the car today. We had to fly into Sacramento.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Can I get you something to drink?” Alyssa’s never felt captive in her own home before. Before she tells them anything, if she tells them anything, she needs to know why they’ve come, what they think Max has done.

“You mentioned something about a report your husband filed? For what?” Elliott asks. Alyssa can tell Elliott is the senior officer and that she has a chip on her shoulder,



that this is more than just business for her. Graham on the other hand looks young and Alyssa suspects he's probably much less into official protocol.

"I don't know," Alyssa says. "You'd have to ask my husband. Are you sure you don't want anything? Coffee or tea?"

"I'd love a cup of coffee, ma'am," Graham says. Elliott glares at him. "If it's not any trouble. If it is, no worries."

"Of course, it's no trouble. I'll be right back."

While she's in the kitchen, she hears their voices from the front room but she can't hear what they're saying. She picks up the phone and calls Sally, explaining quickly how she needs her to come over, to try to keep the MPs busy so she can slip out to get Jack. Not five minutes later, Sally arrives with the twins. The house is filled with the smell of fresh-brewed coffee and Alyssa greets her as if they haven't seen each other in days.

"Sally, come in. I'm so glad to see you. These MPs are from Max's base up north."

"How nice!" Sally says. "So business or pleasure?"

The twins have on cowboy hats and fake pistols strapped to their waists. Eric pulls his out first and points it at Graham, "Give it up, parner," he says. Graham laughs half-heartedly and suggests to Eric he shouldn't point guns at people, but he isn't one to take an order let alone a suggestion. Elliott rolls her eyes. The girl Emily has begun a serious interrogation, one finger looped into her studded pink belt and the other scratching her ear.

“So where you from?” Emily says.

“Up north,” Elliott replies.

“Where’s that?”

“Fairbanks.”

“Fair what?”

“Fairbanks,” Elliott says more slowly. “We get a lot of snow. What about you?

Where did you come from?”

“Next door. Mrs. Alyssa needs our help.”

Elliott frowns and Alyssa shrugs. “Kids.”

“We keep ourselves busy,” Graham says, looking uncomfortable.

“Doing what?”

“Catching bad guys?”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“We’re looking for someone.”

“For a bad guy?”

Graham looks irritated. “Not exactly. I don’t know. Listen, it’s not that simple.”

“But you just said you find bad guys.”

“He’s not a bad guy,” Elliott says. “He just left his base without permission.” She looks at Alyssa. “We want to help him, so other people don’t think he’s a bad guy.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Sally says. “So what if he’s gay. Hell, I liked everybody when I was younger and skinnier and they liked me. So what? It wasn’t like it was a federal offense. It shouldn’t be. This is dumb.”

“That’s not the problem,” Elliott says quickly, glancing at Graham. “The problem is that he hasn’t reported for duty in over a month. They’re going to declare him AWOL.”

“It would be better for him if he turned himself in,” Graham says. “Whatever else he does on his own time is his business. But he can’t just disappear.”

Alyssa nods, half relieved. “I’m sure this is a mistake,” she says. She told them her brother would never go AWOL. Maybe his paperwork isn’t in order. Someone lost it. That happens all the time. The Army isn’t known for its accuracy or efficiency. Bureaucracy would be its downfall, she always said.

“We volunteered to help out,” Elliott says. “We’re friends.”

“Friends, huh? He’s never mentioned you to me.”

“When was the last time you spoke?”

“I’m not in the habit of charting my phone calls with family. If you’re friends, then you should know he wouldn’t do that.”

“I know we all make stupid decisions sometimes. I know he’s been very upset lately and I know he’s impulsive,” Elliott says.

“That’s a recipe for disaster,” Sally interjects.

Alyssa is startled by how well Elliott seems to know her brother. It’s uncanny.

“Well as you can see, he’s not here. Neither is my husband.”

Elliott stands up. “You know your husband can be in a lot of trouble for helping him. So can you.”

“Sounds like you’re a real good friend,” Sally says hotly.

“Hold up,” Graham says. “I know this is hard. But it’s better for everyone if you just give him a message.”

“Are you going to arrest him?” Sally says, crossing her arms.

“Sally...”

She whispers to Alyssa: “I got your back, girl.”

“No, not yet. I told you, we’re here just to get him to come back on his own terms. No harm, no foul. Okay? We have a few other places to go, but please have Sergeant Eaves or Sergeant Gibbs call us. This is the easiest way. Believe me. Here’s my number,” Elliott says.

Alyssa takes the card and shoves it into her pocket. When she looks up Elliott is looking at her with a measured sadness. Graham is gone, lost in the growing darkness and then appearing underneath the newly buzzing streetlight above their white truck.

Elliott hesitates and then leans forward. “He isn’t alone,” she says. “Please tell him that. We really are here to help.”

Alyssa nods.

“You know he once told me about these crazy trips you and he would have to go on with your parents. He said you would go into the High Sierras to a campsite where there was this huge cabin buried deep inside the forest. Told me the old man there had a huge pot farm. Weed coming out of his ass. Didn’t like to sell it though. Do you know where that is?”

“I’m afraid that was so long ago, and I was young. Max was older. Our father drove.”

“Is it some place he might be?”

“I doubt it. He hated it there. So did Jack. That’s where we met him. And after Jack’s grandfather passed away, we took him with us.”

“Your parents adopted Jack?”

“Not exactly. He just lived with us. He had no other family. What’s that got to do with anything?”

Elliott smiles. “I think you have a lot of answers, Mrs. Gibbs. I think you can help Max in a way no one else can. He told me about you.”

Alyssa frowns. “I don’t know what he told you but I don’t know where he is.”

“I think you do. Forgive me, but I think you know where all the dead bodies are buried in your family and you know where he’d go if he needed to run away. Go talk to him. Tell him to come back and I’ll help him as much as I can. I owe him.” After Elliott leaves, Alyssa can’t get what Elliott said out of her head. She started to wonder if Elliott really did know where Max was, but couldn’t go to him herself. Not with Graham, who seemed like a stick in the mud. But she isn’t sure what Elliott expects her to do once she finds him. And the more pressing issue isn’t Max but her husband and son. The other woman. The gun.

Mary’s Gulch. That was the name of the place in the High Sierras where they met Jack. Mary was Jack’s mother’s name. Often over the years, she would hear Jack dreaming about her, yelling for her. His grandfather named the gulch near the cabin after her to show her how much he loved her. But that was the sum total of his love. A name.

A place she didn't even want to be. She can't imagine what it must be like to have lived under Jack's grandfather's roof, to live in fear.

She feels dizzy again, unmoored, but not the same as before. *This* time, it seems like she's the one who is being tugged. That the other woman has the power to pull her back until they merge. The force of the other woman's need stretches across hundreds of miles, pulling at Alyssa until she can feel herself moving at an obscene pace.

There is the wind. There are mountains. A place not unlike the Presidio as it once was existed hundreds of years earlier.

Alyssa hears their voices—Jack's, Aidan's, and Max's. She feels the gun in her hand, which is the other woman's hand. She feels how much the other woman wants Jack to apologize, to tell the truth. How the other woman has known all along that Jack loved and needed her brother in a way he never could her.

Alyssa lets the gun go. Someone picks it up.

The other woman lets Alyssa go. The scene disappears and then Alyssa is back inside her living room on the Presidio. She's ready to leave, to fight for her family. No one, not even the other woman will keep her from them.