An Excerpt from

RAVEN

A dystopian mystery thriller by K.J. Sandoval

Prologue

I wake to a hand gently shaking my arm and jerk away, scraping my elbow against the hard ground. An old man is crouched beside me. I watch his hand and wait for him to reach again.

"Easy," he says, and rests his palm on his knee. "Just wanted to see if you'd wake up. Haven't seen anyone out here in a while."

Metal knocks twice beyond the bench. I turn toward the sound just as the sun breaks through, and the glare brings tears to my eyes. He shifts enough to shade my face. Past his knee I catch a flash of white lettering on green and push up on one elbow to read it. The ground rolls under me. I reach for the bench and come up with a fistful of grass.

"Let me help." This time I take his hand. There's purple in the creases of his fingers. He waits until I can sit on my own, and by then the sun has slipped behind the clouds again.

"Used to get that through my kitchen window every morning," he says. "Had to pull the blind just to see what I was cutting." He settles onto the bench and uncaps a steel bottle. "Here, have some water."

The water is warm and tastes faintly of coffee. After three swallows I lower the bottle, surprised by how little it weighs. I hold it out to him. He keeps both hands busy sorting the plums in his pail, so I take another drink.

"Where am I?" I ask.

"Dolores Park," he says. "Well, what's left of it."

Dolores Park. I nod as though that helps. Up the hill a path curves out of sight before I can tell where it leads.

"I saw you from up on that path," he says, following my gaze. "Had to come down sideways on account of my knees."

I lean over to set the bottle beside his pail, and something taps the steel. A flat silver tag has slipped out of my shirt. His eyes settle on the chain.

"Marine?"

My thumb finds a nick in the edge of the tag. I knew it would be there. I give myself another second. "Um… no."

"Relative, maybe?"

I tuck the tag inside my shirt. The chain catches on my collar, and he gives me time to work it loose.

"Kept mine under my shirt, too," he says. "Ran a mess hall before I retired from the Marines." He picks out a plum and rubs it on his sleeve. "Try this one."

The skin splits under my thumb. "Hard as marbles on Monday," he says.

"Monday?" I look up from the plum.

"My Monday, anyway. I chalk the week on my pantry door and cross off yesterday when I light the stove."

I eat the flesh clean off the stone. When I'm through, my fingers look like his. That knock comes again. I turn toward it in time to see the folded edge of a street sign lift in the wind. All I can make out is ST before the metal falls back against the pole.

I try to picture where I'm supposed to go. I'm in San Francisco, but even if he helped me to my feet, I wouldn't know which way to turn. The only thing that comes back is that green sign, straight on its pole, every letter clear.

"Is that Church?"

He squints at the sign. "You can make that out?"

I shake my head.

"You're right," he says. "You're on the Church Street side, just shy of Twentieth."