

T E S S

Irvine, Alta California (1992 C.E.)

Drums beat in the distance like an amplified pulse. People streamed over the dirt road, leather boots laced to their knees, eyes ringed in kohl, ears and lips studded with precious metals. Some gathered in an open square below the steep path to the amphitheater, making a bonfire out of objects stolen from their enemies. The smoke reeked of something ancient and horrific; materials far older than humanity were burning. A rusty sunset painted everyone in blood, and shrieks around the flames mixed with faraway chanting.

It could have been Rome under Nero. It could have been Samarkand when the Sogdians fled. It could have been Ataturk's new Istanbul, or a feast day in Chaco Canyon. The technologies were industrial, Neolithic, and medieval. The screams were geochronologically neutral.

I paused, smelling the toxins, watching a woman with jet-black lips and blue hair pretend to eat a spider. One of her companions laughed. "Michelle, you are so gross! This isn't an Ozzy concert!" They paused at the ticket booths to flip off the Vice Fighters, a gang of conservative protesters waving signs covered in Bible quotes. Some

of them were burning CDs in a garbage can, and the stench of melting plastic formed a noxious bubble around their demonstration.

The Machine had not delivered me to an ancient war, nor to an anti-imperialist celebration. I was at Irvine Meadows Amphitheater in 1992, deep in the heart of Orange County, Alta California. Soon I'd be seeing one of the greatest punk bands of the decade. But I wasn't here for history tourism. Somewhere in this rowdy concert crowd, a dangerous conspiracy was unfolding. I needed to find out who was behind it. If these bastards succeeded, they would destroy time travel, locking us into one version of history forever.

I bought a lawn seat and raced up the winding pedestrian walkway to the seating area, lurid with stadium lights. The theater was relatively small and open to the sky, with a steep grade of loge seats above the prized orchestra section next to the stage. The lawn formed a green semicircle above it all, pocked with mud puddles and beer cans. Still, even up here, the air vibrated with anticipation for the headliner. Spotlights sent a cluster of beams racing around the stage.

Grape Ape's lead singer Glorious Garcia strutted out alone, sequins on her tattered skirt shimmering in the glare. She let out a furious howl. "HOLA, BITCHES! IF ANYONE CALLED YOU A SLUT TODAY, SAY IT WITH ME! SLUT SLUT SLUT!" All around me, women joined the chant. They wore battered combat boots, shredded jeans, and wrecked dresses. They had tattoos and black nail polish and looked like warrior queens from another planet. Tangled hair flashed in every possible artificial color. "YOU SLUTS ARE BEAUTIFUL!" Glorious fisted the air and aimed her mic at the crowd, still chanting, "SLUT SLUT SLUT!" Back when I went to this concert for the first time, I was an angry sixteen-year-old with too many piercings for suburbia, wearing a military jacket over a 1950s dress.

Now I was forty-seven on the books, fifty-five with travel time.

My eyes flicked to the things I never would have seen back then. Everyone looked so scrubbed and affluent. Our rebel fashions were cobbled together from the expensive stuff we'd seen in some *New York Times* story about grunge. But what really jolted me was the way people occupied themselves as they waited for the music to start. Nobody was texting or taking selfies. And without phones, people didn't know what to do with their eyes. I didn't either. I watched a guy in a Dead Kennedys shirt urging a hip flask on a woman who was already so drunk she could barely stand in her platform creepers. She stumbled against him, swigging, and he gave a thumbs-up sign to his pal. The punk scene, once my inspiration, now looked like a bunch of future bankers and tech executives learning how to harass women.

The rest of the band charged on stage, Maricela Hernandez's guitar squealing over the clatter of drums and bass fuzz. Cigarette smoke and sound merged into a throbbing haze around us. From my distant perch, Glorious was a tiny figure with the biggest voice in the world.

"THIS IS A SONG ABOUT THE GIRLS FROM MEXICO WHO ARE PICKING FRUIT IN YOUR IRVINE COMPANY FARMS! LET'S RIP DOWN THE FUCKING BORDER NET AND STOP THE KILLING!"

That took me back. In 1991, a huge group of refugees fleeing Mexico had drowned in the Gulf of California, just as they'd almost reached the safety of U.S. soil in Baja. They'd gotten tangled in offshore nets the border patrol set up to stop illegal immigrants.

The music tore through me until it merged with muscle and bone. I had a job to do, but I couldn't move. Grape Ape was the only thing here that hadn't been warped by my disillusionment. They still had the power to replace my cynicism with a feeling that careened between hope and outrage. Strobe lights churned the darkness, and the audience frenzy reached beyond fandom, struggling toward something else. Something revolutionary.

Then I felt a broad hand on my upper arm, squeezing a little too

hard, and a large male body pressed against my back. I tried to elbow him and wriggle away, but the still-invisible stranger held me in place. He leaned down to whisper-yell in my ear, blotting out the music. “I know you must have many daughters at your age, and you are worried about their future.” His voice was smooth, and his warm breath smelled like lavender and mint. With his free hand, he started massaging my neck as he continued to grip my arm. “That’s why you come to places like this. To find a better way for women. We want that too. Maybe you’ll look past your prejudice against men and read our zine.”

At last he released me and I whirled to face him. He pulled his zine from a rumpled Kinko’s bag. Grainy Xeroxed images of women in chains adorned the cover, and letters torn from magazines spelled out the title: COLLEGE IS A LIE. Flipping through the pages of ten-point Courier font and smeary cartoons, I scanned a few typical punk rants against suburban brainwashing: college teaches conformity, turns you into a corporate drone, destroys true art, blah blah blah. But there was a weird strand of gender politics in it. Over and over, the anonymous authors preached that college “destroys feminine freedoms inherited from our ancestors on the plains of Africa” and “is anti-uterus.” I scanned a paragraph:

Women are naturally empathic, and college tortures them with artificial rationality. Millions of years of evolution have led men to thrive in the toolmaking worlds of science and politics, and women to become queens of emotional expression and the nurturing arts. College denies this biological reality, which is why so many women feel bad about themselves. But it doesn’t have to be that way! Fuck college! It’s time for liberation!

The entire zine was about why women should drop out of college. I looked sharply at the man, a nasty retort on my tongue, but his face stole my words. It couldn’t be. I would never forget those features, so

perfectly formed it was as if he'd been grown in a vat full of men's magazines. I'd last seen him in 1880, at a lecture on suppressing vice in New York City. He was one of the young men clustered around Anthony Comstock, lapping up the famous moral crusader's invective about the evils of birth control and abortion. Later, at the protest, he'd given me a beautiful smile before punching me in the chest. Gasping for air, I'd dismissed him as one of the many YMCA boys under Comstock's spell. Now it appeared he was something more—a traveler. I feigned interest in the zine and shot another glance at him. The man might be a few years younger than he'd been in 1880, so maybe this was his first time meeting me. His blond hair was currently spiked in an embarrassing imitation of Billy Idol.

He took my silence as an opening, and leaned closer again, touching my shoulder. "I can tell you don't quite understand, but you're intrigued. My friends and I are here to help if you need us." He gestured to a few other men, all wearing black armbands around their biceps, handing out zines to other women in the crowd. Despite the distraction of Grape Ape onstage, they'd managed to get quite a few people to take one. Fear filled my guts with ice. This guy and his buddies were planting ideas, playing a long game. Trying to eliminate choices for these women in the future. It was a textbook example of a forbidden traveler's art: editing the timeline.

I was looking for anti-travel activists, people who wanted to shut down the Machines. It was hardly the kind of political stance a traveler would take. But everything about this guy was off. So I followed at a safe distance, watching him whisper in women's ears, pointing them away from one of their few pathways to power. Eventually, at the very edge of the loge section, the black armband men came together. I stood nearby and bummed a cigarette from an old crusty punk, catching snatches of the traveler's conversation.

"I think we converted a few today. Good work." That was the Billy Idol guy, the one I'd seen over a century ago in Comstock's orbit.

“Do you think we’ll be able to make the edit before time stops?” another man asked.

“We may need to go back a century.”

“How long until we have our rights back? This is taking too long. I think we should hit the Machines now.”

The crowd began to roar, burying their voices.

A terrifying hypothesis coalesced in my mind. There’s only one reason why a traveler might want to lock the timeline, and that’s if he planned to make a final, lasting edit that could not be undone. I looked at the zine again. It was exactly the kind of propaganda that Comstockers would use to revert the secret edits made by people like me and my colleagues in the Daughters of Harriet.

The Daughters often debated whether we were working directly against another group. Even when it seemed like we made significant progress in the past, the present remained stubbornly unchanged. But we had no evidence of oppositional reverts, other than our constant frustration. It was like we were fighting with ghosts.

Now the ghosts had become men.

The Comstocker was delivering a final rallying speech. He gestured at the loge section. “This is what happens when men become victims. But once we take control of the Machine, nobody will remember this world.”

At that moment he looked over and saw me listening. His face went ugly and asymmetrical: he’d recognized me, and realized I wasn’t a temporal local.

“Get her! She’s one of them!” He pointed. Suddenly, four men with black armbands and pale skin had eyes on me.

I took off running, edging my way past the security guards, aiming for the mosh pit. Grape Ape roared through a song I couldn’t hear over the thump of blood in my ears. My momentum was swallowed by a swell of bodies, diverting our chase into a chaotic circle of flailing limbs. Women who smelled like cloves and disintegrating nylon rammed into us. The Billy Idol guy was so close that I could see

the acid-wash streaks in his jeans when he grabbed me by the collar. “Get your hands off me!” I shouted. “I have friends at the Chronology Academy, and I guarantee they won’t like the way you’re trying to change the timeline with your shitty Comstocker zine. They’ll send you back to your home time and you’ll never travel again.” On-stage, Maricela shredded a solo. I glared and hoped he believed me, because there was no guarantee the Chronology Academy would agree that he’d violated regulations. Or that they wouldn’t catch me doing the same thing. But the threat worked. He released me with a sneer.

“You misandrist bitch!” He was close enough that I could smell his strangely sweet breath again. “You and your sisters are a genetic dead end. Next time I see you downstream, I’ll make sure you’re punished for spreading lewdness and vice.” Then he shoved me into a young woman who bounced away and smashed back into him with a maniacal cackle. Screeching and spinning with her arms out, she battered the Comstocker over and over until he fought his way out of the mosh pit and disappeared into the crowd. Good riddance—at least for now. I moved with the circle, bumped and bruised and safe inside its performative violence. Bursts of light from the stage illuminated the Comstocker rounding up his black armband pals and heading for the exit. Hopefully I’d scared them a little, though it had been stupid to reveal myself like that.

At least I’d confirmed Berenice’s report at the last Daughters of Harriet meeting. She’d traveled to early 1992 in Los Angeles, gathering data at ground zero for the anti-travel movement. One of her sources said he’d met some extremists hanging around in the alternative music scene. I suggested this concert would be a good place to look for them. This particular Grape Ape show had been famously controversial, called out by the Vice Fighters as a gateway to hell and by *Rolling Stone* as the most anticipated show of spring. Everyone would be here, especially if they considered themselves radicals.

Of course, I neglected to tell the Daughters that my younger

self had been at the concert too. They never would have agreed to send me if I'd mentioned that little detail. Nobody knew what happened to travelers who met their younger selves; it was both illegal and so morally offensive that most scholars avoided the topic. The only detailed description came from a medieval manuscript about the life of an old, impoverished traveler who took the Machine back thirty years to advise himself to save money. When he returned to his present, the traveler found that his house had become a beautiful mansion. But then his bones began to break themselves, and he was plagued by attacks from a cloud of tiny demons that flew around his head unceasingly.

I wasn't worried about demonic fantasies. They were a staple of medieval manuscripts, along with women giving birth to monsters. I was thinking about evidence-based threats to the timeline, our only timeline, whose natural stability emerged from perpetual revision.

The woman who'd harried the Comstocker earlier was spinning back toward me, and my stomach dropped. I'd been too rattled to recognize her before. Now I could clearly recognize Heather, one of my friends from high school. She barked her crazy laugh again, and I could see the *Wonder Woman Returns* T-shirt clearly under the lacy bodice of her dress. We'd all been obsessed with the Tim Burton Wonder Woman movies in high school, with their badass heroine in fishnets and leather.

I looked around in a panic. Was I here too? I thought I'd been in the loge section during the concert, which was why I'd avoided that area. But my recollections of tonight were murky. Maybe that was the problem. My younger self seemed so distant that I'd figured—stupidly—it would be easy to avoid her. I kept searching for my lost self until the spotlights poured illumination across the steeply angled seats and I caught a brief glimpse of her—me—with my two best friends at the time. Soojin was on my right, frowning with concentration as she studied Maricela's fingering technique. And there, on my

left, was the person who had been my best friend since we were little kids. The two of us were scream-singing along with Glorious Garcia, fists in the air. Seeing us from a distance, I realized how our closeness had even manifested in dressing like each other. We wore the same trashed vintage dresses and combat boots. People were always mistaking us for sisters back then, which wasn't far from the truth. We were angry riot grrl clones, except for the hair.

A pasty white boy grabbed Heather roughly and she stumbled toward him, a red lipstick smile bright in her brown face. The boy's right ear was crusted with safety pins and dried blood. Piercing injury. Very punk rock.

What was his name? A jagged shard of imagery was lodged in my mind, painful and opaque. Oh fuck. The slurry of psychological muck that usually buried my high school memories was gone, leaving behind a crisp picture of what that kid's face would look like in three hours, when it was covered in blood. I stared at him as he twitched to the music, angry and alive. I had to intervene. If I didn't, something horrific was going to happen. Many horrific things. And they would all lead, in the end, to a broken and beloved body, robbed of the consciousness that hurled it off a bridge.

Now that I was here, maybe I could undo that whole narrative and make everything right. I muscled my way out of the orchestra section, away from Heather's laugh and my own age-reversed face, back down the path to the parking lot. Passing the merch table, I felt a painful twist of nostalgia as I read Grape Ape's once-familiar slogans: MAKE BAJA MEXICAN AGAIN! SUCK MY PLASTIC DICK! SLUTS OF THE WORLD UNITE! At last I reached my rental car. I'd made it out before the encore, which should give me enough time to make an edit. As I turned the key in the ignition, recklessness oozed into me. Had I really come back because of Berenice's report, or had I been hoping subconsciously for something like this to happen? Some excuse to intervene in my own past?

I wished I could remember my favorite shortcut from thirty-eight years ago, through Irvine's palimpsest of malls, churches, and walled subdivisions. I'd have to brave traffic. Merging on the 405 freeway, I slowed down and considered what the hell I was doing. The Daughters of Harriet were waiting for me back in 2022, and I needed to tell them about the Comstockers. I should be headed back to the Machine. But this was an emergency. I had to save that boy's life.

B E T H

Irvine, Alta California (1992 C.E.)

I love the pause right before an encore. We could pretend that Grape Ape wasn't coming back unless we broke the world with our noise. The whole crowd stood up and screamed and I kicked the folded-up seat of my chair until it felt like Irvine Meadows was the epicenter of a shallow quake, its high-frequency vibrations booming through the Earth's crust. For a few rare seconds, we were a number on the Richter scale. I looked up at the sky, scattered with ancient blobs of exploding gas, and wanted the anticipation to last forever.

"Where's Heather?" Lizzy leaned in close, and I could feel the prickly tips of her soap-stiffened mohawk on my cheek. People used to say we looked like sisters until she went bleach blond and pierced her lower lip.

I pointed at the mosh pit. "She went down there with Scott!"

Glorious returned to the stage, trailed by Maricela on guitar, and they tore into the title track from their first EP, *Our Time Was Stolen*. I still had the poster for it on my bedroom wall at home, with its lush drawing of what the Machines looked like hundreds of millions of years ago, before their interfaces eroded away to nothing. It was an

aerial view, showing two red, crescent-shaped rocks curving around a circular pearlescent canopy that covered the entrance to the wormhole. From that angle it looked like a beautiful, stylized vulva and clitoris. But it was also an ancient rock formation. I loved it instantly, and loved everything Grape Ape had done since.

When the last chord died, everything sounded faraway and dull.

“I hope we can find Heather,” Lizzy grumbled. “She has my fucking cigarettes.”

Shrugging, I tried to hold on to the pre-encore rush but felt myself returning to a baseline of sadness. Maybe the concert had been pretty good, but I still hated everything. Grape Ape didn’t play that one new song I really loved. My tights were scratchy. Pretty soon I’d have to go home and deal with my parents. Music was nothing like life. When Glorious stopped singing, I missed her magnificent sound, with its power to merge my soul with the crowd and obliterate loneliness. I was stuck in a body. I had to communicate using the pathetic phonemes of language. Suddenly my throat hurt and my eyes were burning and I had to swallow hard to keep myself from breaking down right there in front of every punk rocker in Irvine. This was always happening to me—something random would make me want to cry. But it had gotten a lot worse lately. It was harder to stop the tears before they fell.

“There they are!” Lizzy pointed at Heather and Scott, waving to us from the bottom of the suddenly floodlit arena. Roadies were grabbing things off the stage and we joined the slow river of people draining into the parking lot.

Soojin had watched the show in rapt silence next to us, but now she wanted to discuss Maricela’s new guitar pedal in great detail. “I think she had that thing engineered just for her.” She readjusted a plastic barrette in her bobbed hair with thoughtful intensity. “I haven’t seen anything like it in the catalogues.”

Heather bounced up with the cigarettes and Scott played with the blood-caked safety pins in his ear as we made it out the front gate.

Everybody started talking about the show, and Scott disagreed with Soojin's opinions about guitar pedals while Heather made faces behind his back. It was the same pointless debate they always had. With each passing word and sentence, I felt like I was lagging further behind the conversation. Their voices were nothing but a distant whine now. Maybe I was sliding downstream in time, doomed to vacillate endlessly between weeping and numbness. While my friends barreled into the future, I was back here in the past, unable to move on.

But when Lizzy spoke, I snapped back into the present. "You guys, let's not go home yet," she said. "We can drive up to Turtle Rock and look at the lights."

Heather rubbed her hands together with a high-pitched giggle. "Let's do it!"

Soojin gave a thumbs-up sign.

I still had an hour before curfew and my urge to cry had evaporated. "Okay. As long as I'm home by midnight."

Lizzy's car was one of those infinitely long station wagons with two rows of generous seats and a long, carpeted cargo area that ended in a rear door designed to drop down and become a tailgate picnic table. It was designed for parties of another era. In the front seat, we were blasting *The Bags*, rehashing the best moments of the show, and smoking weed out of a perforated Coke can.

From the top of Turtle Rock, we could see a fringe of lights from the subdivisions around UC Irvine. Dark puddles of undeveloped land spread outward from our parking spot at the edge of the road. Lizzy started imitating the way our hippie social studies teacher always made air quotes around the phrase "Western belief system." Soojin and I could not stop cracking up.

In the cargo area, Scott and Heather were making out.

"Let's get some air." Lizzy shook the pack of cigarettes and raised an eyebrow.

I nodded and spoke in a loud, stagey voice. “Yes, let’s stretch our legs.”

“We’re going to stay here where it’s warm!” Heather called from the back.

“No shit,” I mumbled.

We scrambled out of the car and walked up an unlit dirt path, sharing a cigarette and trying to find a spot with a better view.

When the car was out of sight, Soojin snorted a laugh. “It was getting a little awkward in there.”

“How long should we give them, do you think?” I picked up a rock and threw it down the hill.

Lizzy let out a long stream of smoke. “I dunno. Ten minutes? Fifteen? How long do you think it takes to give that dumbass a blow-job?”

We burst into giggles.

“Okay, I’m definitely going to need another cigarette then.”

Lizzy handed over the pack and I slid out the matchbook she’d tucked into the cellophane.

That’s when we heard a noise almost like a wolf howl. “What the hell was that?” We stood silently for a minute and it came again. It almost sounded human.

Lizzy’s eyes widened and she stamped out her cigarette. “That’s Heather.” She took off running faster than I’d ever seen her, spiked hair wobbling as she scrambled past us and half skidded on the sandy path.

Soojin and I raced after. Within seconds we could see the car and it was obvious that Heather was screaming, “NO NO NO!” and Scott was laughing in a way that was the opposite of laughing and somebody’s bare foot was sticking out the back window at a weird angle.

Lizzy reached the car first and pulled open the tailgate door, launching herself inside the station wagon. “GET YOUR HANDS

OFF HER, YOU FUCKER!” She wasn’t yelling. It was more like a war cry.

It was so dark that at first all I could see was the dim slope of Lizzy’s back. She was perpendicular to Scott, and had settled the weight of her left side against his throat while she looped her arms under his back, pinning him down uncomfortably. Every time he kicked the roof or tried to wriggle away, she followed his body with her own, levering herself against him with a bent leg. He groaned. “Can’t you take a joke? It was a joke, okay?”

Heather scrambled into the back seat, gasping and crying and holding her hand to a red bruise wrapped around the side of her neck. Her long black hair was tangled and eyeliner was smeared in wet streaks around her dark eyes. Soojin came in through the passenger door and scrunched next to her, gently touching the mark. “What did he do to you?”

“He was strangling me!”

“What the fuck are you talking about? We were playing around!”

“No, Scott! Don’t fucking lie! You said you wanted to kill me!” Heather’s voice shook.

“I was joking, *obviously!*” Scott struggled again, trying to escape from Lizzy’s grip, but she twisted around to crush his right arm beneath her shin while she kept his chest pinned. He was practically immobilized.

“That hurts! My arm is going numb!”

“It should hurt.” Lizzy was growling. “I’m going to let you up, and you’re going to get out of the car and walk home. Do you understand?” He didn’t answer and Lizzy shifted her weight, pushing harder.

“Yes! Yes! I understand!”

Slowly she crab-walked backward, dragging him with her out the back door, yanking him onto the asphalt outside. It was only then that I realized he was naked from the waist down. Scott looked

dazed for a minute, and Heather threw his underwear and jeans at him. “What the fuck is wrong with you, rapist!”

He stood up and lunged so fast it was like he was on angel dust. Hell, maybe he was. Before any of us could react, he was back in the car, reaching into the seat where Heather was cowering, smacking her face, head, shoulders—any part he could hit from that angle. Then he grabbed Heather’s breasts in clawed hands like he wanted to rip them off her chest.

Heather was screaming and Soojin was pulling at his fingers and then Lizzy was on Scott’s back, reaching around to put him in a chokehold.

Except it wasn’t a chokehold. A knife flashed in her hand—one of those Swiss Army deals that they always tell you to bring to Girl Scout camp.

“Lizzy, stop! What the fuck are you doing!” It felt like I was screaming underwater. I crawled into the back of the station wagon and reached out, connecting with her shoulder blade. It spasmed under my hand. Lizzy was stabbing the knife in the direction of her own body to penetrate his neck and face. Eventually she was going to miss and impale herself.

“LIZZY! STOP IT NOW!” I grabbed her arm in mid-puncture and she finally went still, her breath the loudest sound in the car. Scott slumped over the back of the seat between Heather and Soojin. His neck was wet and shredded. The knife was buried in what remained of his mouth.

Blood was everywhere. It was running in the seams of the faux leather blue upholstery. It was splattered on the steamy windows. It was dripping onto the floor. It was soaking Heather’s lacy dress. Soojin’s knees made indentations in the seat that quickly turned to bloody pools. It was like a burst watermelon, I thought in a surreal haze of incomprehension. Because this couldn’t be happening. My life hadn’t turned into a gore movie.

Heather was holding herself and hyperventilating. The bruise on

her neck had darkened to purple. I crawled around Lizzy and Scott to hug her, the seat back an uncomfortable lump between us. She buried her wet face in my shoulder, whimpering words I couldn't hear.

"It's okay it's okay it's okay," I said to her, to us, to myself.

Lizzy was more practical. She poked her head out of the rear door and checked whether anyone was watching us. Through the windshield, I could see the streets were empty except for a distant figure, a woman in a bulky jacket who kicked the front tire of her car before driving away. There was no way she could have seen anything.

"Coast is clear. Right now, nobody knows what happened here." Lizzy climbed outside and wiped a bloody hand on Scott's jeans, wrinkled on the ground along with his underwear. Glancing at his body next to me, I realized that he really had been getting off on this. From the waist down, it looked like he was raring to go. I crawled back through the cargo area, past his bare feet, and threw up. Down the hill I could see that woman's car, headlights tracking the twisted streets that led back to reality. Lizzy yanked up the back door, slamming it hard. She led me around to the driver's side and all four of us crowded into the front seat, away from the blood.

Heather talked between panicked hiccups. "What you did was right, Lizzy. That was self-defense." A hiccup. "He said . . . he said . . . he was going to rape me to death. And then he started strangling me. He put his hand over my mouth. I thought he was going to . . ."

"We're all witnesses. We saw it." Soojin nodded vigorously as she talked, and the tiny plastic barrettes in her hair began to lose their hold.

"We should drive to the police station right now, and tell them what happened. He strangled Heather. He was raping her. You saved her, Lizzy. It wasn't just a lucky edit. You saved her." I was babbling.

I still couldn't believe he tried to do that with us right there, a few yards from the car. But Scott had always been a dick—he thought

rape was totally punk rock, in an ironic, GG Allin kind of way. We tolerated him because of Heather. But my guess was that all of us, including Heather, had fantasized about knifing him in the face at some point. Plus, fuck GG Allin. His music sucked, and so did his politics.

Everyone in the car was silent, and Scott's body started to smell really bad, like diarrhea mixed with something worse. I returned to my earlier point. "Lizzy, he went full psycho and attacked Heather. We need to go to the police *now*."

Lizzy was shaking her head slowly back and forth. "We've got to get rid of the body. And clean the car."

For some reason Heather thought this was a great idea. "Yeah, we can't go to the cops."

"What. Why." I had a terrible feeling it was already decided. Lizzy was always the decider.

Sojin looked at me, then back at Lizzy, waiting for an explanation. I rested my fingers on the door handle, wondering if I should get out right then. I hadn't done anything wrong. Not yet.

"Beth, we can't go to the cops. They'll tell our parents. We're not even supposed to be here." Heather was right about that. We were supposed to be seeing a movie at one of the theaters near the South Coast Plaza megamall. "Plus my mom says that the police always take the easy way out. They won't believe us. We have no proof."

I thought about the time a cop stopped us on the street to ask Heather if she was "legal," and demanded to see her driver's license. When he saw her Iranian last name, Sassani, he asked where she was from. She lied and said the name was Italian. He apologized profusely, muttering something about how he should have known that her "olive skin" was Mediterranean, not Mexican. We laughed about all the intricate layers of racist bullshit at the time, but it wasn't funny now.

Lizzy turned on the overhead light. "What's our proof? A bruise?" Heather's makeup was smeared, and despite her shaking

hands, she'd managed to pull a giant, furry sweater over her stained dress. "Look at her. Does she look like she's been attacked? I mean, anybody can have a bruise like that. Maybe it's a really giant hickey. Can you imagine the cops believing her against him?" She gestured at Scott's white body, its fluids slowly leaking away.

I was being ripped into two versions of myself. One knew Lizzy was wrong. One knew she was right. And one of those versions had to die.

"Okay, so where do you think we'll get rid of him?" Soojin sounded dubious.

"Woodbridge Lake. We can drive right up to that spot where there are no houses."

There was a secluded place where we went to get stoned by the artificial lake at the heart of the Woodbridge subdivision, hidden from the street by a small rise in the carefully manufactured grassy hills.

"The water's so shallow, though. Wouldn't he stick out?" The words popped out of my mouth before my brain caught up. I guess I was doing this.

Lizzy thought we should make it look like a sloppy murder, something that Scott's friends would do in a drug-fueled haze. Dump the body in the lake, no frills. Somebody would find him in the morning. If anyone asked, we'd say we had no idea what Scott had been up to. We'd been watching *Lethal Weapon 3*, and then we went to Bob's Big Boy for fries. Lizzy outlined our lie while driving down the freeway. Nobody talked as she took the exit and followed narrow, townhouse-encrusted streets to the lake. Scott's body made a farting noise and the smell got worse.

Heather stayed in the car while we dragged Scott to the water's edge. She'd read in a true crime book that shoe prints are like fingerprints, so we went barefoot in the cool dew of the grass. We wrapped concert T-shirts around our hands to cover our prints. Lizzy tugged the body out into the water, hiking up her skirt to wade through

the muck that softened the lake's cement bottom. Scott was a lump of pale pink in the middle of an oily, spreading stain. When she emerged, a piece of algae clung to the place where she'd repaired her fishnet stockings with the thin wire from a twisty tie.

"Some poor jogger is going to find him tomorrow." My voice sounded weird and my mouth throbbed like it did when the orthodontist tightened my braces.

"Yeah. Gross." Lizzy shrugged.

Soojin started to shiver with more than cold. "C'mon, you guys, let's go home."

Back in the car, we cleaned most of the blood off ourselves with a pile of prepackaged wipes that Lizzy's mom had left in the glove compartment for emergencies. Heather's sweater covered the splatters on her dress, which she vowed to burn. Soojin took off her bloody stockings and wadded them into a baggie. Somehow, I'd managed to stay pretty clean. That left the horrific mess in the back seat.

"Don't worry about that. I can deal with it." Lizzy sounded utterly certain, and completely calm. It was why she was our decider. She always seemed to know what to do, even in the worst situations.

"Really? Are you sure? Can I help?" I knew I should offer, even though I wanted desperately for her to say no.

"It's going to be fine. In the immortal words of Lynn Margulis, 'We are the great meteorite!'" Lizzy glanced at me, smirked, and started the car. I cracked a smile for the first time in what felt like a thousand years. Lizzy and I were obsessed with that PBS series *Microcosmos* in middle school, watching it over and over. We loved when the famous evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis got all philosophical about how humans transform global ecosystems, her voice lowering to a portentous whisper: *We are the great meteorite*.

Thinking about *Microcosmos* made everything feel normal again. When we got to the curb next to my house, I opened the front door quietly and crept upstairs to take a shower. It's exactly what I would have done if I'd been coming back from the movies.

Looking at my fluffy yellow towel through the tropical flowers on my shower curtain, I tried to convince myself that the whole night had been a hallucination. The hot water was washing everything away: blood, mud, smells, weapons, words. Everything except Glorious Garcia, singing. Maybe if I thought about Grape Ape hard enough, the sound of her voice would replace the images encoded by every memory-clogged cell in my brain.

My parents remained asleep down the hall, and I tingled with relief. Setting down my damp toothbrush, I stared at my face in the steamy mirror. An unremarkable white girl looked back: hazel eyes, skin heat-blotched red from the shower, shoulder-length brown hair that my mother called “dirty blond.” Did I look like a murderer? I peered more closely, relaxing the muscles of my jaw and lips. I knew from years of practice how to look innocent when I was guilty. Shrugging at my serene expression, I combed my hair and thought about those stupid, frantic seconds when I demanded that we go to the police. High on weed and horror, I’d almost forgotten that there was something more awful than being arrested for murder. It was what my father would do if he found out I’d broken the rules.