

MELISSA



ALEX GINO



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chapter 1

SECRETS

George pulled a silver house key out of the smallest pocket of a large red backpack. Mom had sewn the key in so that it wouldn't get lost, but the yarn wasn't quite long enough to reach the keyhole if the bag rested on the ground. Instead, George had to steady herself awkwardly on one foot while the backpack rested on her other knee. She wiggled the key until it clicked into place.

Stumbling inside, she called out, "Hello?" No lights were on. Still, George needed to be certain the house was empty. The door of Mom's room was open and the bedsheets were flat. Scott's room was unoccupied as

well. Sure that she was alone, George went into the third bedroom, opened the closet door, and surveyed the pile of stuffed animals and assorted toys inside. They were undisturbed.

Mom complained that George hadn't played with any of the toys in years, and said that they should be donated to needy families. But George knew they were needed here, to guard her most prized and secret collection. Fishing beneath the teddy bears and fluffy bunnies, George felt for a flat denim bag. Once she had it in hand, she ran to the bathroom, shut the door, and turned the lock. Clutching the bag in tightly wrapped arms, George slid to the ground.

As she tipped the denim bag on its side, the silky, slippery pages of a dozen magazines fell out onto the tiled bathroom floor. Covers promised HOW TO HAVE PERFECT SKIN, TWELVE FRESH SUMMER HAIRCUTS, HOW TO TELL A HOTTIE YOU LIKE HIM, and WILD WINTER WARDROBES. George was only a few years younger than the girls

smiling at her from the glossy pages. She thought of them as her friends.

George picked up an issue from last April that she had looked through countless times before. She browsed the busy pages with a crisp *flip-flip-flip* that stirred up the faint smell of paper.

She paused on a photo of four girls at the beach. They modeled swimsuits in a line, each striking a pose. A guide on the right-hand side of the page recommended various styles based on body type. The bodies looked the same to George. They were all girls' bodies.

On the next page, two girls sat laughing on a blanket, their arms around each other's shoulders. One wore a striped bikini; the other wore a polka-dot one-piece with cutouts at the hips.

If George were there, she would fit right in, giggling and linking her arms in theirs. She would wear a bright-pink bikini, and she would have long hair that her new friends would love to braid. They would ask her name,

and she would tell them, *My name is Melissa*. Melissa was the name she called herself in the mirror when no one was watching and she could brush her flat reddish-brown hair to the front of her head, as if she had bangs.

George flipped past flashy ads for book-bag organizers, nail polish, the latest phones, and even tampons. She skipped over an article on how to make your own bracelets and another on advice for talking to boys.

George's magazine collection had started by accident. Two summers ago, she had noticed an old issue of *Girls' Life* in the recycling bin at the library. The word *girl* had caught her eye instantly, and she had slipped the magazine in her jacket to look at later. Another girls' magazine soon followed, this time rescued from a trash can down the block from her house. The very next weekend, she had found the denim bag at a yard sale for a quarter. It was just the size of a magazine, and had a zipper along the top. It was as if the universe had wanted her to be able to store her collection safely.

George settled on a two-page spread about FRAMING YOUR FACE WITH MAKEUP. George had never worn makeup, but she pored over the range of colors on the left side of the page. Her heart raced in her chest. She wondered what it would feel like to really wear lipstick. George loved to put on ChapStick. She used it all winter, whether or not her lips were really chapped, and every spring she hid the tube from Mom and wore it until it ran out.

George jumped when she heard a clatter outside. She looked out the window to the front door directly below. No one was in sight, but Scott's bike lay in the driveway, the back wheel still spinning.

Scott's bike! That meant Scott! Scott was George's older brother, a high school freshman. The hair on George's neck stood up. Soon, heavy footsteps climbed the stairs to the second floor. The locked bathroom door rattled. It was as if Scott were rattling George's heart inside her rib cage.

Bang! Bang Bang!

“You in there, George?”

“Y-yeah.” The shiny magazines were spread across the tile floor. She gathered them into a pile and stuffed them into the denim bag. Her heart was thumping almost as loudly as Scott’s foot against the door.

“Yo, bro, I gotta go!” Scott yelled from the far side.

George zipped up the bag as quietly as she could and looked for a place to stash it. She couldn’t walk out with it. Scott would want to know what was inside. The bathroom’s one cabinet was stuffed with towels and didn’t shut all the way. No good either. Finally, she hung the bag from the showerhead and closed the curtain, desperately hoping that this wouldn’t be the moment Scott discovered personal hygiene.

Scott rushed in as soon as George opened the door, unzipping his jeans before he reached the toilet. George exited quickly, closed the door, and leaned on the wall

outside to catch her breath. The bag was probably still swinging in the shower. George hoped it wouldn't hit against the curtain or, worse, fall and land in the bathtub with a thud.

George didn't want to be standing near the bathroom when Scott came out, so she went down to the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of orange juice and sat at the table, her skin tingling. Outside, a cloud passed overhead and the room grew darker. When the bathroom door banged open, George jumped in her seat, splashing juice on her hand. She realized she had barely been breathing.

Thump, thump, thump-thump-thump-thump-thump. Scott tromped downstairs, a DVD case in his hand. He opened the refrigerator door, pulled out the carton of orange juice, and took a long swig. He wore a thin black T-shirt and jeans with a small hole in the knee. He hadn't gotten a haircut in months, and dark-brown curls formed a mop on his head.

“Sorry if I busted in on you while you were taking a dump.” Scott wiped the juice off his lips with his bare forearm.

“I wasn’t taking a dump,” George said.

“Then what took you so long?”

George hesitated.

“Oh . . . I know,” Scott said. “I’ll bet you had a magazine in there.”

George froze, her mouth half-open and her brain mid-thought. The air felt warm and her mind swirled. She put her hands on the table to make sure she was still there.

“That’s it.” Scott grinned, oblivious to George’s panic. “That’s my little bro! Growing up and looking at dirty magazines.”

“Oh,” George said out loud. She knew what dirty magazines were. She almost laughed. The girls in the magazines she was looking at wore a lot more clothes than

that, even the ones at the beach. George relaxed, at least a little.

“Don’t worry, George. I won’t tell Mom. Anyway, I’m heading back out. Just had to get this.” Scott shook the black plastic box he held in his hand, and the DVD inside rattled. “Haven’t even seen it yet, but it’s supposed to be a classic. It’s German. The title means something like *The Blood of Evil*. When the zombies gnaw this one guy’s arm off and kill him, this other guy has to use the gnawed-off arm of his dead best friend to fight the zombies. It’s awesome.”

“It sounds gross,” George said.

“It is!” Scott nodded enthusiastically. He took another gulp of orange juice, put the carton back into the fridge, and headed for the door.

“I’ll let you get back to thinking about girls,” Scott joked on the way out.

George dashed up to the bathroom, rescued her bag,

and buried it deep inside her closet, under the toys and stuffed animals. She put a pile of dirty clothes on top, just in case. Then she closed the door and collapsed face-first onto her bed, her hands crossed over her head, pressing her elbows to her ears and wishing she were someone else—anyone else.