

Chapter One

Nothing feels better than walking outside after school. You're surrounded by friends, and everyone's talking at once, and you're *moving*, not sitting in rows while some teacher drones on. You step through the door, and the sun hits your face, and the yellow school buses are lined up, and the October leaves are sixteen shades of gorgeous. What can be bad?

Two words: French test.

Make it three: French test *tomorrow*.

The textbook sits in my backpack like a tombstone. My best friend, Jessica Munson, is walking ahead of me, noisily shuffling her sneakers through leaves, not a care in the world. This is because Jess, like the rest of my friends and anyone sane, takes Spanish instead of La Torture Chamber

of Madame Lefkowitz. As soon as my teacher gave us a list of subjects the test's going to cover, my stomach started to feel heavy. Why do verbs come in *irregular* anyway? It makes them sound like they're jeans with a defect.

Jess jumps off the curb and into a pile of dry leaves at the edge of the parking lot. The sun glints off her springy red hair. "Come on, Diana!" she yells, and I can't resist jumping in after her. Jess always manages to lighten things up and make me feel better. We're kicking big piles of leaves at each other when Kayleigh Carell, the reigning queen of the eighth grade, turns to her permanent sidekick, Savannah, and says, "Ever notice how *some* people still act like toddlers?"

Savannah covers a fake giggle with her hand. "Burn!"

Better than acting like mean-girl snobs, I want to yell back, but getting in Kayleigh's face is never a good thing to do. Especially since she's going out with Ethan Horowitz, a boy Jess and I have been friends with forever. Most of the time, Kayleigh pretends to be nice to us for Ethan's sake, and because we're all in the drama club. But it's a little like watching a snake try to smile.

Kayleigh runs her eyes over my vintage corduroy jacket and stares at my Converse high-tops, which are laced up in two different colors, as always. Today they're yellow and orange: my fall foliage look. Kayleigh lifts her nose into the air and practically sniffs as she passes. She and Savannah are both wearing white quilted jackets from Hollister and light-wash jeans tucked into Ugg boots. The only way you can tell which one is which from the back is that Kayleigh's ponytail is blonder.

"Please tell me she's not on our bus," Jess says under her breath.

"She's not," I reply. "Got your bus pass?"

Jess and I both live close enough to walk home from school, but back in September, my stepmother decided I had to help out after school at my father's dry cleaners. The timing could not have been worse: I wasn't allowed to be in the fall play, which was beyond disappointing. But my job turned out to have a real silver lining: Because of it, I got to sneak into the opening night of the world's most amazing Broadway musical, *Angel*, starring my number one celebrity crush, Adam Kessler. And I even got to

meet Adam after the show and dance with him under the stars! None of that would have happened at all if I wasn't working at Cinderella Cleaners, so I'm cool with it now.

Today, Jess is taking the bus to work with me for the first time. She's been dying to visit, but up till this week she's been tied up with rehearsals and chores for her mom. Now she's got a free afternoon to hang out, and wouldn't you know it, I'm drowning in French verbs to study. I wonder how you say "This totally stinks" *en francais*.

We're passing the flagpole. If you sat on the top and looked down at all the kids streaming out of Weehawken Middle School, crisscrossing the parking lot onto their various buses, it would probably look like a roller derby. It's amazing we don't all crash into each other. As Jess and I thread through the pack toward bus 26A, someone jogs over to us. It's Will Carson, a new boy who's in my English class. He also works on the stage crew in drama club.

"Guess what," he says, bouncing up onto the toes of his sneakers.

"I don't know, what?" Jess's voice is sarcastic but friendly; she and Will are buddies.

Will's so excited, he circles in front of us and starts walking backward. He's wearing a Death Cab for Cutie T-shirt and his dark hair tumbles over his forehead. He's grinning from ear to ear, and I notice, not for the first time, that he might be a little bit cute. Not Adam Kessler or Robert Pattinson cute, but not bad for an eighth-grade boy.

"I got a gig! A real one, for money!"

"No way!" Jess stops walking so suddenly that I slam into her back. I flush with embarrassment.

"Really?" I ask Will, though, duh, he just said so.

Will nods happily. "With my brother's band. They're playing a dance at the Foreman Academy Saturday night, and yesterday their bass player broke two of his fingers at football practice. So my brother just asked me to cover."

"Like in *42nd Street*!" I blurt. Oh, God, did I really say that out loud?

Will looks confused, but before I can tell him that it's a musical where the star breaks her leg and the understudy gets to go on in her place, Jess says, "The Foreman Academy?" with so much awe in her voice you'd think Will just told her he's playing on *MTV*

Live. “You mean Preppy Palace? I hope they’re paying you tons!”

“You know what, I never asked.” Will shrugs. “I was so stoked the rest of the band thinks I’m good enough, but yeah, right, I guess.” This sounds more like the Will Carson I know from English class, so shy that his thoughts dangle off in mid-sentence. The first few weeks of school, I thought he was a mute.

“What’s the Foreman Academy?” I ask Jess.

“Oh, come on, you must have passed it a million times,” Jess says. “It’s a fancy boarding school in, like, this *castle* high up on the Palisades,” Jess says. “It’s behind a big fence? Near the overlook point?”

I’m still not getting a picture. She sighs. “You’re probably daydreaming about some show every time you drive by it. And you can’t see the actual school from the road. It’s hidden away from us peasants. I heard that going there costs more than most colleges.”

“Whatever,” says Will. “The band’s really cool. They’re all juniors and seniors. The lead singer sounds like Pink.”

“We *have* to come see you.” Jess folds her arms, setting her jaw in an I-won’t-take-no-for-an-answer position.

Will hesitates. “I think the dance is for Foreman Academy students only.”

“Okay, we’ll come early and carry equipment,” says Jess, and I wish I could step on her foot. How obvious is it that Will doesn’t want to bring two eighth-grade girls to his first paying gig with a cool high school band? He shifts his backpack from one shoulder to the other but doesn’t say anything.

“Tell me you don’t get to bring a few guests. Bands *always* get to bring guests,” says Jess. “We’ll be your fan club.”

Will looks so uncomfortable that the warning blasts from the school buses’ air horns feel like an answered prayer. I grab Jess’s hand, pulling her toward our bus as I yell to Will over my shoulder, “Later, okay?”

Jess and I argue about the Foreman dance all the way down to the waterfront, where there’s a beautiful view of the Statue of Liberty and New York Harbor. There are a couple

of really steep hills, and every time the bus driver rolls down one, the fifth-grade boys make roller coaster sounds of “WwwhOOOa!” and throw spitballs across the aisle. It’s completely annoying.

“But Will doesn’t *want* us to go. It was totally obvious.”

“No way,” says Jess. “He’s just being a boy.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“That he’s secretly happy I asked, but he can’t let us know that because it’s not cool, so he’s acting like he’s saying no, but he really means yes.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“I have a brother,” Jess says darkly. “I know how their twisted minds work.”

Our back-and-forth could easily go on forever, but we’ve reached our stop. Up ahead I can see the neon crown on the roof of Cinderella Cleaners, right next door to the shiny chrome and turquoise trim of Sam’s Diner. We step onto the curb and start walking toward the cleaners.

“So I’m finally getting to meet all these supercool people you talk about all the time,” says Jess.

“Not *all* the time.”

“Almost. More than you talk about drama club.”

“I can’t *go* to drama club, hello. Anyway, you’re not doing anything now except planning the holiday show. Which I won’t be in either, so don’t rub it in.”

“Sorry,” says Jess, looking up at the crown. “Wow. I haven’t been here since your grandfather owned it. Does it still have those gumball machines in the lobby?”

“Gumballs and Skittles.”

“Do you get them free?”

I laugh. “What do you think?”

“When I get a job,” says Jess, “I will *insist* on free candy.”

“You do that. Tell your boss to throw in a free car while you’re at it.”

“With a chauffeur,” Jess says. “Like the guy who drove you to see *Angel*. Mom and I had to go on the PATH train.”

Thanks to my little escapade at *Angel*, Adam Kessler sent two front-row tickets to raffle off at the fall play, and Jess won. She went to a matinee with her mother last weekend, and ever since then, she’s been starstruck. “Don’t you

wish you could see Broadway shows every night and go home in a stretch limo?”

As usual, Jess makes me laugh. “As if!” I say.

“Did I tell you the restaurant Mom and I ate in —”

“You’ve told me five times.”

“The food was *so* good.” Jess sighs.

Jess’s mom is divorced and works hard as a nurse, but when Jess won the tickets, Mrs. Munson took her to lunch at a four-star French restaurant near the theatre. They split one entree and one salad, and splurged on dessert. “It was so worth it,” Jess tells me, again. “Forget your Madame Lefkowitz troubles. Any country that came up with crème brûlée is fine by me. Hey, where are you going?”

I’ve passed by the cleaners’ front door and am heading around to the back of the building. “Employee entrance,” I grin. “We’re going *backstage*.”

“Cool!” says Jess.

The back door to Cinderella Cleaners is, in fact, a bit like a stage door, leading onto a hallway with doors to the dressing rooms and the coffee and soda machines. There’s even a sort of costume rack, full of the pastel green smocks

the employees have to wear. I swipe my card through the time clock and pick up my smock.

“Should I wear one, too?” Jess asks.

I hesitate. “Better not. MacInerny will bark at you.” Miss MacInerny is my supervisor. She’s a thin, birdlike woman whose mouth is pulled down in a permanent frown. Of all inappropriate things, her first name is Joy. My friends at the customer counter and I call her Joyless, or Mac Attack.

Jess and I head into the women’s locker room and bump right into one of those friends, Elise Andrews. She’s a junior at Hoboken High School. She’s already wearing her name tag and smock and pulling her long blond hair into a ponytail. She smiles at Jess. “Are you training?”

Jess looks confused. “Um, no, I’m just —”

“Jess is my best friend,” I say quickly. “She’s just hanging out.”

“Oh, sorry,” Elise says. “I thought you’d been hired to take over my job during basketball season. Practice starts in two weeks. I’m Elise.”

“And I’m Cat,” says the petite, dark-haired girl who’s just entered the dressing room. “We’re the after-school Three Musketeers. You’ve gotta be Jess with that hair.”

Jess gives me the eye, but looks secretly pleased. “You’ve been *talking* about me?”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s all good,” says Cat, peeling her peacoat off and hanging it inside a locker. “Who’s got first shift at the customer counter?”

“You do, Catalina,” Elise says, and Cat rolls her eyes.

“Great. I am *so* up for working with Joyless today.” She watches me pin my name tag on my smock. “Did you tell her you’re bringing a guest?”

“I asked my father to tell her.”

“Oh, she’s gonna have a cow. Good times!” Cat grins, snaps up her green smock, turns, and pushes into the workroom. As soon as the door opens, Jess claps her hands to her ears, and I remember how loud the machine noise seemed to me just a few weeks ago. Elise told me back then I’d get used to it, and I guess I did.

Elise takes something plaid out of a shopping bag,

followed by something navy blue. “What’s that?” I ask, ever curious.

“My cousin’s school uniform. She spilled paint on it, and asked me to drop it off for stain removal. See you in a few!” Elise gives Jess a warm smile and carries the bunched-up uniform into the workroom.

Jess doesn’t cover her ears this time, but her eyebrows arch even higher. “And I thought the woodshop for stage crew was noisy!”

“Oh, we’re heavy metal over here,” I say, closing my locker. “You ready?”

“One second.” Jess whips out her new bright red cell phone and snaps a quick photo of me in my pastel green smock with the name tag pinned under the dorky gold crown.

“You show that to anyone and you’re *dead*!”

“Who would I show it to? Will?” Jess laughs. “Kayleigh Carell?”

“I’ll kill you nine times, I’m not kidding.”

“Relax. It’s for my eyes only,” says Jess. “I promise not to post it on Facebook for all to admire.” I grab at the

phone and she holds it above her head, laughing and snapping a second shot of me lunging toward it.

“Not fair!” I know she’s just kidding, but I’m still alarmed. I would be *so* embarrassed if anyone saw that.

“Hey, Diana. Rewind,” Jess says soothingly. “Look, I’m going to delete it, okay? Watch me press DELETE.” She does, twice, and my body relaxes.

“*Thank* you,” I say.

“What are friends for?” Jess smirks. She carefully places her phone in the outside zipper pocket of her hobo bag and looks at me. “Will this be safe in your locker?”

“Of course.”

“Did I tell you I love my new phone?”

“Only about six million times,” I say, twisting the lock shut. “You ready?”

“You bet!”

I push the door open. The workroom is busy as ever. Picture the world’s biggest closet, with a flock of people in pale green smocks hanging dresses on hangers and steam-pressing trousers and sorting huge mounds of clothes into laundry machines. There’s a radio pumping out music on top of the waves of machine noise, and high

overhead is a moving conveyor belt carrying garments in clear plastic bags.

“Whoa!” says Jess, her head swiveling back and forth. “This is *so cool*! It’s like Santa’s workshop with clothes!”

I would have to agree. If you’re into fashion and costumes like I am, the back of a cleaners *is* kind of magical.

I show Jess the No Pickup rack, where cleaned clothes get stored if they haven’t been claimed within thirty days. If they stay on the rack thirty *more* days, they’re given to charity — or to employees.

“It’s like a free thrift store!” says Jess. “One-stop shopping for Halloween costumes.”

Halloween is still three weeks away, but we’re already planning our outfits. I want to be zombie lunch ladies, but Jess favors punk-rocker fairies. She fingers a black leather jacket. “This would be *perfect*.”

“Don’t even think about that,” says a cheerful voice right behind us. “Six more days and that jacket is *mine*.” It’s Chris, the maintenance guy. His name is Chris Dowling, but he likes to say he’s Chris Rock but less rich. I introduce Jess, and he says, “You got great taste. But I got there first, you hear?”

Jess laughs; I knew she'd like everyone here.

Well, almost everyone.

I want to show Jess my other favorite place, the climate-controlled vault where we store things like fur coats and luxury goods. But I have the feeling she's going to go crazy in there, and I know if we dawdle too long, MacInerny will be even angrier at me for bringing a friend.

"Follow me," I shout over the noise, and we head down the aisle between workstations. I introduce Jess to the elderly man at the steam presser, Mr. Chen, but his wife, Rose, is out sick today. We thread our way past the sorting table and bagging machine, then push open the double doors into the customer section. It's like leaving a noisy restaurant kitchen and coming out into the dining room. This part of the building is light-filled and airy, with big plate-glass windows. Cat's logging a new order into the computer, and Miss MacInerny is handing a customer change from the cash register. As soon as she sees me with Jess, her perma-frown irons into an angry straight line.

"Who's this? What are you doing back here?" she snaps.

Cat turns her head toward us, mouthing “I told you so.”

I can feel my ears burning. “My father said —”

“Employees-only behind the counter. You know the rules.” It’s amazing how someone so small can command such authority. She’s like one of those terriers that bark at dogs twice their size.

I flip up the hinged section of counter, and Jess follows me through. From the customer side, I tell Joyless, “This is Jessica Munson. My father told you she’d be coming today.”

MacInerny shoots me a look that would petrify snakes, and I realize I’ve made a bad thing worse. She’s never approved of me working here in the first place, and mentioning my father is not going to help. Too late, though: The door to Dad’s office is open, and out he comes.

“I may not have remembered to tell you,” he says, “but yes, I did give Diana permission to bring her best friend to visit this afternoon. Welcome, Jess!”

“Thanks, Mr. Donato,” says Jess, sounding uncharacteristically meek.

But MacInerny's not finished. She turns to Jess, pasting on a fake smile for Dad's sake. "There are safety issues involved. I'm sure you can appreciate that."

Jess nods. "My mom works in a hospital lab. I'll be supersafe."

"'Course she will." Dad beams. "Jess isn't going to *work* with Diana, she's just going to take a quick tour and then sit up front and do homework. Frankly, I don't see the problem."

Before MacInerny can come up with an answer to that, I grab Jess by the hand and say, "Come and see Tailoring."

The three tailors have their own glassed-in area, off to one side of the customer counter. It's full of bright swatches of cloth, rows of thread, and the comforting clatter of sewing machines. The two seamstresses, Sadie and Loretta, have both worked here forever. My grandfather brought me to meet them when I was a baby, and they love to tell me how they stitched my crib quilt.

The head tailor, Nelson Martinez, is young enough to be their grandson, but nobody has any doubts he's the boss. He's an amazing designer — he's saving up money for graduate school, but his biggest dream is to win *Project*

Runway. He's actually gone to try out for it twice. Nelson made drop-dead gorgeous dresses for me and Cat when we went to the *Angel* premiere. Jess knows the whole story, but I've made her swear up and down she won't breathe a word to anyone.

Today, Nelson is bent over the cutting table, working his shears around pattern pieces with the confidence of a chef. He's wearing a pin-striped vest over a T-shirt and black jeans, topped off with a hip-hop fedora. He straightens up when he sees Jess.

"Amy Adams!"

"Excuse me?" says Jess.

Nelson takes a step back, looking her up and down. "Five foot three?" he says, and Jess nods. "Perfect."

"This is Jess, by the way," I say, then tell my BFF, "Nelson doesn't believe in hellos."

"*Hola*," says Nelson impatiently. "Would you model a gown for me?"

Jess's eyes get big. "Sure!"

Nelson goes over to one of the dressmaker's forms, from which he unpins a poufy white gown with a full skirt. "A customer asked me to copy a dress from *Enchanted*. The

sleeves look like deflated volleyballs, but that's what she wants. Dressing room is right there." He pushes the gown into Jess's arms, sending her into the curtained booth next to the three-way mirror.

"Who would order a gown from *Enchanted*?" I ask.

Nelson shrugs. "It's for some Halloween charity ball at Newark Performing Arts Center."

I'm stunned. "A hand-tailored dress for a Halloween costume?"

"Rich people are different, *amiga*. Hey, how's it going in there?" he calls into the dressing room.

"Good," Jess's voice comes out muffled. "Except there's no zipper."

"Work in progress. I'll pin you."

"Okay," says Jess. She pulls back the curtain and steps out uncertainly. Sadie clasps her hands over her heart.

"You look like a movie star," she says, and Loretta echoes, "Bee-yootiful!"

"Those sleeves should be shot," Nelson says. "I'm just following orders. Step up on that stool and I'll pin up the hem."

As I watch him at work, I can't help remembering the way I felt wearing the black-and-white satin dress Nelson made me for *Angel*, and that incredible dance I shared with Adam Kessler. *Why can't life be like that all the time?* I think as I picture us whirling together in a moonlit garden. It's all I can do not to sigh.

"That was awesome!" Jess cries as she follows me back to the workroom. I'm pushing a rolling bin full of tagged clothes, having promised Miss MacInerney that Jess won't touch anything in the back room. Since I'm technically too young to run the cash register or work with the heavy machines, most of my job is delivering clothes from one room to another and hanging things up. It's a little like being a busboy before you're a waiter.

"Can you believe someone's buying that gown for a charity ball?" says Jess.

"I want to go to a ball," I say dreamily, thinking of Adam.

"Maybe Nelson will make you a dress for the Foreman Academy dance."

I stop pushing the cart. “We aren’t invited, okay? Will does not want us to go to that dance. No way, no chance, not in this lifetime.”

Jess nods. “Are you sure?”

She drives me insane, but you’ve got to love her.