

this is an uncorrected advance proof

almost home

jessica blank



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藏书章

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HYPERION · NEW YORK

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Dear reader:

Millions of Americans call the streets their home. Sadly, more than 1.5 million of them are teenagers—many running away from what seem like insurmountable problems in their lives.

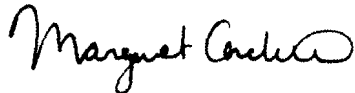
Jessica Blank's debut novel, Almost Home, gave me incredible insight into the lives of seven homeless teens. It paints a picture of the Hollywood we never see—gritty, dangerous and real. These are the kids who live on its sidewalks, struggling to find themselves, and each other, in a world that wants to tear them apart.

We're introduced to characters like Eeyore, who's afraid to fall asleep at night with her stepbrother in the next room; Rusty, who follows the promise of love only to be bitterly disappointed; and Tracy, who, hardened by the streets and her dark past, rejects the closest thing she has to family.

Jessica's writing is raw, unapologetically honest, and ultimately hopeful. Her characters will stay with you long after you've turned the final page.

I hope you enjoy this remarkable novel.

With best wishes,



Margaret Cardillo

Hyperion Books for Children

For Erik

eeyore

Tracy hangs out up against the fence some days, blond hair dangling down in strings toward her tattoos, dirty hoodie sticking through the chain-link holes in little bunches, her weight curving the wire till it looks like it might stay that way. Tuesdays and Fridays, after pre-algebra and lab science, she's always there: the days my backpack is the heaviest and it takes me forever to get through the parking lot and by the time I finally get to the buses I'm practically panting from trying to rush through fast enough to not get stopped by Jenny Kirchner and Julia Birmingham who corner me between the cars, throw my stuff on the pavement and call me whore. I know what Tracy's name is; I heard some seniors say it once and after that I said it over in my head so I'd remember.

Two years ago Lynnbrook Middle closed down. Sixth grade went back to elementary and they stuck seventh and eighth in with Canyon High. I cried when they sent the letter

home that said my sixth-grade class was staying back. I tried not to show it but one of the tears fell down on the paper and made it rattle with this thick kind of splat so then my stepmom Linda wanted to discuss my feelings for like an hour and a half. I kept my mouth shut till she was done discussing. At the end of it she put her hand on my wrist like she was satisfied we'd had some deep communion and then I went downstairs and tried to figure out how I could get a lock and put it on my door without her noticing.

Without a car or knowing anyone who had one, I couldn't really do it. Brian turned fifteen and got his learner's right when I started sixth grade but I wasn't about to ask him. I wasn't about to even talk to him, not after he started coming in at night, creaking on the stupid beige carpet from his room next door, breathing his nasty breath on me. Sometimes I'd watch him across the table when we all sat down for dinner Linda brought home from Whole Foods, though. He'd glance up quick and look away but I kept my eyes on him and after a while he'd start to sweat into his pesto-feta pasta. Sometimes his cheeks turned red to match his zits, and for a minute I could make *him* feel things instead of the other way around. Dad and Linda never noticed but I'm still waiting for the day when they ask Brian what the matter is. I'm curious to see what he'd come up with.

The whole year of sixth grade they never asked. When Dad and Linda weren't there Brian was never nervous and

he made my insides twist around like butterflies in your stomach except their wings beat so hard I was always about to throw up.

Most of the time I just closed my eyes and kept it down by *imagining things*. I tried to think of places to go inside my head. I didn't believe in other lands anymore: I got sick of the unicorn stuff by the time fourth grade ended, and by the end of fifth I was done with making Barbie living rooms, even ones with graffiti on the walls and the Barbies all in cut-up clothes and bald. So basically by then what was left to picture in my mind was seventh grade and Canyon High.

After a few months of imagining, it started seeming cooler: in my mind the lockers loomed up tall like trees making a corridor that led to an entrance to something I could never see and was always inching closer to. Once I walked through that invisible entrance I'd have a new name and face and nobody could touch me then. Maybe there'd even be kids who'd give me cigarettes behind the auditorium.

Two weeks into seventh grade, I realize that's a bunch of bullshit. There are kids who smoke on the hill behind the auditorium, but they're all a foot taller than me and never look when I walk by. I thought the whole point of being a misfit was you're always looking for the other people like you. Loneliness is like a vacuum: it's supposed to suck the other lonely people in like dust till finally it fills up and you're not lonely anymore. I try walking across the hill

super slow to give them lots of chances, let them notice that I'm like them, but they never do.

The only difference between here and Lynnbrook, besides the SUVs always almost hitting you in the parking lot, is I'm that much nearer to my fucking stepbrother.

Oh, plus lockers. The whole first two weeks I never used mine because I was afraid I wouldn't know how. But after I give up on the hill behind the auditorium I start wanting someplace to go between classes so I'm not always the first one alone in the room with the teacher, and it takes a couple days to get my guts up before I finally try. I spend like five minutes trying to unlock it. I can't remember if you're supposed to go left first or right and how many times you're supposed to pass the first number on the way to the second. I try like thirty times till there's actual sweat on my forehead and it feels like everyone's staring and by the time I finally get it open the bell rings so I can't even remember which way I turned the lock. The hallway between me and English class gets emptier and it doesn't lead to anywhere besides another classroom with yellow walls and buzzing lights and posters tacked up beside the blackboard and the flag.

That night Linda starts asking how Canyon is and after that she won't stop. She wants to know my teachers' names and if I'm making friends and do I enjoy the "Curriculum." Plus she starts dropping these weird phrases in, like New Experiences, or Special Feelings, which I know mean, *Are*

there boys I like. One time I almost tell her she should ask her stupid son about *his* Special Feelings and try leaving me alone, but before I can say it a sick feeling comes from my stomach up into my throat and I have to bite my tongue to keep it down. A little piece of tongue comes off between my back teeth. It tastes like blood and when I go downstairs to brush my teeth it stings like crazy.

A month after school gets going Tracy starts showing up outside the fence. I know right away she doesn't go to Canyon: her clothes are way too dirty, she has these weird tattoos that look like stick drawings a little kid would make, and hardly anyone ever talks to her. If she went to school here Jenny Kirchner and Julia Birmingham would be on her all the time, not to mention their jocko boyfriends and probably even kids lower down the totem pole than that. Tracy's weirder than even the geeks and the retarded kids, with patched-together clothes that are all either black or this kind of brown that looks like it used to be white about eight years ago, her tank top worn so thin you can see her ribs through it. Her hair hangs all stringy in her eyes, and not like she put Molding Mud in to look like Jennifer Aniston at the Oscars when I was eight but like she never washes it, and bleached so yellow that it's almost green. If she went to Canyon she'd be getting her ass kicked every day, backpack torn off her shoulders and thrown into her face and fuck it if the books are so heavy they bruise her. But

she's just alone. A couple times goth kids with black mesh shirts and wallet chains hanging from their weird huge pants go up to her, and one time this junior guy who Brian knows from soccer starts talking to her and then stops when a bunch of seniors walk by. Besides that she just leans back against the chain-link, her back to the blacktop, and watches everyone. When teachers come out to their cars she stands up straight and goes near other kids, trying to look like she's part of their after-school clumps; once the grownups are gone she just glares at the kids and goes back to the fence.

Dad and Linda are proud of our house. It's up in Beachwood Canyon, tucked behind Hollywood, and the streets snap around the sides of the hills and everything is green. When we first moved in five years ago my dad taught me the names of almost all the flowers in the neighborhood, jasmine and agave and bougainvillea; we would hike up the hills, me on my little legs, and I'd point them out, repeat back what he taught me. When we got to the top the city spread out below us big as a whole country, lavender smog cloaking the whole thing like a blanket you could see through.

I was seven then and it was me and Dad plus Linda; Brian still lived in San Diego with his real dad and I'd only ever met him at the wedding. He moved in two years later though, when something happened to him down in San

Diego that Dad and Linda only talked about in halves of sentences or else in the other room behind a door. Someone did something bad to him, I think. I wanted to know what. Once on my way to the kitchen I heard Linda say it was her fault for leaving him in that environment. They never said what “it” was. You could tell they didn’t want me to know.

My dad got a full-time job then, at Paramount in the accounts department, because there’d be four of us now; he didn’t have time to take me to the top of the hill to look down at the canyon anymore. Linda still was hardly ever home from work but when she was she always tried to talk to me about my feelings. Brian came in with a big navy canvas bag and took the room next to mine in the basement. After he moved in I remember more about my ceiling than I do about the aloe plants and birds of paradise in the yard beside our street.

Week five of school is when “Tits” starts. I don’t know why they had to pick me: a couple other girls in my grade have boobs too, plus *they* wear Ashlee-Paris-Lindsay shit that shows them off, and I’m in my hoodie every day, men’s XL from Foot Locker. When they first started coming in for real, in like May last year, I was only eleven. It was weird enough even having them but then they also sort of pointed outward like the opposite of cross-eyed, and the left was freakishly bigger than the right one: I measured. Immediately all T-shirts went in the trash except my Blue

Valley Camp ones. “Eleanor,” my dad said which he only calls me when he thinks he knows more about something than I do, “you can’t just throw out all your clothes. It’s wasteful.” Whenever I don’t agree with him about something he always makes me describe what he calls my Reasoning. He started doing it at the end of sixth grade, all official like it was some kind of special grown-up thing but I wasn’t about to tell him my “reasoning” for throwing out my T-shirts so I just said “Fuck you,” but too soft for him to hear. Linda came in from the hallway and stood in the door and gave my dad this smirk I wasn’t supposed to see, like she knew the magic answer and it was a secret, and then my dad turned red and Linda took me on a special trip to the mall the next day. She wanted to take me to Nordstrom and talk about outfits. Instead we went to Foot Locker and I bought four hoodies, size XL, red, navy, black, and gray, and then we had Sbarro, and then we went home.

And yet. Matt Ditkus and Marco Rollo start it in second-period English the first Tuesday in October with some shit they drew on graph paper: this girl with hair down to her chin like mine and a double-pierced ear which I also have, except her body is all bikini-looking like a *Maxim* cover and she’s about to fall over from her boobs being so big. But it says “Elly” on the bottom so I know it’s supposed to be me. Matt Ditkus throws a wad of paper at my back halfway through the period and when I turn around he holds the drawing up. Which of course everybody sees.

After that you can hear like five of them back there the rest of the period cracking up and when the bell rings my new nickname is Tits.

Brian heard my nickname in the halls, I guess, because he tries calling me it at home the next night. I wish I had a pencil I could stab him in the eye with so it'd spurt blood and make him blind forever, but instead I just keep watching *Total Request Live*. He laughs and then he calls me it again before he goes downstairs. I can't go down there after that so I try to stay upstairs on the couch till I fall asleep and it works for a while, through back-to-back *TRLs* and *Road Rules* and some thing with Seann William Scott. My eyes are starting to droop half the time and I know if I can get through one more hour of videos I'll be home free, upstairs for the night in the living room with no doors for Brian to close behind us.

But then of course Linda comes home, thinking she can just breeze in after working till practically midnight and start rearranging everybody. My dad went to bed like four hours ago for a morning meeting; even if I never get to see him, he at least lets me sleep where I want. But Linda wiggles my shoulder saying "Baby, wake up, you won't get a good night's sleep on the couch," and I want to tell her I was getting a perfectly good night's sleep before she fucking woke me up, but instead I just sort of mumble and try to sound as asleep as I possibly can, hoping she'll give up.

There is nothing more annoying than the exact sound of Linda's voice when she is saying my name to try and wake me up. And of course she keeps doing it so eventually it becomes so incredibly irritating that I am forced to open my eyes. "Yeah?" I say, making my voice all bleary.

"Come on, sweetie, time to go downstairs," she says, and there is no way to explain that the idea of going downstairs makes me feel the kind of panicked dirty that happens when you go without a shower for so many days that the grease on your face starts making you itch so I just say "Okay," and take the steps as slowly as I can.

The Ashlee girls love Matt and Marco and their JV friends; they all hang around the double doors at lunch looking like some Abercrombie ad and start giggling like little screechy birds when the guys come out from the cafeteria. The week after Matt Ditkus dubs me Tits I'm sitting on the sidewalk across from the double doors eating Tater Tots when Marco sneaks up to the cluster of girls from behind. He puts one arm around Jenny Kirchner's neck and feels her up with the other hand. She makes this weird noise, sort of halfway between a scream and a laugh except both. The other girls keep bird-giggling, but louder like a swarm. Jenny's smiling when she throws her head backward onto Marco's shoulder except she doesn't really look like she's breathing. Her stomach is sucked in so much you can see the lines of the muscles like a magazine girl, and her hair falls off her

thrown-back neck like she's waiting for Dracula. She is perfect: every part of her fits together just the way it is supposed to and even though my chest feels weirdly tight I just want to watch her forever. I wish I could be invisible and frozen, just so I could stay here looking. Then Matt Ditzkus turns around and sees me. "Tits!" he yells and my stomach fills up with spastic butterflies and my face gets so hot it starts sweating and I know it's red. I hate him. There's nothing to say though and I'm done with my Tater Tots so I just look down at the asphalt like it's the ceiling and memorize it till he turns his back on me again.

The next time I see Jenny Kirchner after that, in B hall before lab science, she makes this gross-out face, then leans in to the other Ashlees and starts whispering at exactly the amount of loudness that I can tell it's about me but exactly the amount of quietness that I can't hear what it is. For I don't know what reason the feeling I get makes me think of Brian and the spastic butterflies start again. It's retarded that I'm embarrassed by the Ashlees whispering when I don't even know what they're saying; usually I just hate them, but somehow Matt Ditzkus seeing me see Jenny made the whole thing different, not to mention that he and Marco have now taken to calling me Lesbo in addition to Tits. When the bell rings Jenny goes "So we'll see you after seventh period, right? Bye!!" like she's inviting me to the mall with them but I know that isn't what she's doing.

If they were just going to throw my stuff on the ground again I don't know why she'd make such a thing about it. They've got some kind of other idea I'm sure and all through lab science I watch the clock, willing the seconds to stretch out like rubber bands, each one pulled out three times its length and so, so skinny. Eventually they hit their limit and the bell rings, making my face sting like a thousand rubber bands snapped back all at once, and I almost cry.

In the parking lot, Jenny Kirchner has a plan. She and Julia and the Ashlees are standing halfway to the buses in a cluster; they're watching the doors when I come out, and I can tell they've been waiting. I stalled in the girls' bathroom for fifteen minutes after last bell, hoping I would miss them. Everyone else is loaded on the bus, doors closed, but they're still here. The weird thing is no backpacks. They've got their hands free and I wonder where their stuff went till I see the JV guys off to the side, laughing in their baggy shirts and shoving each other, the girls' matching backpacks piled at their feet. It's the guys' job to stand near them because the girls all have another job; I know it even though I don't know what it is.

There's no other option but to walk right toward them. If I walked back into the building it would mark me for life. It's one of those face-off things, like *West Side Story* or some cowboy movie. You can't exactly turn around; they'd just