

Chapter One

I'm in love with this view. It's the one truly fabulous thing about growing up in Weehawken, New Jersey: Every time I look east, even if it's just to gaze out the window during eighth-period math, my horizon is filled with the glittering skyline of midtown Manhattan.

Too bad there's a river between me and it.

My eyes follow a red tugboat pulling a barge about six times its size past the Statue of Liberty. There are cruise ships steaming away from the docks, headed for Cancun or Paradise Island, and planes angling upward from Newark Airport, sun glinting off silvery wings. Wherever I look, someone's leaving. Except me.

"Diana Donato?"

My math teacher, Mr. Perotta, has X-ray eyes. He can be drawing a graph on the board with his back to the room and still know who's paying attention and who's got one eye on the clock, or the school buses lining up outside the doors, or the Empire State Building. How does he do it? It must be some trick teachers practice at home.

I don't have a clue what question he's asked me. I hesitate, torn between telling the truth and making a wild flying guess, when the bell fills the air with the sound of freedom.

All around me, kids jump to their feet, scraping chairs and slamming books shut, and Mr. Perotta is so busy yelling, "Work sheets tomorrow! Graphs fifteen to twenty!" that I never have to confess my attention was miles away. *Whew!*

My best friend, Jessica Munson, comes up to me, digging an elbow into my side as we go into the hall. "Should I say it?"

"What?" asks our friend Sara Parvati, her ears always sharp.

"Saved by the bell," Jess intones with high drama. She tosses her head. I've always envied her wavy red hair — mine

is boring dark brown — but she envies me being almost five feet six, so I guess we're even.

Sara groans and takes off with her soccer buddy, Amelia Williams, their ponytails bouncing in rhythm, one black and one blond. Jess shrugs and grins. “Well, I *asked*.”

“No, you should not say it,” I laugh. “*Rewind*.”

I mime pushing the button on an imaginary remote and Jess takes a step backward, pretending to stuff the words back in her mouth. This is one of our bits. Sometimes we put each other into Fast Forward or Pause.

I'd like to put my whole life on Pause today. I know it's completely abnormal to wish I could stay after school. Any other day, I'd be beating a path to my locker and rushing outside with Jess and Sara and Amelia, but right now my sneakers are dragging along the speckled linoleum as if they have magnets attached to their soles. Right foot (hot pink shoelace), left foot (pumpkin orange).

Today's my first day at my new sort-of job. I say sort-of because I'm thirteen, which is not legal working age yet for a regular job. But it's fine to “help out” in a family-run business, and Cinderella Cleaners is nothing if not family-run.

First by my grandparents, now by my dad. One of Dad's part-time workers just went off to college, and my step-mother, Fay, convinced him that I should "pitch in."

Not only that, but I have to start work on the very same day that the drama club's holding auditions for the fall play, *Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder. I'm dying to go there with Jess and try out. I know I can't, but some stubborn piece of my brain hasn't given up hope of a last-minute rescue, even though there's no bell to be saved by this time.

Our friend Ethan Horowitz is walking toward our lockers with a new kid named Will Carson, who sits behind me in English class. Will's tall and quiet, but Ethan is loud enough for two. He's got the kind of looks that could go either way — kind of stocky, with sandy brown hair — but he's so sure of himself that everybody just takes it on credit he's cute. "See you guys at auditions," he says with a grin. I've told him three times that I'm not trying out, but apparently it didn't get through the borders of Ethan World.

"You bet," says Jess, and then, so I won't have to tell him *again* — Jess is that kind of friend — she asks Will if he's going to audition.

Will looks a little embarrassed. He shrugs, and his dark hair falls over his forehead. He pushes it back with one hand. “I’m not into acting much. I thought I’d try stage crew.”

“Oh, cool!” says Jess. “We can use some new hands on the tech side.”

It’s hard not to feel left out of that “we.” I’ve been in every fall play since I started middle school. Last year I played Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*. I spent months watching movies to practice my English accent, and I got to wear this gorgeous ivory ball gown. In sixth grade, we did a musical called *Cafeteria Daze*. I was just in the lunch lady chorus, but even though the show was kind of lame, I was thrilled to be up on the stage with eighth graders. They seemed so grown up.

But this year, I *am* in eighth grade, and I won’t even get to try out. Fay’s waiting right outside the school in her SUV to make sure I won’t “pull any stunts.” This is a waste of her time. I’ve already pulled everything I could pull — I promised my dad I’d work every afternoon *after* the play’s done, and weekends, and winter vacation — but Fay thinks I’m old enough to give up things I love.

Well, what can you say to *that*? I can't stand the look on Dad's face when Fay and I get into fights, like his heart's being pulled into pieces, so I just agreed.

Ethan and Will head down the hall, and Jess leans on the lockers, watching me spin the dial on my lock. "It's not *fair*," she says with her lower lip stuck out like a shelf.

"It's okay," I tell her with a sigh. "There'll be other plays."

"If the drama club earns enough money," Jess replies darkly and I nod. Last year's ticket sales didn't cover expenses, so the drama club is in danger of being shut down. I wish I could help out in some way, but I've got to go take care of rich people's clothes.

It isn't as bad as it sounds. When I was little, Cinderella Cleaners was my favorite place in the world. I used to beg my grandpapa to let me stand on the pedal that makes all the clothes circle around the whole shop in their long plastic bags — the Dress Parade, I used to call it. Now I'll be running the Dress Parade. Last winter, Papa and Nonni retired to Miami Beach, and my dad started running the business. I don't think he likes it as much as he liked painting houses, but Dad's never been a complainer.

I open my locker. The inside of the door is plastered with photos of my favorite actors. Johnny Depp, Daniel Radcliffe, Zac Efron, the whole cast of *Twilight*, and my newest celebrity crush, Adam Kessler, whose eyes are as blue as a tropical pool. He just had a small part on *Gossip Girl* and he's playing the lead in a brand-new rock musical that's opening on Broadway next month. It's called *Angel*, and as soon as I saw the commercial for it, I switched the wallpaper on my laptop from Zac to Adam.

Jess looks at his face. "I can't wait to see *Angel*. He is *so* cute." Suddenly she grabs my arm. "Logo alert!"

I look over my shoulder in time to see Kayleigh Carell, wearing the whole Paramus Park Mall. If Kayleigh owns any item of clothing that doesn't say what store it came from, it must be pajamas.

Today she's wearing an Abercrombie cardigan that says ABERCROMBIE, and Hollister sweats that say HOLLISTER. Her cami is subtle: Instead of AMERICAN EAGLE, it just says AE. She's walking with her boyfriend, Zane, and they're holding hands in this annoyingly *look-we're-holding-hands* way. This is what's called "going out" in eighth grade. You don't *go* anywhere. You just walk around holding hands in

the hall and tell anybody who'll listen that you're going out. Then you get one of your friends to break up for you during lunch, and go out with somebody else. It's ridiculous.

Kayleigh has already heard I'm not going to try out, so she could afford to be nice to the peasants, but she just pretends to be giggling her head off at something Zane said as they pass by my locker.

"If *she* gets to play Emily," Jess says through clenched teeth, "I will puke."

"Maybe *you'll* get the part," I say, though Emily Webb is the lead role in *Our Town*, and Jess always tries out for comic parts. She was a total tomboy when we were both kids — she beat up all the boys on the playground — and even now she dresses in skateboarder hoodies and skinny jeans, adding a Mad Hatter top hat whenever she can. She'd wear the hat to school if there wasn't a dress code rule about headgear; our principal thinks it encourages gangs. It's hard to imagine a gang sporting Mad Hatter top hats, but if there was, Jessica Munson would rule it.

I have a totally different style. I'm into fashion as much as the next girl, but my thing is vintage. I love prowling through thrift stores and resale boutiques, trying to find

buried treasure. I can stop at a yard sale that seems to be nothing but teacups and toddler toys, and sleuth out a pearl-embroidered fifties cardigan that would be *perfect* over a cami, or a hippie-style skirt that's so out, it's back in. If I didn't like acting so much, I'd want to be a fashion designer.

What can I say? I love playing with clothes. In the privacy of my own room, I put together outfits that no one but me could imagine. Only problem is, I'm too self-conscious to wear my best looks to school. Kayleigh and her posse would stare at me like I was wearing a Halloween costume, and even though I know I shouldn't care what they think, it's no fun to have everyone saying you're weird. So I stick to the basic food groups of T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers, and just try to liven things up with accessories. I covered one wall of my bedroom with hooks, and I keep all my earrings and bangles and scarves on display 24/7.

"I've got to roll," I tell Jess. "Break a lemon." I can't remember when we started messing with the old theatre cliché "Break a leg," but now it's tradition. Usually, Jess would respond with a "break a whatever" of her own, but instead she just gives me a sad little smile and a hug.

“I’ll tell all tonight,” she says. “Text me from the cleaners if you get a chance.”

Fay is parked in the Staff Only section, right in front of a sign that says GUIDANCE. Either she didn’t bother to read it or she’s given herself a new title. She’s left her SUV running, of course, with the A/C on. She’s madly in love with her new car, and thinks global warming is nonsense.

“I have a client in twenty-five minutes,” she tells me instead of hello as I get in the passenger seat. “It’s a good thing the twins have an after-school playdate.”

I wish I had an after-school playdate, I think as Fay backs up too fast, nearly clipping somebody’s Toyota. Across the parking lot, flocks of kids are climbing onto their school buses, calling and shrieking like birds. Under the pine trees, some slackers are tossing a Frisbee around. A few girls from the soccer team lope onto the field and do stretches. I turn my head, looking for Sara and Amelia, but they must still be inside the locker room.

I try not to think any more about drama club, but I can’t help wondering who’s going to try out for the role of Emily Webb, or her boyfriend, George Gibbs. Not that

the eighth grade has any great guys, but that's why it's called acting: I can be madly in love with a four-foot-tall nerd if you put us onstage. In *Our Town*, George and Emily fall in love and get married, and years later Emily dies, but she gets to come back for just one precious day. It's all done on a bare stage, with a narrator called the Stage Manager telling the story, and it's the best play ever.

"When I was your age, I worked after school *and* on weekends," says Fay, whose nails are a shade of magenta that doesn't occur in the natural world.

Why don't grown-ups get that if you want a kid's ears to shut down, the best way to start is, "When I was your age . . ."? When Fay was my age, there were ground sloths and mastodons. She's gripping the leather-wrapped steering wheel as she heads down the hill toward the river.

Dad married Fay when I was in fifth grade, six months after my mom died. They met in a cancer bereavement support group. I know he was falling apart without Mom, and that I should be happy he found someone, but why did it have to be *her*?

Mom would have let me try out for *Our Town*. And she would have been thrilled if I got the lead. I think of

the scene in Act Three where Emily gets to come back from the dead for a day, just one day, and I suddenly realize that my eyes are moist. What would it feel like to look at the actress who's playing Emily's mother and tell her that life goes too fast and we don't get to *look* at each other? It's true, it's all true.

That's what I love about being in plays. It gives you a place to put all the feelings you have every day and can't show to anyone else or they'll think you're emo.

When I was a little kid, I used to pedal my bike around the neighborhood, interviewing myself, just to get into practice. "Oh, yes," I would croon to invisible talk-show hosts, "I've always admired the theatre. My favorite show? There are so many. Either *Annie* or *Chorus Line*." (I thought it was dashing to leave out the *A*.) Once I was telling Oprah how I got my big break as a replacement orphan when Annie came down with the flu. I didn't realize how loud I had gotten till Mrs. Pomerantz looked over her laundry line and said to her cat, "That Diana girl talks to herself."

Fay's driving us right past the Hoboken docks, where they shot *The Sopranos*. She's chatting away on her cell phone, so I get to stare out the window. The Hudson River

is choppy today, like the ocean it's meeting. I admire the shapes of the midtown skyscrapers, all different colors and heights like old books on a shelf. Every one of those windows is someone's apartment or office. If you lived in the city, you'd never run out of people to meet. And right in the middle of all those big buildings, carving a long zigzag where everything else is in squares, is Broadway.

I have a *Playbill* for every show I've seen, on the wall of my bedroom. The wall slants right over my bed, so I lie there at night and look, trying to picture myself in each theatre: maroon velvet seats that smell like old curtains, fancy ceilings with gold chandeliers. I think about all the actors who've been on that stage, how they stood in the wings with their hearts pounding, feeling the audience rustle and hush as the lights dimmed to half.

The last show I saw with my mom was *The Lion King*. We loved it so much that we couldn't bear to get up from our seats. We were the last people out of the theatre, except the guy sweeping the aisles. Every time I play the CD, I can feel Mom's fingers twined in mine; and if I have to cry onstage, that's all I need to remember.

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Fay's stopped at a traffic light right down the road from the cleaners. I can see the top of its neon sign over the roofs of the neighboring stores, and the sight makes my heart race a little. I've never had anything like a real job before, just babysitting and yard work for neighbors. This feels really different, much more adult and important. I'm feeling the same kind of pit-of-the-stomach nervous excitement I get when I stand in the wings right before my first entrance.

Maybe the trick is to see this new job as a play I've been cast in. Not the role I was hoping for, but sometimes you have to make do with the role you've been given. And even if Fay was the one who insisted that I start right now, it was Dad who wanted me to come work for him. That's kind of huge.

The traffic light changes to green and we move forward. *This is it*, I think, taking a long deep breath. *This is where everything changes.*