

skinny a novel

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This book is for Tina, Kristen, Carrie, and anyone struggling with an eating disorder. I carry your stories around in my heart. Remember that God made you in His image, and therefore, you are beautiful.

Acknowledgments

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Chapter One

Melissa posed as perfectly as a marble statue. Her head was bent at a forty-five degree angle, her fingers were spread equidistantly, rigid, and exactly in line with her thighs. The music pulsed in her veins. She inhaled and silently counted along with Todd.

“Five, six, seven, eight.” Even though he was only five foot five, Todd had a booming voice that commanded the attention of every girl in the room. The rhythm of the music vibrated from the speakers on the church’s glossy gymnasium floor.

Like a marionette brought to life by invisible strings, Melissa jerked her hands up, forming a V with her arms, snapped her head upright, and flashed a radiant smile.

“And turn, six, seven, eight. Lift and lift and slide and slide,” Todd continued like a metronome. The pulsating beat pulled Melissa’s body back and forth.

Abruptly, Todd’s solid muscular body relaxed. The coach turned his back to the group of girls and padded across the wooden floor to turn off the CD. Since dance team was somewhere low on the priority list of varsity sports at Spring Hill High, they were allotted zero gymnasium time for practices. The school’s gym was designated for the football players, the basketball players, the track team, and the softball team, but not the dance team. Luckily, the church Melissa’s family attended allowed the girls to practice in their gym.

“Okay, any questions? No? Good. Then let’s continue.” Todd’s dark skin shone with perspiration as he flawlessly demonstrated the next sequence. Tiny yellow beads woven into the ends of his cornrows bounced lightly against his strong bare shoulders, bulging from his gray tank top. His compact body moved effortlessly across the floor while his chocolate eyes kept constant contact with the team.

Melissa replayed his every move in her head, trying to make his motions and words translate into her body’s executing the dance correctly.

Feet pounded the floor. Arms stretched to the ceiling. Hips swayed.

Melissa turned to the left.

Everyone else turned to the right.

Melissa missed bumping into Jill by a fraction of an inch. Jill was a junior who could kick higher than the rest of the team and had an attitude to match. Jill’s flawless pale skin and sleek black hair were reminiscent of Snow White, but Jill certainly didn’t act like a fairy-tale princess. Jill shot Melissa a glare from her bright green eyes that could have come from an evil stepmother.

Flames of shame pinched Melissa’s nose and ears. She caught her breath and stumbled to get back in step. How many of the others had seen her mess up? The other girls looked so pretty, so thin, so together. Melissa felt large and conspicuous, like an elephant stomping across the gym. *Feel the music*, she told herself.

“Okay. That’s all for today,” Todd said between gulps of bottled water. “Not bad, but we have a lot to learn, ladies. We perform in two days.” Todd wiped drops of water from his manicured mustache.

“Oh, and, girls, no cake between now and Friday. You want to look spectacular in your uniforms.” He winked.

Sweat slid down Melissa's forehead and stung her eyes. She tried to shrink inside her T-shirt. She darted for her dance bag, grabbed it, and walked as fast as she could until she was safe behind the girls' room door. Protected by the wooden barrier, she pulled on her sweatshirt and yoga pants and exhaled.

Finally her cumbersome body, the one that had turned the wrong way, the one Todd was clearly making the cake comment about, was covered. Tears threatened to escape from her eyes. Melissa waved her hand in front of her face in an attempt to fan her embarrassment and anger away. She peered into the full-length mirror and groaned at her reflection.

Melissa slid into a stall and shut the door. She'd read in magazines about girls who threw up to lose weight. Melissa had thought about doing it before but never had the guts. How exactly should she do it? How would she position her body?

Melissa knelt in front of the white toilet. Thankfully, her yoga pants provided a thin barrier between her knees and the germs and sludge on the once-white tiled floor. The stench of urine almost made her gag. She wouldn't need to do much. Looking down at her hand, Melissa stuck out her index and middle fingers, ready to plunge them down her throat. Those two fingers could empty her of this feeling.

Squeak! The bathroom door swung open.

"Mel, is that you?" Lindsey asked.

"Uh-huh." Melissa's face was blasted with heat like when she opened the oven door. She tried to stand and turn as silently as possible, then swung open the door.

"Do you think there's any way I'll get this routine down by Friday night?" Lindsey rolled her eyes and smiled. The girls had met only about three months ago when they both made the Spring Hill High dance team. They had gone to different grade schools

but had bonded immediately. They were inseparable at practice.

Lindsey was Melissa's physical opposite: five one and so tiny she could still buy her clothes from the kids' department. Her blonde curls framed her pretty face and her pale blue eyes, which sparkled when she spoke. She looked like one of Melissa's dolls she had dressed and fed when she was younger.

Melissa was five nine. She usually wore her straight dark brown hair pulled back into a ponytail revealing her round face, forest green eyes, and the freckles that spotted her nose. Friends told her she was slender, but she described herself as "medium-sized."

"You'll get it, Linds. You're basically awesome."

"Hardly. I'm lucky to have even made this team." Lindsey pushed open the restroom door with her back.

"Right," Melissa began. "I was the one who almost fell flat on my face. Todd moves so fast."

Just then, Jill sauntered through the door as if Lindsey were opening it for her.

"Nice turns." She nodded toward Melissa.

"Nice makeup," Lindsey whispered when they were out of earshot in the hallway, commenting on Jill's overdone face. Lindsey looked around to make sure no one was listening, then gave Melissa a silent high five and whispered, "I don't care what Jill thinks. We rock."

Melissa tried to imitate Lindsey's confidence, but she was still humiliated by her misstep, and her hands shook from almost being caught in the bathroom. *Rock* was not a word to describe her, unless, of course, it was the round, heavy kind.

Chapter Two

Melissa shuffled into French class the next morning as the bell vibrated in her ears. There were no assigned seats in Monsieur Renault's class, but everyone sat in the same seats every day anyway. Melissa always sat in the second row all the way to the right. She could reach out and touch the whiteboard Monsieur Renault used to post special notices. But today someone was sitting in her seat.

A boy she didn't recognize sat in her regular chair that was next to her best friend since second grade, Gracie. The stranger had square shoulders that looked like the bottom side of a triangle and dark, shiny hair that curled around his ears and the back of his neck. The seat immediately behind him was vacant because Jamal was absent today. Melissa slid into Jamal's empty wooden seat and caught her breath.

The new kid smelled nice, like . . . soap. That was it. Soap. Not the fruity, florally, jellybean-colored soaps that Melissa and her friends bought at the Bubble Bath Boutique but good, old-fashioned, clean-smelling soap.

The boy turned and looked at her with round, chocolate-colored eyes framed by thick, dark lashes Melissa would kill for. It was as if he had sensed her smelling him.

Melissa leaned back and smiled.

He smiled back, then turned to face the front as Monsieur Renault said, “*Bonjour, mes amis.*”

“*Bonjour, Monsieur Renault,*” the class chanted in unison.

Melissa stole a glance at Gracie. She and Gracie knew each other better than anyone else in the world, even their parents. She knew Gracie would be thinking the same thing she was. Gracie winked a narrow, dark eye at Melissa, then flipped her head, her sleek, black bob swinging onto her shoulders.

Melissa’s silver charm bracelet jingled as she inadvertently raised her left hand to her mouth and nibbled her nails.

“Class, I would like to introduce you to our new student,” Monsieur Renault’s nasally voice droned. The teacher nodded toward the new boy.

Melissa pulled her hand from her mouth, disgusted at her icky habit. She didn’t mean to bite her fingernails. She just did. Whenever she was bored in class, talking on the phone, or flipping through a magazine, those nubby nails seemed to end up between her teeth.

I will quit chewing my nails this instant so this cutie won’t see my stubby fingernails, she silently vowed.

“This is Beau Pointreaux. He comes to us from New Orleans.”

Beau gave a weak smile and quickly sank back into his chair.

“*Maintenant, nous sommes commençons avec les mots de Halloween.*”

Melissa’s mouth formed the correct pronunciation of the French words for *ghost* and *pumpkin*. She loved French class, partly because she was good at it. The rolling syllables felt natural to her tongue, not stilted as they were for most of her classmates. She also loved the idea of France: the scenes of beautiful people impeccably dressed, strolling down charming streets, and sipping

foam-capped coffees at crowded cafés. Actually, she loved all of her classes, except Chemistry. What did atoms have to do with the rest of her life anyway?

The scent of soap wafted her way again.

He is so cute! Beau Pointreaux, Beau Pointreaux, she repeated to herself.

After class Gracie grabbed Melissa's elbow with her dainty hand. "Don't let Drew hear me say it, but he is, like, so cute!" she whisper-screamed in Melissa's ear.

"I'd say *perfect!*" Melissa emphasized. "And" — she raised her eyebrows — "he smells *mmmmmm*. But it's not fair for *you* to like him. One, you already have a boyfriend, and two, you're so skinny I could never compete!"

Beau shuffled past them. Melissa and Gracie fell silent, then erupted in uncontrollable giggles.

"It doesn't seem exactly fair that he's in French class," Gracie griped. "I mean, he's French. That would be like me taking Mandarin."

"He's not from France!" Melissa laughed. "Lots of people in New Orleans have French heritage, you know, French names."

"Oh, I know. Beau Pointreaux? Poor guy. What a name. . . ." Gracie shook her head.

"Yeah, what a name," Melissa cooed. "Anyway, I'm glad he's in our class." She tucked her hair behind her ears.

"I wonder why?" Gracie grinned.

"Maybe he can tutor me." Melissa raised her eyebrows.

"Like you need a tutor, Miss Honor Student." Gracie shook her head.

"Here's me." Melissa grinned, turning toward her Algebra room.

"See ya, Yellow," Gracie called, using Melissa's nickname that

had evolved from calling her Mel, then Mellow, then Mello Yello, and finally just Yellow.

“*Au revoir, Gray,*” Melissa lobbed back Gracie’s “color nickname” and darted in her classroom door just as the second period bell rang.

Standing next to the scrawny Mrs. Poppendeck in the front of the classroom was Beau.

Chapter Three

“Beat, beat, beat, beat, beat,” Todd repeated as his left foot flexed and tapped the Achilles tendon on his right foot. “And twist, two, three, four.”

Melissa swiveled her hips in perfect time with the music. When she was on the dance floor, there was nothing else—no school, no parents, no one to please—just music and movement. She felt the music was part of her. Her body itched to move to the notes booming from the speakers. Her adrenaline rushed, and she felt reckless and giddy.

“Okay, everyone take five while I make an announcement,” said Todd dramatically, wiping the sweat from his mustache with a towel.

Melissa walked to the back of the gym and pulled a bottled water out of her bag. She cracked the seal and gulped down a third of the bottle before she came up for air. Inhaling and exhaling deeply, she smiled at Lindsey, then walked back toward Todd.

The team of girls formed a circle around the only male among them. Sweat glistened on all of their fit bodies. Some nodded or smiled, but no one spoke.

“Soooo,” Todd began, “several of you ladies have been asking about officer auditions for next year.” He paused to sip his water. “Anyone interested in trying out needs to let me know by the end of November.” He tapped the ball of his foot on the floor, then

flipped it over so the top side of his toes slapped the hard wood.

“After that, I’m on break until after Christmas. When we come back together in January, I’ll start teaching the sequence on Saturday mornings at seven o’clock.”

A loud groan came from everyone.

Todd smiled slyly and shifted his large brown eyes from left to right, building anticipation in his team. “You’ll have all of February to practice on your own and to make sure your bodies are in perfect shape. We’ll have auditions in March, right before I head to the beach for Spring Break.” Todd flipped his head back like a diva. “Oh, and auditions are open to everyone.”

Melissa’s heart raced inside her gray T-shirt. She was only a freshman, and her body was *not* in perfect shape, but something deep inside of her craved the slot of captain, or at least lieutenant. She had always earned solos in her ballet and jazz recitals, but this was different. The girls on this team were so talented! Plus, the older girls had more experience. As far as she knew, there had never been an underclass officer before.

There were twenty girls on the team and only two slots. Of course, not everyone would try out, and the seniors would graduate, but still! Melissa wanted it so much she could taste the metallic captain’s whistle in her mouth.

“Okay, enough chitchat.” Todd waited for everyone to resume their places. “And five, six, here we go.” He pushed play, and the notes of the electric piano echoed through the gym.

Melissa took a deep breath and prayed a silent prayer. *Dear God, I don’t know why I want this so badly, but please let me get it. I’ll work so hard for it. I’ll do anything,* Melissa pleaded while spotting the front wall to keep from getting dizzy.

Melissa slammed her door shut, blinked her eyes, and exhaled loudly as she climbed into her mom's minivan.

"Hi," she panted, out of breath.

"Hi, sweetie. Good practice today?" asked Mom, who was, as always, tastefully dressed, in khaki pants and a lavender sweater set.

"Yeah." Melissa struggled to get settled with three large cardboard boxes around her feet and her gym bag on her lap.

Click. She fastened her seat belt.

"What are those big yellow boxes?" Mom asked, tilting her head to get a better look.

"Tootsie Pops."

"Yum. Are they all for me, or did you go ahead and buy the trick-or-treat candy this year?" Mom winked an eye the color of pine trees. Melissa had gotten most of her mother's genes. They had the same color eyes, the same freckles, and the same thick brown hair, except Mom kept hers cut in a short, sensible style, and Melissa grew hers long enough to touch her belt.

"Very funny, Mom. We have to sell them to raise money for new uniforms." Melissa repositioned the boxes. "But you could buy all of them from me as your trick-or-treat candy."

"How much are you charging?" asked Mom.

"A quarter a sucker or five for a dollar." Melissa flashed her best salesgirl grin.

"Too expensive for me." Mom waved to Pastor Al, who was walking through the church parking lot. "But I'll tell you what. I'll buy ten for our treat jar."

"That will be two dollars, please." Melissa held out her hand.

"How about I pay you when we get home, and you can pick out which flavors to fill the jar with, okay?"

"Okay."

The hum of the heater filled the car.

“Is there something else, Mel?” Mom pulled her gaze from the road to look her daughter in the eye.

“I wish they were M&M’S.”

“You wouldn’t have any allowance left, and you would never fit into your uniform if they were M&M’S,” Mom said with a laugh. “You would eat them all yourself.”

The silence surrounded them again.

Melissa reached to turn up the volume of the Third Day song coming from the speakers.

“Is there something *else*, Mel?”

Mom always knew when something was up.

“Todd announced officer tryouts today,” Melissa said, tracing the designs on the Tootsie box with her index finger.

“Oh?” Mom turned the volume back down.

Melissa knew she was supposed to say more, but she was afraid to say the words out loud.

“Yeah. They’re open to everyone.” Melissa looked out the window, then back at Mom. “Even underclassmen.”

“Are you going to try out?”

For a second Melissa couldn’t breathe. She chewed on the hangnails on either side of her right thumbnail. There it was, out in the open. Was she going to try out?

“I was thinking about it. Well, I’m sure I won’t be picked, but I want to try. It sounds silly, doesn’t it?”

The moment of silence that followed confirmed Melissa’s fears. This was foolish. Then Mom let out a sigh and put her hand on top of Melissa’s. “Melissa, if this is something you really want, then you need to go for it.”

“Maybe I will.” Melissa nodded, relieved. “Maybe.”

At bedtime Melissa pretended her pajamas were the stark

white captain's uniform. She marched around her room blowing an imaginary whistle until she laughed out loud at herself. She tumbled onto her bed and pulled out the leather-bound study Bible she read each night. She opened the vellum pages to the Ten Commandments bookmark her second-grade Sunday school teacher had given her.

She read the words of Matthew 7:7: "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

Here it is in print. Lord, if I ask You to make me lieutenant or maybe even captain of the team, will You give it to me? I've never wanted anything this badly. I know it sounds selfish, but I really think I could help. Oh, by the way, could You help me sell all of my Tootsie Pops too? Back to the officer thing, I could make the underclassmen feel wanted. I could start a Bible study for the girls who were interested after practice. I could . . .

Melissa drifted to sleep.