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Days of Smoke

Paul Kennedy
April, 26, 2019

Senior Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies

Advisor, Tyrone Simpson II

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Acknowledgements

Tyrone Simpson II
Beatrice Solis
Soraya Perry
Maria Kennedy
John Kennedy
Mahalia Iwugo
Mojan Farid
Ethan Fox
Elvira Martinez...

...All praise to the Most High

Note

I love stories, and this is my best attempt at writing one.

This story has no facts, no answers, and no theories.

What it does have is characters, and I have tried to make them true.

I hope you enjoy it.

1. Wednesday Afternoon

Outside, on a clear day, the scraggly profile of the San Cristobal Mountains loom over the town of Mariposa, Colorado. This was not a clear day. The mountains were barely visible, the air was full of smoke.¹

Inside, there was a knock on the bathroom door, and Alex Alvarez dropped his toothbrush in the toilet.

“Oh no,” he murmured through a mouth of toothpaste.

“Are you done in there?” demanded Alvira, Alex’s mother. The door handle rattled.

“Why is the door locked?”

Alex coughed out the toothpaste, “One minute!”

“It doesn’t take a half hour to clean a toilet,” chided Alvira, and Alex heard her walk away.

He fished his toothbrush out of the toilet bowl he was supposed to be cleaning and laid it by the sink.

He looked in mirror and sighed at his reflection. At least his hair wasn’t messy. But it wasn’t much of anything else either. Alvira had held him down and buzzed his head under the cottonwood tree the afternoon before. It was Alex’s least favorite start of the summer tradition.

He rubbed a palm across the prickly surface of his scalp. He looked misshapen and ugly. Another sigh came out of his mouth, he slipped a shirt on, and turned off the light.

Down the hall he plodded, into the kitchen where several pans were burning. Alvira was on her toes looking in the cupboard above the fridge.

“Yes?” he said.

Alvira flicked her head. “Taste the rice,” she said.

Alex placed a forkful on his tongue.

“It’s hot,” he puffed.

“Yes, dummy. Does it need anything?”

Alex shrugged. Alvira closed the cupboard. She filled a cup with water and poured it in a pan. The room hissed and steamed.

The next saucepan over held onions, stewing with green chilis and hunks of pork. It was Wednesday, and unusual for Alvira to be busy in the kitchen. She cooked big meals Sunday and Thursday, and the rest of the week they ate leftovers. But today was an exception, for both of them.

Alvira had told Alex earlier in the week that someone would be coming to stay with them, but she didn’t know exactly when, and Alex hadn’t bothered thinking about it again till that morning, when he was woken up by the fearful noises and loud music that signaled a full-day clean.

All day a steady fear had grown that this guest, for whom he spent the whole day ducking chores, would keep him from his destination that night. Every few hours he dropped hints to Alvira he would be busy later.

Now it was time to act.

“My friends are watching a movie at Ben’s tonight.” he said.

Alvira didn’t respond.

“I mentioned it to you last night.” He continued, technically lying.

Alvira looked at him, her face scrunched together, “Is that girl going to be there?” she asked.

Nervous electricity surged through Alex. “What girl?”

“You know, the one you like.”

Alex turned around so Alvira couldn’t see the smile that had appeared on his face.

“I don’t think so,” he said weakly.

“Oh too bad,” Alvira greased a pan, “when is it?”

Alex’s heart leapt. He tried his luck.

“-Uhh just about now actually.” he said, thinking he might slip off without a hitch. But Alvira laughed dryly.

“No,” she said, “You have to meet Mrs. Adela. And besides, you’ve been telling me you’re going to help all day, and you haven’t done squat.”

“But you said I could,” pleaded Alex “You said yes when I asked you on Tuesday!”

“Well that was before I knew Mrs. Adela was coming,” Alvira fixed Alex with her signature dead-eyed stare. She wasn’t very old for a mom, but the shiny red bags under her eyes made her look a little like a zombie.

“Mrs. Adela,” he exclaimed spinning around, “I don’t even know who that is.”

“Because you never listen to me,” muttered Alvira.

“Oh my God so now it’s my fault I can’t remember every single word you’ve ever said,”

“She lives in Gun Barrel,” Interrupted Alvira, pulling back her curtain of hair and tying it in a ponytail. Gun Barrel was the fancy town in the mountains above Mariposa. It used to have silver mining, but now mostly had tourists.² “I knew her when I was young,” Alvira continued, “she’s very old, I need your help while I cook dinner.”

Alex fiddled with a magnet on the refrigerator. “So what you’re telling me,” he said, “is that instead of seeing a good friend for the first time all summer who-” he fabricated wildly, “Is also moving away next month. I have to spend the night cooking for some old woman I’ve never met in my life?”

“Ben’s moving?” asked Alvira.

“Ahh that’s what he told me.” huffed Alex.

“Well you can do it another night before he... moves,” Alvira said, putting ominous weight on the final word.

Alex went silent. He picked at a thread on his chest.

“And fold those sheets.” Instructed Alvira, pointing with a spoon to the rumple of linens spread out across the kitchen table. Alex badly folded a sheet while he looked at his phone. He read the last message for the hundredth time. It was already five. She said to come by seven. He made mental calculations.

“What time did you say this person is arriving?” he asked

“Six,” answered Alvira distractedly, the stove had gone out and she was thumping the dial with her wooden spoon. It reignited. “She’s getting dropped off from Gun Barrel. And this person’s name is Mrs. Adela.”

“A-delllll-a,” repeated Alex.

“She might be here for a couple months “ said Alvira, eyeing her son, “You can practice Spanish with her.”

Alex ignored the second half of this statement.

“A couple months?” he repeated aghast, “when were you gonna tell me this?”

“I just did,” said Alvira, tasting her spoon.

Alex was in a state of shock. “If this Mrs. Adela lives in Gun Barrel, what’s she doing coming back here?” he asked.

“Her husband died,” answered Alvira as she cut a tomato. “About a year ago. She can’t afford Gun Barrel anymore, so she’s been moving around.”

“Yes but why here?” moaned Alex, watching his bright summer plans wither and die

“I used to know her.”

“I’m sure there are lot of people you used to know,” burst Alex, “Do they all get to live with us?”

Alvira stared off blankly for a few moments and shrugged.

“That’s it?”

Alvira didn’t answer, she was typing on her phone.

“Who are you texting?” demanded Alex.

“This guy,” responded Alvira slowly, still typing, “he works at one of the spas in Gun Barrel, he says they might be hiring.”

“Oh.”said Alex. Alvira had worked for years at Gun Barrel K-12 (which was in Mariposa), with the special needs students, but had been abruptly let go a year ago. Since then she had been stringing together jobs, but at the moment had nothing.

Alvira put her phone on the counter and another pan on the stove. She filled the pan with oil. She grabbed a pack of tortillas from the fridge.

Alex stared at the floor, seeing a temporary advantage open up.

He squirted soap on a sponge and wiped off the counters around Alvira.

“How about I help you out --wait to meet Mrs. Adela-- and then I go over to Ben’s,” he proposed. “I mean if she’s gonna be here for weeks,” he dangled his words deliberately, “I’ll have plenty of time to get to know her.”

Alvira raised her thin, curved eyebrows at him, “take out the trash,” she said.

Alex, prompt and obedient, rushed forward to get the bulging bag of garbage under the sink. He took it through the house, carrying it against his shoulder. He opened the front door and in the hot sun and smoke, found someone standing right in front of him.

2. Mrs. Adela

It was an old woman. She barely came up to his shoulders and was wearing many layers of heavy black clothing. Shawls and scarves, coats and gloves. She held a retractable cane in one black-gloved hand, and a pink umbrella in the other, casting her in a three foot shadow.

Alex stared. It wasn't the umbrella or her clothes. He stared at her face. Beneath thinning white hair was the most lined face Alex had ever seen. Hundreds, if not thousands, of wrinkles criss-crossed from eye to jowl. She looked like a map. Behind wire pentagonal glasses small crescent eyes peered up at Alex severely.

"Hello!" The woman said. She had a dry, wheezy voice that was strangely musical.

"Uhh- hi." Stammered Alex. "I'm Alex." He paused, then, because he felt he had to ask, "Are you Mrs. Adela?"

"Well who else could I be?" responded Mrs. Adela, her voice climbing high with indignation, "It's going to rain," she added sternly, her tiny eyes fixed on Alex.

Alex looked up into the putrid brown sky. It hadn't rained in two months, and that winter had barely snowed.

"Now?" he asked.

"Not now," answered Mrs. Adela, stowing her umbrella.

“Why do you think it’s going to rain?” He asked, wondering what was taking Alvira so long.

“My husband told me,” replied Mrs. Adela matter-of-factly. Before Alex had to respond to this bizarre statement, Alvira laid a hand on his shoulder. Alex stepped to the side, and watched curiously as his mom greeted this strange woman.

“You’re early,” cried Alvira happily as she stooped to hug Mrs. Adela. Alex was shocked at how happy his mom seemed. “Did you just get here?”

“No I’ve been here for two hours, waiting for someone to let me in.”

Alvira’s mouth popped open. “Two hours,” she repeated, “I didn’t hear you knocking.”

“Oh I wasn’t knocking,” answered Mrs. Adela, “just waiting in the hot sun.”

“Oh that’s-” Alvira faded off mid-sentence. Alex looked around to see what had distracted her, then, seeing nothing, to her face. Her eyes had gone extremely vacant, and she was smirking. Alex, knowing what to do at once, shook the corner of Alvira’s shorts. After a moment her eyes regained their focus, she smiled at Mrs. Adela.

“Mrs. Adela says it’s about to rain,” said Alex, offering Alvira some cover for slipping off.

“I was not talking about the weather,” snapped Mrs. Adela, not taking her eyes off Alvira, whom she was giving the same severe look she had been giving Alex.

“Let’s get out of the smoke,” said Alvira, a little weakly, motioning Mrs. Adela inside. Alex felt powerful misgivings watching Mrs. Adela shuffle to the door, knowing she would be sleeping across the hall from him all summer.

“My bags,” Mrs. Adela said with a flop of the wrist. Alex looked behind her. Two hideous floral suitcases were toppled over, abandoned, on the street edge.

“Alex can get them,” offered Alvira as she helped Mrs. Adela over the front step.

How could she have been out here for two hours in the smoke? He thought bitterly as he lugged the heavy suitcases to the house, arms and throat aching by the end.

When he got inside Alvira had situated Mrs. Adela in their little living room. She was seated in the high-backed leather armchair Alvira had been left in a will.¹ It was where Alex sat when he watched TV.

Mrs. Adela seemed to be enjoying it. She had taken her gloves off and was rubbing her hands on the grape colored armrests. “A little dusty,” she said with a smile.

Alex hung back by the front door. His phone buzzed in his pocket. He flipped it open. It was from Jimena.

“Stop lurking,” admonished Alvira, looking over from the living room. “You can take those to the bedroom,” she nodded at the suitcases.

Alex dragged them down the hallway past Alvira’s room, to the door across from his own. He read Jimena’s message:

-Can u come help us get ready?-

His fingers poised on the keypad, nerves rumbled in his stomach. Would he be able to leave soon?

Interrupting his thoughts, Alex heard Mrs. Adela ask “How is your beloved sister?”

He froze. If there was one topic that would make Alvira moody for days, it was her sister.

Alex had only the faintest memories of his aunt, despite the fact he had been born in her apartment in Denver and had lived there for almost four years. They had moved back to Mariposa when Alex was still a toddler, after his aunt had kicked him and Alvira out. Alex still didn't know exactly what happened, but Alvira had never forgiven her.

Alex tip-toed back down the hallway to watch the interaction.

"I don't know, we don't talk much." answered Alvira tightly. Her legs were crossed she was sitting on the striped grey couch.

"No? That's such a shame. She was always so lovely. Used to help me with my flower garden in spring."

"Yes, thats- Nice."

"And she was so sweet at your mother's funeral--"

Alvira got up abruptly. "I'm making enchiladas," she said, "I hope that's okay."

"Oh what a treat!" screeched Mrs. Adela. She stood up surprisingly quick and followed Alvira to the kitchen. Alex dutifully did the same.

Mrs. Adela was barely taller than the counter. She bent a fingertip in Alvira's sauce and licked it thickly.

"Oh," she said "these plain dishes are so nice in cool weather."

Alex giggled. Alvira mopped the sweat on her forehead, "I can add something to it?"

"No. Maybe just a little salt," Mrs. Adela's hand shot around the salt shaker. As she did so a little piece of paper fluttered down out of her sleeve to the floor. Alex bent down and picked it up. It was so heavily creased and frail he was afraid it might disintegrate in his fingers. He

turned it over. Dense cursive handwriting spelled: *Monday: 7AM, Hygroton. 8AM, Sertraline* A whole weeks worth of times, days, and-

“My pill schedule” declared Mrs. Adela, snatching the paper from between Alex’s fingers. She held it up a half-inch from her pentagonal glasses. “I need it to remember when to take these things. Oh yes Wednesday 6PM, Atenolol.”

Alex sent Alvira an incredulous look, but she was staring angrily at the spoon in her hand. Alex wondered if it was all the question about her sister, or if there was something else bothering her. Either way, time was passing, and Alex needed to get out if there.

Mrs. Adela seemed quite oblivious to the changes in demeanor. She was prattling on about all the different pills she took. “This is one of two things I always have on me.” she told Alex, folding and unfolding her pill schedule. “This is the other,” she reached into her many layers of black shawls and pulled out a framed photo of a grumpy-looking man. “My husband,” She said, her voice swelling with pride, “Isn't he very handsome.”²

Alex shrugged.

Alvira intercut, “Did you say there was a pill you needed to take at six?”

“Oh yes, thank God, can’t forget my pills.”

Mrs. Adela grasped Alvira’s arm and they lurched to her suitcases to get her pills.

Alex watched the pans bubble in the suddenly empty kitchen. He looked at Jimena’s text and gazed out the window. The smoke was lifting, the sun was falling towards the mountains, and brilliant orange light streaked through the sky.

Alvira returned and began assembling the enchiladas and laying them in a pan. Alex thought maybe he should ask her how she was feeling. But he didn't want to get sucked into a conversation, and besides, she seemed a bit better now. So he asked directly,

“Can I go now?”

If Alvira heard, she made no acknowledgement of what was said. She wiped her hands on a rag and reached for a ziploc bag of chili powder. Alex repeated his question in a slightly louder voice.

“Can I go now?”

Alvira stepped past him, not looking at him.

“Hey.”

“No Alex, stop asking me,” snapped Alvira.

Alex backpedaled “What’s Mrs. Adela doing?” he asked.

Alvira sighed and stopped working, “She’s lying down, she needs to rest. She says she’s not hungry.”

Alex struck instantly, “If she’s not hungry we won’t all eat together.”

“Alex,” began his mother warningly.

“I’m just saying if she’s lying down there’s not much point in me being here.”

Mrs. Adela’s wheezy voice called out to Alvira from the bedroom. “Can you come here? something is wrong.”

Without another word or glance for Alex, Alvira strode out of the kitchen. Alex watched her go, and a terrible, thrilling idea appeared in his mind. He could bike, he would be back before late. Surely he deserved a little break, and he didn’t see how else it could be done.

He thought for another second, but it wasn't a hard choice.

She would forgive him eventually.

3. The Party

Alex hopped on his bike and didn't ease up till he got to the main road. Then he turned left towards the bridge.

Somewhere alongside the cars over the brown Mariposa River, the weirdness of Alvira and Mrs. Adela left him, and a new set of worries wandered in.

Alex and Jimena had messaged a few times since summer started, but not much. The party wasn't her party, either. Jimena's sister Mari's 18th birthday had been the week before, and she was throwing herself a celebration.

On the other side of the river, past the strip of trees where goats and horses grazed, Alex turned down main street. There was very little traffic and he meandered down the middle of the road. He passed the thrift shop with the wire cowboy for sale in the window. Passed the fading Casa Amarillo, where Alvira had worked. Passed the banks and courthouses with dates carved in stone over their entrances. Passed the empty block that had burned down and never been rebuilt. It only took about ten minutes to walk from one end of main street to the other.

There were two gas stations across from each other, next to the dollar store, where the highway intersected with main street. Alex cut through a parking lot and biked on the edge of the highway.

Alex approached and passed his school, a sprawling concrete structure plopped down in the sage. Gun Barrel K-12. The only school in Mariposa county, except for the private one in Gun Barrel.

He got a glance through a first floor window into his old social studies classroom, glimpsed the maps and posters covering the walls. It was there that he and Jimena had been paired together to do a project on the history of the Gun Barrel Valley.¹ Their flat fertile home in the mountains, 9,000 ft above sea level, 90 miles across, shaped like a massive crater, and enclosed by mountains on all sides

He passed the much beloved Sonic Drive-In, the last building. All around him was dirt, dry chico brush, clumps of blue sage, and dusty fields of barley.

After a few minutes pedaling, he turned down a mirage of a street past a rock with the words Spruce Village carved into it. The only trees in view were limp, leafless ones that had been planted along the rock.

The road curved up a small hill, dotted with tan boulders. His quads burned as he got to the top, where he was greeted by an expanse of grey and tan houses spread out in loops below him. Alex zoomed down between the houses and wondered why they had painted them only two colors. They were big, but not complete. Piles of dirt and work tools sat abandoned. A bulldozer had a large hole in front of it. None of it seemed like it had been touched recently. As far as he knew, none of the houses looked lived in.²

Everywhere will be like this one day, thought Alex, when all the people die. He was starting to worry how he would find the right house when he banked a corner, and saw a figure

lying on her back in the dead grass. She half-waved as Alex neared. He dropped his bike unceremoniously in the grass and approached her nervously.

Jimena had a hand over her eyes blocking the sun. Her glasses were lying next to her in the grass. She was on the phone.

“Next time, I’ll make sure,” she was saying.

Alex realized suddenly he was intruding on something. He took several paces backwards, turning around picking up his bike to steer it and drop it in the grass a few feet over. Over his shoulder he could not help making out yelling through her phone.

“I said I’m sorry,” Jimena was saying.

Alex fuddled on his phone, eavesdropping. He had one missed call from Alvira. When he looked over next Jimena was standing up, walking towards him. Her cheeks were shiny and behind her glasses her eyes looked different.

“Aaaagh, sorry about that” She said, pulling on her twin braids.

“No worries,” Alex said. He held out a fist and Jimena bumped it. He kept staring into her face. He realized she was wearing makeup.

“I’m supposed to be helping Mari get ready, but she hasn’t left the house in two hours and she won’t let me in. She’s sewing a dress in there.”

“Sewing?”

“For her party tonight.”

Alex frowned at the thought of such a task.

“How’d she get in there in the first place?” he asked.

Jimena shrugged “She doesn’t tell me, she got the key from someone, I don’t know. She says she’s the only one allowed inside. But wanna see the backyard?”

“Yeah,” Alex followed her to the gate in the fence.

“Someone must pay to keep the front looking okay,” Jimena said as she fiddled with the lock, “They don’t care much for the back.” The gate opened, and her and Alex walked into an overgrown square of dry, brown grass. Along the house there was a thin concrete patio, where a few plastic lawn chairs sat.

Jimena took one and gestured at the shadeless sky.

“I’ve been sunning here,” she said.

Alex took the other chair. In a land of wide open spaces, an enclosed backyard was an exotic luxury.

“This is where the party is?” he asked.

“Well it’s not like it can be at our house,”

“I thought good parties were off the highway,” said Alex.

Jimena held up hands, “She wanted to have it here. She thinks its cool”

Alex surveyed the backyard again. He could understand that. It was kinda weird. It made it exciting. Although it was hard to imagine how people could have fun there at the moment. There was a lot of grass.

The backdoor of the house opened and Mari walked out onto the patio. She did not look like Jimena. She was taller and lighter, her face dominated by big eyes and a jutting chin.

“Hi Mari, happy birthday” murmured Alex. He was afraid of her.

Mari ignored him and spoke to her sister.

“I’m almost done,” she said, “We need to set up.”

Jimena nodded. “What are you gonna do about all this?” she gestured at the grass.

“Lina is bringing a lawnmower,” Mari said, looking down at her phone as she spoke.

“Did you talk to dad?” She asked.

“Yes,” grunted Jimena.

“Is he still mad?”

“Yes.”

Mari laughed, “Don’t make that face. It’s your fault.” She turned around and went back inside the house. Jimena raked her nails against the plastic chair.

“What happened?” Alex reached over and pushed her lightly on the shoulder.

Jimena shrugged off his touch. She scowled at her phone Alex retreated, he checked his phone to appear similarly occupied, but closed it immediately after seeing a line of angry messages from Alvira. He would deal with that later.

Mari yelled for Jimena to come inside, and a few minutes later they emerged carrying a table, and a pile of shimmery kite-looking things.

“What are those?” Alex asked.

“Decorations I made.”

For the next hour, Mari kept Alex and Jimena busy transforming the bare backyard into a setting fit for her birthday celebrations. While Jimena helped Mari figure out a large speaker she had mysteriously acquired, Alex hung the kite-thing decorations from the fence, and walked around the empty neighborhood taping signs with arrows pointing in the right direction. When he got back a few of Mari’s friends had arrived with coolers and a barely functional lawn mower.

Alex was given the task of mowing the grass. As he sweated and pushed, he reflected that this was much harder than anything Alvira had asked him to do for Mrs. Adela.

Finally, as the night birds began to chirp, the preparations were over. Mari had disappeared inside with her friends a while before, and Alex and Jimena were alone. The light was fading, the air was warm.

“Let’s dance!” exclaimed Jimena.

She blasted pop songs through Mari’s speaker. Alex moved his feet tentatively.

Jimena swung her body around, a smile on her face. “C’mon,” she yelled at Alex, modeling how he should step. Alex tried, a smile creeping on his face as well. Jimena reached her hand out-

“Turn that off!”

Mari ran out of the house. She was wearing a long white dress, and had a cup in her hand. “People are coming, you two have to leave,” she said to Jimena, her friends appearing behind her.

Jimena stopped dancing. The music cut off.

“What?” asked Jimena, turning to look at her sister.

“You gotta go.”

Jimena stared for a second, her mouth hanging open. “You can’t make us leave.” she said, pressing her arms firmly against her chest.

“Absolutely I can!” cried Mari, snapping her fingers and pointing to the gate “You can’t be here.”

Alex examined the patch of clipped brown grass under his feet. He felt like he shouldn't be present for this. Jimena was staring at Mari. On the patio, a few of Mari's friends were giggling.

"You really need to leave, people are coming now." Mari said, her white dress fluttering around her ankles. Jimena was trembling.

"You said I could stay," she said, there were tears on her voice.

Mari mouthed something. Then, In a sudden burst of action, she grabbed Jimena by the shoulder and pushed her roughly to the gate. Jimena squawked. Her hand clawed against Mari's collarbone. The shoulder strap of Mari's dress burst and she backed up, holding her dress to her body.

"I hate you!" yelled Jimena, and she took off, pushing open the gate and letting it slam shut behind her. Mari fumbled with her dress. Her friends converged around her. Alex looked around in panic. He grabbed Jimena's phone off a chair, and hurried after her.

In the front yard, she was nowhere to be seen. Alex picked up his bike and began riding slowly through the empty houses. He passed a grouping of deer, and a car drove past him bearing more of Mari's friends. Towards the hill the development hid behind, Alex found Jimena sitting off the side of the road on a concrete block.

He drooped his bike and picked his way through the sage, his hands raised in surrender. Jimena did not acknowledge him. Her two braids hung over her bent face, a dark veil against the paleness of the sky.

Alex clambered onto the block and sat next to Jimena. He didn't say anything. Music from Mari's party turned on in the distance. It occurred to him that if he were in Jimena's position he'd want to be alone.

"How's it going?" Alex asked, mirroring Jimena by looking down at his dangling feet.

Jimena stayed quiet for several long moments. Alex feared he had made a deep mistake by speaking. Then she said,

"Fine."

Alex nodded, unsure what to do with this.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I hate her," breathed Jimena, her eyes fixed somewhere in the dirt.

"Yeah I can't believe-"

"I *really* hate her."

Alex looked at Jimena. The streetlight on the road turned on, and it cast a glow along the edge of her face. The curve of her chin reminded him of a picture of a seahorse. He liked it.

Jimena was still talking, shaking her head from side to side. "She treats me like garbage. She's always acted like I'm nothing. I'm so sick of it"

"I'm sure she loves you," said Alex, although he had no idea if this were true.

Jimena simply shrugged.

"She definitely loves herself a lot," Alex said, considering the kind of person who throws themselves a birthday party.

Jimena shrugged again. "She's not very happy."

“Well good thing were not at her party then,” said Alex, as a noisy rendition of ‘happy birthday’ echoed over them.

Jimena was silent. Alex swatted a mosquito on his thigh. This was not how he had imagined the night going.

“Can I help?” he asked softly, scooting an inch closer to Jimena.

Jimena shook her head, she opened her mouth but it took a second for words to come.

“Its fine. Im sorry even talking about it. I just want something to change,”

“It will change,” said Alex fervently, though he wasn’t sure what she was talking about. He scooched another inch closer. “Everything changes.”

“I hope so,” said Jimena glumly. She looked up, a few stars poked through the smoke. When she spoke her voice was bitter and dry.

“You’re supposed to love your family. But they don’t love me and I don’t love them.”

“Your family doesn’t love you?” asked Alex.

“My dad is always mad at me.”

Alex frowned, he hated talking about dads. Jimena kept going,

“All day he was yelling at me, and for what? Because I forgot to answer the door for his stupid friend. It didn’t even matter.”

“You forgot to answer a door?”

“I was asleep!”

Alex nodded, “My mom is mad at me too. I kinda snuck out to come here. This crazy old lady is staying at our house, and I ran away while they were looking for her pills.”

Jimena looked at him, a funny expression on her face, then her eyes narrowed. “There’s a bug on your shirt,” she said.

“I don’t care about any bug,” pronounced Alex.

“No wait it’s really big it’s on your shoulder,” Jimena leaned forwards and brushed it off. Alex felt needles of warmth where her hand touched.

Jimena’s phone rang. She groaned.

“Yes?”

Alex listened. It was her dad again. When the call was over, she turned to him.

“I have to go home,” she said.

Alex jumped off the block too, “okay,” he said, disappointed.

Jimena rode on the back of Alex’s bike as they headed back to Mariposa. Her arms clasped around his stomach. He let her off in front of her house, on the town side of the river.

“Sorry for everything,” she said.

“I had a good night,” Alex said.

Jimena smiled. She leaned forward and kissed him quickly on the cheek.

“Bye,” she said.

Alex rode the rest of the way home in a daze, replaying the night in his head. When he turned down his street, however, he remembered what he had done. He leaned his bike against the side of the house mournfully, preparing to face Alvira’s anger. He probably wouldn’t be allowed to leave the house for the rest of the summer. Just a lot of time with Mrs. Adela.

He stood by the back door, and took a deep breath before the storm. Inside the kitchen all the lights were on, but the angry greeting he was expecting didn't come. Alex walked around experimentally. Something felt very strange.

Alvira must have gone to bed, he decided. Unsure what to do, he turned off the lights and went to bed, unable to shake the sense that something was not right.

It wasn't until the morning that it became clear: Alvira was gone.

4. Missing

It was midday, Alex had spent all morning pacing the house, making calls that went straight to voicemail, and listening for the tiniest noise that might signal Alvira's return. Mrs. Adela didn't know where she was either, she told Alex through the door. As far as he knew, she hadn't left her room all day.

Things didn't improve from there. Alex was in the kitchen, warming some leftover enchiladas for lunch, when he cut his bare foot on a tiny particle of glass. When he bent down he found Alvira's cell phone under the fridge. The screen was shattered. After that he called the police.

Then he called Jimena and in a flat voice told her Alvira was gone. He did it without thinking. She arrived before the cops. She had taken off her makeup from the night before, and as soon as he opened the door she started spitting questions at him so fast he thought for a moment he was going to be sick.

No, he didn't know where she was. No, she hadn't left anything. Yes, the police said they would come immediately. Alex handed Jimena the cracked phone. "This is very suspicious," she said. Alex must have let the strain show on his face because Jimena stopped talking and sat next to him awkwardly, clutching her wrist.

Guilt threatened to overwhelm Alex. This was because he left, he had no doubt. His brain assaulted him with memories of Alvira, upset, telling him not to go. He wondered where she was, what she was doing. He was constantly expecting her to walk through the door. Maybe he had made a mistake by calling the police.

Jimena stood up and walked around the living room, looking at the clutter of decorations.

“Is this you?” she asked, pointing to a photo of toddler Alex playing on a playground.

He nodded.

“So cute,” she said, “Where is it?”

“Denver,” croaked Alex, he cleared his throat. “I was born in Denver.”

“Oh yeah I knew that. Didn’t you say there is an old lady staying with you?”

Alex had forgotten about Mrs. Adela. “Oh yeah,” he said, “She hasn’t left her room, I was gonna warm up some food for her, but then I found the phone. I guess I should still do that.”

He got up and walked into the kitchen. Jimena followed him.

“She doesn’t know where your mom went?” she asked.

“No,” he said. He hadn’t eaten the enchiladas from earlier, he put them back in the microwave. “I don’t think she wants to talk to me,” he added “but it’s probably not healthy for her to be in that room all day.”

Jimena looked around thoughtfully. The microwave dinged. “Let me take those,” she said. “Old people like me. Maybe I can get her to come out.”

Alex shrugged. “If you want to. The police should be here soon. I don’t know how long it usually takes them to come.”

Jimena took the plate and Alex led her down the hallway and pointed to Mrs. Adela's room.

He listened for a second as Jimena brightly greeted Mrs. Adela, then turned away. He started down the hallway but stopped in front of Alvira's door. He had gone in there briefly in the morning to see if she was asleep, but hadn't lingered. He almost never went into her room, and she almost never went into his. But now, standing outside, he felt a strange energy. He reached out and opened the door.

Inside, the energy increased dramatically, it was horrible, angry, buzzing. Nothing looked different, the made bed, red curtains¹, cardboard boxes stacked in the corner, childhood drawings tacked to the walls, but something had changed. Alex felt dirty, violated. He sat down on Alvira's bed, his skin was crawling.

It was unbearable. He jumped up and his eye caught something he didn't recognize. On the floor, near the door, was a book. He walked over and picked it up. The cover was a drawing of three green alligators swimming vertically on a flat blue background. The title was written in black wavy font, *Sleepin' with Gators* by Julia Mug.

Alex had never seen Alvira read a book. He wondered if maybe it was Mrs. Adela's. He opened the front page, above the title was an inscription:

You'll need this where your going! Best of luck at S4L, Don't say I didn't warn ya!

Before he could begin puzzling what that meant, Jimena appeared panting in the doorway,

"Alex," she said, "you need to come here."

He followed her into the spare bedroom that, in an incredibly short amount of time, Mrs. Adela had made her own. The room was heavy with sage, and there were several crucifixes hanging from various surfaces.

Mrs. Adela was seated in a small chair by the window, the blinds shut behind her. The plate of enchiladas was on her lap.

Jimena took the floor by her feet, “Alex, Mrs. Adela says she heard you talk to your mom last night.”

Alex stared at the pair of them, extremely confused.

“Heard me to talk to her when?” he asked.

Mrs. Adela blinked at him for several seconds, “I heard you talk when you came in,” she said.

Alex shook his head, “I didn’t talk to her when I got back. She was already gone.”

Mrs. Adela pursed her lips, causing the wrinkles on her face to surge forward. “I know what I heard,” she said.

“You heard voices?”

“Yes. I heard you come in. I was awake. I couldn’t sleep. Horrible pain in my knee. And this room is much too warm-”

“What time did you hear people?” interrupted Alex.

Mrs. Adela shook her head, “I don’t know, I don’t sleep with my eye on a clock.”

“Best guess?” Insisted Alex. He clutched the book in his hand painfully tight.

“Mijo I don’t remember,” Mrs. Adela looked painfully at him, “You spoke to her why don’t you know.”

Alex sat down on the bed “What exactly did you hear?” he asked, his heartbeat racing.

“You were arguing, I heard your voices,” Mrs. Adela lowered her glasses and looked sternly at Alex, “I assumed because you left without permission.”

A thought struck Alex, he held out *Sleepin’ with Gators*, “Is this yours?” he asked.

Mrs. Adela squinted at the book “No, mijo. I hate reptiles.” She said, shaking her head.

“What is that?” asked Jimena.

“I found it in Alvira’s room,” Alex said, his brain going crazy, “It’s not hers.” He made eye contact with Jimena. He saw what he was thinking reflected in her eyes: Someone else had been in his home last night.

A loud knock shattered the moment. Alex jumped. He ran to the front door and threw it open.

A bald police officer stood on the front step.

“Is this the-” he checked a big black clipboard- “the Alvarez household?” he asked.

Alex had a violent urge to slam the door.

“Yes,” he said, restraining himself.

The tag on police officer’s chest identified him as Officer Jim Slep. He had a big round head and looked, Alex thought, like a volleyball with a mouth.

Officer Slep stepped over the threshold and clapped his free hand to Alex’s shoulder.

“You Alex?” he asked, his fingers digging uncomfortably into Alex’s shoulder.

“Yes, please-”

Officer Jim Slep interrupted him to read off his clipboard, “Your mother, Mrs. Alvira Alvarez, left the home sometime last night sometime between hours 8:30 PM and 10:30 PM, and you haven’t seen her since. That correct?”

“Ms.” said Alex.

“What?”

“Ms.” repeated Alex, embarrassed. “Not Mrs.”

Officer Slep chuckled. “Shoulda guessed. And she didn’t say where she would be going?”

“Why does everyone keep asking that!” exclaimed Alex, “Why would I call you if I knew where she was?”

Officer Jim Slep put his hand back on Alex’s shoulder. He ducked his head, his chapped lips close to Alex’s ear.

“Hey pal, I’m gonna need you to cool it. You just gotta help me do my job.”

Alex nodded. The inside of his head was burning. “Yeah, ok” he murmured.

“Great!” Officer Slep strode past Alex into the living room. He sat down on the couch, and motioned for Alex to sit in the chair. Alex kept standing.

“Alright Alex, you mind answering a few questions for me?”

“Okay,” said Alex, thinking of Mrs. Adela and Jimena in the other room. He didn’t know how much to share with Officer Slep.

“What’s your mother’s occupation?”

“Teacher,” said Alex.

“Oh. Where does she teach?”

Alex squirmed, “Well she hasn’t in a bit, but she did teach at Gun Barrel.”

Officer Slep shook his head. “I’ll put unemployed.” he said. “And who’s this?” he asked, looking over Alex’s shoulder.

Alex turned around, Jimena was standing frozen in the hallway, a glass in her hand, “I was just getting some water,” she said slowly.

“That’s Jimena, she’s my.. uh...”

“Sister?” Prompted Officer Slep.

“What no!” Alex blushed, “It’s more of a uhh-”

“Is she family?”

“No, no,” Alex waved his hands, hating his life, “definitely not.”

Officer Jim Slep breathed heavily through his nose and wrote something on his clipboard. “Then she needs to go.”

He stared at Jimena while she put the glass down and exited out the back door. Alex mouthed words at her.

“Is there anyone else here?” asked Officer Slep.

Alex hesitated. He didn’t like Officer Slep, but he wasn’t sure what other options he had.

“Yeah,” he said, “Mrs. Adela, she’s an old lady, she’s staying with us.”

“Family?”

“No, but she lives here.”

“I’ll need to question her too.”

Alex took a deep breath, “There is something else,” he said, “Mrs. Adela, the old lady, says she heard arguing voices last night, before I got home. She thought it was me, but it

couldn't have been. And this morning, I found my mom's phone with the screen shattered, and a book in her room that I've never seen before."

Officer Slep scratched his head with a pen. "Ok," he said. Alex waited expectantly, but all Officer Slep did was make a note on his clipboard. "Where is this Mrs. Adela?" he asked.

"In her room," Alex nodded his head in the general direction.

Officer Slep stood up. Alex figured he would ask Alex to get her, but he followed Alex down the hallway into her room. Mrs. Adela was still seated in her chair, her eyes were closed but she opened them when Alex awkwardly tried to introduce Officer Slep.

"Does she speak English?" Officer Slep asked, looking disdainfully at Mrs. Adela, who was staring back with equal loathing.

"I speak English," she said.

"Well how about you come to the living room, and I'll ask you some questions," said Officer Slep.

"Not on these knees," said Mrs. Adela, "Not unless you want to carry me."

Officer Slep ground his teeth, he sat down heavily on the bed, "I guess I'll just have to question you here."

Alex looked at the window and almost had a heart attack.

There were a pair of bespeckled eyes poking through the blind. It took him a second to realize what it was.

'Get down,' he mouthed to Jimena, hoping she would get the message.

Officer Slep looked at him curiously.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” blurted Alex, and he ran out of the room. He met Jimena outside by the back door. For a second they didn’t say anything, then Jimena asked,

“Is there anyone who really hates your mom?”

Alex snorted. Jimena amended her question, “Like anyone who really hates her, like anyone who would kidnap her?”

Alex sat down on the step. He rubbed his temples. “I feel like I can’t think,” he said, then added “I don’t think anyone would kidnap her, but this doesn’t make sense.”

“What about jewelry? Is there anything missing?”

Alex didn’t know. He shook his head,

“Is the cop helping?”

Alex rolled his eyes, “I told him, but he didn’t even say anything. I’ll try again.”

“But it’s not something Alvira would do right, just leave?” Jimena asked.

Alex stopped. “We, we did get in a fight last night. Well not a fight, but I did leave. She probably was really upset. I don’t know.”

Jimena sat down next to him, “You think she got so upset she left?” Before Alex could respond she added, “and that still wouldn’t explain the voices or the phone.”

Alex nodded slowly, thinking. In a weird way, the idea that Alvira had been kidnapped made him feel better than if she left because how much she hated him. He stood up.

“It’s really smoky today,” he said, wrinkling his nose. “I should go back inside.”

Inside, he was greeted by Officer Slep, who was returning to the living room.

They both sat down on the couch.

“So Alex,” Officer Jim Slep turned to Alex with an expression on his face that was probably supposed to be sympathetic, “Painful business. We see cases like this on occasion. I don’t think your mom -Alvira- is coming back. So it’s time we start looking at next steps.”

“Wait what-”

“It is my authority, as the responding officer, to designate a temporary guardian, until the probate court can decide one. I just spoke with my superior officer, and they said you have an aunt in Denver. I think that seems like the best option.”

Alex was completely flabbergasted. “But you haven’t even looked for Alvira!” he yelled.

Officer Slep patted Alex’s knee, “Alex, Alex, even if she comes back, she abandoned you. That’s all a court needs to forfeit custody, and quite frankly, I’m not sure this would be a suitable home even if she were here.”

“What does that mean? She didn’t abandon me!”

“She left you.”

“We don’t know that, maybe she was kidnapped.” Officer Slep tried to interrupt but Alex kept going, “I found this book on the floor, and I know it isn’t ours”, he shoved the *Sleepin’ with Gators* into Officer Slep’s hands, panicked.

“Don’t hand me things like that,” muttered Officer Slep, he took one look at the book, and set it down beside him.

“It’s a clue!” exclaimed Alex, “It has a message in it! It shows someone else was here last night, you talked to Mrs. Adela, she heard them!”

Officer Slep smiled “Look, Alex, you’re in shock. It makes sense you’re looking for other explanations. But kidnappings don’t happen in places like Mariposa.” He took a deep breath, “Your aunt lives in Denver, do you have a way of getting in touch with her?”

“I don’t want my stupid aunt, I want my mom!” Alex burst into tears.

Officer Slep handed crying Alex a piece of paper, “You need to make contact with your aunt in 48 hours. When you are with her, call this number. If not you’ll transfer into state custody.”

“But I haven’t talked to her in years,” Alex hiccupped, “What about my mom?”

Officer Slep pulled a tablet out of his clipboard and tapped on it. He grabbed a piece of paper out of a breast pocket and wrote on it, then he handed it to Alex.

“That’s the info we have for her.” It was an address and a phone number. “Go to Denver, they’ll have the resources to handle you.”

He stood up.

Alex stared at him, tears wet on his cheeks.

“How do I get to Denver?” he asked desperately.

“Get your aunt to come get you, if not take the bus, it leaves from Gun Barrel every day.”

“But what about Alvira?” Alex got to his feet too, following Officer Slep on his way to the door.

“We’ll put out the notice,” said Officer Slep stiffly, one hand on the doorknob, “We have your info. I’ll let you know if anything shows up.”

He nodded at Alex, who was too shocked to do anything, then he left.

Alex stood there for a period of time he had no measure of. He heard someone enter through the back door, but when he turned around it was just Jimena. She laid a hand on his back. She was holding *Sleepin' with Gators*.

“Did you see this?” she asked, holding out a small blue rectangle. Alex took it, it was a bookmark. ‘Good Times Here’ it read in red font.

“Look at the bottom,” she said. He did.

Huckleberry Coffee Co, 117 Grenade St, Denver, CO.

“If you’re going to Denver, maybe they know who bought the book?” She said.

There was a knock on the door right in front of them. Wild hope briefly filled Alex. He wrenched it open.

It was Officer Slep, looking uncomfortable.²

“Hey, there used to be a fund to cover those expenses for minors.. anyways I just wanted to give you this to do my part. Until you reach your aunt. For the bus fare.” He pushed open Alex’s hand, and hurried back down the walk, leaving Alex there with his mouth open, a few shiny green bills stuffed in his fist.

5. Getting and Going

Alex sat down. He put the money on the table, he turned over the piece of paper with his aunt's number.

Jimena sat with him, "What are you gonna do?" she asked

"I don't know."

They looked up the time of the bus to Denver. It left from Gun Barrel at five in the morning.

"This is messed up, the way they are treating you."

Alex shrugged. He didn't know what to say, what to feel. Thoughts kept forming and collapsing. He had nothing to grip onto to. Everything was overwhelming.

When the afternoon began to grow long, Jimena left. Not long after, Alex stood up, his knees stiff, his mind hardened into intention. If Alvira has not returned by tomorrow morning he would go to Denver. He couldn't explain it to himself, but he felt like she was there, or at least that she might be there. Everything was so hazy and unclear, but Alex felt like it was all pushing him in the same direction: Denver.

He went to his room and filled his backpack with a change of clothes and his water bottle. He went into Alvira's room. The energy was the same in there, the angry buzzing. He forced himself not to run out.

He went through Alvira's drawers. He pocketed the little bit of money he found. In a drawer with her underwear he discovered a speckled wooden box. There was no jewelry inside, but photos. Many of Alex. One of Alvira, looking younger and happier, holding baby Alex to her chest. His aunt was in that photo too, at the edge of the frame. Smiling with her eyes closed. Alex put the photo in his backpack.

“Are you leaving?”

Alex spun around, without him hearing, Mrs. Adela had entered the room.

He deflated slightly, “I have to,” he said.

Mrs. Adela nodded. “When?” she asked.

He told her in the morning. Mrs. Adela stared at him, then slowly reached out a gnarled hand and beckoned him forward. Feeling weird, Alex approached.

“Get on your knees,” she said, her eyes closed. Alex reluctantly obliged. She smacked her palm to his forehead, and started hissing.

Alex almost started laughing, but after a second, a different feeling fell over him. He closed his eyes. The hissing noises of Mrs. Adela carried deep inside of him, cocooning him in the vastness of everything. It felt like smoke. Alex felt very small. Then it was over. Mrs. Adela scratched a clumsy sign of the cross across his chest, and Alex gingerly got to his feet.

“Take this,” she said, pressing into his hand an ancient-looking five dollar bill. “I will stay here while you find your mother.”

“Find her?” asked Alex, not sure if he heard her right.

Mrs. Adela nodded solemnly. “She needs you,” she said. “Now I need to go take my pills,” she shuffled off, leaving Alex standing there. Somehow, stangely, he felt better.

Alex went outside and sat on the hood of their broken down car. If he wanted to go to Denver, he had to get to Gun Barrel.

Alex looked to his next door neighbor Tony’s house. Alvira and Alex had always maintained a lot of distance with Tony, as they did with most people. But since the axle on Alvira’s car broke they had relied on him for rides.¹

Tony’s thing was dogs. He had dozens. When Alex was seven one of Tony’s dogs had chased him crying down the street. Since then he had been very afraid of dogs, and very wary of Tony. But he didn’t have much choice at the moment.

Alex trudged up Tony’s walk --his house was exactly the same as Alex and Alviras, but blue instead of grey-- the moment he knocked on the door dogs started barking furiously from the other side. He heard grumblings and footsteps, then the door opened a crack.

“Alex,” said Tony, he stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

“Hi,” said Alex.

Tony was holding a beer can, he scratched the stubble on his neck.

“You haven’t seen my mom have you?” asked Alex.

Tony coughed on a sip of beer. “Not in a week or so,” he said, looking at Alex curiously.

“Can you give me a ride?” Alex blurted.

“No I can’t.” Tony said, “Martin’s coming over, wants to check out a few of my dogs.”

“Not now,” said Alex quickly, “Tomorrow, in the morning, early.”

“Where ya trying to get to Alex?”

“Just Gun Barrel.”

“Hmm.. Where’s your mom?”

“Denver,” answered Alex immediately “That’s why I have to go to Gun Barrel, I have to take the bus to go meet her in Denver.”

“She’s in Denver?” Tony had a slight smile on his face.

“Yeah. Seeing my aunt.” Alex wasn’t sure why he was lying, but pretending this was no big deal made him feel a little better.

“Oh so they’ve reconnected then?”

This completely threw Alex. He didn’t know Tony knew anything about Alvira and his aunt.

“Yeah,” continued Tony, “I used to be real close with Linda, I was too many years older than Alvira in school, but Linda and I we got along fine.” He grinned.

“Ok,” said Alex, confused by the idea that Tony had known his aunt. Alvira had never mentioned knowing Tony growing up, although it made sense she had, Mariposa was so small.

“What time is your bus?” asked Tony, shaking himself from his reminisce.

“6 AM.”

“Oh forget about it, I’m not getting up then, you gotta find someone else.”

“Please!” yelled Alex.

Tony looked startled, “That’s really when the bus leaves?”

“6:10.”

Tony shook his head and sighed “Alright Alex, if I’m not out at 5:30 just come in and wake me up. I don’t lock the door.”

“Thank you so much. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. You sure everything's alright?”

“Yes, things are great.” Alex took a few steps down the walk, happy that for once something had gone right.

“I saw the cop car earlier,” said Tony, his arms crossed. Alex froze, “What were they after?”

“Just, uhh, checking in.” Alex bounded away, “See you in the morning!”

-Texts-

A-my neighbor is going to give me a ride-

J-omg good-

J-thats really nice of him-

A-yeah it is-

J-How are you doing?-

A-Im ok-

A-nervous-

J-Yeah makes sense-

J-How is Mrs. Adela?-

A-Ok. She’s going to stay at my hiuse. I dont think she has anywhere else to go-

A-and this way if my mom comes back she’ll be here-

J-good idea-

A-how r u-

J-im okay!-

J-my dad is being a dick again-

A-That sucks. whats he doing-

J-yelling at everyone-

J-he's still mad about me falling asleep the other day-

J-he says we never do anything useful.-

J-I hate him I hate him I hate him-

A-that sucks-

J-and he's being really mean to my mom too-

A-whats he doing?-

...

J-Alex-

J-can I come with you?-

J-to Denver?-

Alex woke up with a river of energy inside him. The sky outside was a pale orange, even in his room, he could smell the smoke. Alex grabbed his phone off his bedside table and read the last messages Jimena had sent him. As he walked down the hallway into the dark kitchen he wondered how to respond.

He turned on a light and jumped a little. Jimena was asleep on the couch, snoring lightly. He touched her shoulder and she stirred awake. Her braids were loose and she had bits of hair stuck in her mouth.

She fumbled for her glasses, her eyes puffy.

He held up his phone “Do you really wanna come?” he asked.

She didn’t say anything but nodded fervently.

A few minutes later, they stepped off the front porch. It felt like a bizarre first day of school.

Tony was awake and outside, sipping from a cup of coffee.

“Two of you!” he had exclaimed, “I ain’t gonna hear from any angry parents about this?”

They drove out of Mariposa as the sun cracked over the horizon. Orange light shone into their eyes, painting the brush gold.

“Too bad you didn’t ask in a week,” Tony was saying “I gotta take Brinny to Denver. Man there wants to pay me \$4,000 for her, I coulda taken you all the way.”

Alex mumbled a response. He couldn’t tell if Jimena was asleep, her head was slumped against the window. He was thankful for her presence, but he felt like she was doing something very different from him. She was running away.

“You two could use some coffee.”

Alex found himself dreading getting to Gun Barrel. He was tired, but electric, his bones were buzzing lightly. He looked at his phone. He had 11 minutes. 11 whole delicious minutes. So much time. He was so sleepy, all he wanted was for the 11 minutes to go on forever. The road started climbing and the sun went back behind the mountains. Seven minutes. Alex closed his

eyes and when he opened them they were entering Gun Barrel, the mountains looming over their heads. All the shops and stores were closed and empty. Alex wasn't paying attention.

"It's behind the gas station," he said, his voice dry. Tony turned off the main street, past some houses. A few people were milling around.

Tony parked the car. Alex and Jimena got out. Through the window Tony made Alex take his phone number, in case they needed anything. Alex accepted it silently, and Tony left. They were alone.

Alex shuffled through his bills. He had the \$40 from the cop, another \$11.55 from Alvira's room and random drawers, and the five dollar bill Mrs. Adela had given him. Almost 60 bucks total. The bus to Denver was \$35. One way.

"I only have enough for one ticket," he said to Jimena, his stomach dropping.

"It's okay," she reached into her pocket, "I stole Mari's birthday money." She spread out 30 dollars in fives and tens. They looked at it.

"We won't have enough to get back," she said.

Alex touched her wrist awkwardly, then pretended he had been reaching for a bill.

"You don't have to come," he said, "but when we reach my aunt she'll give us money to get back."

Jimena nodded, her lips pursed.

The bus was already there, big and sleek. They crossed the parking lot and got onboard. The tired-looking driver took several minutes counting their money, then two tickets whirled out from a small machine and they were allowed on.

Jimena strode down the aisle. She was still wearing the pink shorts and hoodie from the day before. No backpack and none of her things with her. Alex wanted to ask what had happened to make her want to leave, but was afraid it would break some spell, and he desperately didn't want her to go.

They chose seats near the back. There weren't very many other people on the bus.

"I'm gonna find an outlet," Jimena slid past Alex with her phone and a cord. Alex reached in his pocket for his flip phone and slid it open to see if Alvira or his aunt had somehow messaged him. They hadn't.

Jimena scurried back, still clutching her phone.

"Alex," she half-whispered, her eyes alight, "Matt De La Vega is sleeping back there!"

Alex creased his eyebrows skeptically. He followed Jimena to the final row on the bus.

"Oh," he said, looking down on what was indeed the slumbering body of Matt De La Vega,² twisted over a row of seats.

"I wonder if these are his boxes," Jimena pointed across the aisle to where three ragged cardboard boxes sat.

Alex figured they must be. He wondered what was going on. Matt was one year older than them, though he routinely took classes with lower grades. When Alvira had worked at the school, Alex was pretty sure she had worked with him.

Alex peered disdainfully into Matt's wide face. His lips were open. His defining feature was being the only ninth grader who could grow a beard. He must have shaved recently, but still had wily hairs growing out his cheeks and acne that made Alex feel less bad about himself. All in all, Matt was one of the ugliest people Alex had ever examined, but he felt there was

something sweet about him. He imagined drifting from his head into his, taking on his thoughts and leaving his own behind. It couldn't be worse.

“Should we wake him up?” asked Jimena, yawning.

“Definitely not,” responded Alex, ending his pondering.

But as they turned back to their seats, and the bus began to roll, Matt opened his eyes.

“I'm not asleep” he whispered.

Alex and Jimena jumped. They pivoted. The portion of Matt's face they could see was staring at them from the gap between the seats.

“Why were you pretending?” demanded Jimena, indignant.

“I felt like it.”

“That's not a reason!” exclaimed Jimena. Matt didn't respond.

“Why are you going to Denver?” asked Alex.

Matt scowled. “I'm not telling you.”

This made Alex more curious, “C'mon?”

Matt turned over so he was no longer looking at them. When he spoke his voice was muffled.

“Police.”

Alex's jaw clenched painfully.

“You're going to Denver for the police?” he asked tightly.

“I have to go to the court.”

“What court? Why?”

Matt's back moved so he was even more turned away from them. Alex's eyes scanned over the three boxes. A large and ugly lamp was sticking out the top of one.

He took several steps until he was leaning directly over Matt's huddled form.

"Matt, what court?"

There was no answer.

Alex asked the question that was burning on his tongue:

"Where is your mom?"

Matt rolled all the way around. There was shock in his eyes.

"Who told you that?"

Alex shook his head. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Jimena looked between them, disbelief on her face as well.

"What's happening?" asked Matt.

Alex collapsed in the seat in front of him. Nothing felt solid. He looked at Jimena, she was looking at Matt.

"Your mom didn't leave," Alex muttered.

Jimena sat next to Matt.

"We have some things to tell you."

6. Denver

Something was patting his shoulder.

“Alex,” said a familiar voice, close to him. “Wake up.”

He opened his eyes. Jimena was leaning over him.

“Arghh,” groaned Alex as consciousness returned. He rubbed his eyes. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“It’s okay, we all did” said Jimena, “But you should get up now, we’re here.”

Alex looked out the window, they were parked next to another bus. Slowly the memories started to come back.

“Where’s Matt?” he asked, looking around.

“Outside, using my phone,” answered Jimena.

Together they got off the bus and walked into the station. Alex felt a horrible weight drop inside him. They had actually gone to Denver.

The inside of the bus station was unpleasant and cold, it froze the sweat on the back of Alex’s neck. Wrappers and pieces of trash were strewn across the tile floor. People were lugging bags and suitcases, a few were asleep on the floor and draped across the seats. The voices and

noisy air conditioning made it hard to hear. A garbled voice on the loudspeaker announced the bus to Des Moines would be leaving in five minutes.

Amidst the tangle, they spotted Matt standing next to a wall of vending machines, poking at Jimena's phone. His boxes were stacked next to him. Alex's stomach seized with fear, they had talked for several hours on the bus, and yet he still couldn't believe Matt's mom had also vanished... They walked over to him.

"I can't find the court" Matt said, frowning.

"We're not going to court," said Alex, tugging the phone away from Matt. They had decided on the bus not to trust the government. They were going to find Alex's aunt.

"We're gonna go find my aunt and take it from there," declared Alex. "Then we'll have a place to stay while we look for our moms."

A woman shuffled by to use a vending machine.

"Will she come get us?" asked Matt.

Alex shuffled, "No, I've been calling her number, but she hasn't picked up. But we the cop told us where she lives."

"The address isn't very far away," offered Jimena, who had taken her phone back, "Or is it? How far is that?"

Alex looked over her shoulder. "Doesn't look far," he turned to Matt, "Are you ready?"

Matt bit his fingers and nodded. They distributed his boxes between them. Alex got the one with the lamp. He had trouble holding it in a position where it didn't smack him in the face.

It took them several minutes to find the exit. Outside, heat and light washed over them. Alex took a deep breath and was surprised at the lack of smoke. It wasn't the biggest surprise though.

Across the street, over their heads, stretched a blindingly white skyscraper. Every floor had two strips of black windows, it looked like a barcode.

"That's bigger than the ones in Albuquerque." breathed Jimena.

Alex stepped back, terrified and absolutely convinced it was about to fall on him.

"Oh that's not even the tallest one," said Matt happily.

They put the boxes down to get their bearings. A collection of people sat on both sides of the bus station entrance, some were asleep, a few had grocery carts full of things and cups asking for money. Alex kept his back to them.

"Ok," he said, staring at the map on Jimena's phone, "This way."

They set off. It was hard for Alex to balance carrying the box while checking to make sure they were going in the right direction. Hard to balance checking directions with not walking into someone, hard not to stop and stare at the people and buildings passing all around him.

Alex caught snippets of the conversations of the people moving by,

"I never told her to say that, I would never have told her to say-" A man in a suit was saying to his phone. "It's gonna be nuts," two men were grinning. "Actually the 15th doesn't work for me, how about next month-" said a woman. A group of girls passed, "-Maybe it's the lettuce that made my stomach upset... "

"Wait," said Jimena, Alex walked into her. She was pointing at a street sign, "We were supposed to be walking to Chester."

Alex handed her the phone. They turned around and walked back the way they came. It was hot, and Alex began to sweat. They passed the bus station and the giant white building again, and abruptly hit a seven lane highway.

“This isn’t right,” murmured Jimena. Alex ground his teeth. Matt’s box wasn’t especially heavy, but it still made his shoulders ache. They backtracked down their original path, and Jimena realized where they were supposed to have angled down a different street. A few minutes later, the street opened up into a square that was thronged with people.

“Look!” said Matt. Alex was already staring.

It was the tallest thing Alex had ever seen, far higher than its neighbors. Blue glass the color of the sky, and a stuck out, angled top.

“It’s like a straw with the top bent” said Alex, shivers running down his spine.

“Yeah I don’t like that part,” said Matt.

Jimena set her box down, she craned her neck back. “It looks like it’s gonna tip over,” she said, squinting.

Alex stared hungrily. What went on inside these buildings? He wondered if it mattered at all to anyone in Mariposa. All those windows, all those floors, all those rooms. If Alvira was in Denver, she could be in any one of those rooms. Panic once again flooded Alex’s body. He wanted to scream, but didn’t think that would improve the situation.

He looked over at Jimena. She was staring wide-eyed at her phone.

“What’s up?” he asked her.

Jimena gritted her teeth, “Just my mom, she’s freaking out cause she doesn’t know where I am.”

“Oh,” Alex had completely forgotten about Jimena’s family problems. They didn’t seem that major compared to what he was going through, but he didn’t want to say that.

Jimena adjusted her glasses and rubbed her eyes. “Where’s Matt?” she asked.

Alex turned around, he hadn’t seen Matt in a minute.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Matt!” yelled Jimena.

“Matt!” echoed Alex, looking into the mass of bodies moving around them, “Matt!”

They ran around the square looking for him. They found him in the center.

“What are you doing?” Jimena yelled, pulling on her hair. Matt didn’t seem especially bothered.

“Looking at this,” he said, pointing at a statue in front of him.

Alex hadn’t noticed there was a statue. He looked at it. It was a copper woman, standing tall with a gun in one hand, and a baby that she was breastfeeding in the other. Her hair frozen in the wind behind her.

““Mother of Denver,” read Jimena off the plaque, “Honoring the founding of Denver, and the wisdom and fertility of her founding mothers.” she paused. “That’s weird.”¹

“They should put one of these in Mariposa,” said Alex, “But instead of this lady it can be one of us.”

“We didn’t start Mariposa,” said Jimena.

“Yeah, but it would be fun to have a statue.”

Matt nodded in agreement. “I would love a statue of my cat,” he said.

They left the square and walked uphill on mostly empty streets, passing blank stone office buildings. At the crest of the hill, in front of a fancy-looking steakhouse, they caught their breath and tried to figure out where they were. Jimena's phone kept showing them in a different locations. Over their heads, the skyline of Denver loomed.²

Alex cast his mind back to the few memories he had from Denver. There had been a park not far from where they had lived. He had played in the playground. A smile appeared on his face. The fib he had been telling, that Alvira was with his aunt, had been working through him. Now it was hope, almost expectation.

They started moving again, and turned down a small, tree-lined street. Reality swirled before Alex. The park he had been thinking about was right in front of him. Crowded with bright green trees, red brick benches, and the exact playground Alex remembered. He walked into it in a daze. A few homeless people looked at him curiously.

He put down his box and laid his hand on the slide, another memory returned, of his aunt high fiving him. "This is strange," he said.

"It should be around the next, next corner," said Jimena.

Alex in the lead, they hurried down the street and around the corner and then-

"Woah," murmured Matt, "Your tia is rica."

"Damn Alex," echoed Jimena, "your aunt lives here?"

"Uhhhhh, I guess so."

Before them, with the correct address pasted to a wall, was a massive apartment building. Alex counted windows two at a time. 16 stories high. Black glass with alternating grey balconies and a vertical strip of red brick. A sign in front of it said Aspen Tower Luxury Residence. It's

neighbors on either side were plain, two story structures. Alex was reminded of the development where Mari's party had been.

They crossed the street. The word 'open' was written in white on a tinted door. Alex opened and found himself in a blindingly white space. White walls, white lights, there was a shiny silver desk, but no one sat at it. At the end of the room there was an elevator, a white door, and a wall of metallic mailboxes. High above him, bordering the ceiling, was a wood box of shockingly green moss. It was rather cold.

"Hello?" said Alex. He tried the one door but it was locked. He pushed the button on the elevator, but a light flashed red. He supposed they would have to wait until someone came in to ask if they knew Linda Alvarez. Alex put down the box and sat next to it. Matt and Jimena followed suit.

"This is very clean," said Jimena, rubbing her finger along the white wall.

"It smells weird," said Matt.

"I can't smell anything," sniffed Jimena.

"I smell it too," Alex added distractedly, he was trying to figure out what to say when he saw his aunt.

"I don't like how bright it is either," commented Jimena. "Alex do you remember being here?"

"No," he said, plugging his phone into an outlet behind the desk. "But it looks pretty new, it's probably been changed."

Matt opened his box, took out a pillow, and laid his head on it. He stared at the ceiling, breathing slowly.

The silver door opened.

A man with a dazzling smile and extravagantly coiffed hair walked out.

“Hi!” he said, clasping his hands and looking between Jimena Alex and Matt, all of whom had frozen guiltily. “I just wanted to let you know that this is actually a private space.”

They looked at each other, “Ok,” said Alex. He was about to ask if the man knew which apartment his aunt lived in.

“I’m sorry, that means only residents and invited guests are allowed inside.” The man said, speaking very slowly.

“My aunt lives here,” said Alex.

The man’s smile froze, his eyes lingered on Matt’s boxes. Alex realized they probably looked homeless.

“Your aunt? Does she know you’re coming?” the man asked.

Alex flushed, “Yes, well no, would you mind checking actually which apartment she’s in-” he trailed off.

Two sweaty women in running clothes entered from the street. Their conversation abruptly stopped as they saw Alex, Matt, and Jimena. They gave the man a quizzical look and stepped around the boxes. There were several awkward silent seconds while they waited for the elevator. Then they were gone and he spoke again.

“I’m going to have to ask you to wait outside,” the man said.

Alex unplugged his phone to show good faith. “Okay could you please just check which apartment my aunt is in? Her name is Linda Alvarez.”

“I’m going to have to insist you wait outside. You can’t sit here.” the man repeated, glaring at Matt.

“Yeah, okay,” Alex said in frustration, “We won’t sit here, we’d be very happy to go upstairs if you could just tell me which apartment Linda Alvarez lives in.”

“I’m sorry but I can’t give out personal information about the residents.”

“I’m her nephew,” exclaimed Alex. Behind him, Jimena and Matt clambered to their feet, collecting the boxes in their arms.

The man motioned with his arm, “If you wouldn’t mind stepping outside.” His voice was horribly cheerful.

There was a moment of confusion and they were all hustled back onto the street.

“I need to see my aunt,” yelled Alex, as a car screeched behind him “the police said so!”

The mans face was red, his smile was gone. “Wait here.” He went back inside.

Alex spun in a circle. Alvira would have blown up on that guy. Theres no way she would have let him kick them out like that. Alex heard Matt and Jimena exchanging words, but was too riled up to understand what they were saying.

The tinted door opened and the man reemerged. “Nobody named Linda Alvarez lives here.” he said. The words echoed strangely in Alex’s ears. Time briefly stopped. The man gave them all a dirty look like they had been bothering him on purpose. “Now if you wouldn’t mind not loitering on our sidewalk space.”

Fury filled Alex. He yanked his box from Jimena’s arms and stormed across the empty street.

“That better?” He yelled at the man “Is this better?”

Jimena and Matt hurried behind him.

“Alex shut up or he’s gonna call the cops,” hissed Jimena.

“What is happening?” screamed Alex, not at the man anymore, at the sky, at the ugly apartment building, at everything, at the earth. “I hate this!” he yelled. “I hate this!” He wanted to throw something, he did. Matt’s box went tumbling, it’s contents broke on the ground, the lamp bounced into the road.

“No!” screamed Matt. He collapsed to his knees grabbing the shards of plates and broken photos that were spread across the concrete. “Why did you do that!” He shrieked, ugly tears running down his face, shaking a photo frame helplessly “Why did you do that!”

Alex stepped back, shocked at what he had done. Jimena rushed around picking up the plates and other things, she grabbed the lamp out of the street, unharmed except for a bent top. Alex stepped behind her, feeling numb. He looked over Matt’s shoulder, he was smoothing out a photograph.

“I’m sorry,” Alex whispered, his voice hoarse. “I- I didn’t mean to break that.”

Jimena glared at him.

Matt was still shaking, but he had stopped crying. Slowly, carefully, he packed the things, including the shards, back into the box. He stood up and faced Alex. His eyes were red and there was a dribble of snot coming out of his nose. “This is mine.” He said, hugging the box.

“I know- I’m sorry.”

“Mine.”

“I know.”

“You don’t get to touch it.” Matt stared directly at Alex.

“I said I’m sorry.” said Alex sheepishly.

There was moments pause. Alex reached out and tried to take the box from Matt, who recoiled. “No!” he yelled.

“C’mon,” sighed Alex, feeling bad “Let me carry it.”

“I have it.”

“Fine!” Alex threw up his hands, “Carry two boxes, I don’t care.” He stepped away and walked in a circle.

“What do we do now?” asked Jimena, who was sitting on the curb, a hand on her forehead.

“I don’t know,” answered Alex loudly, and the truth of the words crashed over him. He felt exhausted. Where was his aunt? Where was Alvira? What was he doing?

“Should we go back to Mariposa?” he asked.

“What about our moms?” demanded Matt.

“We don’t have any money,” reminded Jimena.

Alex sat down next to her. “Well I don’t know,” he said.

“The bookmark.” said Jimena, suddenly alert. She unzipped Alex’s backpack and pulled out *Sleepin’ with Gators*. “Let’s go to the bookstore,” she said.

Alex didn’t have any other ideas so he nodded. Matt looked unhappy.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“It’s a book that was left it my mom’s room,” Alex heard himself say. “We think it was left by whoever took her. We wanna see if they can check who purchased it.”

“You think the kidnapper left a book?” Matt shook his head, “That makes zero sense.”

“None of this makes sense.” said Alex wearily.

Jimena put the address in her phone, “It’s back kinda near the bus station.”

They slowly got to their feet. Alex kept staring at the apartment building, trying to summon some memory that would help them. Nothing came.

Jimena navigating, they departed. They walked a different way back, along a wide potholed road. Many of the storefronts were empty, others offered bail services, halal cooking, and cash for gold. Soon Alex’s feet started hurting worse than before. He wasn’t the only one. Jimena’s breathing was ragged and she was moving very slowly, every block or so they had to stop and put the boxes down.

“Please let me carry one,” pleaded Alex during one such break.

Matt didn’t say anything, he was breathing hard, his hands on knees. Everytime they stopped Alex tried calling his aunts number, but it was an endless dial.

Gradually, thick clouds formed across the sky, cutting the heat somewhat. Hunger ached in Alex’s stomach. They stopped at a convenience store and Alex spent seven dollars on a flimsy packet of bread and jam. They sat on the curb and ate sticky jelly sandwiches. Around them, the streets became lively. Patios filled with people, laughing and drinking in the newly humid air. Bikers swerved between them.

After what felt like much longer, they were back amidst the skyscrapers. Alex was so tired his thoughts were coming as one word, repeated mechanically, step, step step step. Twice he almost walked into oncoming traffic.

Matt finally let him carry a box again. From around the lamp Alex's eyes climbed up the walls of steel and glass around him. "Left," wheezed Jimena, her hand was pressed to her side, her hair was sweaty and sticking in her mouth. Matt had taken her box.

"It says it's here."

They were standing on a blank stretch of concrete, next to a setback brown skyscraper.

"Here?" repeated Alex, unable to keep the irritation out of his voice.

"Maybe it's around the corner," said Jimena, swiping at her phone.

They traveled around the corner. Nothing. Alex looked at the phone, the blue dot blinked innocently.

"Maybe it's inside?" asked Matt. Alex was on the verge of saying this was a stupid idea, but he stopped himself.

"Let's check," he said.

It took them awhile to find the entrance on the exact opposite side of the building, but in the basement they did find it, but it wasn't what they were hoping for.

"I don't think this place sells books," said Jimena dejectedly. They were looking at a small coffee shop, its grate curtain pulled open, in a small nook next to a burger chain and taco shop. There was almost no one in it.

"Let's ask," said Alex. He walked up nervously to the counter, where a bored cashier eyed him suspiciously.

"Uhh do you sell this book here?" he asked, holding up *Sleepin' With Gators*, the cashier blinked slowly at him for several seconds. "No," she said.

Alex showed her the bookmark, she called her manager, the manager looked at it and said that years before they might have sold books, but she didn't know anything about that. Alex stalked back to the table where Matt and Jimena sat.

All day he had been fighting his feelings, now they engulfed him. He had absolutely no idea where to go or what to do. Tears formed in his eyes. Alvira could be anywhere, his aunt likewise. He was in a city he had no idea how to navigate, with no plan, and almost no money. God, if you exist -- Alex prayed, his eyes clenched -- when I open my eyes I'll be back home with Alvira. He kept his eyes closed, his heart bumping, but when he opened them and he was still in the grimy basement. Jimena had taken her glasses off, she was resting her forehead on the table.

"Maybe we should ask people if they know your aunt?" said Matt, who seemed to be the only one not given in to despair.

"Who?" asked Alex, motioning around the empty basement.

Matt stood up, "I'll do it," he said. Alex sighed and told him her name. He left, Alex watched him go.

Bitter thoughts crowded Alex's head, as Matt turned around the corner where the staircase was. He pushed through them.

"Hey," he said to Jimena.

She looked at him, "This is really scary," she said, shaking her head.

"I think we should go back to Mariposa," said Alex, "We should go back to the bus station--"

"I can't go home," said Jimena fiercely. "And we still don't have any money."

“-It’s okay,” said Alex, “We’ll ask people to help. Maybe we can sell Matt’s things.”

Jimena rolled her eyes, “That’s a bad idea.”

Alex started crying, “Well I don’t know what to do,” he said through his tears.

Jimena reached out and grabbed his hand, she was about to say something, when Matt suddenly reappeared.

“Alex, Alex! This guy knows your aunt!”

7. Peter

Stupefied, Alex and Jimena followed Matt up to the street level.

Matt pointed to a man leaning against a fire hydrant “That’s him,” he said. Jimena shot Alex a skeptical look. The man was wearing a sleeveless white t-shirt, he was talking on the phone

“Yeah, yeah I’ll be there” The man was saying. He had a low, melodic voice, and a slight accent. He held up one finger to Matt, “Hey I’m sorry man, I will have to call you back,” He put his phone in his pocket. He was dark-skinned and had a tattoo of a cross on his shoulder. His eyes wandered over the bedraggled trio and his lips twisted.

“Now I don’t need anything to know you three are in a desperate state.”

Alex stepped forward, “You know my aunt?” He asked, intensely suspicious.

“I know Linda Alvarez,” said the man, “Is that your aunt?”

Alex tried not to react, but his heart was pounding. The man wiped his mouth. When he spoke again his voice was a bit gentler.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Alex.”

“I’m Peter,” he motioned to his chest, “and you?” he asked, nodding at Jimena.

She looked at him silently for a moment, “Jimena,” she said.

“And you said your name was...?”

“Matt!”

“Right, Matt. Matt said you are looking for Linda Alvarez, she’s your aunt?”

Matt nodded vigorously, Alex glared at him. He took a second before replying “yes.”

“You running away from your parents?” Peter asked jokingly. Jimena coughed uncomfortably.

Peter’s expression changed. “Those yours?” he asked, pointing at the boxes they had set down on the pavement.

“Mine,” said Matt.

Peter observed them all for a second then stooped down and picked up two of the boxes.

“Nothing else to do but help the children,” he murmured, “Come along!” he started walking down the street.

Startled, they followed.

Alex hurried to walk alongside Peter.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m taking you to your aunt’s place,” Peter said.

“We can walk there?”

Peter chuckled “Oh no, you wouldn’t want to walk. We’re going to my car.”

Alex stopped walking. After a day of nothing working, this was too good to be true.

Down another street he could see the big bar-code skyscraper that was across from the bus

station. They had traveled in one big circle. And somehow here was Peter, taking them where they needed to go. It didn't add up.

“How do you know my aunt?” Alex asked, not moving.

Peter looked behind in surprise. Then he propped the boxes against his knee and wiped his forehead. “She used to work with a friend of mine.”

“Where does she work?”

“The Hospital,” said Peter, “I think she's still there. When I met her she worked at a smaller clinic.”

“She's a doctor?”

“Oh, no. A receptionist.”

“Prove that you know her,” Alex said.

Peter laughed, “what?”

Alex stood his ground, “Prove that you know her,”

Peter nodded. He reached into his pocket for his phone “Her number just changed,” he said, “but does this work?” He showed Alex a photo of a group of people. There was Peter, and there standing next to him was a woman-- was it Alex's aunt? He couldn't tell.

“That work?” asked Peter again. Alex looked around. Matt and Jimena were both staring at him, waiting.

“Ok,” he said.

Peter hoisted the boxes up. “Okay,” he said.

They crossed the street and walked several more blocks along a wide, four-lane road. It was more open, and all the tall buildings around them looked new. The sidewalk was wide and empty enough for all four of them to walk together.

“You three are cousins?” Peter asked.

They all shook their heads no. Peter frowned and nodded.

They turned off the large road down a quiet, tree-lined street. Peter stopped besides a faded red car. “It’s a good thing you ran into me when you did” he said, banging on the trunk until it popped open, “I work around where Linda lives, this way I’ll just be a little early.”

He loaded the boxes into the trunk. Matt took shotgun. Alex looked at the car dubiously and said a tiny prayer hoping he wasn’t making a huge mistake. Then he got in. The car was clean on the inside but smelled weirdly like a turkey sandwich. Alex was full of misgivings.

Peter slid into the driver’s seat and groaned. “Nice to sit down,” he said and cleared his throat “Now, why don’t you three tell me what’s happening.”

They were silent. Alex was nervous, he had been wondering when Peter would demand some information. He figured it wasn’t every day you find three lost teenagers looking for their kidnapped mothers and estranged aunt, but he didn’t want Peter to know all of that, especially not the part about Alvira being kidnapped. Then Matt spoke,

“We’re looking for our moms.” He said.

Peter held up a hand “One moment,” he said, “I thought you were looking for Linda?”

“We are, to help us find our moms. They were kidnapped.”

Alex groaned. Peter looked at Matt. He put the key in the car and started the engine.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning.”

Matt took a deep breath:

“It was Monday, last Monday. I came home from my job. I set the chairs and sweep at the church, and I came home and on Monday’s my mom is at work, well she works every day at the motel-”

“Sorry, where?” asked Peter

“Golden Motel. It’s on the highway, across from the farm supply store.”

Peter shook his head, “Where?”

“Mariposa,” answered Jimena from the backseat. “It’s four hours southwest.”

“Oh, okay. Oh my. Keep going.”

Matt continued:

“I was home with our cat, Pig, she’s really my cat, I look after her. And my mom didn’t come home by dinner time. And I had made mac n cheese. And I got really really worried, because she always calls when she works late. So I called the motel, and no one answered. That night I waited all night for her to come home, but she didn’t come home. I called the motel again at seven in the morning, and one of the ladies, Clarisel, who is nice, came by, cause they didn’t know where my mom was either. And she called her boss, and he called the police, and they came and said she probably left for good and told me I had to go to Denver, because courts are in Denver, and we can’t handle you here. And no one would tell me where my mom was. They gave me a court time and told me to take the bus. So I packed up our things because, I didn’t want to leave them in the house alone. I wanted to bring Pig too, but she wouldn’t come out from under the bed-” Matt stopped talking abruptly.¹

Alex and Jimena exchanged a guilty look. Neither of them had asked Matt in any detail how his mom had been kidnapped. Even on the bus, it was all about Alex, Alex telling Matt what had happened. Alex laying out the plan.

They couldn't see how Peter was reacting to Matt's story, but a moment later he spoke.

"Alex, Jimena, your moms went missing too?"

"She's not missing, she was kidnapped," said Alex, "Same with Matt's mom. Jimena's helping us."

Jimena didn't acknowledge this statement, she was staring at her phone, her lips pursed.

"Are we close to my aunt?" Alex asked, not wanting Peter to ask any more questions about his mom.

"Not yet," said Peter.

They were in traffic on the big road they had been walking along, and it, along with everything else, was making him incredibly antsy. Every few minutes the cars would open up and they would zoom ahead, and then it would go back to gridlock.

Peter tried asking Matt a few more questions, but he stopped responding. The car lapsed into a heavy silence. Alex watched the buildings and people pass by. He had been so worried for so long, he was completely fried. And yet in the car going exactly where he had been trying to get, he only felt more nervous. His aunt had kicked him and Alvira out before he hadn't seen her in 10 years. Why would she help him?

"Are we close?" he asked, several more times.

Gradually the answers Peter gave dropped from 40 to 20 to 10 minutes. Alex desperately wanted to ask Peter questions about his aunt, but he resisted. Instead, he stared out the window,

every few seconds expecting the buildings to stop and the city to end, but it just kept on going. An endless sequence of mechanics, mattress stores, office buildings, fast food places, homes, parking lots, and so much more.²

“Denver is big,” he whispered.

Peter chuckled “This is just a bit of it,” he said, “See, Denver is big in some ways, but it’s a small city too. More like a town. People know each other. That’s how you ran into me. I’m excited for Linda to see you. She’s going to be excited.”

“She kicked me and my mom out when I was only three.” said Alex bluntly.

Peter didn’t respond for a second, when he did his voice was slightly stiff, “That’s not the kind of thing I think she’d do.”

He turned at a light by a vacant motel. The drove down a quiet street full of identical one-story houses. There were no big buildings around them anymore, but there were trees, and it felt a bit like passing through a green tunnel. It looked, Alex thought longingly, like his street in Mariposa.

“Pretty close now.” said Peter.

Alex felt his nerves ratchet up a gear. He dug his fingers into the plastic seat. His leg was pumping uncontrollably. Quite unexpectedly, Jimena took his hand and squeezed it tightly in hers. Warmth spread up his arm. Alex closed his eyes.

“Alright,” said Peter. The car stopped. They were parked in front of one of the identical houses. Alex felt very heavy as he opened the car door and stepped outside. He could see the distorted orb of his reflection in one of the windows as he approached the front door. He ran a hand over his prickly scalp.

Peter walked in front of him. He knocked on the front door.

8. Aunt Linda

They stood there waiting.

“Maybe she’s not home,” said Matt.

Peter raised his fist and was about to knock again, when a muffled voice came from behind the door.

“No thank you! I don’t want to buy anything!”¹

“Linda, open up!” yelled Peter. They could hear footsteps and a second later the door swung open.

A middle-aged woman was standing in front of them. “Pete?” she asked, confused, looking at the strange group on her doorstep. Then her eyes stopped on Alex, her brow tightened, her mouth opened, “Alex?”

He nodded. The next second he was pulled into an overwhelming embrace.

“Alex, Alex,” his aunt breathed, her hand clutching the back of his head. Alex was crying uncontrollably. He tightened his arms around her waist, massive sobs shaking his body.

He could not compose a single thought, much less a word. All he could feel was the tears, pushing through him.

It went on for an amount of time until the crying gradually lessened. Linda released him slightly, keeping her hands on his shoulders, and they looked at each other. Alex saw she had tears in her eyes too. She was Alvira, but in different dimensions. Shorter and heavier, her hair combed and straight, and wearing a white uniform Alvira would have hated. But the harp curve of her eyelids was the same, the brown of her pupils, the soft underside of her lips.

“Alex,” she said quietly, “What are you doing here?”

Alex couldn't speak, he started crying again.

“It's okay, it's okay” she murmured, stroking the back of his shaved head, looking around at Jimena, Matt, and Peter.

“I met Matt here outside Convention Center, asking if anyone knew Linda Alvarez,” said Peter.

Alex stepped away from his aunt and wiped the snot from his nose. He glanced at Jimena, feeling embarrassed.

“Where's your mom?” Linda asked.

Alex rubbed his eyes and shook his head. “That's why we're here,” he said.

“My mom is gone too,” added Matt urgently. Linda stared at him, alarm on her face. Peter nodded.

“Come inside,” she ushered them into a carpeted living room. There were a few, framed items on the walls: an image of mountains and a sunset, a piece of cloth, a cross. It was quite unlike Alex and Alvira's cluttered craziness.

She led them into a small kitchen and pulled out chairs around a square table. Alex, Matt and Jimena sat, Peter leaned against the counter.

“Tell me what’s happening,” instructed Linda, her hands wrapped over Alex’s shoulders.

“We think,” Alex gulped and looked around, “She was kidnapped. Alvira and Matt’s mom.”

“Kidnapped?” asked Linda, her nails biting into Alex’s shoulders.

He nodded. “I came home and she was gone,” his voice quickened, “and Mrs. Adela said she heard arguing, and we found this book from Denver, and then a cop came and he said I have to find you and if we don’t call this number in 48 hours saying I’m with you they’ll take me away!” he finished, trying not to cry.

Linda shook her head, trying to sort through the words “When was this? When did she go? What cop?”

“The day before yesterday, in the evening, when I was gone.”

She turned to Matt, “And your mom is missing too?”

“Yeah. Since last, last Monday.”

She did not say anything for a few seconds. Her eyes were wide and fearful. Finally, she asked, “You think she was kidnapped?”

They all nodded.

“We don’t know who,” said Jimena.

Linda let go of Alex and slumped against the counter. She held her face in her hands.

“Tell me everything.”

They did. Alex started with Mrs. Adela, how she was going to stay with them. How she had been so strange-

Linda groaned, “How is she still alive?”

Alex wanted to ask Linda about Mrs. Adela, but now that he had started telling the story, he couldn't stop. He told her how Alvira had acted weird, and how he left. He skipped over Mari's party and everything after, and picked up the story coming home. How the house was empty, but he didn't notice till the morning. How he and Mrs. Adela had waited, and how he found Alvira's broken phone and decided to call the the police.

Linda interrupted, she had taken out a pad and was taking notes.

"Sorry, Alex. I need to call the hospital and let them know I'm coming late. And I'll make some food too. Is fideo okay?" She put a pan on her stove and started cutting up an onion.

Alex kept going. He told her how Jimena had come over and figured out things didn't add up. Jimena joined in, she explained how she had talked to Mrs. Adela, and how Mrs. Adela had heard Alvira arguing with someone who wasn't Alex. Then Alex told them about going into Alvira's room and feeling like someone had been there, he took out *Sleepin' With Gators* and showed them the bookmark and inscription.

Then he told them about Officer Slep finally coming, and then how he said Alvira probably wouldn't come back, and that Alex needed to find his aunt.

He told her how they had gotten on the bus (leaving out why Jimena joined). Then Matt started adding details too, going back and sharing the same things he had told Peter in the car.

They told her about getting to Denver, and how they kept getting lost. How they went to the apartment on Cannonball Street, and how the super rude manager kicked them out.

Linda listened to all of this as she stirred the fideo. She talked only occasionally to ask questions, although when Alex described how they had been thrown out of the apartment

building she slapped her thigh and shook her head, “Why would they give you that address? I haven’t lived there in years.”

“What does it mean?” asked Alex desperately

“I don’t know,” said Linda, trailing off. “The food is ready,” she added, spooning out bowls of fideo. “I just don’t know why this police officer would lie about that, unless he didn’t want you to find me...”

They kept talking while spooning food into their mouths. Alex skipped over throwing Matt’s box in the street, and the ordeal of walking back to the coffee shop. Matt, who Alex kept pushing out of the conversation, took over and described how he had asked people on the street if they knew Linda, and how Peter had said “yes.”

They finished into an expectant silence.

Linda sank into the open chair next to Jimena. Alex remembered that when they were young Linda had been more of a mother than a sister to Alvira, while their own mother slowly died. He considered that now, watching the worry intense across her face.

“Do you know what to do?” he asked, hoping she would say yes.

“No,” she said, her eyes were closed and clenched. Her words were slow. “I’m not sure I understand everything-”

“Should we call the police?” asked Alex, “So they know I’m with you.”

“What?” demanded Matt. “I didn’t go to the court today because you said we shouldn’t trust the police.”

“They don’t know we’re together, it’s a different situation.”

“I want to find my mom!” exclaimed Matt.

Jimena tapped on Alex's shoulder.

"I need to talk to you" She looked upset.

Alex grimaced at Matt and stood up. He followed Jimena into the living room.

Jimena put her phone in Alex's face. There was a line of red missed calls from 'dad.'

"He's texting too."

"Oh," said Alex, slightly taken aback, "Can you block his number?"

Jimena squirmed, "I don't know what to do."

"Do you want to talk to him?"

"No! But what am I doing in Denver?"

"Helping me," answered Alex quietly.

Jimena pulled on her braids, "Should I go back to Mariposa?"

Alex dropped his chin to his chest. He shrugged.

Jimena grabbed his hand, "We found you aunt, I can't help you anymore." She paused, then added, "You'll find her Alex."

Alex nodded dejectedly, "But I like you," he said.

Jimena didn't respond, she was typing on her phone. "I'm sorry," she said, looking up, "I like you too. I'm just so stressed."

"Well how do you think I feel?"

"Probably horrible, but at least you have a place to stay now."

"You can stay here too."

Jimena turned in a circle and threw up her arms, "I have to go back to my family at some point. My dad will literally come find me."

“But you hate him.”

“I know! Agh It’s like he controls me.”

Alex picked up a small heart-shaped pebble from a small table. It had the word family scratched onto its surface. He thought about Linda, when was the last time she had spoken to Alvira? Was it when she had kicked her out?

“The next bus to Mariposa leaves in the morning,” said Alex, remembering the schedule.

“You’ll have to stay here one night.”

They looked at each other. Jimena nodded, her lips closed tight.

“Is that okay?” Alex asked.

Jimena shrugged, then nodded. “Let’s go back,” she said, nodding towards the kitchen.

In the kitchen Matt and Peter were standing together, looking at something. Linda was putting on shoes.

“I have to go to work, but all of you stay here, there are two men who might stop by about seven, they live in the basement, don’t mind them”² she looked at Peter, “can you stay?” she asked.

He shook his head at her, “I’ll have to leave for a bit,” he rumbled, “I’m at the docks at six.”

Linda gazed off thinking, “That’s alright,” she said eventually, “Alex is 14-- I’ll be home after midnight. Things might get a little cramped.”

“I’m 15,” growled Matt, as Linda scooped some fideo into a cottage cheese container.

“You can’t get someone to cover for you?” pleaded Alex, completely thrown by this turn of events.

She smiled sadly “No, they need me too bad over there. And I can’t get fired today.” She laughed sarcastically. Then her smile brightened, she put down her bag and walked towards Alex, “Here you are,” she said laying her hands on his shoulders “So big. So tall. I’ve missed you so much.” Her eyes were red, tears were pooling on her eyelashes, “We’ll find her Alex. We will.” she sniffled, “And we’ll look back on this together.”

Alex didn’t know what to say. He didn’t want her to leave.

She took her hands off him and turned to Matt, “We’ll find your mom too,” she assured, “try to get some rest, there’s extra blankets in the closet, or any of you can sleep in my bed.”

Alex wasn’t processing her words, flares of panic and terror filled him as she walked towards the door.

Alex slid out of his chair, if she was going to leave, there was something he had to know, it couldn’t wait.

He caught her on the front step, a car was pulling up to the curb.

“Aunt Linda-” he didn’t really know how to address her. She turned around.

“Yes honey?”

The words tumbled out of his mouth, “Why did you kick us out?”

Linda stared at him, her hands hanging limp by her sides, she looked startled.

“Alex, I never kicked you out. Your mom chose to leave.”

Behind her the car beeped.

“Did Alvira say I kicked you out?” she asked softly, hurt in her voice.

But Alex was gone. Darkness encircled his vision. His legs turned him around and carried him back into the house. He sat down at the kitchen table. Matt, Jimena, and Peter didn't acknowledge his arrival, they were talking, but Alex didn't listen. It no longer mattered.

9. S4L

Everything was a lie. If the floorboards had opened him up and the earth swallowed him whole, it might have felt better.

Suddenly, the idea that Alvira had been kidnapped was ridiculous. She had left before, she had done it again. And why? The answer settled at the bottom of Alex's stomach: him. He was a burden, he was stupid. He never helped, and he left when she asked him to stay. That must have been the final straw.

He wondered, what other lies had he been told? What about his dad? Killed in a car crash before Alvira knew she was pregnant, was that all a lie too? Alex looked over his shoulder, wildly expecting Alvira to walk in, to answer for this wreaking havoc of emotions. But there was nothing but an empty door frame. All the energy and rage drained out of him. His skin suddenly became very cold.

Alex had no idea what the others were talking about, but he vacantly heard Jimena say, "Oh he does this sometimes."

"I do what?" he demanded, bursting from the stream of despair.

"Oh are you back now?" Jimena asked.

Alex glared, "I've been here the whole time."

“Alex,” interrupted Matt breathlessly, “Mr. Peter knows S4L.”

This caught Alex completely off guard, “wait what?” he noticed that *Sleepin’ with Gators* was on the table in front of him. He looked up at Peter, who was looking at Matt uneasily.

“I didn’t say that I know it,” Peter cautioned.

“What?” repeated Alex, unsure how many more jolts he could take in one day.

“He thinks it’s a surfing shop.” said Jimena, standing up and striding to the counter.

Peter’s stroked his jaw, he was contemplating the book.

“We should go,” Matt’s face shone eagerly. “Check it out?”

“Will someone tell me what you’re talking about?” groaned Alex. “A surfing shop?”

Peter licked his lips, “there’s a surfboard shop in a strip mall near my work. Called Surf 4 Life, I see it every day driving by, it’s sign is just a big S4L. I thought maybe there was a connection, because I know their mascot is a crocodile, and this book is about alligators.”

“Why would a surf shop have anything to do with this?” Jimena demanded, tapping her fingers against the counter.

Peter opened his hands, “I don’t know.” he said, “It’s a strange coincidence.”

“What if our mamas are there!” exclaimed Matt, “Even if they aren’t there, we might find something. we have to go.”

None of this made any sense to Alex. He didn’t think S4L would lead them any closer to Alvira, even if the inscription was somehow referring to the surf shop, he seriously doubted Alvira and Matt’s mom had anything to do with each other.

“Linda wants you to stay here,” said Peter to Matt.

“But if we don’t go now, it will be closed till Monday.”

“It might already be closed. You’re not leaving.”

“Let’s go,” said Alex loudly.

“Yes! Mr. Peter can you take us now?”

Peter looked dubious, he glanced at Jimena, “You three should stay here,” he said, putting the book back on the table.

“No,” said Matt in a pained voice, “we have to go.”

“I agree,” Peter affirmed “But I’m not going to leave you there by yourselves.”

“We’ve been doing this whole thing by ourselves!” cracked Alex “You’re just some guy who knows my aunt!”

Peter looked for a second like he might get mad. Then his face changed, he rubbed his cheek. Alex felt exhilarated and slightly ashamed.

“You want me to take you there now?” Peter asked seriously.

“Yes,” answered Alex immediately.

“What are you going to do there?”

Matt answered: “Ask them about the book. Maybe the guy works there.”

“We have to go now,” supported Alex automatically, “Before it closes for the weekend.”

Peter grimaced and glanced at the plastic watch on his wrist. “Jimena, are you okay with this?” he asked.

She looked between Matt and Alex. “It’s their decision,” she said.

“Ok,” he said, he scratched at the back of his head. “I know there is a pizza shop by it, you go ask and then wait there. I’ll try to finish quick and come get you.”

They all started moving about.

Matt took several minutes arranging all his boxes in Linda's bedroom. And Peter made Alex take his phone number and Linda's actual phone number, who Peter texted and told what they were doing.

"I hope this isn't a very bad idea," murmured Peter, as they stepped outside. There was a thick, warm wind blowing. "Might rain for once," Peter whistled. Alex kicked a tuft of brown grass.

They climbed back into Peter's turkey smelling car, Matt again took shotgun. The roads were still busy but they moved steadily. Alex had grabbed *Sleepin' With Gators* and read random pages without really reading them. Everything he was feeling and thinking had curdled into a bruising headache.

None of them talked as they drove past walled off neighborhoods, empty lots, and occasional warehouses. Then they were on a different road passing lots of fast food and strip malls.

"You have a lot of options," whispered Matt.

Alex silently agreed.

"It's up here," Peter said, and a few moments later they turned into one of the strip malls. It was the last in the line, and beyond it all Alex could see was sage and a few trailers, and in the distance the road curving away. The strip mall itself was fairly small, the pizza shop Peter had mentioned was there. Then down at the far end there was a tall green banner with white text flapping above one of the stores, framed by the great cloudy sky. S4L. Surf 4 Life.

Alex hiccupped.

The crocodile mascot was nowhere to be seen.

“Do you want me to get out with you?” asked Peter as they pulled up in front of Surf 4 Life, “It looks like its closed.”

It did, the lights were out. But it was still the second most vibrant front in the strip mall. Except for the pizza chain, every other space was empty with big For Lease signs inside their windows.

Peter put the car in park.

He was about to open his door when Alex quickly jumped out. “It’s fine,” he said, “You should go to work.” He motioned to Matt and Jimena, who both got out of the car, looking around cautiously.

“Hey- what are you gonna do, it’s not open.” challenged Peter, his accent stronger.

“You should go to work, like my aunt!” Alex shouted, slamming the door.

He stalked away from the car. Over his shoulder he saw Peter on his phone. A moment later, the car reversed, and Peter left.

Alex walked up to Jimena and Matt, who had approached Surf 4 Life and were peering through the dark glass.

“Why did you make him leave?” demanded Matt when Alex got close.

“I didn’t make him leave, he left! He had to work.”

“What do we do now?” asked Jimena in a tired voice, “There’s nothing here.”

Alex looked through the window. There were racks of clothes. A few cardboard boxes stacked near a counter. It didn’t look like it had been open in a while.

And yet Alex felt something. “This is strange,” he whispered, not trusting the mix of hope and terror flopping in his heart.

“What?” asked Jimena.

“I don’t know,” he said, “C’mon, let’s walk away. Matt! stop doing that.” Matt jumped off the window he had been climbing.

“Let’s walk around the back.”

They stared into every window they passed, but they all looked empty. The pizza place, was open, no customers, the only person they saw was behind the counter.

On the back side of the strip mall there were two thick green trees standing over some garbage cans and a wooden fence with bushes and a lots of litter, a few cars that looked like they hadn’t been driven in a while, several loading docks, and three evenly spaced blue doors between them.

None of them spoke, Matt coughed. “Shhh!” hissed Alex. There was tension in the air. The sky was roiling, sound sounded different.

Alex was alert. He felt a presence.

“Doors,” he said quietly. The crept along the cinderblock wall. Alex kept brushing his shoulders, convinced he could feel something crawling on him.

There was a bucket and cigarette butts outside the first blue door. It was locked.

“I have to pee,” moaned Matt.

“Go in the bushes,” said Alex.

“I can’t pee outside!”

“Then hold it!”

They walked cautiously to the next one. Alex reached out his hand and twisted the knob. It jerked in place. The door was also locked.

A plastic bag blew past them.

Alex's heart was racing. One more door, behind where Surf 4 Life was on the other side.

They approached it quickly, Jimena and Matt in a line behind Alex.

None of them breathing, he tried the door.

It was locked.

He put his ear to the door. Nothing.

Alex exhaled loudly.

"I still need to pee," said Matt, holding himself.

They headed back from behind the strip mall. The moment they turned the corner Alex felt some of the pressure in his heart lift. The sounds of the highway became clearer. The sensations lessened.

They went inside the pizza shop. It wasn't very pleasant, everything was painted orange, it was playing crummy pop tunes, and in that way it was also comforting. Matt immediately disappeared through a door to find the bathroom. Alex took the final few dollars he had wadded in his pocket and got a slice of pepperoni pizza.

He and Jimena sat in a stiff plastic booth. The store smelled strongly like lunch meat. Jimena laid her head down.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Peter drives you all the way back to Mariposa," said Alex, trying to be supportive, "He seems pretty nice."

Jimena shook her head, "I'm already gonna be so dead. But it would be nice if he could."

Alex took a big bite of pizza. He was oddly content. His mind was easy. He felt like he was floating in warm, slow water.

He dripped the grease onto his tongue, remotely fantasizing about catching the kidnapper and reuniting with Alvira. He would ask her about why they left Denver, and she would explain she was only doing it to help him-

“Matt’s been gone a while,” said Jimena.

Alex came back to the present. “He’s probably pooping.” he said.

Jimena nodded and pulled at the hair on her forearms.

“I actually have to go to the bathroom too,” she said, and she got up and left through the door.

Alex imagined how Alvira would beg him for the forgiveness he would of course give. A smile appeared on his lips as he imagined her reaction when he found her. They would go back to Mariposa together, and maybe Linda would come with them Maybe Jimena would move in too, if she wanted.

Alex finished his pizza. It occurred to him that he hadn’t see the guy working in a while, or Matt or Jimena.

He got up and peered over the counter “Hello?” he asked. There was no reply.

He went to the door Matt and Jimena had left through and opened it. He was in a long, beige hallway with no doors. “Jimena?” he called.

Alex walked forward. The hallway turned right and there were two doors. The one straight ahead was locked, and the other one opened into another hallway. Alex sped down it, his heartbeat quickening. There were many unmarked, identical doors on both sides of him. Alex tried the first one and it swung open.

“Jimena, Matt?” Again, there was no reply.

Alex wanted to keep going, but something made him stop. He stepped cautiously into the room. The lights were off. There was a desk near him, flanked by a filing cabinet.

“Jimena?” Alex called. His voice echoed strangely.

This is just some office, he told himself, but he didn’t leave. Something about the room felt strangely familiar. There was a computer on the desk next to him. Alex jiggled the mouse. It asked for a password. He moved on. He opened the filing cabinet and pulled out the first thing he grabbed. It was an analysis of sales. He put it back.

He looked around for the light switch. He took a few steps forward into the darkness and walked into something.

“Ouch!” he rubbed his knee. He couldn’t see what he had collided with. He groped in darkness, and his hand found a rough, fabric texture. He grabbed a handful and pulled. The object beneath glinted in the light from the hallway. Alex reached out to touch it, when something moved behind him.

Alex spun around and collided with another dark shape. Yelping, he fell to his knees. He clambered to his feet, and his outstretched fingers randomly caught the edge of the light switch. Fluorescent light flooded the room. There was no one there.

Alex turned back to see what he had walked into. It was a chain-link cage. Alex dropped into a crouch and examined it. It was larger than a refrigerator. Around the room there were many more black veiled shapes, more cages. He heard something move in the hallway.

“Jimena?” he asked, standing up. “Jimena?” He paused to listen, the silence was claustrophobic, pulsating.

He left the room and hurried down the hallway, “Matt? Jimena?” he called. He tried another door at random, and burst outside back where he had been a half hour before. He fumbled in his pocket for his phone. He should call Linda. He clicked through his contacts trying to find where he put her, when he heard something large closing in behind him.

Alex turned his head at the same moment something immensely heavy made contact with his back. He went sprawling, his forehead cracked against the pavement. The pain was shocking. He couldn’t hear anything. For a moment, he couldn’t think. In the back of his throat he tasted blood.

Sound came back. Footsteps stomped around him. A pair of strong hands pushed down on his back. His wrists were jerked together and something plastic cut into his skin.

“Tell him we got the last one,” he heard a man’s voice say.

Alex tried to move. They had tied his ankles too.

“No!” he screamed, “Stop that!”

He twisted to see what was happening. A boot made contact with his face. Black circles exploded in his vision. He wasn’t sure if the thunder he heard was real or in his head.

Another pair of footsteps approached. “This is the son?” asked a horrible, oily voice.

Alex could feel the speaker standing over him. He tried to yell, but there was something wrong with his jaw.

A gloved hand squeezed the back of his neck, and wrenched his head up. Alex’s jaw clicked back into place, he did scream. He was inches away from a smiling face. The most horrible smiling face he had ever seen. It was a man. His tongue was out, and he was panting like

a dog. Alex could smell his breath, sweet and meaty. But that wasn't why Alex screamed. He had screamed because of the man's eyes. His green, fluorescent eyes.

"Take him," the man said.

Alex fell back to the ground.

Something wet hit his neck. His heart stopped. All around him, it started to rain.

Endnotes

Chapter 1.

1. There are many types of smoke. This was the smoke of burning pine trees, hot, campfire smelling smoke. Blown down off the San Cristobal Mountains, where two wildfires were then burning. Even in the valley, in Mariposa, it made going outside a tearful, miserable affair.

Many in Mariposa could remember when the summers hadn't been full of smoke. When wildfires were only occasional. They had watched the fire season lengthen. Seen fires start in July, not August, and last all the way to late September. Now it was June, and already one forest had turned to smoke, and another was well on its way.

2. A short history:

In the long history of people living in the Gun Barrel Valley, both Mariposa and Gun Barrel were fairly recent developments. For tens of thousands of years, the Gun Barrel Valley was the intermittent hunting grounds of the Ute people. Spanish explorers, missionaries, and soldiers changed that, building the first permanent settlements. For over a century and a half, Mexican settlers trekked north and started farming in small numbers.

Mariposa was neither the first of these settlements, nor the largest. Located in the northeast corner of the valley, near the headwaters of the Mariposa River, abundant groundwater and fertile sandy topsoil made sugar beets, potatoes, and wheat easy to grow.

Years and years passed. The flags that hung over the army bases in the Gun Barrel Valley changed color, the Utes were shunted into smaller and smaller parcels of land to the southwest, and the Mexicans kept farming. The advent of the railroad and the discovery of gold in the San Cristobal Mountains turned what had been a trickle of eastern settlers into a flood. Mariposa became a hub of trade. Minerals, produce, and timber flowed out,

and people flowed in. The town's population expanded, and, twelve miles to the east, Gun Barrel was founded.

Located at the mouth of a canyon, Gun Barrel was one of several hundred mining camps that briefly swelled, as prospectors sluiced the mountain streams for gold. After a few years, when the gold rush subsided, most of these towns disappeared. Gun Barrel, because of its natural beauty and proximity to the railways of Mariposa, clung to existence, but was largely forgotten.

Mariposa's growth also slowed without the gold trade, and slowed even more when the railroad was rerouted south. For nearly eighty years, the farmers of the Gun Barrel Valley continued to grow the same wheat, potatoes, and sugar beets, surviving drought, the highway, and a brief idea to turn the Gun Barrel Valley into a massive missile testing site.

Things changed around the time Alvira was growing up. The farms around Mariposa began to grow a new crop: Barley. Nobody ate barley, but it was profitable. Colorado breweries needed it for beer. The golden period that ensued did not last long. Many farms were bought out, and new machines reduced the number of workers needed. In search of work, many young people left.

While Mariposa twisted, Gun Barrel experienced a very different sort of change. A company of ski resorts had decided Gun Barrel was ripe for a luxury resort. It was a slow process, but the year Alex was born the plans finally came to fruition. Cristobal Resorts gobbled up the dinky ski-hill that had been in operation, and began transforming Gun Barrel into a mecca of outdoor recreation. It took a few more years to really gain traction, but when it did, it was with a vengeance. Blocks of high-end shops appeared, A seven-story Alp-themed hotel was built on the spot of the first gold mines, chairlifts and zip-lines crisscrossed over the mountains, and a runway was built for the private jets. Mansions dotted the slopes above Gun Barrel, and during peak tourist season, it was

larger than Mariposa for the first time ever. It didn't last long, but for several years, business boomed.

Chapter 2.

1. The average age in Mariposa was north of elderly, and it was considered just good manners to attend every funeral to pay respects and exchange gossip. Alvira, though, never went to any funerals, and rarely did much of anything to interact with the Mariposa community. This is why it was such a surprise when she was named the beneficiary in the wills of not one but two old men who both passed away in a seven-month span (later Alex would find out both men were friends of his grandmother, who had died in Alvira's childhood).

Between the two wills, they were left the high-backed leather chairs, a large wooden chest, a small amount of money, several never opened books on the importance of a balanced checkbook, and a hand-made drum Alex punched a hole in. It had been a disappointment to Alex when years passed without more items bestowed to them, he had assumed it would be a regular thing, like Christmas.

2. A word about Mrs. Adela's husband, Luis Martinez. Luis was born in the now non-existent town of Cameron. Roughly ten miles south of Mariposa, his family's farm was near the river, and through some mysterious combination of factors, it grew the sweetest sugar beets in the whole Gun Barrel Valley. Luis, despite his grumpy appearance, was a sweet person, and an optimist, who aspired to succeed to the level of his father, who had opened a profitable gas station in Cameron. Around the time he met Mrs. Adela (at Church, naturally), Luis became convinced there was more money to be made in tourism than in sugar beets. He moved his young family to Gun Barrel and started giving tours of the San Cristobal mountains to the few tourists he could find. While, Luis was ultimately right about the tourism appeal, he was thirty years early. His

business floundered, and he spent most of the rest of his life working in Gun Barrel's general store, a devoted husband to the end.

Chapter 3.

1. The Gun Barrel Valley, contrary to popular belief, was not named for any wild west shenanigans, but because of the supposed "Gun Barrel" straightness of the Valley (which made little sense since the valley wasn't especially straight in any direction). Of course, the Gun Barrel Valley had many names before Gun Barrel. El Valle de Cristo, it was called in Spanish, and that was still how it was known in many parts of Mariposa. The Utes must have had a name for it too, but Alex had never heard it.
2. Since Gun Barrels emergence as a skiing destination, Mariposa had been strung along as the supposed beneficiary of its neighbor's success. Some good things did happen. Many people worked in Gun Barrel, or in the handful of hotels that were built near the highway. The school got renovated, and a new swimming pool was built. But for all the benefits, there were downsides too. People in Mariposa hated the throngs of tourists, hated the traffic that would appear on winter and summer weekends. Many Mariposa restaurants relocated to Gun Barrel or closed, as did a significant proportion of the shops that had populated main street. (To be fair, that wasn't all Gun Barrel's fault. Main Street had not been the real center of Mariposa in almost 20 years. Most of the actual stuff, the walmart, the hardware store, the health clinic, the grocery store, were located along the highway.)

Spruce Village was one of the largest attempts to "Gun Barrel" Mariposa (the other was a golf course that never got built). During construction, the initial hope Mariposa residents had for the new houses turned to skepticism and eventually outright hostility. Still, few people took pleasure in what happened. Several winters of little snow decimated Gun Barrel's newfound status as a ski town. Spruce Village ground to a halt, as did the majority of the other tourism dependent businesses. The hotels laid off workers, the

restaurants cut staff, the long promised renovation to the community center fell to the wayside.

Chapter 4.

1. Red was Alvira's favorite color, and her room reflected that. Her bedside table was deep cherry, her lampshade was rose, the pillowcases were crimson. Being in her room felt like being inside a blood vessel. For some reason she never extended her fondness past the bedroom. She didn't wear red more than any other color, and the rest of the house was free of red decorations. Alex had never asked about it, it had never occurred to him to.
2. Officer Slep had only one real love: fly fishing. He was never happier than when standing wader-deep in the ice cold Frying Pan River, tempting trout with glass, bug-shaped tackle. Most Friday (Thursday) afternoons he would be off, sometimes with the buddies, sometimes all alone. A cooler full of beers would, over the course of the weekend, become a cooler full of trout, and Sunday nights he would bring it home to his wife, who didn't like fish.

Chapter 5.

1. Alvira's car was not one of Alex's favorite things. It was an ancient green ford that had been passed off by one of Alvira's old coworkers. It rattled like a tambourine, barely made it up the smallest inclines, it's stereo only played static, and the air conditioning hadn't worked in living memory. Alex called it "The Dead Turtle," and Alvira had talked about replacing it for years. Still, neither of them were ready the day it finally died. Alvira had been driving home from the grocery store when the The Dead Turtle gave its final lurch. The front axle was broken, and the car wasn't worth the cost to fix it.

Life had become much harder after that. Mariposa was not an easy places to live without a car. Even in the summer, even if the smoke hadn't made going outside intolerable, there were few things within easy walking distance. For Alvira, it made finding a job almost impossible. She tried carpooling, but it was hard to organize, and there was no real bus service to Gun Barrel, where most the opportunities were. Tony drove her sometimes, but he was unreliable. It was an impossible situation, without the car Alvira couldn't find a job, and without a job Alvira couldn't pay for a new car.

2. Many residents of Mariposa still had old-time Spanish spanish surnames. It was a side effect of a population that, until recently, hadn't moved around much. Matt, Alex, and Jimena could (even though none of them ever had) trace their lineage in the Gun Barrel Valley back almost to the first Mexican settlers.

Chapter 6.

1. Before the pioneers arrived, the area that would be Denver was the winter home of the Arapaho Indians. The site of their encampment, at the confluence of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River, also had a plaque, and a new whitewater rafting park.

Without the Arapaho, Denver's status as the "Chicago of the West" could have never happened. It was Arapahos who guided the prospectors that found gold in the South Platte River, and, twenty years after that, it was the Arapaho who were massacred for their refusal to leave.

Actual mining in Denver didn't last much longer than a decade, but it was long enough for clever businessmen to realize that Denver had more potential as a center of trade. Much of the resources that flowed from the Rocky Mountains --including the crops and cattle of the Gun Barrel Valley-- ended up in the stockyards and warehouses of Denver.

2. The Denver skyline is notoriously difficult to get a good vantage of, especially at close range. Many of the tallest buildings are similar heights, and have the architectural personality of a cereal box. In recent years, there had been a rash of construction that broke the mold somewhat. In addition to the the “bent-straw” building, there was a wide, oval-based skyscraper with ridges coming out like fins every few stories. On the other side of downtown, a big telecommunications company had built a building that was designed to look like a mountain, which meant it had a slanted top. From the top floor it had an excellent view of the real mountains, waiting in the distance.

Chapter 7.

1. Pig was a curious cat. For many years they had lived a largely feral life in the trash heap beyond Matt’s house. Matt was outside hanging clothes with his mom one day, when he found them writhing in pain with a shotgun pellet in their stomach. Matt had taken them in, named them Pig, and slowly nursed them back to health.

By conventional standards, Pig was not an especially pretty cat. They had clumpy brown hair, cloudy film-covered eyes, and a mouth that drooled uncontrollably. And yet Matt loved Pig unconditionally, and Pig, in their own strange way, loved Matt back. They slept on Matt’s pillow, and allowed him to pet them when Matt was sad. Pig was still prone to disappearing from the house for days at a time, and then returning like nothing had happened. When Matt had left his house, with Pig huddled beneath his bed, he had told them that’s what he was doing, and that he would be back before long.

2. Denver has no solid shape or clear orientation. Yes, there are the mountains, forming a wall to the west, and there are major roads and highways that tie it up, but the city is always changing, always expanding, both up into the mountains, and out across the open

prairie. Driving through it, it feels and looks like several different cities, all mashed together into one.

Chapter 8.

1. There had recently been a dramatic upswing in door to door salespeople. It was a plague in Denver, but even in Mariposa Alex had seen Alvira slam the door several times on insistent knife-sellers, life-insurance hawkers, and air-conditioning evangelists. In Denver, it was not uncommon to see crowds of people walking between houses, on both sides of the street, selling whatever the day's product was. Many wealthy families had put walls around their front doors just to keep them at bay.
2. Brothers actually. Ignacio and Jose. Linda almost never saw them. They both worked at restaurants. Jose was a line cook at a bar and grill, and Ignacio was across the street, washing dishes in a Chinese restaurant. Late at night, they would play music together, Ignacio had a bass, and Jose sang and played drums. They tried to be quiet so as not to wake Linda, and she always claimed she couldn't hear. But secretly she enjoyed their music, and she would often lay in bed, her eyes open, listening.