

CHAPTER ONE

“Hey, Edie, where you headed? Aren’t you going to choir practice this afternoon?” Kat shouted over the din of after-school noises. Before Edie could utter a response, Kat found herself on the floor, gasping for air.

“Darnell, that was so messed up. I saw what you did!” Edie yelled.

Darnell smiled, showing his beautiful white teeth against his very black skin and mockingly bowing toward Kat as he continued down the hallway backward.

“Sorry, Katherine, didn’t mean to bump into you, sorry.” As he passed Edie, he half-whispered, “Whaddya expect with you two whales blocking the hallway?” Edie swung her book bag at him, but missed and nearly fell as a result of the centrifugal force of the bag missing its mark.

She tossed her bag on the floor and knelt beside Kat, who was bleeding from the mouth. “God, are you OK? Do you need to go to the nurse? Gross! There’s blood all over your hand. What’s bleeding?”

“It’s nothing really. I think my braces just cut the inside of my lip a little. It seems to be stopping already. I think I have some napkins in my locker. Could you get them for me?”

Edie managed to get herself up off the floor, which was no easy task at five foot four and just under 200 pounds. She found the napkins and handed them to Kat, still sprawled on the floor. Students were walking all around them, pretending they weren’t there, which was really hard to do as Kat was pretty much the same size as Edie. But both Kat and Edie were fairly accustomed to being ignored. It was an interesting phenomenon.

It seemed the bigger they got, the more invisible they became, except when someone like Darnell wanted to make some point of embarrassing them.

“Why do people do things like that?” Kat asked rhetorically. “It’s so mean. Does he really get pleasure out of making other people feel bad?”

“It beats me,” Edie responded. Though she was quite sure that Darnell did take pleasure in hurting people. She knew the type. Her father was like that, charming on the outside and mean as hell on the inside. Edie shivered, thinking about her father, happy that her mother had finally managed to extricate them from his life. It wasn’t easy, but her mom had figured out how to finally accomplish that feat. Edie was extremely proud of her mother, and fully understood why her mother was so strict with her. She didn’t always like it, but she understood.

“Here, let me help you up.” Edie put out her hand to Kat. She grabbed on and managed to lumber up, grunting with effort in the process.

“So where are you headed with your coat on already?” Kat asked again.

“I have a dentist appointment this afternoon. Believe me, I’d much rather be going to choir practice.”

“Well, OK then. Thanks for your help. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Kat liked choir practice better when Edie was there. She liked having Edie’s strong voice next to her so the altos nearby didn’t throw her off. Kat didn’t have a particularly good voice, but she had a wonderful music sense. In fact, she played the piano amazingly well, but it just didn’t translate well to her vocal cords. Maybe one day she’d take singing lessons.

She enjoyed choir practice as they were doing Gershwin’s *Porgy & Bess*. She much preferred jazz to the classical music she was being forced to learn during her piano

lessons. Her mom thought she should be more cultured. Her mom had divorced her father because he wasn't good enough for her—too crass and ignorant about the “arts.” He had made a lot of money in construction, so they lived in a really nice house in Society Hill, but her mom made him leave. If Kat had had a choice, she would have chosen to live with her dad. He was much more fun to be with. Her mother was always trying to move up the social scale. She'd go to the concerts and operas and all kinds of charity benefits. Kat knew her mom was bored as hell most of the time, because she didn't really know or understand anything about music, but just figured it was a good way to meet a wealthy guy that was “someone.” Kat thought it was really stupid to spend all kinds of time doing stuff that bored you just to impress someone. And besides, what was the point of meeting someone who liked to do things that bored you? For a smart lady, her mother could be really dumb sometimes!

Kat came home after choir practice to an empty house for a change. There was a note on the fridge that her mom had a date—so what else was new—and that she could heat up some leftovers that were in the fridge for dinner.

She turned on the TV to keep herself company and then stuck her head in the fridge to see what the leftovers were. Her mother was into all kinds of health food, so she doubted she'd be very interested in the leftovers. Her mom was very slender. It was no wonder since all she seemed to eat was horrible stuff that was supposed to be healthy. As far as Kat was concerned though, it all tasted like cardboard. If that's what it took to be slim, then forget it. She'd rather be fat.

As she suspected, there was a dish of vegetables with what she thought was probably tofu, but looked more like vomit. Ugh! No way was she going to eat that crap.

Her mother never kept anything “decent” to eat in the house, because she figured it would help her lose weight. She was constantly nagging her and giving her dirty looks whenever she ate anything that wasn’t on her mother’s OK list.

Fortunately for Kat, she had a generous allowance, so she decided to go get a Jim’s cheesesteak with extra cheese to go. She stopped off on her way home from Jim’s and got one of those fabulous double chocolate-chip cookies from Famous. God, they were to die for. Her mouth was watering for the cookie so badly she almost ate it on the way home, but managed to exert enough self-control to save it for dessert.

She ate her dinner in the living room, watching MTV. If someone had been in the next room, he or she might have thought she was making out rather than eating, as Kat groaned with pleasure with each morsel of chocolate-chip cookie that she put in her mouth. Kat just couldn’t imagine eating the way her mother did. It wouldn’t be a life worth living.

When Kat was finished eating, she took all the telltale wrappers and carefully buried them deep into the bowels of the trash masher, where her mother was sure not to notice. Then she took the vegetables and tofu, and sent them down the garbage disposal, but purposefully left the dirty dish in the sink.

Her mom was pretty easy to keep in the dark about things. Kat was sure it was because her mom didn’t really like her, so she didn’t much care what Kat did. Her mom never hugged her except when it was for show in front of other people, and even then Kat could sense her discomfort doing it. She never said anything complimentary or nice to Kat, mostly she just nagged her. Kat was kind of glad her mom was rarely home.

Kat's dad, Mark, though made her feel very special. Whenever they were together, she always came first. He touched and hugged her a lot, like he really cared. He made her feel good about herself. He didn't lie or anything, but when it was deserved, he always complimented her. She loved her father so much. She wished she could spend more time with him. She vowed that when she was old enough, she would live with her dad and leave her mother to her own devices. She was sure it would make her mother happy anyway. The only reason her mother kept her around, Katherine was convinced, was because it would be too embarrassing to explain why she was living with her father.

CHAPTER TWO

Edie came home to emptiness, as did Kat, but for entirely different reasons. Her mother, Lynette, worked two jobs to help keep them financially afloat. She cleaned offices at night and worked as a cashier during the day. She needed a car to get to both jobs and neither job paid benefits. Consequently it was really hard to make ends meet. Their tiny two-bedroom apartment in west Philly was quite neat, clean, and cheerful. Edie was very thankful that she actually had her own room. It was small, but it was hers. It was safe. She could lock the bedroom door, and no one would bother her.

She thought again of the incident with Darnell this afternoon, when suddenly, unbidden visions of her father entered her head. Edie's weight gain was intentional unlike Kat's. Edie had always been good at reading people. When she had realized her father, Jonas, had lost interest in her mother as her dress size grew, Edie deliberately started gorging herself with everything in sight, hoping her father's attention to her would diminish as well. She figured if she got fat enough, he wouldn't sneak into her bed at night while her mother was asleep and force her to do all those horrible things.

She was right. He didn't want her sexually anymore, but verbal and physical abuse took its place. She supposed in the end it worked out all right, because her mother never knew anything about the sex stuff. But when Lynette saw Jonas slap their own daughter right across the face and call her a fat pig, simply because she hadn't moved out of his way fast enough, she realized that he was mistreating Edie. Lynette had been able to put up with her own abuse, but it was quite something else when he started abusing their daughter. That she wouldn't tolerate.

Lynette had tried restraining orders, but they never worked. Jonas had made their life miserable. Edie had been sure that he was going to shoot them one day or worse. Edie had become a nervous wreck along with her mother. She had started eating more, no longer intentionally, but simply as a result of chronic anxiety. Then, her mother came up with a plan while they were still living in Virginia.

Lynette had worked with this woman, Brie, cleaning motel rooms. Lynette hadn't liked her very much, because she used to steal things from the motel rooms. She caught her once, and Brie threatened that if she ever said anything, she would make certain that Lynette took the blame. So she kept her mouth shut, but figured out a way to get even.

Brie was fairly attractive, and Lynette had known that she thought Jonas was hot. So knowing that Brie would do the opposite of anything Lynette told her, she'd deliberately told Brie to keep her mitts off Jonas and stop sashaying her ass around him. And at the same time, she had lied to Jonas, "letting it slip" like it was a big secret that Brie had come into a substantial inheritance.

It didn't take long for both of them to take the bait. And, while they weren't looking, Lynette had changed the title transfer papers for their car into her name, sold his gun and some gold jewelry that Jonas was saving for a rainy day, and left town without a trace. They drove to Philadelphia that same day and stayed with Lynette's cousin for a couple of days until she could get them an apartment of their own.

After several months looking over their shoulders, they had started to relax a little. Not taking any chances, Lynette bought one of those "throw-away" cell phones and used it to call back home to find out what Jonas was up to. Apparently, he had moved in with Brie, but when he found out there was no tidy inheritance, he beat the crap out of her. In

spite of that, they were still living together. Lynette felt a little guilty—well, maybe not. She figured they deserved each other.

That all happened over a year ago, and Edie was very happy in her new school. She just started this fall. It was a magnet school, which meant that you could live anywhere in the city, but you had to pass entrance examinations to get in. It was just by luck that her mother had heard about it through her cousins. She barely made the deadline. But Edie was very smart and landed some of the highest scores they'd seen. They wanted her. It meant that she had to take public transportation across town and get up very early, but Edie was the happiest she could ever remember.

Her classmates were from all walks of life. Some lived right in the area like Kat, because even though it was a public school, it had an excellent reputation. Others were from poorer neighborhoods like hers, and then there were a whole bunch of Asians, Hispanics, and even Middle Easterners, because they had a special program in the school for non-English speaking kids. There were a number of after-school programs, which pleased Edie tremendously, because her mother didn't usually get home until very late, and she didn't like to spend quite that much time home alone.

Edie stuck her head in the fridge, like Kat, after turning on the TV and didn't find much to eat either. She finally unearthed some two-day-old Kentucky Fried Chicken and mashed potatoes. It was left over from the weekend. Edie was very happy, because unlike Kat, she didn't have a generous allowance. She even brown-bagged her lunch, because she couldn't afford to buy it in school. Some days all she had for lunch was a soda and a couple of bags of chips from the vending machines. It was all she could afford when there was no food at home to bring in.

Not too far into the evening, while Edie was doing her homework, she heard the front door open. It made her heart skip a beat since her mother didn't usually get home until much later. "Mom is that you?" she called out.

"Yes, Sweet Pea, it's me!" came the answer.

"How come so early?" she shouted.

"You don't have to shout. I'm right here," Lynette said as she entered the room and leaned over to kiss her daughter on the forehead.

"Sooo, how come so early, not that I'm complaining, Mama?"

"Two of my cleaning clients are away this week. There wasn't much I needed to do in either of their offices, so I got finished early. So how's my Sweet Pea?"

"You know, I hate it when you call me that."

"I can't help it darlin'. You'll always be Sweet Pea to me. So anything interesting happen today?"

"Not exactly interesting, but you know that guy, Darnell, I told you about, you know the one that reminds me of you know who?"

Lynette nods and a slight frown furrows her eyebrows.

"Well, he deliberately walked into Kat in the hallway and knocked her down. Even caused her mouth to bleed. And you should have seen him smile, Mom. It gave me the willies." Edie shuddered just thinking about his smile again.

"Why don't you report him?"

"Oh, Ma, you don't understand anything!" Edie said with exasperation. "Really, what good would that do? He'd just say it was an accident, and the principal will believe him. He's so good at lying. And besides, even if the principal did believe him, Darnell

would just find some other way to get even for reporting him. I'm telling you, Ma, he's scary."

"Well then, I'd just do my best to avoid him as much as possible."

"I'll try. Hey, what's that you've got under your arm? Let's see." Edie grabbed what looked like a manuscript from under her mother's arm. She read the cover—*A Novel Diet*. "Where'd you get that Mom?"

"From Doctor Lang. She suggested I get it to help me lose some weight. My last blood tests showed some prediabetes, and she said that if I could lose the weight, maybe I could avoid getting diabetes altogether."

"Can I take a peek at it?"

"Sure, why don't you glance through it while I go put on something more comfortable."

Edie started reading the book and was immediately intrigued. It was a novel to start with, and the main character, Cheryl, weighed a little more than Edie when she was in high school, though, not middle school as Edie was. They were fat for different reasons, but Edie could still relate.

She read the first couple of chapters when her mother interrupted. "So what do you think?"

"I like it, Mom. I'd like to read more."

"Well, you can read it when I'm not around. Tonight's one of those rare nights when I'm home early enough to consider reading anything. I'm going to take it to bed with me. I'll see you in the morning. Goodnight, Sweet Pea."

“Mmmph.” Edie mumbled, expressing her displeasure at being called Sweet Pea again. Edie thought about what she had just read. She hadn’t ever really considered going on a diet. In her very short twelve years, she had only wanted to be fat so her father would stay away from her, but now that he was no longer around, she began thinking that maybe it would be nice to lose a few pounds, so the kids at school would stop making fun of her. She’d give it some thought.