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DONNA COONER

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CHAPTER ONE

I know what they think because she whispers their thoughts into my ear. I can hear them. Clearly. Constantly.

“If I ever look like that, just kill me.”

Her name is Skinny.

I don't know how long she's been sitting there on my shoulder, whispering her messages. She popped up when I was about ten, when I started gaining weight after my mother died. At first, her voice came infrequently . . . softly . . . but as I got bigger, she grew stronger. She probably looks like a goth Tinker Bell, maybe a winged fairy kind of thing, but I've never actually seen her. I only hear her.

I squeeze down the aisle of my sophomore algebra class to the far back corner accompanied by the swishing sound of my thighs rubbing together with each step.

“You're huge.”

Skinny whispers in my ear the thoughts of size-zero

Whitney Stone as I push by her desk, almost knocking her purse off in the process. Whitney gives a big sigh of disgust, rolls her eyes, and moves the knockoff Prada to the other side of the desk.

Believe me, Whitney. I wouldn't come near you if I didn't have to, but I can't escape it. I can't escape me. Trapped in layers of blubber and excess everything. It all feels tight . . . stretched . . . uncomfortable. From the moment I wake up in the morning and struggle to stand up out of my bed to the moment I go to sleep at night, I am trapped inside this enormous shell. The anger I keep stuffed beneath the layers seeps out toward Whitney, an easy target.

"So, Whitney, my sister said you did really well on cheerleader tryouts. You know, all except for that one part . . ." I let my voice trail off and wait for the fear to take over her eyes. Small satisfaction. I feel a pang of guilt and push the anger back down inside.

"What is she talking about?" I hear Whitney ask behind me as I move on.

She has no idea that my older stepsister, Lindsey, head cheerleader for Huntsville High School, hasn't spoken a word to me in weeks. Lindsey's not mad at me. I'm just not worthy of conversation. But Whitney doesn't know that. She turns to confront her clueless best friend and fellow cheerleader-wannabe, Kristen Rogers. "You said it was perfect."

"Good one." Gigi Retodo, drama geek, smiles broadly at my comment. As I waddle on down the aisle, she slaps me a high five as though we're friends. We're not. I think she just dislikes

me a little less than she does Whitney. Evidently “fat” wins over “popular” with the thespians.

“You’re like the big marshmallow monster in that old Ghostbusters movie. Soft. Goey. Horrifying,” Skinny says softly in my left ear.

I push on down the aisle because I don’t really have a choice. I pass Jackson Barnett on my right. He wears jeans with a blue tee under an unbuttoned long-sleeved plaid shirt. I notice the three leather loops around his right wrist as he reaches up to push his dark hair out of his eyes. His style is meticulously thought-out to look deceptively unplanned. I love that about him, but then I love everything about him. If only I could touch him. I’d burrow into his side and wrap my arms around his flat stomach, stretching up on my tiptoes to lay my head on his broad shoulder. And I know exactly how that would feel because I’ve been right there. Once upon a time.

I wait for Skinny to whisper Jackson’s thoughts in my ear, but nothing comes.

I don’t know what’s worse. The fact that Jackson doesn’t think bad things about me, or the fact that he doesn’t think about me at all. When he was scrawny with buckteeth and glasses, he used to think about me all the time. Now that he’s tall, with straight white teeth and contacts, he’s forgotten the tree house we made in his backyard and kissing me behind the street sign on Gardenia Street. As I covered myself in grief and fat over the years, his memory of me as his best friend trickled away until now I am completely unrecognizable. I know the feeling. I don’t recognize me, either.

Jackson turns to laugh at something Whitney says about a party last weekend. I push on. Look ahead. Anticipate space available. The back row always fills up first, but I'm usually here early enough to snag a seat. Not today. Scan the room. Is there space for me? Somewhere? Only two desks are available. Both are the kind with the desktop that snaps down over your stomach. Only it won't snap down over my stomach. I'll leave the desk up, but then I'll have to balance my notebook and books in my lap. A lap that really doesn't exist.

"You'll drop things. Things you won't be able to pick up. People will stare and giggle and point. You will be noticed. Do you really want that?"

I look around the room once more. No other choice. I slide into one of the chairs, my bottom falling over both sides of the seat. I put my book bag on the floor beside me and carefully hook the strap over one arm. Don't let it fall. If it falls then everything will be out of my reach for the rest of class. I pull the strap up until I can manage to reach inside. Rummaging around, I look for a pen and notebook. Pulling them out, I try not to make much noise. I don't want anyone's attention. I rest the notebook awkwardly on my stomach and try to turn to today's blank page. Finally, I'm ready. Everything is hard.

The teacher looks toward me.

"Look at the pity in his eyes."

I guess that's better than the disdain I see in most of the teachers' eyes and the outright fear I see from most other kids. Fear that it could happen to them.

“Look. She can’t even fit in the chair.”

Skinny doesn’t have to whisper that in my ear. I can hear it plainly. Kristen Rogers doesn’t even lower her voice. She is wearing a little pink tank top with the glittery word “Juicy” across the boobs. People think being fat somehow affects your hearing.

“I didn’t know pants came in that size,” Kristen says. “Maybe I should go on a diet. I told you my jeans were getting tight.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll never look like that,” her petite best friend Whitney responds. I know she’s right. Neither one of them will ever look like me. I don’t know why, but I know it’s true.

“Gigi Retodo has an announcement to make before class starts.” Mr. Blair waves Gigi up to the front of the room. “Only five minutes,” he warns.

Gigi’s face is an exotic combination of her Filipino father and Texan mother — creamy olive skin and almost black, almond-shaped eyes. But the bright blue bangs and the pink hair that fades into purple around the back of her neck distract from the pretty face. They’re definitely what you notice first. Today she’s wearing red leggings and sparkly high-top tennis shoes. She’s tiny, with elf-like features and the body of a twelve-year-old boy. It’s March, but she still has a purple-striped scarf wrapped around her neck. She moves with a jittery grace that makes me think she just ate a sackful of candy and is dancing it off.

“The drama club wants to invite all of you to the spring musical in April,” Gigi says in a surprisingly big voice for such

a little person. Then with an amazing lack of self-consciousness, she bursts into song. “Oooooooo . . . *klahoma* . . .”

She dances around the front of the room, like Rainbow Brite on speed. Her voice is strong and on pitch even without accompaniment. It’s a good voice, but I can sing better. A secret no one in this room knows.

“But who wants to see an elephant dancing around?”

Everyone bursts into applause at Gigi’s final, flourishing bow. I glance over at Jackson. His teeth are flashing in a blazing smile as he claps enthusiastically. There used to be braces on those teeth. I remember. Mr. Blair gets the class back on track, and I try to concentrate on algebra. Skinny is quiet at my ear. Good. If I stay very still, maybe I can stop the whispering.

Chance Lehmann, his rich ebony hair curling wildly out from underneath the New York Yankees baseball cap he has pulled low over his eyes, slides into the chair across from me. He’s ten minutes late. Early for him. I shake my head at him when he meets my eyes, but one side of my mouth creeps up in a half smile. Chance has that effect on people. His mouth twists down in a grimace, his puppy-dog brown eyes fake sad, and then he waves a hand briefly in hello. His skin is a dark honey color. The better to notice the sparkling purple fingernail polish on his hands.

“You like?” He holds his hands out toward me, palms down. “It’s called Jammin’ Jelly.”

I look to see if Mr. Blair is paying attention, but he’s talking

to someone in the front row about their homework. “Do your toes match?” I whisper across the aisle.

“Of course. I’m completely in touch with my feminine side.” Chance grins at me, fanning his face with one purple-painted hand. That might be true, but he’s also “completely in touch” with a baseball and can pitch an amazing curveball that will buy his way into any university he wants to attend, painted toenails and all. “You should try it, Ever. A mani/pedi is exactly what you need.”

“You can paint a pig, but it’s still a pig,” Skinny whispers in my ear.

I frown at Chance and turn toward the front of the room again. Mr. Blair calls a couple of students to the board to work on some problems. Panic rises in my chest. *Don’tcallonme. Don’tcallonme.* The idea of squeezing through the aisle to display my backside to the whole room’s comments makes me start to breathe hard.

“Ever Davies,” the teacher calls out. “Will you tackle problem number seventeen?”

It isn’t a request. I’m trapped. Inside and outside my body. I push my way out of the chair, which clings to me like a big inner tube, and start back up the aisle.

Kristen Rogers rolls her eyes at Whitney.

“Oh my god. Here you come again,” Skinny jeers.

I’m fifteen years old, and I weigh 302 pounds.