

**I'LL MEET
YOU THERE**

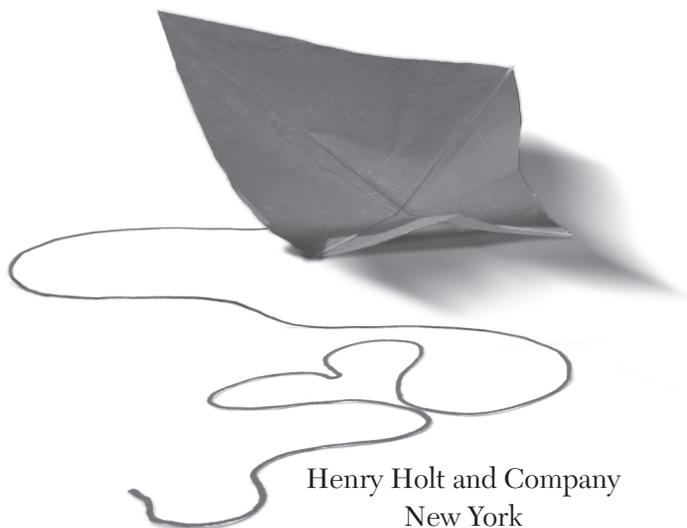
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Something Real

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I'LL MEET YOU THERE

Heather Demetrios



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For Mom, Dad, and Papa

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*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other
doesn't make any sense.*

—Rumi

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chapter one

The Mitchells' backyard was packed, full of recent and not-so-recent grads in various stages of party decay. The girls leaned against one another, wilted flowers that looked on while the guys got louder, sweatier.

I craned my neck and scanned the crowd for Chris, but my wingman had disappeared.

"Shit," I muttered.

Like I needed any more confirmation of my loner status. I moved purposefully through the crowd, on a mission. The last thing I wanted was to have some drunk dude notice I was alone and try to hit on me.

A girl to my right stumbled, spilling her beer on my All Stars. I had to reach out an arm to steady her before she stabbed me in the toe with her stilettos. I sighed and shook my foot.

"Thanks!" she said, more to the air than me, as she turned back to the knot of girls beside her.

"Skylar!"

I turned around—Chris was over by the keg. When I raised

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my arms like, *WTF*, he turned over his empty cup, then made a sad face and pointed to the line of red-faced guys in front of him. Obviously he hadn't taken me very seriously when I'd said, *Let's get out of here as quickly as possible*.

I pulled out my phone and started texting Dylan while I made my way to Chris. Knowing her, she was probably in the back seat of her boyfriend's beat-up Chevy Malibu, but I wanted Brownie points for coming out at all. Really, I was only here to see Josh Mitchell, this Marine I used to work with who had just come home from Afghanistan. I could have waited to see him some other time, but it seemed like a dick move; someone comes back from fighting a war, you go to their homecoming party.

U still here? Looking for Josh.

No answer.

People stumbled through the Mitchells' back door, probably looking for the bathroom or somewhere to hook up. Every now and then, someone would wander out grinning stupidly from Reggie Vasquez's hastily rolled joints. Linkin Park blared inside the house, and I wondered what the night would feel like if someone switched the soundtrack from angry kick-the-shit-out-of-stuff to Ben Harper or the Chili Peppers.

I stopped by the doorway when I saw a flash of long blond hair, but it wasn't Dylan so I backed away, ignoring the *what's she doing here* looks people were shooting at me. They weren't mean-girl looks—I just didn't belong. Didn't want to.

Drunken laughter erupted from groups of partiers at regular intervals, but not because anything was funny. It was like laughter was just something you were supposed to *do*. I scanned

the faces around me: the usual crew of locals from my high school. There were also a lot of slightly older faces—Josh Mitchell’s friends, partying with the teenagers, doing the same thing they had done every Saturday night since they were in junior high: Drink. Smoke. Screw. Repeat.

Chris walked toward me, sipping on his frothy beer as he picked his way across the lawn. He was wearing the shirt I’d given him for graduation, the words *mathematician* and *ninja* under the heading CAREER GOALS. He held out a can of Coke like a peace offering.

“Dude, *you never, never leave your wingman*,” I said. “Didn’t you learn anything from *Top Gun*?”

I had this thing about *Top Gun*—it was my dad’s favorite movie, and I’d been obsessed with it since I was six.

“I told you I was getting a beer! I thought you were behind me when I made the turnoff at the kitchen.” He gave me the puppy-dog eyes that always got me laughing, and I grabbed the Coke, trying to keep my lips from turning up.

“Well, thanks for this.” I hit the can against his plastic cup. “To graduating,” I said.

“Hell, yeah, to graduating!”

It had only been three hours since the ceremony ended, but it looked like any normal Creek View night. I shouldn’t have expected it to feel different. I knocked the Coke back like it was eighty proof, keeping my eyes peeled for Josh Mitchell.

It’d been no surprise when Josh joined the Marines two years ago. Like most of the guys in Creek View, his choices had been limited: the military, truck driving, or crappy part-time jobs along the highway. We lived in a blink town—blink and you’ll miss it—off California’s Highway 99. It was just a trailer park, a

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few run-down houses, a couple of businesses that barely made enough to keep their doors open, and the Paradise Motel (aka my part-time job).

Though we'd worked together at the Paradise and I'd grown up around him, I'd been weirdly shy when Josh came up to me in his uniform, his head all shaved, calling me ma'am. I'd asked if he was scared, and he said no, that this was as good as it would get for him. He couldn't wait. For a minute we'd just looked at each other and then I kissed his cheek—which surprised both of us—and told him good luck. Then he was gone.

"Have you seen Josh yet?" I asked.

Chris shook his head. "No, but I wasn't going out of my way to hang out with a jarhead the night of my graduation."

"Insensitive much?"

Chris snorted. "Josh Mitchell is a dick. I'm only here for the free booze."

"That's pretty much why everyone's here," I said.

"True that. Listen, since we're stuck in this backyard until the American hero graces us with his presence," Chris said, "I vote we get shit-faced and freak out the squares. We can tell our grandkids how we got all crazy when we were youngsters."

This was our little joke, calling the Creek View kids *squares* when I'd never had a sip of alcohol in my life and we were probably the only virgins over the age of sixteen in our zip code.

"I bet you'll look good with bifocals and a walker," I said. "Grandpa Chris." A smile sneaked onto my face.

"You having a moment?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm having a moment."

"Nice."

I'd been like this all night; we'd be doing whatever and then

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I'd remember we were finally getting out of Creek View. Hopefully for good. And I'd get these mini joygasms, like, *yes*. Even the girl throwing up into an overflowing trash can a few feet away couldn't really kill the buzz of satisfaction that had been humming inside me all day.

I took another sip of my Coke, then set it on a broken lawn chair. "But me getting sentimental doesn't mean I want to waste any more of my life at this party. Josh has gotta be here somewhere."

"Mitchell!" a voice yelled over the crowd. "Hook me up!"

Wrong Mitchell.

Blake, Josh's brother and my sort-of ex, was walking through the back gate, a twelve-pack of Bud on his shoulder and another one dangling from his hand.

Why, why, *why* had it seemed like such a good idea to hook up with Blake after an entire adolescence of pretty much zero boy action? And *Blake*, of all freakin' people!

As if reading my thoughts, Chris patted me on the back. "Hey, you could have done worse. Imagine if you'd spent spring break making out with *Josh* instead of Blake? You chose the better brother by far."

I glared at him. "*Not* comforting."

It was still hot, but a cool breeze swept through the party, and I rubbed my arms to erase the goose bumps that scattered across my skin. California tricks you like that—a scorching hot day, and you still need a sweater once the sun goes down.

"This is the most anticlimactic graduation night in the history of graduation nights," I said.

"Agreed."

"What's up, bitches?"

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I turned around: Dylan was dancing her way toward us, shaking her hips to the music. Whoever was playing DJ had switched from Linkin Park to hip-hop.

“Hey, Mama.” Chris whistled, and Dylan did a little pirouette as she got closer.

“Hey, hey,” she said.

“Where’s Seanie?” I asked, my eyes automatically straying to Dylan’s left hip.

Sean was Dylan’s six-month-old. I’d been helping take care of him, insisting on Dylan doing her homework so that we could graduate together, on time.

“The little man is with his grams—probably watching so much *CSI* he’s gonna become the youngest serial killer in the history of murder, but whatever. This mama had to get out.”

A stab of sadness shot through me at the thought of saying good-bye to Dylan at the end of the summer. Dylan had been my neighbor since we were little, but she became family after she punched someone in the face for calling my daddy drunk. That someone had been our Sunday school teacher. I’ll never forget how nine-year-old Dylan had rolled her eyes at the blood spewing from our teacher’s nose, then turned to me and said, “She puts the *trash* in white trash, huh?” It was a favorite saying of her mother’s.

I didn’t want to think about days without Dylan’s brassy commentary on everything from tamales to tampons. I had the urge to grab her in a bear hug, but I didn’t know how to explain missing her while she was standing right next to me.

Dylan looked over her shoulder, then leaned forward. “Did you hear about Lisa?”

I shook my head, but Chris just stared fixedly at Dylan’s

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forehead, avoiding looking at her chest with the same concentration he'd applied to his AP Calculus homework.

"Dylan, you are super boobalicious. You should cover those things up—they've got to be illegal in all fifty states," I said.

Dylan laughed and shook her chest. "Hey, I'm enjoying the perks of motherhood. Besides, it's just Chris."

"Thanks," he muttered.

Just Chris.

If she knew he'd been in love with her since the days we played with Power Rangers and Barbies, she might not say shit like that.

"Okay, so check it out." Dylan lowered her voice even though someone had just turned the music up even higher—some dude rapping about how I needed to bend over. *God.*

"Lisa eloped with Raul right after graduation, and her dad is, like, freaking out. He's all, 'If I see that wetback, I'm going to cut off his—'"

"Yo," said Chris. "Brown boy standing *right here.*"

"Christopher, I'm *quoting* the racist bastard," Dylan snapped. "Hello? My son's half Latino."

"Just call it the W-word," Chris said. "How hard is that?"

"*Anyway,*" said Dylan, rolling her eyes, "you guys are lucky to see me alive. Her dad was at Ray's, literally waving around a butcher knife. I refused to take his order. I was like, I'm too young to die, you know?"

"Dylan!" someone shouted.

She looked across the yard: Jesse Hernandez, whom Chris referred to as Dylan's baby daddy, was waving her over. "Gotta go get some," she said.

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Chris's hand tightened around his red cup. "One baby's not enough?"

Dylan patted the pocket of her skirt. "Oh, we learned our lesson. I came prepared." She looked back over her shoulder and began edging away. "You guys hanging around?"

"Do we ever?" I asked.

"There's a first time for everything." She fluttered her eyes at me. "Remember what we talked about."

"*Dylan!*" I swatted at her, but she was already too far away. She was currently making it her life's mission to get me to third base before I went off to San Francisco State.

Chris stared after her until she was lost in the crowd. "What?"

I socked him in the arm. "Eyes on me, *amigo*."

You know what. Why do you torture yourself like that?"

A thick pair of arms came from behind me, and I started as they wound around my waist.

"Hey, you," whispered a low voice, lips against my ear. I knew who it was—I'd spent a week drenched in that smell. I swear to God, Blake must have poured half a bottle of Curve on his body just before the party.

"Blake," I said, "go hug your girlfriend if you're feeling sentimental."

I tried to maneuver out of his grip, but he had the strength of a man who had already downed a six-pack. There's nothing worse than getting affection from drunk people. It's almost as bad as if someone had paid them to be nice to you.

"But I want to hug *you*," he said.

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Chris snorted, and I gave him a look loaded with dire promises. He just rolled his eyes and took a long drink of his beer.

“Blake, I’m, like, two seconds away from using self-defense on you,” I said.

He laughed, soft, and loosened his hold just a little. “I miss you.”

I gripped his arms and pulled them off me. “That’s your Budweiser talking. We lasted a week—you can’t miss me after seven days. Besides, I’m sure Alexis loves when you’re all up on other girls.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed his girlfriend staring at us, her glossy lips turned into a frown.

“*Sky*,” he said, as if I were being unreasonable. Then he grinned, like we had a secret, which we didn’t.

He caught sight of Chris and raised his hand for his half of the obligatory fist bump. “What up, dude?”

Chris hesitated, then hit his knuckles against Blake’s. “Hey, man.”

“Fuckin’ graduation, huh? I’m glad that shit’s over.” Chug, chug, chug; half his beer down his throat in seconds.

Chris and I proceeded to have an eye conversation that went something like this:

What the hell did you see in him?

Nothing, I don’t know, shut up.

I pled temporary insanity to Dylan and Chris after that week of ill-advised hooking up, even though I knew better. It’d had nothing to do with Blake.

“Hey, is your brother around?” I asked. “We wanted to say hi, see what’s up with him.”

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Blake wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and looked around the yard. “Yeah, somewhere. Probably inside or something.”

“When does he have to go back?” I asked.

Blake shrugged and started peeling the label off his bottle. He wouldn’t meet my eyes. “Not sure.”

Chris elbowed me, and I elbowed him back. I thought we were having another secret conversation about Blake, but then he elbowed me again and whispered, “Sky.”

I looked in the direction Chris was staring.

“Hey, Skylar. Long time no see.”

The voice was familiar, but I barely recognized the person in front of me. In the dark, all I could make out was a shaved head and gaunt face, but then I saw the eyes. Those were what tipped me off. They were Van Gogh eyes—swirls of dark and light blue. All the Mitchells had them.

“*Josh?*”

He smiled, but there was nothing behind it. His eyes were glazed over, two bottomless wells that reflected the kitchen lights but held none of their own.

“Yeah, if you can believe it.”

I looked at Blake, almost for confirmation, but he’d gone back to peeling the label off his bottle, his shoulders hunched and lips set in a hard line. The place between expectation and reality had instantly become so wide that I couldn’t see to the other side of it. There weren’t any words I could build a bridge with. Words didn’t mean shit.

“Welcome home,” I whispered. At least, I think I did. I felt my lips move.

Josh opened his arms for a hug, but as he moved forward,

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his body jerked to the side in an awkward limp. I looked down and choked on the air.

His leg. He'd lost his leg.

Fuck. God, God, fuck.

“Like it? It’s my souvenir from the Taliban,” Josh said, giving a slight kick with the metal cylinder that used to be his left leg.

All I could think was: Josh squatting by the Paradise pool, his bare feet leaving wet footprints on the concrete; Josh on the roof of the motel, looking out over the orchard and saying, *Dare me to jump*?; and Josh walking toward me, tall and proud in his uniform but trying to be cool, like it was no big deal.

“Now I can be a goddamn pirate or something, right?” he said. “Got the peg leg and everything.”

“Shit.” Chris breathed.

Josh shrugged. “Shit happens.”

I had to tear my eyes away from the metal pole that began somewhere under Josh’s khaki shorts and ended inside a tennis shoe. I was like those drivers out on Highway 99 who felt compelled to slow down and stare when there was an accident. *Lookie-Loos*. The more gruesome the wreck was, the slower the Lookie-Loos drove, their eyes drawn to the thick pools of blood and shimmering shards of glass that spread across the asphalt like a Jackson Pollock painting.

I lurched forward and hugged him, holding my breath as his arms went around me. He reeked of whiskey, weed, and rank sweat. It was a stiff, graceless hug—me trying not to accidentally kick his leg, him trying to stay balanced. I wanted to kill

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someone. Whoever had done this to him, his parents for telling him he should go, the president. It was the sickest thing I'd ever seen, this man-boy whose whole life was screwed.

"This is so fucked up," I whispered.

Words.

His breath caught, and he let out a raspy "yeah."

A bridge.

We stayed like that for a few more seconds, then I pulled away. Chris was staring at Josh's leg, and I hoped I didn't look like him, so shell-shocked. Blake was still pulling at the label on his empty bottle, letting the torn pieces flutter to the dead grass at his feet.

"So you're home now? I mean, for good?" I asked.

"Don't know." "Josh frowned. What about you? How's the motel?"

"Same, same," I said.

It seemed like those long days working together at the Paradise were a million years ago.

"I believe it." He turned to Chris, as if he'd noticed him for the first time. "What about you, faggot? You still playing with computers and shit?"

Chris's eyes flashed, and he opened his mouth to reply, but then Josh clapped him on the back.

"I'm just fucking with you, man. You're all right."

I could almost see the debate in Chris's head: is it, in fact, morally reprehensible to deck a one-legged dude who's been fighting for his country?

It got quiet then, the air oozing awkwardness. All I could think about was that leg, blown to bits.

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“You need a drink,” said Josh, pointing to my empty hand.

He called out to a girl in super short shorts and a crop top—it took me a minute to realize it was Josh’s thirteen-year-old sister, Tara.

“Baby girl, hook us up with some beers, will you? And put on some goddamn clothes.”

Tara rolled her eyes and headed over to the coolers.

I shook my head. “I’m okay.”

Josh gave his brother a knowing glance. “Ah, still a good girl, I see.”

“*Dude*,” growled Blake.

Our town was so small that even a guy who’d been in *Afghanistan* knew about our stupid fling.

“Get your head out of the gutter, Josh,” I said.

“Um, that’s impossible.” Blake’s lips turned up just a little. Josh snorted in response—for a second, we forgot about the leg. Seemed to, anyway.

“Josh! Get over here, soldier!”

He turned around and gave a thumbs-up to a bong raised high in the air. A group lay sprawled on the grass a few feet away, staring at the sky. Josh turned to us and shrugged.

“Duty calls. See you later.”

He gave us a lazy salute and then limped away, his fingers groping the darkness, as though he were trying to take hold of the night’s hand.

Blake cleared his throat and looked away, toward the garage that was filled with guys playing beer pong. I stole a glance at him. For the first time I noticed his tense shoulders and how his clenched teeth made the lines of his jaw sharp and pointed.

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“I’m sorry about your brother,” I said. Nineteen years old and—bam—just like that, his life was over . . . or at least exponentially worse. I reached for Blake, because right then he looked like a little boy trying not to cry, but Alexis was still staring jealous-girlfriend daggers. My hand dropped against my thigh, slapping the skin.

“He’ll be okay. He’s tough.” Blake threw his beer in the general direction of the trash cans lined up along the fence. “You gonna be around for a while?” he asked, scanning the packed yard. “I gotta resupply the coolers.”

“I don’t think so. I’m pretty wiped out from the ceremony.”

Strange. It was only a few hours ago that Mom had given me a bouquet of wilted carnations dyed a bright, unnatural blue to match our school colors. Seeing Josh had turned it into a distant memory. The war had come home, and it was ugly and senseless, and I just wanted to be in my bed, to be anywhere but here, really.

Blake grunted, and I risked putting my hand on his arm. “When did you guys find out about . . . you know?”

“January.” He shoved his hands deep in his pockets and looked up at the starless sky. “He was in some hospital in Maryland for like six months, doing rehab or whatever, but he didn’t want any of us to visit him. Then he was in San Diego, doing whatever guys like him do on a military base. He made my mom promise not to tell anyone.”

“Shit,” Chris said again. It seemed to be his only response.

“Blake, I—”

I didn’t know what to say. It seemed like I should have guessed. How could you kiss someone every day for a week and not know his family was going through hell?

“S’okay. He’s a Mitchell. He can take it.”

Tara waved him over from one of the empty coolers. “I’ve gotta motor, but, you know, thanks for coming. I know this isn’t your scene.”

I nodded, surprised he realized that, and he went toward the house. I glanced at Josh again; I didn’t know if it was because it was so sad—all of it, all of *us*—but my vision started to blur.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” I said.

Chris’s face was all kinds of relieved. “Lead the way.”

People were starting to pass out on the grass, and couples were peeling away, leaning into each other as they stumbled to their cars. For a second, I was jealous. I wished I had someone I could lose myself in. I watched Blake maneuver through the crowd, saw Alexis slip her arm around his waist. Pot and cigarette smoke hovered above the party, covering the wasted youth of Creek View with a thick, pungent haze. It was like the whole town was swimming in failure, but no one realized they were drowning. I turned my back on everything I never, ever wanted to be and headed toward the chain-link gate near the driveway.

“Hell,” Chris muttered. He stopped for a moment and looked back.

I followed his eyes. “Yeah,” I said, my voice soft.

I could just make out Josh, leaning on his real leg, surrounded by the bodies of whole people. All I could think about were those words he’d said, just before he left for Afghanistan: *This is as good as it gets for me.*

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JOSH

I get that Vonnegut line now, got it after that sniper wasted Sharpe but *really* get it now—broken kite. *This isn't a man. It's a broken kite.* Flew all the way from Afghanistan and crashed in the middle of fucking nowhere, right back where I started except minus a goddamn leg. Major combat stress. But this is my welcome home party, so I gotta look happy and fuckin' mingle. This dude I knew in high school comes up to me, and he's all *Hey, man, what's up* and shit, and then we sort of shake hands and drink beer and watch the party.

So what's it like over there? You get to kill some Iraqis? Afghanis.

Yeah, yeah, whatever. So . . . what's it like, man?

What's it like? It's seeing your friend die and then trying to scrub his blood off your boots except it won't come out. The water turns pink and your hands are shaking and you've got what's left of someone you were just standing next to under your fingernails and you need these boots for inspection so they gotta get clean, they gotta get clean, and suddenly you're angry, so fucking angry, *stupid bastard had to die all over me*, and then you're crying

like a fucking baby and the boots are red and there's nothing you can do.

But I just say, *Crazy, man. Crazy.* Then I belch and hold up my empty beer bottle and say, *Gotta refuel. I'll catch you later. Good seeing you, bro.*

Fist bump.

Clap on the back.

Exit.

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chapter two

I only saw Josh once during that first week after graduation. I was at Ray's Diner, picking Dylan up. I'd just gotten off from the motel and was groggy because Amy had called in sick so I'd been there for eighteen hours and had to deal with one pissed-off trucker who'd gotten a flat, two hippies who I'd caught smoking weed by the pool, and a woman from LA who spent most of the morning complaining about her room. The diner was oppressively hot, and from the fans set up on the counter, I could tell that the air-conditioning had broken again. The blinds were half closed, and flies buzzed around the pastry case, which only had two questionable-looking cinnamon rolls in it. It was just after the lunch rush, so most of the booths were empty. Because Dylan was the only waitress on, everything was clean and organized—you wouldn't have known it by looking at her, but she was an absolute neat freak. As soon as Dylan saw me, she started taking off her apron and pointed to the back, and I nodded, getting ready to sit at the counter and wait while she sorted out her receipts and tips.

Then I saw Josh.

He was sitting at one of the cracked vinyl booths by himself, pushing steak and eggs around on a plate, staring out the grimy window. I remembered he used to come in with his friends, taking up two or three booths, so loud that you either had to join them or find another place to eat. Josh was always between two girls—different ones each time—who he pretty much ignored in order to do the male-bonding thing. The status of guys in our town rose and fell on those nights, and it all came down to who Josh laughed with and who he laughed at. He was never cruel, not the kind of bully they warn you about in school assemblies. He was just the final answer in whether or not you belonged.

Josh and I had never been what you'd call friends, but I'd worked with him at the Paradise since I was fourteen, and that counted for something. Besides, while Dylan was in the back, I couldn't just pretend I hadn't seen him. Creek View's not that sort of town—it's what my dad called a "shoot-the-shit" kind of place. I went up to the booth and leaned against the side opposite him.

"Hey."

He looked up, blinking, like he'd been somewhere else and had forgotten where *here* was.

"Skylar," he said, after a moment. "What's up?" His smile slid all over his face, like it couldn't make itself comfortable.

"Not much. How's it going?" Dumb, dumb, *dumb* question to ask someone who'd just lost his leg.

He took a long sip of his Coke. "I'm hot as hell. You?"

"Same." I was wearing my usual summer attire of cutoffs, tank, and flip-flops, but I would have joined a nudist colony just to peel them off.

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“You look good,” he said.

His eyes traveled down the length of me—typical Josh Mitchell move—and when I caught him and raised my eyebrows, his lips twitched and he took a bite of his eggs.

I swear, the Mitchell boys were raised on *Playboy* while the rest of us normal kids were reading Dr. Seuss.

“I look like crap,” I said. “You’ve just spent the past two years with a bunch of dudes. I bet you’d hit on Marge if you had the chance.”

Marge, our boss at the Paradise, was in her fifties and what you’d call a “large” woman.

Josh laughed, sort of. “I don’t know about that.”

“Okay, I take that back.” I grimaced a little. “I really don’t want that picture in my head anymore. Actually, when you think about it—which maybe you shouldn’t—”

“No, I really don’t want to.” He shook his head.

“Okay, but if you *did* want to think about it—like maybe on a particularly lonely night—it’s kind of kinky. You and Marge would make quite an interesting pair.”

“I’ve been home for, like, two seconds, and you’re already cracking one-legged sex jokes?”

“It wouldn’t be a joke to Marge.”

“That’s nasty, Sky.”

“Although maybe you should wait to hit on her until you get a tan or something. You’re looking kinda pasty right now.”

Finally, a real laugh. I felt my body relax: shoulders going down, hands unclenching. I hadn’t even realized I’d been tensing every muscle in my body until I suddenly wasn’t.

He shook his head again, then looked down at his plate and

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focused on cutting his steak. “Trust me, I look amazing compared to a few months ago.”

What could I say to that? What were the lines you weren’t supposed to cross in these sorts of conversations? It seemed like there needed to be a whole other language for what had happened to Josh, one that didn’t need words to clog up what you were trying to say. *I’m sorry. This sucks. Hang in there.* None of it was right. I sat down across from him, folding my legs under me. I couldn’t stand seeing that booth swallow him up.

“So, what are you up to today?” I asked.

I grabbed the container that held all the sugar packets and organized them so that all the Sweet’n Lows were together. Then I decided to alternate each packet: sugar, Sweet’n Low, sugar, Sweet’n Low. I kept my eyes on my hands.

“I was helping out my dad at the shop for a bit.” His father owned the sometimes-open garage just off the highway, a few miles past the Paradise. “I’ll probably go home and . . . do something, I don’t know. Maybe head to the creek when the sun goes down. What about you?”

“Pretty much the usual,” I said. “Dylan and I are going into Bakersfield to get stuff at Walmart for her baby. Then we’re meeting up with Chris later.”

Chris’s mom had taken to cooking massive meals full of his favorite foods because, as she said, “Boston is full of *gringos* with *gringo* food.”

Josh’s eyes widened. “Dylan has a kid?” I nodded, and he shook his head. “Damn. I mean, I’m not surprised, but—”

My hands stopped organizing packets. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

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“Skylar, don’t get all . . . I’m just saying, you know, Dylan’s always liked to have a good time.”

If Chris were here, he’d be giving me shit because I can literally feel my nostrils flare. Sometimes Chris or Dylan would say stuff to piss me off just to see The Flare.

“Is that your way of calling her a slut?”

Josh, I could tell, was seeing The Flare.

“Jesus, Sky.” He threw up his hands. “I’m sorry. You know I’ve always liked Dylan.”

I grunted in response, because Josh “liking” a girl was reason enough for her dad to buy a shotgun.

The radio was too loud, so the air was filled with never-ending commercials with lines like “Buy now!” and “Don’t miss it!” The Fresno Tire Center was insisting I go in there right away to take advantage of their fabulous summer savings. A huge Evangelical church was announcing its summer Bible studies, and McDonald’s wanted me to try their new summer shakes. I pushed the sugars against the wall and looked down at the Formica tabletop, tracing my hand along the lines of fake marble.

Sometimes it was hard to breathe, knowing how small my world could be. Maybe in San Francisco it wouldn’t feel like the universe was conspiring to keep me in a bubble. I looked up, caught Josh’s Van Gogh eyes for a second. God, they were intense. Was it rude to stare when you were staring *back* at someone? As soon as I tried to hold them, his eyes dimmed, like he’d shuttered them somehow. It was silly feeling disappointed, but I was.

Josh cleared his throat. “Hey. Uh. Sorry about the other night. At my house. I was pretty wasted.”

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“It’s fine. Seriously. Everyone was off their ass that night.”

“Not you,” he said.

I shrugged. “Never me. But I’m, you know, weird like that.”

“I was being a dick to Chris, and . . . shit, I don’t even remember most of the night.”

He let out a slow breath and rubbed his hand over his shaved head. He looked thinner, more vulnerable, with just that brown stubble covering his skull. Why do they make guys shave their heads when they become soldiers? It makes them look like lost kids.

“I didn’t think it was all that memorable. No offense,” I added, because it was sort of his welcome home bash.

He shrugged. “It’s cool.”

“Besides, it was your brother who was being the dick, not you.”

Josh laughed. “You’re the one who dated him.”

“*Dated* is a very strong word.”

He leaned back in the booth and crossed his arms. “Well, I’ll tell him to stop trying to get in your pants then.”

“That sounds scary, coming from a Marine and all.”

“Yeah, I’m terrifying, aren’t I?”

He tried to make a joke of it, but he spit the words out, like food gone bad. His eyes shifted to the window, and he pointed to the faded snowmen painted on it.

“Fuckin’ Ray ever gonna clean off this Christmas shit?”

“I think that’s been there since I was a sophomore.”

He snorted. “This town.”

I grabbed the napkin wound around the silverware in front of me because paper was my lifeline and I needed to touch it, to know that maybe when I went home later, I could collage him

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and then it would all make sense, *he* would make sense. I hoped my fingers would remember the exact quality of the sunlight on his forehead, the shadows under his eyes.

“Marge said you’re coming back to the Paradise?”

I spread the napkin out and began folding it. It’d be easier if it were made of actual paper, but I’d done napkin origami before.

He nodded. “Yeah. Guess I’ll be a handyman again until I figure out . . .” He waved his hand in the air. “Stuff.”

“Good. I’ll have someone to play checkers with.”

“Oh, I’m a chess man now,” he said. The ghost of a smile played on his face.

I raised my eyebrows. Josh Mitchell—chess? He was the kind of guy who would have called a “chess man” a fag. “So that’s what’s really going on in the Marines, huh? Bunch of guys just sitting around playing chess?”

His eyes went dark for a second, and I worried that my teasing had hit a nerve, but then he sort of laughed.

“Half the time, yeah. Basically, when we weren’t patrolling, we were stuck on base. And by base I mean this shitty-ass camp we set up in the middle of nowhere. The military is, like, ninety-six percent boredom, four percent action. All hurry up and wait. So, it was chess or trying to get online or, you know, jerking off to—” He saw the look on my face and stopped himself. “Anyway, I can kick your ass on the board, Evans, so watch out.”

I handed him the napkin I’d folded into a crane. He held it up, looking at the wings, the beak.

“A bird?”

“Crane. It means peace. It’s better with paper, but this was the best I could do.”

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He looked at it for a long moment. “Peace, huh?”

“Josh. Eat that before it tastes worse than it already is,” Dylan said, sidling up to our table. Her face was still flushed from her shift, and I could tell how exhausted she was by the fact that she hadn’t even bothered to fix her hair or reapply her makeup.

He pushed the plate away. “I think it’s reached that point already.”

“Well, next time, take my advice.” She turned to me. “I told him the cheeseburger was the way to go.”

“Should have listened to you,” he said. “I thought the stuff in the corps was bad, but Ray can’t cook for shit.”

Dylan agreed with him about her boss’s inability to make edible food, then told us her Worst Customer of the Day story. Josh asked to see a picture of Sean, and he looked at me like *what?* when I glared at him. A few minutes later, we were waving good-bye, leaving Josh to stare out the window and crunch on the ice in his glass. As we got in the car and headed down the highway, I couldn’t concentrate on whatever Dylan was talking about. I just kept seeing Josh by that dirty window. Looking out, but not seeing anything. And then I thought of how the first thing he’d said to me was that I looked good.

“—and I was all, *no*, Jesse, you can’t give a baby gum. Right?”

“Huh?” I looked over at Dylan.

“You weren’t listening, were you?” She was practically shouting above the funky sounds my car was making, and I gripped the steering wheel, praying we wouldn’t break down.

I shook my head. “Sorry. It’s just . . . Josh. You know?”

“Yeah.” She rolled down the window and spit out her gum. “It’s weird. I mean, Josh has always been kind of a bastard, but

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now I feel, like, so bad for him. I mean, he *lost his leg*. Like, *his leg*. Plus, he saw some serious craziness. It might have been all *Saving Private Ryan* over there, you know?” Dylan looked at me. “Maybe he’s different now—like the war changed him or something.”

I wasn’t naïve. It was obvious Josh could never be the same kid who used to spend his nights driving around in his souped-up truck, throwing beer bottles at abandoned buildings on the highway—way too much had happened for that to be enough for him.

“He’s still a sexist pig,” I muttered. “He, like, talks to my boobs more than me.”

Dylan pulled down the visor and looked in the mirror as she dabbed lip gloss on her lips. “Yeah, but he’s probably extra horny right now, with all of us walking around in shorts and tanks. I mean, the women in Afghanistan are covered up in, like, sheets and stuff. Don’t they wear those things where you can’t even see their faces?”

I rolled my eyes. “*Dylan*. They do not wear sheets. *Jesus*.”

“Anyway, he’s still hot. I wonder what it would be like to . . . you know. I mean, he’s still got what matters.”

“Oh my God, Dylan, shut up. I don’t need that image in my head.”

“It’s totally in your head, isn’t it?”

“*No*.” Except, *yes*.

Dylan laughed and turned up the music. We had an hour of driving just to get to the nearest Walmart, but it wasn’t too bad if you had some company and a working radio.

I stared out the window, at the unbearable flatness of the Central Valley with its endless fields where workers bobbed up

and down over the plants, their straw hats and bandannas swaying like dancing flowers. Somewhere, in one of those fields, Chris's dad was supervising the picking, reminding himself that the crappy wage was worth it because his son was going to college. And miles behind us, my mother was just getting to Taco Bell, ready to spend another day in fast-food hell. And Josh was sitting alone in a diner, thinking about whatever horrible stuff was going down thousands of miles away.

I pressed my foot against the accelerator.

I'd splurged on new bedding for my dorm, and I couldn't wait to show it to my mom. It was the first thing I'd bought for school—having it made college feel more real than my acceptance letter. I'd also bought a bunch of paper for a collage I was making as a going-away present for Marge: thin-as-tissue Japanese rice paper, thick construction paper, Canford papers to sculpt objects that burst from the collage, and the shimmery, expensive sanded pastel paper that I hadn't been able to resist. I hugged the bags to my chest, thinking about roommates and being an art major. I hoped the stuff for my dorm looked appropriately arty. It was hard to know, being in a town like Creek View.

The birch trees planted around our little lot stood like friendly sentinels that welcomed me home, and I could hear the distant shrieks of the neighborhood kids as they ran through sprinklers and gunned each other down with water hoses. I looked around me at the forlorn trailers and the beat-up cars. The sky was still a bright cornflower blue, and the sun shoved against everything

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it touched. The heat, the dust, the disrepair—it didn't bother me so much, knowing that I'd be leaving soon. Even our sea-green trailer wasn't too bad, though it could definitely use a paint job and a couple of the shutters were about to fall off. I almost felt nostalgic.

I put the key in the lock, but at my touch, the door swung open and bright shafts of light streamed into our darkened living room. For a second, I just stood on our tiny front porch, my key still raised, heart beating fast. Mom was supposed to be at Taco Bell until late tonight, and she was just as paranoid as I was about locking the door. It wasn't uncommon to have burglaries in the trailer park, so my mom and I were borderline obsessive-compulsive about locking up, especially since my dad had died. Not having a man in the house was something I didn't think Mom would ever get used to. Which was why she put up with skeezy Billy Easton, who came around to “help” with repairs but really just wanted to ask my mom out for the thousandth time. Five years, and he still didn't understand the word *no*.

I stood on the front porch, paralyzed, until I heard my mother's familiar cough coming from her bedroom. I stepped inside and wrinkled my nose against the stench of cigarette smoke that hung in the stale air.

“Mom?” I called, setting my things down on the floor and shutting the door behind me.

No answer.

The trailer was dark, all the blinds closed and curtains drawn. I opened the kitchen window to kill the sour smell. The darkness, the smoke, the heaviness that blanketed everything—I knew what it meant.

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Mom was having one of her bad days.

At her room, I took a breath before I pushed open the door, cheap plywood that made it easy to hear her when she cried at night. She was lying in the middle of her bed, wrapped in my dad's bathrobe, and the room was thick with smoke. *Judge Judy* was on the tiny TV on top of her dresser, but it was muted, its light the only color in the room.

"Hi, baby," she whispered.

I moved close to her, then gently took the cigarette from between her fingers and put it in the Coke can she was using as an ashtray. Stray pieces of ash from her cigarettes dusted her nightstand and covered the collage I'd recently made for her of the Golden Gate Bridge. I'd told her to put it up and think of me when I was out there for school.

"Hey." I smoothed back her hair, then planted a kiss on her forehead. "Wanna take a shower?"

She shook her head.

"You sure? It always makes you feel better."

"No." Her voice was far away.

I pushed down the fear that I wouldn't be able to bring her back this time, that she'd never leave that dark place she went to on her bad days. Her eyes slid back to the TV, and I concentrated on picking up her room. Work clothes were piled on the floor, and crumpled packages of Little Debbie snacks littered the carpet beside her bed. The shade on her lamp was cock-eyed, as though she'd stumbled into it.

"You need me to give the Bell a call? Tell them you can't go in tomorrow?"

Mom cackled, and I turned away to throw the clothes in her

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overflowing hamper so I wouldn't have to see the bitterness stamped on her face. I'd have to go to the Laundromat soon—it looked like half her wardrobe was in there.

“Oh, sure,” she said. “Call them. I'd love to hear what Brian has to say.”

Brian was her manager, a smarmy zit-faced kid just a year or two older than me.

“What are you—”

“They fired me,” she said. Her voice had turned dull, flat.

“*What?*”

She stared at the TV, as if she couldn't bear to miss one second of Judge Judy's court proceedings. “Yep,” she said. “After eighteen years, it was like, *Fuck you, Denise!*” She reached for her pack of cigarettes, and I leaned in close, grabbing her arms.

“Mom. Look at me. Are you serious right now?”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she nodded. “I screwed up. I screwed up bad.”

My stomach turned, like I'd put bad milk in my coffee. “Okay. What happened?”

She looked down, playing with a loose thread on her robe. “I was closing and . . . I . . . I left one of the tills on the front counter. I was tired . . . just forgot it was there. Some punks broke in after I closed up. I came in this morning, and Brian showed me the tape. Little bastard. I could tell how happy it made him.”

“But it was an accident!” I said. How could some teenage manager fire her, after all those years?

“Doesn't matter—that kid hates me, always has. If it wasn't this, it'd be something else. Says he has ‘cause’ to fire me. Can you believe it? He says I left the cash drawer out *on purpose.*”

“That's insane. Why would he say that?”

She grabbed the cigarettes and fished one out of the pack. “Because I was upset that he wrote me up at the beginning of my shift last night. I was late—just a couple minutes, but you know how he always rides my ass. I called him a prick.”

“He can’t fire you for calling him a prick.” Besides, it was true.

The flame from the lighter flickered, then caught the cigarette. She sucked in the smoke. “He’s saying I left the till out to get back at him. Says he has witnesses.”

“Mom, we can totally fight this.”

“No one’s gonna be on my side. Whatever. I’m out.”

She started chewing on her lip like she always did when she got anxious, and I knew she’d be bleeding in a minute.

I squeezed her hand, but she pulled away and took another shaky drag of her cigarette. “What are we gonna do?” she whispered.

Mom started crying for real now, big sobs that seemed to grate against her insides. I pulled her to me and let her cry, her tiny body shuddering in my arms. I hadn’t seen her like this since Dad had died. Her bad days could usually be taken care of with a shower, some good food, a night in watching movies. After a day or so, she’d come back to herself. But without a job to return to, how could I pull her out of this?

“Sky.” Her voice broke, and I patted her hair, her back.

“Shhh,” I whispered. “It’s okay, Mom. It’s gonna be okay.”

“No it’s not,” she said.

She cried for a long time, and I held her while I watched the cold shadows that the TV cast on the walls of her room lengthen and bleed across the bed. As I sat there trying to hold my mother together, I realized that the thing I’d been fearing for

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most of my life was finally happening: that I'd be so close to getting out, then just at the last moment, something would happen that would keep me in Creek View indefinitely. I always thought it would be a freakish thing, like a natural disaster or getting a brain tumor. Not this.

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JOSH

I'm walking across the field. Everything's brown: brown huts, brown mountains, brown dirt. Harrison is handing out soccer balls and candy to the kids. He's laughing because they keep screaming "I LOVE AMERICA I WANNA CANDY," and Sharpe is lighting up another Marlboro and my gun's in my hand and my gear is fucking heavy and I'm so hot. Davis is leaning against the Humvee, talking to Abdul. You're shooting the shit with the village elders. *As-salaam alaikum. As-salaam alaikum.* You call me over when you're done and I say, *Let's go to that wall, man. I need to take a fuckin' knee.* The sky is blue blue and all I can smell is dust and the smoke from Sharpe's cigarette, and we're going toward the wall but then I say, *Hold up, I'm gonna check behind that hut.* I raise my gun. Five steps to the hut. Four. Three. Two. Then I wake up. Sweating, fucking sobbing like a little bitch. Just like every night. Looking for my rifle, but it's not there—*shit, where is it?*—and then I remember I don't have one anymore. And my leg that isn't there is burning—I can feel it but it's not there—and I look at the clock and fuckshitfuck it's only one in the morning and it won't be light for

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hours. So I lie back down and stare at the ceiling and run through every cadence my drill instructor taught me at Camp Pendleton and then I repeat the Rules of Engagement and I think of all my favorite quotes from *Three Kings* and I play imaginary games of chess with you in my head and you always win because I forget about the queen again. I'm so tired, so goddamn tired, but sleep isn't happening. It's just me, the ceiling, and the night becoming morning.

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chapter three

There were only two reasons the Paradise Motel stayed in business: we rented rooms by the hour, and there wasn't any competition for seventy miles in either direction. All you could see from the highway were a bunch of scraggly trees and our old-school sign at the beginning of a long dirt drive. Once the sun went down, the freaky-looking angel sitting on top of the sign became neon pink and green, winking at drivers as they passed on the highway. The motel itself squatted behind the trees—it was one story with an inner courtyard in typical Cali style, with ten rooms and the pool, bordered on three sides by Gil Portman's orchard.

The Paradise needed a paint job bad—Marge said it looked like a kid had vomited an orange Slurpee all over her walls—and the TVs didn't have cable. But it wasn't creepy in that *Psycho* kind of way. In fact, we'd recently been featured on a blog called *Quirky California* because of our themed rooms. You'd be surprised how many people were into the unicorn room.

Everything was falling apart at home and school was out, so I was happy to spend more time than usual at the Paradise. There

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was something kind of cozy about the broken stool I sat on behind the front desk and the way people would pop in at all hours of the day and night. And I didn't know how I would have gotten through Creek View summers without the pool.

Working at the Paradise was fine when it was an after-school job, but I couldn't imagine myself sitting behind the counter in September, when I should be in San Francisco feeling all chic and intellectual. But as the days rolled by, Mom got worse, not better. It wasn't just that she wasn't applying for jobs—she wouldn't leave the house. Whenever I got home, she was always sitting on the couch, staring at nothing. For the first time, I realized that maybe my mom wasn't just depressed about Dad. Maybe she was like me and felt the hopelessness of Creek View in her bones, but unlike me, she didn't have a ticket out. There had to be a way to help my mom and still move to San Fran. I had eight weeks. At the beginning of the summer, I'd thought the days couldn't go by fast enough, but now all I wanted was time.

It was a Friday afternoon, and my shift was almost over. I tipped my stool back, leaning my damp head against the wall behind me. There was a heat advisory, and the air settled over me like a lead blanket, sapping all my energy. The only sound in the Paradise lobby was the distant roar of cars and the whiny creaking of the overhead fan. Every now and then, a big rig would sound its horn out on the highway, jolting me awake. I swatted at the fly that kept tiptoeing down my neck and put the can of Coke I'd just gotten out of the vending machine against my cheeks. I was in that dazed limbo of overcaffeinated drowsiness, coming off another graveyard shift and trying to stay awake until Amy showed up. I set my Coke down and let my head fall

forward, not even caring that I was lying on one of my collages. It was a crappy one, anyway.

“I need a room.”

My eyes snapped open. I didn’t know how long I’d been out. A woman about my mom’s age was standing at the counter, drumming her long fingernails on the scratched wood surface. I sat up, tried to look welcoming.

“Sure. We have a few vacancies.” *A lot*, but who was counting? I peeled myself off the stool, the back of my legs sticking painfully to the leather seat.

“Single or double?” I asked. I used my professional voice, the one that the girls who worked at the Hilton had. I knew because sometimes I would call the fancy LA or San Francisco hotels, just to listen to the way they answered. Marge said my talents were wasted here, and honestly, I had to agree.

“Single.”

The woman frowned as she looked around at the decorations. The lamps and artwork were straight out of 1970—all creams and bright orange and brown. My favorite thing was the tangerine-colored vase with yellow ceramic bees attached to it. It used to be in the David Bowie room, but I’d found a vase shaped like an electric guitar at Goodwill, so the bee one ended up in the lobby. Marge had owned the place for two years by the time I came on, but the rooms didn’t turn into themed extravaganzas until my love of art and her worship of all things kitsch came together.

I opened the registry to see what we had available. “One night or—”

“God, just one, I hope.” The woman pulled a wallet out of her designer purse.

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I gave a pointed look at the framed article from *Quirky California* that we kept on the wall next to the room keys.

“So . . .,” I said, flipping through the registry. “We have the *Grease* room, the Tom Cruise room, the *Viva México* room, and the *Gilligan’s Island* room available.”

“Are you serious?” she asked.

“As a heart attack.” That was a Marge phrase that I had to use surprisingly often around there.

The woman wrinkled up her nose. “*Gilligan’s*.”

Gilligan’s Island was this show from the sixties that Marge loved.

“Great,” I said. “Just don’t light the tiki torch—”

“Tiki torch?”

“Tiki torch.” The woman nodded, and I turned the registry around for her signature. “That’ll be thirty-nine dollars.”

I ran her card, then turned around to the row of tiny hooks behind me and grabbed the key for *Gilligan’s Island*. I slid it across the counter, forcing my lips to go up. “Here you go.”

She held the keychain between two fingers, like the plastic etched with a number five (written in Sharpie, because we were classy like that) carried multiple diseases. I wanted to tell her that poverty wasn’t catching, but I just leaned across the counter and pointed to my left.

“If you just go to the sliding glass door to your right and cross the patio, it’s the room directly in front of us. There’s an ice machine and a couple of vending machines down this hallway.” I motioned to the left of the reception desk, where the light was dim to hide how bad the stains in the carpet were. “And the pool is open until ten.”

“Thanks,” she muttered. I kept smiling until we had two

inches of sliding glass door between us, then I leaned back in my chair and groaned.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the screen door open. “What a bitch,” a voice said.

Josh stood in the doorway, looking thoroughly entertained. The sun behind him was bright, outlining him like a woodcut, all sharp, jagged lines and invisible details.

“Hey,” I said. He stepped inside and let the door swing shut behind him. “Who’s the bitch—her or me?”

He laughed. “Her, of course.”

He was wearing a pair of aviator sunglasses, so I couldn’t tell if he still had that haunted look in his eyes from Saturday night or just the dazed one from Ray’s Diner. He seemed better, though. As he walked toward me, my brain kept chanting, *Don’t look down, don’t look down.*

“You were way too nice to her,” he said, nodding toward *Gilligan’s*.

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t want to be stuck in Creek View, either.”

Josh sighed. “Yep.”

Central California was a veritable no-man’s-land: this was not the California of people’s dreams. We didn’t have a music-video world of palm trees and sandy beaches that we frolicked on under the sun. I mean, there were more items on the McDonald’s Value Menu than there were things to do in Creek View.

“How’s the Sky today?” he asked. It was this old thing we used to do, him asking me how I was, me answering with a corresponding weather condition.

I tilted my head to the side, thinking. “Hazy,” I decided.

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“Why so?”

“Um . . .” Was I seriously thinking about telling this guy *my* problems? “Well, I think my brain’s gone all fuzzy from the lack of air-conditioning in here.”

“So . . .” Josh’s eyes swept over the walls. “Nothing’s changed since I’ve been gone, then.”

“Well, more stuff’s broken. And the pool has suffered greatly. It missed you,” I said.

“Glad something did.”

His words hung in the air, their weight an almost tangible thing. I wanted to say, *No, Josh, everyone missed you. We talked about you all the time.* But I’d have been lying. When people left Creek View, everyone who stayed took it as a personal offense. Like you’d gotten all bougie or something just because you wanted to live in the kind of place where you could get a Frappuccino without driving fifty miles. But in his case, it wasn’t like that, not exactly. He hadn’t left a void so much as taken a break. There was no doubt he’d be back someday.

Thankfully, Marge saved me, so I didn’t have to figure out a way to lie well.

“Josh? Is that you?” she called. Her room-slash-office was down the hall, and if she wasn’t there, she was either by the pool or lying on the couch in the lobby, filling me in on the latest celebrity news.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he said.

Marge shuffled in, wearing one of her muumuus and patting at her burgundy hair. It was supposed to be red, but every time she dyed it, the color ended up more purple than anything else. She was a few years older than my mom, a Midwest transplant who couldn’t get enough of the California sun, even when it was

punishing. She'd said opening this motel had been her dream. I thought Ohio must have been pretty bad if opening up a motel in the armpit of California was your dream.

"Look at you," she whispered. She was beaming, her eyes suddenly glassy. "Come here, hon."

Josh limped over, and she threw her arms around him, pressing him to her thick body. She reminded me of a mama bear, all hulking and protective. It was how she was with all her employees. I couldn't even count how many times she'd helped me with college applications and schoolwork. This was different, though. Marge's son had been in the Army, gone to Iraq. He'd died—in Fallujah, I think. Ever since Josh joined the Marines, she'd been obsessed with getting him back home.

"I prayed for you every single night," she said, her voice thick with tears. "Every single night."

I busied myself with the guest register so that I could look away from Josh's balled-up fists against Marge's back and the way he'd squeezed his eyes shut.

When my cell rang a second later, I grabbed it and slipped outside, grateful for the excuse.

"Hey, Chris."

"Hey, hey. What's up, *chica*? You sound all depressed."

I kicked at the weeds pushing up through the brick walkway, stomping on them as if they'd committed some terrible offense. "It's been a crappy morning."

"Just remember: you're getting the eff out of here in T minus sixty days!"

When we were freshman, Chris and I had promised each other that we'd be the ones to get out—we called it our Sacred Pact. We nagged each other all throughout high school, when

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one of us wanted to be lazy or give in to giving up. Whenever I liked a boy, Chris had been all, *The pact! The pact!* Because, of course, romance was bad for GPAs. I didn't think it was a coincidence that Chris started the pact once it became clear Dylan was never going to fall for him.

"Yeah, but, you know. Creek View still sucks," I said. Each day felt like I was walking on a sidewalk full of cracks and I had to keep jumping around so that everything wouldn't collapse.

"Which is why we're going to Leo's," Chris said. "Tonight. Get ready to get down, know what I'm sayin'?"

Leonardo's was this Mexican restaurant about a half hour away that turned into a local dance hall every Friday and Saturday night. It was mostly reggaeton and hip-hop, and everyone went because the drinks were cheap and they didn't card. I went because Chris's cousins were the DJs, and they always played stuff you couldn't help but dance to.

"I don't know, Chris. I'm wiped out. Amy is late as hell, and I gotta help my mom with some stuff."

"You say that every time. And then I practically have to pull you off the dance floor to go home. Besides, Ricardo said he wanted to say hey since he couldn't come to graduation."

"Chris, I'm not—I repeat, *I'm not*—going on a date with your twenty-eight-year-old cousin."

"Dude. It's not like that. He just—"

"I'm tired. Like, I-want-to-sleep-forever tired."

"I'll buy you as many virgin strawberry margaritas as you want."

"You can't buy something that's free," I said. Chris helped the restaurant with its accounting in exchange for free food and booze. He had all kinds of little deals like that around town.

“Don’t hate because of my mad math skills. Come on. You’ll wish you’d said yes when you’re in San Fran and I’m in Boston.”

And, really, you couldn’t say no to that. “Fine. My car’s not working great, so we have to take your dad’s truck or I’m staying home and watching *Friends* with my mother.”

“That’s pathetic, Sky. *Pathetic*. I’ll pick you up at eight.”

We hung up, and I waited to go inside until I heard the glass door open, then I went back into the lobby, watching as Josh and Marge walked toward the pool. Every few seconds, she would look up at him, shake her head, and beam. They’d gotten really close after he joined the Marines, and I’d seen letters from him come to the Paradise every now and then. Once I’d even heard her on the phone in the middle of the night—I’d known it was him because of the questions she was asking. She cried for a long time after they’d hung up. Now I was wondering if that had been after he lost his leg.

A car pulled up in the driveway, and I checked the customer into the *Grease* room (a road tripper who wanted to stay at our place because it was so “random”), and then went outside to where Josh was sitting by the pool in the shade of a stand of tired-looking palms. His prosthesis was stretched out, the sunlight glinting off the thin metal, and he was absently rubbing his thigh. I didn’t know how much of his leg he’d lost—he was wearing long board shorts—but I wondered if he was in pain or if touching the stump was compulsive. I steeled myself against feeling horrified or grossed out, but those feelings never came. It was just so . . . it gave me the same feeling as looking at a Dalí painting, where everything is upside down and inside out. Surreal.

“Where’s Marge?” I asked, pulling one of the creaky lawn chairs over.

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“Bitching to Gil that he has to cut down those branches.” He pointed to where the orchard trees were beginning to slither over our wall.

“Never a dull day at the Paradise,” I said.

He smiled, his eyes on the water. Seeing and not seeing it. “I’m gonna clean the pool when the sun goes down a bit. You still swim every day?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I try to keep the leaves out, and sometimes Chris comes over and does the thing with your pool tools, but he’s not as good as you.” I bumped my shoulder against his. “Glad you’re back.”

“Yeah.” His eyes were far away again, and he was fiddling with his fingers, pressing against each nail.

I didn’t know what made me do this, but I turned to him and said, “Do you want to go dancing with me tonight?”

His jaw kind of dropped, and I stumbled over my words, trying to explain. “I mean, with me and Dylan and Jesse—that’s her boyfriend—and Chris. At Leonardo’s.”

I suddenly remembered about his leg, and my whole body broke out in this embarrassed sweat. “I mean, we don’t have to dance. It’s just, I thought maybe you were bored as hell and . . . never mind. It was a dumb idea. I mean, I don’t even know if I’m gonna go.”

I took off my sunglasses and wiped the lenses with the bottom of my tank top, just to give my hands something to do. What was I thinking, inviting Josh to go *dancing*? He probably thought I was an idiot.

“That’d be cool.” He looked down at his leg. “I don’t know about dancing, though.”

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I laughed, more from relief than anything else. “Okay. Do you want us to pick you up?”

“How about I pick *you* up?” He pointed to his leg. “I need a little room when I’m in the car.”

“Oh. Duh. Okay. Um.” Someone rapped on the glass door, and I jumped up, thankful for an out. A middle-aged couple waved me inside. “It’s one of the hourlies.”

Josh shaded his eyes and looked toward the door. “Is that dude a sheriff?”

I raised my hand and waved. “Yep. The woman sells real estate up near Hanford—they’re here every Wednesday and Friday.”

“I wonder if he takes her out to lunch after,” he said.

“Yeah, I don’t think so. He doesn’t strike me as the romantic type. Anyway, I better go in.”

He stood up, wincing a little. “Dude looks like he’s in a hurry.”

I laughed as I hurried toward where the sheriff and his lady friend waited for me. A half hour later, after I’d told Chris I was hitching a ride with Josh, Dylan was texting me, asking if one-legged men turned me on. I looked out the window at Josh. He was shirtless, his dog tags glimmering in the sun, and there was a tattoo on his back—the words *Semper Fidelis* in dark, Gothic letters that moved up and down with his muscles as he worked.

I texted her back: Shut up.

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JOSH

Why did I say I'd go? I'm gonna look like an idiot. This isn't the kind of stuff they help you with in rehab. There aren't fuckin' dance lessons for gimp Marines. I couldn't even dance when I had *two* legs. Remember when Gomez decided that he wanted to make his wife a video of our squad doing Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" routine for Christmas and so we all had to learn it like a bunch of homos? (*Don't say homo, Josh, you tell me. That's fucking bigoted.*) Still, you have to admit, we looked like a bunch of homos. You asked a medevac to film it with the crappy camera you bought off one of the translators in Kandahar and somehow the video ended up on YouTube, so we were kinda famous for a week or two. When I get home from the Paradise, I decide to watch it, don't know why. Just need to. Guess Sky asking me to go dancing made me think of it—this shitty video was the last time I danced on two legs. Last time I danced, period. I find it on my computer and even though the video's all wobbly, it's like I'm right back there. I'm off to the side, fucking the dance up and laughing so hard and Sharpe is getting way too into it and Harrison is wearing the bra his girlfriend sent him to help him

get off on thinking about her. At the end we all just start dancing like idiots. I'm doing some cowboy rodeo thing and you're pretending to slap my ass and Gomez is humping the floor like it's his wife or something. And here I am sitting alone in my room in the States, cracking up and it feels so good to laugh, man, but then the laughing turns to something else and before I know it I'm on my feet and punching the wall, which hurts like a bitch, but I do it again and again until my mom opens the door and says, *Jesus Christ, Josh*, and then slams it closed. My knuckles are bleeding and the video is finished. We're frozen on the screen. And now I'm looking at Sharpe and you, posing like trannie models, and at me with my two beautiful goddamn legs and it doesn't make sense, doesn't make any fucking sense that you're both gone. How can you do some dumb dance like that and then not exist anymore?

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chapter four

“Mom, *please*. You can’t sit here all night. Come on. I made you the pasta you like—the squiggly kind. And a salad.”

She didn’t even look at me, just kept her eyes glued to the TV. *CSI* was on, and they were cutting up a body while calmly discussing the atrocious rape-slash-dismemberment of the victim.

“My ride’s gonna be here any minute, and I really need you to eat something before I go.”

She reached for her cigarettes, but I darted out and grabbed them. In our house, cigarettes meant a day when Mom couldn’t stop thinking about Dad and how he’d gotten into his truck that night when he should have let someone drive him home. They didn’t help her forget. They helped her remember.

“You’ll get wrinkly. Then George Clooney will never have sex with you.”

Her mouth twitched, but she beckoned for me to give the cigs back. “Don’t you have to finish getting ready for your date?”

“It’s not a date.”

It wasn’t. It was . . . a thing. An outing. Whatever. What was

I thinking, going dancing? It was wrong to leave her, but just being inside there for too long made my chest feel like someone was pressing against it as hard as they could.

I heard Josh's truck roar into the little patch of dirt in front of the trailer that served as our driveway, Kid Rock blaring. My face reddened as I imagined myself in Josh's truck, looking like some girl he'd picked up for the night.

Mom looked at the door, as if she could see through it. "That Chris?"

She knew it wasn't. Chris didn't listen to loud music, and his dad's old Chevy sounded nothing like Josh's flashy truck.

"Josh. Did you want bread or—"

"Josh *Mitchell*?" she asked.

"Uh-huh."

I put some ranch on her salad and threw the bottle back in the fridge, then dished out her pasta.

Mom frowned. "Maybe you should stay home tonight."

I heard the door of Josh's truck slam shut. There was no way I was canceling on him, even if these past few hours with my mom had worn me out more than my whole shift at the Paradise.

I reached over to squeeze her shoulder. "Why don't you give Crystal a call? I bet she's babysitting Seanie for Dylan tonight. You could go over there for a bit."

Crystal was Dylan's mom. Their trailer was practically across the street from ours, and other than a few of the women at work, she was my mom's only friend.

Josh knocked on the door.

"I won't stay long," I said. "And I'll have my cell if you need anything."

Mom pursed her lips, and her eyes slid to the TV. She

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grabbed the remote and turned it back on. When I opened the door, Josh was leaning against our rickety railing, his hands in his pockets. Only a few tiny beads of sweat near his temples gave away his difficulty getting up the steps. Even so, I had to admit he looked good. He wore long cargo shorts and a plaid button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled, his sunglasses in his front pocket, and a Marines baseball cap. I was sort of angry at him for looking so good. Because this wasn't a date, and I was suddenly wishing—against all my better judgment—that it was.

He smiled. “Hey.”

The sun had just gone down, so the sky was purple and the first stars were coming out. It was a warm twilight, an exhalation after the intense heat of the day. Creek View almost seemed pretty.

“You found me.” I frowned. What a stupid thing to say. Of course he'd know where the trailer park was, and it wasn't like it was a particularly complicated neighborhood to navigate. Was it the leg thing that made me so dumb or was it that he was standing on my doorstep, which was strange enough in and of itself?

“Yeah,” he said.

We sort of stood there for a moment, my palms getting sweaty, and then I motioned inside. “I'm just gonna grab my purse, okay? I'll meet you in the truck?”

“Cool.”

When I shut the door behind me, Mom was still staring at the TV. I grabbed my purse. “Love you.”

She nodded. “Have fun.”

I blew her a kiss the way we always do, pressing my lips to my

fingers then raising my hand in a wave as I shut the door behind me.

Josh's truck was a thing I'd only seen from afar, except for the one time Blake drove me home in it. It was a red Ford F-150 with extra-big wheels and two annoying stickers in the back window of naked female silhouettes looking in opposite directions. There was also a Marine Corps decal and an American flag sticker.

"Josh, on behalf of women everywhere, I demand that you remove those skanky stickers from your back window."

He turned around and fixed me with a look of mock horror. "How dare you call the flag of the greatest country on earth *skanky!*"

I punched him on the arm. "You know which ones I'm talking about."

He rolled his eyes and handed me his MP3 player. "You can pick the music."

I scrolled through his albums. "Gee, how's a girl to decide between Fifty Cent and Metallica?"

He grabbed it out of my hands. "Never mind."

We went back and forth like that all the way to Leo's, me feeling surprised that he was so easy to talk to, him trying not to make it obvious that he was checking me out.

On top of his dashboard was a black, leather-bound journal. It would have been number one on my Things Josh Would Never Own list. I was about to ask him why he had it when he beat me to an uncomfortable question.

"So, what's with you and my brother?" he asked, as we turned into the packed parking lot.

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“Nothing.”

“At the party you two seemed kinda . . . you know.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

Ugh.

“Blake needs to remember that he has a girlfriend, and last I checked, that girlfriend isn’t me. You know how he is when he gets drunk.”

“You mean he acts like any dude in the world?” he said.

“Eww.”

Josh snorted. “When Blake e-mailed me about you, I was seriously like, what? *Skylar?*”

I laughed, but not in a ha-ha way—more in a bitter what-the-hell-was-I-thinking way. “I don’t know, Josh. It was only a week—just spring break. And I guess I was feeling like, why not? We weren’t a couple or anything. We were just . . . it was dumb.”

I didn’t tell him how that had been one of the worst weeks of my life or that I’d never done anything with a boy, not really, and that, after each afternoon with Blake, I’d go home and cry in the shower and wonder what was wrong with me. And then I’d meet him by the creek the next day and it would happen all over again. It wasn’t like we even went that far—it just felt far to *me*.

“Wow. That’s romantic.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Would you prefer *your* version of relationships?” I asked.

“You mean the ones where the girl actually wants to be with me? Um, *yeah*.”

He parked the truck, and I sighed, wondering if we were still joking or not.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing. You ready?”

“Oh, no. You’re pissed. I said something wrong.” He shook his head. “This buddy of mine always tells me—” He stopped for a second and tapped his key against the steering wheel. I waited for him to finish his thought, but it was like he’d already gotten out of the truck. Like Mom, he wasn’t there.

“Josh?” I reached out to touch his arm, but he jerked away.

“I’m fine,” he snapped.

“Okay,” I said, my voice soft.

We sat there for a minute, sharing air, the music from Leo’s slipping through our slightly opened windows.

I cleared my throat. “I know we’re not, like, best friends or whatever, but if you need someone to talk to . . .” His whole body seemed to tense up, so I stopped and opened the door. “C’mon. I’ll buy you a beer.”

He gave me a sideways glance. “You don’t drink.”

“Yeah, but I bet the only way I’ll get you on the dance floor is if *you* drink. Besides, Leo’s doesn’t card.” Leg or no leg, the dude needed to have some fun.

He shook his head. “I’m not dancing.”

I shrugged. “Okay.”

“Seriously.”

I gave him a we’ll-see smile, then jumped out of the truck and came around to his side.

“Do you need any he—”

“No.” He shifted his good leg around to jump down from the truck, which was way too high up because of the extra-huge wheels. He slammed the door and grabbed my hand. “Let’s go.”

I didn’t know how that happened—my hand in his—so

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quickly, and why wasn't I pulling away? He opened the door, and that's how we walked into Leo's, looking like a couple, but he let go as soon as we got past the dark entryway. It was like this little secret that I knew would hang over my head all night. And Dylan would see it right away; I knew she would. It was probably written all over my face, this feeling in my chest that was tight and loose at the same time. I let Josh walk ahead of me and I put the hand he'd held against a pillar just inside the entryway, letting the cold seep through my skin and up my arm. I told myself I wouldn't stay long.

And I'd get a ride home from Chris.

The restaurant-turned-dance-hall was packed, as usual. The walls were covered in sombreros and black-and-white photographs of people in traditional Mexican dress. Colorful piñatas in all shapes and sizes hung from the ceiling, their thin paper blowing in the breeze from the air-conditioning vents. The wooden tables that covered the floor during the day were pushed against the walls, stacked on top of each other. In the far corner, Chris's cousin Carlos was spinning. One of my favorite reggaeton songs was playing, that familiar *buh-buh-bump-bump, buh-buh-bump-bump* thumping, and I focused on the music, letting it massage my brain until all I could think of was getting that beat inside me for the rest of the night.

"Dance?" I asked Josh. I'd decided he needed to, bum leg and all.

"Beer," he said.

We went over to the bar, but before we'd even made it,

Ricardo, Chris's incurably flirtatious older cousin, was catching me up in his arms.

"*Mi hija!* Congratulations!"

I let him twirl me around for a minute and then I was back on my feet, dizzy but laughing.

"It's just high school graduation, Ricky."

"Yeah, but around here, that's a big thing." He looked over at Josh, and I started the whole Josh-Ricky-Ricky-Josh introductions and then we were at the bar. Josh wouldn't let me buy him a beer, and he handed me a Coke before I could say anything.

"Ohmygod, *Josh?*" A gorgeous girl I didn't know pushed between us, and in seconds, he was all up on her, which was so par for the Mitchell course.

"So, is this, like . . . a date?" Ricky whispered.

The girl had her hands on his waist and was leaning into him, laughing at something he'd said.

"No! *God.*"

How did girls do that? I mean, how did they manage to have a guy's full attention in less than a minute?

Ricky raised his eyebrows. "Well, in that case—"

"Aren't you supposed to be spinning?" I pointed to the DJ. "You just left Carlos up there all by himself. That's cold."

He laughed and started toward the turntables just as Dylan shimmied up to me. I wouldn't have to be Josh Mitchell's third wheel all night, after all. Awesome.

"Hi!" Dylan said, already a bit tipsy.

"Hey, Mama."

"When did you guys get here?" She kissed my cheek and leaned across me to give Josh a thumbs-up. "You clean up good, soldier."

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“Hey, Dylan,” Josh said, turning away from the clingy goddess. “You want a beer?”

“I won’t say no.” She threw an arm around me. “Um, Chris needs a dance partner *pronto*. You know I can’t salsa for shit.”

I was pretty sure Chris didn’t care about that, but I needed an excuse to get on the floor. “You don’t need to tell me twice,” I said.

I took another sip of my Coke, and Josh took it out of my hand. “Get out of here,” he said.

It was like we were together, but not. So weird. Out of the corner of my eye, I could tell Dylan was already psychoanalyzing us. I turned on my heel and booked it to the dance floor. I could feel eyes on me, but I didn’t turn around. I didn’t want to know whose they were.

I saw Chris’s curly head in the middle of the floor, a few inches above everyone else. I danced my way to the center, spinning out of the random hands that reached for me. I loved to dance, but I never danced with strangers—the last time I tried that, some dude tried to grab my boob.

“Sky!” Chris’s hair was damp with sweat, and he took my hand and started twirling me around before I had a chance to say anything. We swayed our hips in perfect rhythm, our days of boredom in his backyard paying off in our snazzy salsa performance.

For a while, I just let the music have its way with me. The beats soaked into my skin and filled me up. I tilted my head back and laughed into the rainbow-colored lights, my body slick with sweat. A couple of girls threw me envious glances as Chris pulled me closer. This was an oft-discussed phenomenon among

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Chris, Dylan, and me, because girls never gave Chris a second glance until he was on the floor at Leo's.

"Don't look now, but you are seriously ruining your chances of getting laid tonight," I told him. If only they knew how *not* sexy Chris was to me. Or noticed how often his eyes shifted to where Dylan stood by the bar.

"Hey, I'm not the one who walked in with Josh Mitchell," he said. "That's like wearing a T-shirt that says DON'T TOUCH ME UNLESS YOU WANT YOUR ASS KICKED."

I swatted at his arm. "Not you too! He's a Mitchell. *Hello?* I've learned my lesson."

"I know. I'm just giving you a hard time. It's cool that you brought him out. I mean, he's a total douchebag, but it sucks to be him right now."

Did I ask Josh out of pity? I wasn't so sure. You don't pity someone that your fingers itch to touch.

"He's not a douchebag," I said.

Chris leaned in close so I could hear him over the music. "He called me a faggot. That officially classifies him as a douchebag."

"Well, okay, that wasn't cool. Douchebaggery was involved there."

"And I'm still pissed at him about my dad's truck."

Once, Josh was so drunk he crashed into Mr. Garcia's parked truck, then left a note that said *Oops*.

"Chris, that happened, like, three years ago."

"Yeah, yeah."

Carlos switched up the music, and Chris and I both shouted as one of our favorite Ozomatli songs came on, the momentary

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seriousness of our conversation forgotten. The floor was packed, and the energy was crazy hot, everyone getting lost in the music.

“Hey, wanna see how low we can go?” Chris yelled.

I nodded and followed his lead, twisting my body lower and lower as I held on to his waist for support. Our knees were almost to the ground, my dress hiked up in a seriously indecent way, but I didn’t care because I was having fun for the first time since I graduated.

“Up, up!” I gasped, my thighs burning.

We managed to stand again, laughing at the expression on his cousins’ faces.

“Oh, man, I’m gonna hear about that for the next few days,” Chris said.

His family was convinced we were madly in love, even though we’d told them over and over that it was so not happening. It wasn’t just the Dylan thing. We’d made out once—in seventh grade—but it had felt too incestuous, so after five minutes of sweating all over each other, we gave up. You either feel it or you don’t, and we just didn’t, much to his mother’s disappointment.

“Those moves are gonna kill in Boston,” I said.

“Don’t I know it. I’m gonna get me a hot little math major, just you wait.”

“As long as you don’t use any of your math pickup lines on her.”

“I’m totally using my math pickup lines. Works every time.”

“On who?”

“A gentleman never tells.” He got close to me and did his best impression of this telenovela star that his mother loves. “*Hola, señorita*. I just want you to know that I’ve been watching you all night, and I can tell that you’re as sweet as 3.14.”

“Oh my God!” I pushed him away, cracking up. “That is the *worst*.”

He pumped a fist in the air. “Yes! My Latino charm strikes again!”

“Sweet as pi? *Ugh*.”

“You laughed,” he said, pointing at me. “You know what all my female cousins say? They want a man who can make them laugh.”

“A man they can laugh *with*, not *at*.”

“My mathematical suaveness is irresistible, and you know it.”

He grabbed me and proceeded to drag me around in a tango, and for the next few songs, it was just Chris and me being our usual goofy selves. Chris sang along in his terrible, warbly voice and my crappy week evaporated. When I was out there dancing, it was like anything was possible. The thought that we wouldn’t be doing this come September threatened to crush me; Chris was my *other*, my kindred spirit, and he was moving thousands of miles away. I pushed the thought back to where I’d put my worries about going to school and taking care of my mom. I just wanted to dance it all away.

I only looked over at the bar once, but Josh was still talking to that girl. As if he sensed me, his eyes found mine, and I gave him a quick wave and then looked away, my face burning. Dylan and Jesse joined Chris and me, and the four of us busted out our best moves, Dylan hanging on me like she does when she’s had a few.

My heart was hurting from all this love for her and Chris, and I pressed my lips against her cheek and held tight to Chris’s hand, just to let some of it seep out so I didn’t drown in it.

Dylan grinned. “I know someone who might want in

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on some of that lip action,” she said, with a nod in Josh’s direction.

“So not interested.” I pulled away from her and reached up to throw my hair into a ponytail. “I’m saving myself for Art Boy.”

After I got into SFU, we created the perfect boyfriend for me. I’d meet Art Boy in the Intro to Russian Art class I was taking, and he’d be from some fancy East Coast family, and he’d draw portraits of me like Leo did of Kate, except we wouldn’t be on the *Titanic*, and I’d keep (most of) my clothes on.

Dylan stared me down with her psychoanalyzing X-ray vision. “Art Boy isn’t here, and yet you look extra hot tonight.” She glanced at Josh, then back at me. “Are you *sure* this isn’t a date?”

I was wearing my slightly faded black sundress that went to my knees and a pair of dirty All Stars. “Dyl, I hardly think this qualifies as sexy.” I gestured to her dress, a skintight number verging on lingerie status. “But I see you thought this was a pajama party.”

“Hilarious,” she said.

She pinched my ass, and I yelped, slapping at her. “Stop it!”

Jesse pulled her in for the slow dance, and for a second, Chris and I stood there awkwardly. I could feel his good mood seep out, like one of those shiny balloons that start to sag as they lose air.

He leaned in. “Dude, I need a drink. And maybe some taquitos. Wanna take a break?”

I nodded and followed Chris as he pushed his way through the writhing, sweating bodies around us.

“Remember,” I said, “there’s a hot little math major in your future.”

Chris wiped the sweat off his forehead. “Yeah, yeah.”

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I patted his arm, but there was nothing more I could say. Dylan and Jesse had a kid together and were crazy in love. It was just never gonna happen.

When we got to the bar, Josh was still there, now trading high school football stories with one of the guys he'd graduated with. Their voices were loud, the conversation peppered with *fuckin'-A's* and other choice phrases from the locker-room phrasebook.

"Hey," he said, when we came up. The other guy turned back to his date, a non-Creek View girl I'd never seen before.

"Hey, yourself," I said.

He handed me my Coke, his eyes glassy from however many beers he'd managed to down, and I took a long sip while Chris ordered a beer for himself from the bar. Chris was so obviously not twenty-one—he had one of those baby faces that ensured he'd be carded until he was forty—but the bartender was a distant cousin or something, so Chris always got whatever he wanted. Josh was only nineteen, but he was just one of those people you didn't say no to.

"You guys come here a lot?" Josh asked, his eyes taking me in with one quick glance. I was keenly aware of the sheen of sweat that coated my skin and made my dress cling to me.

"Yeah," I said. "Like, twice a month?"

He shook his head. "I didn't think you were into, you know, going out or whatever."

"Just because I don't hang around Creek View parties doesn't mean I don't go out, Josh." True, other than Leo's, "going out" for me usually meant seeing a movie in Bakersfield with Dylan and Chris or going for a post-midnight dinner at the Denny's an hour up the highway.

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He shook his head. “*Skylar*.” He said my name in a singsong way. “Don’t get upset. I was just . . .” He put a fist up to his lips to block a silent burp. “Joking around.”

Yep, he’d definitely gotten through a few beers.

I wanted to be angry with him, or grossed out by his sober-to-drunk ratio, but it was hard. Maybe he’d wanted to get out of Creek View just as badly as I had and then he’d gotten out and some asshole in Afghanistan had sent him back. If I were him, I’d be drunk too.

Another slow song came on, and I set my drink down and held out my hand. “I didn’t invite you so you could be an ass. Come on.”

Josh’s eyes widened. “No way.”

“Yes way. Or do you want to wait until something really fast comes on?”

He frowned and, when he could tell I wasn’t taking no for an answer, stood up, setting his empty beer bottle on the bar with a long sigh. “I’m not drunk enough for this.”

I rolled my eyes and tried not to shiver when he put his hand into mine. What the hell was I doing?

Chris was still talking to his bartender cousin, but his eyes followed me as I walked onto the floor with Josh. I gave him a look like, *What?* and he responded by swirling his index finger next to his temple in the international sign for *loco*.

“Let’s go in the middle,” I said, pulling Josh after me. “It’s better there.”

In the crush of bodies, you could dive into the music and forget yourself. I felt like Josh and I both needed that right then. I expected it to be awkward, like we’d have to come up with a game plan for dancing with prosthetics, but he just pulled me

against him, one arm slipping around my waist while the other rested between my shoulder blades, his hand on the base of my neck. I reached up and draped my arms over his shoulders, and he looked down at me as we swayed in a little circle. Part of me was terrified of stepping on his fake foot or something, but it was fine. More than fine.

“This song sucks,” he said. The lights painted his skin blue and pink.

“You’re just saying that because you don’t speak Spanish.”

“No, I’m saying that because it sounds like some Mexican cowboy lost his dog and is drowning his sorrows in a bottle of Cuervo.”

“Oh my God, you are so annoying.”

“C’mon, you have to admit this shit’s cheesy as hell.”

“What, do you prefer to slow dance to Metallica?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“Remind me never to ask you to dance again.”

“Mission accomplished.”

But he pulled me closer so that my cheek naturally rested against his chest, and I let him do it because there is nothing more, I don’t know, *naked* than dancing with someone while looking into their eyes. Josh’s heart was beating out a quick rhythm, and I wondered how much of his casual bravado was for show. Had it always been that way, even before his accident?

When the song ended, I pulled away, twirling out of his arms. I couldn’t breathe so well, and my bones felt like Silly Putty, like you could twist me into all kinds of crazy shapes and it wouldn’t even hurt.

We stood there in the middle of the dance floor, staring at each other, my hand still in his. His blue eyes were shining and

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clear, all that glassiness gone, and a slow smile spread across his face.

“You wanna get out of here?” he asked. “Go swimming?”

My mouth opened; I didn’t think. “Yes.”

This time he didn’t let go of my hand. We slipped out of Leo’s, leaving the loud music and laughter behind.

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chapter five

Josh took me to the Paradise pool (or, rather, I took him, since he wasn't totally sober yet), which was perfectly clean after his afternoon with it. It shone like a new toy, and I grinned.

"Look at you," he said, shaking his head. "You really got a thing for pools."

"They're my first love." Pools didn't get you pregnant, and they didn't die on you. Who needed anything more?

The moon was crazy full that night, its milky light spilling across the surface of the water. The motel was quiet, just a few lights peeking out of closed curtains. Amy was at the desk behind the glass door, her headphones on. She had no idea we were there.

Josh unbuttoned his shirt and threw it onto the lounge chair behind him, but he left his dog tags on. Even though it was dark, I could see dozens of scars crisscrossing his chest, like ridges in a sand dune. What else had that place done to him?

"From the bomb," he said, his voice tight.

"They got you good, huh?" I wanted to ask him about the scars, but it seemed like shaky territory. Just being around him

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shirtless felt like shaky territory. There was too much skin, and my body still hummed from our dance at Leo's.

"Oh, yeah," he said. Then he gestured to the water with his trademark sneaky smile. "Ladies first."

There was no way I was undressing in front of him. "Yeah, I don't know about that," I said.

He folded his arms across his chest, the left side of his mouth inching up at my hesitation. "I won't look."

I raised my eyebrows. "Promise? You're not gonna get all pervy on me after a perfectly nice evening?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "Skylar Evans, where the hell did you come from?"

I kicked off my tennis shoes. "Same place you did. Don't tell me your mom never explained the birds and the bees."

I held up my finger and twirled it around, once, and Josh sighed and faced away from me. I slipped off my dress, thankful I'd decided to wear the underwear without holes. I wasn't trying to be a prude—I knew my bra and panties covered just as much as my bathing suit. But you don't take off your clothes in front of Josh Mitchell and expect to be a virgin by the end of the night.

I dove into the water, swimming until I touched the bottom of the deep end. The pool lights cast trembling reflections onto the peeling baby-blue paint. It was ghostly down there, as if I'd somehow pushed through to another world. I stayed under for a while, letting the cold water devour every bit of heat in me. Like I was a drunk trying to get sober.

When I broke through the water's still surface and turned around, Josh was sitting on the edge of one of the lounge chairs.

"Hey, Skylar?"

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“Yeah?”

“Can you, like, not pay attention to me for a minute while I get in?”

“Sure. I’ll be over there.” I pointed to the diving board, and he nodded.

When I got to the board, I reached up and hung off the end, going underwater every now and then when I heard him grunt or sigh. I wanted to help, to let him know that it was totally okay, but I was afraid he’d snap at me like he did when I offered to help him out of the truck.

When I pulled myself up, I heard a splash and whipped around, worried that he would drown or something, which didn’t make sense, but that was the first thought that went through my head. He was fine, a dark shadow swimming underwater. My eye caught a glint of metal; his prosthesis lay across the lounge chair. It was so strange, this limb, separate from a body, abandoned on the patio. Not human. Where there should have been blood and bones, there was only metal and plastic. Seeing the leg sitting by itself—that was the moment when I really understood what had happened to Josh. Here I was, treading water like it was nothing when for him it would be everything. I reached down and touched my leg. I ran my hand over my foot, past my ankle, along my shin, my calf, my knee, my thigh. Still there. I flexed my foot, turned my ankle round and round. It was a miracle, this leg.

Josh’s metal calf ended at a plastic joint that acted as a knee—it was how he was able to bend the leg when he sat. Above the joint was a hollow plastic tube, like a soda bottle, but not transparent: dark blue and thick. I realized it made up for the part of his thigh that he’d lost. What did it feel like, to have that

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under your hand when you touched your leg? To scratch at an itch that couldn't possibly be there?

“Crazy, isn't it?”

I jumped at Josh's voice, my face reddening. I didn't know how long he'd been watching me. Had he seen me touching my leg? I felt like a Peeping Tom.

“I'm—I'm sorry. It's just . . .” I bit my lip, searching for an answer.

“It's okay,” he said, after a minute. “I'd be curious too.”

I wanted our laughter and joking around to come back, but it was too late. I'd screwed everything up.

He flipped onto his back so that he was floating in the water, staring up at the sky. His dog tags glistened on his chest, and the pool lights hit him from below so that he had a sort of halo all around him, like those pictures of saints in Chris's house. He'd put on a pair of long silky basketball shorts, so I couldn't see his stump—the extra fabric swayed in the water like a jellyfish, and I swam over to him, careful not to invade his space.

I hoped he hadn't put on the shorts because he thought it would bother me, seeing his stump. But I wasn't honestly sure how I would feel if I saw what was left of his leg. Grossed out? Scared? I thought about how everyone at Leo's had avoided it, as if nothing had changed. The pretty girl, the high school friend, Ricky. Even Dylan and Chris. Their eyes never left his face, and they were always smiling, smiling, smiling. You don't talk about lost limbs and smile. You don't talk about war and sacrifice when you're wearing your Friday-night clothes. And I wondered if that was what Josh really wanted—that pretending. I didn't think I would. I'd want to talk about it or at least be honest about the fact that it had happened.

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“Does it hurt?” I asked.

He let out a sigh and his body seemed to relax and sink a little more into the water. I decided that I’d made the right choice.

“Yeah,” he said. “Always. But it feels good to be in the water. At Walter Reed they had these pools we could swim in every day, for rehab and stuff. I miss that.”

I stopped treading water and lay on my back to float beside him. The stars were never very bright in Creek View—it was in a valley and there was too much pollution blowing down from San Francisco. But they were still pretty, so far above us.

“You’ve changed,” I said.

He snorted. “No shit.”

I gently pushed him on the shoulder. “Shut up. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah.”

His voice was soft, and it made me think of that moment when he was in his uniform and I kissed him on the cheek. Maybe he’d started changing even before he’d lost his leg. Maybe I hadn’t bothered to notice.

I don’t know how long we floated on the water, the only sounds our breath and the pool water gushing in and out of its drain. I wondered what he was thinking about and why I cared so much. I wondered if I pitied him and if that was why I’d said yes to swimming in creamy moonlight.

But I didn’t want to be anywhere else.

“Blake said you’re moving to San Francisco,” he said.

“Hmm,” was all I said.

My throat had suddenly closed up, like San Francisco was Mom, like the two had become so attached that I didn’t know

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how to break them apart. All I could think was, *Please don't let me be stuck here forever*, and I didn't know if I was praying or just talking to myself.

"Was that a yes or a no?" he asked.

"It's an I-don't-feel-like-talking-about-it."

"Not even to a one-legged dude? I promise I'll keep your secret."

"Not even to a one-legged dude. Maybe to an armless one." I turned my head a little, let my lips turn up. "You have too many limbs. Sorry."

Josh laughed and pushed his body down, standing in the water by moving his arms in slow circles as he looked at me. I put my eyes back on the stars.

"I think it's cool," he said, after a little while. "You know, that you want to go to college and stuff. Full scholarship, right?"

I nodded.

"What do you want to study?"

"Art. I want to . . ."

"What?" He was looking at me like he really wanted to know.

I shifted so that we were eye to eye. "I was thinking that I could work in an art museum someday. Or teach art, like a class about Impressionism at a college or something? But at night I could work on my collages. I'm also thinking about paper sculpture." I tilted my head back, stared down the stars. "It's stupid."

He kept looking at me. "That's not stupid." When I didn't answer, he moved a little closer. "It's not a crime to get out. Even if . . . even if it doesn't go the way you thought it would."

"Maybe," I whispered. I took a breath, cleared my throat.

"I'm turning into a prune."

I showed him my wrinkled fingertips, then slipped underwater, swimming to the shallow end. When my hands collided with the stairs, I broke the surface and climbed out.

“Shit,” I said. Water pooled at my feet and I looked at the glass door to the lobby, wondering if a towel was worth Amy talking my ear off for the next hour.

“What?” he asked.

“No towels.”

“You can use my shirt.”

Too late, I realized that I was standing there dripping wet in nothing but my bra and underwear. I instinctively covered my chest and backed away from the pool.

“Nice panties,” he said.

“Turn around,” I snapped.

He raised his hands in the air and flipped onto his back. “You need to learn how to take a compliment. Besides,” he added, “I’ve seen a lot less on a girl, believe me.”

“Yes, Josh, everyone in Creek View is well aware of your sexcapades.”

He snickered. “*Sexcapades*. I like it.”

I stomped over to the chair where he’d thrown his shirt and dried off as best I could. I slipped on my dress and pulled off my soaked undergarments, balling them up in my hand so Josh wouldn’t make another comment about my lack of clothing. The wind gusted through the palms and the fronds rubbed together like crumpled tissue paper. It carried the scent of manure and gasoline and the orchard behind the fence. It blew under the thin material of my dress, and I shivered when it slipped over my skin. I envied its reckless abandon, the way it touched without fear.

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A train was going by in the distance, and I closed my eyes and listened to its slow, clunking progress through the fields surrounding Creek View. I wanted to be on it, flying away from Mom and the trailer park and these strange feelings that were taking root in the pit of my stomach. I wanted to get out of there, under cover of darkness, hiding in a metal boxcar.

“I used to jump them,” Josh said.

I opened my eyes and turned around. He was sitting on the edge of the pool, his good leg dangling in the water.

“Jump what?”

“The trains,” he said. “It’s a fuckin’ amazing rush.”

This was what country boys did, the Industrial Revolution’s answer to cow tipping.

“Can’t you, like, *die* doing that?”

“You can die doing a lot of things.”

I hugged my arms, the wind suddenly too cold. I’d seen some pretty real stuff in my life—my mom, before she got sober, sitting in a pile of her own vomit the day my dad died, missing him too much to care about anything but dulling the pain; my best friend giving birth to a baby she was terrified to have. But what Josh saw in the war . . . I wasn’t sure how to touch on that. Or if he wanted me to.

I’d heard the stories about Afghanistan. Guys coming home all screwed up with PTSD, lots of them killing themselves. I thought of the pictures in the paper, with the coffins being unloaded on airfields and the American flags folded into neat triangles at funerals for guys who weren’t even old enough to legally drink. But it had never been real to me. Now I could see the flesh and blood of it.

I forced my feet forward and crouched behind him, then raised my hand, my skin inches from his, hesitating. Then I traced the letters on Josh's back: *Semper Fidelis*. He sighed as I silently trailed my finger along the intricate letters.

"Always faithful," I whispered. "To what?"

"The guys," he said, his voice low. "I should be out there with them. I'm a fucking waste of space here, Skylar."

I swept my palm across the words. "No you're not."

He snorted.

"You're an excellent dance partner. A badass pool cleaner. Probably the best mechanic in town, but nobody will ever know that because—"

I stopped myself, afraid of going too far.

"You can say it," he said, keeping his eyes on the water. "I know my dad's a total screwup."

"Well. My mom has spent the past few weeks sitting in her bedroom, feeling sorry for herself and eating enough Little Debbie snacks to keep them in business. So, you know, it is what it is."

He turned to look at me. "Why's that?"

I shook my head. "She lost her job. Long story." I stood up and started putting my shoes on. "Speaking of . . . I should get going. She's probably mildly freaking out right now."

It was only eleven, but the longer I stayed out there with Josh, the more our night got hold of me.

His eyebrows drew together. "What are you gonna do?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat and made myself look him in the eye. "Work, like always. And try to . . . I don't know—" My voice caught, and I turned away.

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“Hey,” he said. Gentle—very un-Josh-like.

He reached out a hand and grabbed my wrist so I couldn’t run off like I wanted to. I almost missed the devil-may-care Josh who made stupid jokes and was sober for about three hours a day. He was so much easier to deal with.

For a minute we stayed there, looking at each other. The wind rustled the orchard trees and whispered secrets to us.

“I’m fine, seriously.” I shrugged him off and headed toward the back gate. “I’ll wait out front, okay?”

When I got to his truck, I leaned against it, drinking the night air in great, heaving gulps. My hands were shaking, and my lips tingled, and the skin around my wrist—the part that Josh had touched—the skin was singing.

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