

## **chapter I**

# **SECRETS**

George pulled a silver house key out of the smallest pocket of a large red backpack. Mom had sewn the key in so that it wouldn't get lost, but the yarn wasn't quite long enough to reach the keyhole if the bag rested on the ground. Instead, George had to steady herself awkwardly on one foot while the backpack rested on her other knee. She wiggled the key until it clicked into place.

Stumbling inside, she called out, "Hello?" No lights were on. Still, George needed to be certain the house was empty. The door of Mom's room was open and the bedsheets were flat. Scott's room was unoccupied as

well. Sure that she was alone, George went into the third bedroom, opened the closet door, and surveyed the pile of stuffed animals and assorted toys inside. They were undisturbed.

Mom complained that George hadn't played with any of the toys in years, and said that they should be donated to needy families. But George knew they were needed here, to guard her most prized and secret collection. Fishing beneath the teddy bears and fluffy bunnies, George felt for a flat denim bag. Once she had it in hand, she ran to the bathroom, shut the door, and turned the lock. Clutching the bag in tightly wrapped arms, George slid to the ground.

As she tipped the denim bag on its side, the silky, slippery pages of a dozen magazines fell out onto the tiled bathroom floor. Covers promised HOW TO HAVE PERFECT SKIN, TWELVE FRESH SUMMER HAIRCUTS, HOW TO TELL A HOTTIE YOU LIKE HIM, and WILD WINTER WARDROBES. George was only a few years younger than the girls

smiling at her from the glossy pages. She thought of them as her friends.

George picked up an issue from last April that she had looked through countless times before. She browsed the busy pages with a crisp *flip-flip-flip* that stirred up the faint smell of paper.

She paused on a photo of four girls at the beach. They modeled swimsuits in a line, each striking a pose. A guide on the right-hand side of the page recommended various styles based on body type. The bodies looked the same to George. They were all girls' bodies.

On the next page, two girls sat laughing on a blanket, their arms around each other's shoulders. One wore a striped bikini; the other wore a polka-dot one-piece with cutouts at the hips.

If George were there, she would fit right in, giggling and linking her arms in theirs. She would wear a bright-pink bikini, and she would have long hair that her new friends would love to braid. They would ask her name,

and she would tell them, *My name is Melissa*. Melissa was the name she called herself in the mirror when no one was watching and she could brush her flat reddish-brown hair to the front of her head, as if she had bangs.

George flipped past flashy ads for book-bag organizers, nail polish, the latest phones, and even tampons. She skipped over an article on how to make your own bracelets and another on advice for talking to boys.

George's magazine collection had started by accident. Two summers ago, she had noticed an old issue of *Girls' Life* in the recycling bin at the library. The word *girl* had caught her eye instantly, and she had slipped the magazine in her jacket to look at later. Another girls' magazine soon followed, this time rescued from a trash can down the block from her house. The very next weekend, she had found the denim bag at a yard sale for a quarter. It was just the size of a magazine, and had a zipper along the top. It was as if the universe had wanted her to be able to store her collection safely.