

Chapter One

NATALYA PULLED HER dark blue winter jacket more tightly around her, shivering in the sharp January wind as she waited for the light to change. She was almost half an hour early for lunch with Victoria and Jane, and she had stupidly planned on watching the chess players in Washington Square Park. She loved seeing the men (they were always men for some reason) curled over their games, totally oblivious to the fact that she was lingering at the periphery of their vision. Focused and silent, they reminded her a little of her dad, who'd emigrated from Russia long before Natalya was born.

But clearly no sane person would be playing chess outside on

a day when it made your lungs ache just to breathe. If Natalya could have teleported to Ga Ga Noodle, she would have, but since she couldn't, the shortest way to the Darlings' favorite lunch spot was the hypotenuse across Washington Square Park. She hurried under the shimmering white arch, too cold to linger in appreciation of its majesty as she normally might have.

As she headed west, she saw to her amazement that two people were playing at the southernmost table. Both were so bundled up that it was impossible to tell whether they were old or young, fat or thin, male or female; they just looked like enormous collections of outerwear playing each other. Natalya wondered how they managed to grip the pieces through their thick mittens. Standing on the walkway about twenty feet from where they sat, she felt the painful tingling of her toes from the cold and shook her head, half awed, half bewildered by their commitment to the game.

As she lingered, one of the players reached up and tucked his scarf more firmly around his throat. The gesture made Natalya register the fact that the scarf bore the colors of Thompson Academy, her elite private school's brother school. Natalya was used to seeing guys from Thompson hanging out on the front steps of Gainsford in the afternoons, talking to their friends or sisters or girlfriends, their purple-and-gold team jackets clashing brutally with Gainsford's uniform of red-and-green plaid skirts. She had never understood why, when their schools were coordinated in so many ways, no one had tried to match the Gainsford and Thompson colors.

It was too cold to stand still for another second, and Natalya

took a step forward. Her movement caught the attention of the boy with the Thompson scarf, and he glanced her way. Natalya gasped.

It couldn't be. . . .

His chin and forehead were covered, but Natalya was positive she knew exactly who she was looking at. Even as she told herself she was crazy to think she was looking at *him*, her heart began to pound hard against her ribs. *Stop it*, she told herself. It is *not* him. He lived miles away from Washington Square Park, all the way on the Upper East Side. What would he possibly be doing downtown, playing chess outside in subzero weather?

The guy kept looking in her direction, but he didn't call out or wave, and after a few seconds, he turned back to the chessboard in front of him. Natalya bolted for the corner. As she stepped into the street, a bike messenger running the light swerved wildly to avoid crashing into her, but she was already so discombobulated that the near-accident barely registered.

"And you're *sure* it was Colin?" asked Jane, leaning across their table at Ga Ga Noodle, her enormous green eyes growing even larger than usual as Natalya told her story. Even though Jane had been in L.A. with her dad for all of Christmas vacation, she and Natalya hadn't wasted any time on catch-up chitchat.

Best friends know when they have an emergency on their hands.

Natalya had only hung out with Colin Prewitt twice, but that had been enough for her to develop a serious crush on him. A serious crush she'd pretended didn't exist so she could be friends

with his cool sister, Morgan, who was the most popular girl in Natalya's grade and who thought her brother Colin was a major dork. Though Natalya had ultimately realized she'd chosen the wrong Prewitt sibling, Colin had made it clear that it was too late for her to change her mind. Remembering his face when she'd blown him off the last time they'd seen each other, Natalya nodded slowly. "I'm sure."

"That's incredible!" said Jane, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms. "The odds of you two running into each other must be . . . tiny."

"One in eight million," Natalya agreed. "Give or take."

Jane was still sitting in shocked silence when the door opened and Victoria dashed inside calling, "Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!" as she crossed the nearly empty restaurant to their table. Her pink cheeks matched her fuzzy pink earmuffs. With her baby blue coat and straight, beautiful blond hair, she might have stepped out of a J. Crew ad.

"You look so pretty," said Natalya, standing up and hugging Victoria.

"I'm sooo sorry I'm late," said Victoria, squeezing Natalya back, then turning to hug Jane.

"Natalya just saw Colin," Jane announced as Victoria hung her coat over the back of an empty chair.

"Oh my god! What'd he say? What'd *you* say?" Victoria dropped into the chair across the table from Natalya.

Natalya told her what had happened. When she'd finished, there was a long silence broken only by Tom, their usual waiter. "Hello." He was carrying a tray loaded with three virgin piña

coladas, the drinks the Darlings had ordered so often they no longer had to ask for them.

“Wow,” said Victoria, holding her cherry by the stem and twirling it thoughtfully through her drink. “So neither of you said *anything*?”

“I was just so . . .” Natalya looked down at her hands, as if the word to describe how seeing Colin had made her feel might be written there.

In the silence, Jane studied her friend’s face. “Wait a second.” She waited for Natalya to look at her before announcing, “You still like him.”

“No I don’t!” Natalya said automatically. “It’s just . . . embarrassing, that’s all.”

“Yes, you do,” Jane countered, still watching her. “You still like him.”

“I . . .” Natalya pulled anxiously on her necklace, with its single luminous pearl. Jane and Victoria were wearing matching necklaces, as always. “I don’t know, maybe I do,” Natalya finally admitted.

“It’s okay to like him,” Victoria assured her.

Natalya dropped the pearl and plucked angrily at the paper wrapping on her straw. “No, it’s really *stupid* if I still like him, considering I e-mailed him twice that I was sorry, and he never e-mailed me back. He’s obviously forgotten all about me.”

“Yeah, right,” Jane snorted. “You’re a super cute, genius chick who’s practically, you know, a chess grandmaster. Colin meets girls like that every day. *In his dreams.*”

“You think?” asked Natalya, perking up. Then her shoulders

slumped. “Whatever. Let’s talk about something else.” She looked over at Victoria. “How was the swearing-in ceremony?”

“Nat . . . ?” Victoria probed gently.

But Natalya just held up her hand to silence Victoria. “Seriously, it’s not worth talking about. I was just really surprised. Forget I even mentioned it. Now . . .” She dropped her straw into her glass and looked across the table at Victoria. “Tell us about D.C.”

Victoria took a sip of her drink before answering. “I know this is a big *dub*, but it wasn’t until I saw his apartment that I realized now that he’s a senator, my dad’s going to be living down in D.C. all week for the next six years! And sometimes he’ll even stay there on the weekends. He’s there now.” She shook her head sadly. “My mom’s really bummed. I can’t imagine if it were Jack and me.” Her cheeks flushed at the mention of her boyfriend’s name.

“Ooooh, Jack,” said Jane, clasping her hands in front of her chest and making her voice mock dreamy. “Jack. Jack. Wherefore art thou, Jack?”

Victoria giggled, then threw her napkin at her friend. “I do *not* sound like that.”

Jane dodged the napkin. “Yes, you do. Everyone does. Even my *mom* is starting to sound that way about boring Richard.”

“No!” said Victoria, horrified. They all knew what a complete zero Jane’s mother’s new boyfriend was.

“Yes!” Jane corrected her. “Last night my mom sat me down and was all, ‘Honey, I want you to know that Richard is becoming very special to me, and I’m hoping you two will get to know

each other better.” She rolled her eyes. “The man does not *speak*. It’s like he’s in a coma. How do you get to know someone like that?”

“What does your mom say?” asked Natalya, laughing.

“She says he’s *shy*.” Jane gave her friend a look of incredulity. “But you know what I say?”

“What?”

“At a certain point, shy becomes clinically dead.”

“I always pictured your mom getting together with someone really cool,” said Victoria.

“That’s because of Nana,” Jane explained, referring to her grandmother who had died suddenly in July and whom all three friends had loved. Nana had been the one to name them the Darlings. “All of Nana’s boyfriends and husbands were cool. Oh, which reminds me! The invitations for the opening came. And my mom said that the party’s going to be super swanky, which means we will all be purchasing *awesome* dresses.” She reached into her bag and pulled out a glossy postcard. “Look! Isn’t it beautiful?”

Natalya and Victoria huddled over the card, which featured a painting of a young woman in a one-piece bathing suit lying on a deck chair with a drink on the table beside her and an open paperback on her lap. The pale yellow of the woman’s suit stood in sharp contrast to the vivid blue of the water and the bright red-and-white stripes of the chair; even in the photograph, it was easy to see how rich and luscious the brushstrokes were, to practically feel the thick texture of the painting’s surface.

“I didn’t realize Nana was so gorgeous,” said Victoria, almost

to herself. "I mean, she was really pretty even when she was older," she added quickly.

"No, I know what you mean," Jane said. She craned her neck to look at the painting of her grandmother as a young woman. Beneath it were the words *EDGAR VINYARD: The Elizabeth Rawlings Years. A New Permanent Installation, Barnard College.* "Nana said Edgar painted her more beautiful than she really was because he loved her so much."

Victoria pressed the card to her chest. "Oh my god, that is *so* romantic."

Jane nodded. "He was the love of her life. And he wasn't even famous yet. I mean, not as famous as he got after he died." She sighed. "I don't think Nana ever got over him. In her will she said she left the paintings to Barnard because her years with Edgar and her years at college were some of the happiest of her life."

"I'm seriously going to cry," said Victoria. She looked back at the picture. "I want someone to love me that much."

"Well, the fact that you have a date to the opening is probably a good sign," said Jane.

But Victoria shook her head. "Jack can't come. He's got plans that night."

"Okay, that's a bummer," Jane acknowledged. "But at least you *have* a boyfriend. You're not a spinster like I am."

"Hey, if you're a spinster, then so am I!" Natalya objected.

Victoria waved away her friends' fears. "You can't be a spinster at fourteen!" she assured them, sliding the card back to Jane.

"Maybe not in *this* century," Natalya said. "But definitely back in the day."

“Whatever. I’m over love.” Jane brushed away their debate. “It’s all in the past for me.”

“Is this about Mr. Robbins?” asked Natalya. “Because you can’t swear off love just from that.”

“Seriously.” Victoria gave her friend a meaningful stare. “He was your *teacher*. It’s *good* that nothing happened between you two.”

Jane stabbed her straw into her drink. “Let’s talk about something other than love.”

“Yes, please,” groaned Natalya.

“Okay,” agreed Victoria. “As long as it’s not biology.” She pressed her palm to her forehead, “I’ve got a massive test Monday, and I haven’t even started studying for it.”

“Done,” promised Natalya.

“Though in your case, love and biology are kind of the same thing.” Jane was referring to Jack’s being in Victoria’s bio class.

“Well, when you think about it, aren’t love and biology *always* the same thing?” asked Natalya.

“Truer words were never spoken,” agreed Jane, and in honor of their astute observation, the Darlings clinked their glasses together.

They didn’t talk about Colin for the rest of the weekend, and Natalya did her best not to think about him. She’d meant what she’d said: it *was* stupid to like some guy who had clearly forgotten all about you. Still, despite not speaking his name again for the entire time she was with her friends, Natalya found herself taking a detour through Washington Square Park Sunday

morning on her way from Jane's to the subway. She told herself it had nothing to do with Colin, that it was a beautiful day and she just felt like taking a walk.

A light rain was falling, and she paused in the exact spot where she'd stood less than twenty-four hours earlier, staring at the row of stone chess tables. They were all empty.

It had been stupid to think he'd be there.

And even if, by some bizarre chance, he *had* been playing chess outside in the rain, what did she think would have happened? That he would have jumped to his feet, told her he forgave her for blowing him off, and announced he'd been secretly dying of love for her for the past three months?

By the time she got off the subway in Brighton Beach, it was pouring, and she arrived home soaked, freezing, and furious with herself. The only thing dumber than choosing Morgan Prewitt over her "dorky" brother Colin was regretting her decision months after she'd made it. Whenever Natalya or her brother, Alex, complained about something that was really their own fault, their father always said, "*Vy sdelali svoi krovat', v nastoyashchyye vremya lezhat v nem.*" In other words, Natalya had made her bed.

And now she had to lie in it.

Natalya's mom made her take off her soaking clothes and get into a hot shower as soon as she walked in the door. After she'd put on a pair of sweats and a hoodie and drunk a scalding cup of tea, she went to the new computer her parents had gotten her for Christmas and logged on. She had a major bio lab to finish, and even for someone who liked weird, scary Dr. Clover as much as Natalya did, the task was a daunting one. Still, she gave

herself five minutes to check out the pictures of Victoria's dad's swearing-in ceremony, since she'd told Victoria that she wanted to see them.

As soon as she opened her Facebook page, Natalya saw she had a message. But it wasn't from Victoria.

Colin Prewitt sent you a message.

A message. Colin had sent her a message. Her hand was shaking so hard, she could barely force the mouse to navigate so she could read what he'd written. When she did, she found herself staring at a single sentence.

I saw you at Washington Square Park yesterday.

So she'd been right. It *was* Colin. And he *had* seen her standing there when he'd looked up and adjusted his scarf.

But if it was Colin, and he saw her, why hadn't he done something: called her name or said hello? And why the cryptic message: I saw you? Shouldn't he have written I saw you *and . . .* ? Or I saw you *but . . .* ? Like, *I saw you, but I had laryngitis and couldn't call out to you.*

The whole thing was very weird. But was it bad weird? Or was it good weird? What did he mean by writing to her? And how was she supposed to respond?

Her plans to finish her lab report evaporated. Heart pounding, she texted Jane and Victoria to call her immediately.