

A photograph of three women lying on their stomachs on a red and white checkered picnic blanket in a grassy park. In the background, there are tall city buildings under a clear blue sky. The title 'The Darlings Are Forever' is written in a large, elegant script, with 'The Darlings' in white and 'Are Forever' in pink. The author's name 'by Melissa Kantor' is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font below the title.

# *The Darlings* Are Forever

by Melissa Kantor

# Chapter One

**THE LABOR DAY** sun was scorching, and as Jane waited for the light to change, she could practically hear her dark hair frizzing. It had taken her longer than she'd expected to wrap the boxes, and racing along the few blocks between her house and Ga Ga Noodle, where she was meeting Natalya and Victoria, had made her sweaty. In Los Angeles, where she'd spent the past month with her dad, it was too dry to sweat. Still bleary-eyed from her overnight flight, she was surprised to be surrounded by plane trees wilting in the late morning sun instead of palm trees swaying in an arid breeze; to see the brick buildings of Greenwich Village instead of pink stucco Spanish-style villas.

Crossing Sixth Avenue, Jane looked down the block to her right. She couldn't see One Room, the school where she, Victoria, and Natalya had gone since they were five, but she could picture it in her mind's eye—the bright blue lobby, the walls of the main stairs covered in paintings and poems written by the littlest students. As memories of One Room flew through her head, her stomach turned over. And it wasn't just because tomorrow was the first day of school. Tomorrow was the first day of *high* school. That would be stomach-tightening enough if One Room had a high school. Which it didn't.

One Room only went through eighth grade.

Squeezing the bag of gifts to her side, she finished crossing the street and pushed tomorrow out of her mind. Through the plate-glass window of Ga Ga Noodle she could see Natalya and Victoria already sitting at their regular table. Just the sight of them comforted her, and she waved madly in the hopes of catching their attention. They saw her and waved back, grinning at her through the window. She hurried across the last squares of sidewalk and pushed at the heavy glass door.

Inside, the room was hushed and freezing. As usual, almost every table was empty. When the restaurant had first opened, the girls had worried it had so little business that it might have to close, but then they'd realized that two delivery guys were constantly running in and out with people's orders.

"I am sooo sorry I'm late." Jane practically leaped across the room as Victoria and Natalya screamed and jumped up to greet

her. “I can’t believe it’s been a whole *month!*” she said as they hugged.

“Just to fill you in, we’ve decided you can’t visit your father anymore,” Natalya informed Jane, slipping back into her seat and tucking her straight brown hair behind her ears. She’d spent the past year growing out her bangs, and now it was finally possible to see her extraordinary, dark brown, almond-shaped eyes.

“Unless it’s just for a long weekend.”

“Oh, and we agreed that Natalya can’t go to Russian camp again,” Victoria added, sitting down and dropping her napkin onto her lap. “She already knows enough about Russian culture.”

“*Da.*” Natalya nodded.

Victoria shook her blond head. “It has been *so* boring here without you guys. I’m amazed I survived.” Even in a pair of faded jean shorts and an ancient Harvard T-shirt of her mother’s, Victoria was strikingly beautiful.

“Boring?!” Jane repeated doubtfully, pulling her bright green tank top away from where it was stuck to her stomach with sweat. “Your dad is like, a *rock star*. He was on the front page of the *LA Times*.”

Victoria sighed and put her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands. “It is *so* weird. Yesterday my dad was at a fund-raiser in the Hamptons with *the president!*”

Jane and Natalya stared slack-jawed at their friend. Ever since they’d been little, Victoria’s father had run a nonprofit, working to provide national health insurance. A little over a year ago he’d

gotten so aggravated by the state of the nation's health care system that he'd announced he was going to run for Senate, to go to DC and change things. The whole thing had been . . . well, not a joke, exactly, but almost. Only the joke was on Victoria's dad. Because in May, the front-runner, a hugely popular Democratic congressman from Long Island, dropped out of the race when it was discovered he'd been having an affair with his au pair.

And suddenly Andrew Harrison, Independent, became the Democrat's only chance of holding on to a Senate seat they'd never thought was in play.

"The president," Natalya breathed. "That is the coolest."

Victoria continued, shaking her head in amazement at her own life. "Saturday I went with my parents to this county fair and some girl asked for my autograph."

"I am *sooo* jealous," said Jane.

Victoria shook her head. "No, you're not. It's really *weird*. What if it's like that at school?" Tomorrow Victoria would be starting at The Morningside School, a magnet high school just a few blocks from her Upper West Side apartment.

At the mention of school, the girls looked at each other. "I'm freaking out," Victoria announced.

"We need a plan," said Natalya.

"Different high schools," Victoria reminded them. "Different high schools! We are going to be freshman at *different high schools* tomorrow."

"Vicks, we know," said Jane. In April she'd received a letter

telling her she'd won a spot at The Academy for the Performing Arts, New York City's most competitive performing arts school.

"I mean, what were they thinking?" Victoria demanded, banging her fist on the table in indignation. "Why would they create a school that only goes through eighth grade? It should be *illegal*."

Tom, the ancient waiter who had been serving them ever since the beginning of eighth grade, which was when One Room students were allowed to go out for lunch, came over to their table.

"Hello. How are you girls?" He nodded and smiled.

"We're okay," said Natalya.

"The usual?" he asked.

"Oh my god, you remember us!" Victoria was amazed.

"Vicks, we came here like, every day from September to June," Jane reminded her. "Of course he remembers us. And yes, thank you, Tom, we'll have the usual."

Jane, Victoria, and Natalya had been drinking virgin piña coladas ever since Jane's ninth birthday, when their waiter at a bistro in Nolita had asked if the "pretty little girls" didn't want Shirley Temples. "We are not little girls," an irate Jane had informed the condescending waiter. That was when Jane's grandmother, Nana, had stepped in. "Maybe you would enjoy a virgin piña colada, darling." With its glamorous-sounding name, the drink suggestion had mollified Jane.

Now, as Tom stepped away from their table, smiling, Natalya giggled. "Do you remember when we found out what *virgin* means?"

“I don’t know what I thought it was before.” Victoria squinted at the effort of trying to remember. “I think I just thought it was an adjective. Virgin. Like . . .”

“Decaf?” offered Natalya, laughing.

“Exactly,” said Victoria.

Jane sighed. “I miss Nana.”

Nana had always picked the girls up from school on Tuesdays, which was the day Jane’s mother worked late. She’d taken them to art galleries in Chelsea and used-clothing stores in Williamsburg. They’d explored the neighborhood along the Gowanus Canal and seen old movies at the Film Forum.

“Mom,” Jane’s mother used to ask, “why don’t you take them to a playground or something?”

Nana would shrug. “New York City *is* a playground.”

Nana had lived all over the world—Zimbabwe, Paris, São Paulo (her third husband had worked for the State Department). Nana had climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. She knew how to do a dance called The Hustle, and she had been to Woodstock. She had ridden a camel in Morocco and an elephant in Jaipur, India.

Nana had had what she called a *real life*. She said every woman should have a real life.

Most people talked to Natalya, Jane, and Victoria like the children they were, but Nana talked to them like the grown-ups they would someday be.

And now she was gone. In July, the day after Nana had taken them out for Jane’s fourteenth birthday, she had suffered a major

stroke. An ambulance had brought her to the hospital, but she'd died that night without ever regaining consciousness.

"I miss her, too," said Natalya.

"Me three," agreed Victoria. "Nobody's going to call us *darling* anymore."

The girls sat in silence until the waiter placed their frothy drinks on the table. The piña coladas came straight out of a can, and the single cherries sank into the pale, creamy liquid, but they were still the girls' drink of choice.

Jane snapped out of her trance. "Wait!" She put her hand into her bag and pulled out three small boxes, wrapped in white and tied with blue ribbons.

Victoria looked at Jane, amazed. "Are these for us?"

"What are they?" asked Natalya. "How come there are three of them?"

"You'll see." Jane handed Victoria and Natalya each a box, then took one for herself. "Open."

Natalya and Jane slid the ribbons off their boxes, but Victoria untied hers carefully. Her friends waited until she got the ribbon off. Then they all opened them at the same time, and Natalya and Victoria gasped.

"Oh my god!" said Victoria.

"What *is* this?" asked Natalya. "It's *beautiful*." Lying in the center of a small cotton square was a single pearl on a thin silver chain. Natalya took hers out to admire it. "Jane, where did you get these?"



Jane's smile was sad. "Remember Nana's necklace?"

Victoria and Natalya nodded. Of course they remembered Nana's necklace, with its six strands of pearls, its clasp a huge, shimmery opal surrounded by sapphires. Whenever Jane's mother had come home and seen that Nana was wearing the necklace with her jeans and sneakers, she would roll her eyes. "For heaven's sake, Mom, you shouldn't wear that thing while you're traipsing all over Manhattan. One of these days it's going to get lost or stolen, and you'll never see it again!"

"I'd rather lose something I've worn every day than keep something I never get to enjoy," Nana would answer. Then she'd wink at the girls. "Remember, darlings, everything can be replaced except people."

Sliding the thin silver chain along the back of her hand, Jane explained about the necklaces. "Well, my mom brought it to a jeweler to get it appraised, and he said she should have it restrung. So before she did, she asked me if I wanted the jeweler to remove one of the pearls and have it made into a necklace because Nana always wanted the whole necklace to be mine someday, but my mom didn't think I should have it until I'm older. She said this would be like a deposit on the whole necklace. So *I* asked her if she would do three necklaces, and she said technically the necklace is mine, so if I wanted her to do that, she would!"

"Your mom is *amazing*," Victoria breathed.

"Sometimes," Jane admitted. She opened the plain metal clasp and draped her necklace around her neck.

“It’s beautiful.” Victoria had already put her necklace on, and she pulled it away from her body to admire it. “Thank you, Jane.”

“It’s incredible,” said Natalya, studying the simple pearl with its tiny hat of silver.

Victoria’s eyes were suddenly damp as she looked around the table at her friends. “First Nana, now this. What if being at different schools changes everything?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Jane. Tom stepped toward the table to take their order, but Jane asked him for another minute.

Victoria shrugged. “I don’t know.” She toyed with the paper of her straw, not looking at her friends. “You guys are so much better than me at meeting people. You’ll probably have all these new friends. . . .”

“*WHAT?*” Jane glared at Victoria.

Natalya held up her hand to calm Jane down. “Vicks, you can’t mean that. We’re best friends. We’re always going to be best friends. Going to different high schools isn’t going to change that.”

“Seriously,” Jane said. “Look—” She whipped out her Sidekick. “I’m putting it down in my calendar right now. Tomorrow right after school . . .”

“What?” challenged Victoria. “We’ll meet here for a late lunch? My parents aren’t going to let me go from school to here and all the way back uptown.” In the air in front of her, she traced

the route she would have to take to meet her friends at Ga Ga Noodle and then go home again.

“Well . . .” Natalya began. But she couldn’t come up with a plausible scenario in which they would be able to meet after school. The Gainsford Academy, an exclusive girls’ school to which she’d received a full scholarship, was on the Upper East Side, and the trip back to Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, where she lived, would be a long one. Her parents were definitely going to want her to come right home at the end of the day.

“See?” Victoria said into Natalya’s silence. “I’m scared.”

Jane frowned, considering Victoria’s despair. “We need Nana.”

Victoria sighed.

“Guys,” Natalya said. She was holding her pearl out away from her neck and studying it. “We *know* what Nana would say.” She looked at her friends. For a second, their faces were puzzled, and then they both realized exactly what she meant.

Knowing they had understood, Jane lifted her glass. Natalya raised hers to meet Jane’s. Hesitantly, Victoria did the same.

Glasses touching, they recited together the toast Nana had made every year on Jane’s birthday. “May you always do what you’re afraid of doing,”

“Here’s to us, darlings,” said Natalya, her eyes shining.

“To us making Nana proud,” Jane said, and her eyes were misty, too. “By doing all sorts of things we’re afraid to do.”

“Including going to high school,” added Victoria.

Each wondering what tomorrow would bring, they clinked

glasses, then sipped their watery but delicious piña coladas, the pearly liquid almost the exact same color as their new necklaces.