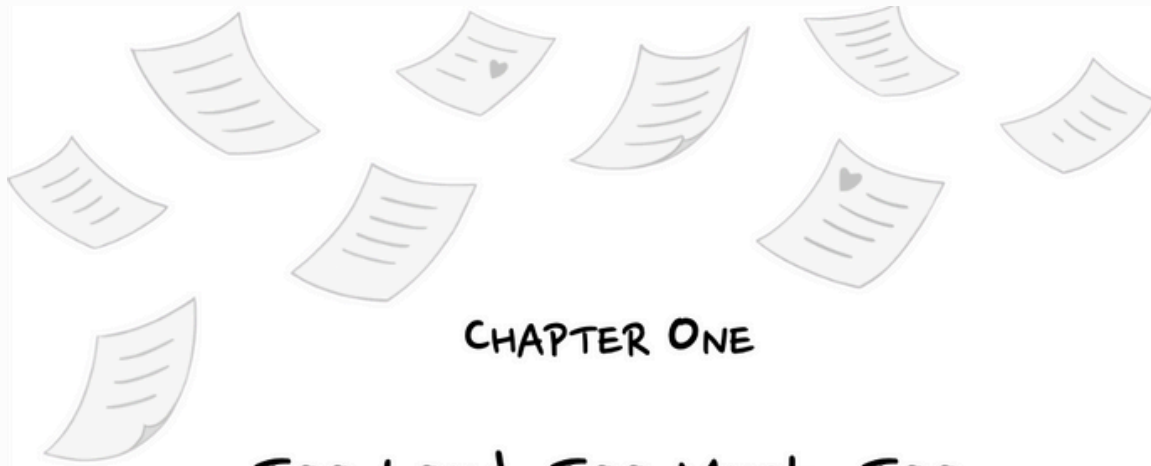


SAMPLE CHAPTER





CHAPTER ONE

Too Loud, Too Much, Too Everything

AMARA'S STOMACH DROPPED WHEN she saw what Ms. Baxter had written on the board.

TOO MUCH.

The words stretched across the whiteboard like they were screaming just at her. They were sharp, bright and impossible to ignore. It was, after all, what everyone had been telling her all her life without actually saying it.

"Make a collage," Ms. Baxter said, waving at tables covered in magazines and glitter and complete chaos. "Whatever 'too much' means to you. Go wild."

Everyone was already moving... chairs scraping, scissors clicking, people bouncing ideas off each other like this was the most fun assignment ever. Amara heard someone say "mine will be a glitter tornado" and laughter erupted like a spell breaking.

But she couldn't move. She remained frozen at the back table, chewing so hard on her glue stick cap she could taste plastic.

Across the room, Lin Park stared at her blank paper like it might bite her. For a split second, their eyes met and Amara saw it. That shimmer of recognition. It was the same look she got when she caught herself in mirrors. The look that said *I don't know how to exist without apologizing for it.*

Amara looked back down.

What isn't too much?

The question dragged her straight back to Grade 1, Show and Tell, the memory hitting her like a punch to the chest. She'd brought this perfect shell from Cornwall that sparkled like it had caught the sea.

"She glowed like trapped moonlight," Amara had told the class, her eyes shining.

She'd named her Aqua Queen. She had been SO excited to tell everyone about how the waves whispered secrets at dawn and how seagulls sounded like they were gossiping and how she'd found seventeen shells but this one had literally called to her from under the seaweed.

She'd been halfway through explaining how the water looked like melted sapphires when Mrs. Carver clapped her hands. It had split the air like a whip.

"That's enough, sweetheart. We don't need every single detail."

The giggles started immediately, all eyes on her. She swallowed the rest of her story and sat down, cheeks burning hot, wanting to disappear forever.

That night she shoved Aqua Queen into the back of her drawer and slammed it shut.

After that, she started editing herself, cutting away the parts that were too much. Her laugh got quieter. She started counting to three before speaking. The rainbow tights went back in the drawer, even though they made her feel like she could fly.

It kinda worked.

People liked her better at 70%. Teachers smiled more. Friends called her “chill”. But at night, she missed the version of herself that felt like stardust and fireworks.

Now she was staring at this blank paper and her hands were actually shaking. *What if she made something real and everyone laughed again? What if she showed them who she actually was and they flinched?*

The thoughts spiraled faster. Around her, everyone else was already deep into their projects, confident and sure. She picked up a magazine, put it down. Picked up scissors, set them aside, and just stared at the paper. She felt like she couldn’t breathe.

Then... rip!

Something inside her snapped. She started tearing up bright pages, neon concert flyers, comic strips screaming BOOM! and KAPOW! Lipstick ads in colors that didn’t exist in nature.

Her hands moved as if they had a life of their own, layering, gluing, creating something that looked like an explosion.

She grabbed a black marker and wrote over everything: LOUD, BRIGHT, WILD, YES!!! The exclamation points looked like tiny victory flags.

She glued down a broken pencil because why not? In the center, she drew a girl with her arms stretched wide and hair like flames.

It looked like her if she’d never learnt to shrink.

When she stepped back, her heart was hammering hard against her ribs. It was chaos. It was ugly-beautiful. It was SO MUCH. And it looked exactly like the part of herself she’d been hiding.

She didn’t know if she loved it, or hated it, or if it made her want to cry.

Her hand reached for the corner... if she ripped it up now, no one could see it. Then no one could laugh.

“That’s my favorite one.”

Amara froze.

The voice was so soft she almost missed it. She turned around and Lin Park was standing there, arms wrapped around herself like

she was afraid of something. Lin, who whispered when she talked and wore beige everything and moved through the world like she was apologizing for existing. But she was staring at Amara's collage like it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

"Really?" Amara's voice cracked. "It's kind of... a disaster."

Lin studied it for the longest time. "That's why I like it. It doesn't ask for permission. Or forgiveness.."

The words hit Amara like lightning.

Then Lin put her collage next to Amara's and Amara actually gasped. It was all white space and silver fairy lights and a pressed flower that looked like it might crumble if you breathed wrong. It was perfect and delicate and everything hers wasn't.

"Yours is like a secret garden. It's gorgeous," Amara whispered.

"Thanks." Lin's cheeks went pink. She hesitated. "But sometimes I wonder what it would feel like to make something that screams instead of whispers."

Around them, everyone was chattering and cutting and laughing, but it felt like they were in their own bubble.

"I've been watching you," Lin said quickly, then went bright red. "Not in a weird way! Just... you always look like you're about to say something amazing. Then you don't. Like you're editing yourself in real time." She took a shaky breath. "I always noticed your rainbow tights in middle school. I wanted to be brave enough to wear something like that."

Amara's eyes widened. "You remember my tights?"

"I still think about them sometimes," Lin admitted. "And your Show and Tell stories. You made everyone stop and listen. I don't know how to be loud like that. Even on paper." Now even her ears were crimson.

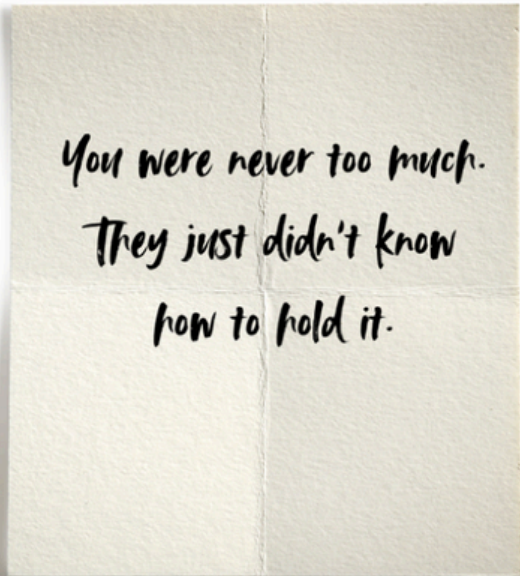
They sat there looking at their work—Amara's explosion and Lin's whisper—and suddenly Amara saw it. They weren't opposites. They were both scared of taking up space, just in different ways.

During lunch break, Amara walked to her locker feeling raw and exposed, like she'd shown everyone her diary. But also lighter somehow, like she'd finally admitted a truth that she'd been guarding too tightly for too long..

When she unzipped her pencil case, something fell out.

A folded piece of paper. She stared at it, confused. Her hands shook as she opened it.

"You were never too much. They just didn't know how to hold it."

A photograph of a folded piece of paper, likely a note, with handwritten text in black ink. The text is written in a cursive, slightly slanted script. The paper is off-white and shows the creases from being folded. The text is centered on the paper.

*You were never too much.
They just didn't know
how to hold it.*

She looked around frantically. There were people everywhere and she had no idea who had written this. The handwriting wasn't Lin's. Not even close. Was it from someone else in class?

Slowly, the butterflies in her belly settled. The words felt like confirmation of what she'd just discovered... that maybe the problem hadn't been with her after all.

She folded it carefully and put it in her notebook.

A decorative flourish or signature, consisting of a series of connected loops and curves, rendered in a dark, elegant script.

The next day she didn't try to fix her collage. She added to it. She glued a bright red ribbon at the bottom and wrote: *Be proud of you.*

When class ended, Lin tapped her arm. "Want to trade? I turn in yours, you turn in mine?"

"What?"

Lin smiled and it transformed her whole face. "I want to know what it feels like to hand in something that..." She paused, searching for words, then made a gesture with her hands like an explosion. "Something big. And maybe you want to know what it feels like to choose quiet instead of being forced into it."

It took a moment. Then slowly, Amara slid her collage across the table. "Okay. Let's do it."

That night she dug out her old journals, the ones she'd stopped writing in because even her thoughts had felt too loud. She flipped to a random page. *BUTTERFLIES ONLY LIVE A FEW WEEKS??? THEY'RE TOO BEAUTIFUL TO DIE THAT FAST. WHO MADE THAT RULE!!!* The words spiraled into the margins in all caps and a million exclamation points. God, she'd forgotten. She used to think like that, FEEL like that.

The next day Lin handed her something folded. Inside was a watercolor version of Amara's collage. Every wild, chaotic piece rendered soft and beautiful. At the bottom, in tiny perfect handwriting: *The world's too gray. Stay loud.*

Amara read it three times and her eyes started burning.

At lunch she walked straight to Lin's table. "Can I sit here?"

Lin looked up and smiled. "I'd love that."

"I'm reading this book and it's SO WEIRD and amazing and I need to tell someone about it right now." She didn't wait for permission. She just started talking... hands flying, voice getting louder, laughing too much at her own jokes. And Lin didn't flinch. She listened. Asked questions. Laughed with her.

Other people turned to look, drawn by the noise they were making, but for the first time in forever, Amara didn't shrink. She just kept being exactly who she was.

That night she wrote in her journal. *The right people won't ask you to turn yourself down. They'll give you space to turn yourself up. Maybe I'm not too much. Maybe I'm exactly enough.*

The next morning, she put on the rainbow tights. Because Lin was right. The world needed more color, and she was done apologizing for bringing it.

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