

## **“Dreaming of Columbia”**

### **Part 1**

On their way home from school, Mattie blurted out her big news. “I got in to Columbia University, and I accepted today. Can you believe it? I’m going to live in New York City. It’s going to be amazing!”

“No, I can’t!” said Gabriella. “I can’t believe you’re going to leave me.” Gabriella and Mattie had been best friends since they were six years old. “What am I going to do in this stupid little town without you? How am I going to survive community college alone?”

Mattie looked at her friend and saw tears in her eyes. She felt awful. Mattie loved her hometown. Aiken was beautiful. It has acres and acres of woods, a huge lake, and horse stables everywhere you looked; and she knew everyone in town. What she loved most about Aiken was her friends and family. But that wasn’t enough to keep her there. She wanted adventure and excitement. She wanted to meet new people and try new things. Mattie couldn’t do those things in Aiken, which is why she wanted to live in New York and study at Columbia. She’d been dreaming about it for years.

“You know your parents will be furious,” Gabriella said. “They said you couldn’t go away to college. They don’t even know you applied. What are you going to tell them? How are you going to tell them?”

“I don’t know,” said Mattie. “I mean, they said I couldn’t go away to school, but now that I got in and said I would go, they can’t really say no. Right?”

### **Part 2**

But deep down, she knew they could. She and her parents had been fighting about college for months now. Her parents wanted her to stay home, and she wanted to go to Columbia. Her parents wouldn’t budge, so she decided to apply without them knowing. She almost told them when she received the acceptance letter, but she was too scared. She didn’t want any more drama, and she didn’t want to put an end to her dream. So once again, she sent in the paperwork without them knowing. But now, she had to confront them.

Mattie was so nervous, she barely ate her dinner. "Um, Mom, Dad," she stuttered, "I have some big news. Um, I'm going to Columbia next year."

For a full minute, no one spoke. Then her father, with a pained expression, left the table without excusing himself. Her mother quietly followed him, with disappointment written all over her face. Mattie expected them to be angry that she'd acted without their consent, but she thought they'd at least be proud of her for getting in. Her older sister Kim just glared at her. Now Mattie was angry. "How could they be so selfish?" she asked Kim. "I am not going to let them ruin my life just because they didn't want me to live far away."

"They're selfish?" Kim spat. "You're the one who's selfish. You don't care about anyone else! You just do whatever you want!"

"Why are you mad? What difference does it make to you? It's my future!"

"Don't you get it?" Kim's voice got louder and more shrill. "Do you really think they don't want you to leave home or that they don't want you to go to a good college? Of course they want the best for you, but they can't afford it! Have you even thought about what a school like Columbia costs? They thought if they said no, you would drop it and never have to know."

Mattie was stricken, immediately suspended in the conversation. First her face got hot with shame and then she was in tears. How could she have been so blind?

### **Part 3**

Mattie went to her parents' room. She could hear her mother crying and her father talking in a hushed voice. She knocked. Her father swung open the door. "I'm so sorry," she choked out.

He pulled Mattie into his arms. "I'm sorry too, sweetie. Your mom and I are so proud of you, and we want the best for you, but we can't afford to send you to Columbia. You're going to have to tell them you can't go."

Mattie stayed in his arms for several minutes, crying into his shirt. Then she nodded and slowly walked to her room. She cried all night. She didn't want to give up her dream, but she didn't know how to make it come true.

The next day she went to the guidance counselor's office and told him she couldn't go to Columbia. When he asked her why, she was too embarrassed to tell him. When he pressed her, she began crying again and told him she couldn't pay for it. "That's no reason to give up," Mr. Wilkins said. "There are a lot of ways to pay for school—student loans, scholarships, grants. Here are some applications and some resources for scholarships. Take them home and talk to your parents. Maybe you can work something out."

That night they had a family meeting, and Mattie explained what Mr. Wilkins said. They sat for hours, looking through all the applications and searching for scholarships online. Mattie applied for every scholarship she was eligible for and filled out the student loan forms. Now they just had to wait. If they didn't get enough aid, she'd be going to community college.

A month before graduation, Mattie received two local scholarships. Then a letter arrived from Columbia—another scholarship and a significant loan. Her father pulled out his calculator and started adding and subtracting. Finally he looked up and smiled. "Mattie," he said, "get packed. You're going to New York!"