

An excerpt from *The Angel Room*

Chapter 1

“Ellie,” he says. “Ellie...”

It’s dark and I’m warm. The darkness like swimming submerged.

Like fingers everywhere.

Like having on a blindfold when the lights are out.

Just my name, his breath in my ear. The last part drawn into a deep sigh.

His arms cocooning me.

“Ellie...”

I blink, focusing on the far corner of my bed, where Creep is hunched in the dawn gray. He could be just a paper cutout, he’s so flat and still. But I see his head swivel as he turns to look at me, the black globes of his eyes catching the dim light from the window. He unfolds one skinny arm.

“Morning, Ellie.” He’s gravel-voiced, swiping at one spiky ear with the back of his hand like a dog. “What are you thinking about?”

I've been lying completely still for a while, the way I do, in that strange floating place before sleep comes. Thinking about tomorrow. How everything changes tomorrow. I didn't realize that my thoughts had started to sink until I heard Creep's voice.

Breath in my ear. His arms.

"None of your business," I tell him. I turn my back on him and curl up. I tuck my hands under my cheek and close my eyes. Maybe if I pretend to sleep, he'll leave me alone.

I feel him move. Over my ankles. Padding slowly up the bed on all fours until he's crouched by my elbow. I open my eyes again to see him hanging over me. Flaky skin the color of coal, his skeletal fingers kneading the blanket. If I look too closely, his eyes look backlit. Like there's a lamp somewhere behind them, shining through smoky glass. I don't look too closely anymore. "I'm sleeping," I tell him.

"No, you're not," he says. He flashes that glistening, fish-boned smile, laced with strings of saliva. "You didn't sleep all night. Tell me what you were thinking about. Daydreams? Plans? Memories?"

So he's not going to leave me alone. "No," I say.

He snaps his teeth together the way he does when I say something he doesn't like. I sit up away from him, cross-legged, and run my fingers through my hair. He watches me pull it into a high ponytail. I secure it with the elastic I keep on my wrist.

"Aw, please?" he says. "You have the best memories of anyone I know." I roll my eyes. "I'm the *only* one you know."

"Correction," he says. He pulls a scab from his shoulder and then examines it. "I know everyone. You're the only one I *love*."

I'm watching him touch the scab to his oily tongue when the bedroom door opens and Mom bustles in with an armful of cardboard boxes. She has her hair tied back too. "Oh good," she says. "You're up." She drops the boxes and pulls a Sharpie from her pocket. Creep hops down from the bed to sniff around her feet. He sticks his head into one of the boxes. "How did you sleep?" She looks at me.

"Fine," I lie, my head swimming as I watch Creep. It was another night fuzzy with insomnia, but I don't tell her that. She nods. "Great. Dad's arranged for a truck tomorrow morning, so you need to finish getting your room packed."

It's hard to concentrate on what she's saying when Creep starts hacking like a cat about to vomit. I stare at Mom. She looks around and then puts her hands on her hips.

"Honestly, Eleanor. You haven't started yet?" She doesn't notice Creep at all. She never does.

I look around too. Odds and ends, books, piles of drawings. Everything clutters together on my shelves, seeming dingier under the Mom-gaze.

"You've known about this move for weeks," she goes on. "You're fifteen years old now. It's time to start acting like it."

Creep's voice comes, echoing from inside a box. "Fifteen. Only three more years 'til the age of consent."

My neck is tight. I pull my legs up and I wrap my arms around my knees.

When I don't answer, she sighs. "I'm sorry, Eleanor," she says. "I just want this to be a new start. For all of us. Let's make a goal, okay? See if you can get everything you want to bring to the new house, that isn't clothes or books, to fit in one box."

I look at her, doubtful. “I don’t know about that.”

Creep laughs, something about fitting a body into a box. “It will be easy,” she says, “if you don’t bring any of this junk.” She sweeps a hand around, indicating things on the shelves that I used to pick up as a kid: rocks, twigs, shells, feathers. She ends at the horse wall, my collection of pictures cut from books and magazines. My own private herd of horses. *Junk.*

“Look,” says Mom. Creep scrambles out of her way as she leans down to pick up two boxes. One says *Things To Keep*, and the other says *Things To Throw Away*, both labeled with Sharpie in Mom’s tight lettering. “See?” she says. “Easy.”

Things To Keep. Things To Throw Away. Fit Ellie in a box. Easy.

Mom goals are my *favorite*.

“Okay,” I tell her.

“Great,” she says again. She tosses the Sharpie onto my bed. “And when you’re done, come help me in the kitchen.”

Then she’s gone, her buzzing energy gone with her, tension left behind like a haze.

I fall back onto my pillow. She didn't close the door, so I can hear her waking up Joshua. Dad is thumping around in the living room. Creep's head appears at the foot of my bed. He rests his chin on his folded forearms. I glance at him.

"Easy," he says. "Easy Ellie." When I don't answer, he goes on. "Why did you ever stop talking to Mom about me?"

"You know why," I tell the ceiling. "I got tired of being told that you weren't real."

He tilts his head. "Who cares if she thought I wasn't real? *You* know I am. That's what counts."

I sit up. The opaque marbles of his eyes roll in their sockets. He grins. "I got *whipped* for talking about you."

"I know," says Creep, like it's his favorite memory. "It's been almost ten years since you stopped talking about me. And I found it very hurtful." A chuckle jitters in his throat. "Can we change the subject?" I get out of bed and wrench open a drawer. "Anyway, it worked. They forgot all about you." I throw jeans and a t-shirt onto the bedspread.

"A new start," he says, changing the subject for once. "How do you feel about that?"

I don't tell him that I'm okay with starting over. A new start sounds like a dream. A good one. I just don't know where to begin.

Creep says, like he knows what I'm thinking, "You should start under the bed. There's all sorts of great stuff under there." He ducks his head and crawls underneath. He's still talking, his voice muffled, saying something about mushrooms and dental records and human remains. I try not to pay attention as I get dressed.

A new start. A new school at the end of the summer. A new Eleanor. What would that look like? I decide Creep is right. A new start can start *there*, with what has been moldering away in the dark. I tighten my ponytail.

The room gradually lightens as I pull things out from under the bed: an old clarinet mouthpiece from elementary-school band, a scuffed pair of roller skates I got for my ninth birthday, a torn grocery sack full of fabric scraps. Creep is crawling around out of sight, droning on about how people go missing and all they find are perfectly preserved shoes.

I pull out a box marked *Ellie's Things*. When I open it, there's a white church dress folded, ribbons and ruffles. I rub the fabric between my thumb and forefinger,

remembering how hot I felt wearing it. Hot and bored and anxious. I lift a handful of skirt to see what's underneath. It's a green baby blanket. I close the box and put it into *Things To Keep*. I find an old school folder full of "100%!" math tests. A latch-hook rug I abandoned. A copy of Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* with a broken spine. Then I find the shirt box.

I turn slow and quiet as I pull it out. My fingers make tracks in the dust when I lift the lid and find it filled with crinkled papers. I stare at the top sheet. Two stick figures grin out at me, one with a sharp wide mouth. Scribbly clouds over the top of the page, the rest filled in with fat raindrops. I shuffle down through the stack and it's all black line sketches of me and Creep, most of them drawn in crayon. No drawings of Mom and Dad. No drawings of Joshua. Just me. Over and over, just me and Creep. I think about little-kid me, drawing these. I see my thin arms stretched across the paper.

Fingers gripping the crayon. My blue eyes concentrating, dark hair tucked behind my ears.

I trace the outline of me on the page now, the triangle dress, the scrawled hair. I don't feel like I've changed at all. My eyes prickle. Blinking fast, I look up at the sun coming in through the gauzy curtains. The light hits a teardrop of

crystal I have hanging from the curtain rod. Every morning, the walls are thrown with rainbows. I've always loved it. Creep says it gives him a headache.

He sticks his head out from under the bed.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks, wrinkled eyebrows raised. “Nothing.” Quick, I put the cover back on the box of drawings.

I can hear Dad talking loud about things he's not going to get rid of. Mom calls him a packrat. His voice barrels down the hall and I get up to shut my door.

Sometimes my brain feels like an episode of *Hoarders*. Creep pulls his head back and disappears under the bed.

“Look at this mess.” His sandpaper voice is muted. “You are such a dirty girl.” My shoulders tense. “I wish you wouldn't call me that.”

Creep says, “What...dirty?”

I want to say, *No... girl*. But I don't say it. I never say anything like that out loud anymore.

Words for things like that froze inside me a long time ago. Cold and dark. They'll always be there in my throat, like an ice cube getting stuck halfway down and never melting.

Creep's voice makes a grocery list of lost underbed objects: two apple cores, five library books, three missing socks, one headless Barbie. He tells me he'll keep the Barbie and pretend it's me. I imagine him sticking it with pins in the middle of the night.

I turn around to see that Mom wrote *Ellie's Room* on all of the boxes. I uncap the Sharpie. I scribble over my nickname, thinking about the night we went box hunting, when Dad boosted us into a recycling dumpster behind the grocery store. I write *Eleanor's*.

A new start. I say it to myself, over and over, like a mantra. Creep's drone has fallen silent. He crawls out from under the bed. "More secrets?" He points a clawed finger at the shirt box full of drawings.

"It's nothing," I say.

"C'mon, Ellie, you should know better," he says. "You can't hide anything from me."

“Whatever,” I tell him. But his words scoop out my chest and I shiver. *A new start*, I think. While I don't want a hundred pictures of Creep, I do want to show six-year-old Eleanor that someone remembers her. So I turn and put the box of drawings in *Things To Keep*.

Creep watches while I toss lots into *Things To Throw Away*: papers from school, old sketches, tattered stuffed animals. I take down the horse pictures. Careful. One by one. There are fifty-seven altogether. I spend most nights staring at the wall of horses until I fall asleep: all long legs and graceful necks, manes streaming out in the wind. Horses rearing, leaping, running. I stare at the wall and imagine myself in the golden pastures, on the salt water beaches, lost under green leaves.

“You can't keep those,” Creep says. “This is a new start, remember? No *junk*.”

“I'm not going to do something just because you tell me to.” I press the stack of pictures in a copy of *Where The Wild Things Are* and put it all in *Things To Keep*.

“Wanna bet?” It's a snap of his teeth.

“Whatever.” I almost say, *You’re not the boss of me*, like I used to. Our patterns are so ingrained. Instead I say, “Besides, they’re not junk.” I start stacking novels from my bookcase.

“Horses don't really fit you anyway,” he says. “You've never seen one up close before.” He scratches behind his ear, looking at the ceiling. “What would be a more fitting mascot for Ellie?” He ticks them off on his fingers. “Alley cats. Cockroaches. Horny toads. Oh, I know. Those anatomically correct dolls they show kids at the police station.” He laughs, rolling onto his back, hands clutched around his stomach.

Creep laughs like someone choking.

“Would you shut up?” I tell him. “And don't call me that.” He digs in his ear. “I can't help it,” he says. “That's what *everyone* calls you.” He puts his big flat feet all over my bedspread.

“Not everyone,” I say. “Just Joshua, and you, and –” I stop. Creep lowers his head. He looks at me from under his eyebrows. “And who, Ellie?”

Just almost *saying* his name makes goosebumps come out on both arms. I rub them away and unclench my jaw.

“Get off my bed.” I swat at Creep with a copy of *The Last Unicorn*. He scurries backward and ends up sitting on my pillow. He is hairless-cat skin and bones, crouching on my pillow.

“Always pushing me out.” He folds his arms in a sulk. “I remember when you used to invite me in.”

“Things change.”

A knock at the door and I say, loud, “What!”

Joshua pokes his head in. “Can I show you something?”
I nod, sorry I yelled. He comes in, carrying a shoe box.
“Remember that baby bird I found last year?”

“I forgot about that,” I say, remembering the rescued hatchling, limp in a nest of fabric. His eyes glisten, lower lip trembles. “So did I.” And he lifts the cover off the box. Inside is a folded hand towel and a plastic food container lid turned upside down. The bird's head is twisted back, beak gaping — with its toothpick skeleton and paper-dry skin, crooked wings spread like it's going to fly, wire legs curled.

Joshua gulps. “It's dead.”

“Yeah.” I nod. He snuffles, head bent. We kneel over the box. I put my hand on his shoulder. He reminds me of the bird, with his too-big head and hunched-over back. He’s only eight, but probably my favorite person in the world. I hate to see him sad.

“I killed it,” Joshua says.

Creep cranes his neck to see from where he sits.

“I meant to keep it alive,” says Joshua. Words come out of him, fast and falling over each other. “I was going to feed it and I left water for it and I was going to let it go when it was stronger but I put it under the bed and I forgot one day and then I forgot again and now it's dead and it's all my fault.”

Swallowing hard, I squeeze his shoulder. “It's not your fault. Baby birds who fall out of the nest always die. The mama bird is so worried about taking care of everything else, getting food and keeping things safe up in the tree that she forgets one is missing.”

Joshua looks up at me with moist cheeks.

“It would have died anyway,” I tell him.

He wipes his nose on the back of his hand. “What am I going to do?” Animals in his room mean Mom's grounding and Dad's belt. I grew out of spanking, but Joshua is still fair game. Both of us listen for footsteps, the rustle of Dad's camouflage cargo pants, any hint that his brown hand might turn the doorknob.

I cover the bird up. “I'll take care of it. Just go finish packing.”

Joshua puts his arms around my neck. “Thanks, Ellie,” he says. I decide not to mention the nickname. I pat his back. After he closes my door, I pull out my sketchbook. I study the tiny carcass. As I draw, I wonder what it was like, to be put in a dark, dry place and forgotten. Just silence — just close my eyes and fade away into dust.

Creep is quiet for a while and then climbs down to get a closer look. He says, “It's like your room — a casket for little lost souls,” and then giggles.

I snap my sketchbook closed, turn away from Creep and put the bird coffin in *Things To Throw Away*. I dig in *Things To Keep* and pull out the box of Creep drawings.

Junk, I think as I toss them, and then I spend the next three hours splitting my life into two boxes: the part of my life I

want to keep and the part I want to throw away. This is the only place I've ever lived. When we move, Creep will stay here. If I leave the crayon drawings behind too, it will be like he never existed.