

CHRIS CRUTCHER



• STAYING FAT FOR SARAH BYRNES •

CHAPTER 1

My dad left when I still had a month to go in the dark-room, and historically when people have tried to figure me out (as in, "What went wrong?"), they usually conclude that Mom spoiled me; gave me everything I wanted because I had no pappy. Truth is, Mom thinks I'm a whole lot better off without that particular pappy and has told me a thousand times she's glad I had the good sense to stay packed away until he split. They were young. My mother was my age now when I was born, and so was my dad.

I don't know very much about Dad, really. In eighteen years he's made no effort to contact me, and all I have is a picture. He's a college professor somewhere in the Midwest, Mom thinks in Geology. She doesn't think Geology is in the Midwest, she thinks that's what he

teaches. The fact that he's excited about rocks hasn't had much genetic influence on me as far as I can tell, but what I see in the picture of him has. My dad is a tub of lard. At least he was at eighteen. I'm not talking about a guy who should have gone light on the desserts and between-meal snacks. I'm talking about a guy who should have spread Super Glue on his lips before showing his face outside his bedroom each morning. My dad could have sold his extra chins for marble sacks.

And my mom is a fox. Really. Bona fide, hundred-thousand-dollar silver-pelt fox. She has dark brown hair and green eyes and this slinky, long, muscular body that she keeps in perfect working order, and I know for a fact half the kids who come to my house hope to catch her in shorts and a tank top. Christ, she's only thirty-six years old.

"Mom," I said one morning a couple of years ago, Dad's picture clutched tight in my beefy paw, "tell me something. Tell me why somebody who looks like you would fall for somebody who looks like *this*." I plopped the picture on the coffee table in front of her.

"Looks aren't everything, Eric," she said.

"His looks aren't *anything*," I said back. "And he left them for me."

She looked up and smiled. "You look a lot better

than your dad," she said. "He was compulsive, ate all the time. You're big and solid. That's different."

"Big and solid as twelve pounds of mashed potatoes in an eight-pound bag," I said. "If you dressed me up in an orange-and-red sweater, you could ride me around the world in eighty days."

"And you have a much better sense of humor than your father," she said, probably remembering Dad's high regard for rocks. Mom was never one to let me dwell on the parts of me I didn't like.

My name is Eric Calhoun, and though I have spent hours in the weight room since that conversation, most folks call me Moby. My English teacher, Ms. Lemry, who is also my coach, sometimes calls me Eric the Well Read, because I'm pretty smart. She also calls me Double-E, for Eric Enigma. "I can't figure exactly how you're put together inside," she says. "You're a jock who doesn't compete in his best sport, a student who doesn't excel where his aptitude is highest, and you surround yourself with a supporting cast straight out of 'The Far Side.'"

"Tweech his own," I said, and pirouetted to tippy-toe out of the room, in keeping with my image as Double-E.

. . .

"A transcendent story of love,
loyalty, and courage."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)



Sarah Byrnes and Eric have been friends for years. When they were children, his fat and her terrible scars made them both outcasts. Later, although swimming slimmed Eric, she stayed his closest friend.

Now Sarah Byrnes—the smartest, toughest person Eric has ever known—sits silent in a hospital. Eric must uncover the terrible secret she's hiding, before its dark currents pull them both under.

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