


Models
don't eat
chocolate
COOKIES

by Erin Dionne

Dial Books  for Young Readers

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Now, I have to admit, being a model sounds like a pretty cool job. Flying to all parts of the world to have my picture taken, hanging out with stars, never going to school, making lots and lots of money . that would be great. I imagined myself on a beach with Theo Christmas, posing for a Celeb Eye magazine cover shoot. “Closer,” the photographer would direct. “Theo, pull her closer.” I’d rest my head against his chest and smile hugely for the camera.

And then my imagination showed me nestling with him in my polka-dot one-piece, the one with the “modesty skirt” Grandma got me to hide what she calls my “peasant” shape. Modeling might be fun or a great opportunity, but being the face of a clothing line for chunky girls was not the type of modeling that would generate seaside celebrity photo sessions. Excessive junior high teasing. Probably. Snuggles with Theo Christmas? No way. Also, husky or not, models don’t eat chocolate cookies.



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DIAL BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

A division of Penguin Young Readers Group • Published by The Penguin Group Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014, U.S.A. • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) • Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa • Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Dionne, Erin, date.

Models don't eat chocolate cookies / by Erin Dionne.
p. cm.

Summary: Overweight thirteen-year-old Celeste begins a campaign to lose weight in order to make sure she does not win the Miss HuskyPeach modeling challenge, which her mother and aunt have entered her in—against her wishes.

eISBN : 978-1-101-01484-4

[1. Overweight persons—Fiction. 2. Weight control—Fiction. 3. Models (Persons)—Fiction. 4. Friendship—Fiction. 5. Self-esteem—Fiction. 6. Schools—Fiction.] I. Title. II. Title: Models do not eat chocolate cookies.

PZ7.D6216Mo 2009

[Fic]—dc22

2008020612

<http://us.penguin.com>

For Frank, with all my love.

You were right.

Chapter 1

“NO WAY,” I hissed through the slatted dressing room door. “I am not coming out.”

“Honey, I have to see how it fits,” Mom said. “Let me look.”

I dropped my forehead against the beige cubicle wall. I’d have to give in eventually, but I wasn’t opening up until my cousin was back in the clothing cubby next to me.

“Oh, angel! It’s just bee-yoo-ti-ful on you. Isn’t she a sight, Noelle?” Aunt Doreen’s nasal whine came over the top of my dressing room door like arrows over a castle wall. Of course the dress was “bee-yoo-ti-ful” on Kirsten. What wasn’t? She was tall, blond, athletic, and one of the nicest people I knew. She also shared my celebrity crush on singer Theo Christmas. We both fell in love with him when her older sister took us to see him in concert last summer. I swear, he was singing to me the whole time. (She disagrees.)

“Does it look okay from the back?” Kirsten asked. I imagined her pirouetting in front of the three-way mirror at the end of the row, hair twirling like a shampoo commercial, evenly tanned skin standing out against the back of the dress, pastel lace and fabric hugging her in all the right places. I chose the only dressing room without a mirror on purpose.

“It’s lovely,” my mother offered, her voice tight. “Will you come *out*?” she stage-whispered through the dressing room door. “This is ridiculous.”

“Where’s Celeste?” Aunt Doreen said. “I haven’t seen her yet. Celeste, do you need help in there?”

I cringed. “No, Auntie, I’m fine,” I called. “Just, uh, almost ready. One more minute.” I tugged at the dress, hoping for the magical yank that would straighten seams, smooth wrinkles, or snap it into the right proportion. Sometimes you don’t need a mirror to know when things are *very* wrong.

“Kirsten, turn around again. I think it needs hemming, don’t you?” Aunt Doreen said. “Let’s get the seamstress in here.” Then, louder, directed at me, “Okay, Celeste, we’re waiting.”

Ready or not, here I come, I thought. Sliding the door’s bolt back, I hiked up the skirt and stepped into the dressing room corridor, head high. Maybe it wasn’t as bad as it felt.

Aunt Doreen gasped, then covered her mouth as if to trap what might follow. I let the dress sag to the floor.

“It’s . . . Oh, honey,” Mom tried. “It needs some alterations.”

I could imagine.

“Some?” said Aunt Doreen, biting the word like a potato chip. “What size did you order?”

I hung my head, trying to dampen the zing of her words, trying not to hear Mom explaining that I needed to order an adult size because the youth sizes weren’t cut for me. Besides, Mom said, the seamstress could fix it so the dress would “fall right,” whatever that meant.

“Wait!” barked a short white-haired woman with a tape measure around her neck and a handful of pins. She stood in the doorway between the dressing rooms and the rest of Angelique’s Bridal

Boutique. “Don’t move or you’ll tear the lace!” When she said it, though, “move” came out like “moof” and “the” sounded like “ze.” I stayed put. Besides, where could I go in a falling-wrong dress?

“Zis needs several substantial alterations,” she said, gesturing in my direction with her chin. “When is the wedding?”

“Nine weeks,” Mom said, tearing her eyes away from me and turning to the seamstress. “Can it be fixed in time?”

Straight out of a soap opera, I thought. *I’m in critical condition*. I stared at my feet, lost in a puddle of apricot satin. Usually I avoided this type of situation—comfort was more important to me than fashion. Comfort meant clothes that didn’t pull, ride up, or show off too much. Comfort was so cozy, and worn; not lacy, satiny, or peachy. A movement caught my eye. Kirsten, the Barbie Bridesmaid, was slipping into her dressing room. She raised her perfectly shaped eyebrows in an expression of sympathy before closing the door.

A bony hand pushed against the small of my back, and the seamstress ushered me to the carpet-covered platform in front of the three-way mirror Kirsten had just vacated. I hoisted myself up and thought, *I hate Kathleen*.

Kathleen was the bride. She’s Kirsten’s older sister, my oldest cousin. Ever since we moved to Los Alvios, California, five years ago, she’d watched me and my brother, Ben, when my parents went out or away for the weekend. I was flattered that she asked me to be a junior bridesmaid in her wedding, but once I saw the Peach Monstrosity, I wondered if my parents owed her babysitting money.

The dress was designed for someone like Kirsten. It had two layers sewn together down the length of the side seams. The bottom layer was fitted at the chest, with thin spaghetti straps holding the flimsy satin in place. The narrow waist dropped into a skinny skirt with a high slit in one leg and a mermaid-like swoosh of fabric in the back. The other layer was frothy peach lace that followed the shape of the satin, except the top had a scoop neck with elbow-length sleeves and slightly tufted shoulders.

Standing in front of the mirrors, I saw just how substantial those alterations would have to be.

I’m what you call “chubby” if you’re nice, “fat” if you’re like Lively Carson at school. Mom and Dad say that I haven’t lost my baby fat. If that’s the case at thirteen, I must have a lot of growing left to do. I’m short and round in the middle. And the bottom. Basically, I’m round all over, just like my dad. According to the way the dress fit, though, I’d once been six feet tall and had suddenly turned into a watermelon.

The lace constricted my upper chest and arms, forcing my pale skin through the pattern’s opening. Blood pressure cuffs make looser sleeves, and I could see a purple line around each forearm under the seams. The fabric hung loosely over my chest, bunched at my belly and hips, and puddled around my feet. And the view was reflected over and over in the triple mirror in front of me.

This is why I always shop for myself, I thought, trying to avoid the multiple Celestes. I settled on staring at a spot above my own head. Mom complains that I buy the same stuff all the time when I’m at the mall with Sandra, my best friend. She says that my wardrobe “makes me look like a lump” and that I am “hiding my beauty under hoods and zippers.” It’s true that my closet is home to track pants and hoodies in a range of colors, but I know what looks good on me. When Mom gets fed up with my clothes, she brings home outfits for me to try on. Then she gets fed up with my labeling them “to

tight,” “too uncomfortable,” or “showing too much” and returns them. This dress definitely fits into multiple “too *something*” categories.

“We can take extra fabric from the bottom to make the side panels,” the seamstress muttered as she buzzed around my feet, measuring here and pinning there. “The lace sleeves will be a challenge.”

“It’s my daughter’s wedding,” said Aunt Doreen, her voice climbing. “You have to make it fit.”

“Mom,” Kirsten called from her dressing room, “can you help me get out of this?” After a moment’s hesitation, Aunt Doreen huffed to her aid.

The coil of anxiety that had been growing in my chest loosened. *Thanks, Kirsten*, I thought. Aunt Doreen was seconds from going nuclear.

I caught my mother’s eyes in the mirror. Mom’s got great eyes—toffee-colored, with tiny green flecks that sparkle when she’s angry or happy. I got my dad’s eyes, kind of. His are dark brown, deep like chocolate, but mine resemble mud. Mom offered a smile that was supposed to be encouraging, but I just tried to smile back.

Kirsten, out of her dress and into a pink tank and jeans, hustled Aunt Doreen from the changing rooms and into the rest of the store.

When “ze” seamstress inserted the final pin and I was free from my reflection, I shuffled to my dressing room and wriggled out of the Monstrosity and into the day’s blue hoodie and track pants. I wrapped my hair into a knot, hoisted my bag, and tried to forget the peach watermelon in the mirror.

Chapter 2

WHEN I LEFT the dressing room, I found Mom, Aunt Doreen, and Kirsten hovering around the dyeable shoes.

“It’ll be fine, Doreen,” Mom said, holding a pair of pumps. “The wedding’s nine weeks away. Angelique does this all the time.”

“I hope you’re right,” Aunt Doreen replied, “because that dress was not in good shape.”

I coughed. *Do they think I’m deaf?* Okay, the dress looked awful on me, but how was that my fault? Why hadn’t Kathleen thought of her roundest bridesmaid before she picked them out? I fumed, staring at the display.

“I hate it too, you know,” whispered Kirsten, appearing at my side. “Who picks *lace*? Something from this decade would’ve been much better.” She rolled her eyes at her sister’s choice. Our moms moved their conversation closer to the cash register.

“But it looks good on *you*,” I protested. She didn’t have to say stuff like that just to make me feel better, even though I was glad she did.

“So? Just because it looks good doesn’t mean I have to like it. Actually—”

“Girls,” Aunt Doreen called, “we’re ready to leave. Let’s go.”

“Never mind,” Kirsten said to me, waving at her mother. We made our way to the front of the store, dodging colorful racks of bridesmaid dresses and sparkly wedding gowns. Well, Kirsten dodged. I squeezed between the racks and knocked a dress off its hanger. My face warm, I struggled with the slippery material. Kirsten helped me replace it before the moms noticed. *Crisis avoided*, I thought. Aunt Doreen wouldn’t have been able to leave without a full Fallen Dress Inspection.

We nearly bumped into them as we reached the door. Angelique’s had a table just inside the entrance that was covered in flyers and brochures advertising community events, school concerts, and bridal shows. Mom and Aunt Doreen huddled together, peering at an orange flyer.

“It’s perfect!” Aunt Doreen screeched, her voice reaching her nuclear register, only this time with happiness. “Five thousand dollars in scholarship money! And the chance to meet with an *agent*,” she breathed, as though “an agent” was her favorite celebrity.

“What an opportunity,” Mom agreed. Neither turned to see us behind them. Kirsten and I shot looks at each other.

“Mom?” Kirsten asked. “What’re you looking at?”

Aunt Doreen spun like a top. “I’m looking at your future,” she said, giving Kirsten a big smile. Aunt Doreen is what Mom likes to call “a nervous wreck.” She gets stressed out over nothing and spends too much time worrying about other people’s business. But when she gets excited about something, she doesn’t let it go. Same when she gets upset. When Kathleen got engaged, Aunt Doreen cried for three days straight about “losing her angel to that *boy*,” even though Kathleen and Paul had been together for years. Now, cheeks flushed, she thrust the orange page at us.

Across the top, in bold letters, it read: *Be a Model!! This is your chance to shine!* And, underneath: *Local catalog company looking for young women ages 12-16 to model our new line of active wear, formalwear, and sleepwear. Send recent full-body photo and headshot with contact information and parent or guardian signature to PeachWear Industries, 4567 South Market St., Suite 450, San Francisco. All submissions will be considered for the regional Miss HuskyPeach contest, winner eligible for \$5,000 scholarship and a meeting with a representative from Torre Modeling Agency.*

Sounded perfect for Kirsten.

Evidently, she didn't think so, because she giggled.

"What is so funny, missy?" Aunt Doreen snapped, her voice dropping into the I'm-not-please range. "This is your *future*."

Based on that tone, I'm glad it's not mine. I stepped to the side to get some space from the developing circus—and to hide behind a rack if anyone I knew came in to shop.

"Really?" Kirsten chuckled. "My future? Are you sure?" Her giggles changed to laughter.

"What harm is there in sending your picture?" Mom asked. "I don't understand."

Kirsten rolled her eyes. "I don't think I have a chance," she explained. "It's really not for me. Besides, Kathleen did pageants, remember? I decided to swim."

What was she talking about?

"Kirsten Beth Lowry," Aunt Doreen said, her eyes turning to flint. "You are a beautiful girl. Why don't you want to take this opportunity?" She shook the flyer for emphasis.

Kirsten sighed. "Mom, it's not for me," she said again, looking uncomfortable. She twirled a piece of hair around one finger. "Do you know what PeachWear is?"

"It is a company offering you the chance to be a model," Aunt Doreen said, "I know *that*."

Kirsten shook her head, sending her shampoo-commercial hair flying. She really could be a model if she wanted to. "They make clothes for, um, larger sized girls," she explained. Her eyes flicked over to me and she bit her lip. "You know that store in the mall, the HuskyPeach? That's this company."

My stomach went cold. *The HuskyPeach? That's where Mom goes on her Fed Up shopping spree for me.*

Kirsten tilted her chin at the flyer. "I don't think they want me as their model."

That light in Aunt Doreen's eyes faded. Her face was as sad as a little kid watching a brand-new helium balloon float into the sky. "Oh," was all she said.

I let out a breath I didn't even know I was holding.

"The HuskyPeach?" Mom asked. "Really?" Her eyes slid past Aunt Doreen and focused on me.

The breath caught in my chest. Quickly, I shook my head. *No way*, I mouthed.

Mom's toffee eyes were joined by Aunt Doreen's blue ones.

Not the Double Sister Stare! This would not end well.

"Celeste," Aunt Doreen said, catching on, "we could send your photo in instead. Since Kathleen

gave it up, we could have a model in the family again!” Her eyes gradually regained their light.

“This could be so good for you,” Mom said. “Think of how fun it would be to be out there, wearing new clothes, being in a catalog. It’s such an *opportunity*.”

Now, I have to admit, being a model sounds like a pretty cool job. Flying to all parts of the world, have my picture taken, hanging out with stars, never going to school, making lots and lots of money. . . that would be great. I imagined myself on a beach with Theo Christmas, posing for a *Celeb E* magazine cover shoot. “Closer,” the photographer would direct. “Theo, pull her *closer*.” I’d rest my head against his chest and smile hugely for the camera.

And then my imagination showed me nestling with him in my polka-dot one-piece, the one with the “modesty skirt” Grandma got me, to hide what she calls my “peasant” shape. Modeling might be fun or a great opportunity, but being the face of a clothing line for chunky girls was not the type of modeling that would generate seaside celebrity photo sessions. Excessive junior high teasing. Probably. Snuggles with Theo Christmas? No way. Also, husky or not, models don’t eat chocolate cookies. I sighed.

Mom and Aunt Doreen were watching me like all of a sudden I was going to grow six inches and turn into Kirsten.

“Um, I don’t think that’d be a good idea, Auntie,” I said, the burn of shame from her earlier words about the state of my dress rekindled. “I’m not cut out to be the model in the family.”

Aunt Doreen’s eyes narrowed. “Think of the scholarship money, Celeste.”

“And you could put it on your applications as an activity,” Mom said, rereading the flyer. “You don’t have any.”

I wanted to point out that since I hadn’t even started high school, college scholarships and applications weren’t really on my radar screen, but my stomach was churning and my cheeks felt hot. How could I ever get on a stage and show off my “full figure”? I turned to Mom, raising my eyebrow and hoping she’d get the hint that it was time to leave. Unfortunately, she was focused on that orange piece of paper. The top of her head was not much help.

“Mom,” Kirsten interrupted, shifting from foot to foot, “can we go? I’m going to be late for practice.”

Aunt Doreen glanced at her watch. “Swim practice begins at eight,” she said. “It’s not even five yet.”

“I know, but I have a Spanish test tomorrow and need to review my vocab tonight.” Kirsten leaned against the door, opening it an inch at a time. “I don’t know all my verbs.”

Mom gave me a last pleading glance. I scowled.

With a reluctant shake of her head, Mom placed the flyer back on the table. Kirsten held the door open and we filed into the parking lot, Aunt Doreen bringing up the rear. I thought I saw a flash of orange as she dug through her purse for the car keys, but once we were in the car, I was just glad to be leaving both the Monstrosity and all that peachness behind.

Chapter 3

I'D TOLD SANDRA about the Peach Monstrosity during our nightly phone call, and a week later was still our main topic of conversation. She and I had been best friends since Chuckie Swift poured glue in our hair in third-grade art class. We first bonded over the school nurse's scrubbing, and our friendship was sealed during detention in the principal's office after she punched Chuckie and cheered her on. She agreed that Kathleen could have picked a better bridesmaid dress.

"You've been talking about it like it's the worst thing ever. But, you know," she said, making loud smacking noises into the phone, "it doesn't sound too bad." Addicted to sour apple Jolly Rancher candies, Sandra sounded as though she was walking through mud puddles when she paused or stopped talking. Gross, but I'd gotten used to it. I organized six Oreos into a stack on the edge of my nightstand.

"What's not too bad?" I winced at a loud slurp. The candy clicked against her teeth.

"The dress. It sounds like the style is cute." I could tell she was stifling a giggle.

"Yeah, if you're six thousand feet tall and into dressing like a frothy dessert." The stack became stairs. Two fingers climbed the cookies. Seeing who could top the other was one of our favorite conversation games. We'd been doing it forever.

"Or if it were the turn of the century." Smack, slurp, slurp.

"Or if I were a mermaid queen who wanted to live in the desert."

A pause. "What is too bad—with your coloring, the peach should look really cute on you."

"Yeah, but it doesn't."

"Obviously." She clicked the candy against her teeth in an extra-long silence. "You're not the right shape for it either."

"No one is the right shape for this dress. Kirsten barely looks good in it." My fingers tap-danced on my Oreo stack. A wiggling sensation, similar to the one I felt when listening to Aunt Doreen and Angelique's, crept through my belly. Where was Sandra going with this?

"If you weren't as round . . ." Her voice trailed off.

A zap, like a bee sting, pricked my heart. My cookie climbing ceased. "*Weren't as round?*" repeated, coughing the words out.

A pause in the slurping, then the smacks came faster. "Uh, well, you know. Your shape just makes it harder to fit."

"Mmm," I answered, not trusting my voice to sound normal. I guess Sandra took it as an invitation to keep going.

"I mean, if you paid more attention to your look . . ."

"*What?*" I squawked. So much for normal. A bomb of hurt burst in my chest.

From Sandra's end there was a loud crack. She'd split the candy, something I knew she did only when she was nervous. I didn't care. I was too busy trying to pick up the shards of my exploded feelings.

Where did that come from? Sandra shared my love for caramel sundaes and cookies; they just didn't stick to her the same way they stuck to me. She never said anything about my size . . . *or hadn't until recently.* Sandra had always spoken up for me; she said and did things to take care of us both. I just watched from the sidelines and stayed out of the way. All through elementary school, she'd threaten to beat people up if they were mean to me. Once junior high rolled around, though, things changed. Sandra seemed to get annoyed with me, especially lately. And she was saying less and less when Lively made fun of me—no matter how out of the way I stayed.

"It's just . . . I don't know. Maybe people wouldn't say stuff to you if you tried something new with your look once in a while." Her helpful tone grated on my wounds.

"People," I said, filling my words with sarcasm in an effort to hide the hurt burning my chest. "I shouldn't be saying anything about my look. Especially people like Lively Carson. I'd rather be uncomfortable than mean any day."

"She's not mean to everyone."

"You're *defending* Lively Carson? Are you serious?" If Sandra told me she was moving to China, I wouldn't have been as shocked.

"You're right. Forget it. I'm sorry." Her words came quick and tight. The Jolly Rancher wrapper crinkled in the background.

"Sure," I muttered, not wanting a fight. Pushing the issue wouldn't make anything better. As a distraction, I pried the top off an Oreo and licked at its sugary filling.

"Anyway, did you see Robbie Flan today?"

"Mm-hmm." I wasn't ready for words. *Why was Sandra so interested in my appearance all of a sudden? And why was she defending Lively?*

"He was wearing a baseball hat at lunch." Sandra's crush on Robbie started when they were paired to work on a social studies map project in the fall. Each night, we spent lots of phone time trying to figure out how she could get his attention. Unfortunately for her, our plan of sliding one-letter notes into his locker that spelled "I LIKE YOU" backfired when Sandra wouldn't sign her name to the last one. Robbie thought Joanie Purcell was his admirer. I let her speculate about where Robbie got his hat and why he'd risk getting a dress code demerit for wearing it, while I sorted my emotional debris.

During the day, I stayed away from Robbie and his friends—from many of the boys at school, actually. They called me "Burrito Grande." Theo Christmas, smiling down from his poster on my wall, never compared me to an oozy overstuffed food item. Or said anything about my "look." I smiled at him, and he grinned back, all dark curls and smoky eyes. *Bet he'd like me no matter what I looked like. Or wore.* Then Sandra's older brother, Geoff, yelled at her to get off the phone.

"He wants to talk to his *girlfriend*," Sandra said, stretching the word out like taffy. "Ow!" The scuffling sounds floated over the receiver. "I'm hanging *up!*" she shouted. Things settled down, and she resumed her Jolly Rancher clacking.

“Don’t forget about PE tomorrow,” she said. “It’s important.”

“Why?” The word came out sharper than I’d intended. Sandra felt it her duty to never let me forget my PE clothes. Tonight I didn’t appreciate the reminder.

Sandra didn’t seem to notice. “Part one of the physical fitness test.” Suck, smack, slurp.

I groaned. One more thing to wreck this week. We’d suffered through the Fitness Challenge twice a year, once in the fall, once in the spring, since fifth grade. The gym teachers at Albert J. Hancock Memorial Middle School—AlHo to its students—kept records on our year-to-year progress through sit-ups, push-ups, hanging on a bar, and, my least favorite, Running the Mile. Every time I hit the track, I fell into the “needs improvement/no progress made” category. Sandra always scored in the top ten percent.

“Can’t wait,” I said. Sandra squealed again, and our conversation was over.

After hanging up, I realized that I still hadn’t told her about the modeling flyer. I never could seem to get around to it. Better not to bring up Miss HuskyPeach tonight anyway, I decided, especially after her comments. Instead, cookie by cookie, I dismantled the rest of my tower and munched under The Christmas’s sympathetic eyes.

Want one? I split a cookie and offered the top to my poster.

Have them all, he replied with a smile. *Each and every one.*

An hour later, I was curled up on my bed with *The Lord of the Flies* (for Language Arts) and a bag of Butter Brothers Extra Butter microwave popcorn (because you need snacks if you’re stuck on a deserted island and your best friend is acting like a jerk) when I heard a giant *slam!* and the house shook.

“Noelle!” My dad’s voice boomed through the house like summer thunder. Not good. When Daddy yells, something is very wrong. “Noelle! Let’s go!”

Scurrying footsteps came from my parents’ room.

“Wes?” For a moment, Mom sounded squeaky, like Aunt Doreen. I propped my book next to the popcorn and slid off my bed. A peek into the hall showed Mom bolting down the stairs wearing the green and pink striped bathrobe she changed into after dinner.

Dad lowered his voice and I couldn’t hear. Then, louder, “Celeste!”

I leaned over the banister. “Yeah?”

“Ben’s at Goodwin Memorial, sweetheart. Mom and I are going over there now.”

“What happened this time?”

Dad shook his head. Behind him, Mom traded her bathrobe for one of his fleece jackets from the front hall closet. She was still in her paisley pajamas and slippers. “I wish you’d remembered to bring your cell phone with you,” she muttered.

“Fly ball. Caught it with his noggin instead of his glove. He’s getting X-rays,” Dad said to me, jingling his keys. “Coach Anchor is with him.”

“That’s a first,” I said, as Mom disappeared from sight, then returned with her purse.

“That’s what I’m worried about,” she said, fishing through the bag. She held up her cell phone for me to see. “I’m ready.”

“We’ll be back in a couple of hours,” Dad said over his shoulder. From where I stood, his bald spot and protruding belly made him look like the number eight. “Don’t open the door to anyone, okay?”

I nodded, knowing he couldn’t see me. Not like this scene was anything unusual anyway.

Ben’s spent more time in casts, slings, braces, wraps, and Band-Aids than any kid I know. He’s broken his nose twice, and his wrist, one big toe, and a finger once each. The last time we added them up, he’d received 159 stitches. When we first moved, the school called social services on my parents, thinking they were abusive. Then they saw Ben on the playground.

“Make sure you pack your schoolbag for tomorrow,” Mom called. From above, with Mom’s thin frame and Dad’s round one, they made an eighteen. I nodded again, but the door had closed.

Back in my room, I plopped on my bed and propped the popcorn on my stomach. I tried to dredge up more than average concern for Ben. *What if this accident really rocked his brain? What if he goes blind or something? Could you go blind from being hit with a baseball?* I turned to Theo for an answer, but he just sat, arm slung around his guitar, contemplating the microphone.

You’re not helping me feel any better.

I sighed. Even with all that could happen, when your parents spend more time in the ER with your brother than watching the show on TV, it’s hard to be dramatic.

I paged through *The Lord of the Flies*, but put it down when I felt like Piggy was getting what he deserved. Plus, I was out of popcorn and parched. A trip to the kitchen was in order.

Downstairs, a frosty mug of root beer in hand, I wandered around the family room trying not to be bored. On my second lap, I stopped in front of Mom’s desk. Its surface was covered by piles of papers and receipts; she spent about a half hour there every night after dinner, paying bills and sorting out lives. I poked at the stacks, idly glancing at a grocery receipt (\$93.34) and the permission slip for Ben’s class field trip to the planetarium.

Bet he saw stars tonight, I thought. Then I felt bad.

A glossy corner with a ragged edge stuck out from under the permission slip. I tugged and a page torn from a magazine slid from the pile. “Creative Cruciferous Creations: Snazzy Cauliflower Broccoli, and Brussels Sprouts Recipes Your Family Will LOVE!” The photo showed a casserole dish of dark-green lumps lurking in a bubbling batter.

Oh, no. Mom cannot have this in the house, I thought. For the past few weeks, she had been trying to liven up our vegetable intake and get us to eat healthier. Okay, get *me* to eat healthier. Dad and Ben never saw a food item they didn’t like—green, leafy, or otherwise. Rabbit food doesn’t do it for me. Why nibble broccoli when you can eat potatoes? They’re both vegetables. Salad is okay, and corn, but I can pretty much guarantee that a “Creative Cruciferous Creation” is going to taste as good as steamed made from soggy weeds and dirt. Tossing the recipe would benefit the whole family. I stood over the garbage can and ceremoniously dropped it. The recipe fluttered from side to side as it fell and, true to my athletic powers, missed.

I bent and scooped it off the floor. As I was about to stuff it in the can, the headline “Be Model Thin in Four Weeks!” on the back of the recipe made me pause. The ad featured a woman whose waist looked as big around as my pinkie, and her red bathing suit was cut up high and down low. I didn’t need much imagination to see the wonders this diet worked on her.

It was simple: The ingredient list included prune juice, carrot juice, lemons, egg whites, and a few others. You mixed it together, drank it twice a day, and, according to the woman, “the weight just fell off.” I glanced down at my snug XL pajama bottoms, rolled so I wouldn’t trip over the long legs. *Really?* Still standing over the trash can, I told myself, *This is stupid. That stuff never works. It’ll taste awful.* But I didn’t move or throw the page away. I took a swig of root beer and closed my eyes as I swallowed.

As the sweet soda slid down my throat, I saw myself wearing the Monstrosity, reflected again and again in Angelique’s dressing room mirror, and heard Aunt Doreen’s “What size did you order?” followed by Sandra’s comment about my shape, and her not-so-helpful suggestion to change my look so “people” wouldn’t say stuff about me.

It’s not like dieting had never occurred to me, but it seemed as though I never *absolutely* needed to go on one. In elementary school, where everyone had a little baby fat, weight didn’t matter—someone always hung out with me on the playground. But instead of disappearing when I reached junior high, my “baby fat” grew with me and all of a sudden things were different: There weren’t as many people to sit with at lunch when Sandra wasn’t around. Lively Carson made me her favorite target. When I was a seventh grader, a group of boys yelled “Wide load approaching!” when I came down the hallway. That did not help my social status. And after today’s Self-Esteem Explosion, a diet drink seemed like the perfect solution. When I opened my eyes, the woman in the red bathing suit was smiling at me. *You can do it, her eyes urged. Try it! Be like me!*

I imagined being able to eat like Sandra and look like the bathing suit model instead of a beach ball like Dad. Next, I imagined what it would be like to *like* my reflection in the triple mirror, or buy something other than track pants and not have to worry about my “look.” Instead of “Burrito Grande” I’d be the Eensy Enchilada, the Teensy Tortilla. At the very least, people wouldn’t tease me.

Why not? Depositing the ad on the counter, I scavenged the kitchen in search of the blender. Behind the pots and pans? Nope. In the cabinet with the old coffeemaker? Not there either. With the help of a chair from the kitchen table, I found it in the cabinet over the fridge. Then I dug out most of the ingredients, lining them up on the island.

After a couple of false starts getting the blender bucket to fit the base properly, I went to work mixing, measuring, and pureeing. We didn’t have everything the recipe listed, so I swapped limes for the lemons and fudged a few others: mayo for egg whites (close enough) and balsamic vinegar for apple cider vinegar. Besides, is there really a huge difference between tomato paste and tomato juice? Doubt it. My completed concoction was dark brown, gloppy, and appeared about as appetizing as the picture of the Brussels sprouts recipe. Actually, it looked a lot like root beer—if root beer was chunky instead of fizzy.

I needed a spoon to nudge the ploppy chunkiness from the pitcher into a glass. When I held it up to the light, I couldn’t see through it. *Definitely not root beer. They should show you a picture of what it’s supposed to look like when it’s done,* I thought, alarmed by its murky color. The ad woman smiled at me. *Go for it!* she encouraged.

I took a deep breath, held my nose, drank, and swallowed. And swallowed some more, trying to empty the glass. It tasted *nothing* like the sugary zing of root beer. I retched, bracing myself over the sink. My stomach rolled, then clenched tight, and for a minute I thought I was going to yurk. I counted backward from ten, taking slow, shallow breaths like Dad taught me when I had the flu, and gradually my stomach settled.

I guess the weight “just falls off” because it tastes so nasty you don’t ever want to eat or drink anything again. I rinsed my mouth, but the aftertaste—spoiled coleslaw—coated the back of my throat. I’d need a toothbrush with a handle as long as a rake to get back there and scrub my tonsils if I ever wanted to enjoy dinner again.

“You suck,” I muttered at the red bathing suit model. Then I squished her and tossed her in the garbage can for good. It didn’t make the taste go away.

After cleaning up the experiment, I held my nose and poured what was left of the concoction into my travel mug. An odd-smelling garbage can might inspire questions I didn’t want to answer.

I’ll dump it out at school, I thought. Once finished, I packed my backpack and got ready for bed.

Then the cramps started. They came in waves: three or four hot squeezes of pain, and then my belly would be fine again. Until the next round. I lay in bed, waiting for them to pass, listening for my parents to return with Ben, hating Skimpy Red Bathing Suit Woman and the Peach Monstrosity. Regardless of my look, or what was said about it, being a wide-load grande *anything* certainly *felt* a lot better than being a diet-drinking, tiny-bathing-suit-wearing almost-yurker.

Change was not worth this.

Chapter 4

AT BREAKFAST THE next morning (which I barely ate—clearly, the Diet Drink of Horror was still doing its job), Mom told me that Ben had a mild concussion and would need to stay home from school.

“He’ll have an awful headache for a few days, but he’ll be fine,” she said, stirring a pan of scrambled eggs. “Want some?” she continued, tilting the pan in my direction.

Nauseated by the smell, I shook my head and hurried to get out the door.

“They’re goood,” Ben taunted. His smile revealed egg in his teeth. Some slipped out and splattered on his T-shirt.

“Gross!” My stomach rolled at the disgusting sight, but even though eating didn’t appeal to me, I was jealous that he was staying home.

My stomach finally settled halfway through my first class. When the passing period bell rang, I slipped from my seat, grateful to be feeling better. I was so grateful that I forgot to close my backpack, and it spilled the contents of the big pocket. *Lord of the Flies*, my social studies book, and my notebook skidded across the floor. My face hot, I bent into the crush of kids and fumbled for my stuff.

“Whoa, Supremo Grande, you’re blocking the exit,” one of the boys cackled.

“That’s a fire hazard,” another joked. I pushed my books into my bag as fast as I could and kept my eyes to the floor as I bumped my way into the hall.

By second-period break, the “Supremo” reference had revived the Gaggle of Negative Comments from the night before. I stood in front of my locker, listening to the crowd of whispers in my head, searching for my Emergency Twinkie Stash, when my hand closed around the smooth plastic of the travel mug. I hadn’t dumped the drink yet.

Maybe it’s better the next day, I reasoned, like spaghetti sauce. As nice as it sounded, I doubted my own logic. There was no way that glop would taste any better, plus it made my stomach do the mambo when it was fresh. And wasn’t there some mom-warning about mayonnaise spoiling fast? I debated.

“Hey! Look! It’s a solar eclipse!” Lively Carson’s excited voice sounded behind me. Without thinking, I spun around.

“Oh, it’s just Celeste. Never mind.” She flicked her hand like she was brushing a fly away and kept walking. The girls following her were laughing hard enough to pee themselves.

Debate over. I brought the mug to my lips. The cover kept the aroma from escaping, at least. Before I could lose my nerve, I slugged down the rest of the concoction in big gulps.

I bolted for a water fountain. It hadn’t aged well.

“You’re not looking too good today,” Sandra said as we met in the hall a few minutes later and walked to gym, our first shared class.

“Not feeling too good,” I responded, stifling a burp.

“Do you need to—”

“Oh no,” I said, cutting her off, and froze. Sandra walked into my backpack. We had just crossed the threshold of the girls’ locker room.

“Are you okay?” she asked, concerned. She raised her voice over the slamming lockers. “What’s up? Did you forget your clothes? I reminded you last night!”

“I wish,” I said. “It’s the Fitness Challenge that I forgot about. Tell me we don’t have to run today.”

Sandra plopped her backpack on the narrow wooden bench between the rows of lockers. “Can’t tell you that. We’re running the mile.”

My stomach flipped a cartwheel. I groaned.

“Maybe Coach will let you out of it,” she said. “Get changed and talk to her. I’ll go with you, if you want.” She tossed her shirt into her locker.

Not a chance, I wanted to say. I much preferred reading to running, lounging to laps, and Coach Anapoli knew it. I bent to my lock, twisting the combination while figuring out what I was going to say.

Sandra stood in her bra and jeans, unfolding her gym shirt before putting it on. Sandra never experienced embarrassment. While other girls (including me) would tug our arms out of shirts, hunch over, pull our gym shirts over our heads and pull the other shirts out through the neck, Sandra just took everything off like she was in her bedroom at home. If I looked like her, I wouldn’t care either. Small and athletic, Sandra didn’t have any fat on her body. She also had just the right amount of something to fill her bra with—not a lot of something, but enough. On the other hand, I was always trying to hide too much of something.

I squirmed into my gym clothes, then shoved my schoolbag into my locker and slammed it. Coach Anapoli made the girls sit in the unused shower area while she took attendance and made announcements. The green tile floor was cold and dirty-looking, even though no one had showered in the room for years. I squeezed into a corner, leaning against the sticky wall tiles, still tasting the Drink of Horror. Sandra went to get me a cup of water. Across the room, Millicent Taposok and Kate O’Sullivan, who Sandra and I ate lunch with, waved. I managed a weak smile in their direction. My stomach shuddered.

In front of me, Lively Carson and her friends huddled together, giggling, probably about the “solar eclipse” in the hall. Lively was AlHo’s Miss Matchy Perfect—her barrettes matched her earrings, which matched her shorts, which matched her socks. I’m sure, if I cared to stick my head down behind the locker row when she was changing, I’d see that her underwear matched everything too. For all her matchiness, though, Lively’s personality didn’t coordinate with her designed appearance. Her favorite sport? Being mean to everyone except her special group of friends—who she complimented constantly, if they met her standards.

The group giggle-fest over, I watched as she mocked Carlee Morgenstern—one of her supposed friends—about the new way she was wearing her hair, in a French braid. After a few minutes of incessant teasing, Carlee switched it back to the Lively-approved ponytail. Revolting.

Sandra came back with my water, but before we could talk to Coach Anapoli together she sent Sandra to set up cones. The other girls whispered on our walk down to the track, eyes sliding toward me every so often. My stomach churned.

Coach divided us into five groups of twelve (gym was not only a double class period, it was twice the size of a regular class). While one group ran laps, the other four would play soccer or field hockey against one another. Sandra wasn't on my team. Instead, Millie, Katy, and I—three of the worst athletes in our class—made basic attempts to provide field hockey defense. Not that anyone was playing an actual game—they were just knocking the ball around enough so Coach wouldn't make us do extra laps.

“Oh look,” Lively said as she jogged by on her way to the track, her group summoned by Coach Anapoli's whistle, “it's the Barnyard Squad: Cow, Pig, and Horse!” She moaned and snorted as she passed.

“Cretin,” Katy whispered under her breath. Tall, with a long face, Katy was a science brain. She was enrolled in an accelerated program, so she took high school science classes in the afternoon. Lucky.

Millicent nodded, pink scrunchie bouncing in her dark hair. “Can't stand her.” She'd earned her nickname for wearing something pink every day. I guess having a favorite color was not high on Lively's List of Cool.

I was about to join in when another cramp, this one epic in comparison to the ones I'd had the night before, hit my stomach like a boa constrictor squeezing a jungle explorer. I doubled over my stick.

“Celeste? You okay?” Katy asked. Her eyebrows made a deep V over her nose.

I shook my head. “Stomach,” I gasped. Sweat popped up on my forehead. I tried to breathe, regretting every drop of that drink.

“We should tell Coach,” Millicent said.

As soon as she got the words out, the tweet of Anapoli's whistle pierced the air around the track. “Group three!” she shouted. “You're up!”

“That's us,” said Katy. “Do you need help?” Around us, the rest of our group dropped their sticks and headed toward the starting line.

Some short, shallow breaths helped. “I'm okay,” I said, and repeated myself to be sure. “I'm okay.” The cramp loosened its hold.

“Ladies, let's move it!” Coach Anapoli shouted. “What are you doing, grazing?” I swore I heard Lively laughing. I trudged to the starting line, then over to Coach herself. Sandra waved encouragement from the sidelines.

Supposedly one of a pair of identical twins, Coach Anapoli stood about six feet tall. Rumor had it that she was such a good basketball player in college that she cut her hair short and tried out for the NBA. Rumor also had it that she only washed her blue tracksuit every two weeks. No one wanted to get close enough to find out the truth. What I *did* know was that she hated me. I was a big soup

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