

## Chapter

# ONE

This was the beginning. Angie bit the end of her thumbnail awaiting the result. She had — unwittingly — found a rival. A rival was the last thing she needed halfway into her rerun of freshman year.

That was when Fat Angie challenged Stacy Ann Sloan on the basketball court. Stacy Ann *slapped* Fat Angie across the face. An entire gym class of girls laughed, cheering on the queen of sting, Stacy Ann Sloan, aka the rising star (vixen in disguise) of William Anders High. No one *ever* challenged her on the basketball court, even if they were playing volleyball.

“Say something now, you freak,” Stacy Ann said to Fat Angie. “You’re crazier than your G.I. Joe sister.”

Fat Angie did not like confrontation.

Fat Angie did not like Stacy Ann.

Fat Angie especially did not like confrontation with Stacy Ann.

But Stacy Ann crossed a line when she said Angie's sister was . . . Fat Angie snapped up and yanked Stacy Ann's Farrah Fawcett (original cast member of the 1970s TV show *Charlie's Angels*) retro hair with vicious intent. And before anyone could say, "Damn . . ."

Fat Angie *slapped* Stacy Ann, batting two eyelashes in Hugh Grant form. To everyone's surprise, Stacy Ann hit the floor.

A sudden "Oooooo," and the gym went a hush.

Fat Angie held up her red, pulsating hand for verification. This was an event she needed proved because the action was too large even for her to believe. She gulped. Her sweaty palm shook and her amazement faded fast because Fat Angie, a mortal among the teen crowd, realized that retaliating on Stacy Ann Sloan meant:

## **WAR**

Fat Angie had become keen on the term. First because of her older sister's fascination with troubles foreign and less domestic. Then later when her parents engaged in war over her and her adopted older brother, Wang, and over who got Lester, the aging family dog, during the divorce. Lester hated his name.

Fat Angie told her therapist, "*Lester hates his name. He won't respond to it.*"

The therapist made a note: *Projects feelings of animosity on family dog.*

“Show us your crazy pose, Fat Angie,” said a mean girl, her camera phone popping off a mock photo shoot.

Fat Angie did not like photo shoots.

Fat Angie did not like any of the girls in her gym class.

She particularly did not like the mean girl, and she began to sweat and shake.

“This is gonna jet on the net,” said a busty girl, moving in with her cell in video mode.

Before the girl could get her juicy close-up, Stacy Ann had returned for Round 2.

Stacy Ann countered Fat Angie’s slap with a fierce-naughty punch. Fat Angie held her pudgy arms low, boxer-like, to protect her ribs. Fat Angie, though once an avid viewer of kung fu movies with Wang and their sister, failed to remember Rule #1 in the art of hand-to-hand combat: regardless of the circumstance, always protect one’s *head*.

Popped in the face, Fat Angie toppled to the basketball court floor and landed face-first.

“Check out her underwear,” said one of the girls.

Fat Angie had had the same underwear since eighth grade—the elastic *stretching* to its edges. She hated her underwear. It came eight to a pack for \$6.99 at Wal-Mart and her stomach hung over it. The girls in gym loved that fact. Almost as much as the fact that she was the only girl in their school who had ever had a nervous breakdown. Fat Angie’s therapist had explained it quite slowly and with unnecessary precision. Angie was neither slow nor nervous.

She felt the diagnosis was inaccurate and meant only for insurance billing purposes. Her mother had argued at great length with Angie's therapist about the importance of an accurate diagnosis for her group health provider.

Disappointed in her opponent's lack of effort to fight back, Stacy Ann towered over Fat Angie.

"You really are wacko, Fatso," said Stacy Ann.

Fat Angie would agree. People were obese for all sorts of reasons. She'd tell anyone that. If she trusted someone to share such thoughts.

The gym teacher, Coach Linda Laden, who had been otherwise occupied in the equipment room, broke through the circle of ogling girls.

"Who started this?" Coach Laden asked.

"Fat Angie," said a voice in the back.

"Fat Angie," chimed another girl.

"She pulled my hair, Coach Laden," said Stacy Ann.

Coach Laden stared at an aggressive clump at the top of Stacy Ann's silky, perfectly highlighted hair.

"Angie?" said Coach Laden, in her most sensitive but disappointed voice.

Clearly, Laden had a soft spot for Angie. A woman known to be hard as a ten-inch rusty spike had hoped for greater things for Angie, the way she had for Angie's older sister. To see the girl defeated and so unattractively fitted in a two-sizes-too-small HORNETS' NEST T-shirt was nearly more than the coach could bear.

"Angie?" Coach Laden asked again, now squatting to her level.

The girls whispered. Laughed. Angie sat there, her not-so-loved love handles sweat soaked from edge to wide edge of her stomach.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Fat Angie said to Coach Laden.

Coach Laden helped her to her feet. Angie's sneakers, with the sides overturned, slipped and there was yet another burst of laughter from the gaggle.

"Wall sits!" Coach Laden said. "Everyone. Now."

The girls groaned and made for the gymnasium walls. Stacy Ann, however, stood firmly in place, arms crossed, hip angled to one side.

"Coach, she started it," Stacy Ann said. "Everybody knows she's crazy."

Coach Laden leaned in and said, "No matter what, you *know* better. Move!"

Stacy Ann muttered profanities under her breath as Coach Laden walked across the basketball court with Fat Angie.

Fat Angie decided that it must be common after a battle with the meanest, prettiest crank-ho of the school to withdraw quietly into the downstairs girls' locker room. Coach Laden sat with Fat Angie and told the tales of her youth and how she had overcome adversity to become the woman that she was. Fat Angie watched the silver whistle dangle from

Coach Laden's chest as she leaned forward, placed a kind hand on Angie's knee, and said a variation of what so many had said since Angie had come home from the institution: "You can't let yourself get drawn into that kind of situation. You're too smart and have too much going for you. Do you believe that?"

Angie had become an expert at the art of the rhetorical question. She simply had to acknowledge it with an answer that concurred with the adult's expectation: nod and/or say yes.

"Come upstairs when you're ready," Coach Laden said.

With the coach now out of the locker room, Fat Angie undressed, pulling her sweaty yellow T-shirt off, the words HORNETS' NEST along the front stretched every which way possible. A cocky, bicep-bulging hornet stared back at her. It had been her sister's shirt. The shirt her sister had worn beneath her basketball jersey on game day for good luck. Not that a girl with her academic and athletic prowess had ever had to rely on such a thing as luck.

The shock waves of her sister snubbing scholarship offers to save the world from the tyranny of terrorism, after seeing a *Dateline* special on the war in Iraq, reverberated throughout the state and beyond. Fat Angie's sister had become a household name, much like Tide. No one could believe that she had joined the air force on her eighteenth birthday and lied to her parents and, most notably, to Fat

Angie until a week before leaving for boot camp at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

Fat Angie's sister was skinny. The HORNETS' NEST T-shirt barely fit Fat Angie, but she wore it every day to gym.

Wearing that shirt was the one thing about her miserable, predictable life that she did not hate. Because Fat Angie's school day consisted of one or more of the following from her classmates:

#### Short List

They pantsed her.

They egged her.

They rolled her down a hill at lunch.

They mooded at her.

#### Longer List

They spit on her food.

They spit on her.

They spit spitballs at her.

They yelled obscenities.

They stole her pens, pencils, and/or highlighters.

They erased her name from school-sponsored events.

They repeatedly lied about her to the press.

Fat Angie skipped showering. She rolled a chalky stick deodorant over her sweaty armpits and sniffed for a smell

check. It would do. There were only three and a half hours left in the school day. Three and a half hours and seven months. Give or take a few days for socially awkward holidays and the off chance of a snow day. A snow day in Dryfalls, Ohio, was highly unlikely. Highly, highly unlikely.

Fat Angie struggled to fasten her blue jeans. She stretched out on the bench, held her breath, wiggled, and . . . success! She had triumphed over her jeans once again, despite her couldn't-be-bothered mother. A woman who had vowed during a recent text argument that she would not buy her daughter another pair of pants until she lost twenty-nine pounds. That day, Angie had eaten three doughnuts and two Big Macs. And a small fry. And a Diet Coke. And a Hershey's Bar and a bag of Mr. Peanuts. And three Taco Supremes from Taco Bell. And an Andes mint from her mother's nightstand drawer.

Fat Angie had not been hungry.

When Angie dragged herself out of the locker room, the girls were running stands. This was the same as bleachers. Up and down the squeaking steps they huffed. For some reason, the image incited the memory of Fat Angie watching the movie *Carrie* at Halloween.

***Carrie* (1976):** Carrie White (Sissy Spacek) is a teen ostracized by her peers because of her acute shyness and the fact that she freaks out when she starts her period in the gym showers and thinks she is dying.

All the girls throw tampons at her. Carrie later seeks revenge by using her telekinetic powers to flame broil everyone at the prom.

Angie recalled this brief synopsis while watching the girls in her gym class run bleachers. Despite how they treated her, especially when they mocked her in the locker room, she never wanted to have telekinetic powers to destroy them the way Carrie does in the movie. Besides, Angie had already gotten her period and they had never thrown tampons at her.

Coach Laden yelled at the girls, "Faster! Faster!" as Angie walked over to her.

Coach Laden was a very voluptuous woman with slim hips and muscular thighs. Fat Angie wondered what that kind of body felt like when it moved.

"You can sit in study hall until fourth period," said Coach Laden to her.

That was when *she* walked in.

She was the kind of girl who didn't exist in Dryfalls, Ohio. She was 199 percent *wow!*

She crushed the gym floor with her pair of eighteen-eyehole black combat boots. Skull-and-crossbones fishnets swirled up her legs and disappeared at the hem of her red plaid skirt, which was far shorter than the regulated dress code but, based on her stride, she was the kind of girl who could get away with it. Her tattered white button-down

with custom-cut sleeves revealed slender arms masked by a soft gray shirt for layering. While it was much too hot for layering, the girl did not drip a bead of sweat. There, in the gymnasium of William Anders High School, was the girl that sound tracks played for whenever she stepped into the room, and Fat Angie was . . . well, moved.

The new girl handed a yellow slip of paper to Coach Laden. "I gotta be here," she said, her chestnut eyes cutting to Fat Angie. "Hey."

And when the new girl said that simple word, she smiled with something no one smiled at Fat Angie with: interest.

Coach Laden said, "Angie's having a hard day," and scooted Angie off the way Mr. Apall did the special-ed kids when they did something on the "special" side.

But Fat Angie could not take her eyes off the slim tall girl standing only a few feet away. The whole moment clicked into slow motion as the girl whipped her hair to the side. The ivory stem that was the nape of her delicate neck revealed a purple-heart tattoo. Fat Angie's eyes widened. The new girl grinned at Angie, her elbow in tow by Coach Laden. The coach's gab on mute.

All the obese girl could do was lock in on that grin glowing . . . at her!

Then . . .

Stacy Ann tapped the new girl on the shoulder and the

moment between Fat Angie and the girl severed. Stacy Ann, in an evil Grinch grin, muttered something to the new girl. As the new girl listened to the loose-lipped Stacy Ann, her eyes occasionally cut back to Fat Angie's. Fat Angie's fate was surely sealed. No doubt Stacy Ann would make it her personal mission to enlist the new girl into her army of Fat Angie loathers. She'd get the new girl on day one before Angie ever realized she was supposed to grin back.

"Angie?" said Coach Laden, the mute button released to blaring volume.

The sound of the world returned. Girls' sneakers pounded the bleachers. Gabbing echoed throughout the gym. And the mysterious new girl, led by Stacy Ann, walked away from Angie. Beyond Coach Laden's shoulder, Angie caught Stacy Ann's beautiful blue eyes and wondered how so much evil thrived behind them. Then Stacy Ann's middle finger appropriately shot Fat Angie the rod.

"Remember, Angie," assured Coach Laden. "You are a special girl."

Fat Angie grimaced as she walked out of the gym.

Fat Angie's dad had also said she was a special girl when he'd left the house a few months after her sister had completed basic training. Two pieces of Samsonite luggage and a rollaway waited at the door. He was not interested in the furniture, the extensive Blu-ray collection, or the Superpop popcorn maker that Angie had saved for a month

and a half to buy him for his forty-fourth birthday. He merely wanted her to know that she was special, and then carried his things out to the car.

Fat Angie did not like being special.

Fat Angie did not go to study hall after leaving the gym. Instead she went to the vending machine, sank in four quarters, and punched in

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on the number pad, and out dropped a pack of Little Debbie Swiss Rolls. They were cheaper at the Five 'N' Go gas two blocks from her house, but a girl had been shot there three and a half weeks earlier and Angie's couldn't-be-bothered mother had been bothered by the incident. She was adamant about Fat Angie not going anywhere near that place. *The criminal element could still be lingering*, she'd texted.

Tearing open the package with her teeth, Fat Angie considered her couldn't-be-bothered mother's theory and strongly disagreed. No one who shot another person would wait around the Five 'N' Go Gas to be apprehended. It did not fit the logic of the criminal mind. Whereas Wang was of the criminal mind, or so it had seemed since her sister had flown the nest. Even though Wang's court-appointed therapist had assured Fat Angie's mother after a hearing, "Wang is just acting out. He isn't really headed down the wrong path."

Fat Angie's brother began selling pornography ripped from the Internet shortly thereafter and was apprehended

by an undercover investigator. Wang was, in fact, headed down the wrong path, Fat Angie was convinced, but she didn't argue this with her mother. Her mother had enough on her plate dating Wang's therapist, supposedly without either one of the kids knowing.

The bell rang. Fat Angie finished off the last bite of the Swiss Roll and disposed of the wrapper in a trash can. Students poured from their classes, filling the breezeway for lunch. Fat Angie hated lunch. Fat Angie hated high school. Most of all, Fat Angie hated that her classmates consistently reminded her of what had happened at the beginning of the school year.

#### BODY FOUND

had flooded the Internet—the TV cameras, microphones, everyone swooping down. Fat Angie Humpty Dumpty cracked. A pack of razors in her pocket and the song “Free Fallin’” on her iPod. She ran onto the court during a football pep rally with slit wrists and screamed, “We’re all killers!” while the high-school band played a boy-band hit.

Images of her meltdown flooded front pages of newspapers and national evening news. Images of the grieving girl. They cheered in parts of Iraq. A victory for their side. They were winning. Only the report about Fat Angie's sister had been false. Her body was not found.

#### BODY OF SOLDIER WAS NOT FOUND

A guy plowed past Fat Angie.

She held up her wrists, one feebly covered by her dad's

Casio calculator watch and the other adorned by a ratty yellow sweatband. Six vertical scars clawed their way out.

Fat Angie was moving uncomfortably through the crowded breezeway when —

“Hey, hey, hey! It’s . . .” — Gary Klein deepened his voice — “Fat Angie!”

Gary had been a bully since preschool. He read at a seventh-grade level.

Gary was a junior.

Fat Angie tried to step around Gary. Gary sidestepped and cut her off.

Fat Angie stepped the other direction. Gary slid that direction too.

“I bet this is the closest you’ll get to a dance, Fat Angie,” said Gary.

“Can’t you pick on a freshman transfer?” she said.

He reached out and pinched her stomach.

She squealed.

Gary reached and pinched her again. This time the pain was deep.

“Quit it,” she said.

“Fat Angie the crazy mad cow,” said Gary. “Moooo. Come on. *Moo*, freak.”

Fat Angie began to crumble in place when —

A charge-shove rammed into Gary’s chest. It came out of nowhere. Gary slammed against the wall. The breezeway chatter hushed.

Fat Angie stood stunned to see Gary pressed against the red brick. She was even more stunned when she looked to her right. There he was. All-star-every-sport Jake Fetch.

Kids lingered. The *fight-fight-fight* anticipation ignited in their eyes.

"I'm seriously gonna kick your ass, Jake," said Gary, peeling himself off the wall.

"How seriously? A little or a lot?" said Jake. "That way I can prepare my ass."

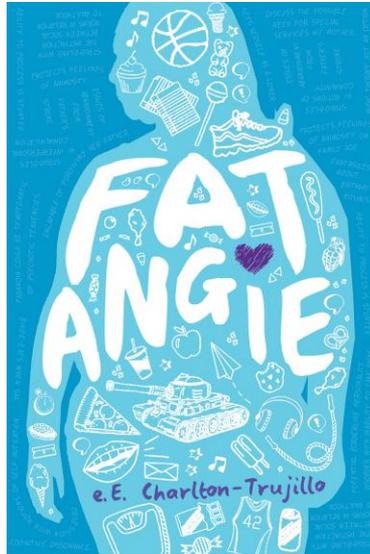
Although Fat Angie did not like confrontation, she did like Jake Fetch at that moment until he looked her way and said, "You cool?"

The world had turned upside down. The sky would rain frogs by the end of the day, or at least sometime in the next week, because Jake Fetch had stood up for her.

She ran.

# Fat Angie

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