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Opening extract from

Immortal City

Written by

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IMMORTAL CITY

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To my parents, who taught me to believe

CHAPTER 1



At three a.m., the Pacific Coast Highway was nothing more than a grey ribbon winding through the ocean fog. Despite being more than a little buzzed, Brad downshifted, smashed the gas pedal, and sent his BMW M5 surging forward. His iPod had shuffled to "California Love", by 2Pac. He turned it up.

"*California! Knows how to party!*" Brad sang out. Except when he sang it, California came out "*Caaafna*", and party sounded more like "*parry*". It didn't matter; in his head he was performing for a sellout crowd at the Staples Centre, and they loved him. In the rear-view mirror the lights of Santa Monica twinkled. The Pacific Wheel on the pier glowed like a neon disc reflecting on the black mirror of the sea. Up ahead, the rocky shores of Malibu lay dark and silent. The music roared and Brad depressed the gas pedal almost involuntarily. He couldn't help himself. Gladstone's and Sunset Boulevard streaked by as the world accelerated into a violent blur.

He took each turn a little faster than the last, pushing the limits of the machine. He felt a surge of adrenaline as the headlights suddenly illuminated the churning Pacific just beyond the rocks. He stomped hard on the brake and yanked the wheel over, pointing the BMW back towards the curve he had nearly missed. He let out an exhilarated breath. *This would make such a cool music video,* Brad

thought. *Dangerous and exciting.* Up ahead he saw another sharp turn in the road. This time, he would be ready. He pumped the brake, threw the wheel over, and punched the gas pedal hard. The car growled in protest but managed to stay on four wheels. Brad let out his best rock star scream as he half-skidded, half-flew around the turn.

Right into the headlights of an oncoming car.

Brad tried to brake, but he had finally pushed the BMW too far. Anti-lock brakes grabbing and releasing, he was a missile rocketing towards the other vehicle, a pickup, at eighty miles an hour.

That's when it happened.

It occurred so fast Brad didn't even see it. But he certainly felt it.

It hurt like hell.

It was a hand. A hand grabbing him and pulling him out of the car. To the oncoming driver it must have looked like a magic trick. In one instant Brad was there, wide-eyed and terrified in the driver's seat, and in the next, gone.

Suddenly the pungent smell of sea air filled Brad's nose. Salt-spray flicked across his neck. He realized he was standing on the side of the road, watching a fantastic collision unfold. His BMW slid across the centre line and collided head-on with the pickup. The bed of the pickup leapt up over the cab and sent the truck toppling end-over-end, over the retaining rail and down the rocky slope. Safety glass sprayed across the rocks in glittering crumbs. Then the truck hit the water, upside down, with a sickening smack. Brad's BMW ricocheted off the cliff wall and spun across the road, breaking through the retaining wall on the opposite end and

soaring into the air. It entered the water nose first, gracefully, like a diver. The spectacle was all so violent it was almost beautiful. Then, sputtering and steaming, both vehicles began their slow descent under the icy waves.

Brad shivered against the breeze. He was so staggered by what he had just seen that he didn't immediately notice the figure standing next to him. Turning, he at first saw only a pair of wings silhouetted against the full moon. Six feet in both directions and razor sharp, the broad appendages rose and fell with the heave of a great breath. The figure stepped forward, and Brad recognized his Guardian Angel.

"Oh my God, it's you," Brad said, trying his best to sound sober.

The Angel smiled but said nothing.

Brad became aware of something warm and wet dripping down his left arm, forming small, trickling droplets at the end of his fingertips. He lifted his fingers to his mouth and tasted. It was blood.

"I'm bleeding," he said.

The Angel's eyes twinkled in the moonlight. When he spoke, his tone was even and smooth. "I had to pull you out through the window," he said. "It was the only way."

Brad remembered it now, as if recalling a nightmare. He remembered the white-hot pain of travelling through the glass window, the tiny slivers lodging in his face, and the way the jagged edges had felt as they sliced through the living skin. He shuddered.

"The cuts on your arm and shoulder are superficial and will heal," the Angel continued. "But your hip is fractured. It's very

common in this type of save. I've taken the liberty of calling an ambulance to take you to the hospital. It should be arriving momentarily."

Brad took a cautious step forward, then cried out as his right hip erupted in pain. He stepped back and quickly shifted his weight. He blew out a ragged sigh.

The Angel hadn't moved.

"Oh, right," Brad said, embarrassed. He fumbled for his wallet in his trouser pocket. "Sorry, this is my first time, you know," he mumbled as he flipped the wallet open and struggled to pull a Platinum American Express card from its sleeve. His fingers were already numb from the cold.

"There's no need," the Angel said, dismissing the effort with a wave of his hand. "The funds have already been transferred out of your account."

"Oh," Brad said. He returned the billfold to his trouser pocket. "How much . . . was this?"

"One hundred thousand dollars, in addition to your monthly rate."

Brad's gaze drifted to where the cars had landed in the water. His M5 was already submerged, but the back end of the pickup still protruded from the surf, bobbing in the swells like a corpse.

"What about him?" Brad asked.

"Him?" the Angel asked.

"Yeah," Brad said, and pointed to the tailgate as it slipped under the waves. "Him."

The Angel looked at the sinking pickup as if seeing it for the first time.

"He didn't have coverage," he said.

Brad nodded numbly.

The headlights of an approaching ambulance swept over the scene.

"Good night, Brad," the Angel said, and smiled.

"Good— " Brad began to reply, but trailed off as he realized the Guardian was already gone. Alone now, standing in the cold, Brad began to shake uncontrollably. The realization had only just hit him. The realization that he should be dead.

CHAPTER 2



Maddy woke up to the drone of her alarm clock. It was early, the dawn dim and grey outside her window. She had been dreaming she was lounging on the shores of some faraway tropical beach, the ocean glittering, diamond-like, as it reached to the horizon. Maddy wanted to stay in the dream, still feel the warm sand under her feet, nothing to do but simply enjoy the sun on her face, no one to be but *herself*. But the sound of the alarm was unrelenting, and her eyes began to open, unwillingly.

Lifting her head, she looked out of the window. There it was, like a ghost in the misty half-light – the Angel City sign. It loomed huge and silent on the hill, perfectly framed by Maddy's bedroom window. She sighed. The final remnants of the dream faded to nothing, replaced by the reality that she was still living in Los Angeles. Still stuck in the Immortal City.

She swung her legs out of bed and tried to shake the remainder of the sleep away. Kids at school complained about first period starting at eight a.m., but for Maddy, the day started at five. Every day. She groped for a pair of jeans off the floor and pulled a striped long-sleeved tee from her closet and changed into them. Nothing fancy, and that's the way Maddy liked it – simple and comfortable. She didn't have the time – or the money, for that matter – for much else. She grabbed her favourite grey lightweight hoodie before

leaving the room. Then she brushed her teeth and ran a comb through her hair before heading quickly down the stairs.

The light outside was fuller now, and she could tell by the way it illuminated the haze that her uncle, Kevin, would already be plating the first orders. This was their routine and had been since Maddy's freshman year. He would wake before Maddy and open the restaurant, taking the first orders so she could get a few more precious minutes of sleep. Then he would put on his apron and take up his position in the back as cook. It was Maddy's responsibility to bring the orders out and work the rest of the morning shift until she had to leave for school. Like most mornings, she would be the only waitress on duty. Maddy was used to it, though. And even though it could get annoying to spend most mornings working after late nights up doing schoolwork – especially in the winter, when it was totally dark through a lot of her shift – it still made her feel good to help Kevin, to be the one he really counted on. She knew he appreciated it.

Maddy grabbed her backpack off the living room couch, which was covered in laundry, and quickly scanned the room to see if she was forgetting anything. Knick-knacks and pictures lined the walls, hanging over the worn furniture and haphazard laundry-folding job Kevin had apparently started the night before and then stopped halfway through. The home was modest and could've stood a remodel in 1987, but it was all she had ever known – and, to be honest, all she'd ever really needed. Satisfied she wasn't leaving anything behind, Maddy dashed out of the door and down a narrow path that led from the front door through the sloping yard to the back door of Kevin's Diner.

When she was eleven, she had tried to get her uncle to change the restaurant's name to something more original, but Kevin was a bit of a traditionalist, and Kevin's Diner it remained. She went in through the back door, slipped into the tiny office, and changed into her waitress uniform, which she kept in the office so she could head straight to school at the end of the shift. The uniform couldn't be more traditional either: a simple pin-striped dress and white apron. The waitresses were *theoretically* supposed to wear heels with the outfit, but most of the time Maddy managed to sneak her black Chucks past her uncle, who always seemed to look the other way.

Maddy could already smell the sharp aroma of fresh brewed coffee, sizzling bacon, and freshly poured pancakes as she emerged from the back and walked down the narrow hallway towards the kitchen. Just as she expected, Kevin was already hard at work behind the counter, plating the first three orders of the day. Maddy shoved a notepad and pen into the pocket of her dress and pulled her hair into a ponytail.

"Morning, Mads," Kevin said, slapping butter on some wholemeal toast. "These go out to four and seven." He indicated the plates. He was an average-looking man, if a little more weathered than most, but the lines of worry that criss-crossed his face were offset by a smile that always crackled with resilience and optimism.

"Cool," Maddy said, yawning and deftly stacking the plates up her outstretched arm – a seasoned pro at seventeen.

"And Mads?" Kevin added. "Get yourself some coffee. On the house." He winked. Maddy laughed sleepily, then, balancing

the plates on her arms, swung out of the kitchen and into the dining room.

The dining room was like the rest of the restaurant – old and unremarkable, with fluorescent lights flickering over a scuffed black-and-white linoleum floor. The diner was laid out like an L on its side. The long part was bordered by a counter and stools on one side and cracked beige vinyl booths on the other. The booths ran along the windows that looked out to the street. The short part of the L faced back towards the house and the hill, giving those booths, like Maddy's room, a near-perfect view of the famous Angel City sign. Maddy dropped off the orders to tables four and seven, then turned to head back for the water pitcher and coffee carafe to refill drinks.

"Excuse me, miss?" an overweight woman in one of the booths asked as Maddy passed. "Can you fix the TV?"

Maddy looked up at the ancient Magnavox propped in the corner. On the screen was nothing but rolling static, which tended to happen a lot. The woman's cheeks were flushed, and her face wore the expectant expression of a child. "Didn't you hear? There was a *save* last night in Malibu." She emphasized the word *save* as if it was the most exciting, most important thing in the world.

"Oh, really?" Maddy murmured noncommittally. She placed one knee on the woman's table and reached up, banging on the side of the set. After a moment the signal came in, and the diner filled with the sound of ANN – the Angel News Network. If it were up to Maddy, she'd rather watch anything else, but the customers always insisted on hearing the latest news about the Angels, and so ANN it was.

"*A terrible accident but a dramatic save in a two-car collision in Malibu last night – and the Guardian had one of the NAS's trial Angelcams!*" announced the news anchor, her face obscured by smears of dust on the Magnavox. "*We'll have first-person, thrilling footage of the save and an exclusive interview with Archangel Mark Godspeed coming up within the hour, right here on ANN.*"

At the word *Angelcams*, the woman in the booth sat up straight and watched the screen with wide, excited eyes as it previewed the tantalizing footage of a misty hairpin curve on the Pacific Coast Highway.

"Oh my gawd! Can you *imagine*?" she said, her eyes fixed on the screen. "Can you imagine having one of them Guardian Angels always watchin' over you, keeping you safe no matter what? And wakin' in in their big, strong arms, with everybody having seen it?" Her eyes remained on the TV. "One day *I'll* be saved."

But Maddy was already walking away. The truth was, she just didn't understand the big deal about Angels. Ever since they had revealed themselves to the world over one hundred years ago – the Awakening, as they called it – and turned their lifesaving abilities into a business, the Immortals seemed to be the only thing anyone cared about. Everyone, that was, except Maddy. It's true she lived in Los Angeles – the Angel capital of the world – but she had never been able to go along with the crowd around her and get caught up in the mystique of their fame, fortune and lavish lifestyles. She didn't buy clothes from their clothing lines or sample their Angel-themed perfumes, and she certainly didn't read about them in *Angels Weekly*. When you can't afford any of that stuff, it's just easier not to be sucked in, she had long since concluded.

The morning rush passed quickly, Maddy expertly wielding her pen and notepad to scratch down orders, dealing plate after plate of eggs, French toast and sausage to the steady breakfast crowd. Near the end of her shift, when Maddy went back to the kitchen, she found another steaming plate of food waiting for her on the counter. There was no ticket with it. She frowned and looked at her pad.

"Kevin? Who ordered this?" she asked, flipping through her tickets. Kevin looked at her over the counter and smiled, the skin crinkling like paper around his eyes.

"You did."

Maddy looked down at the plate again, her mouth flooding with water. Scrambled eggs with seared peppers and onions. It was her favourite dish at the diner.

They sat in one of the booths in the back, the customers having thinned enough that Kevin could hang up his apron for five minutes.

"Thanks again," Maddy said as she scooped another forkful of egg into her mouth. "You didn't have to cook for me."

Kevin shrugged as he glanced out of the window. He took a sip of coffee. "Sometimes I still can't believe you're a senior, and that you'll be graduating in the spring. You've always been my little Mads, but you're not little any more. My niece has grown up into a smart and beautiful young woman."

Maddy blushed and looked down, fiddling with her fork. She wondered why she could never stand to have anyone compliment her looks. She didn't think she was unattractive, but as a realist, she knew she was average. She had shoulder-length brown hair, brownish-green eyes, and a normal, if slender, body. The only make-up she had were some things that her best friend, Gwen,

had given her for her birthday, and she almost never used the stuff. Gwen also launched an exasperating campaign every six months or so to get her to dress "cuter", which Maddy always evaded – she didn't care about all that. She had to work the morning shift, get good grades and maybe, just maybe, get into college on a scholarship. No time for clothes and make-up – or boys.

But if she was honest, part of it was that if she even began to think about what would happen if she put on make-up and dressed "cuter" – about the attention she would get, or maybe worse, the attention she *wouldn't* get – her stomach flipped in anxiety. So she mostly just hid behind her grey hoodie and her iPod earbuds. It seemed easier that way.

"I want you to know I'm proud of you," Kevin went on, "and your parents would be proud of you too." Maddy paused, another bite of egg poised in front of her mouth. Kevin rarely mentioned her parents. They had both been killed in an accident when Maddy was a baby. Kevin was a kind man, and a good man, but if she was being honest with herself, she missed having parents. She missed their role in her life, and she missed *them*, even though she had no memories, no recollection to hold on to at all.

Kevin was still talking. "I know it hasn't always been easy in our little family. I know working at the diner isn't your favourite— "

"It's fine, Kevin," Maddy interrupted, feeling guilty.

"It's no dream job, I know. But I want you to know that I really appreciate your help." Maddy smiled at him over her cup. "And besides," he went on, brightening, "I think our luck is due to change this year. I really do. Just you watch, Maddy, this place is finally going to take off!"

Maddy's gaze drifted out of the back window, out once again to the view of the famous sign on the hill. Giant white letters, fifty feet high, spelled out the iconic words ANGEL CITY. To everyone else the sign was a symbol of glamour, an icon of the Angels' wealth and power. Maddy just couldn't bring herself to care. Housing was actually pretty cheap up on this side of town, and all the sign really meant was that she had to endure those annoying Angel Tours tourist buses coughing blue exhaust on her walks to and from school. People all over the world would kill for a chance to live in the middle of the action – in the glorious Immortal City – but as far as Maddy Montgomery was concerned, she couldn't wait to get out.

Suddenly Maddy realized her uncle was staring at her.

"I'm sorry?" Maddy asked.

"Our luck, Maddy," Kevin said, "I feel like it's finally going to change."

"Right. Me too," Maddy said, and tried her best to believe him.

The door jingled as more customers came in. It was starting to get busy again.

"I better get back to it," Kevin said. "But have a great day at school, OK?" Maddy nodded, and Kevin rose and left. After he had gone, her eyes fell once again on the view out of the window and the famous sign. Maybe her uncle was right. She was a senior now, and next year hopefully meant college. Maybe things *were* looking up for her.

Then, realizing she was about to be late for school, she ran to the back to change.

*

The walk to school took Maddy down Vine Street and through the heart of Angel City. She passed under the towering billboards of Angels selling jewellery, sunglasses, designer handbags and luxury cars. Half-naked Immortal bodies were the alluring backdrop for labels like Gucci, Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Christian Dior. Maddy only casually glanced up at them. She had never had fancy things, not that she was complaining. Most of her clothes were from Target or were second-hand, and she didn't own any jewellery, or even a proper handbag for that matter. She was also one of the only seniors without a car, and if you didn't drive in Angel City, you didn't exist.

Listening to her iPod shuffle, Maddy barely noticed as she turned on to Angel Boulevard and strode down the famous Walk of Angels. She unconsciously stepped over the names bronzed in the pavement, the names of the most famous Guardian Angels placed in stars to be forever celebrated. She passed the souvenir shops selling little plastic Angel statues, fake wings and T-shirts with slogans like SAVE ME! on them. She wove her way through the wide-eyed tourists looking around excitedly, hoping to catch even a glimpse of a flawless Immortal. Eyeing them, Maddy wondered if there was something wrong with her. Why couldn't she bring herself to care about what the rest of the world seemed to be so obsessed with? What were they seeing that she seemed to be missing?

Suddenly Maddy had to stop herself from crashing into a throng of excited tourists blocking the pavement. They had gathered around a shiny new star with no name on it – the star of a soon-to-be Guardian Angel. A couple of girls let out screams of delight as they posed for a picture next to it.

"What's going on?" Maddy asked.

"Don't you know?" a woman replied. "That's Jackson Godspeed's star! He's being Commissioned this week!"

This Angel, of course, Maddy had heard of – everyone had. He was the hottest, wealthiest, and most eligible young Angel in Angel City, or so she had been told. To Gwen and millions of other screaming fans, he wasn't just an Angel. He was a god. Tourists held their cell phones high, taking video of the star and chatting excitedly as Maddy squeezed through the crowd. *How can you get so worked up over some pavement?* she thought.

While waiting for the light to change at Highland Avenue, she didn't even glance up at the screens breathlessly reporting a "MIRACULOUS LATE-NIGHT SAVE IN TWO-CAR COLLISION IN MALIBU. WE'VE GOT AN EXCLUSIVE WITH THE PROTECTION – ANGEL CITY'S NEWEST CELEBRITY, BRAD LOFTIN!" After a moment she crossed the street, dodging a shiny new Mercedes that had no intention of slowing for her, and hurried the remaining three blocks to school.

Angel City High was not what you would think. It was not, as the name suggests, where the rich and famous Angels go to school. Years ago that might have been the case, but that was long before young Angels were pulled from the public school system and put in exclusive private schools. Despite the plaques on the wall recording the famous Angel alumni who had once been students there, the last Angel at Angel City High had graduated in 1969. Nowadays it was just another subpar public school.

After passing through the chain-link fences and metal detector,

Maddy walked under the faded HOME OF THE ANGELS sign and entered the crowded hallway. Like a well-worn routine, no sooner had she arrived than she was joined by Gwen, who was reading her BlackBerry. Gwen was wearing a jean miniskirt and revealing halter top she would probably be made to change out of by lunch.

"OMG," Gwen murmured as she scrolled through paparazzi photos, "Vivian Holycross looks so cute in those boots. And did you see the Malibu save? It's all anybody's talking about this morning."

"Of course," Maddy said ruefully, "Angels." Angels were pretty much the only thing that seemed to matter to Gwen at all. Every day she read the Angel blogs and tuned into Angel television to hear the latest and greatest about the Angels' perfect lives. The clothes they wore. The places they went. The fancy cars they drove and the amazing houses they lived in. Gwen had been known to obsess for weeks about a save if it had been one of her favourite Angels. She kept track of who was friends with who, who was Protecting who, and, most importantly, which young Angels were dating each other. Gwen was definitely what they called "Angel Crazy".

"And who is Vivian again?" Maddy asked as they headed to their lockers.

"Honestly, Maddy," Gwen said. "How can you live in this city and not know these things? Vivian is only the most beautiful Angel on the planet. We would so be best friends. If I can't marry Jackson Godspeed, I want her to."

Maddy leaned over her friend's shoulder and looked at her

BlackBerry. On the screen was a picture of a stunning brunette running with a handful of shopping bags, hiding behind a pair of Chanel sunglasses.

"Why do you read that stuff?" Maddy asked for the hundredth time. "That guy Johnny whatever who blogs about the Angels is such a jerk."

"I can't believe your uncle won't get you a BlackBerry," Gwen said, wrinkling her nose. "You're, like, missing out on life."

Maddy pulled an ancient-looking flip phone out of her backpack and did her best Uncle Kevin impersonation. "Only for homework and emergencies, Maddy, homework and emergencies," Maddy said, laughing and dropping the phone back in her bag.

"Your uncle is such a dinosaur," Gwen said. Maddy shrugged.

"I'm sure he would get me a new one if he could afford it."

Maddy and Gwen reached their lockers, side by side, middle row. This was how they had met in seventh grade. Even in a school of three thousand, *Montgomery* and *Moore* were somehow always right next to each other, and it had been that way since middle school. At the beginning Maddy was quiet, especially around someone as outgoing as Gwen, but after only a few weeks of seeing each other day in, day out at the lockers, Maddy had started to let down her guard. Soon they were real friends. Then later that year, Gwen's parents split up. A lot of her more popular friends didn't feel like dealing, but Maddy was there for her the whole time: she knew what it was like to feel abandoned. They'd been best friends ever since.

"I try not to read the blogs," Gwen said, setting up her mirror and make-up inside her locker, "but it's like an accident on the

freeway. As much as I try not to, I just have to look."

"Or you're obsessed," Maddy said as she shovelled in books.

"I'm not *obsessed*," Gwen said defensively. "I just know I'll be Protected someday. I want to be *ready*."

Maddy stopped unloading her books. "Gwen, you bought one of those maps on Sunset Boulevard and tried to get me to go with you up to their houses. On your learner's permit." She turned back to her locker and smiled. "Obsessed."

"That was so forever ago," Gwen huffed.

"That was last summer," Maddy said.

Gwen nodded. "Exactly." She paused. "Besides, if I was *really* obsessed, I would have already shown you this footage of Jacks shirtless at the beach that leaked on to SaveTube last night."

A roar of laughter echoed down the hall behind Gwen and Maddy. They turned and saw a group of four boys heading towards them.

"Hey, Gwen, what's up?" one of the guys, Kyle, said. He was tall, with broad shoulders and lank brown hair. He and Gwen had dated for the first semester of junior year but ultimately decided it was better to be just friends. Maddy secretly felt like her best friend might still have some feelings for him, even though Gwen swore up and down against it. He and Maddy had bonded slightly over how they didn't care about the Angels, not the way most people did.

"Hi, Kyle," Gwen said, pushing back her hair. They gave each other an awkward hug.

"Hey, Maddy, have a good Columbus Day weekend?" Kyle asked.

"Um, yeah," Maddy said, wishing she hadn't put her hood down when she'd got in the school. She felt . . . exposed. Sometimes

when it came to guys, Maddy found herself a bit tongue-tied, even if it was just her best friend's ex. Like, why hadn't she asked him if he'd had a good weekend too?

"Are you guys coming?" the boy standing next to Kyle eagerly blurted out to Maddy and Gwen. He had long hair and glasses, and Maddy thought his name was Simon.

"Dude, of *course* they are." This came from Tyler, with whom Maddy had been in government class sophomore year. With every school year he seemed like he'd got a little "edgier": he was wearing black skinny jeans and a little too perfectly ripped-up Vans. "Hi, Maddy," he added as an afterthought, waving slightly even though he was only a couple of metres away.

"What are you talking about?" Gwen asked.

"Ethan's having a party later this week," Kyle said, clapping his hand on the shoulder of the last of the boys, who hadn't spoken yet.

"Yeah, you should come. My mom's out of town," the guy said, stepping forward slightly.

Maddy realized she recognized him, but not from school. He sometimes came in to eat at the diner. They'd had a few brief conversations at the restaurant – he had recently moved to Angel City, to somewhere up the hill from the restaurant, and he'd come in and eat sometimes when his mom was travelling for business. Today he was wearing a navy T-shirt, shorts and sandals, and as her gaze reached his face, he smiled at her. But that wasn't what caught, and held, her attention. It was his eyes, which she hadn't really noticed before. Dark hazel and expressive, they pierced out from under sandy-coloured, beach-boy hair. It was almost as if they were talking to her all by themselves.

"The party's going to be amazing," Simon said. In an almost reverent tone: "He got a keg."

"Er . . . hey," Gwen said to Ethan, flipping her blonde hair the way she did around cute boys.

"This is Ethan. He's new to this beautiful institution," Kyle said, motioning to the cracked paint and dingy hall of Angel City High. "E, this is Gwen and— "

"It's Maddy, right?" Ethan interrupted, still smiling at her.

"Yeah, she's Maddy," Gwen answered for her. Maddy elbowed her friend.

"We know each other already," Maddy said, feeling a little shy. "So you're going to school here now?"

"Yeah," he said, "Just transferred a couple of weeks ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said, joking.

"I know, me too," Ethan said, and laughed.

"So are you guys coming on Friday?" Kyle asked. "I know Gwen will. But, Maddy, you should definitely come too. It'll be fun. I promise, no SaveTube and no ANN." Kyle looked at her and gave her a flirtatious smile. Confused, Maddy glanced down.

"*ANN*," Tyler repeated with scorn, rolling his eyes. He was "alternative", and part of that was being against all the Angel glamour and glitz – although Maddy sometimes suspected that if someone offered one of the alterna-kids the chance to become a famous Protection, they'd still do it in a heartbeat.

"Yeah, come to the party," Ethan said.

"Oh, um, the weekend. . ." Maddy said, stalling. In truth, she had no idea what to say. Getting invited to parties was Gwen's thing. Whenever Maddy wasn't doing homework or working

shifts at the diner, she usually just listened to music or curled up with a good book. Parties were pretty much unknown territory for her. She thought about the stack of college applications waiting for her back home. The weekend would be her only time to work on them.

"I'd like to," Maddy finally said. "But I have college apps, so . . ."

"So that means no, right?" Ethan said, sounding downcast.

It was Gwen's turn to elbow Maddy. She gave her a look and turned to Ethan.

"It just means she might have some other stuff too," Gwen said, improvising. "She's pretty popular, you know," she added. Maddy felt her cheeks beginning to flush.

"Well, if you want to come, I can give you directions," Ethan said.

"Maybe she should get your number?" Gwen offered. Simon and Tyler slightly sniggered under their breaths. Now Maddy was sure she was bright red.

"Yeah, totally."

Maddy fumbled in her bag for her old phone as Ethan slipped his iPhone out of his pocket. The two exchanged information, Maddy awkwardly asking Ethan to spell his last name, McKinley, while the other boys stood there watching. Maddy couldn't believe how embarrassed she felt. "The party should be cool," Ethan said as he slid his phone back in his pocket.

"Um . . . OK," she said. "Thanks?"

"Keep it quiet, though, he doesn't want the whole school coming, you know?" Kyle added. Maddy could've sworn he winked at her. "See you guys later."

"See you Friday," Ethan said.

Simon and Tyler also said goodbye, and the group of senior guys strolled casually down the hallway. Ethan gave her a final smile over his shoulder.

"OMG," Gwen breathed.

"OMG?"

"OMF-ing G!" Gwen could hardly contain herself. "You *know* him?"

"Kind of," Maddy said, tossing another book in her locker and untucking her hair from behind her ears. "He comes in to eat at the diner."

"That's the new guy everyone is talking about. I guess he moved to Angel City with his mom and she wanted him to do his senior year in public school or something, but word on the street is he's totally loaded. He even did an around-the-world trip earlier this summer. And the big rumour is that he *knows* the Angels," Gwen continued excitedly. "He sometimes surfs with them off Malibu. He might be the only student at school who will get an actual *Guardian*; they just haven't announced the Protections yet, not till Friday. And, of course, he's gorgeous."

"Well, I don't know why you said I could go. Because you know I can't," Maddy said.

"What?" Gwen gasped. "We're going and I'm your wingman!"

"I still need to finish my apps, and you should see those financial aid packets. They're like books. Besides, Kevin would kill me. He always says parties are dangerous, you know, dumb kids and alcohol, that whole thing."

"Maddy," Gwen said sternly. "Don't you realize you guys just had the moment?"

"The *moment*?" Maddy asked.

"Of course," Gwen said, explaining: "That's when a boy sees you in the perfect outfit, and the light is falling on you just right, and you're laughing or smiling, and everything about the moment is so perfect that he falls in love with you. I mean, he's seen you at the diner, of course, but he hasn't *seen* you seen you until right now!"

Maddy looked down at her jeans and hoodie. "Gwen, I barely said anything to him," she protested. Besides, what was up with Kyle giving her that wink? Gwen hadn't seemed to see it, thankfully.

"Trust me," Gwen said with a knowing smile. "You guys just had your *moment*."

Maddy looked down the hall in the direction Ethan had walked. He'd always been totally friendly when they'd interacted at the diner, but she couldn't remember having felt, like, sparks. Still, he was definitely nice-looking.

"Maddy," Gwen said, her tone suddenly pleading, "you've never had a boyfriend; you've never even been on a real date. Please, you can't let me down now."

Maddy looked into Gwen's eyes and sighed. This wasn't a battle she was going to win today.

"OK," she said, "I'll think about it."

"Perf!" Gwen squealed.

Maddy turned back to her locker – and froze. She stood there, trying to figure out why her mood had suddenly flipped to a feeling of suffocating dread. She glanced down the hallway. Next to her, Gwen typed away on her phone, not seeming to notice that

anything was wrong. But to Maddy the corridor seemed gaping and haunted. Distorted sounds echoed through it. Maddy had experienced this before – a bad feeling coming out of nowhere – but never this strong. Never this vivid. She forced herself to take a deep breath and closed her eyes. When she reopened them, the hallway was once again normal. The banks of lockers, the scuffed linoleum, the yellowed ceiling tiles – it was all as it should be. She shook the lingering feelings away.

The bell rang, a nasal monotone drone, and students scrambled into their classrooms. Gwen gave Maddy a hug, then skipped away down the hall. Maddy affectionately watched her go and wondered what it must feel like to be so bubbly and blissfully happy all the time. Then she grabbed her backpack and closed her locker with a metallic click.