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Opening extract from
Underwater

Written by
Marisa Reichard

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CHAPTER ONE

I just moved. Not from one town to another, but from one end of the couch to the other end. I don't usually sit on this side, but I'm trying to listen in on the apartment next door. I'm rather particular about where I sit because I like things to be to the left of me. I need to be able to see what's there.

The walls of our two-bedroom apartment are thin and covered in the standard off-white paint of a rental unit, but I still can't make out the words on the other side. I can only decipher the pitch of the voices.

One is high.

One is low.

Girl.

Boy.

And then I hear feet hitting the linoleum floor and the noise of the screen door as it slaps open followed by the double bang of it shutting back into place.

Someone knocks on my door. Their knuckles thrum against the flimsy wood, and the echo of it rings hollow through my apartment.

Yes, I can open the door. But I can't cross the threshold. That's my rule: *Nothing will ever hurt me if I don't cross the threshold.*

I press my shoulder against the door and grab hold of the knob. "Who is it?"

“Evan.”

“I don’t know you.”

“No kidding.” He laughs. “I just moved in next door.”

I peek through the peephole. It offers up a long, distorted version of whoever is out there. It’s not the best view, but I can tell his hands are empty. That’s good.

Even though Evan will eventually segue from new person to neighbor, I’m not eager to get the introduction ball rolling. This kind of attitude is exactly what guarantees that, by the end of the month, Evan will think of me as the weird chick with the frizzy hair who never goes outside. I’m pretty sure that’s what everyone else in my apartment building thinks of me. They leave every day, and I stay here. They come home, and I’m still here doing the same thing. But right now, Evan doesn’t know all of that, so I should probably open the door even though the thought of it makes my hands sweat. I pull it open a crack. A tiny crack.

Whoa.

Evan is cute.

And he looks my age.

The peephole didn’t do him justice.

He runs his hand through his hair. It’s fluffy and brown with golden sun-bleached tips. His skin is tan, sun-drenched like his hair, and his nose is peeling. He must’ve moved from the beach. Literally. Like, he had a hut on the sand. Something about the way he smells makes me want to stay near him. He reminds me of things I miss. I breathe him in, relishing the aroma of earth and ocean and bonfire smoke.

“Um, hey,” he says. “Are you sick or something?”

I consider shutting the door in his face. How can he call me out so fast?

“Why?” I can hear the edge in my voice, the *back-offness* to my tone. It’s enough to make him straighten up and push back on his flip-flopped feet.

“Sorry. It’s just—it’s Wednesday. Shouldn’t you be at school? Are you home sick?”

Of course he meant was I physically sick, like with pneumonia or explosive diarrhea. Not mentally sick.

“Why aren’t *you* at school?” I say.

“Because I’m moving in today and starting school tomorrow.” He says this like I should get it. “I can’t do both at the same time.”

I realize I’m not being the most welcoming neighbor. “Sorry,” I mumble. “I don’t do well with strangers.”

“Does the fact that I now live next door make me less of a stranger?”

“Not really.”

“Okaaay.” He runs his hand through his hair again like he’s frustrated. But also like he’s trying to understand. It’s the same way my mom looked at me on Thanksgiving four months ago when I told her I couldn’t take the trash out to the dumpster anymore.

“What was it you wanted?” I ask.

He shakes his head, and one of those golden-tipped curls comes loose and falls down over his eye. He shoves it back behind

his ear. “Is that your car out back with the tarp on it? It says 207 on the space number. That’s you, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Cool, because my mom needs me to unload the U-Haul. I don’t want to scratch your car. Can you move it?”

My heart rate speeds up instantly. It pounds through my chest like rain on the roof. Evan can probably hear the fast and furious thump of it. I wipe my palms against my flannel pajama pants and grasp for excuses. I actually feel like I’m stretching up, reaching for apples on a really high branch.

“I can’t. I’m sick. I can’t leave. I can’t move my car.”

I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. It’s my mantra now.

Evan looks at me. Brow creased. Perplexed. “Wait, I thought you just got mad at me for assuming you were sick. Now you really are sick?”

“Yep.” I cough. “Super sick. And it’s really contagious. You probably shouldn’t get too close.”

He scoots back a couple inches. In the courtyard below, the sunlight smashes against the surface of the swimming pool and shoots a reflection at Evan’s feet so it looks like he’s standing in a puddle. “You don’t wanna move your car?”

“I can’t.”

“But like I said, it’s in the way.”

“How about if you move it?” Yes, brilliant. *Good job, Morgan.* Being quick on my feet is a skill I’m getting progressively better at as the months pass.

“You want *me* to move your car? You just called me a stranger

five seconds ago. What if I steal it and sell it on Craigslist?”

“You won’t. Let me get the keys.”

I shut the door and grab the keys from the rack my mom hung in the kitchen after one too many mornings of frantically searching the apartment for lost keys. When I crack the door back open, my breath catches again, because he really is cuter than he should be.

Stop it, Morgan.

I hold the keys up to Evan, but when he reaches in to grab them, my body goes on high alert.

I flinch.

I flutter.

I drop the keys at my feet.

He bends over, calm and steady, eyes on mine the whole time, as he reaches past the threshold to grab them.

His fingertips graze my bare toes.

I jump back.

I breathe fast.

He stands up.

He straightens out.

“Hey, is the pool heated?” he asks. “Or am I gonna freeze my face off if I jump in?”

The pool. I try to ignore it. It taunts me. But I can practically feel the cool water sliding through my fingers and down my back as soon as Evan mentions swimming. I imagine him yanking off his shirt and jumping in. Then I try to unimagine it.

“It’s warm enough, but it’s too short to get a good workout.

And too shallow to pull off a flip turn. Plus you have to scoop the leaves out yourself.”

“You sound like you know something about swimming. Are you on a team?”

“Not anymore.”

“Oh. Why not?”

“Because. Just bring the keys back whenever, okay? Or, if you sell it, bring me the cash.”

“I’ll get you a good deal.” He laughs. “I don’t back down too easy.”

I shut the door and hope my car will start. My mom takes it out once in a while to keep it running, but it’s old. She’s actually threatened to sell it. She says we could use the money. I’m pretty sure she’s bluffing. For her, selling my car would be the same as giving up. She’d rather hang on to hope.

My mom hopes I’ll go back to school when it’s time to be a senior.

I do online high school now. Going to my other school got to be too hard. I can’t control things out in the real world. Cars turn corners too fast. Doors slam. People appear out of nowhere. It’s unpredictable.

I don’t like unpredictable.

Home is predictable enough. Until just now when I realized we have new neighbors. And there’s a teenager like me next door. Well, not really like me, because I’m pretty sure Evan actually

leaves the house. He looks like he surfs and watches bands play at crammed clubs with entrances in backstreet alleys that require secret passwords. He looks like he rides his skateboard in the empty parking lots of places in town that have gone out of business or zooms down steep hills for an adrenaline rush. So not really like me at all.

Because he has a life.

I go to school online and eat tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich for lunch every day.

I form an assembly line along the coffee-stained Formica of the kitchen counter just the way my dad taught me. Bread. Butter. Cheese. Piping hot griddle.

I like the sound of the sizzle of the butter as it hits the pan. It's a reminder of how quickly things change. One second you're whole, the next second you've melted.

I like to put extra cheese on my sandwich so it drips out over the sides. That way, I can scoop it up, twirl it around my fingertip, and suck it into my mouth. I also dunk the toasty bread into the soup, sopping up what's left in the bottom of the bowl. I eat on the couch where the TV is in front of me and the closed curtains are behind me. I'm a shut-in. I'm unaware if it's foggy, sunny, cold, or hot outside unless I'm specifically paying attention. Nothing changes inside my living room. I have a television lineup, online school, the same lunch, and scheduled ten a.m. and two p.m. check-in phone calls from my mom every weekday.

My psychologist visits twice a week.

Her name is Brenda.

She has a hard edge and soft eyes.

She has tattoos that snake up and down her arms until they get lost underneath the sleeves or the collar of whatever shirt she's wearing.

She comes on Tuesdays and Thursdays after lunch.

At one p.m.

She'll be here tomorrow.

We'll sit on the couch and she'll make me turn off the TV.

I hate that.

Sometimes Brenda forces me to say things that make me cry. But usually, talking to her calms me down. She also checks up on my medicine to be sure I have enough emergency pills. I need them sometimes. On bad days. Brenda can't prescribe them for me because she's not that kind of doctor. She's a psychologist. My regular doctor gave me the prescription after he talked to Brenda.

Today feels different because Evan is next door.

I can hear the *bang bang* of him hammering nails into the wall. I can hear the *thump thump* of him bounding up the stairs. I can hear the *slap slap* of his screen door as he goes in and out, back and forth, up and down the stairs.

Evan is next door. He smells like the ocean.

This runs through my head for the rest of the day. It's what I hear as I sop up soup and sift through soap operas.

I assume he'll bring my keys back when he's done hauling things inside. But when hours pass and he doesn't return, I wonder if maybe he did sell my car. Or at least moved it someplace far away. That would almost be a relief.

But, eventually, there is a knock at my door.

“Who is it?” I ask, as if anyone else ever comes by unannounced.

“Me again. I have your keys.”

I flick on the porch light because the evening shadows have set in and I want to be able to see him better. He’s a bit sweatier for wear, but his hair is still fluffy and curly and falling into his face in a way that makes me avoid eye contact. He dangles my Pacific Palms High School key chain out in front of him.

“Sorry it took so long, but I put her back where she belongs,” he says. “That Bel Air is a classic. How’d you end up with such a sweet ride?”

“It was my grandpa’s.”

I know nothing about cars. I only know things about this particular matador-red Bel Air because my grandpa told them to me one million times so I could commit the words to memory.

“What year is it?”

“A fifty-seven.”

“Your grandpa must’ve been one cool dude.”

“He was.” I smile and shut the door.

Evan knocks again. He knocks loud and long. I open the door because I can’t not notice him. There’s something pulling me closer to the threshold, and I can feel it. There’s a tingle in my big toe. I look down and see I’ve practically got one foot out the door. I yank it back inside, stunned that I even tried.

We stand. We stare.

“Why’d you shut the door like that?” he asks.

Thankfully, my little brother comes soaring through the courtyard right then. His arms are spread out wide like an airplane. His mouth makes the sputtering noises of the engine, and his lips spritz spit into the sky. My mom comes in behind him in dirty hospital scrubs. Her hair is knotted, sloppy, on the top of her head, and my brother's superhero backpack strains against one of her shoulders. She's not a nurse. She does the gross stuff. From Monday through Friday, she mops up blood and puke from hospital corridors. And some nights, like tonight, she comes home balancing a pizza box from Penzoni's on her hip as she struggles to open our mailbox to fish out the pile of bills inside.

My brother takes the stairs to our front door two at a time. He stops short at Evan's feet. His arms fall flat at his sides and some spittle stalls, then sucks back between his lips—*zzzzzip*—as he eyes Evan with kindergarten suspicion.

“Who are you?”

“I'm Evan.”

“Evan who?”

Evan laughs. “Uh, Evan Kokua.”

Evan tosses out some sort of secret handshake, bumping his fist against Ben's in a way that sends my little brother into spasms of laughter.

“Are you a superhero?” Ben asks.

Evan shoots my brother a grin that lights up the otherwise dingy wraparound balcony outside our front door, then leans down to look him in the eye. “If I am, I'll never tell.”

“Awesome!”

Ben pushes past me and through the front door. I rock backward then forward, but manage to stay inside.

And then my mom shuffles up the stairs, hands the pizza box over to me, and looks at Evan. “Half cheese, half pepperoni. I know it’s not very original, but you’re welcome to join us, Superman.”

She brushes past him to get inside.

Evan shifts forward, ready to make the crossing into our tiny apartment, but he stops midstride over the threshold when he looks at me. My eyes must be bugging out of my face, because he falls back into place on the other side of the door, feet firmly planted on our welcome mat.

“Nah, I better not. I’ve gotta nail a bookshelf to the wall. Earthquakes.”

He shrugs. We all shrug.

California earthquakes. We’re all waiting for them. We’re all waiting for things to happen that might never come—things that, if they do come, might not be as bad as the things that have already occurred.

“I’m Carol,” my mom says, shoving her hand past me to grip Evan’s. They shake. He smiles.

“It’s nice to meet you, Carol. I’m Evan. My mom and I just moved here from Hawaii. You’ll meet her, I’m sure.”

My mom throws her arms out on each side of her, accidentally thwacking the hanging planter with the dying fern in it hard enough to send it swaying under the porch light. “Welcome to Paradise Manor, Evan. Ain’t it grand?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I bet you didn’t realize paradise has a view of the dumpster and no AC.”

Evan lets out a genuine laugh that shakes something loose deep inside of me. I like genuine laughter in the same way I like the warm sun on my face, but I haven’t heard or felt either of those things in a long time.

“Well, good night, then,” my mom says as she slips all the way inside. “You’ll have to swing by for pizza some other time. Right, Morgan?” It’s not a question. It’s an expectation. It’s a request to hurry up and have a life again.

“Um, right,” I say, rolling the knotted string of my daytime pajama pants between my fingertips. I stand at the door staring at Evan. “Sorry. My mom’s kind of embarrassing.”

“Not really. She just tells it like it is. It’s not like we don’t know where we are. It’s not like we don’t know we’re living the lyrics to a bad country song.” He fakes strumming a guitar.

Something about Evan makes me want to be brave, so I fasten a fake guitar strap across my own shoulder and strum the strings at my waist.

“She lives in a rundowwwwn building on the outskirts of towwwwn,” I croon in an over-the-top country twang.

“Not bad,” he says as he backs away from the door, nodding. “Not bad at all. I’m gonna have to write some music to go along with that. Right after I learn to play the guitar.”

The idea of us making music together is so ludicrous that it makes me laugh.

Evan grins at me. “You have a good laugh. Like when you

hand one out, you mean it. My cousin was like that.”

The compliment throws me off-kilter, and I play it back in my head to be sure I heard him right. “Well, your cousin must’ve been one cool dude.”

He smiles halfheartedly. “Yeah. I think you would’ve liked him.” He shrugs his shoulders. “Well, I hope you feel better. My mom swears by soup. Do you have any?”

That makes me laugh again.

“What?”

“That was just really funny in a way you don’t even know.”

“Oh, well, then I’m glad I could make you laugh. Again.”

“Me too.”

I’m still laughing as I say goodbye and shut the door behind me. It’s a sound that echoes inside and outside of me, and it stops my mom in her tracks when I turn to face her. She stands dead still in the center of the kitchen and looks at me, a smile creeping across her face. It’s quick. There and gone. And then she pulls a slice of pizza from the box and slaps it down on my brother’s plate.

“You eating?” she asks me.

I nod and pull myself onto my stool at the kitchen counter. The stool where my mom and Ben are to the left of me because they know the drill.

“Evan seems nice. Did you talk for long?” my mom asks. She’s fishing.

“Long enough.”

“I’m not sure it was long enough for him. He wanted to stay for dinner.”

“He shoulda stayed,” Ben says. “He’s cool.”

“Yep, too cool for me, I think.” I grab a slice of pizza and turn to my brother. “So who’d you play with at school? I want to hear all about it.”

Ben launches into a story about recess. He tells me about how they played Farm and all the kids were different animals and he got to be the farmer.

“That’s the best part because then you get to pretend to feed all the people.” He laughs, then shakes his head trying to knock his mistake loose. “I mean, the animals.”

He keeps talking, animated and stuttering with excitement. I listen to the sound of his voice. And even though the sides of his mouth are covered in tomato sauce and he smells like kickball sweat and playground dirt, I pull him into me and kiss the top of his messy head of hair.

“I love you,” I tell him. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he says through a mouthful of pizza. “I love you, too.”

CHAPTER TWO

My emergency pills are in an amber prescription bottle on the second shelf of the medicine cabinet. I look at them every morning and hope today isn't a day when I'll need to take one. But knowing they are there makes me feel better. I haven't needed an emergency pill for almost two months. Since Valentine's Day. That was a bad day because my dad called. I refused to get on the phone even though he asked to talk to me. That was the last time he tried. But he did talk to my mom, which made her angry. And he talked to Ben, which made him confused. Ben asked my dad when he was coming home, because by then it had been over a year since Ben had seen him. Over a year since he'd returned from his last tour, his fifth one, in Afghanistan. Over a year since my mom had filed for divorce and full custody. Once Ben had gone into another room where he couldn't hear her, my mom told my dad he'd better not even think about showing up at Paradise Manor.

So he didn't.

And he probably never will.

After my mom and Ben have left for work and school, I hold the amber prescription bottle in my hand. I run my thumb over the label that tells Morgan Grant to take one pill as needed.

Not today.

I put it back.

I shut the door.

I hear Evan leave when I'm in my room pulling on a clean pair of pajama pants—I don't see the point of wearing real clothes since I never leave the house. *Slap slap* goes his screen door and *boom boom* go his footsteps on the stairs outside. I pull back my curtains and watch him go.

It's the first week of April, but today will be Evan's first day of school. Everything will be new, but enough of it will be the same. Because it's still high school. And high school doesn't change that much from one place to another. Evan will go to a classroom. He will sit in a desk that faces a whiteboard. A teacher will stand at a podium and tell him things that are supposed to sound smart. Evan will write them down in a notebook covered in graffiti doodles. The girls at school will like him; I'm sure of it. The pretty girls will call dibs and drag him off to the quad at lunchtime to watch them eat apples and sip Diet Coke. I know this because I used to be one of those girls.

I think about these things.

I watch a soap opera.

I eat a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup.

I complete two online lessons.

I study Rolle's theorem.

I e-mail an analysis of colors in *The Great Gatsby* to my English teacher.

I wait for Brenda.

I wait for one p.m.

At noon, I know Brenda is coming soon. It is because of this that I feel zingy electricity in my veins. I know she's coming and I have to open the door to let her in.

I have to talk. I have to tell.

Maybe a shower will help.

I duck my head under the hot water and let it soak through to my skull. My hair suctions itself to my ears, locking the noise out. I like being underwater where it's only me. Sounds and the world are far away.

I've spent a lot of time underwater because I used to be on my high school swim team. I swam every weekday, even in the off-season, from three until four thirty p.m., in the twenty-five-yard lanes of the Pacific Palms High School pool. I swam with the same three friends I'd met on youth squad when I was eleven and my dad first received orders to a base near Pacific Palms.

My mom was newly pregnant with Ben so we'd hoped my dad's transfer meant he would be home for a while. But we'd barely gotten settled when he was called up for his third tour in Afghanistan. So he returned to combat and my mom and I committed to making the best of Pacific Palms.

I got close to my swim team friends, and by the time we got to high school, we'd become an inseparable foursome. Chelsea was brilliant and beautiful in that blond SoCal way that made boys stutter when they talked to her. Brianna swam the fifty-yard freestyle faster than any other girl in the history of our high

school. And my best friend, Sage, was wise beyond her years, poised to perfection on Model UN and talking about things other sixteen-year-olds didn't even know existed.

I was a little of all of that. But after October fifteenth, after that day, Pacific Palms High School shut down. My friends and I had to go to different schools so construction workers could get busy changing the parts of PPHS that would haunt us forever. The administration split up students based on a set of neighborhood boundaries they'd come up with. The four of us didn't live close enough to go to the same place, so we drifted as things continued to change.

Brianna got a boyfriend.

I started online high school.

Chelsea stopped calling.

And Sage moved away before she was even supposed to start at her new school.

But at our old school, I imagined the bright blue championship banners still hanging from the rungs of the metal fence that ran around the outdoor pool deck. I didn't know if they were still there, but I wanted them to be. Because my name was on one of them. I held a record. I was a long-distance swimmer. I was someone who could go on and on forever, steady and even, then finish hard to pull off the win.

Now my whole life is a race. Every minute leading to the next. Every day feeding into another. It's a constant crossing of the finish line. It's like playing a fast song slow.

Chelsea and Brianna don't understand that. They tried.

They'd come over, but we'd only end up sitting and staring at the television.

"Come with us to the party," Brianna would beg. "There are going to be so many cute boys."

"So many," Chelsea would echo.

I'd curl up tighter on the couch, tucking my slippered feet underneath me. "I don't care about cute boys or parties right now. But don't let me stop you from enjoying them."

"It's not the same without you," Chelsea would whine.

Sage would call from her new house on the weekends. More often than not, she'd sound distant and sad and in search of solutions. "So you quit school?" she'd ask. "Is it easier?"

"A little," I'd say.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Brenda knocks her knuckles against my door at 12:57 p.m. I want those three minutes before one p.m. to myself. But she's here. So I breathe deep. I breathe long. And I open the door. Brenda smiles, and I can see the gap between her top two teeth that makes her look like a little kid. I know how old she is because I once asked her to tell me.

"If it really matters, I'm twenty-nine," she said. "But why do you want to know?"

"I just wanted to see if you would tell me."

Today, a long burgundy dreadlock falls into her face, and she

tucks it back into the other chunk of dreads she has fastened with an oversize ponytail holder at the nape of her neck. I can see the string of tiny silver loops that line her lobe when she does it. And the peace sign tattoo etched into the skin behind her ear. I pull the door all the way open, and she comes inside.

She sits. She is to the left of me because she knows. She takes out a notebook and a pen. She has pages filled about me. I'm sure she goes back to her office after we meet and types the notes into her computer. She didn't tell me that. I just know. I'd be stupid not to know. Everyone keeps everything on computers.

She pulls the remote from my hand and shuts off the TV with a click.

We stare. We start.

“So. How have the last couple days been for you?”

I tell her about the mundane stuff that happened yesterday and today. Soup. Soap operas. School assignments. And then I tell her about Evan.

“A boy? Your age?” She's intrigued. I can tell by the way she taps her pen against her notebook. “Tell me about him.”

“He's tall. And summery.”

“Summery? What does ‘summery’ mean to you?” Her voice is calm, like petting a cat.

And then I tell her about soft sand and crisp ocean water. Of bright blue skies dotted with seagulls and airplanes. Of those same blue skies turning dark and dotted with the moon and stars. I tell her of bonfire smoke and surfboards. Of tank tops and short shorts. Of beach cruiser bicycles and snow cones. Of string

bikinis and tan lines. Of parties and promises. Of cold beer and warm kisses.

I tell her all the things I used to be before this. It's not the first time I've told her, but she seems to be listening extra hard today. I think it must be because I sound wistful.

"Do you miss it?" she asks me.

And that makes me cry.

She hands me a tissue, and I sit like a lump on the couch.

"Missing summer is a good thing," she says. "It will be here before you know it. You can be ready for it. You can enjoy it again."

After she's gone, I feel better for a little bit. I don't hate thinking about summer. But then I think too much about other stuff. I curl up into the fetal position, knees tucked into my chest, waiting for the memories to pass.

An hour after that, there's a knock on my door. I'm still curled up, but I've stopped crying. My nose is stuffed up with snot, and I snort it down into my throat. My eyelids are puffy, and the throb of a headache bangs at my temples. I want to be alone. I stay very still and hope whoever is knocking will go away. But they don't. Whoever it is wants me to know they are there.

"Who is it?" I ask through the door.

"Superman."

Even though that makes me smile, I tell Evan I'm not dressed. "I can't open the door."

“Well, get dressed. I’ll wait.”

So I do. I don’t know why, but I do.

I scrub my face. I run a brush through my hair. I dab deodorant under my armpits. I put on a clean bra and change my stained shirt. I do it all in five minutes flat.

When I crack open the door, Evan’s holding some envelopes and a white to-go cup of something. There’s a lid on top with three holes poked through it, like the lids of jars Ben uses to collect bugs from the planter at the entrance to Paradise Manor.

“First off, we got some of your mail,” Evan says, handing over a credit card bill and some grocery store coupons.

“Feel free to keep them.”

He smiles. “Second, I brought you some soup. To make you feel better.” I can smell the garlic through the lid when he holds it out to me. “My aunt owns a restaurant. They make good soup.”

“I like soup.”

“Well, yeah. Doesn’t everybody?”

I shrug.

I watch Evan take me in. “Wow, you don’t look so good.”

“Okay, then.” His words hit me hard. I shouldn’t have opened the door. I don’t need this cute boy from Hawaii to bring me soup and tell me I’m not pretty. There was a time in my life when I knew I was pretty. But I don’t feel that way right now.

“Aw, man.” He runs his hand through his hair, flustered. “Look, I’m sorry. That came out wrong. That sounded like I think you’re ugly or something. Which you’re not.” He looks down at our welcome mat. “You just look sick. That’s all.”

Right. Sick. I push my hair back from my face with my free hand, knotting it on top of my head without a ponytail holder.

“It’s okay,” I say.

“I just meant you seem worse today. So maybe it’s one of those things where you have to get worse before you get better.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

I pull the lid off the soup. A stream of steam hits the air between us. The smell of garlic goes from pleasant to overwhelming.

“I didn’t want it to get cold. That’s why I needed you to open up,” he says.

“Thanks, Superman.”

He grins like he’s relieved I’m calling him that. I notice dimples digging into his tan cheeks. There’s a part of me that wants to nudge my pointer finger into one of them because they’re so cute.

“I’m not Superman. Clark Kent, maybe. Not Superman.”

“Yeah, okay.” I smile.

Evan kicks the front of his flip-flop against the edge of our welcome mat.

“So did you learn to play the guitar yet?” I ask.

“Nope.” He laughs. “Did you write any songs?”

“Oh, yeah. Dozens.”

“I better pick up the pace then.” He grins and those dimples show up again. “But right now, I better go do my homework. This trigonometry class is way ahead of where we were at my old school.”

“Trig, huh? So are you a junior?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Same.” I don’t tell him I’m already in calculus and that math is one of the few subjects I haven’t let slip.

“Well, you need to get well so you can show me around town, okay? I don’t know anybody here.”

I think about how fun that would’ve been a year ago. When I was the way I was before. I would’ve taken him to Clyde’s Coffee for frozen hot chocolate. And I would’ve shown him the strip of beach where the locals hang out and the tourists don’t. I would’ve shown him which hill it was fun to ride down on your bike, and I would’ve let go of my handlebars and let my arms fly out like wings while the wind whipped past my ears. And on a Saturday night, I would’ve taken him to a party and leaned into him so his lips would’ve been close to my ear when he talked. That move always worked. I would’ve shown him the alcove in the hallway by the auditorium at school where I used to think I could hide and nobody would find me. I would’ve shown him my world. Now, I can’t show him anything but a tiny apartment and a girl who can’t walk out the front door.

“I don’t get out much. But thanks for the soup. I’m sure it’ll taste really good.”

Before he can say anything, I shut the door and leave him behind it.