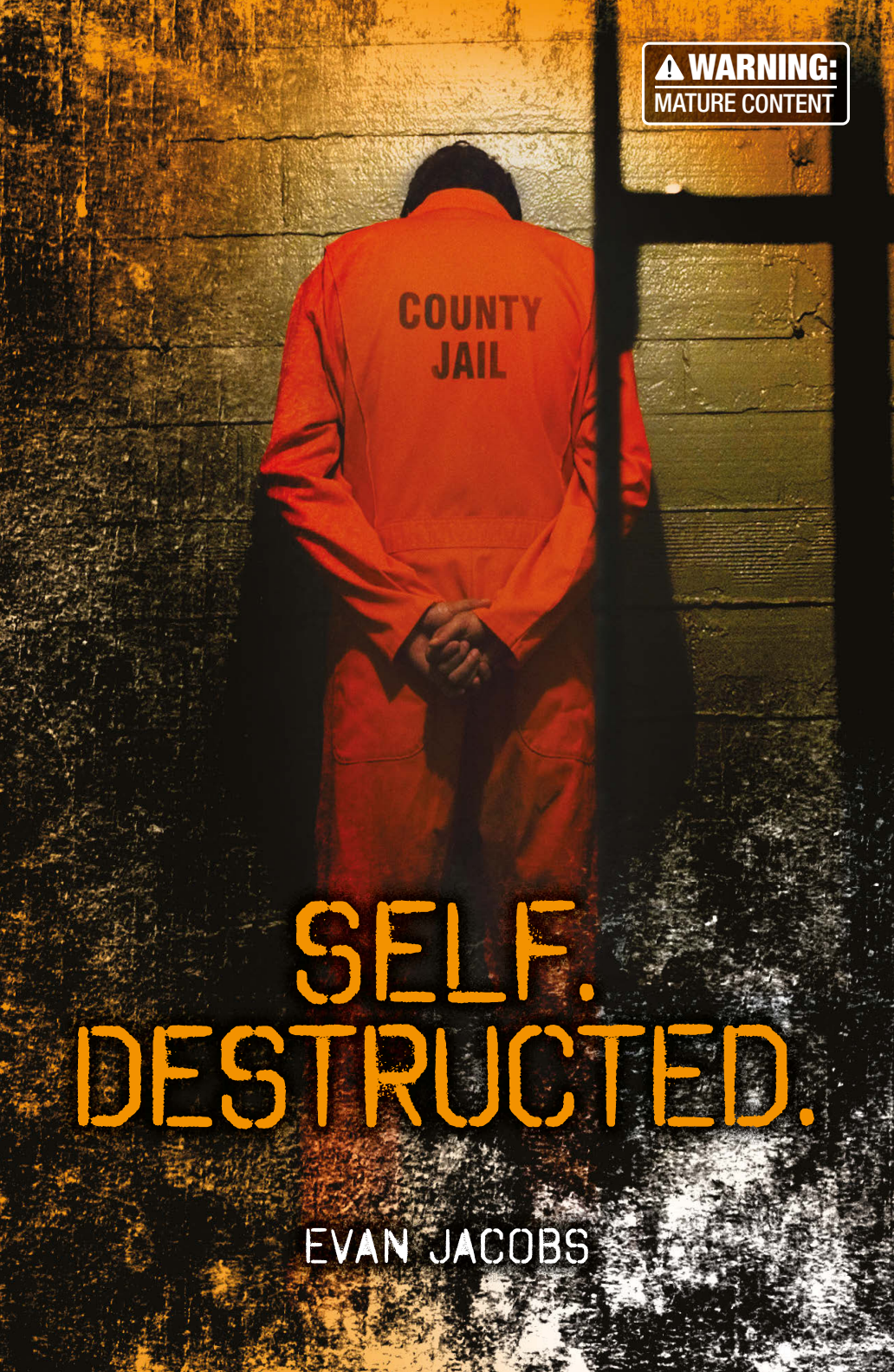
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EVAN JACOBS

ASHLEY

Nice shirt." Ashley Walters smiled as she passed Michael Ellis. She was paying a compliment to his T-shirt for the band the Who. It was the one where the *O* in the name had an arrow coming out of it, and there was a red, white, and blue bull's-eye behind it.

"You want it?" Michael replied looking up from his *MacWorld* magazine. Ashley laughed. Her smile was enough to let him know she thought he was okay, that he could keep talking to her.

"I'll give it to you, seriously." Michael started to lift his shirt up, ignoring the fact that he was wearing a jacket. Realizing it would be impossible to take off, Michael stopped trying.

"Come on, keep going." Ashley's smile became a stern expression. "You *did* offer."

Michael stared at her. Ashley had really inviting hazel

eyes. They went well with her dark complexion and thick brown hair. She wore a pair of white tennis shoes, white shorts, and a red T-shirt.

"Okay, I'll let you off the hook." She smiled. "I can see by your jacket that you run for the school. Running's cool."

"You like to run?" Michael asked.

Ashley nodded her head.

"You want to run together sometime?" He asked the question before he realized what he was saying.

"You think you can keep up with me?" She jogged in place. "I'm pretty fast."

"I run the hundred-yard dash."

"Wow, that's a humble brag." She smiled.

Michael liked how she teased him and seemed interested at the same time.

"You're new here," Michael stated.

"Do I stand out that much?"

"In a good way."

Michael had no idea why he was saying all these things. There was something about Ashley. He felt drawn to her. She didn't seem like the other girls at Willmore High School. He felt like it was okay to talk with her like this.

"Well, I've gotta run. Not literally." She smiled again. Dazzling. "But you better stay in training. Especially if you're gonna keep up when you take me running."

"Okay."

"I'm Ashley."

"Michael."

He wanted to set up a time for their run but she was gone.

Michael thought about going after her but he didn't. He had a feeling he would be talking to her again. He just didn't know when, which kind of bothered him.

John walked up. He was wearing the same Willmore High School track jacket that Michael was wearing. It said Willmore across the back and had a runner in the center.

"Who was that girl you were talking to?" John asked.

"That was Ashley."

"She's cute."

Michael continued to watch Ashley as she walked away. Eventually, she blended into the crowd of students.

The school year had basically just started, and Michael thought it was going to be a great one.

MICHAEL

Michael jogged home after track practice. There was a bus he could've taken with a group of other students, but Michael preferred running.

"I like running to school and running home," he told people. "It helps me clear my head."

He'd been running to and from Willmore since he started there as a freshman. He was a junior now.

The area that he and the other students were bused from was just outside the town of Willmore. It was called Porterville. It was also considered the "poorer" section. (Some of the rich Willmore students called it "Poorerville.") The homes, parks, and stores were all older. The high school that had initially been there was torn down, so all the students in the area went to the newer one in Willmore.

Michael's friends John and Kevin were also from Porterville, but they took the bus unless John got to use his parents' car.

Michael's thoughts turned to his homework. He had seven classes. The first week of school was over, and the teachers were starting to pile it on. Michael didn't mind; he just wished he was better at English. It wasn't that he didn't like the subject; it just wasn't concrete and simple to him like math and science. Too many gray areas.

"There are so many ways to look at this stuff," he once told a teacher. "It confuses me because I never know if I'm looking at it the right way."

Michael wanted to be a pediatrician. He had two older brothers, Erik and Jason. They were both married with kids. Michael got along well with all of them. Jason had a girl, Ally, who was six. Erik had two boys, Kyle and Sebastian, who were seven and nine.

One time Michael was watching all the kids. Sebastian fell. He skinned his knee and it bled a lot. Michael patched Sebastian up. Sebastian was crying, and Michael made him feel better. He liked how that felt. That's what made him want to help children.

As he neared his home, he ran past Otis Park. It was really run-down. There were two rusty swings and one sorry slide. Next to that was a basketball court with rusted hoops and a large patch of brown grass. When Michael was younger, he'd loved going there. For a while.

One time when he was six, his brothers were babysitting him. They thought it would be funny to take him to the park and leave him there. Michael tried to find his way home, but he got lost. The farther he walked, the more scared and lost he got.

Eventually, a neighbor spotted him wandering around crying, and they helped him find his way home.

His mom comforted him like she always did.

"It's okay now," she said as she kissed his forehead. "Everything's going to be fine, sweetie."

His dad yelled at his brothers, but he seemed disappointed in Michael. As if he, at six years old, should have known how to get home on his own.

THE SETUP

"No invite?" Ashley called as Michael ran around the perimeter of the Willmore track field.

It's her, he said to himself and stopped running.

Michael walked over to Ashley. She was hanging out by the fence, standing next to two popular girls, who were both talking on their cell phones. Their names were Blanca and Tori. They were rich girls that Michael had never really talked to. He assumed Ashley was with them.

Ashley was wearing jeans and a white hoodie. Her brown hair hung down her back in a ponytail. Michael felt himself breathing heavier and heavier.

"I'm sorry." Michael grinned.

"You run before practice?" Ashley asked, motioning to the other runners who were all stretching.

"Yeah. I stretch too … I just, I like running." He was hoping he didn't sound weird. Michael always found that

people liked him, but sometimes they thought he was odd. Like running before track practice. He did things he didn't need to do. "Did you move here over the summer?" he asked.

"Yeah, with my parents. My dad's a doctor at the hospital. The main one in Willmore."

"I want to be a doctor."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Michael wiped some sweat from his brow. He hoped he wasn't sweating too much. His breathing had steadied. "I want to work with kids. What about you? What do you want to do when you graduate?"

"I like writing. I want to do something with that."

"I wish I was better at writing. I like math and science."

"I'm not surprised."

"Really?" Michael asked, confused. "Why?"

"You seem smart. Really smart people always like math and science better than English."

"I've never thought about it like that," Michael replied. He wasn't sure he understood what Ashley meant, but he was pretty sure she wasn't messing with him.

She doesn't know me well enough to do that, he thought.

"So does that mean I'm smarter than you?" After he said it, Michael realized he might have offended her.

"You might be. At least you like good music." Ashley just seemed to go with the flow. Michael thought she liked talking to him.

"I also like movies," Michael stated.

"Me too."

"What's your favorite one?"

"I like the *Harry Potter* ones."

"Me too. I liked the first one the best, though." Michael had seen all the *Harry Potter* movies.

"I loved them all," Ashley said.

Then there was a lull in the conversation. This sometimes happened to him. It was hard to keep a conversation going, especially when he was nervous.

I wish I could kiss you, he thought. *Would she let me kiss her sometime?*

"Were you serious about going running with me?" Michael knew he should have been more forceful. John and his other friends told him that you never "ask" a girl to do anything. You "tell" her what she's going to do.

Michael couldn't do that.

"Were *you* serious? I think you're afraid you'll see how good I am, and then you'll lose your spot on the team." Ashley laughed after she said that.

She laughs a lot after she says things, but she's not laughing at me, Michael told himself. *I think she just thinks a lot of things are funny.*

"Let's go running on Saturday night." Michael put it out there. This was the hang-fire moment.

"That sounds like a date." She eyed him coyly.

"Maybe it is." Michael smiled.

Now it's my turn to laugh. And he did.

"Okay."

Ashley wrote down her phone number and gave it to him.

Michael stuffed the paper into his pocket just as Blanca and Tori were getting off their phones. He gave Ashley a quick smile as he heard the coach blow his whistle for the start of practice.

As Michael ran back to the team, he wondered what Blanca and Tori might tell Ashley about him. They'd known Michael since freshman year. Would they make fun of Ashley for dating a guy from Poorerville?

Don't worry about that, he told himself. *You're going out with Ashley, not them.*

MEET THE PARENTS

Hey, come on in, Mike," Ashley's dad said as he extended his hand. Michael shook it as he walked into Ashley's big two-story house. Normally, he didn't like being called "Mike," but he wasn't going to tell that to Ashley's dad.

The house had hardwood floors, leather couches, modern light fixtures. Everything was new. It also had a dramatic entrance with a winding staircase in the middle of the house.

This looks like something out of a movie, Michael thought.

This was in stark contrast to Michael's house. It had older carpet, older furniture, and "popcorn" ceilings. His parents worked hard to make it look nice, but they didn't have enough money to do a lot of improvements.

"Ashley tells me you want to be a doctor," her father said as they sat in the living room.

"Yeah. A pediatrician," Michael stated.

"That's admirable. It's a very a competitive field. You've got to get into a good school. You need to be an ace student. Everything. A good doctor has to be top-notch."

Her father eyed Michael as he picked up his drink off the table. It was almost like he was asking, "Are you top-notch, Michael? Are you good enough for my daughter?"

Ashley's mom walked out with a big smile on her face. She looked like Ashley, only older. They had the same long brown hair. The same warm, inviting hazel eyes.

"Hi, Michael," Ashley's mother shook his hand as he stood up. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thank you," he said. Michael wanted to make a good impression. He wanted Ashley's parents to like him and to tell her that he'd make a good boyfriend.

Ashley walked downstairs dressed in pink sweats and a white hoodie.

"I thought we were going running?" She smiled.

Michael was wearing dark blue jeans and a white button-down shirt. He hadn't forgotten. They were some of the nicest clothes he had. He didn't want to meet her parents wearing sweats.

"Oh, Ashley," her mother started, "you're not going out like that?"

"Yeah, we're going to the best restaurant in town, right, Michael?" Ashley eyed him.

"Well …" Michael had to think fast. "I'm going there. You might have some problems getting in."

That made Ashley's parents laugh.

"So you don't want to run?" Ashley asked. "You know what? Let's get pizza. I know a great place," she said. Before Michael could respond, Ashley disappeared up the stairs.

"That's Ashley," her mother said as she walked out of the room.

"Yeah, she's a girl who knows what she wants." As her father said that, he eyed Michael. The way he said it was odd.

Is he questioning why she might want me?

He talked with Ashley's father for a few more minutes before she came back down wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and her white hoodie.

Then they left the house. Michael wasn't able to stop questioning everything Ashley's father had said.

Does he like me? Does he not like me?

Michael told himself to relax. He was with Ashley now, and that was who he really cared about.

SELF. DESTRUCTED.

"I like you because you're different."

That's what she had said. And he thought she was different too. Different was better than being normal. But she was a fraud. And she was done dating him. That's when he started to self-destruct. When he became obsessed. When he forgot about his dreams. When he became a criminal.



⚠ WARNING:
MATURE CONTENT

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