

# 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.