



MAYA GOLD

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Chapter One

I wish there was a law against having math class last period. The only numbers I can possibly concentrate on at this time of day are the ones on the clock, as the second hand ticks oh-so-slowly toward freedom.

It doesn't help that my teacher, Mr. Perotta, is standing directly in front of the Homecoming parade poster that's tacked up on the bulletin board. Most schools have Homecoming in October, but Weehawken, New Jersey, where I've lived all my life, is right across the Hudson River from a *very* famous parade. In fact, the giant balloons for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade are stored in an old Pepsi warehouse here and get trucked into New York through the Lincoln Tunnel, a few blocks away. So our town's tradition is to throw our own big parade on the

weekend before Thanksgiving. This year's poster has a turkey design, and Mr. Perotta is standing so close that it looks like the drumstick is coming right out of his ear.

My best friend, Jess Munson, is sitting diagonally in front of me. I wonder if she's noticed our teacher's new look. I try to catch her eye, but she's bending forward, her springy red curls nearly hiding her face as her pencil moves eagerly over her loose-leaf notebook. If you didn't know any better, you'd assume she was taking notes as Mr. Perotta drones on about dodecahedrons, but I'm sitting at just the right angle to see that she's doodling flowers and cartoon monsters all over the margin.

I can't help smiling, since my own notebook's margins are totally covered with fashion sketches. Still, I don't want Mr. Perotta to ask, "What's so funny?" or worse yet, to come see for himself, so I turn my head. But the view to my left is way more distracting than Jess's doodles or the Homecoming poster. The second-floor windows look across the river at the world's most spectacular skyline. The sun's glinting off the chrome spires of the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building, and I picture a giant silk banner flapping between them, with the words:

DIANA DONATO, WISH YOU WERE HERE!

No such luck. I'm in eighth-grade math, and as soon as the bell rings, I'll be heading to work at my family's dry-cleaning business, Cinderella Cleaners. I've been helping out there ever since my stepmother, Fay, decided I was old enough to work after school instead of being in the Drama Club's fall play, *Our Town*. I was pretty mad about having to work there at first, but the cleaners turned out to be way more fun than I could have ever imagined. I've made some great friends, learned a little about tailoring and design, and had some amazing adventures. So no regrets, right?

Well, maybe one. This afternoon our Drama Club advisor, Ms. Wyant, is posting the sign-up sheet for the holiday show, *The Snow Queen*. It was bad enough missing out on *Our Town*, my favorite play in the world, but *The Snow Queen* is a *musical*.

If there's anything I love more than getting to act, it's getting to sing, dance, *and* act. All I want to do when the bell rings in (count 'em) twelve seconds is beat a path to Ms. Wyant's door to sign up for auditions. Which is exactly what Jess will be doing without me. I wouldn't say that I'm jealous, but . . .

Three . . . two . . . one . . . *BRRRRRRINNNNG!*

The classroom erupts in a sudden stampede. Jess slams her notebook shut and jumps up, turning toward me.

“Come on!” she says breathlessly. “Help me sign up!”

Help her sign up? I don’t really get why she’d need help, and I don’t have a whole lot of turnaround time before I need to be on the bus to the cleaners. Plus it’s bound to make me feel even more I’m-not-saying-jealous to go to Ms. Wyant’s classroom and *not* put my name on the sign-up sheet.

But Jess is my best friend, and I wouldn’t dream of leaving her hanging.

“You bet,” I say, scooping my own notebook into my backpack and waving good-bye to our friends Sara Parvati and Amelia Williams. Math is the only class all four of us have together, and we fall into neat pairs: Sara’s a straight-A math whiz and Amelia loves number puzzles like sudoku and kenken. They’re also both soccer fanatics, while Jess and I live and breathe theatre, music, and art. We used to call ourselves the Left Brain/Right Brain Club.

So today the left brainiacs are heading to soccer practice, and we right-brained creatives are going to Drama Club, one to sign up and one just passing through.

"I'm *so* excited!" says Jess as she grabs my hand, pulling me through the after-school swarm in the hall. She's perfected the art of rushing just enough to get where she's going without having teachers call after her, "No running in the halls!"

Even so, we're not the first to arrive at Ms. Wyant's door. That would be Riley Jackson, a lanky African-American boy in our class with a really sensational voice. He played Henry Higgins and I played Eliza Doolittle when the Drama Club did *My Fair Lady* last year. Riley's writing his name on the top of the list with a bright orange Sharpie. His signature looks like an autograph.

"Can't miss *that*," says Jess, bending to write her own name right under his.

"That's the point," Riley grins as he snaps the cap back on his Sharpie. "Hey, Diana, are you trying out for this one?" His tone is hopeful, which makes me happy and sad at the same time.

I shake my head. "I've got work every day after school. I can't go to rehearsals."

"Hello, young stars," says Ms. Wyant, coming out of her classroom with her trademark big smile. She once told us that when she was fresh out of college and at her first-ever screen test, the casting director said, "You'll never work in commercials with *that* set of gums." But I think she's gorgeous. And she's taught us so much about acting, auditions, and *life*.

"About those rehearsals, Diana," Ms. Wyant says, clearly having caught the tail end of our conversation. "Do you think your father might be willing to let you miss work for just one week? It would be the last five days of rehearsals before the show."

"I'm not sure," I say honestly, but my heart starts beating faster.

"If so, there might be a role you could do," Ms. Wyant explains. "It's a solo."

A *solo*! My heartbeat speeds up.

"You mean the Enchantress?" says Riley, and Ms. Wyant nods.

"Of course!" cries Jess. "You'd be *perfect*, Diana!"

I haven't read the script — I thought it would just make me feel even worse. But as soon as I hear “the Enchantress” my imagination goes into overdrive. As Ms. Wyant explains that the character sings a song that casts a spell, plunging the kingdom into a winter that lasts for ten years, I picture myself in the silvery robes and fur-trimmed cloak of Narnia's evil White Witch. It gives me the shivers. In a good way.

“I'm planning to stage the Enchantress's song in front of the curtain while the stage crew is changing the set to a snow scene behind,” she explains. “So there's no one else in the scene. If you get the part, we could work on the music together during your study hall, or at lunch. You'd just have to commit to come in every day during tech week.”

“That would be amazing,” I tell her, feeling as if the clouds have just parted to let in a ray of bright sunshine. “I'll ask my dad this afternoon.”

“Auditions are tomorrow and Thursday,” she smiles, tapping the sign-up sheet. “Bring a prepared song — anything you'd like to sing — and I'll let you go first, so you won't miss your bus.”

“Thank you so much!” I can feel my eyes shining. What am I going to sing? My mind’s turning cartwheels.

Not so fast, I remind myself. Dad hasn’t given permission yet, and there’s no guarantee that he will. I take a deep breath, trying to hold down my skyrocketing hopes, though it’s probably already too late. Once I start dreaming about something I want, it’s hard to let go of it. I’m stubborn that way.

“Here,” says Ms. Wyant, and hands me a script; Jess and Riley already have theirs from earlier Drama Club meetings. I clutch mine against my chest like a good luck charm as Jess and I rush toward our lockers. But as soon as we turn the corner, we run smack into my least favorite person in Drama Club, Kayleigh Carell. As always, she’s with her matching blond sidekick, Savannah Bates. They’re both dressed in full cheerleader outfits. They haven’t had time to change clothes since the bell rang, so they must have been wearing their uniforms all afternoon, just so the rest of us know they’ve got cheerleading practice today.

What is it about being a cheerleader that makes everyone think you’re the queen of the universe? What’s the big deal

about wearing a short skirt and learning a few simple arm movements? News flash: *Anybody* can jump in the air and yell, “Tick, tick, boom!”

Not that I’d ever want to. But surely I *could*.

All the middle school cheerleaders strut down the halls as if they own the school, and they’re all *obsessed* with making it into the big league: the varsity cheer squad at Weehawken High. But Kayleigh’s the worst, because not only does she give off cheerleader attitude 24/7; she also thinks she’s the star of the Drama Club.

Now, *that’s* getting personal. Jess and I have been acting since we were in preschool, where we played both ends of the Cow That Jumped Over the Moon. I was the head and front legs, and Jess was the tail end that got all the laughs. With her wild red curls and great sense of timing, Jess still prefers playing comic parts. Which leaves me and Kayleigh duking it out for the leads.

“What are you doing with *that*?” Kayleigh demands, pointing a polished pink fingernail at my script for *The Snow Queen*.

“She’s going to try out,” says Jess. “So am I.”

Kayleigh shoots Jess a you're-not-even-worth-answering glare and turns toward me, tossing her ponytail over one shoulder. "Don't you have to work at the laundromat?"

"It's a dry cleaner," I say. I can feel my ears burning. "And yes, I do have to work there. But Ms. Wyant's letting me audition anyway."

"Must be because she's so *good*," Jess says loyally.

Savannah lets out a little snort, like a whinnying pony. "Yeah, right," she says. I notice she's carrying two sets of pom-poms: her own and Kayleigh's. Imagine if Jess made me carry her Mad Hatter top hat around, like a lady-in-waiting.

"You know what, Diana?" says Kayleigh, her voice going syrupy. "I'm glad you're going to try out. It'll be nice to have *some* competition."

If only. Even if Dad lets me try out, the lead is off-limits — I'd have to be free to rehearse every day. Jess has her eye on the role of Court Jester, and most of the other girls who can sing well are sixth and seventh graders, so unless Ms. Wyant casts a newbie, Kayleigh will probably be wearing the Snow Queen's tiara.

Just what we need from her: more royal attitude.

As if she were reading my thoughts, Kayleigh scans my outfit from top to toe. My brown hair is pulled back with a small rhinestone clip, and I'm wearing a vintage angora cardigan over a pastel pink cami, black skirt, and tights, plus my signature Converse high-tops with two different laces (neon yellow and pink this week).

"Where did you pick up that sweater, the Salvation Army?" she smirks.

Actually, it was Goodwill, but I don't expect country-club Kayleigh to get how much fun it is trolling through racks of secondhand clothes for the odd buried treasure. For her, "used" means you've worn it to school more than once.

But I don't have enough nerve to confront her head-on. The only time I've ever stood up to Kayleigh was when I was wearing a mask and she thought I was somebody else, a rich girl named Taylor with famous friends. It felt pretty sweet, but "Taylor" did not have to face Kayleigh's snap judgments day in and day out, like I do when I'm just plain Diana. And ever since that masquerade ball, when Kayleigh's boyfriend, Ethan Horowitz, broke up with her and went trick-or-treating with our group of friends

instead, she's been even snootier toward Jess and me than usual.

I'm trying to figure out how to snap back at that crack about my vintage sweater — something sharp enough to make me feel I'm not being a doormat, but not such a burn it'll make Kayleigh pick on me more — when Ms. Wyant comes around the corner. She's holding an empty coffee mug and is clearly on her way to the teachers' lounge.

"Hello, young stars!" she says again. It's her usual greeting, but the effect on Kayleigh is instantaneous. In a blink, she's transformed from a sneering queen bee to a simpering fan. Maybe she *can* act a little.

"Oh, Ms. Wyant," she gushes. "I just love *The Snow Queen*. I was reading the script out loud last night and it made me cry every time."

"Well, good," says Ms. Wyant. "The trick will be making the *audience* cry." She looks at Savannah. "Are you trying out?"

Savannah shakes her head, giggling. "I'm shy."

She's about as shy as a squawking parrot, but fine.

“We can always use help on the stage crew, Savannah,” Ms. Wyant says with a smile. “And Kayleigh, be sure to sign up for auditions with Jess and Diana.”

“Did you see Kayleigh’s face?” Jess gloats as we walk toward my bus. “She looked like she was sucking on lemons.”

“Must be ‘cause she misses me so,” says a boy’s voice right behind her. I turn and see Ethan, grinning from ear to ear.

My heart skips a beat when I see that he’s with his best friend and my friend-maybe-boyfriend, Will Carson. It’s hard to know what to call Will, now that we’ve taken the plunge and *held hands*. (All right, only once, but still.) There’s got to be some better way to describe our relationship, but I don’t have a clue what it is. Neither does anyone else, it seems. The English language could really use some new words for those wobbly steps between “just friends” and “couple.”

Will’s dark hair is in its usual bed-head tumble, and he’s wearing a new entry from his seemingly bottomless

drawer of T-shirts with band logos. This time it's the Kings of Leon, a funny design with a fake necktie stenciled below the neck. It looks really cute peeking from his jean jacket.

I smile, glad to see Will as always, and he smiles back awkwardly. Now, if *he* told Ms. Wyant that he was shy, he'd be telling the truth. He might work on the sound crew, but there's no way he'd ever perform on a stage. The only exception is when he's holding one of his instruments: either the bass guitar he plays with his big brother's mad cool rock band, or the euphonium, the tuba-like horn he plays in the middle school stage band. You get to see the real Will when he's doing his music. Just like you see the real me when I'm acting.

Neither Jess nor Ethan has such a problem. What you see is what you get. They tease each other nonstop, but sometimes I think it's because they're so much alike. I wonder if Ethan, with his blue eyes, cleft in his chin, and oversize ego, thinks Jess has a crush on him. But she totally doesn't; Jess is dating a super-cute boy from a nearby prep school. Still, Ethan seems to get a kick out of any attention

paid to him, even negative attention. Like now, when Jess swats his arm with her Mad Hatter top hat.

“Dream on,” she says. “Who would miss *you*?”

“Anybody with taste,” Ethan shrugs. “Though I guess that excludes any girl who wears top hats.”

“That’s just what your cheerleader girlfriend thinks,” Jess responds.

“*Ex*-girlfriend. Accent on *ex*,” Ethan says. “Not a moment too soon either. Kayleigh’s parents are throwing a luau theme party Saturday night, right after the Homecoming game. They’d probably want me to dress as a pineapple.”

Since Kayleigh’s parents made Ethan wear a red-and-gold clown suit to the masquerade ball, that’s probably not far from the truth.

“But you guys are both going on Saturday, right?” I ask, looking at Will.

“What, to the luau? No way!” Ethan says with a shudder. “One ukulele and I would be toast.”

“I meant to Homecoming,” I say.

I love our town’s Homecoming tradition. There’s always

a big parade with fire trucks, banners, and floats sponsored by local groups or decorated in the high school's colors, blue and white. The high school marching band struts its stuff, and the local police have a bagpipe and drum corps. There's a cool ceremony where the senior class officers crown the Homecoming king, queen, and court right before the big game, and the whole crowd does the Wave. And even though I'm not as much of a football fan as Amelia and Sara, there's something incredibly exciting about sitting in the bleachers with your friends and roaring, "Go, team!"

Even though there are bound to be cheerleaders.

This year, Homecoming should be even more fun than usual. Jess, Amelia, Sara, and I have always gone with somebody's parents — usually Amelia's dad, who played football in high school — but this year we've gotten permission to sit by ourselves for the first time ever. I'm hoping Will and Ethan will join us, too.

"I'll be in the parade," says Will. "Playing euphonium."

"Really?" I say, surprised. "I thought only the high school band marches."

Will shrugs. "I'm in it. They're short on euphoniums."

"I believe it," says Ethan. "Who'd play an instrument you can't pronounce?"

"*You* can't pronounce *guitar*," Jess says. "So you don't count."

"That is so cool!" I tell Will. I'm really impressed. That is just like him, to be in the high school band when he's still in eighth grade and not even mention it. "We'll be at the parade with Amelia and Sara."

"And Jason," says Jess with a really bright smile.

"Oh, *Jaaaa-son*," says Ethan in an exaggerated posh accent that sounds like *Project Runway*'s Tim Gunn. "So the preppy prince stoops to attend an event with us public school bottom-feeders?"

"Who said anything about going with *you*?" Jess responds, grinning. They might keep this up for the rest of the afternoon, but the school buses let off their warning horn blast.

"Bye, guys!" I say, running off as they all chorus, "Bye!" Is it my imagination, or is Will's smile the widest?