

Chapter 1

Cindy Gibson tripped over a stack of magazines in the middle of the living room, bumped her knee against the sharp corner of the coffee table, and dropped a can of cat food on the floor.

“Ouch, my leg!” she howled. “This place is a freakin’ mess!” Her two cats, Theo and Cleo, scurried beneath the table.

Lorraine, Cindy’s mother, came out of her bedroom carrying a small mirror. She peered at her reflection as she walked, carefully examining the lipstick she had just put on. “Stop whinin’, baby. Just straighten things up before you leave for school. I’m late for work.”

“I’m not going to school today,” Cindy declared. She waited to see if her mother would get angry and insist that she go. Cindy was a freshman at Bluford High, and even though it was only

October, she had already missed several days of school.

“You better go to school, baby,” her mother said, touching up her eye make-up. “If you drop out at your age, you’ll end up like me, in your thirties waitin’ tables at some grease pit for next to nothing. This ain’t the kinda life you wanna have, girl. Believe me on that. By the way, if Raffle calls, tell him I’m off work at five tonight. Bye, baby.” Cindy heard a thud as her mother closed the front door of their small apartment.

Theo, a jet-black cat, crept warily from under the table, followed by Cleo, who was gray and white. Dust and crumbs from under the table stuck delicately to each cat’s coat.

Cindy brushed the cats’ fur, cleaned up the spilled food, and walked out to the kitchen. Theo and Cleo followed quickly behind her. “Mom doesn’t really care if I go to school,” Cindy pouted, grabbing a fresh can of cat food. “All she cares about is Raffle and whether or not she’s put the right gunk on her face, right, Theo?” The cat blinked and rubbed its furry face against her leg.

Theo and Cleo were Cindy’s best friends. She told them everything. They

were there for her whenever she was lonely or needed someone to talk to. It was more than she could say for Mom, Cindy thought.

“I ain’t goin’ anywhere today, Cleo. I’m stayin’ right here and watchin’ trashy talk shows all day. I don’t care what Mom says,” Cindy said, spooning chunks of cat food into Theo’s and Cleo’s plastic bowls.

Just then the doorbell rang. “Who is it?” Cindy cried, walking towards the door.

“It’s me. Open up,” a familiar voice said.

Cindy opened the door to find Jamee Wills, another Bluford freshman, staring at her.

“Cindy!” Jamee shouted. “Girl, what’re you doing in pajamas? It’s time to go to school.”

“I’m not going to school,” Cindy said firmly. “Why don’t you cut too? We can watch TV, and I got popcorn we can stick in the microwave. And there’s pizza in the freezer, too. Today on Paula Poole’s show—”

“Cindy! Girl, get it together!” Jamee said, stepping into the apartment. “You need to throw on some clothes and come to school. Keep this up, you gonna be so

far behind that you can't do nothin' but fail."

"You don't understand—" Cindy replied, looking down at the worn flip-flops on her feet.

"I understand all right. I understand you gotta get back on track," Jamee replied. "Remember in middle school, Mr. Schuman said you were such a good artist you could be a famous cartoonist for Disney or something? How you gonna be famous if you don't go to school?"

Cindy shrugged. "I can't hang around school all day, Jamee. I get bored. Who cares anyway? My mom wouldn't mind if I quit school. We all just wasting our time in school anyway. Ain't none of us goin' anywhere."

"Cindy, you're crazy," Jamee said, tugging on Cindy's arm. "My sister, Darcy, she's already planning to go to college, and so is her friend Tarah. I'm gonna do the same thing, and you can do it too. But first you gotta get up, change them clothes and get to school. Now come on!"

"Just leave me alone," Cindy insisted.

"Cindy, please come to school."

"Jamee, cut school with me today," Cindy moaned. "If you don't wanna

watch TV, I got some CD's we could play and—”

“I'm outta here,” Jamee snapped. “I'm not gonna sit here and watch you throw your life away!” Jamee stormed towards the doorway. “When you want to do something with yourself besides sit here watching TV, call me,” she said, walking out the door and slamming it behind her. The loud crash of the door was followed by a heavy silence.

Cindy moved to the window and watched Jamee shift her backpack and join the stream of kids heading for Bluford. Part of her wanted to join the crowd and head to school, but another part of her did not want to move. Unlike Jamee and her classmates, Cindy felt foreign and out of place at school. Her teachers often said she was “quiet” and “shy,” but Cindy knew she was just different.

Turning from the window, Cindy grabbed the magazines on the living room floor and stacked them neatly on the coffee table. Then she picked up a pile of dirty clothes she had left sitting on the living room chair for weeks.

“Yuck, these stink!” Cindy groaned. It had been a while since she had

washed her laundry. Sometimes she just picked an outfit from the dirty clothes pile to wear to school. As long as things were not too dirty or wrinkled, she would still wear them. It had not always been this way. In fact, Cindy did have a few new clothes that she got for the start of her freshman year. But as weeks passed and her mother spent less and less time at home, laundry, like school, seemed less important.

Glancing around the cluttered living room, Cindy focused on the small picture of her mother that sat next to the TV. Raffie, her mother's boyfriend, was also in the picture, his arm resting on her shoulder like a heavy snake. Only a few months old, the picture captured her mother's flawless milk-chocolate skin and her radiant smile. *Mom is beautiful, Cindy thought, and I look nothing like her.* Where her mother was tall, curvy, and attractive, Cindy was long and skinny. But worse than her lanky shape was her nose. To Cindy, it seemed to spread too far across the middle of her face, making her feel that her head was just a platform on which her nose rested.

Friends of her mother had always been kind, but even they noticed how

different Cindy was. *"Oh, I can't see a resemblance,"* they would politely begin. *"You must take after your father."* Cindy knew exactly what they were trying to say, but she appreciated their attempt to spare her feelings.

The only person who did not seem concerned with Cindy's feelings was Raffie. *"Are you sure she's your momma?"* he asked Cindy when he began dating her mother last year. When Cindy first met him, he was sitting at the kitchen table, gold chains jangling around his neck, gold earrings glittering from his earlobes, and a smirk on his face.

"You ain't nothin' like your momma," he had said. *"She is what a man would call one hot lady."* Since then, Cindy did her best to ignore Raffie, but it was not easy. Often he said things that made her feel even worse about her looks, but he always did it out of Mom's earshot, calling Cindy "Ugly Mugly" and flaring his nostrils to taunt her. Whenever Cindy asked him to stop, he would laugh in her face. Once, he even flapped his arms in a mock imitation of her long, awkward limbs.

In August, Cindy's mother announced that she and Raffie were "serious," and since then, she spent most of

her free time with him. In the rare moments Mom was home, all she could talk about was Raffie. Cindy cringed each time she heard his name. It seemed to her that Raffie was gradually taking over her mother's life. Worse, it appeared as if that was exactly what Mom wanted.

Alone in the apartment, Cindy sat in the recliner in front of the TV and turned it on with the remote control. She had to push hard to make the recliner go back into a comfortable position. The old chair did not work as well as it used to, and Mom said she did not make enough money at her waitressing job to buy a new one.

Cindy had believed her until she noticed her mother frequently buying herself new outfits to wear for Raffie. It seemed that once a week Mom came home carrying shopping bags from expensive department stores. When Cindy asked her about it, Mom explained that Raffie had been giving her money so she could buy nice clothes, but this only made Cindy more upset. It was as if Raffie was buying her mother away from her, and there was nothing Cindy could do to stop it.

Cindy began flipping through the channels when she heard the doorbell

ring. Annoyed, she turned toward the door and called out, "Yeah? Who is it?"

"Mrs. Davis, honey," came a familiar voice. Rose Davis lived at the other end of the hall. She was raising her fifteen-year-old grandson, Harold. Once, in the basement laundry room, Cindy overheard Mrs. Davis tell a neighbor that Harold's mother had died in childbirth, and his father never was in the picture.

Cindy got up and opened the door. "Hi, Mrs. Davis."

"Child, I heard the TV goin', so I figured you were home. I was worried about you. Ain't you supposed to be in school?" Mrs. Davis asked.

"Uh . . . I got cramps," Cindy lied, rubbing her hand on her stomach.

"Poor thing! I make tea that's real soothin' for that. I'll bring you some if you like," Mrs. Davis offered.

"No, thank you. I just took something. I'll feel better soon," Cindy said, smiling.

Rose Davis stared at her for a moment. Cindy braced herself for criticism about not being in school. But then the old woman began to smile. "Child, you got the prettiest eyes I ever did see," she said.

“Me?” Cindy said, stunned. “You must be thinkin’ of my mom. She’s got real pretty eyes with long lashes, but my eyes are—”

“I never noticed before that you got the prettiest hazel-brown eyes, Cindy,” Mrs. Davis added. “Folks say the eyes are windows to the soul. They believe you can look someone right in the eye and tell what kind of person they are.”

“Some boy in school says I have freak eyes,” Cindy said. “Now, him and all his friends call me that whenever they see me.”

Mrs. Davis grabbed hold of Cindy’s shoulders and looked into her face. “Child, your eyes are beautiful, and don’t you forget that. Pay no mind to what a boy says ’bout you. My grandson Harold tells me that some of them kids at your school can be downright nasty sometimes. It’s like I tell him—when they start talkin’ that nonsense, you just stop listenin’. Let ’em call you names. But it’s you who’s got the prettiest eyes around, not them. Remember that.”

As she spoke, Mrs. Davis gently placed her hand on Cindy’s cheek. “Some people need to see their own beauty before they can believe they got

it," she said, smiling. Mrs. Davis waved goodbye and headed down the long hallway.

Cindy hurried to the bathroom mirror and stared into it. She stood for a long time, moving her face in close for a better look. Her mother had a mirror that magnified everything, and Cindy looked in that too. Her large hazel eyes stared back at her. *Did Mrs. Davis mean what she said, or was she being nice?* Cindy wondered.

Leaving the TV on, Cindy jumped in the shower and washed her hair. Then she gathered her dirty clothes, took them downstairs and put them in the washing machine. When the clothes were dry, she brought them back upstairs, folded them neatly and put them into her drawers. It was the first time she had done her laundry in weeks.

After putting the clothes away, Cindy found a pair of white jeans and two ribbed tank tops, one blue and the other green and yellow. *Maybe I'll go to school tomorrow wearing one of these tank tops,* she thought. Probably not, but if she felt like it in the morning, she might go. Mom would write a note explaining that she had been sick. Mom never seemed to

care what excuses Cindy used to skip school. Cindy practically dictated them, always remembering to vary the made-up ailments. She used headaches until a nosy teacher started pushing her to see a doctor. Then she added cramps and fevers to her list of illnesses.

As Cindy thought about returning to school, she again recalled what Mrs. Davis said about her having “the prettiest eyes.” She grabbed her mother’s magnifying mirror and sat on the recliner looking into it. Cindy tried hard to see what Mrs. Davis saw.

“Maybe my eyes *are* pretty,” Cindy said into the mirror.

On Paula Poole’s show, two sisters who were married to the same man were screaming at each other. The show kept bleeping out the bad words flying between them, and when they started pulling each other’s hair, the audience went wild. Everybody was laughing and cheering.

But Cindy did not pay much attention to the show. She kept staring in the mirror, trying out different expressions to see how they changed the look of her eyes. Maybe she wasn’t that bad looking, she thought. With her hair clean and

brushed, she didn't think she looked as ugly as Raffie said. And she had clearer skin than most of the other kids at school.

Suddenly the phone rang. Cindy put the mirror down and answered it.

"Hello," she said.

"Yo—who's this?" a familiar deep-throated voice replied.

"It's me," Cindy answered.

"Oh, Ugly Mugly," Raffie Whitaker said. "How come you home? You get suspended for messin' up at school again?"

"I never been suspended," Cindy corrected him sharply. "And stop calling me that."

Raffie laughed. He always chuckled when he upset Cindy. She could just imagine him on the other end of the line—smiling in satisfaction at how he managed to insult her. "C'mon, Ugly Mugly. Where's your momma?" he asked, still laughing.

"I told you to stop calling me that," Cindy demanded. She wished she could reach into the telephone and wrap the cord around his neck.

"Girl, you so ugly," Raffie went on, in between bursts of cackling laughter,

“when the doctor delivered you, he was wearin’ a blindfold.”

Cindy slammed down the phone. In about a second it rang again. She turned up the TV volume to drown out the ringing. One of the sisters on the Paula Poole show had a nail file, and she looked as if she was about to attack the other one with it. Maybe it was all an act, but the hate in the girl’s face seemed real. It was the same hatred Cindy felt for Raffie.

Cindy fantasized about being on the show with Raffie Whitaker. She imagined herself grabbing the gold chains he hung around his neck and pulling them so tight his eyes bulged out.

The phone kept ringing. “I ain’t gonna answer you. You can’t make me.” Cindy smiled because for once she had power. Raffie Whitaker was fuming somewhere, and he could not do a thing about it.

Ignoring the phone’s periodic ringing, Cindy picked up the mirror again and repeated the words that Mrs. Davis had said. “Pretty eyes . . . pretty hazel eyes.”

Maybe Mrs. Davis was not the only one who thought she was special. Maybe someone else would feel that way about her too one day.