



AND ME

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CHAPTER 1

OUR SHUL

“Are you going to ask him for the Yum-Yums?” I whisper to Honey. It’s Saturday morning and we are scampering across the lobby of our synagogue on our way to the candyman. Mr. Eisner only gives Yum-Yums, the best kind of lollypop, to the kids he really likes.

“Don’t we deserve the best?” Honey says with a wink as we reach the door to the men’s section.

“You two think you’re so special, don’t you?” someone calls to us. We turn around. Honey’s younger sister Miriam is sitting on the counter of the cloak-room, watching us as she sucks on a lollypop—the bad kind. Miriam is ten and very annoying.

“I don’t think it, I *know* it,” Honey calls back, putting her arm around me and sticking her tongue out at Miriam. I don’t feel special like Honey is, but I grin anyway and put my arm around my best friend. Then we each use our other hand to pull open the double doors to the main sanctuary.

As the doors close softly behind us, I inhale the

familiar smell of woolen prayer shawls, dark suits, leathery aftershave, and old prayer books. Everyone in front of us is standing and swaying slightly, many with their prayer shawls draped over their heads. Honey catches my eye and I nod: We'll wait back here by the door until the silent Amidah prayer is over.

"Hi, Milla!" My little brother, Max, whisper-shouts, spying me from my dad's regular spot about a third of the way into the sanctuary. Max waves and scoots over on the velvet-cushioned bench of the synagogue pew to make room for me.

"Shhhh." A few men cloaked in their cream and black-striped prayer shawls turn around. My face heats. Do they stare at me an extra beat before turning their backs again? My father looks up from his siddur for a moment to give me a smile before looking down at the prayer book and continuing the silent meditation. I give a small wave back at Max, pointing to Mr. Eisner to indicate that I'm just making a quick candy run.

When I was Max's age I also used to come to shul early every Shabbat morning with my dad. I'd sit with him here in the main sanctuary, quietly watching all the men praying, my eyes inevitably drawn to where

Honey's dad always sits. She and her siblings were usually squished two or three to a seat, jostling one another and loudly saying "shush"—until eventually Mr. Wine would release them to attend the children's services. More likely they would run to the cloak-room, or the lower level where the kitchens are, or the stairs to the ladies' section, or any of the other spots the kids in our synagogue like to hang out. That's when I would whisper to my dad that I was going with Honey and before he'd even finished nodding his assent, I was down the aisle.

"C'mon." Honey tugs my arm now as the prayer ends and people sit. "Good Shabbos, Mr. Eisner," she says as soon as we get to his seat, wishing him a good Sabbath and offering her hand for a handshake.

"Good Shabbos, ladies," Mr. Eisner says, shaking Honey's hand and then mine. "So good to see you both again." Honey and I have been away at sleepaway camp together for the last seven weeks.

"Next year we'll send you a postcard," Honey says with a grin.

"Marvelous!" Mr. Eisner says, his eyes twinkling. "Perhaps I shall send one back."

"Even better, you can send us some candy,"

Honey says, and I cover my mouth with my hand. I don't know how she can be so bold, so chutzpadik—and with a grown-up!

But Mr. Eisner claps his hands together now as he beams. “Always negotiating, this one,” he says. “You strike a tough bargain, young lady. But it's a deal.”

Honey laughs and offers her hand again for Mr. Eisner to shake and seal the deal, which he does. He puts out his hand to me and I give him a firm handshake too.

“So—” Honey says. “Any Yum-Yums today?”

“Please,” I add.

“For you two, of course,” Mr. Eisner responds with another beam. “You know I save them for my favorite kids.”

“Thanks!” we both whisper with gusto as he hands us the lollypops. Then Honey tugs my arm again and we run back down the aisle and out of the sanctuary.

“Oh, hi, Miriam,” Honey says, smoothly opening the wrapper of her lollypop as we pass by the cloakroom. Miriam's still on the counter, watching a group of girls her age playing a hand-clapping game underneath the coatracks.

“Well, you won't be getting those for long!”

Miriam calls after us. “Soon you’re going to be sitting next to Aginéni and hoping she doesn’t offer you some cod liver oil.” Miriam laughs.

Aginéni is an old lady who sits in the front row of the balcony women’s section every Shabbat and festival, in a seat she staked for herself before our parents were even born.

“At least I’m not afraid of her,” Honey calls back. “Like *someone* I know.”

On cue, we both cough into our fists and say, “Miriam.” Of course, I’m totally scared of Aginéni too—everyone is, except maybe for Honey—but we both crack up as we turn away again.

When we reach the stairs that lead to the lower level, I say, “It’s true though about Mr. Eisner. I mean, your bat mitzvah is in March.” I don’t add that mine is in June. We both know that once Honey is twelve and too old for the men’s section, there’s no way I will go to Mr. Eisner by myself.

“So we have until March,” Honey says, hopping onto the banister and sliding down sidesaddle.

“I can’t believe we’re starting middle school,” I say, meeting her at the bottom of the stairs. “My mom told me all the sixth-grade girls do a bat mitzvah

presentation at the end of the year. Does your school do something too?"

Honey is still sitting on the bottom curl of the banister swinging her legs, but a weird expression has crossed her face. "Huh?"

"Does your school have a bat mitzvah presentation or something?" I repeat. Honey and I don't go to the same school.

"Oh, um, maybe," she says.

I raise my eyebrows. My nine years of experience being best friends with Honey Wine tells me this is something she would know.

"What's wrong?" I say.

"Nothing," she says. Then the uncomfortable expression leaves her face and is replaced by her familiar grin. "C'mon, let's go see if we can sneak into the kitchen and get some kiddush food." She hops down from the banister and loops her arm through mine.

My mouth waters at the thought of hot potato kugel, maybe with a side of salty herring on a cracker. I grin back and give her arm a squeeze.

Everything is always better with Honey by my side.