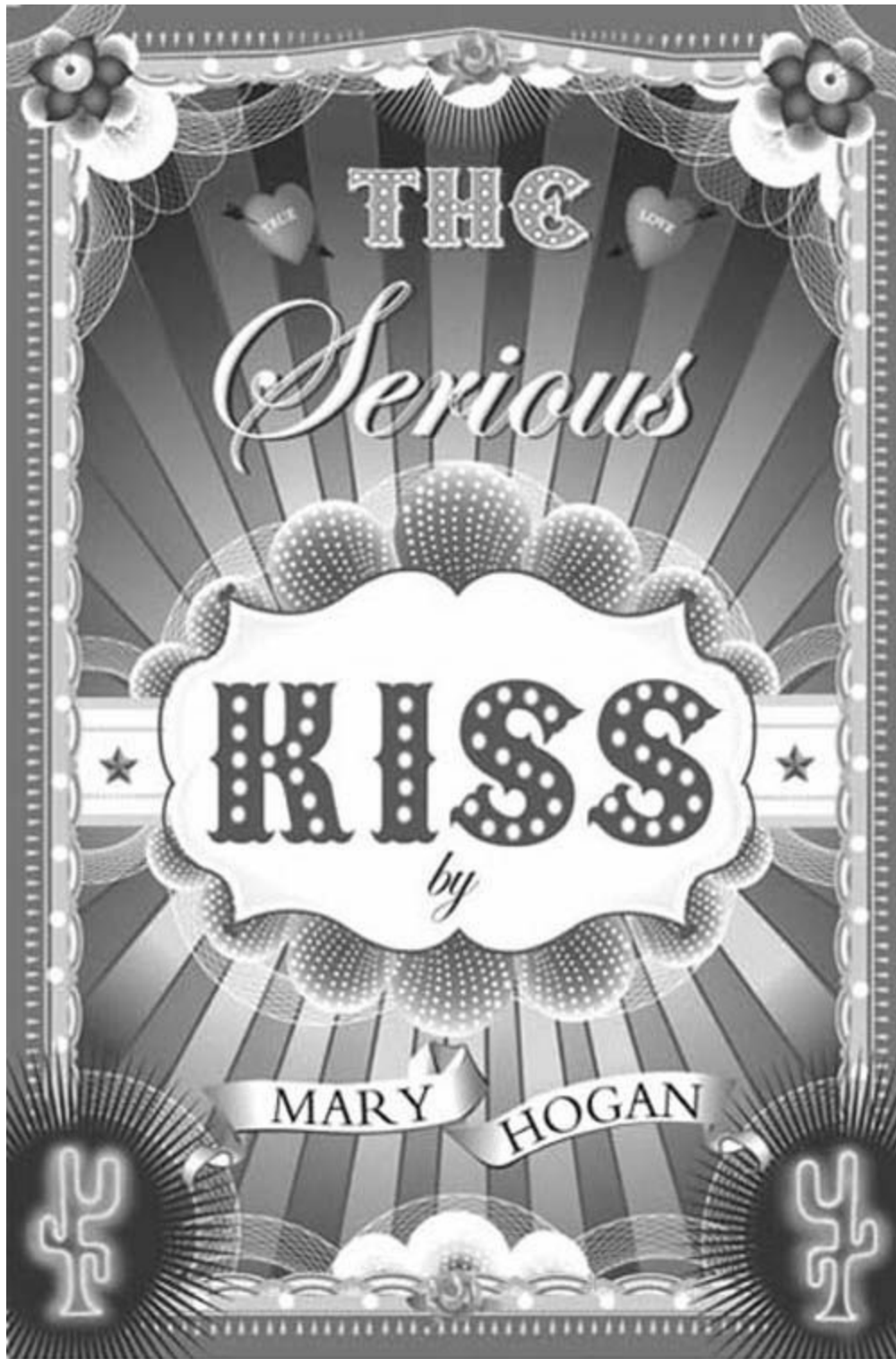


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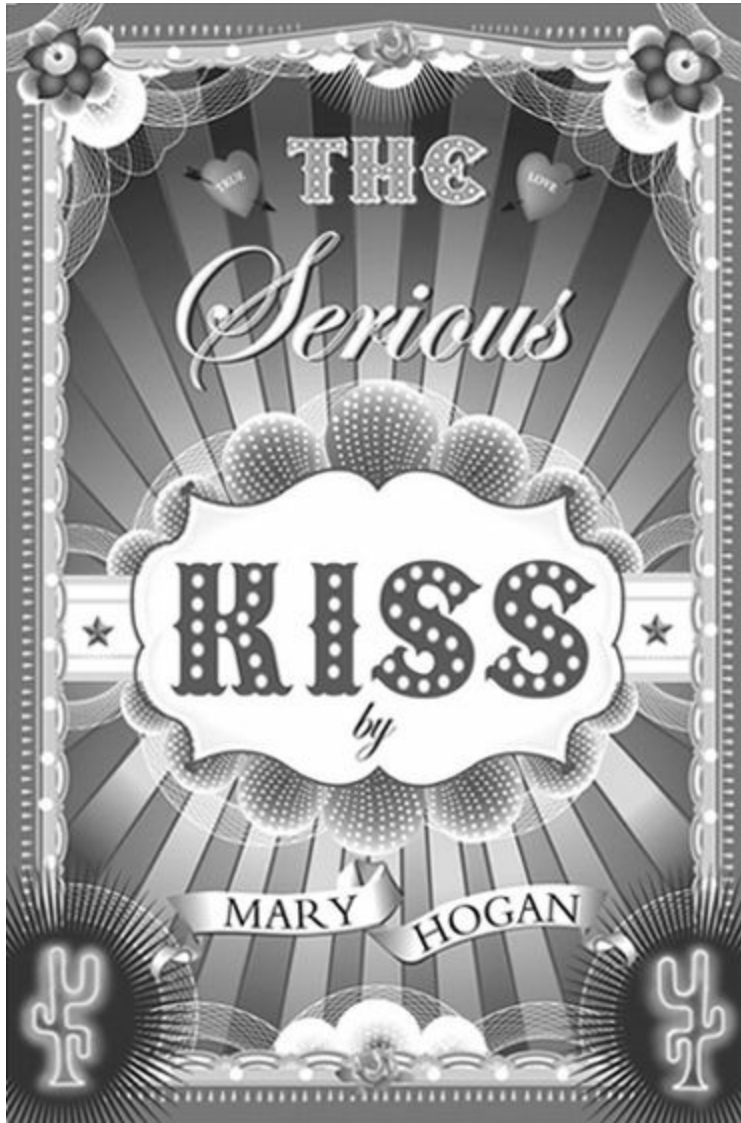
MARY HOGAN

SIMON AND SCHUSTER



SIMON AND SCHUSTER

THE SERIOUS KISS



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For Bob Hogan,
who makes it possible for
me to do what I love

PART ONE

Chatsworth

ONE

My dad drinks too much and my mom eats too much, which pretty much sums up why I am the way I am: a knotted mass of anxiety, a walking cold sweat. Three weeks ago, when I entered my fourteenth year of existence, I realised the only stable, solid truth in my universe: Being me isn't easy.

“Dinneroo!” Mom yelled down the hall like she always yells down the hall each night as she comes home from work. Her perfume instantly gave me a headache. The slamming of the front door and the jingle of her car keys woke Juan Dog. *Yip. Yip.*

“In a sec!” I yelled back, but I didn't move a muscle. Dinner scares me. In fact, *all* meals and most salty snacks freak me out. They trigger an inner horror movie: *Attack of the Killer Fat Cells*. It's not that I hate food. I *love* it. What's better than hot bread slathered in melted butter? Or, Doritos with an extra blast of nacho flavour? My mouth is watering just thinking of it. But, given my genetics – Mom's size has never even come close to my age and Dad wouldn't need *any* padding to play Santa Claus – I realise that letting my guard down, even once, is an invitation for my fat cells to puff out like blowfish. I'm definitely *pre* -fat. And food is simply too hard to control, too easy to send your whole life careering out of control. So, when Mom called me for dinner, I ignored my growling stomach, lifted the phone back to my ear, wiggled my shoulder blades into the comfy warm groove of my bed, and kept talking to my best friend Nadine.

“So what'd *he* say? Then what'd *you* say? Uh-huh. Then what'd *he* say?”

Through my closed bedroom door I heard one of my brothers playing with his Game Boy. “Get him! Get him! Get him!” I smelled the Mackey D fries Mom had brought home.

“Dirk!” Mom yelled. “Dinnerooney!”

My eleven-year-old brother, Dirk, is three years younger than me, but light-years from maturity. He's not what you'd ever call a high achiever. He's forever stalling for time, saying “Huh?”, scratching his nose, and slurping

back the pool of drool that builds up behind his hanging lower lip. Juan Dog the chihuahua is almost my age, which, in dog years, means he's like ninety-eight. Juan is what you'd call highly-strung. He yaps so much he levitates his tiny, quivering body all the way off the floor.

"Dirk!" Mom shouted. "Shake your *fannywannyingo!*" Did I mention my mother adds cutesy suffixes to words? She thinks it's youthful and snappy. I happen to know it's too embarrassing for words. One time, about a month ago, she called Juan Dog's business a *poopadilly*. Outside – in front of everybody.

Mom pounded on my bedroom door. "You still on that thing?" Like she hadn't clicked in on the extension twice already. "Dinner's on the table."

"I'll be off in a minute!" I said. Then to Nadine: "So what'd *he* say?"

"Rif!" Mom screeched. "Where the heck is Rif?"

That was a no-brainer. Rif, my sixteen-year-old brother, is never around. He hides cigarettes in the tight curls of his ashblond hair. When no one is in smelling distance, he lights up, takes a long slow drag, then smothers the end with two spit wet fingers and tucks the cigarette back into his hair.

"Who needs a nicotine patch?" he says. "I got my own method." Whatever that means. One time, about a year ago, the right side of Rif's head started smouldering while he sat in the family room watching MTV. Mom was like, "Call the fire department!" Dad was like, "Isn't there a football game on?" My parents have never seemed like they belong together. And I've never, ever felt like I belong in this family.

"Now, Elizabeth," Mom pounded my door one last time. I groaned.

"I gotta go, Nadine," I said into the phone. "E-mail me later?"

"Yeah. Later."

I hung up, fluffed my flattened hair, and walked down the hall to the kitchen. Rif slithered in behind me, smelling of burned hair gel.