



CHAPTER 1

It all started because I was afraid of a cake. It would be a lot less embarrassing if I said the cake was poisoned or really a meat loaf covered in mashed potatoes pretending to be a cake (gross), but no. It was just a plain, boring chocolate cake.

“I’ll go up with you if you want,” Zoe whispered. We sat straight in our chairs, trying not to wrinkle our fancy dresses. They both had big poufy skirts that crinkled when we moved and sleeves that hung loosely to our elbows, only mine was purple and hers was green.

The whole room applauded. Not for Zoe—they were all staring at the front of the room, where my big sister, Hannah, stood behind that terrifying cake. Some of her friends smiled by her side, their braces glinting in the light

from all the candles and the flashes from the professional camera.

Beads of sweat popped all across my forehead. Because soon she'd call *me* up to smile by her side and light one of those candles. Up in front of the room. In front of all two hundred and forty-seven eyes (and Uncle Barry's eye patch, which was somehow even more intimidating than an extra staring eyeball). All judging every move I made. Against Hannah. And against my pretty, popular older sister, what would they think of me?

“. . . to light candle number ten, my younger sister, Eliana!” Hannah announced with a gleaming smile.

I raised my hands to clap, but they stopped midair. Eliana? Already?

That was me.

“My younger sister, Eliana!” Hannah repeated through clenched teeth. Those two hundred and forty-seven eyes and one eye patch spun around the room, searching for me. I froze in place, breath catching in my throat.

“MY YOUNGER SISTER, ELIANA!” Hannah was getting a little screechy now, the way she got when I was dawdling and making her late for theater club or debate team. You didn't want to get in Hannah's way when she

got like that. That was how you got her lines screamed in your ear while you were just trying to get ready.

“Ellie! Go!” Zoe gave me a little push. By the time I stumbled to my feet, the whole room had found me. I felt every one of those eyes piercing me like a thumbtack, trying to pin me to a giant invisible bulletin board.

They already had to be wondering what was taking me so long, which was bad enough. I knew what else they were probably thinking. *Why’s she moving so slow? What’s wrong with her? Why does she look so stupid? Especially compared to that sister of hers?*

My whole body was running with sweat when I made it to Hannah, and the fire from all those candles just made it worse. “Finally, Ellie!” Hannah hissed. She was still smiling beneath the glossy pink lipstick she was allowed to wear for special occasions. “Are you okay?” She didn’t wait for me to answer. “Unless you’re dying, light your candle before the whole cake’s covered in wax.”

She handed me a candle. I touched it to the flame, and it blazed to life. I let out a long breath, making it shiver. Light a candle. I could do this.

Except the only empty candles were way on the other side of the cake. What genius had decided to light the

closer candles first, meaning that any latecomers had to stretch their arms alllll the way over a field of fire? I'd never really thought about how I was going to die before, but now I knew. I could see my own obituary:

Eliana Rachel Katz, age almost-eleven, went up in flames Saturday night in front of an enormous crowd of people. Her mother said tearfully, "I shouldn't have made her get that itchy dress off the clearance rack! If only I'd let her get the soft, silky, and much less flammable one off the mannequin, she'd be alive today." Other guests said, less tearfully, "Who?" Because nobody could ever possibly stop celebrating Hannah for any reason whatsoever, guests did the conga line over the deceased's charred body.

An elbow bit me in the side. I jumped. The candle wobbled in my hand, shaking loose a big glob of wax. It hit the table, just barely missing my hand. My heart

thudded. I didn't have to look up to know that all those eyes were still staring at me, judging everything I did. I could feel them prickling.

"Ellie, stop spacing out!" It was truly amazing how Hannah could whisper and screech at the same time.

I couldn't ruin my only sibling's bat mitzvah. I could do this. I raised my candle, taking a deep breath to fill me up with courage . . .

. . . only it kind of felt like I'd inhaled the fire instead. It filled me up, scorching my lungs and my ribs and my stomach, making the chicken fingers and fries I'd eaten earlier bubble unpleasantly. It left no room for any air. Just my heart, pounding against my ribs as if it were trying to escape.

I sucked in another breath, but it only fanned the flames. For my next one, I took such a big breath that it wheezed in the back of my throat. I tried another, then another. It didn't help. Could I suffocate to death while I was still breathing?

I gulped air, then choked. Black speckles danced at the corners of my vision. My knees wobbled. My mind was blank, but somewhere a tiny, desperate voice pleaded, *Don't fall into the cake of fire.*

That cursed cake. *I knew there was a reason to be afraid of you.*

I barely felt Hannah prying the candle from my hand, even though she had to unstick each finger individually. They'd all gone totally numb. Once she'd taken the candle, she grabbed my hand in hers and raised them both above her head. "Stage fright," she called. The crowd laughed. Somehow, that fanned the flames inside me worse than any of my breaths had, making them jump wildly.

They were going to eat me alive.

I must have missed Hannah lighting the candle, because suddenly she was nudging me gently to the side and reading a new poem that would invite our parents up to light their own candle. Her words echoed in the emptiness between my ears, as if I were hearing them from the other end of a long tunnel. I tottered off to the side of the dance floor, and I definitely would have fallen over if Zoe hadn't suddenly appeared to catch me.

"Those heels. Hard to walk in them," she told a group of distant cousins who were staring at me like I'd sprouted a second head from my shoulder. Then she whispered, "It's okay, Ellie. Lean on me."

I did lean on her, all the way out of the big main room and into the hallway to the bathrooms. There, Zoe and I sagged together against the flowered wallpaper and sank to the dirty green carpet. I traced where the wallpaper met the floor. It was peeling along the bottom. I pulled a strip loose and let it curl to the floor.

“Ellie, what’s wrong?” Zoe whispered frantically.

The world around me was getting fuzzy. I closed my eyes so that I wouldn’t have to see Zoe watching me die. Blackness swamped me, which was surprisingly soothing. Maybe that was also due to the fact that we’d finally escaped all those staring eyes. Nobody was watching me except Zoe, who didn’t really count as a person.

I mean that in the best possible way. I’ve known her forever. My family’s condo was across the hall from her family’s condo until we were eight, when both our families bought houses and moved out. So we grew up running back and forth between our unlocked doors, grabbing food out of each other’s refrigerators, and sleeping in each other’s beds. We used to tell people we were identical twins, which would get us funny looks considering Zoe’s Black and I’m about as white as you can get.

Zoe said, “It’s going to be okay,” but there was still panic in her voice. “You have to breathe, or you’re going to pass out.”

I am, I wanted to tell her, but I couldn’t get any words out over the whistling sounds of my gasping and gasping and gasping.

“I think you’re hyperventilating,” she said. “This happened to my dad after my grandma died. It’s not good!”

I wished I were capable of screaming at her, *I know it’s not good! I’m the one who can’t breathe!*

“Are you having a panic attack or something?”

A panic attack? Seriously? If I could’ve shouted at her, I’d’ve done it then. Because this wasn’t mere panic. This was something way more than panic. I’d panicked before, feeling nervous before a test and worrying that I’d fail. This wasn’t panic—this was something physical.

The soothing blackness and the quiet were already starting to help, though. Some of the flames inside me died down, leaving a little room for air. I tried to tell Zoe so, but my throat was still too strangled to speak.

I had no idea how long we sat there. I thought I was going to die. But eventually the flames shrank until they

were nothing but a pile of cool ashes sitting atop my diaphragm.

I opened my eyes, squinting at the light. “I’m alive.”

“Thank goodness,” Zoe said.

As if the partygoers could hear us, a roar of applause swelled in the big room. I pushed myself to my feet, cringing at how the sweat had gone all cold and sticky on my skin. “We should get back in there.”

Zoe rose, too, her dark eyes full of concern. “Are you sure?”

I rolled my shoulders till they cracked. “Yeah. I’ll be fine now.” And I would be, I knew it. Because I wouldn’t have to get back in front of the crowd or talk to anyone I didn’t know. I could just hide in the back with Zoe and eat cake. And after all that cake had done to me, I *wanted* to slice it open and chew and swallow it.

“What about your own bat mitzvah?” Zoe murmured as we reentered the banquet hall.

I had no idea what to say back to that. Fortunately, it was just then that the DJ broke out the bright stomping beat of “Hava Nagila.” We had no choice but to step onto the dance floor and get sucked into the hora, swirling round and round in circles with all the other guests.

Hannah was in the middle, getting hoisted into the air on a chair. Nobody was looking at me, which was fine. I was just one of many.

My mom danced by me, twisting down to look at me before she sailed past. “You okay?”

I forced a smile. No way I was going to let on that I couldn’t even handle something small like lighting a candle. “Yeah! Totally fine! Just had to run to the bathroom.”

She gave a little laugh like we were sharing a secret. “Eat too many sliders?”

I managed to force a whole laugh before she disappeared back into the crowd. *See? Look how fine I am. More than fine. I’m just peachy.*

Still, as Hannah got lifted up and down on the chair in the middle of the dance floor, Zoe’s words crawled through my mind. *What about your own bat mitzvah?* It was a valid question. After all, I barely had to do anything for Hannah’s bat mitzvah—just get up in front of the crowd and light a stupid candle with her. And I couldn’t even handle that. That evil cake sent me into a spiral of fear. How was I going to spend the whole *day* in front of all those eyes, and not just lighting candles,

either—singing in Hebrew, making speeches, and smiling for pictures?

Don't worry. That's almost two whole years away, I told myself firmly as the crowd rushed to bring our hands to the center of the dance floor, then swooped back out. You have plenty of time to figure out a plan.

Over the next year and a half, I tried to figure out ways I could possibly do everything that would be required of me as a bat mitzvah girl. The only conclusion I came to?

The only way I wouldn't freak out during my bat mitzvah was if there *was* no bat mitzvah.