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Karen almost jerks my shoulder out of its socket dragging me out of the house and onto the front stoop. We stand huffing on the top step in the February air for a second. I nod at her, impressed. She nods back and bends over, hands on her knees. We're like athletes. Sprint runners. Sprint runners specially trained to run into burning houses to rescue orphans. Except we don't run into houses, we run out of them. And our house isn't burning, at least not with fire. We're out here because Karen freaks out when Mom and Dad fight. She always has. As soon as one of them so much as cocks an eyebrow, Karen is out the door. She grabs me by the wrist and drags me out after her. She's done it since we were kids.

She says she used to keep an old and smelly lunch box by the door, filled with a spare diaper, a bottle, a box of crackers,

and these earmuffs that were shaped like teddy bears. She'd make me wear the earmuffs, even in summer, because I was always either getting or getting over an ear infection. She thought the teddy bears helped. Over the years we lost the earmuffs, but I kept the ear infections. We have much better provisions now. I reach over the side of the steps and slide out the loose brick. I pull out the tin box, replace the brick, and sit on the top step. Karen sits next to me and hands me my science book. She'd be the best and worst person to have with you if your house actually were on fire. She'd tear you out of the house before you got a whiff of smoke, but the only thing she'd rescue besides you is your homework.

She opens her Spanish workbook, and I open the tin.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Do we have any caramel chews left? Zip up your jacket."

"No caramel. There's peanut, though," I say, zipping my jacket to my chin and burying the bottom half of my face in its high neck.

"Fine," she says, reaching over and yanking my hood up over my head. She zips her own jacket and takes a handful of the peanut candies from me. I go to work on a half-eaten box of Valentine's Day chocolates left over from last week. I can tell Karen's listening to Mom and Dad, pretending to be reading. She would never bring us farther than the front steps. We go far enough so that we don't have to see it up close, but we're close enough so nothing really bad can happen. They know we're out here.

It's already almost too dark to read my science book. I open it anyway and let my eyes unfocus on the page until the ink and the paper blend together. Then I slam the book shut and look at Karen. Her nose has turned bright red from the cold.

"I'll make you macaroni later," she says, not looking up from the book that I know she can't see. She used to tell me this to calm me down, to keep me from banging my fists and my knees against the front door, trying to get back in. She always made good on her promise. When they were done fighting, when Dad had sulked off and Mom had locked herself in the bathroom, we'd slink inside. Karen would make macaroni and we'd pretend it was just us living there.

I rest my chin on the edge of my book and start thinking about how if I were in the woods, way up on a mountain, instead of on my front steps, this time of night would be really scary.

Especially if something went terribly wrong with the mission that me and the rest of my highly trained team of secret service assassins were on. We made camp for the night in a small clearing, surrounded by towering pine trees that swayed and creaked in the cold wind. I am on first watch with Harley, the most loveable screw-up I've ever served with. Midway into our shift, I elbow him in the gut to wake him up and tell him I'm going to take a leak. I step outside of the circle of firelight and go to the edge of the woods. Midstream, the reflection of the fire suddenly disappears

from the leaves I'm peeing on. I finish fast and turn around to whisper-yell, "H! You asshole. What'd you do? Piss on the fire? Harley? Stop fucking around and bring some wood." I curse under my breath while I relight the fire. What I see as the fire slowly lights the camp makes me drop to the ground and pull out my gun. They're gone. My whole team, all of them. Harley. Everybody. The tents have been slashed, the sleeping bags are empty, and there are drops of blood on the ground leading out of our campsite and into the woods. I remember Captain's words during training. He called me the wild card, a loose cannon. If it were up to him, I'd be guarding some eighth-term-senator's grandmother, not the president's daughter. But it's not up to him. Me and the president go way back, further back than I'd ever be able to tell a soul without turning up dead somewhere. The president wanted me on this, and now that his daughter has been kidnapped, it is up to me to save her. Captain would want me to do the safe thing: wait till morning. I can hear his raspy voice, *There's no telling what's in these woods, soldier.* "Only one way to find out," I say aloud. I grab my night-vision goggles and my pack, and head into the darkness.

"Who's that?"

Up, up out of the woods and back to where my butt has frozen to our top step, Karen's actually looked up from her book to watch a crooked rust-red pickup truck that's parking at the house across the street.

"Must be the new people," I say. Mom said someone had

moved in. I just assumed it was another old couple, like the one who lived there before. The two of them had looked like brother and sister; twins even, except they were married. Creepy.

A really big guy in a parka you'd wear if you were climbing polar ice caps is getting out of the driver's side of the truck. He looks like one of those guys that builds houses. Or tears them down. Either way, he'd do it with his bare hands. He stretches when he's out, and sees us watching from across the street. He waves.

"Hiya." His voice rolls like rocks across the street. The passenger-side door opens, and a soccer ball falls out and rolls under the truck. The big man picks it up. Karen and I are both watching to see who gets out. I'm hoping for a kid my age, someone I could hang out with all weekend, till school on Monday when he finds out I'm a leper and pretends not to know me. The truck door opens farther and someone gets out. It's not a kid my age. But it is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. Roll your eyes if you want. You think of a better way to say it when you see someone and every single part of you stops for a second, and then starts up again, but in a way that will never be the same.

Karen's already standing. She pulls me up by my jacket sleeve.

"Hi. I'm Karen," she calls as I stare at the girl crossing the street toward us. Her hair's pulled back in a ponytail and she's wearing a soccer uniform under her jacket. She's been sweating.

"This is Donnie," Karen says, nudging me with her elbow. "Did you just move in?"

"Yep. I'm Amanda. You live here?" Her socks are doubled down, showing her shin guards. She's got a scab the size of a dime on her right knee. The skin around the scab is lighter than the rest of her.

"Yep," I say. I can't look her in the eye. So I look at her chest until Karen elbows me in the ribs.

"Yeah, we live here," Karen says, as if my answer wasn't good enough. I hate it when she does that.

"So . . . what are you guys doing out here? Aren't you cold?" Amanda asks, resting the toe of her cleat on the edge of the step. I stare at the lines of her leg muscle and wonder how Karen will answer this one. From inside we all hear Mom yell, "The hell I don't!"

"Family tradition," Karen says quickly. Good answer. Amanda nods and smiles.

"What grade are you in?" Karen and Amanda ask each other the question at the same time and laugh.

"I'm in tenth," Karen says.

"Me too," Amanda says. "I start at Kennedy on Monday. I just met with the coach for the indoor league."

Karen nods toward me. "He's in—"

"I'm in eighth," I interrupt, and Karen snorts. Amanda smiles at me and I try to tuck my entire head inside my jacket.

"Dad and I just got Chinese food if you want to come over. It'll be warmer inside than out here."

"Sure!" I say. That's a lie: I don't *say* it, I practically scream it from inside my jacket.

Amanda and Karen both look at me.

“Sure,” Karen says. “Thanks.”

I don’t notice that it’s gone quiet inside till Mom opens the front door and comes out wearing her stupid fake smile and talking in her stupid fake voice.

“Hi there! I’m Karen’s mom.”

Apparently Karen’s an only child.

“You must have just moved in across the street.”

“Yes ma’am. My dad and I did.”

“Well, tell your dad we would love to have the two of you over for dinner sometime real soon.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Mom’s eyes are red-rimmed and glassy. Through the door I can see Dad pacing. He’s not done yet. We all stand there for a second, looking at our feet.

Amanda says, “I actually just asked if . . . they wanted to eat at our house tonight. We’re having Chinese. There’s plenty.”

I hold in my mouth the taste of Amanda including me, and watch Mom.

“Well, sure, Karen can eat at your house. Donnie, you don’t want to hang around girls all night, do you? You’ll stay here with us.”

I look back inside the house. Dad’s standing still now, watching us from the living room. I look back at Karen, trying to grab onto her with my eyes. I think *Don’t leave me, don’t leave me, don’t leave me*. She leaves me.

“Okay. Bye, Mom. I’ll be home later.”

“Nice meeting you, Donnie,” Amanda says.

I watch them walk down the driveway; their heads already tipped toward each other, Amanda linking elbows with Karen as if they’ve been best friends forever. I’m left to follow Mom into the house as she is answering Dad’s demand, “Who was that?”

I don’t blame Karen. I would have left too, if I could have.