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Opening extract from
Our Own Private Universe

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CHAPTER 1

THE STARS ABOVE me danced in the cool, black Mexico sky. So I started dancing, too.

My body buzzed with the lingering vibrations from all those hours of flying. The music poured through my headphones and straight into my soul. I twirled, I soared, my head tipped back as I watched the stars.

I'd never seen a sky like this one. All my life I'd been surrounded by cities. Lights had shone on every side of me, drowning out the world.

I never realized that before. Not until I came here.

Here, in the middle of nowhere, all the light came from above. The sky was pure black with a thousand dots of white. Millions, actually, if I remembered Earth Science correctly. The air above looked like one of those lush, incomprehensible oil paintings my mother was always staring at whenever she dragged us to a museum back home.

I wanted to float up among those stars.

Nothing to think about. Nothing to do but soak it in and watch them shine.

The song's beat pulsed through me. It was my favorite—

well, one of my favorites. It was the one I'd never told anyone about because I didn't want to deal with the looks I'd get.

Listening to it without dancing was impossible.

With my headphones on and my eyes on the sky, my body in constant motion, I was oblivious to the world on the ground. So I didn't know how long Lori had been trying to get my attention before I felt her sharp tug on my arm.

"Hey!" I lowered my gaze to meet my best friend's. She winced.

"You don't need to yell." Lori rubbed her ear. "I'm right here."

"Sorry." I pulled off my headphones.

"You always shout when you wear those. One day you're going to do it in the middle of church and get kicked out."

"I never wear headphones in church. Mom would slaughter me."

"Yeah, well, I'm going to slaughter you right now if you keep acting so antisocial. What are you doing out here all by yourself?"

"Oh, uh." I glanced back across the darkness toward the courtyard I'd abandoned. The house where the party was being held was on the far edge of town, backing up into the empty hillside. Behind me I could hear the sounds of voices and laughter and faint faraway music floating out over the walls. "Sorry. I guess I forgot."

Lori laughed. "You're lucky you're hot, because you can be a total weirdo when you want to be. Come on, we should mingle."

Right. I was supposed to be trying.

I followed Lori across the hills and through the courtyard's tall, swinging wooden door. We passed a few people gathered

along the back wall and went up to a table where some chips were set out next to flickering decorative candles.

At least half the party was gathered around the table, talking and rubbing their eyes. We hadn't all taken the same flights, but everyone had been on at least two planes today, and most of the group looked like they still felt dizzy.

Someone had set up their phone to play music through its little speaker. The melodies were tiny against the open dirt and dotted sky beyond the courtyard walls.

I said hi to the people I knew from church. Lori chattered at everyone, flirting with the guys and fiddling with the bracelet that dangled from her wrist. It was one I'd made. Our allowances were pathetic, so Lori and I made jewelry to sell at school.

I wasn't sure if saying hi to people and following Lori around officially counted as trying. Maybe it was something close, though. Something closer than dancing by myself under the stars.

But, God, those stars. I had to fight not to let my gaze drift back out into the open air.

Trying wasn't optional, though. Not this summer.

Because, well. I had this theory.

Granted, all I ever had were theories. That was the whole problem. My life, all fifteen years of it, had been all about the hypothetical and never about the actual.

I was a hypothetical musician (I hadn't played in more than a year). I was a hypothetical Christian (it wasn't as though I'd tried any other options). Despite the age on my birth certificate, I was essentially a hypothetical teenager, since *real* teenagers did way more exciting stuff than I ever did.

But as of this summer, there was one particular theory that was taking up way more space in my brain than I had to spare.

To be honest, my theory was mostly about sex. But it applied to life in general, too. If I wanted to have an interesting life—which I did—then there was no point sitting around debating everything in my head on a constant loop.

If I wanted my life to change, then I had to *do* something. Or at least *try*.

And it was now or never. This summer, the summer we'd come to Mexico, was the time to test out my hypothesis.

The problem was, I was really good at sitting around and debating things in my head. Trying stuff? Actually *doing* it? That wasn't really my jam.

Lori was different, though. She wasn't any better than me at doing things, but she sure loved trying.

"We've *got* to go to the welcome party tonight," she'd whispered to me that afternoon, seconds after the bus dropped us off at the church. "How else are we going to meet all the new guys?"

"I am absolutely not in the mood for a party," I whispered back as I helped her haul her stuff inside. I'd already decided that, due to jet lag, my theory could wait at least one more day for testing. "I'm all woozy. Like I'm still on that plane, the one that kept shaking around."

It had taken three different planes followed by a four-hour bus ride to get from home, in Maryland, to this tiny town somewhere way outside Tijuana. I'd never flown before, and now that we were on steady land all I wanted to do was put on my pajamas, go to bed and sleep until noon.

Except it turned out we didn't have beds. Just sleeping bags lined up on the cement floor of an old church.

I didn't have pajamas, either. The airline had lost my suitcase.

So I gave up fighting it. My theory was getting tested, jet lag or no jet lag.

"The new guys are going to be incredible," Lori had whispered to me as we walked to the party with the others.

"They're going to be exactly the same as the guys we already know," I whispered back.

"Not true. These guys are way cooler. Much less boring."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"Look, I'm an optimist, okay?"

For the next month, the youth groups from our church and two others would be working together on a volunteer project. All Lori cared about was that we'd be spending four weeks with guys who weren't the same seven guys we'd been hanging out with since we were kids.

I didn't see what was so bad about the guys at our church. Sure, most of them thought of me as a dorky, preacher's-daughter, kid-sister type, but, well, that was pretty accurate. And I'd never been great at meeting people. I wasn't shy or anything. It was only that sometimes, with new people, I didn't know how exactly to start a conversation. I liked to listen first. You could learn a lot about someone that way.

The welcome party was at one of our host families' houses. The local minister's, maybe. But all the adults—my dad and the other ministers and chaperones, plus our Mexican host families—spent the whole time in the living room, which meant the forty-or-so of us from the youth groups had the outdoor courtyard to ourselves. That was a good thing, since whenever the adults were around I could hardly understand what anyone was saying. I'd gotten an A in freshman year Spanish, so I thought I'd be able to get by in Mexico all right, but we hadn't even made it out of the Tijuana airport before I'd found out the truth. The woman at customs had asked me a question and the only part I understood was *por favor*. So I stared at her with my head tilted helplessly until Dad whis-

pered for me to unzip my purse so the woman could check it for bombs or whatever.

Along the back wall of the courtyard, where the adults couldn't see them from inside, a handful of people had started dancing. I turned back to Lori and stole a chip out of her hand. She pushed her long, curly blond hair out of her face and raised her eyebrows at me.

"See, aren't you glad we didn't skip this?" Lori lowered her voice. "The guys on this trip are already way more interesting than our usual crowd."

She meant that they were older. Lori and I were the only two sophomores who'd been allowed to come on this trip. The others were mostly going to be juniors or seniors in the fall. Some, like my brother, Drew, were already in college. Lori and I got special permission because my dad was our church's youth minister, and he and Lori's aunt Miranda were both chaperones on this trip.

"Why are you so into meeting new guys, anyway?" I asked Lori.

"I don't know. I just want to expand my horizons. Have something new, something that's all mine. You know what I mean?"

I nodded. It sounded like Lori was testing a theory of her own.

We fell into silence. A new song had come on, one of the big songs of the summer that had been playing in every store back home for weeks. Half the group was up and dancing. One of the guys from our church and his girlfriend were swaying slowly with their arms wrapped around each other, even though the song was a fast one.

"Do you want to go dance?" Lori asked.

I gave her a weird look instead of answering. Lori knew very well I never danced in front of people.

I tilted my head back to get another look at those stars. They swam dreamily in the sky.

“Stop looking up so much,” Lori whispered. “Your neck is already freakishly long. People are going to think you have no face.”

“My neck is not freakishly long,” I said, but I lowered my chin anyway.

Two white girls I didn’t know were half dancing, half standing in the darkest corner of the courtyard. One girl had hair so short you could see her scalp and leather cuffs with silver buttons on both wrists. The other girl had dark hair that curled around her ears, heart-shaped sunglasses perched on her head, a tiny silver hoop in her nose and a quiet smile that made me want to smile, too.

“Aki, you’re staring,” Lori said.

“Sorry.” I looked away from the girls.

“Do you like one of them?”

“No.”

“It’s okay if you do. You can tell me.”

“I don’t. I was distracted, that’s all.”

Last year I told Lori I thought I might be bi. Ever since, whenever she saw me looking at a girl, she asked if I liked her. Lori didn’t get that sometimes it was fun just to notice people without having to think about whether you liked them or not.

The girl with the sunglasses turned toward Lori and me. Oh my God. She wasn’t that far away. Had she heard us? I was going to kill Lori.

The girl was still smiling, though.

She was cute, but she made me nervous. I wasn’t used to looking at girls that way. Being bi, just like the rest of my life,

had always been mostly hypothetical. I scanned the crowd, trying to look for a guy who was equally cute.

"Is there anyone here you might like?" I asked Lori.

"Maybe." She nodded toward a super-tall blond guy drinking from one of the frosted glasses our host family had set out. "What do you think of him?"

I studied the guy. He had to have been a senior, at least. He had a T-shirt with a beer company logo and he was laughing loud and sharp at something his friend had said, his mouth open so wide I could see the fillings in his back teeth.

"He looks like a tool," I said.

"Whatever, you think everybody looks like a tool."

The girl with the sunglasses was coming toward us. She was even cuter up close.

Oh, *God*.

"Look who it is," Lori whispered.

As though I hadn't already seen her. As though she wouldn't see Lori whispering and think we were incredibly obvious and immature.

"Hi." Somehow, the girl was now standing in front of us, her head tilted at a startlingly attractive angle. "You guys seem cool. I'm Christa."

I had no idea what to say. I shoved a chip in my mouth.

"Thanks." Lori glanced over at me. "I'm Lori."

"Hi, Lori." The girl turned toward me, expectant, but I was still chomping on my tortilla chip. I probably looked like the biggest tool in Mexico.

But Christa didn't seem bothered. "What church do you guys go to?"

"Holy Life in Silver Spring," Lori said. I swallowed, nearly choking. Lori ignored me. "What about you?"