

Chapter 1

Angel McAllister held her phone away from her ear and winced.

“*Seriously?*” yelled Sharice Bell, Angel’s best friend. Her piercing voice crackled through the tinny speaker. “You don’t think Trey is into you? You know he’s always looking at you in English class, right?”

“Just because some boy looks at me once in a while doesn’t mean he’s into me,” Angel replied. “I’m pretty sure Trey doesn’t look at me like *that*.”

“Girl, what planet do you live on?” Sharice scoffed. “That boy looks at you, like, every five minutes. He’s obviously trying to get your attention.”

“No, that’s not it,” Angel said as she closed her bedroom door and flopped on her bed. “He only looks at me when Mr.

Collins asks a question. All he's interested in is whether I'll answer it so he won't get called on."

Sharice sighed. "Well, you could at least look *back* at him and smile or something! You just stare straight ahead like you actually care about Collins and his stupid poetry."

"Well, I *do* like poetry. Some of it, anyway," Angel replied, hoping to change the subject. "Have you started that poetry assignment yet? I can't believe we're going to have to read our work in front of the whole class next week!"

"Whatever," Sharice grumbled. "Can we get back to the topic of Trey and your love life? Tomorrow when he starts staring at you, you better smile at him. I'm gonna be watching to make sure you do. If he smiles back, ask him if he wants to go to the eighth-grade graduation party with you."

"I don't know," Angel said, shifting uncomfortably on her bed.

"C'mon, Angel! You know Trey is *fine*, and I've never seen him with a girl. Whenever I ask Marcus why Trey isn't seeing anyone, he says it's 'cause Trey's real shy. So what you gotta do is—"

"Can we just drop it?" Angel cut in.

Marcus was Sharice's boyfriend, and ever since the two of them had gotten together, Sharice insisted Angel needed a boyfriend too. Marcus's twin brother, Trey, seemed like the obvious choice to Sharice. Nothing Angel said seemed to stop her from trying to hook them up.

"I'm not asking Trey Jones out to the party, so let's stop talking about it."

Sharice huffed dramatically. "You sound just like Marcus. Every time I ask him about getting Trey with you, he gets all mad and tells me to drop it. So, you don't even think about Trey? How can you not be interested in him at all?"

A familiar nervous twinge fluttered in Angel's stomach. She rolled over on her bed and stared up at the tea-colored stain on her ceiling. It had been there since she and her family had moved in three years ago. The first time she saw it, Angel thought the stain looked like a bird in flight. Sometimes, like now, it almost seemed sad, like a lonely creature trapped in her room.

"It's not that I don't want to. It's just . . ." Angel paused to find a response that would satisfy Sharice. "It's just that my mom says I can't see boys until high school."

“Your *mom?*” Sharice grumbled. “Why does she even need to know? Please, if my mom knew everything I did, I would never be allowed out.”

“You’re right about that,” Angel laughed. “You’d be staying home with me.”

“It’s true! That’s why you should just go. Find an excuse or whatever. Just don’t tell her.”

“I’m not doing that. She’d kill me if she found out,” Angel lied.

Only weeks ago, Mom had asked her if there were any boys she liked at school.

“*They’re all so weird,*” Angel had said. It was a vague, meaningless answer that had stopped Mom’s questions. Angel had used the tactic many times since moving from Virginia to California with her little sister and parents. Fake answers, Angel discovered, were easier than admitting the truth—that she had trouble making friends and felt out of place most days.

Sharice was Angel’s closest friend in Lincoln Middle School, but lately Angel felt as if Sharice was changing, growing away from her somehow.

“But high school is practically here!” Sharice’s voice crackled through the phone again, breaking her thoughts. “We’ve only got a few days of eighth grade

left. I mean, your mom is gonna let you go out with boys over the summer, right?”

Again Angel paused. Sharice didn't wait for a response.

“Oh girl, you gotta talk to her. Now! Tell her *everyone's* gonna be at the graduation party. It's not like you'll be alone with Trey or anything. Tell her that *all* the girls you know are already hanging with boys. Tell her you *have* to go to this party with a boy, okay?”

“Okay,” Angel said without any enthusiasm. “I'll try. But don't get your hopes up.”

“That is just sad,” Sharice said with a dramatic sigh. “We're gonna have to talk more about all this. I gotta go now, though. I just got a text from Marcus and I gotta see what's up with him before Mom gets home and starts bugging about me being on my phone too much. Later, girl,” Sharice said and hung up.

Angel sat up on her bed and flipped through the stack of fashion magazines Sharice had made her borrow last month. “*You really should look at these,*” she had said when she left them. Angel stopped on an article in an old edition of *Youth Swag* called “Perfect Teen Style.” It was full of pictures of girls her age and a

few years older.

They all look so happy, like they don't have a worry in the world, Angel thought as she stared at the broad smiles, flawless hair, and curvy shapes. In one picture, several girls were laughing as if they had just heard the funniest joke on earth. A beautiful dark-skinned girl with bright lipstick and huge earrings gripped her stomach as if the laughter almost hurt.

Angel couldn't remember the last time she had laughed that hard. Maybe a year ago? She and Sharice had gone to the movies, and Sharice had drunk a large soda so quickly it made her burp loudly right when the movie was totally quiet. People in front of them turned around, and Angel began to giggle. Then Sharice accidentally belched again, and both girls burst into such loud laughter that they had to run out to the lobby. It took them nearly ten minutes to calm down and tiptoe back to their seats.

That was before Sharice changed. Now all she ever talked about was clothes, boys, and parties. Whenever Angel suggested doing some of the things they used to do, like riding bikes to East Park or making up recipes for pizzas (once they created a truly horrible pickle

and pineapple one), Sharice would roll her eyes. Since the start of eighth grade, she frowned upon anything that didn't seem "grown up." Riding bikes was for children. Giggling at burps was out of the question. Instead, Sharice had started forcing style and fashion magazines on Angel and making blunt comments about her looks.

"Girl, you have got to do something about that hair. In case you didn't know, it's sticking straight out in back like a shelf or something," Sharice had said this morning when they rushed by each other in the hallway after first period.

Angel closed the magazine and reached back self-consciously to feel her hair. Was it still messy? She got up and stared at herself in the mirror next to her dresser. A thin girl with cinnamon skin and large brown eyes rimmed by oversized glasses peered back at her. Angel tilted her head and eyed herself critically. She thought her nose was too flat, her shoulders too narrow. Her legs too lanky, and her arms too skinny. Angel pushed her hair behind one ear so that she could see the small gold earrings her father had given her the last time he visited. He had told her that

she was getting prettier every single day, but Angel doubted it. She forced a weak smile at her reflection and then shook her head.

“I’ll never be like those girls in the magazines,” she said quietly. “I’m not like them. Not at all.”

Angel sat back down on her bed and pushed the magazine aside. She reached under her mattress and pulled out a tattered notebook with the words “English Class” written on the front. It was a disguise Angel had invented so no one would ever open it. In reality, the notebook was her journal, the one place where she confessed her deepest thoughts, dreams, fears, and hopes. She glanced down at her first entry from the week they arrived in California:

Our first dinner here: hamburgers, which is something Mom usually knows how to cook. But these ones tasted like old cardboard. Yuck! I hope dinners here won't always taste this bad.

As dull as the early entries were, writing them had made Angel feel better after the move. Her journal gradually

became like a trusted friend, a place where she could talk about anything and everything. Each time she wrote, she felt a rush of excitement, as if she were sharing a secret. Lately, her secrets had grown more complicated.

Angel opened to a new page and jotted down the date: June 13. She glanced up at the trapped bird on the ceiling and began to write.

I'll admit it. There IS someone in our class that I would love to go to the party with, but can you imagine? THAT could never happen. Could it? Sharice would freak out. So would everyone else, I'm pretty sure. What would happen if I asked

“Angel?”

There was a tap on Angel's door and Dionne, her seven-year-old sister, opened it. She was holding onto Ellie, her old stuffed elephant, and sniffing a little. She frowned at Angel and stood in the doorway looking gloomy.

“What is it, Di?” Angel said, giving her a smile. Her little sister was Angel's favorite person, even when she was grumpy.

“I’m hungry, and there’s nothing happening in the kitchen *at all*,” Dionne moaned. “I asked Mom, but she told me to leave her alone.”

Angel looked at the clock by her bed. 6:45.

Not again, she thought to herself. Angel tucked her notebook under her pillow and walked over to Dionne.

“Well, let’s go make something happen in the kitchen,” she said, putting her arm around her sister’s small shoulders. “How about if we make some pancakes in the shape of hearts?”

“Mmm, breakfast for dinner!” Dionne cheered. Her frown instantly turned into a broad grin that revealed a missing front tooth. Dionne had waited for the Tooth Fairy for two days when it fell out at the babysitter’s last week. Mom kept forgetting, so Angel finally snuck into Dionne’s room and hid a dollar under her pillow.

“*I knew she’d come!*” Dionne had cheered the next day. It was great to see her sister’s excitement, but it wasn’t enough to erase Angel’s growing worries about Mom.

Angel sent Dionne into the kitchen to grab some bowls. As they passed the

living room, Angel saw her mother sitting on the sofa in a haze of cigarette smoke. It was the fourth time this week that Mom spent the evening chain-smoking in front of the TV.

“Are you hungry, Mom?” Angel asked carefully. The first time she found Mom like this and asked her, Mom had blown up and yelled at her to leave her alone.

“No. There’s leftovers in the fridge, I think,” Mom answered, her face worn and expressionless, her eyes glazed.

Angel sat down next to her, unsure what to do. Up until a couple of weeks ago, Mom had always been strict about keeping the apartment neat. She had insisted on sitting down to a home-cooked dinner at 6:30 on weeknights. She used to yell if Angel left a dirty sock on the floor or wandered in late. Now, dishes were piled in the kitchen, and ashes covered the dusty table in front of the television. The only leftovers in the refrigerator were a jug of week-old milk and some dry, shriveled pizza from one of the nights Mom hadn’t felt like getting up off the couch.

“Are you . . . sick?” Angel asked gently. “I can get you an aspirin or something?”

Mom fanned the air and coughed. “No.

Just low on energy. I think I'll be better in the morning." She stared blankly at the TV, where a celebrity chef yelled at a contestant who had undercooked some chicken.

Angel sighed. She doubted Mom was going to be better any time soon. When Dad had first left them four months earlier, Mom was like this for a few days, but then she snapped out of it. She went to her job at Essentials Salon as always. She wore her bright dresses and fixed her hair perfectly. Except for a day or two, dinner was always on the table at the same time.

Then, two weeks ago, Mom ran into Dad and his new girlfriend at the grocery store near their apartment. Angel had been there with Dionne flipping through magazines while Mom had run off to the produce section. That's when Angel heard her father's unmistakable nervous laugh. Dionne heard it too.

"Is that Daddy?" she had asked, dropping a sticker book and looking up at Angel with wide eyes.

Angel knew Dionne struggled with the idea of her parents splitting up. It took her three months before she stopped asking if Dad was going to

come back home from his trip.

"I think so," Angel had said.

Dionne had raced down the aisle toward the sound of Dad's voice. When she and Angel reached him, Dad was holding a bag of chips and a jar of salsa. He looked as if he had just swallowed something rotten. Standing next to him was a beautiful young woman with smooth brown skin who reminded Angel of the perfect girls in Sharice's magazines.

Dionne stopped and gawked at the woman, who had her hand on Dad's back.

"Nice to meet you," Mom had said, her voice strained and hollow sounding. Mom's eyes had focused more on the floor than at the pretty young woman.

"And . . . and these are my girls," Dad said with another burst of nervous laughter. *"Angel, Dionne, this is my . . . my . . . friend, Anita."*

Angel mumbled a vague hello. She didn't like seeing this strange new woman touching her father in such a familiar way. She hated thinking about what was really going on. Dionne huddled close to her, as if it were raining and Angel was an umbrella.

"Well, we're, ah, running late for a party, so . . ." Dad had said as he

scratched his head and looked away.
"Nice seeing y'all."

Anita smiled and waved goodbye by wagging all the fingers on her right hand. Then she winked at Angel as though she knew a secret. It made Angel feel kind of sick.

"Good Lord," Mom said when Dad and Anita disappeared. She grinned an odd tight-lipped smile and went back to picking out apples, her movements shaky and rough. Later that evening, Mom had laughed a little too loudly at dinner when Dionne asked if the pretty woman with Daddy was a movie star.

"Not in any movie I want to see," Mom had said.

Later that night, Angel thought she heard her mother crying. The next day, Mom overslept and didn't seem to care that her skirt was wrinkled or that her mascara was smudged. Then the long evenings of smoking and staring at the TV started. Angel even found empty wine bottles on the counter a few times. Before that Saturday, she had never known her mother to drink. Now she wondered when it would stop.

Angel took a deep breath and gently brushed ashes off her mother's lap.

Mom pushed her hand away.

“Stop fussing over me, Angel. I’m fine!” she huffed. “Go help your sister.”

I’m trying, Mom, Angel thought to herself as she left her mother and hurried into the kitchen to cook dinner.

I’m trying.