

#1 New York Times BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

Sarah Dessen

what happened to
goodbye



One



The table was sticky, there was a cloudy smudge on my water glass, and we'd been seated for ten minutes with no sign of a waitress. Still, I knew what my dad would say. By this point, it was part of the routine.

“Well, I gotta tell you. I see potential here.”

He was looking around as he said this, taking in the décor. Luna Blu was described on the menu as “Contemporary Italian and old-fashioned good!” but from what I could tell from the few minutes we'd been there, the latter claim was questionable. First, it was 12:30 on a weekday, and we were one of only two tables in the place. Second, I'd just noticed a good quarter inch of dust on the plastic plant that was beside our table. But my dad had to be an optimist. It was his job.

Now, I looked across at him as he studied the menu, his brow furrowed. He needed glasses but had stopped wearing them after losing three pairs in a row, so now he just squinted a lot. On anyone else, this might have looked strange, but on my dad, it just added to his charm.

“They have calamari *and* guac,” he said, reaching up to

push his hair back from his eyes. “This is a first. Guess we have to order both.”

“Yum,” I said, as a waitress sporting lambskin boots and a miniskirt walked past, not even giving us a glance.

My dad followed her with his eyes, then shifted his gaze to me. I could tell he was wondering, as he always did when we made our various escapes, if I was upset with him. I wasn’t. Sure, it was always jarring, up and leaving everything again. But it all came down to how you looked at it. Think earth-shattering, life-ruining change, and you’re done. But cast it as a do-over, a chance to reinvent and begin again, and it’s all good. We were in Lakeview. It was early January. I could be anyone from here.

There was a bang, and we both looked over to the bar, where a girl with long black hair, her arms covered with tattoos, had apparently just dropped a big cardboard box on the floor. She exhaled, clearly annoyed, and then fell to her knees, picking up paper cups as they rolled around her. Halfway through collecting them, she glanced up and saw us.

“Oh, no,” she said. “You guys been waiting long?”

My dad put down his menu. “Not that long.”

She gave him a look that made it clear she doubted this, then got to her feet, peering down the restaurant. “Tracey!” she called. Then she pointed at us. “You have a table. Could you please, maybe, go greet them and offer them drinks?”

I heard clomping noises, and a moment later, the wait in the boots turned the corner and came into view. She looked like she was about to deliver bad news as she pulled out her

order pad. “Welcome to Luna Blu,” she recited, her voice flat. “Can I get you a beverage?”

“How’s the calamari?” my dad asked her.

She just looked at him as if this might be a trick question. Then, finally, she said, “It’s all right.”

My dad smiled. “Wonderful. We’ll take an order of that, and the guacamole. Oh, and a small house salad, as well.”

“We only have vinaigrette today,” Tracey told him.

“Perfect,” my dad said. “That’s exactly what we want.”

She looked over her pad at him, her expression skeptical. Then she sighed and stuck her pen behind her ear and left. I was about to call after her, hoping for a Coke, when my dad’s phone suddenly buzzed and jumped on the table, clanging against his fork and knife. He picked it up, squinted at the screen, put it down again, ignoring the message as he had all the others that had come since we’d left Westcott that morning. When he looked at me again, I made it a point to smile.

“I’ve got a good feeling about this place,” I told him. “Serious potential.”

He looked at me for a moment, then reached over, squeezing my shoulder. “You know what?” he said. “You are one awesome girl.”

His phone buzzed again, but this time neither of us looked at it. And back in Westcott, another awesome girl sat texting or calling, wondering why on earth her boyfriend, the one who was so charming but just couldn’t commit, wasn’t returning her calls or messages. Maybe he was in the shower. Or forgot his phone again. Or maybe he was sitting in a restaurant in a

town hundreds of miles away with his daughter, about to start their lives all over again.

A few minutes later, Tracey returned with the guacamole and salad, plunking them down between us on the table. “Calamari will be another minute,” she informed us. “You guys need anything else right now?”

My dad looked across at me, and despite myself, I felt a twinge of fatigue, thinking of doing this all again. But I’d made my decision two years ago. To stay or go, to be one thing or many others. Say what you would about my dad, but life with him was never dull.

“No,” he said now to Tracey, although he kept his eyes on me. Not squinting a bit, full and blue, just like my own. “We’re doing just fine.”

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Whenever my dad and I moved to a new town, the first thing we always did was go directly to the restaurant he’d been brought in to take over, and order a meal. We got the same appetizers each time: guacamole if it was a Mexican place, calamari for the Italian joints, and a simple green salad, regardless. My dad believed these to be the most basic of dishes, what anyplace worth its salt should do and do well, and as such they provided the baseline, the jumping-off point for whatever came next. Over time, they’d also become a gauge of how long I should expect us to be in the place we’d landed. Decent guac and somewhat crisp lettuce, I knew not to get too attached. Super rubbery squid, though, or greens edged with slimy black, and it was worth going out for a sport

in school, or maybe even joining a club or two, as we'd be staying awhile.

After we ate, we'd pay our bill—tipping well, but not extravagantly—before we went to find our rental place. Once we'd unhitched the U-Haul, my dad would go back to the restaurant to officially introduce himself, and I'd get to work making us at home.

EAT INC, the restaurant conglomerate company my dad worked for as a consultant, always found our houses for us. In Westcott, the strip of a beach town in Florida we'd just left, they'd rented us a sweet bungalow a block from the water, all decorated in pinks and greens. There were plastic flamingos everywhere: on the lawn, in the bathroom, strung up in tiny lights across the mantel. Cheesy, but in an endearing way. Before that, in Petree, a suburb just outside Atlanta, we'd had a converted loft in a high-rise inhabited mostly by bachelors and businessmen. Everything was teak and dark, the furniture modern with sharp edges, and it was always quiet and very cold. Maybe this had been so noticeable to me because of our first place, in Montford Falls, a split-level on a cul-de-sac populated entirely by families. There were bikes on every lawn and little decorative flags flying from most porches: fat Santas for Christmas, ruby hearts for Valentine's, raindrops and rainbows in spring. The cabal of moms—all in yoga pants, pushing strollers as they power walked to meet the school bus in the mornings and afternoons—studied us unabashedly from the moment we arrived. They watched my dad come and go at his weird hours and cast me sympathetic looks as I brought in our

groceries and mail. I'd known already, very well, that I was no longer part of what was considered a traditional family unit. But their stares confirmed it, just in case I'd missed the memo.

Everything was so different, that first move, that I didn't feel I had to be different as well. So the only thing I'd changed was my name, gently but firmly correcting my homeroom teacher on my first day of school. "Eliza," I told him. He glanced down at his roll sheet, then crossed out what was there and wrote this in. It was so easy. Just like that, in the hurried moments between announcements, I wrapped up and put away sixteen years of my life and was born again, all before first period even began.

I wasn't sure exactly what my dad thought of this. The first time someone called for Eliza, a few days later, he looked confused, even as I reached for the phone and he handed it over. But he never said anything. I knew he understood, in his own way. We'd both left the same town and same circumstances. He had to stay who he was, but I didn't doubt for a second that he would have changed if it had been an option.

As Eliza, I wasn't that different from who I'd been before. I'd inherited what my mother called her "corn-fed" looks—tall, strawberry blonde, and blue-eyed—so I looked like the other popular girls at school. Add in the fact that I had nothing to lose, which gave me confidence, and I fell in easily with the jocks and rah-rahs, collecting friends quickly. It helped that everyone in Montford Falls had known each other forever: being new blood, even if you looked familiar, made you exotic, different. I liked this feeling so much that, when we moved to

Petree, our next place, I took it further, calling myself Lizbet and taking up with the drama mamas and dancers. I wore cut-off tights, black turtlenecks, and bright red lipstick, my hair pulled back into the tightest bun possible as I counted calories, took up cigarettes, and made everything Into A Production. It was different, for sure, but also exhausting. Which was probably why in Westcott, our most recent stop, I'd been more than happy to be Beth, student-council secretary and all-around joiner. I wrote for the school paper, served on yearbook, and tutored underachieving middle school kids. In my spare time, I organized car washes and bake sales to raise funds for the literary magazine, the debate team, the children in Honduras the Spanish club was hoping to build a rec center for. I was that girl, the one Everyone Knew, my face all over the yearbook. Which would make it that much more noticeable when I vanished from the next one.

The strangest thing about all of this was that, before, in my old life, I hadn't been any of these things: not a student leader or an actress or an athlete. There, I was just average, normal, unremarkable. Just Mclean.

That was my real name, my given name. Also the name of the all-time winningest basketball coach of Defriese University, my parents' alma mater and my dad's favorite team of all time. To say he was a fan of Defriese basketball was an understatement, akin to saying the sun was simply a star. He lived and breathed DB—as he and his fellow obsessives called it—and had since his own days of growing up just five miles outside campus. He went to Defriese basketball camp in the

summer, knew stats for every team and player by heart, and wore a Defriese jersey in just about every school picture from kindergarten to senior year. The actual playing time on the team he eventually got over the course of two years of riding the bench as an alternate were the best fourteen minutes of his life, hands down.

Except, of course, he always added hurriedly, my birth. That was great, too. So great that there was really no question that I'd be named after Mclean Rich, his onetime coach and the man he most admired and respected. My mother, knowing resistance to this choice was futile, agreed only on the condition that I get a normal middle name—Elizabeth—which provided alternate options, should I decide I wanted them. I hadn't really ever expected that to be the case. But you can never predict everything.

Three years ago my parents, college sweethearts, were happily married and raising me, their only child. We lived in Tyler, the college town of which Defriese U was the epicenter, where we had a restaurant, Mariposa Grill. My dad was the head chef, my mom handled the business end and front of house, and I grew up sitting in the cramped office, coloring on invoices, or perched on a prep table in the kitchen, watching the line guys throw things into the fryer. We held DB season tickets in the nosebleed section, where my dad and I sat screaming our lungs out as the players scrambled around, antlike, way down below. I knew Defriese team stats the way other girls stored knowledge of Disney princesses: past and present players, shooting average of starters and second stringers, how many Ws Mclean Rich needed to

make all time winningest. The day he did, my dad and I hugged each other, toasting with beer (him) and ginger ale (me) like proud family.

When Mclean Rich retired, we mourned, then worried over the candidates for his replacement, studying their careers and offensive strategies. We agreed that Peter Hamilton, who was young and enthusiastic with a great record, was the best choice, and attended his welcome pep rally with the highest of hopes. Hopes that seemed entirely warranted, in fact, when Peter Hamilton himself dropped into Mariposa one night and liked the food so much he wanted to use our private party room for a team banquet. My dad was in total DB heaven, with two of his greatest passions—basketball and the restaurant—finally aligned. It was great. Then my mom fell in love with Peter Hamilton, which was not.

It would have been bad enough if she'd left my dad for anyone. But to me and my dad, DB fanatics that we were, Peter Hamilton was a god. But idols fall, and sometimes they land right on you and leave you flattened. They destroy your family, shame you in the eyes of the town you love, and ruin the sport of basketball for you forever.

Even all this time later, it still seemed impossible that she'd done it, the very act and fact still capable of unexpectedly knocking the wind out of me at random moments. In the first few shaky, strange weeks after my parents sat me down and told me they were separating, I kept combing back through the last year, trying to figure out how this could have happened. I mean, yes, the restaurant was struggling, and I knew there had been tension between them about that. And

I could vouch for the fact that my mom was always saying my dad didn't spend enough time with us, which he pointed out would be much easier once we were living in a cardboard box on the side of the road. But all families had those kinds of arguments, didn't they? It didn't mean it was okay to run off with another man. Especially the coach of your husband and daughter's favorite team.

The one person who had the answers to these questions, though, wasn't talking. At least, not as much as I wanted her to. Maybe I should have expected this, as my mom had never been the touchy-feely, super-confessional type. But the few times when I tried to broach the million-dollar question—why?—in the shaky early days of the separation and the still-not-quite-stable ones that followed, she just wouldn't tell me what I wanted to hear. Instead, her party line was one sentence: "What happens in a marriage is between the two people within it. Your father and I both love you very much. That will never change." The first few times, this was said to me with sadness. Then, it took on a hint of annoyance. When her tone became sharp, I stopped asking questions.

HAMILTON HOMEWRECKER! screamed the sports blogs. I'LL TAKE YOUR WIFE, PLEASE. Funny how the headlines could be so cute, when the truth was downright ugly. And how weird, for me, that this thing that had always been part of my life—where my very name had come from—was now, literally, part of my *life*. It was like loving a movie, knowing every frame, and then suddenly finding yourself right inside of it. But it's not a romance or a comedy anymore, just your worst freaking nightmare.

Of course everyone was talking. The neighbors, the sports-writers, the kids at my school. They were probably still talking, three years and twin little Hamiltons later, but thankfully, I was not around to hear it. I'd left them there, with Mclean, when my dad and I hitched a U-Haul to our old Land Rover and headed to Montford Falls. And Petree. And Westcott. And now, here.

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It was the first thing I saw when we pulled in the driveway of our new rental house. Not the crisp white paint, the cheerful green trim, or the wide welcoming porch. I didn't even notice, initially, the houses on either side, similar in size and style, one with a carefully manicured lawn, the walk lined with neat shrubs, the other with cars parked in the yard, empty red plastic cups scattered around them. Instead, there was just this, sitting at the very end of the drive, waiting to welcome us personally.

We pulled right up to it, neither of us saying anything. Then my dad cut the engine, and we both leaned forward, looking up through the windshield as it loomed above us.

A basketball goal. Of course. Sometimes life is just hilarious.

For a moment, we both just stared. Then my dad dropped his hand from the ignition. "Let's get unpacked," he said, and pushed his door open. I did the same, following him back to the U-Haul. But I swear it was like I could feel it watching me as I pulled out my suitcase and carried it up the steps.

The house was cute, small but really cozy, and had clearly been renovated recently. The kitchen appliances looked new,

and there were no tack or nail marks on the walls. My dad headed back outside, still unloading, while I gave myself a quick tour, getting my bearings. Cable already installed, and wireless: that was good. I had my own bathroom: even better. And from the looks of it, we were an easy walking distance from downtown, which meant less transportation hassle than the last place. I was actually feeling good about things, basketball reminders aside, at least until I stepped out onto the back porch and found someone stretched out there on a stack of patio furniture cushions.

I literally shrieked, the sound high-pitched and so girly I probably would have been embarrassed if I wasn't so startled. The person on the cushions was equally surprised, though, at least judging by the way he jumped, turning around to look at me as I scrambled back through the open door behind me, grabbing for the knob so I could shut it between us. As I flipped the dead bolt, my heart still pounding, I was able to put together that it was a guy in jeans and long hair, wearing a faded flannel shirt, beat-up Adidas on his feet. He'd been reading a book, something thick, when I interrupted him.

Now, as I watched, he sat up, putting it down beside him. He brushed back his hair, messy and black and kind of curly, then picked up a jacket he'd had balled up under his head, shaking it out. It was faded corduroy, with some kind of insignia on the front, and I stood there watching as he slipped it on, calm as you please, before getting to his feet and picking up whatever he'd been reading, which I now saw was a textbook of some kind. Then he pushed his hair back with one hand

and turned, looking right at me through the glass of the door between us. *Sorry*, he mouthed. Sorry.

“Mclean,” my dad yelled from the foyer, his voice echoing down the empty hall. “I’ve got your laptop. You want me to put it in your room?”

I just stood there, frozen, staring at the guy. His eyes were bright blue, his face winter pale but red-cheeked. I was still trying to decide if I should scream for help when he smiled at me and gave me a weird little salute, touching his fingers to his temple. Then he turned and pushed out the screen door into the yard. He ambled across the deck, under the basketball goal, and over to the fence of the house next door, which he jumped with what, to me, was a surprising amount of grace. As he walked up the side steps, the kitchen door opened. The last thing I saw was him squaring his shoulders, like he was bracing for something, before disappearing inside.

“Mclean?” my dad called again. He was coming closer now, his footsteps echoing. When he saw me, he held up my laptop case. “Know where you want this?”

I looked back at the house next door that the guy had just gone into, wondering what his story was. You didn’t hang out in what you thought was an empty house when you lived right next door unless you didn’t feel like being at home. And it was his home, that much was clear. You could just tell when a person belonged somewhere. That is something you can’t fake, no matter how hard you try.

“Thanks,” I said to my dad, turning to face him. “Just put it anywhere.”

Two



When your dad is a chef, people always assume that at home he does all the cooking. This was not the case in our family. In fact, after spending hours in a restaurant kitchen either preparing food or overseeing others as they did so, the last thing my dad wanted to do when he finally got to leave was turn on the stove.

Because of this, my mom was always left to her own devices, which were decidedly not gourmet. If my dad could make a perfect white sauce, my mom preached the gospel of Cream Of: Cream of Chicken soup over chicken breasts, Cream of Broccoli soup over baked potatoes, Cream of Mushroom over, well, anything. If she was feeling really fancy, she'd sprinkle some crumpled potato chips on top of whatever she'd thrown together and call it a garnish. We ate canned vegetables, Parmesan from a shaker, and frozen chicken breasts, thawed in the microwave. And it was fine. On the rare nights my dad was home and could be coerced to cook, it was always on the grill. There, he'd flip salmon steaks or thick T-bones between layups on our battered basketball goal, the backboard of which was papered with Defriese stickers so completely you

could hardly see any white at all. Inside, my mom would open a bagged salad, toss on some boxed croutons, and top it off with bottled dressing. The contrast might have seemed weird. But somehow, it worked.

When my parents' marriage first imploded, I was in a total state of shock. Maybe it was naïve, but I'd always thought they had the Great American Love Story. She was from a wealthy southern family that bred beauty queens, he the late, only child of an autoworker and a third-grade teacher. They could not have been more different. My mom was a debutante who literally went to charm school; my dad wiped his mouth with his sleeve and did not own a suit. It worked until my mom decided she didn't want it anymore. And just like that, everything changed.

When she left my dad for Peter, I honestly could not believe it was happening, even as I witnessed the debris—snickers in the hallways at school, her moving out, the sudden, heavy fatigue in my dad's features—all around me. I was in such a daze that I didn't even think to object when it was decided for me that I'd spend the weekdays with my mom at Casa Hamilton and the weekends at our old house with my dad. I just sleepwalked along with it, like everything else.

Peter Hamilton lived in The Range, an exclusive gated community by a lake. You had to pass through a guardhouse to get in, and there was a separate entrance for landscapers and repairmen, so the residents could be protected from the sight of the lower classes. All the houses were enormous. The foyer of Peter's place was so big that whatever you said there rose up, up, up toward the high ceiling overhead, leaving you

speechless. There was a game room with a Defriese pinball machine (a welcome gift from the booster club) and a pool with the Defriese insignia painted on the bottom of the deep end (compliments of the contractor, a huge DB fan). It always struck me, without fail, that the one person who would have truly appreciated these things was the only one who would never get to: my dad. I couldn't even tell him about them, as doing so seemed like yet another insult.

As far as cooking went, Peter Hamilton didn't. Neither did my mom. Instead, they had a housekeeper, Miss Jane, who was pretty much always on hand to prepare whatever you wanted, and even what you didn't. There was a healthy, pretty snack waiting for me every day after school, a balanced dinner—meat, vegetable, starch, bread—on the table promptly at six on nongame days. But I missed the Cream Ofs and the potato chips, the same way I missed everything about my old life. I just wanted it back. It wasn't until my mom told me she was pregnant with the twins, though, that I understood that this was never going to happen. Like a bucket of water over the head, the news of their impending arrival snapped me out of my daze.

My mother didn't tell me about this when she split with my dad, but if I did the math—and oh, how I hated having to do the math—it became clear that she not only knew about it, but it was the reason she finally came clean. All I knew was that there was so much news coming at me at such a fast clip (such as: we're separating, you'll be moving to another house for half the week, oh, and the restaurant's closing) that I didn't think

anything else could shock me. I was wrong. Suddenly, I had not only a new stepfather and a new house, but a new family, as well. It wasn't enough to wipe out the one I loved: she was replacing it, too.

My parents had separated in April. That summer, when I knew I had half siblings on the way, my dad decided he would sell Mariposa and take a consulting job. The owner of EAT INC, an old teammate of his from college, had been trying to hire him forever, and now what they were offering seemed like just what he needed. A change of direction, a change of place. A change, period. So he said yes, planned to start in fall, and promised me that he'd come back whenever he could to visit me, and fly me out during the summers and vacation. It didn't occur to him for a second that I'd want to come along, just as it didn't occur to my mom that I wouldn't move in full-time with her and Peter. But I was tired of them—of her—making my decisions for me. She could have her bright and shiny new life, with a new husband and new kids, but she didn't get to have me, too. I decided I was going with my dad.

It was not without drama. Lawyers were called, meetings were held. My dad's departure was held up first weeks, then months, as I spent hours sitting at a conference table in one office or another while my mom, red-eyed and pregnant, shot me looks of betrayal that were so ironic they were almost funny. Almost. My dad was quiet, as her lawyer and his had me clarify again that this was my choice, not his urging. The court secretary, flushed, acted like she didn't spend the entire time looking at Peter Hamilton, who sat next to my mom,

holding her hand with a grave expression I recognized from double overtimes with only seconds left to play and no timeouts left. After about four months of wrangling, it was decided that—surprise!—I could actually make this decision for myself. My mother was livid, because of course she knew nothing about doing what you wanted, and only what you wanted, other people's feelings be damned.

Our relationship since I'd left had been tepid at best. Under the custody arrangement, I was required to visit in summers and for holidays, both of which I did with about as much enthusiasm as anyone would do something court ordered. Each time, the same thing immediately became clear: my mom just wanted a clean, fresh start. She had no interest in discussing our previous lives or the part she may or may not have played in the fact that they no longer existed. No, I was supposed to just fold myself in seamlessly with her new life, and never look back. It was one thing to reinvent myself by choice. When forced, though, I resisted.

In the two years or so we'd been on the road, I did miss my mom. When I was really homesick in those first lonely, bumpy days at a new place, I wasn't lonely for my old house or friends, or anything else specific, as much as just the comfort she represented. It was the little things, like her smell, the way she always hugged too tight, how she looked just enough like me to make me feel safe with a single glance. Then, though, I'd remember it wasn't her that I was really yearning for as much as a mirage, who I'd *thought* she was. The person who cared enough about our family to never want to split us all into pieces. Who loved the beach so much that she thought nothing of

packing up for a spur-of-the-moment road trip east, regardless of weather, season, or if we could really even afford to stay at the Poseidon, the dumpy ocean-view motel we preferred. Who sat at the end of the bar at Mariposa, glasses perched on her nose, reviewing receipts in the lazy hours between lunch and dinner service, who sewed together cloth squares in front of the fire, using all the bits and pieces of our old clothes to make quilts that were like sleeping under memories. It wasn't just me that was gone. She was, too.

When I thought of my mom most, though, was not on the first day of a new school, or a holiday we weren't together for, or even when I caught a glimpse of her—fleeting—when the TV cameras flashed to her at a Defriese game before I could change the channel. Instead, weirdly enough, it was when I was cooking dinner. Standing in a strange kitchen, browning meat in a pan. Adding a chopped green pepper to a jar of store-bought sauce. Opening a can of soup, some chicken, and a bag of potato chips at dusk, hoping to make something from nothing.

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Whenever my dad came in to take over a new restaurant, there was always one person who pretty much personified resistance. Someone who took each criticism personally, fought every change, and could be counted upon to lead the bitch-and-moan brigade. At Luna Blu, that person was Opal.

She was the current manager, the tall girl with the tattoos who'd finally gotten us a waitress. When I came in the next day for an early dinner, she was dressed like an old-style pinup girl: dark hair pulled up and back, bright red lipstick,

jeans, and a fuzzy pink sweater with pearl buttons. She was pleasant as she got me a Coke, smiling and gracious as she put in my order. Once I was settled with my food and they sat down to talk, though, it was clear my dad had his work cut out for him.

“It’s a bad idea,” she was saying to him now from the other end of the bar. “People will revolt. They expect the rosemary rolls.”

“The *regular* customers expect them,” my dad replied. “But you don’t have that many regulars. And the fact of the matter is, they’re not a cost-effective or practical thing to be offering to people as a complimentary appetizer. What you want is more people ordering more drinks and food, not a few filling up on free stuff.”

“But they serve a purpose,” Opal said, her voice slightly sharp. “Once people have a taste of the rolls, it makes them hungrier, and they order more than they would otherwise.”

“So those people I saw sitting up here last night, drinking discount beer and eating rolls and nothing else,” my dad replied, “they’re the exception.”

“There were only, like, two people at the bar last night!”

My dad pointed at her. “Exactly.”

Opal just looked at him, her face flushing red. The truth was, no one looked kindly on their bosses bringing in a hired gun to tell them what they were doing wasn’t working. It didn’t matter if the place was losing money or had the worst reputation/food/bathrooms in town, and any and all improvements would only benefit them. People always complained at the beginning, and usually the senior staff members did it the

loudest, which was why EAT INC often fired them before we even showed up. For whatever reason, this was different and therefore difficult.

“Okay,” she said now, her tone even, controlled, “so suppose we do away with the rolls, then. What will we offer people instead? Pretzels? Peanuts? Maybe they can throw the shells on the floor to add more of that ambiance you’re so sure we’re lacking?”

“Nope.” My dad smiled. “I’m thinking pickles, actually.”

Opal just looked at him. “Pickles,” she repeated.

I watched as he picked up the menu in front of him. It was the same one I’d found on our kitchen table that morning, covered in notes and cross-outs in black Sharpie pen, so ravaged it looked like one of my term papers from when I’d taken AP English with Mr. Reid-Barbour, the hardest teacher in my last school. Based on just a glance, things didn’t look promising for most of the entrées and all of the desserts.

Now, he slid it between them on the bar, and Opal’s eyes widened. She looked so dismayed I couldn’t even watch, instead going back to wrestling with the Sudoku puzzle in the paper someone had left behind on the bar. “Oh my God,” she said, her voice low. “You’re going to change everything, aren’t you?”

“No,” my dad said.

“You’ve eliminated all our meat dishes!” A gasp. “And the appetizers! There’s, like, nothing left.”

“Ah, but there is,” my dad said, his voice calm. “There are the pickles.”

Opal leaned closer, squinting at the menu. “Nobody orders the pickles.”

“Which is unfortunate,” my dad said, “because they’re very good. Unique. And incredibly cost-effective. The perfect giveaway starter.”

“You want to give people fried pickles when they come in the door?” Opal demanded. “We’re an Italian place!”

“Which brings me to my next question,” my dad said, flipping the menu over. “If that’s really the case, why are you serving guacamole, tacos, and fajitas? Or pickles, for that matter?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I’m sure you already know that the previous owners of this place ran a very successful Mexican restaurant. When the new management came in and changed the menu, it only made sense to keep some of the more popular dishes.”

“I do know that,” my dad said. “But the average POTS does not.”

“POTS?”

“Person Off the Street. Your generic customer, the person walking by, looking for a place to try for dinner.” He cleared his throat. “My point is, this restaurant is in an identity crisis. You don’t know what you are, and my job is to help you figure it out.”

Opal just looked at him. “By changing everything,” she said.

“Not everything,” he replied, flipping the menu over. “Remember: pickles.”

It wasn’t pretty. In fact, by the time they were done and my dad finally came to join me, he looked exhausted, and it wasn’t like this was his first time doing this. As for Opal, she disappeared into the kitchen, letting the doors bang loudly behind

her. A moment later, something clattered loudly to the floor, followed by an expletive.

“So,” my dad said, pulling out the bar stool beside mine and sliding on. “That went well.”

I smiled, then pushed my plate closer to him so he could help himself to the chips and salsa I hadn’t eaten. “She likes the rolls, I guess.”

“It’s not really about the rolls.” He picked up a chip, sniffed it, then put it back down. “She’s just running a muddle.”

I raised my eyebrows, surprised. Since the whole Peter Hamilton thing, my dad’s love of Defriese basketball had waned almost to nothing, which was understandable. But he’d been a fan for so long, the legend and lingo of the team such a big part of his life, that certain habits were impossible to break. Like invoking Mclean Rich’s most famous offensive move—which consisted of distracting a team with one pass or play so they wouldn’t notice a bigger one happening at the same time—when he thought someone was trying to work it on him. He didn’t notice or chose not to acknowledge this slip, though, so I let it pass without comment as well.

“She’ll come around,” I said instead. “You know that first meeting is always the hardest.”

“True.” I watched him run a hand through his hair, letting it flop back over his forehead. He’d always worn it long and somewhat shaggy, which made him look even younger than he was, although the divorce had added a few lines around his eyes. Still, he had the kind of ramshackle good looks that had pretty much guaranteed a new girlfriend, if not wannabe stepmother, in each place we’d landed so far.

“So,” I said. “Ready for the latest update?”

He sat back, taking a breath. Then he slapped his hands together and shook them out—his version of a reset—before saying, “Absolutely. Hit me.”

I pulled my list out of my pocket, unfolding it on the bar between us. “Okay,” I began. “All the utilities are up and running, except the cable’s still not getting half the channels, but that should be fixed by tomorrow. Recycling is on Thursday, garbage pickup is Tuesday. I can register at the school on Monday morning, just need to bring my transcripts and come early.”

“And where is that?”

“About six miles away. But there’s a city bus stop about a block over from us.”

“Cool,” he said. “What about supplies?”

“I found a Park Mart and stocked up this morning. The toaster in the kitchen is busted, so I got a new one. Oh, and I got an extra key made.”

“Met any neighbors yet?”

I thought of the boy I’d found on the porch as I picked up my Coke, taking a sip. It wasn’t exactly a meeting, though, so I shook my head. “But I’m guessing on the right is a family, professors. On the left, students. I could hear bass thumping all last night.”

“Me, too,” he said, rubbing his face again. “Not that I was sleeping anyway.”

I glanced at the marked-up menu, which was on his other side. “So. Pickles, huh?”

“You had them yesterday,” he said. “They were good, right?”

“Better than these tacos. They all fell apart the minute I picked them up.”

He reached over, taking my fork and helping himself to a bite from my plate. He chewed, his face impassive, before replacing it and saying, “Meat isn’t drained enough. That’s half the battle on a good taco. Plus, there’s too much cilantro in that salsa.”

“But they still have a loyal following,” I reminded him.

He shook his head. “Well, I guess they’ll be joining up with the bread people.”

“*Vive la révolution*,” I said, just to make him laugh. It worked, kind of.

There was another bang from the kitchen, this one followed by a long series of clattering. He sighed, pushing back from the bar. “Time to meet my kitchen staff,” he said, sounding less than enthusiastic. “You going to be okay on your own tonight?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “I’ve got a ton of unpacking to do.”

“Well, call or come back if you get lonely. I’ll try to get out of here at a decent hour.”

I nodded, closing my eyes as he kissed my cheek then ruffled my hair as he passed behind me. Watching him go, noting his slow gait and how stiff he seemed in his shoulders, I felt that same pang of protectiveness that had become like second nature since the divorce. There was probably a term for it, some brand of codependence, a daughter acting too much like a wife, once said wife takes off. But what was I supposed to do? We had each other. That was all.

My dad could take care of himself. I knew that, the same

way I knew there were so many things about his life I couldn't fix, no matter how hard I tried. It was probably why I worked so hard to handle the things I did. Getting us settled, taking care of details, keeping the chaos we'd chosen as neat as possible. I couldn't mend his broken heart or give him back the love of his team. But getting a new toaster, making sure we had enough soap and paper towels, and agreeing about the pickles? That, I could handle.

This was especially true now that I didn't know if I'd have a chance to do it again. I was in the second semester of my senior year, my college applications—which had been a challenge, to say the least, with my patchwork transcript—already submitted. In the fall, like the last two, I knew I'd probably be somewhere else, and again, I didn't know where. What I was sure of, though, was that I would be going it alone. The thought made me sad enough to want to do everything I could now for my dad, as if I could bank it away for my eventual absence.

I paid my check—that was another one of my dad's rules, no freebies—then got up and headed outside for the short walk back to the house. It was a crisp day, early January, with that kind of quickly waning afternoon light that always makes it feel like the dark snuck up on you. I'd cut down the alley just to the left of Luna Blu, which I was pretty sure was a shortcut to our street, when I came upon Opal. She was sitting on a milk crate by the side door of the restaurant, her back to me, talking to a guy in jeans and an apron, who was smoking a cigarette.

"I mean, it takes serious nerve to just come in here and call

yourself an expert on any and all things,” she was saying. “Oh, and you can just *tell* he’s used to women falling all over him and agreeing to everything he says, even when it’s stupid bordering on offensive. The man is clearly in love with himself. I mean, did you see that hair? What kind of grown adult can’t get a simple age-appropriate haircut?”

The guy with the cigarette, who was tall and skinny with a seriously protruding Adam’s apple, let out a guffaw, nodding at me as I approached. Opal turned, laughing, too. Then her eyes widened, and she jumped to her feet. “Hi,” she said too quickly. “Um, I didn’t realize . . . How was your meal? Good?”

I nodded, silent, then slid my hands farther into my pockets as I walked between them. About two beats later, I heard footsteps behind me, running to catch up.

“Wait,” Opal called out. Then, “Please?”

I stopped, turning to face her. Up close, I realized she was older than I’d first realized, probably in her early thirties rather than twenties. Her cheeks were flushed, either from the cold or being embarrassed, as she said, “Look. I was just blowing off steam, okay? It’s not personal.”

“It’s fine,” I told her. “It has nothing to do with me.”

She looked at me for a moment, then folded her arms over her chest. “It’s just . . .” she said, then stopped, taking a breath. “It’s kind of jarring, to suddenly be under scrutiny like this. I know it’s not an excuse. But I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t . . . you know . . .”

“I wouldn’t,” I told her.

Opal nodded slowly. “Thanks.”

I turned and started walking again, ducking my head

against the cold. I'd only taken a couple of steps when I heard her say, "Hey, I didn't catch your name earlier. What was it again?"

I never picked the moment. It always chose me. I just knew, somehow, what would work at the exact instant that I needed it to.

"I'm Liz," I said, turning back to her.

I liked the sound of it. Simple, three letters.

"Liz," she repeated, sealing the deal. "It's nice to meet you."

x x x

Back at the house, I unpacked my suitcase, finished putting away the groceries, and moved our couch four places in the living room before deciding it looked best in the very spot my dad and I had unceremoniously dropped it the day before when we brought it in from the U-Haul. Just to be sure, though, I plopped down on it with a glass of milk and booted up my laptop.

My home page was still set to my last Ume.com home page, the one for Beth Sweet. At the top was a picture of me, taken on the beach, our bungalow a pink-and-green blur behind me. There was my list of activities (yearbook, volunteering, student council) and interests (travel, reading, hanging with my friends). Said friends were just below, all one hundred and forty-two of them, face after tiny face I would, most likely, never see again. I scrolled down to my comment section, scanning the handful of new ones there:

Girl, we miss you already! The last board meeting sucked without you.

Beth, I heard from Misty you moved. Awful short notice, hope you are ok. Call me!

What happened to goodbye?

I leaned a little closer to the screen, reading these four words again, and once more. Then, against my better judgment, I clicked on the face beside them, bringing up Michael's page.

There he was, sitting on the seawall, in his wet suit, his hair wet and wicking up in the back. He was looking to the right, at the ocean, not the camera, and seeing him I felt that same little nervous tug in my stomach. We'd only known each other a couple of months, since meeting on the beach one morning when I was taking a walk and he was out catching early swells. I spent 6:45 to 7:15 with him for weeks, working up to . . . well, nothing, as it turned out.

But he was right. I hadn't said goodbye. It had been easier, like always, to just disappear, sparing myself the messy details of another farewell. Now, my fingers hovered over my track pad, moving the cursor down to his comment section before I stopped myself. What was the point? Anything I said now would only be an afterthought.

In truth, since my parents' split, I hadn't had much faith in relationships and even less of an inclination to start any lasting ones of my own. At home, I'd had several friends I'd known since grade school, girls I'd played Rainbow Soccer with and stuck close to in middle school. I'd had a couple of boyfriends, and gotten my heart broken more than once. I was a normal girl in a normal town, until the divorce happened.

Then, suddenly, I wasn't just one of the group anymore: no one else had a coach for a stepdad, a scandal at home, and new siblings on the way as an aftermath. It was all so public and awful, and while my friends tried to be there for me, it was too difficult to explain what was going on. So I pulled back from everything and everyone I'd known. It hadn't been until we got to Petree that I realized I'd been changing even before we started moving, that my reinvention began when I was still in the most familiar of places. Once the setting was totally new, though, I finally could be, as well.

Since we'd been moving, I'd gotten smart about dealing with people. I knew I wouldn't be staying forever, so I kept my feelings at the temporary stage, too. Which meant making friends easily, but never taking sides, and picking guys I knew wouldn't last for the long haul, or any haul at all, for that matter. My best relationships, in fact, usually started when I knew we were about to move to a new place. Then, I could just go all in and totally relax, knowing that whatever happened, I could cut and run. It was why I'd started hanging out with Michael, a boy who was older, out of school, and with whom I could never have had any sort of future. That way, when I didn't, it was no surprise.

I clicked back to Beth Sweet's page, then signed out. BE THE U IN UME! the subsequent page read. SIGN UP FOR YOUR NEW ACCOUNT NOW! I was just typing my e-mail address and Liz Sweet when my computer made a cheerful beeping noise and my webcam activated itself.

Crap, I thought, quickly putting down my laptop on the coffee table and darting into the kitchen. HiThere!, the video-

chat application, had come preloaded on my computer, and no matter what I did I couldn't seem to disable it. Which shouldn't have been an issue, really, as none of my friends used it anyway. Unfortunately, someone else did.

"Mclean?" A pause, some static. "Honey? Are you there?"

I leaned against the fridge, closing my eyes as my mother's voice, pleading, drifted through our empty house. This was her last resort, after I'd ignored her messages and e-mails, the one way she still, somehow, was always able to track me down.

"Well," she said now, and I knew that if I looked at my screen, I'd see her there, craning her neck, looking around for my face in yet another room she didn't recognize. "I guess you're not home. I just had a free moment, wanted to say hello. I miss you, honey. And I was thinking about your applications, if you'd heard anything, and how if you end up here at Defriese, we can—"

This thought was interrupted by a sudden shriek, followed by another. Then, babbling and what sounded like a struggle before she spoke again.

"Okay, you can sit in my lap, but be careful of the computer. Connor! What did I just say?" More muffled noises. "Madison, honey, look in the camera. Look there! See? Can you say hi to Mclean? Say, hi, Mclean! Hi, big—Connor! Give me that pencil. Honestly, both of you, just—"

I pushed off the fridge, then out the kitchen door onto the deck. Outside, the air was cold, the sky clear, and I just stood there, looking at that basketball goal, her voice finally muffled behind me.

From where I was standing, I had a partial view of the

dining room of the house next door, where a woman with short, frizzy hair, wearing a plaid sweater and glasses, was sitting at the head of the table. There was an empty plate in front of her, the fork and knife crossed neatly across its center. To her left was a man I assumed to be her husband, tall and skinny, also with glasses, drinking a glass of milk. Their faces were serious, both of them focused on whoever was sitting at the other end. All I could see, though, was a shadow.

I went back inside, pausing in the kitchen to listen. There was only silence and the fridge whirring, but I still approached my laptop with caution, creeping around to the front and peeking over to make sure there was only the screen saver in view before I sat down again. As I expected, there was a HiThere! message bubble, bouncing cheerfully from side to side as it waited for me.

Wanted to say hello, sorry we missed you! We will be home all night, call and tell us about your new place. I love you. Mom

My mother was like Teflon, I swear to God. I could tell her a million times I didn't want to talk to her right now and needed some space, but it made no difference to her whatsoever. As far as she was concerned, I wasn't furious, choosing to avoid her. I was just busy.

I shut my laptop, having lost any momentum I had to tackle a new Ume.com account. Then I sat back, looking at the ceiling. A beat later, bass began thumping again from the other side of the house.

I stood up, then walked down the hallway and into my room. From my bed, I had a perfect view over the hedge to the small, white house on our right. There were still several cars parked in the yard, and now I watched as an SUV pulled in beside them, bumping up on the curb and almost sideswiping the mailbox. A moment later, the tailgate opened and a beefy-looking guy in a peacoat hopped out from behind the wheel. He whistled through his fingers—a skill I’d always admired—and went around to the back of the car, pulling at something as another couple of guys spilled out from the house’s front door to join him. A moment later, they were carrying a keg up the front steps. When they came through the door, someone cheered from inside. Once the door shut behind them, the bass got even louder.

I looked up the street in the direction of Luna Blu, wondering if I should take my dad up on his offer and go hang out there. But it was cold, and I was tired, and it wasn’t like I really knew anyone there either. So instead, I went back to the kitchen.

In the other neighbor’s house, the couple had moved from the table into the kitchen, where the woman in plaid was now standing by the sink while her husband ran the water and piled in a couple of plates. As she spoke, she kept glancing at the back door, shaking her head, and after a moment he reached over a dripping hand, squeezing her shoulder. She leaned into him, her head against his chest, and they stood there together as he kept scrubbing.

It was a study in contrasts, to be sure. Like a choice I could make, one story or another: the rowdy college kids, their

evening just beginning, the middle-aged couple whose night was coming to an end. I went back to the couch, where I stretched out, this time making sure to turn my laptop away from me first. I stared up at the ceiling for a little while, feeling that bass vibrating softly beneath me. *Thump. Thump. Drip. Drip.* It was kind of soothing, these sounds of lives being lived all around me, for better or for worse. And there I was, in the middle of them all, newly reborn and still waiting for mine to begin.