

Penguin



Readers

CLOUDS over CALIFORNIA

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CHAPTER ONE

A new start

“I don’t want to hear any more about it!” Dad shouts.

“Be quiet,” Mom says, quietly. “You’ll wake Stevie up.”

But it’s too late for that. They woke me up an hour ago when they started arguing. I don’t know why they are fighting. They were watching TV and laughing together before I went to bed. But now . . .

I try to go back to sleep, but they’re just too loud. Then I have an idea. “Maybe they’ll stop fighting if I go down to the kitchen,” I think.

I walk downstairs and enter the kitchen quietly, but then I decide to **hide** behind a corner. I don’t want them to see me.

“I don’t understand it,” Dad says. He turns his back away from Mom and **starts** to fill a glass with water. “You have everything that you need here. I look after the family and bring home the money. Why do you want to go to college?”

Oh. Not this again.

Mom shakes her head. “I’ve already told you. It’s only a couple of classes.”

“Women only go to college to look for husbands,” Dad says. “Are you trying to find a boyfriend? Is that why you want to go to school?”

A boyfriend? At school? What is he talking about?

“Don’t be stupid, Cooper,” Mom says. She walks toward

him, but he doesn't turn around.

"I'm the man!" Dad says. "I go to work, and you stay at home and look after the house. What's wrong with that?"

Mom thinks that Dad is "**old-fashioned**." But I don't understand why she can't take a few classes at college. Why is that a problem?

"I just moved us into this nice home," Dad says.

"I didn't ask to move!" says Mom. "None of us wanted to move, Coop!"

I really didn't want to move here. I loved our old house. My room was nice and my best friend, Jennifer, lived just across the street. My parents didn't fight in our old house.

Dad turns around to look at Mom, and he finally sees me hiding. Then Mom notices me, too.

"Stevie!" She walks toward me quickly. "I knew that you were being too loud, Coop."

"I'm not stupid," Dad says, quietly. He wants to continue arguing. "I know **what** this is really about, Kitty."

Mom doesn't listen to him. "Come on, Stevie. You need to get back to bed."

"OK," I say, quietly.

Dad's face is red and I can hear him talking to himself angrily as Mom and I walk back to my bedroom.

"I'm sorry that you heard that, Stevie," says Mom. She puts her hand to her face to hide her **tears**, but I can still see them. "But don't worry. Everything's OK."

She's lying, but I smile at her anyway. I don't want her to worry about me.

“Shall I read you a story?” she asks.

“Yes, please!”

Mom climbs into bed with me. “This is a story about a king and a sandwich.”

It’s a silly story, and I keep laughing. She starts to tell me another one, but soon I’m asleep.

When I wake up in the middle of the night, Mom is sleeping next to me. She’s not wearing her wig and I think, “She looks so pretty like this.”

The next day is my first day of school, and I’m late! My new school is close to our new home, but Mom has to drive me because we slept for too long.

“You’re going to have a great day,” says Mom.

Mom waves goodbye and then I’m alone. Everyone looks at me as I walk through the school to find my new classroom. They all know that I’m the new girl and all I want to do is run and hide.

My new teacher is called Mrs. Quakely, and she seems nice. She’s very tall, and she has a huge smile and big feet!

“It’s nice to meet you, Stevie,” she says. “Class, this is Stevie.”

Everyone just looks at me.

My face feels hot and I quickly sit down at my desk. After the lesson, everyone runs out to the playground and I follow them. I watch them start a ball game called tetherball. At my old school, I was the best at playing tetherball but I don’t tell the children here that. I decide to just watch.

A girl called Ally is playing and winning every game. Then she looks at me and says, “Do you want to play?”

I look around. Is she really talking to me?

“Let’s have a game,” she says. “I won’t play so hard because you’re new.”

I jump up and we keep playing even when it starts to rain. But Mrs. Quakely stops us when she shouts, “Come inside, quickly!”



I notice something when I sit back down at my desk. My braids are starting to open because of the rain. When my hair isn’t in braids, it gets bigger and grows UP!

Everyone else in my class has straight or **wavy** hair, but mine is big and very **curly**. I try to press my hair down to make it flat again but nothing works.

Oh no. I'm already the new girl. I don't need huge hair for everyone to look at, too.

"Wow!" A boy called Kenny puts his hand on my head and laughs. "Your hair is so soft! And big!"

More people follow him and start pulling and touching my hair.

"It's so soft and **fluffy**, like a candy!" someone says.

"Please stop," I say. But no one listens to me.

"Can we eat it?" someone laughs.

"STOP IT!" I shout.

"What is happening here?" Mrs. Quakely asks. Everyone quickly runs back to their desks. "Are you OK, Stevie?"

"Yes," I say.

But I'm lying.



I'm home alone after school, and I can't stop thinking about Jennifer.

She was my best friend at my old school. I saw her every day, and we always played together after school.

I miss her.

I tried to call her after we moved to the other side of town, but it seemed like she was never home. Then she went to England with her family during summer vacation.

"I'll call her now," I think. "And ask her about her first day back at school."

I pick up the phone and call her number. Jennifer's sister, Lizzie, answers the phone.

"Hi, Lizzie. Is Jennifer there?" I ask.

Lizzie drops the phone and shouts, "Jenny?"

I can hear voices far away from the phone, but I can't understand what they're saying.

"Hello?" says a different voice. "Who is this?" It's Jennifer's mom.

"Hi, Elaine," I say. "It's Stevie. Is Jennifer home?"

"Oh," says Jennifer's mom. "Sorry, Stevie. She's not here."

"That's OK," I say. "Please tell her that I called."

"I will," she says. "Say 'hi' to your mom for me." And then she puts the phone down.

I know that she's lying. Jennifer *is* home. I heard her voice.