

Chapter One

Boobs, bazongas, bazookas, big berthas, blouse bunnies, boulders, buds, cannons, chubbies, coconuts, the devil's dumplings, dirty pillows, flesh melons, fun bags, the girls, hooters, headlights, jubblies, jugs, knobs, knockers, milk wagon, milkshakes, ninnies, norks, pompoms, rack, speed bumps, sweater cows, tatas, tits, torpedoes, twin peaks,

chest pumpkins, mosquito bites, raisins on a breadboard, aspirins on an ironing board, bee stings, goose bumps on steroids. I could go on.

Number of words I know for breasts: one hundred and thirty-eight, and counting.

Number of times since the age of ten that I have actually seen a naked female breast (not counting TV or movies or online): four. My cousin Amber when I was twelve and she was fifteen. I grabbed her towel when she was changing at the beach. A woman in the mall who was nursing her baby. Janice Hayward when her shirt rode up when she was taking off her sweatshirt in PE. And, sadly, my mom.

Number of times since the age of ten that I have actually touched a naked female breast: zero. Amber punched me out. The woman in the mall flipped me off and pulled a blanket over her chest.

Janice called me a pathetic loser perv. My mom, who is a women's studies professor, just laughed and tied her robe a bit tighter. When I was younger, I saw her and my dad naked all the time. It was no big deal. Really.

I'm not alone in my obsession with breasts. I'm just more organized than most guys. I keep track of things. In notebooks. I've always kept notes about things I'm interested in. I even have a notebook that keeps track of my notebooks. When I was five, it was caterpillars. When I was ten, it was fossils. When I was twelve, it was crows. Now that I'm fifteen, it's breasts. I'm not a stalker or anything. I don't have a secret porn collection under my bed. I'm only interested in boobs in the wild. No airbrushing, no surgery. Just the real deal.

My observation skills are very highly developed. That's one of

the reasons that I ended up at the Warren Academy. Warren is a high school for gifted kids. Don't get too excited. There's no end-of-the-year performance where a talent scout discovers the ballerina turned hip-hop star. Warren is a school for the academically, not artistically, gifted. Our end-of-the-year assembly features awards for the highest marks in things like college-level statistics. There are announcements about who got into what university and how big their scholarships are. Then everyone sings the school song, "The Warren Way." It was written in 1927 by the wife of the school's founder. That's as artsy as we get. The kids who are great at singing, dancing or acting go to the Beacon School for the Performing Arts. They probably don't worry too much about getting into Ivy League schools. Warren is for kids who get straight A's

in physics. They couldn't dance if you held a gun to their heads. There are dances at Warren, but mostly the girls dance with each other. The boys lean against the walls and talk about how they got six thousand points on a triple word score in Scrabble. Me—I lean against the wall and watch the girls dance. I suck at Scrabble, and there's always a chance that there will be a wardrobe malfunction. Especially now that strapless dresses are so popular.

I'm sitting in my advanced-fiction class, supposedly working on a short story about a hemophiliac hermaphrodite. I don't really believe in Write What You Know. I'm trying to figure out whether Melissa Reed's boobs have actually gotten bigger over the weekend or whether she's wearing one of those weird gel-filled bras.

“Jack!” Leah’s voice comes from behind me and is accompanied by a sharp jab between my shoulder blades. Unlike most of the kids at Warren, Leah is athletic. She plays basketball and soccer. She swims. She’s the pitcher on her softball team. Her fastball is incredible. And very accurate. Even a jab in the back from Leah hurts.

I ignore her and try to concentrate on Alex. He’s my bloodstained, sexually confused and doomed main character.

“Jack!” Leah hisses again. Another jab, a little closer to my neck this time. Leah is my best friend and probably the most impatient person on the planet. Ignoring her is futile, even though I risk detention (again) if I answer her. Before I have a chance to reply, I feel a piece of paper slip between my regulation navy blue sweater and the collar of my regulation white shirt. Slowly and casually, I stretch and “scratch” my neck.

I yawn too, for effect, even though Ms. Lieberman isn't paying any attention. She's reading a gigantic book about Hitler. Come to think of it, Hitler was a bit like Alex. Sexually confused and doomed, but not in a good way. I doubt whether Ms. Lieberman would appreciate the connection.

Leah's note is written on a prescription pad. She steals them off doctors' desks. This one is from the desk of Dr. Ronald Myers, BSc, MD, FRCPS, Specialist in Reconstructive Surgery. Which makes the good doctor sound like some kind of saint. Fixing cleft palates on big-eyed orphans in the Sudan. Performing painstaking skin grafts on burn victims—that sort of thing. But no. Dr. Myers should have *No nose too big, no boob too small* printed on his business cards. He's Leah's mom's plastic surgeon. Cosmetic surgeon. Whatever. Mrs. James loves him. She had her

(first) nose job when she was sixteen, and she's had "work" done every couple of years since. It's the only kind of work she does. She's had so much Botox that her emotions don't register on her face anymore. Happy, sad, angry, afraid? You can't tell from looking at her. I've known her forever, and from a distance she looks the same now as she did when I was six. Up close, it's a different story. A sad one.

I unfold the note and smooth it out. *The Lipo-Lizard is having her book club tonight. Can I come over to your place?* Leah has a lot of rude nicknames for her mom: Butterface, Chipmunk, Trout Lips, Kabuki Head. You don't even want to know what they refer to. The worst thing I've ever called my mom is an effing feminazi. We were arguing about cleaning up my room, I think. I mean, yes, she's a feminist, but she's not the militant, anti-man, hairy-legged kind.

She's more the equal-pay-for-equal-work, pro-choice, anti-war kind. She's got wrinkles, but she would sooner vote Republican than get her forehead injected with a deadly poison. Needless to say, my mom and Leah's mom aren't best buds. Leah and my mom, on the other hand, are tight, especially when it comes to ragging on me. It's a regular pastime with them.

I flash Leah a quick thumbs-up and get back to staring at Melissa's chest. Her thin white shirt is unbuttoned to the third button, which is promising, but I've only got a side view, which is less than ideal. I casually toss my pen toward the floor by her desk. She hears it fall and looks over at me. I shrug in what I hope is a charming manner, and she leans over to pick it up. I angle toward her just as Ms. Lieberman looks up from her book and says, "Jack? Is there a problem?"

“No problem, Mrs. L.,” I reply. “Dropped my pen, is all.” I take the pen from Melissa, who turns away from me and slides her hand inside her shirt to adjust her bra strap. She’s definitely suffering from NBS—New Bra Syndrome. Symptoms include strap slippage, underwire chafing, cup wrinkling and the dreaded back-fat bulge. I sigh, and Leah jabs me in the back again.

“Loser,” she whispers. Leah hates my current hobby. She says it’s because it’s degrading to women, but I’m pretty sure it has more to do with her breasts being on the small side. Not that I care—she’s my best friend, after all, not my girlfriend—but I can’t help noticing. Being analytical is a curse sometimes.

Chapter Two

When I get home after school, Mom is sitting at the kitchen table marking essays and eating Zesty Ranch Doritos straight from the bag.

“Good day?” she says, offering me some chips.

“Yup,” I reply. “Leah’s coming over later, okay?”

“Sure,” she says. “Don’t forget, this is your dad’s weekend home.”

My dad is a marine biologist. He worked for the government for a while when my brother Mike and I were in elementary school, but office work drove him crazy. Now he’s a fisheries consultant. He’s worked in Japan and Brazil and China. Today he’s flying back from the Philippines. Twice a year, Mom flies out to wherever he’s working. It’s a weird arrangement, but it works for them. They met at some student protest at university. At least that’s the party line. I suspect they met at a kegger—they both love their brewskies. But they cling to the story that activism is what brought them together. Our basement is a protest-sign graveyard. It says a lot about my mother’s politics and my father’s knack with power tools.

Plastic

Save the [Insert endangered species here: Whales—Seals—Marmots—Eagles—Wolves]

End [Insert social evil here: Racism—Poverty—Homelessness—Hunger—Violence Against Women]

Stop [Insert global issue here: Pollution—Capitalism—Crime—Climate Change—War]

All worthy causes, no doubt. One of my earliest memories is of a pro-choice rally outside an abortion clinic. Man, that was scary. Mom went to support the women's collective that ran the clinic. People spit on us and yelled "Baby killer" at her, even though she was pushing me in a stroller. Mike was riding his tricycle beside us. I guess her T-shirt might have set them off. It said *Pro-Sex Pro-Child Pro-Choice*. Her sign read *Every child wanted, every mother willing*. I don't remember if my

dad was there too. All I remember is the hatred on the faces of the pro-life crowd. When I was eleven, I almost drowned when I fell out of a Zodiac during a Greenpeace demonstration. After that, I refused to go. Mom still attends rallies, and she still tries to get me involved. We're both kinda stubborn.

“And there’s an email from Mike too,” she says, licking salt and grease off her fingers. “He sent pictures this time.”

“Cool,” I say as I grab a soda from the fridge and head to my room.

“I’m leaving at six for the airport,” Mom calls after me. “There’s pizza in the freezer—and ice cream.” Cooking’s not one of Mom’s passions. It’s always a bit of a relief when Dad’s around to fire up the barbecue.

“Cool,” I say again as I sit down and open up my laptop. Mike’s email doesn’t tell me anything I don’t already know.

He's alive, Hawaii is awesome and he's making pretty decent cash teaching tourists to surf. The pictures tell a little more, but not much. He's shaved his head. He has a new tattoo on his left arm, from wrist to elbow. His six-pack is even more defined than it was when he emailed from Australia. In a couple of the photos he has his arm around the same bikini-clad girl. Her breasts are perfect—on the small side but shapely—as are her teeth, and pretty much everything else about her.

You'd never guess that Mike has a genius-level IQ. He graduated from Warren with the highest GPA in the history of the school. The summer after he graduated, he turned down scholarship offers from four universities. Then he went tree planting for the summer and bought himself a one-way ticket to Australia. That was two years ago. Mom and Dad say they're not worried—

Mike is apparently “finding his own path.” Path to where, I wonder? Sleeping on the beach at forty-five? Working as a waiter in a cheesy tiki-torch restaurant when his knees give out? Mom says Mike and I are chalk and cheese, and that both chalk and cheese have their uses. I’m pretty sure I’m the chalk. Useful, reliable, tall, skinny, pale, a bit dusty, snaps easily.

I’m trying to convince myself that it’s not wrong to lust after my brother’s girlfriend (if that’s what she is), when I hear the back door slam. Leah. I shut down the computer and head downstairs. When I get to the kitchen, my mom is saying, “You must be joking.”

“Joking about what?” I ask.

Mom is standing by the back door, purse in one hand, keys in the other. “Leah can fill you in, Jack. I have to run. Your dad’s waiting.” She seems in an awful hurry to get away.

I glance over at Leah, who is leaning against the fridge, her face watermelon red. The back door slams after my mom. “What the hell?” I say. “What’s going on? You look terrible.”

“Thanks, Jack. What a friend.”

“No, seriously. Are you okay?”

“I told your mom about my birthday present, and she...she...said...well, you heard her...” Leah turns away from me, but not before I see that she’s crying. I’m not good with crying. Put simply, I’m an empathetic crier. You cry—I cry. When I was little, it was cute. Now it’s a social liability. I’m better at controlling it than I used to be, but as Leah gasps and sobs, I can feel the familiar sting behind my eyelids. I blink and press the heels of my hands into my eyes.

“What birthday present?” I ask. Leah wipes her nose with the sleeve of her gray hoodie. She knows about the crying thing, so she must be pretty upset

to cry in front of me, even for a couple of minutes.

“From my mom. For my sixteenth birthday.”

Uh-oh. “What’s she giving you?” I ask.

“A boob job,” Leah says. “Isn’t that awesome?”

“You must be joking,” I say.

Leah bursts into tears again. But she still manages to kick me—hard—in the left kneecap. Now I really have something to cry about.