

## Chapter One

“**L**ook at this sweater and tell me what you see.”

As we stroll through the Macy’s mall entrance, my friend Sara pulls something from her bag that resembles a grayish, wooly pillow with arms. She waves it around impatiently, but I can’t read from her expression whether she loves it or hates it.

“Well, um,” I bite my lip, “It’s kind of furry.”

“*Furry?*” Sara throws the sweater back in the bag. “Lanie, it looks like a hairball coughed up by a mountain yeti.”

“Let me guess,” I laugh. “Birthday gift from your stepmother?”

Sara nods. “Who, as usual, removed the tags and forgot the gift receipt. Which renders this lovely moose pelt exchangeable only for a store credit worth the lowest clearance price.”

I spot the Macy’s return counter and nudge Sara toward it, steering her past a group of half-dressed mannequins.

“Say it with me, bitches,” she addresses the mannequins. “Worst. Gift. Ever.”

I do see Sara’s point. The sweater is a huge fail, not to mention a disastrously ill-assessed statement about her sense of modern fashion. And it’s definitely a drag that we’ll pay more for parking than she’ll get back on the store credit.

But I still feel the need to point something out. Despite its

shortcomings, that sweater is not the worst gift ever. Not even close. Not even close to close.

The worst gift ever, in the history of human absurdity, arrived at my doorstep eight years ago, on eve of my twenty-fifth birthday. About the size of a shoebox, it was delivered from an unidentified store with only a p.o. box as a return address. Inside was another box, adorned in lavish silver paper and a bright red bow, but as I tore through the wrapping, my exuberance turned to instant horror as I read the words “Chocolate Sex Toy!” on the front of the label.

Okay. I know what you’re thinking. What kind of sadistic lunatic would combine two of God’s most ingenious inventions into a single device that is, for all practical purposes, unusable. A chocolate sex toy? That’s like, the *Sophie’s Choice* of a single woman’s Friday night alone.

You can’t play with it. I mean, let’s face facts: chocolate melts. And you can’t eat it either, because nothing screams “rock bottom” louder than a birthday girl in her flannel p.j.’s, lounging on the couch and licking a rod of chocolate molded from an authentic Johnny Wad phallus replica.

(Okay, fine. So you *can* eat it. You just can’t look at yourself in the mirror for several days afterward.)

I curse my ex-best-friend Candace, who, upon spotting the chocolate unmentionable in a novelty store, immediately thought “Hey, great birthday gift for Lanie!” Then again, I suppose if I curse Candace for anything, it should probably be for turning her back on our lifelong friendship one year later, without any apology or explanation. The edible love wand was just a fun extra.

The strange thing is, the irony of this semi-sweet “shaft of amour” has actually become, over the years, a symbol of my own paradoxical life. An emblem of all the elements in my world that exist together, but don’t work together. Like Mark, my boyfriend of six months, who doesn’t call what we have a “relationship.” Or my deep love and appreciation of food, that’s resulted in a scath-

ing hatred of my ass and thighs. And now I wonder, was the gift given with the wink of a deeper meaning? Could Candace have predicted how my life would unfold after she coldly and cruelly abandoned it?

After our friendship ended, I'd tunneled into a dark habit of "living in the past," obsessing about what went wrong and why she walked away. When the answers never came, I turned my fixation to the possibility that I was still single because deep down, I was still in love with my high school boyfriend, Chad Michaelson. I was at Dairy Queen last year with my family, when the Mariah Carey song "Always Be My Baby" (the official song of our senior prom) came on the radio, and I suddenly started crying, ruining a perfectly delicious Peanut Buster Parfait with my stupid tears. True to form, it took that gross, inedible slop of chocolate sauce and melted, teary ice cream to make me realize that the constant stream of past memories was unraveling my sanity. And I knew things had to change.

So the next day, I semi-jogged over to CVS, returning with an old fashioned, pleather-bound, pen-and-paper diary. I needed to purge my soul of all the things I wouldn't dream of writing in a blog, or even speaking out loud. The goal was to focus my mental energy on events of the present, and leave the past where it belonged – buried in denial. Miraculously, I've stuck to this pact, which over time, has healed and prepared my heart for its newest romantic venture, my "non-relationship" with Mark. Which, despite the frequent, vodka-fueled bouts of confusion and frustration, is mostly fun, sexy and totally going in the right direction.

Which brings us back to Macy's. And here I stand, looking around the store, patiently waiting as Sara returns the sweater. I'm completely unaware that before I leave the mall, a comment will be uttered that will change the course of my entire life. That my newfound clarity of living-in-the-present will be bounced on its ass to make way for an impending collision of past and future.

Thank God there's a food court here.



Twenty minutes later, I shimmy out of the fitting room in a bright purple, wrap-around Diane Von Furstenberg knock-off. Sara is now busy perusing the sale rack, searching for a treat to celebrate getting her post-baby body back after only six months (lucky bitch). So I turn to the saleswoman for some honest feedback (i.e., a sure-bet compliment).

“That looks fantastic on you, dear. Very retro-glam.”

“Really? It’s not too bright?”

This is an age-old strategy. When you receive a compliment, immediately express doubt (without making it obvious that you’re fishing). Then impart a tone of voice that subtly implies your trust in the other person’s expertise, and – voila.

“You look amazing,” she gushes. “It’s a real head-turner.” Right on cue.

I spot Sara walking over, and strike a catwalk pose.

“Well?”

“Love it,” she nods.

I turn to the saleswoman. “I’ll take it.”

A moment later, I slip back into my clothes and carry the dress to the register. Bouncing from one foot to the other as I watch her ring it up, my mind races with potential wearage occasions. Then, as I reach for my credit card, she holds up the dress once more to admire it.

“You know,” she says thoughtfully, “This is a great cut for your body. You’re lucky you’re not really thin, or it would hang like a limp noodle.”

The wallet freezes in my hand.

From behind, I can hear Sara stifle a giggle.

“And the neckline falls perfectly into the pattern,” she continues, blathering on about the fine fabric and design.

But I’ve stopped listening.

A lump rising in my throat, I glance over my shoulder, my eyes

darting around for a mirror. I spot one on the wall and take a small, hesitant step to the right so I can see my whole self. My gaze slowly travels down the length of my body, and I can see that because of the slant at which the mirror is hung, my ass actually covers the entire expanse of the glass.

“So, did you want this in a bag or on the hanger, dear?”

I turn back to the saleswoman as if in a trance. “I... uh...”

She looks at me, confused.

“I think I’m going to keep browsing.”

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“Did you hear that?” I hiss as Sara and I walk back into the mall.

“No, not a thing,” she shrugs innocently.

“That bitch called me fat!”

“No, she didn’t.”

“‘You’re lucky you’re not thin’ is hardly a Miss America nomination.”

“She said ‘you’re lucky you’re not *really* thin’. *Really* thin. Like, if you were *praying mantis* thin, the dress wouldn’t look as good.”

“No, she said ‘you’re lucky you’re not really *thin*.’ As in, ‘thin is not how I’d describe you, lucky thing for this stupid Lane Bryant mark-up.’”

Sara stops. “Lanie, who cares what she said or what she meant? You loved that dress. And you know you’re not fat, so what’s the difference?”

I look around, noticing my reflection pulled and stretched from all angles in the glass of the various store windows. Then I’m quickly distracted by the scent of chocolate cookies wafting out from Williams-Sonoma. My stomach rumbles in response.

I frown and motion for Sara to keep going, and we continue for a few minutes in silence.

As we walk, I feel myself calm down a little, and I start to feel a bit guilty for calling the saleswoman a bitch. Maybe Sara’s right

— maybe it was a jumbled compliment, in whatever universe that woman occupies.

It's just that her "really thin" comment was more than just a passing observation. It was a crossroads. A turning point. The dreaded moment when, despite a buried awareness of something lurking in denial, now that it's been spoken aloud, it's suddenly out there and must be addressed.

I take a deep breath.

"Okay, I'm going to just say it," I finally mumble. "It's obvious, we both know it, so here it is. I haven't fit into my jeans in over six months."

Sara shrugs it off. "Your jeans look fine."

"But these aren't my jeans. These are a cheap pair of fat jeans I got from Target to tide me over until I lose weight. Size twelve. A *replacement* twelve for the size ten I grew out of when the eights stopped fitting. Which adds up to twenty pounds more than I've ever weighed in my life. And unlike you, I don't have a baby to blame."

"You've really gained twenty pounds?"

From the corner of my eye, I glance at Sara and wonder if she's for real. We've been friends for five years, since landing jobs at the same publishing company. She's been in countless situations to observe every bend, bulge and blister on my body — fitting rooms, locker rooms, at the beach, by the pool — is it really possible to not notice twenty pounds that were never there before? Or has she been distracted with losing her own weight from the baby, which by the way, seemed to fall off practically overnight, which she attributed to breast-feeding and pushing a stroller around. Luxuries that I, at the moment, do not have.

"Maybe this is why Mark doesn't want a committed relationship," I mumble glumly.

"Now you're just being ridiculous."

"Well, you know what I don't need? I don't need to be lied to. Twenty pounds is a noticeable difference, and the last time I

checked, you had functioning eyeballs.”

“You want me to tell you that you look fat?”

“No! I just want you to acknowledge that I’ve put on the weight so I don’t feel like you think I’m crazy.”

“Okay. So you have to make some healthier choices, that’s all.”

“Twenty pounds does not warrant ‘healthier choices’. Twenty pounds calls for an emergency order of black market Fen-Phen from an online Mexican pharmacy.”

“Or, you could love yourself and accept your body the way it is.”

“Sara, please. Ninety percent of people who say they love and accept their own body are secretly wishing they could chop off their own ass cheeks with a deli slicer.”

“So go on a diet already!”

“But I’m not inspired,” I whine.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” she says, exasperated. “People lose hundreds of pounds every day. Even I did it after Bernie was born. And if I can do it —”

“Please don’t say that. That’s not helping.”

“You just need to find a goal and figure out how to reach it.”

We turn into the food court and I put my hand up to silence her. Slowly, my head turns from left to right, perusing what appears to be an endless mecca of delicious choices. Sbarro. Panda Express. Taco Bell. Cinnabon. Hot-Dog-On-A Stick. Orange Julius. Gordito Burrito. To me, this collective vision is like Shangri-La, pulling me forward, seducing me with the instant gratification of scrumptious flavors and aromas.

I look at Sara and shake my head. “I can’t deal with this diet talk on an empty stomach,” I say.

“Then let’s eat some lunch.”

And just like that, denial reclaims its chokehold.

Later that night, I dig halfheartedly though the fridge for something healthy, then give up and order a pizza. As I wait for it, I prop my full-length mirror up and begin plucking my clothes out of the closet, piece by piece, until the entire contents is piled on the bed.

I begin trying on the clothes, growing more and more horrified with each item. Pants that once slid up my legs like butter now require tugging, sucking in, grunting and lying flat on the bed. Dresses that used to zip right up now form a wide, open V across my back. Shirts that once fell perfectly against my torso now bulge at the sleeve and gape at the buttons, pulling the shirt apart to reveal the front of my bra. Holy shit, what the hell happened? It's like a chemical gas crept into my closet and silently shrunk everything to "petite."

The doorbell rings, and a minute later, I carry the pizza and Diet Coke into my bedroom, plunk down and stare at it. I hate that pizza now. I hate everything that it stands for, and even more, I hate the fact that despite all this hate, I'm still looking at it with drooling lust in my heart. If I'm going to walk away, it must be right now, when there's still a microscopic shred of willpower to prevent me from devouring the entire thing. Because when it comes to sinful food, I can pinpoint my moment of corruption. It's the very first bite. The first taste. The first crunch. The first instant when the delicious euphoria washes over my senses like a heroin rush, leaving me defenseless to the draw of having more. It's not unlike a first kiss. Or the first flutter of inclination that what seems like a romantic crush might be turning into something more.

As I reach for the pizza, my thoughts drift to Mark, the guy, as I've explained, that I've been dating for six whole months. The guy I'm desperately crazy about, who usually arrives with flowers and leaves with me dreaming of wedding cake, mini-vans and mom-jeans. He's also the guy, as I've mentioned, who "isn't ready for a serious commitment," which yes, is a tiny glitch on the mom-jean track. But relationships are nothing without evolution. And in our



case, there's plenty of evolving to look forward to, because I'm not even talking about marriage or moving in – I'm talking about his hesitance to call each other “boyfriend” and “girlfriend.”

Was I correct in my thinking at the mall, that if I weighed twenty pounds less, Mark would view me as something to be prized, cherished and held onto forever? Would he be proud of me then, wanting to shout from the highest rooftop that I'm his beautiful one and only?

Sara had shut this proposition down immediately, but not necessarily because she disagreed with it. The truth is, my friends banned together about three weeks ago and announced that they were tired, fed up and ultimately finished with listening to me analyze my relationship with Mark. According to them, I had become like a scratchy broken record – the same bluesy heartbreak song, over and over, to the point of them wanting to throw the Victrola out the window of a moving car.

So now I have no one. No one to listen, no one to lend perspective, and no one to help me decode the exquisite mystery that is love. I'm lucky I have my diary, which has now become my only confidante regarding all things Mark. So essentially, I'm talking to myself, but at least the diary never rolls its eyes or tells me that I need to “chill.”

The phone rings.

Out of habit, I leap across the room in a single bound, hoping to see Mark's name on the caller ID. But it's only Sara.

“Have you looked at your Facebook invites?” she asks excitedly.

“You're trolling around my Facebook again? Don't you have diapers that need changing?”

“Shut up, Lanie! I'm breastfeeding and I'm bored. So have you seen it?”

“Seen what?”

“The Save-The-Date!”

I am silent. Please God, not another wedding.

“Oh, wow. This is so perfect!” she trills.

“What’s so perfect?”

“You’re having a fifteen-year high school reunion!”

Pause. “Seriously?”

“Remember how much fun you had at your ten-year? My ten-year was amazing. My homeroom partner Bill Menozzi got up to make a speech, and –”

As she begins to ramble about her own glory days, I glance down at my tight, bulging sweatpants. You see, this is the genetic difference between Sara and me. When she thinks about a class reunion, she feels joy and anticipation at the prospect *seeing everyone*. I, on the other hand, feel dread and anxiety at the prospect of *everyone seeing me*.

“So it’s perfect timing, don’t you think?” she asks.

“For what?”

“Lanie, this is it. This is your goal! You have exactly ten weeks and four days to lose that weight, fit into an amazingly hot dress and show those cheerleading bitches what jealousy feels like!”

Her intentions are good, but she’s falling a little short here. Making anyone jealous of *anything* in my life is going to take a lot more than losing weight. My mind starts to drift to the dread of telling my former classmates about my boring, dead-end job. Or my handsome date, who has a great body but believes the concept of “commitment” is the poison of human existence. Then I snap back and think about the reunion itself.

I actually did have a blast at the last reunion, despite my sad longing for Candace, who broke my heart again by being a no-show. And my bitter, on-going feud with the cheerleading captain, Lisa Schwalsky, which almost came to blows in the parking lot after the dance.

On the fun side, we were still in our twenties, mostly still single, and it somehow seemed acceptable for the whole class to get rip-roaring smashed, break into the school, raid the bathrooms and TP the football field. Not to mention the amazing, furtive kiss I shared with my old flame, Chad Michaelson, behind the lockers,

as his fiancée mingled with the crowd.

Nowadays, being wedged firmly into our responsible thirties, I'm not sure what to expect from the reunion. I toy, for a moment, with the idea of not showing up at all. But I know that would never happen. Despite my dread, I could never stay away.

Later, I toss and turn in my bed. It's too hot to sleep. I open the window and listen to the crickets for a few minutes, then reach underneath the bed and pull out my high school yearbook. I run my hand over the cover. I haven't looked at this book in years. Opening it will be like an emotional Pandora's box, starting, of course, with Chad.

Chad Michelson. My first crush. First love. First time I scribbled my first name with his last name on my notebook, and actually believed we might get married someday. Despite all efforts to put him out of my mind, he's been creeping in a lot lately, for two reasons. First, because remembering his eager enthusiasm and pride in calling me his 'girlfriend' makes Mark's hesitance sting all the more. And second, because I recently heard a rumor that Chad and his wife might be getting divorced. Not that it matters.

I slide the yearbook back under the bed for now. Chad is only one of the ghosts I have to confront before walking into that reunion. And Sara's right about one thing. There's no way I'm walking into that reunion looking like a coiffed and sequined water buffalo. So I guess now I have a goal. Lose twenty pounds in ten weeks and four days. That's my goal.

And, of course, attempt by then to morph Mark into a date that I can actually legitimately introduce as "my boyfriend."

Jesus. Did I just say ten weeks and four days? That's an eternity. One pint of Chunky Monkey this far out won't hurt a thing.