



MAYA GOLD

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## For Emily, with Hugs & Kisses

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# *Chapter One*



It's half an hour since my alarm clock went off, and I'm fully dressed except for my feet.

I've settled on fuzzy striped socks, but I'm having an indecision attack over my shoelaces. I can't remember exactly when I started mix-and-matching the laces on my Converse, but it's become my trademark look, and I change the color combo at least once a week. I keep a rainbow of different colored laces in a basket on top of my bureau.

"Diana!" my stepmother, Fay, yells up the staircase. "You're going to be late!"

"Coming!" I answer, and squeeze my eyes shut as I plunge my hand into the basket. Sometimes a random pick is the best way to go.

I grab two laces and open my eyes. Orange in one hand, black and white checks in the other. Well, why not? It *is* almost Halloween.

I sit on the edge of my bed and thread in the new laces. The black and white checks look a little insane with the striped socks, so how about . . . purple? Orange and purple. No, purple and *turquoise*.

So much for the random pick. The thing is, I really love fashion, and detail is everything. A cool pair of earrings, the way a scarf drapes, or the right choice of belt can make all the difference. It's about how you *feel* in the outfit you're wearing. When I'm in a play at school, my costume is mega important. When you put on a character's shoes, you put on her walk. You become someone else for a while.

I love that.

Not that I've gotten to be in a play this fall. This is the year Fay decided I needed to help out after school at Dad's dry-cleaning business, Cinderella Cleaners, so I had to drop out of Drama Club for the time being. I thought I would mind, but the job has turned out to be more fun than I ever could have imagined. Among other things, I'm surrounded by clothes every afternoon. Which totally rocks.

My two-tone Converse high-tops look great with my socks, favorite jeans, and teal green V-neck sweater. I bounce past my twin stepsisters' room, where they're having their usual fight about who stole whose barrette. Their voices spill into the hall.

"I did *not* take it off of your dresser!" That's Brynna, the whiner.

"Then who did?" That's Ashley, the boss.

"I don't *know*!" Brynna whimpers.

It's tough to be nine.

I head down to the kitchen to make my school lunch. Today's a no-brainer. Fay had to work late at her real estate office last night, so after Dad closed up at the cleaners, he and I picked up a couple of pizzas from Benny's. The twins and Fay ate up all the Extra Cheese, but there are two slices left of the Broccoli-Garlic-and-Mushroom, and my favorite lunch in the world is cold pizza. I lay one slice on top of the other, face-to-face like a giant triangular sandwich, and reach for the foil. Fay is frowning.

"You call that a lunch?" She's just spread grape jelly and Skippy on white bread for Ashley and Brynna, so if we're going to butt heads about good nutrition, I think possibly

broccoli wins. But I've promised my dad I'll be nicer to Fay, and he's sitting right there at the table, so I just smile and reach for the carrot sticks.

"Want me to pack some of these for the girls?" I ask, and she nods. Would it kill her to say "Thank you"? I toss carrots into three ziplock bags, grab an orange and a juice box for my lunch, and I'm good to go.

"Bye, Dad," I say, leaning over to kiss him on top of his head. He looks up from his newspaper, raising his eyebrows. They're dark like mine, though everyone tells me I look much more like my mother. I wish that were true. I got her wavy brown hair and brown eyes — Dad's are blue — but not the irresistible twinkle that makes me miss her bright smile every morning.

"You're not eating breakfast?" Dad asks. I hold up a granola bar, and he makes a face. "More than one food group, please."

Are he and Fay in this together? "It has dried fruit and nuts," I say, rolling my eyes. "And I'm having orange juice, see?"

"How about some eggs?" Fay pipes up, and I'm trapped.

• • •

Two fried eggs and a piece of toast later, I'm barreling out the door to meet up with my best friend, Jess Munson, who lives two blocks away. The fact that I'm late doesn't mean much, since she's always later. Jess's mom is the queen of last minute.

We meet at the corner — me tearing up my street with my scarf flapping wildly, Jess streaking down hers with her jacket unzipped in spite of the chill in the air.

"Beat you!" yells Jess, though she didn't, not really.

"Fay fed me fried eggs," I explain.

Jess *hates* fried eggs, especially when the yolks are runny. She shudders, her red curls tossing under her signature Mad Hatter top hat. "Ugh. Better you than me."

We turn onto Underhill Avenue, heading up the long hill toward Weehawken Middle School. My next-door neighbor, Mr. Wheeler, crosses the street with his two tiny papillon dogs jumping up and down on their leashes. Jess always calls them "the yappers," but I think they're cute. I love the way their ears stand straight up, like bows on a hat.

My eyes follow them as Mr. Wheeler walks past the Underhill Deli, and I spot a new poster in the front window. The poster is bright orange, with a graphic of eyes peering

through a black satin mask. I look up the street and notice the same poster's stapled to every phone pole. Before I have time to react, Jess is pointing to one.

"What's with the mask?" she asks. "Is someone doing *Phantom*?"

"Not without *us*," I respond, since *Phantom of the Opera* is on my all-time Top Ten list of Broadway shows. There's nothing quite as romantic as a mysterious guy in a mask. When I was little, my favorite DVDs were *The Princess Bride* and *Zorro*.

We move closer to look at the poster, which reads:

Dance with the Stars at  
*Hunger Unmasked*

"Oh, of course. It's that fund-raiser thing they do every year," Jess says.

I nod. "I heard last year's was great." We keep reading eagerly.

**Masquerade Ball to Benefit Arts Against Hunger**

- Live Music by Dreamcatcher



- Silent Art Auction
- Fleet Feet Dancers
- PLUS Broadway Stars from *Bye Bye Birdie* and —

I gasp out loud. “*Angel!*”

*Angel* is a new Broadway musical starring my major celebrity crush, Adam Kessler. I used to have a Zac Efron photo as my desktop background, and now it’s Adam instead, so we’re talking *incredibly* cute.

When I first started helping out at the cleaners, I found a pair of tickets to *Angel*’s opening night that had been left behind by a customer. By a series of chances that still feels like magic, I went to the show’s opening night and got to meet Adam, who’s even dreamier in person. Then Jess won a raffle and got to see the show, too. Which is now on our all-time Top *One* list.

I wonder what “stars” will be at this masquerade ball. Could one be . . . *him*?

As usual, Jess is right on my wavelength. “Do you think Adam Kessler —?” we say at exactly the same time.

Jess laughs and tags my arm. “You owe me a Coke,” she says, which we started saying in nursery school.

“No, you owe *me* a Coke,” I reply, while my heart does a little flip-flop at the thought of seeing Adam in person again.

Not that either Jess or I can afford to attend the ball — according to the poster, the tickets cost eighty dollars apiece, with a discount of one hundred fifty dollars per couple. It’s all for a good cause, of course, but those aren’t eighth-grade prices.

“Don’t you wish . . .” I start, and Jess says, “Yes!” before I even finish my sentence.

“It just looks so *glamorous*,” I go on dreamily.

Jess nods. “I wish I could bring Jason.”

Jason Geissinger is Jess’s new crush — I might almost have to say *boyfriend* — who goes to the Foreman Academy, a snooty prep school where Jess and I went to a dance and had some adventures. They’ve seen each other exactly twice since, but they’re setting world records for texting. Whenever Jess mentions his name, which is all the time, I know I’m going to be in for a monologue. But before she can really get going now, a gust of wind picks up her top hat, blowing it into a nearby hedge.

Something else blows past us, too — a loose poster from the next phone pole. I want that!

We pounce like two kittens. Jess scoops up her hat and I grab the poster, and we're both so excited we charge to the top of the hill. Our gym teacher would be proud.

We're just turning into the school parking lot, still breathing hard, when a long line of empty yellow buses starts to move down the driveway. We really *are* late.

"Uh-oh," I say, and we pour on the speed, skidding through the front doors just before the first bell rings for homeroom.

It's not till I go back to my locker for lunch that I remember the Hunger Unmasked poster I saved from the wind. (Maybe the eight by ten photo of Adam Kessler inside my locker door, wedged between Robert Pattinson and Johnny Depp, is the reminder.) I take the poster out and look at the mask again. I can practically hear the rustle of silk and see elegant dancers swirling in pairs. *Will* Adam be one of the guest Broadway stars? I would so love to go!

Will Carson stops by on the way to his locker. He's

wearing his usual band logo T-shirt — Modest Mouse, whose name seems to suit his don't-look-at-me bangs and shy manner.

“What’s that?” he says, looking over my shoulder. I show him the poster, feeling suddenly super self-conscious. Will and I like each other, more than a little and maybe a lot, which makes things that used to be normal feel totally awkward. Like having those fan photos inside my locker. Or being aware that he’s standing so close and is just the right inch or two taller than me.

Am I blushing? I hope not.

“This looks mad cool,” says Will, scanning the poster. “I’ve heard of this Dreamcatcher band.”

The date is next Friday, I notice — the day before Halloween. I also see there’s a Web site, and make a mental note to look it up when I get home.

Will lets out a low whistle. “A hundred and fifty bucks, whoa.”

He’s pointing at the discount price, the one that’s for couples. Will darts a quick look at me, then looks away fast. Great, now we’re *both* blushing.

It is *so* much easier crushing on celebrities than a real

guy you actually know. Perfectly innocent words, like “couple” or “talking to,” or even something as simple as “with,” can blow up in your face.

“Are you going to lunch or the band room?” I ask quickly, tucking the poster on top of my afternoon books.

“Lunch,” says Will, mumbling a quick “See you there” before scuttling off to his locker.

See you *there*? Really? I’m going there, too, duh. So couldn’t we walk down the staircase together, like we used to before all this liking-each-other stuff got in the way and made everything mean much too much?

Apparently not. Will’s bending over his combination lock as if twisting the dial is some kind of brain surgery that needs every ounce of his concentration. I could wait till he’s done, but I don’t want to stalk the guy, so I grab my lunch bag and go down the stairs by myself.

Am I imagining things, or does Will look after me as soon as my back is turned? This is getting ridiculous. Aren’t we just friends, plus a little bit extra?

That “little bit extra” is killer.

• • •

I always eat lunch with the same three friends: Jess, of course, Sara Parvati, and Amelia Williams. Straight-A student Sara and sporty Amelia are each other's besties, just like me and Jess, and the four of us love to hang out as a group. But lately our table has swelled to include Will, Ethan Horowitz, who's been my friend since forever, and — this is the deal breaker — Ethan's girlfriend, Kayleigh Carell.

Kayleigh is that queen-bee blond cheerleader every middle school seems to have, as predictable as the perfume wafting out of a Hollister store (which she wears 24/7, just to make sure we know where she shops). She's the bane of my life, because unlike most cheerleaders, she thinks she's an actress and goes out for Drama Club like me and Jess. Why can't she stick to her own clique? It's just *wrong*.

Kayleigh started eating with us when Sara and I got cast in a music video starring Kayleigh's favorite pop singer, Tasha Kane. This made us at least temporarily cool. But she can't quite decide between kissing up to us and her usual dripping disdain, which makes lunch conversations a little bit weird. You never know which side of Kayleigh you'll get.

Sara starts opening take-out containers from her family's Indian restaurant and wonderful curry smells float through the air. I'm suddenly starving. I take my lunch bag off my pile of books and unwrap my pizza sandwich.

"Trade you a bite for a bite," says Jess, holding up her ham and Swiss. I nod, even though she's put on so much mustard her rye bread looks yellow.

Kayleigh leans over the table, flipping her blond hair away from her face with one hand as she looks at the Hunger Unmasked poster sitting on top of my math book.

"Oh, the *masquerade* ball," she says, putting her other hand on Ethan's arm as if he were a purse she was carrying. "We've got tickets for that, don't we, Ethan?" Sometimes Kayleigh seems to be running her own private contest to see how many times she can use the word *we* in a sentence. Everyone gets it, okay? You're a *couple*. Big whoop.

I look down the table at Will, who's best friends with Ethan and doesn't like Kayleigh much better than I do. He's dredging a buffalo wing through blue cheese dressing. Sometimes his lunch is leftovers from the Craft Services

table on video sets. Will's father was the recording engineer on Tasha Kane's video, which is how I got to try out for it, with the help of a really cool vest that I found at the cleaners.

But Kayleigh's not done yet. "My parents already bought tickets for us," she says, smirking at me. "They're really expensive."

"Too bad Diana hasn't been paid for the Tasha Kane video yet," Jess can't resist saying. "She could buy tickets for all of us out of her fee." Kayleigh's lower lip, shiny with gloss, curls into a pout.

Just then Amelia comes back from the hot lunch line with a tray full of popcorn shrimp, wax beans, and corn. Her whole lunch is yellow and tan. So is her outfit — a pale yellow hoodie and khakis. With her blond ponytail and outdoor tan, she looks kind of yellow and tan herself.

"Where'd you get *that*?" she asks, eyeing the poster as she settles down at the end of the table. "My sister's dance school is performing there."

"The Fleet Feet Dancers?" Jess asks her, at the same time as I ask, "What stars are coming from *Angel*?"



“Fleet Feet, right. No idea what stars — if they knew, you can bet it would be on the poster,” Amelia says calmly, answering both of our questions at once. She pops a shrimp into her mouth. “Ooh, hot,” she says, fanning her mouth with one hand. “My mother is making me volunteer at this thing.”

My ears prick up. “Really? Do they need more volunteers?”

“I can ask, but I totally doubt it,” Amelia says. “Mom’s drafted every kid in Fleet Feet who won’t be on the stage. Plus lucky me.”

“Hey, if you want to trade places,” says Jess, “I’d love to get a free pass to this. So would Diana.”

Amelia shakes her head glumly. “No way I can get out of this one. My mom was a dancer when she was young, and it’s her whole world. You’d think having one daughter in toe shoes would be enough, but she keeps hoping I’m a late bloomer who’ll drop soccer and get into dance if she just keeps *exposing* me to it. Good luck with that, Mom.”

“So we’ll see you there,” Kayleigh says brightly, draping her arm around Ethan’s neck as she beams at Amelia. “It’ll be so *fun*!”

I'm sorry, but there's something wrong with a world where Kayleigh Carell gets to go to a glamorous masquerade ball — possibly with *Adam Kessler* as a special guest — and Jess and I don't.

I must look way disappointed, because Amelia studies my face as she finishes chewing her shrimp. Then she says, "Let me talk to my mom," in a voice that sounds more like, "We'll work something out."

Yes!