Always ANGEL

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CHAPTER ONE

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"Angel! I thought you were expelled!"

Tiana's reaction to seeing me is as dramatic as her coily brown curls bouncing up and down. Other than the occasional smirk across the hall during detention, we don't know each other, but that doesn't stop her from barging past people in the corridor to catch up with me.

"Keep moving, Year Eight!" a teacher shouts, waving their arms around like an air traffic controller trying to direct everyone to the first lesson of the day. It takes me a moment to realize that I'm one of the people being told to stop blocking the corridor. It feels strange to be reminded that I'm now in Year Eight.

Last time I was here I was halfway through Year Seven. Instead of heading to my lesson, I stormed out of the school gates, yelling at Mr Simpson, my head of year, that I was

leaving and never coming back. I thought he'd be happy. Teachers were always telling me that they'd had enough of my behaviour. Well, they didn't know that I'd had enough too.

I had my first detention during the first week of school. That's a record for a Year Seven. Turns out I'm good at breaking school records: the bad ones, at least. I arrived late and got stopped in the corridor for not having the correct uniform on. It was three weeks since I'd been taken into foster care for the first time and Lauren, my social worker, had ordered a replacement for the blazer still hanging in my wardrobe back at home. It hadn't arrived in time, so she phoned school to let them know and told me that I didn't need to worry about it. Nobody told the teacher who stopped me in the corridor to give me a detention slip.

I told the teacher that I didn't care. That was my answer for every detention and every time I got sent out of a lesson. I thought that if I pretended nothing mattered, then maybe it wouldn't hurt as much.

That was also the reason I had a smile on my face every time I got yelled at. It wasn't because I found it funny. It was to hide how much it stung. I saved my crying for later. When it was just me alone in the corridor or when I made the lonely walk up to the isolation room. That's when my tears would flow.

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Mr Simpson used to joke that the isolation room should have a revolving door just for me. I was always going in and out. Once my science teacher sent me within the first five minutes of the lesson. It was added to my ever-growing list of behaviour records.

Then, after Christmas last year, I started making my way straight to isolation every morning. I thought it made sense because it would be where I would end up anyway.

Despite having to trudge to the far end of the muddy field to sit in a portable cabin with only one rickety heater, there were no shouty teachers to deal with and I preferred it to being in class.

I learned how to play my teachers. I asked to stay in the isolation room for form time, explaining that it would give me a calm start to the day. Then I asked for an extra five minutes. Those five minutes turned into missing all of period one. I stayed out of trouble by being as quiet as a mouse and leaving other students to kick up a fuss. I started to go unnoticed. Teachers must have enjoyed the break from me, because I was soon getting away with staying all day. Nobody questioned why I wasn't in lessons.

Until Mr Simpson got involved. He didn't like the arrangement I had made for myself, and became concerned that I was spending all my time in a room meant for

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punishment. Now I'm no longer allowed to be there.

I'm the first student ever to be banned from the isolation room. It's another record.

The trouble is, the more time I spent out of lessons the harder I found it to go back. My form group was always a few lessons in front of me and I would do absolutely everything to hide the fact that I was struggling to catch up.

I made my pen leak so I had a reason to leave and wash my hands. I complained the room was too hot so I could get up and slowly open all of the windows. I did anything to waste time. It didn't take long until I was at the front of every seating plan, allowing my teachers to be close enough to notice when I was about to bolt from my chair. So I became the class clown, telling jokes and answering back. I spent most of my time being sent out to the corridor. It was supposed to be a punishment, but my teachers didn't know that's what I wanted. As soon as the classroom door shut behind me, I could take a deep breath. I could drop the performance I was putting on. But it's hard keeping up an act, and being disruptive quickly became exhausting.

I needed a new plan to escape lessons. Instead of getting into trouble, I asked to go to student services.

I told my teachers that I had toothache. Then I had a stomach ache, then a headache – anything to sit on the red

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plastic chairs reserved for poorly students. Mr Simpson caught on to my new plan and instructed student services to direct me back to class whenever I turned up.

That's when I stopped going to school altogether.

"School avoidance" is what Mr Simpson called my poor attendance, and he arranged a special meeting. I'm used to meetings about me. I'm usually invited in when all the good biscuits are gone and everybody's tea is cold. I knew this one was serious because not only were my foster carers, Helen and Dennis, there, but my social worker and Mrs Patel, the safeguarding officer, too. I asked if Mum was invited, but my social worker only replied that she would be there if she could.

After months of refusing to go into school, they all wanted me back. I couldn't believe it. When I'm there, I'm used to being dismissed. Whether I'm asked to leave class, shooed away from student services or sent to Mr Simpson, I'm always somebody else's problem. Yet here they were, practically begging me to come back. I couldn't hide my smile as the meeting went on. It was nice to know I was wanted for a change.

That's why I'm back to school two months into Year Eight. It's my chance to give secondary school another go. It's the Monday after October half term and it's been six

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months since I've stepped foot inside a classroom. I told Mr Simpson I wasn't nervous but that doesn't stop butterflies doing a jittery jig in the pit of my stomach as I head towards my first lesson.

"Your form group has Spanish," Tiana says, stopping as I walk past the stairs to the languages corridor to continue to English.

"I'm not going back to my old form," I reply, the hair on my arms feeling prickly as I reach for my timetable.

Mr Simpson decided a fresh start meant moving form groups. I was happy about this at first. I always got into arguments with my old classmates after my chaos led to everyone being kept behind at break times.

The trouble with leaving one form group is joining another. Tiana grabs my timetable from my shaky hands and gasps.

"You're in my form now!" Her reddish-brown eyes dance as she examines my timetable to confirm that I'm the newest member of 8JDE.

Mr Simpson tried to give me a pep talk in his office this morning, but his speech about second chances only made me feel even more scared than I already do.

As I get closer to my lesson I try my hardest to remember what he told me.

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Treat this as your fresh start.

I whisper his words as I follow Tiana through the classroom doors.

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