

zoey Dean's  
**ALMOST FAMOUS**

# CHAPTER one

mac

◀ Sunday September 6 ▶

8 PM Practice Le Strut for tomorrow

9 PM Discuss social chair strategy w/the Inner Circle)

10 PM Kate Somerville clay masks for all (skin must glisten on first day!)

10:30 PM Beauty sleep

Get ready for B.Y.E.—Best Year Ever!

“Ladies, focus!” Mackenzie Little-Armstrong bel-  
lowed to her best friends, Evangelina Becks, Coco  
Kingsley, and the newest member of their group,  
Emily Mungler. She clapped her Essie-polished hands  
together, her signature wooden bangles clacking on her  
wrists, and flipped her waist-length blond mane. “Ems  
needs to get this.”

*This* was Le Strut, which was to be their grand entrance  
on the first day of eighth grade at Bel-Air Middle School,  
aka BAMS. Le Strut meant walking like you were too  
bored to care and therefore cooler than everyone who’d  
missed the memo on not caring. Making eye contact with  
others was strictly forbidden, as was engaging in serious  
conversation. Hence the need to rehearse Le Strut nine-  
teen times, with the video camera on Mac’s white iBook  
providing instant playback for full analysis.

“Emily, you need to get into character,” Mac said, her  
turquoise eyes focused on her computer screen. “Tomor-

row is your debut as Cool New Girl at Bel-Air Middle School, and right now you look like a sweet girl from Iowa who can't believe her luck."

"But that's exactly how I feel!" Emily protested, twirling a lock of her wavy, cinnamon brown hair.

Mac shook her head at the naïve Iowa transplant. She'd discovered the gap-toothed beauty faking her way into a premiere party and had instantly gotten a talent-crush on the girl's acting skills and *je ne sais quoi* adorableness. Just that morning Mac and her mother, the biggest talent agent in Hollywood, had convinced Emily to move to Bel-Air and pursue an acting career while she stayed in the Armstrongs' guest bedroom. "I don't care if you have to use Meisner, Hagen, or some sort of sense memory," Mac commanded, listing famous acting techniques. She knew her starlet-in-training had it in her; it was *her* job to coax it out. "Get it right."

Emily nodded, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply. She looked like she was doing yoga standing up, but Mac knew that was how Emily got into her acting zone. Then Emily opened her eyes and curled her lips into a half smile. She strutted confidently across the wooden floor, like a totally different person than the girl who'd tried the exact same thing only seconds ago.

"That's my girl!" Mac said approvingly, watching Emily sail across her computer screen. If she could work it like this in private, she was just a few public outings from being the next It girl.

The girls were in Coco's private dance studio, surrounded by wall-to-wall mirrors for their annual night-before sleepover, which Coco, Mac, and Becks had enjoyed every year since the night before first grade. Coco's father was the hotel mogul Charles Kingsley, and she lived in the top-floor suite of his King Bel-Air Hotel, which was a sprawling hacienda tucked off Stone Canyon Road. Swans ambled across the front lawn and graced a small pond in the back.

Even though Mac, Becks, and Coco had discovered their personal Le Strut years ago, it was always smart to fine-tune. Mac had insisted they rehearse in Coco's studio to get "the most honest" impression of what they really looked like. Mirrors, like iBooks, could lie, but mirrors + iBooks + Coco's high-tech studio = brutal honesty.

The girls looked extra good because they were trying on their first-day-of-school outfits, which had been personally selected by Mac's stylist, Xochi (pronounced ZO-hee) Dawn. Earlier tonight Xochi's team had delivered one rack per girl, filled with the snuggest-fitting jeans—Edun, Habitual, Rock & Republic, and Paige—all pre-selected based on the girls' body types and personalities. The racks had been pushed to the side, where the mirrors and wall curved up to a domed skylight. The girls lined up again in front of the arched foyer entryway, its door emblazoned with Coco's initials, and Le Struttred one more time.

Mac hovered in front of her iBook like a football coach. “Good news,” she said, her eyes narrowing. “We’ve got it!” She flipped the screen toward her friends so they could observe the playback of their work. The iBook was divided into a split screen, each quarter playing a clip of one of the four girls striding across the dance studio. Emily’s normally shy, hunched-over posture had improved tenfold (Mac had made her walk with a stack of French *Vogues* on her head); Coco as usual looked like a gazelle—dancing gave her excellent carriage—and even Becks’s swagger was a little less tomboyish than usual. Mac strode confidently, her blond head held high. “Le Strut is *parfait!*”

“That’s great and all, but will you pass *zee dinner?*” Becks gestured toward the tray of rolls delivered from Nobu on a table in the corner. “I’m starving!”

Mac rolled her eyes as she handed the tray to Becks, who was *always* hungry. In fact, no matter how much Becks ate, (1) she was always famished and (2) she always looked like a Roxy girl, compliments of her amazing surfing skills. Technically, Becks was a tomboy, but it was usually the last thing people noticed about her, after taking in her tall, toned body, racehorse-long legs, golden skin, and saltwater-tousled strawberry blond bob. Tonight she wore a cream-colored Love by Ya-Ya hoodie dress over Hudson jeans, only because it had been delivered by Xochi. Left to her own devices, Becks saw no shame

in leaving the house in Reef sandals, boxers, and Old Navy tank tops.

“Okay, next order of business,” Mac commanded, pulling up a new window on her iBook. Mac needed to strategize her upcoming campaign to win social chair, the holy grail of BAMS positions and also Mac’s *raison d’être*. Voting was in three days, and Mac needed to make a splash with her campaign poster, which so far was a movie trailer poster of herself with the rating A for “Amazing.”

“Now, I need your honest opinions. Is it too—” Mac was cut off by the ping of Coco’s intercom. “Oh, that must be the Pinkberry. My treat.”

She’d forgotten she’d ordered frozen yogurt. It was very un-Mac to forget anything—in fact, she and her friends kept prioritized schedules on their iPhones, synched so they could always keep track of one another. Sigh.

“Fro-yo!” Becks bolted out of Coco’s dance studio, completely forgetting all talk of social chair posters. Coco’s French bulldog, Madonna, who had been asleep in her custom-made Louis Vuitton dog bed, yelped and chased after Becks.

“Don’t step on my dog!” Coco wailed, readjusting the satin headband in her shiny chocolate brown hair before chasing Becks out the frosted-glass studio door.

Mac sauntered behind, Centurion AmEx in one hand

and her iBook in the other, and Emily followed, smiling.

When Coco opened the door to the penthouse's private entrance, overlooking the swan pond, everyone gasped. The girl delivering their frozen yogurts was a total freakasaurus: She had buckteeth and long stringy hair dyed mauve, and there were plastic *Battlestar Galactica* pins all over her neon yellow vest. It was like she'd stepped off the pages of the *What Not to Wear, Ever* manual.

"Hi," Mac said finally.

"Hey!" Freakasaurus said, clutching the Pinkberry bag. She stood pigeon-toed and stared at Mac, then Emily, then Becks . . . and then, spotting Coco, her jaw dropped.

She pointed at Coco. "OH MY GOD, YOU'RE CARDAMMON'S DAUGHTER?!" The bag in her hand started to shake vigorously.

It was an unspoken rule in Hollywood that you didn't acknowledge fame. And rule number one was that you never, ever pointed at celebrities.

Mac shot a glance at Coco, who was hiding behind Becks. Coco was always a little touchy about the Cardammon subject. She was a pop-star-in-training herself and always worried she'd never measure up to her superstar mother.

"Are you okay?" Mac asked the Pinkberry freak. It was not a question; it was a polite way of saying, *Please stop spazzing out right now.*

"I've been in loooove with your mom since I was thirteen," the girl said, stretching her arms toward Coco like an opera singer, the Pinkberry bag waving wildly. A tear trickled down her pasty cheek. "'Forever Blue,' like, got me through two breakups," she said, referring to one of Cardammon's eleven hit singles from the late '90s. "When I was—"

"That's great thank show much do we owe you?" Mac interrupted.

"Oh. Sorry." The girl handed a receipt to Mac. Le Freak was still staring at Coco, mesmerized, like she'd seen a talking gnome.

"All righty, then." Mac signed the receipt briskly and held it far out in front of her, so the girl had to walk through the door to get it. "'Bye, now,'" she whispered. When the door closed, Mac waved her index finger around her ear to make the crazy sign.

*"I've been in loooove with your mom since I was in high school."*

Mac spun around, wondering how Freakberry had gotten back inside the penthouse. Then she blinked. Twice. It was Emily. Her impression was so spot-on that for a second Mac had thought the girl was still there.

*"'Forever Blue,' like, got me through two breakups,"* Emily continued. Then she pointed at Coco, her hand shaking, a real tear trickling down her cheek. "Oh my God—are you Cardammon's daughter?"

"Dude, you're freaking me out! It's too much like

her!” Becks gasped, ripping into the paper bag and taking out two large frozen yogurts in white-and-green containers.

“Thatwasahmazing!” Coco agreed, taking her green tea-flavored fro-yo.

Mac led the troupe back into Coco’s Tuscan-inspired bedroom, which was adjacent to the dance studio. Every item in Coco’s room had been selected to create the feel of an Italian palazzo, except for the three real Mark Rothko paintings that hung above the marble fireplace.

“You should see her be a guy,” Mac said proudly, turning her clear plastic spoon upside down to lick the yogurt. “When Emily plays Jeff, she’s so hot that girls have a crush on her. I mean, a crush on *Jeff*.”

Emily covered her face, embarrassed. Earlier in the week, Mac had been trying to land Emily a role in a major Hollywood movie, *Deal With It*. The part was that of a girl who pretended to be a guy at boarding school. Mac had taken her budding star to the Grove, one of L.A.’s best shopping malls, and Emily had even fooled the Abercrombie salesgirl into thinking she was a guy. She’d also fooled Kimmie Tachman, BAMS’s biggest gossip, whom they’d run into on their way out.

Mac set her iBook on Coco’s antique writing desk and plopped into a wooden chair while Coco darted into her bathroom to scrounge through her Essie nail polish set. Emily sat cross-legged on the forest green

carpet and started braiding her hair, and Becks flopped onto her back.

Mac reopened her computer, ready to revive the discussion of her campaign posters. Her home page was the Bel-Air community web page—a special, password-protected web community just for people in the 90077. Which was where she saw The Ad. Mac was stunned speechless for about two seconds. “Oh my,” she said suddenly, staring at the computer screen. The other girls rushed to Mac’s side and read over her shoulder.

### Seeking Personal Assistant

Very important Bel-Air social chair seeks assistant to provide daily support and help orchestrate big school fund-raiser. Must be organized, highly efficient, proactive, with great interpersonal skills, keen attention to detail, and a “can-do” spirit. Personal style is a plus, but not a requirement. Interested candidates: iChat RG here.

“It’s just an ad.” Becks crawled back to the carpet and went back to flipping through Coco’s very dog-eared *In Style*.

“Yes, but it’s to work for *Ruby Goldman!*” Coco translated, shaking the bottle of cotton candy pink nail polish she’d chosen.

“Cha-ching!” Mac declared. Ruby Goldman was her biggest rival in the upcoming social chair elections. Ruby

had spent the past four years trying desperately to steal Mac's style—she followed Mac's outfit choices like the North Star—and now here she was, already *hiring* for Mac's job.

"How can you tell it's Ruby?" Emily asked, brushing her hazelnut bangs out of her eyes.

"Social chair. Big school fund-raiser. Her initials: RG. Plus, *who else* would think this was a good idea?" Coco sat down on the carpet and started painting the nails on her left hand.

"Well, there's one way we can be sure." Mac grinned wolfishly at Emily.

"Don't look at me!" Emily shrieked. "I'm too new to make enemies!"

"Not *you*." Mac made air quotes. "Jeff."

"Jeff! Jeff!" Coco and Becks chanted.

Emily's eyes darted nervously around the room. She eyed Coco's bed as if she were thinking about darting underneath it.

"Oh, puh-leeeee!" Coco cried. "You have to!"

"Do it for the Inner Circle!" Becks said.

"Okay, fine," Emily groaned. "But I have a bad feeling about this."

Mac ran to her Hervé Chapelier overnight bag in the corner of Coco's room and promptly returned with a Stanford baseball cap that smelled like BO. Emily had worn Mac's brother's hat during her audition, and it had helped make her feel . . . masculine.

“Ladies, this is going to be fantastic,” Mac said, licking her clear plastic spoon with a naughty twinkle in her eye. “But Emily, Kimmie’s probably told Ruby about ‘Jeff’ by now, so it’s better to use another alias.”

“Got it.” Emily nodded. She plopped herself in front of Mac’s white iBook and stretched her fingers like a pianist. She shook her head back and forth and rolled her shoulders in circles. She jutted her chin out from under her baseball cap. Then she cleared her throat to lower her voice a register. Watching Emily made Mac proud that she had a professional actress pulling the prank. Everything Mac did was A-list.

“Okay, everyone please move,” Mac said, waving to the air around Emily. “Or you’ll be in her interview.”

Emily clicked on the link to video chat Ruby through the Bel-Air intranet. Coco, Becks, and Mac lay on the green carpet in a semicircle around Emily, hands on their chins so they could peer up at the computer screen.

“Hello, this is Ruby,” said the voice. In the window on the laptop screen popped Ruby Goldman. Her long blond hair had newly fringed, sideswept bangs, and she wore high-waisted jeans and a red sleeveless blouse with ruffles, like she was in costume as a ’70s movie star.

“Hey, I’m, uh, Tom,” Emily said, her voice husky, her shoulders slouched. “I’m interested in the job.”

Coco and Becks exchanged awed looks. Mac smiled.

“Are you new to Bel-Air, Tom? I thought I knew everyone. . . .” Normally Ruby talked in a fake baby voice, but now she sounded super grown-up.

“Yeah, my dad just got transferred here,” Emily improvised

“Great. Hi. I’m Ruby,” she said, relaxing just a bit.

Coco dropped her clear spoon into her melting yogurt and leaned closer to the computer. Mac and Becks cupped their mouths to prevent their laughter from escaping.

“I’m about to be elected to a *very important* job at a *very important* school in Los Angeles,” Ruby said. “It’s too much for one person. And unfortunately, I can’t clone myself.” She sighed dramatically, as though it were a travesty that there was only one of her.

Becks reached for Coco’s Hello Kitty notepad and wrote frantically with a purple gel roller: *Is she for reals?*

Mac shrugged. It didn’t matter. They had stumbled upon the best entertainment ever in the history of night-before sleepovers.

“Wow, you sound really busy,” Emily-as-Tom said in her deep, boy voice.

“I am. That’s exactly it,” Ruby said, fluffing her long blond hair and straightening the ruffle on her shirt. “But enough about me. Tell me about you. Why does a cute guy want to work for *me*?”

Mac’s eyebrows shot up. Was Ruby *flirting* with Tom? Ew!

"I just thought the job sounded cool 'cause I'm organized and I like parties." Emily pulled her hat lower so that it covered more of her face.

Ruby crossed her arms. "Well, Tom, there are lots of *parties*, but I'm planning high-end events. *Grandes fêtes*. And I need someone who is hungry to learn. This job is the fast track to Bel-Air's best people."

"Yeah, I guess that's what I meant." Emily shrugged her shoulders.

"Listen," Ruby said, leaning in like she was about to tell a secret. "Let's interface and see if this would be a good fit. What's your e-mail address? I'll send you a confirmation."

"It's, uh, Tom, T-o-m. At e-m-a-i-l dot com."

"Great. I have a good feeling about this, Tom," Ruby said, nodding seriously.

Mac played with her wooden bangles, wondering how Ruby could be so stupid. The number one rule of the Internet was, never trust anything or anyone you meet online. Clueless people were always getting themselves into trouble with technology.

"Yeah, me too. Okay, see ya," Emily said, waving goodbye to Ruby.

The girls were quiet for several seconds before they erupted into laughter.

"*Grandes fêtes!*" Coco hyperventilated. "I can't believe she fell for it!" She looked at Emily seriously. "That was even better than your Freakberry impression!"

“Wait, wait, wait! Emily, puh-leeeee do more impressions!” Becks cried.

“Well . . .” Emily pulled the arms of her sweatshirt way down so it looked like she had no hands. Then she stood with her hand on her right hip, her left leg jutting out. “Totes!” she said.

“BECKS!” Coco and Mac screamed in unison.

“That *is* me!” Becks exclaimed, lifting up her sweatshirt arms to reveal that she’d tucked her hands inside. “Do more!”

Emily leaned her head down, getting into character. Then she popped her head up, and tucked her hair behind her ears. She mimed twirling bangles on her wrists and checking her iPhone. Then she flipped her hair behind her back in one brisk motion and stared intently at her friends. She spoke in a slightly deeper, more businesslike voice. “Girls, I have a plan!”

Mac blushed. Coco and Becks laughed. “Mac!” they screamed.

“Don’t do me!” Coco crossed her arms and shook her head in tiny, rapid back-and-forth motions. “I’ll be too embarrassed!”

Emily crossed her arms and stared right at Coco. “Okay. I won’t do you.” She shook her head in the same tiny, rapid back-and-forth motions.

“You got me!” Coco covered her face in mock embarrassment.

“I have others,” Emily said. She slowly curled her

hand into a paw and made cat sounds. “*Meow!* Thanks for coming to my par-tay.”

“*Kimmie Tachman!*” Becks and Coco cried. The girls had been to Kimmie’s Sweet Thirteen party earlier that week. She had dressed as a sexy lion and had gone around making cat noises all night.

“That’s exactly how she does it!” Coco cried. “It’s sort of adorable, actually.”

Becks, Coco, and Mac all started making paws and lion noises.

“Stop!” Coco puffed out her cheeks like a blowfish, then let out the air. She crossed her legs, twisting her ankles and pointing her toes. She looked like she was about to explode—her face was bright red and tiny beads of sweat glistened on her forehead.

“Meow!” Emily said again, making a paw.

“No, seriously, people, stop!” Coco spoke through clenched teeth. She was squeezing her fists tightly and her eyes were closed. “I’m serious!” Her breaths came in short pants, like those a pug.

And then Mac realized—

“Oh, Coco,” Mac said calmly, knowing that she had to call out the obvious. “Please tell me you did not just pee yourself!”

Coco turned an even brighter shade of red.

“Ew!” Becks yelled, cracking up even more.

“Just a drop!” Coco pleaded. “Nothing anyone would actually notice but me.”

“And me, apparently,” Mac pointed out.

“Okay, fine,” Coco said, blushing. “When I laugh really, really hard, sometimes a little just comes out. I can’t help it. Last year it happened at dance practice.”

“Gross!” Mac said, and threw a green silk pillow at her friend.

“I know!” Coco laughed and threw a pillow back. “I’m gross! Can we please talk about someone else now?!”

“I have a secret.” Becks said, jumping to her friend’s rescue. She sat on her knees on the green carpet and the girls turned to face her. “It doesn’t leave this room,” she said slowly, and everyone nodded. She waited a few seconds, relishing the attention. “I’ve never kissed a boy.”

Everyone groaned. None of them had kissed boys. Besides, the only datable boys at BAMS were Lukas Gregory and Hunter Crowe. They were best friends and water polo players, with really good fashion sense (Diesel jeans and plain tees) without being gay about it. All the other boys at BAMS were either (a) jerks, (b) immature, or (c) all of the above.

“That’s right, these lips have never touched a boy,” Becks went on, pointing to her naturally Angelina Jolie-esque pout. “But until they do, I have my ways. And that’s what you *really* can’t tell anyone.”

Very slowly, Becks reached for her Pinkberry yogurt. “Pretend this is Austin,” she said, referring to

her next-door neighbor and crush. They'd grown up together, and this year he was starting at Bel-Air Prep. Becks drew the dessert close to her lips, as though she were about to inhale it, and then she slowly opened her mouth and proceeded to *slobber all over the frozen yogurt*, making a mess of her face as she moved her lips over the fro-yo dome. By the time Becks had finished displaying her talents, there was just a messy puddle of melted frozen yogurt.

"Oh God, are you trying to make me pee again?" Coco uncrossed her legs and ran to her private bathroom.

Emily smiled, but resisted teasing anyone or laughing too much at their expense. *Well played*, Mac thought approvingly of her young star.

"Come on, Mac, don't you have any secrets?" Becks asked, putting down her mangled fro-yo and lying on her side. She propped her head up with her arm.

"Yeah, we always tell you everything!" Coco squealed, reappearing from her black and white-tiled bathroom as the toilet flushed.

Mac felt a flash of panic: Her mother was Hollywood's most powerful agent, her father was an Oscar-winning screenwriter, her little sister was a certified genius, and her older brother was a triple-threat volleyball/tennis/surfing phenom. Mac sometimes felt like a fraud: Managing Emily was the only

*truly big* thing she'd done, and if she failed at that, she'd ruin both their dreams. But of course there was no way she was going to admit *that*. She had to say *something*.

"Well," Mac said casually, "even after I win social chair I'm still going to hang out with you girls all the time. I have no interest in hanging out with anyone else at BAMS." Mac shrugged as if she'd just revealed a deep, dark secret.

"DUH!" Coco screamed.

"BIIIIIG SHOCKER! Tell us something we don't know!" Becks commanded. "I want truly confidential information!"

Emily, Coco, and Becks stared at Mac wide-eyed. "Sorry, chickadees, you know everything about me," Mac replied nonchalantly, twisting the strap on her blue Splendid pajama top.

"Fine," Becks sighed. "I give up. And I'm tired. And I don't care."

"Me too," Mac said, realizing she'd lost the chance to revive her social chair strategy talks. They flicked off the lights and crawled under their Italian linens in the guest beds that housekeeping had wheeled in earlier that day.

Mac closed her eyes, grateful that she'd managed to dodge the *what's your secret* question, which came up at every slumber party. There was nothing Mac hated more than feeling vulnerable. And there was no

faster way to become social roadkill than to be an open book.

Mac was half awake, half asleep, listening to the gentle hum of Coco's sound machine and thinking about how if she could just get social chair, her life would *finally* be complete when . . . it happened.

*Brrrrrrt!*

Mac Armstrong farted.

Mac's heartbeat instantly raced at triple speed. She prayed that everyone was still asleep.

"Mac, was that you?" Coco squealed, sitting up, the whites of her eyes visible even in the dark.

"Maaaaaaaaaaaaaac! How could such a large sound come out of such a teeny girl?" Becks hollered, tossing a silk pillow at Mac.

"Oh, Mac, it really does reek in here," Emily said softly.

Mac blushed when she heard Emily's voice. Surely Mama Armstrong had never farted in front of her hotshot clients. She waited until the giggles subsided and the last of the pillows had been flung. "Fine. I'm lactose intolerant."

"Aha!" Coco exclaimed. "*That's* why you always get soy lattes!"

"No more Pinkberry for you!" Becks decreed.

"I'm sure we can all sleep better knowing my systems are working," Mac said. "But I need my beauty rest." She slipped on her baby blue Bliss satin eye mask. "Good night!"

*"It was a good night until you farted,"* Becks teased.

Mac sighed. But in the darkness, she smiled to herself. It was great to have good friends. Friends who had your back no matter what. This was going to be a great year. The Best Year Ever.

Almost Famous

RAZORBILL

Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Young Readers Group

345 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario,  
Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,  
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,  
New Delhi-110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310,  
New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,  
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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**alloyentertainment**

Produced by Alloy Entertainment

151 West 26th Street

New York, NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is available

Printed in the United States of America

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