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Opening extract from

Pretty Face

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One

Mom bought me digital scales.

"So you can't lie to yourself," she said.

I glared at her, my right foot jutting forward.

"God, Mom," I scoffed. "I mean, *God.*"

What else could I say? She was totally right. Yesterday, I shunted my rusty old IKEA scales all over the bathroom floor looking for the most favourable reading. Turns out, you can shave a full five pounds off if you put the bottom half of the scales on the bath mat, hang your toes off the front, and squint.

Today, it's no such luck. The digital scales won't read anything at all unless it's on a level surface. Thanks a lot, Mom.

Behind the locked bathroom door, I pee, kick off my slippers, drop my robe, step out of my pyjama pants, and lift my cotton cami over my head. Taking a deep breath, I exhale hard, blowing all the air out of my body. Contracting it as much as possible. Then I step on my new digital scales.

I hear a sound.

Beep. Then a loud, robotic voice.

"One hundred and f—"

Horrified, I leap off the scales. Mom bought me scales that talk!? Is she out of her mind? Not only do I have to see the bloated number glow accusingly at me in a hideous green light, I have to *hear* the bad news, too? What else will they say?

Shave your legs, slacker. Would a pedicure kill you? Think you'll ever have a boyfriend with those thighs?

Mom shrieks through the closed bathroom door. "I'm calling Dr Weinstein."

"Mother!" I shriek back. "Can't I have any privacy?"

"Your brother weighs less than you, Hayley. Do you want to weigh more than a boy?"

"His brain is only an ounce. Mine is packed with weighty knowledge."

Mom presses her mouth up to the door. "I'm only thinking of your health."

I roll my eyes and turn on the shower.

"If you keep going like this," she says into the crack of the door, "you're going to weigh as much as two people."

"I've always wanted a sister," I reply. Then I get in the shower and let the hot water drown out my mother's voice.

The awful scales accusation echoes through my brain. Thirty pounds from where I should be. If only I were taller – five foot eleven, instead of five foot five! I press my eyes shut, feel the disgusting curve of my bowling-ball

belly as I soap up. My arms are soft and fleshy. Even my toes are fat.

I hate myself.

Turning the cold water down, I feel my skin burn. I stand there for as long as I can take it.

"Today," I say out loud, "I will be *good.* Salad for lunch. No dressing."

Quickly washing and rinsing my long brown hair, I step out of the shower and grab a towel before I can see my hideous pink reflection in the steamy bathroom mirror.

"Yes," I repeat. "Today I'll be good."

Mom is gone. Ragging on Dad somewhere, no doubt. Which is good because no way can I stomach one of her evangelical lectures about portion control. There's nothing worse than a former fatty who found God in fresh fruits and vegetables.

"If I can do it, you can, too!" she chirps constantly.

"Can you find the square root of sixty-four?" I asked her.

"Hayley . . ." she said, with a disapproving look.

"See?" I replied. "We can't both do everything. There *are* differences between the two of us."

Mom doesn't get it. I *want* to be thin. Hell, I want to be America's Next Top Model, if only to out-bitch the other anorexics. But something goes awry every time I try. I don't know what it is. I think I'm improperly wired. My need to feed is stronger than my desire to – literally – fit in.

Standing before my open closet door, I flip through my

clothes. Then I moan. They can put a lunar rover on Mars! Why can't they make jeans that don't make my ass look like Jupiter?

Two

It's a sunny day. Of course. It's always a sunny day in Southern California. And this morning, even the pavements are glowing bright yellow. Jackie waits for me in front of her house, eating a granola bar.

"Here," she says, hopping in my car. "I brought one for you."

"I already had breakfast," I lie.

"Whatever."

Jackie opens the glove compartment of my old Saturn and tosses the granola bar inside. She props her feet on my dashboard as I drive us to school.

"You know Randy? That idiot in my Graphic Design class?"

I nod.

"He e-mailed me this Photoshop collage of a woman made from the different body parts of supermodels."

"How inventive," I say dryly.

"It was like Gisele's right boob, Naomi's left leg, Kate's belly button—"

"I get the picture."

We turn left on La Mesa Drive, another left on Ocean.

"The freaky thing is, she looks awesome."

"Who?" I ask. "Gisele? Naomi?"

Jackie groans. "Are you listening, Hayley?"

"Of course I'm listening," I say.

Truth is, I'm not. Not fully. Jackie chatters like this every day. She's one of those "morning people". I'm not sure what time of day I am. Probably midnight, when it's dark and so silent even scales don't talk.

"You were saying?"

Jackie and I have been best friends since Ms Rafter paired us up for the rope climb in sixth-grade gym class. Neither one of us got very high. I was mortified, convinced from the start that my flaccid arms could never hoist my heft up a skinny little rope. Jackie was more philosophical about it.

"I'm going to be a fashion designer," she said. "If this were a rope *necklace*, I'd be interested."

She half-heartedly pulled herself up a few feet, while I huffed and puffed and turned red in the face.

Finally giving up, I said, "Maybe I'll be a fashion designer, too."

We laughed. I liked her instantly, even though she's thin and can eat like a truck driver. At least she's not blonde. We're both brunettes. Though, admittedly, Jackie has a blonde personality. Me, let's just say I'm woefully short on highlights of any kind. Jackie walks through life as if every moment is her first. She takes on new situations with an

open face and an open heart. She even dismantled the caller ID on her cell phone because, she said, "Why ruin the surprise?"

I want to know what's about to hit me. I brace myself for life even as I watch my best friend embrace it. Like last week when I drummed up the nerve to ask Drew Wyler if he wanted to hang out with me at the Promenade this weekend. He said, "Sure. Will Jackie be there?"

"You want her to be?" I asked him.

"Why not?"

Dazed, I spent the whole week dissecting our conversation. Did he want to go *out* with my BFF? Or, is it just more fun when she's around? Was he asking to be polite, because Jackie and I are *always* shopping on the Promenade together?

"Drew is cool," Jackie said innocently, when I suggested our threesome. "But, I thought *you* liked him. Why do you want me there?"

What could I say? *I don't. Drew does. Or does he?*

Feigning indifference, I didn't respond. Jackie shrugged and forgot about it. I obsessed for days.

Why is everything so damn hard?

"The point is," Jackie says in the car, "a model's body parts are interchangeable. However you mix them up, they are going to look hot. Even though Randy is a jerk, I think he makes an interesting social statement. Don't you?"

"Models are perfect! Call the six o'clock news!"

As Jackie playfully gives me the finger, I notice that even her middle digit is much thinner than mine.

"Do we have time for a Starbucks?" she asks.

I check my watch. "If there's no line."

With a final left onto Wilshire Boulevard, I pull into the Starbucks parking lot, three doors away from school. Jackie hops out.

"Strawberry Frap?" she asks.

I sigh. A venti Strawberries and Crème Frappuccino with whipped cream is seven hundred and fifty calories. I looked it up. Even though my stomach is growling, I'm going to be good today. My goal: to have my new bathroom scales whisper praise in my ear.

I can barely feel you. Who needs shaved legs when they look this good in pants?

"Well?" Jackie asks.

"Okay," I say, pulling money out of my backpack. "But only a grande. And no whipped cream."

Jackie skips off into the store. The moment she's out of sight, I reach into the glove box and devour the granola bar before I even know what I'm doing.

Three

Pacific High is five blocks from the beach. Our apartment is about half a mile away, and Jackie's house is a bit beyond that. We could walk to school, but this is Los Angeles – Santa Monica, to be exact – and the only people who walk are the homeless and cleaning ladies.

The school bell rings just as I'm feeling the last cool swallow of Frappucino slither down my throat.

"Baja Fresh for lunch?" Jackie yells as she dashes to class. "It's meatball grinder day in the cafeteria."

"Yeah, okay," I call after her. They have salads at Baja Fresh, right?

Smoothing my straight hair down my neck, checking my teeth for gloss smudge, and making sure my pockets are flat on my too-tight jeans, I walk into first period.

"Hey," he says as I curl into the desk next to his.

"Hey," I repeat, sucking my stomach in.

His sandy hair isn't even combed and he's still gorgeous.

Drew Wyler and I are in Advanced Placement English together. Which is why my brain is so weighted down in the morning. Love is heavy. So is literature. When they're not

cramming Shakespeare down our throats, it's Homer. (Not Simpson, unfortunately.) And I don't care how good Nicole Kidman was in that movie about Virginia Woolf; *Mrs Dalloway* is unreadable. I did like *The Great Gatsby*, though, which I read over the summer. Why can't more of the classics be about hunky rich guys who fall for other men's wives?

I fell for Drew on the first day of class.

"Is this the first level of Dante's *Inferno*?" he asked me, pointing to the semester's reading list.

I smiled stiffly, too stunned by his literary reference to reply. Had he already read Dante? Though it's my third year in high school, it's my first year in AP English. Was I already hopelessly behind?

Drew's black eyes peered out through John Lennon glasses. His wavy hair fell over his forehead and curled around his ears. The hollows of his cheeks indented like perfect inverted parentheses.

Clearly, Drew Wyler was way out of my league.

Still, how can you tell your heart not to take a swing?

"Did you see this honking syllabus?" another student asked me.

I nodded. But I was lying. I only had eyes for Drew.

I'd seen Drew Wyler around campus all last year, and a few times at the pier. Girls were around him a lot, but he never hooked up with anyone in particular. And it was a badly kept secret that he didn't live in Santa Monica.

His uncle had an apartment on Marguerita Avenue, which he used as the address that got him into Pacific High. I'd heard he lived in Inglewood, a freeway drive away. But, he'd never say for sure, 'cause if the principal found out, he'd be booted out of here.

"Um, what time you wanna meet on Saturday?" I ask him quietly.

"Saturday?"

My heart sinks. He's forgotten already?

"The Promenade?" I say. "Hanging out?"

"Oh, yeah."

He reaches down to the floor and pulls his notebook out of his pack. My Strawberry Frap sits cold in my gut.

"I can get us into any movie for free," I say, leaning across the aisle between us, trying not to sound as desperate as I feel. "I work at the Cineplex part-time."

"Hayley?"

Ms Antonucci, our teacher, looks at me with her eyebrows raised.

"Are we interrupting your social intercourse?" she asks.

"No," I say. "I believe in social abstinence before marriage."

The class laughs. Ms Antonucci laughs, too. But the only sound that matters is Drew's chuckle beside me. When he smiles, his whole face changes. Like Ewan McGregor's. You can't help but smile back when you see it.

"Saturday at ten," he whispers.

Four

"If I wash these jeans tonight, I'll have to wear them tomorrow so they won't be too tight on Saturday. That's three days in a row. Do you think anyone will notice?"

"What about that cute skirt you bought?" Jackie asks. Then she orders a pork carnita from the hottie in the Baja Fresh shirt.

Jackie's answer to my question lets me know what I already know. *Everyone* will notice. This is Santa Monica. Los Angeles, California. Narcissus unable to turn away from his own reflection. Here, every waiter is an actor, and every actress is twenty pounds underweight because the camera adds fifteen. This is the city next to the Venice Beach boardwalk and Malibu, where women shop in bikini tops and "shave" their legs with lasers. On a quiet afternoon, you can almost hear the sound of fat being sucked through liposuction cannulas. Three girls in my school had boob jobs over spring break.

"I'll have the Baja salad," I say to the guy at the register. "With chicken."

He hands us a vibrating pager, and we find a table near the window.

"That skirt looks too needy," I tell Jackie. "I want to seem casual. Like I don't care."

"Wear it with a double cami and flip-flops. You'll look casual *and* cool."

I shoot Jackie a look. "A cami? Sleeveless in front of the boy I want to see naked? Get real."

"Your arms are fine, Hayley. And you have *such* a pretty face."

There it is. The kiss of death. She might as well have told me I have a great personality.

"Hello, chickies."

Lindsay Whittaker sashays past our table on her way to the salsa bar. Her entourage – Chloe, Bethany, Lacey, and some other "E" whose name I can never remember – smiles at us in that fake way that makes me want to trip them. In fact, I poke my toe out slightly. But not enough to look like it's on purpose.

"You're looking very . . . perky," I say to Lacey, one (two?) of the spring break boob jobs.

"Waiting for nachos, Hayley?" she shoots back. "With extra cheese?"

"Hey, Bethany," Jackie pipes up. "How'd you do on that Spanish quiz?"

"Bueno."

"Yo, tambien," Jackie says, giggling. The "E's" giggle, too.

Jackie is cliqueless. She gets along with everybody. I'm cliqueless, too. I get along with her. I do see irony in the fact that Jackie and I are both technical "E's" since our names end in that sound, but I'd never be invited into Lindsay's crew. Not that I'd want to be. They're totally superficial. Last Christmas, they all got gift certificates for Brite Smile treatments. I asked for a gift certificate to Amazon, but Mom bought me an exercise bike instead.

Bzzzzzz.

The pager lights up and vibrates. I don't move. No way am I getting up in front of the "E's" and giving them a full-on view of my rear.

"I'll get our food," Jackie says, hopping up.

Thank God I got a salad.

Lindsay and the other girls help themselves to the free salsa bar. It's their lunch. Topped with a sprinkling of coriander. They wouldn't be caught dead eating a carb. You'd think management would kick them out, but when the "E's" arrive, the "B's" are never far behind. Drooling boys who order burritos and quesadillas and extra-large sides of tortilla chips with guacamole. God, I hope Drew Wyler isn't one of them.