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CHAPTER 1

Despite the suffocating mid-May heat and the nonbreathable fabric of my lavender polyester dress, it was shaping up to be a very good day.

As a matter of fact, the entire week leading up to my mother's wedding had been *exceptionally* good. Mom was finally marrying her boyfriend, Stan, which was great, since he was a nice guy and didn't try to replace my dad in *my* life, and as a bridesmaid, I had received an iPod (the awesome kind that holds a gazillion songs) as a wedding party thank-you gift.

The only person not happy about the nuptials was my poor dad, who hadn't done anything to get back out there since the divorce. Nothing. Like, not one date or even a profile on an online dating site.

He was pretty deep in denial, but this wedding was the final nail in the coffin of his marriage. But more about him later.

So now that the ceremony was over, the brunch had been eaten, and a few crazy individuals were sweating it up on the dance floor under the big white tent, my best friend, Alex, and I sat at a table sipping our iced teas, listening to the band.

“Ugh, I can’t believe anyone would want to play a wedding gig,” Alex said.

I snorted. “We haven’t even started our band yet, and already you’re too good for weddings?”

“Uh, yeah. No weddings or bar mitzvahs for us, my dear Lilah. We’re going big time.”

I had my doubts, since we could barely play, still needed instruments, and hadn’t even had our own bat mitzvahs yet, *and* so far it was only the two of us. Our dreams of having a band were still just that: dreams.

“You’ve got quite an inflamed ego for someone who doesn’t even own her own guitar.”

Alex held the cool glass up to her forehead and rolled it back and forth. It was hard to believe it was only May.

“We’re going to be huge. And the guys are going to be all over us. You watch. We will get to choose our boyfriends from the cream of the crop.”

That's one thing you probably need to know about Alex: she's boy crazy. And I mean CRAZY. She has a crush on a new guy almost every day. I'm more the consistent type: I've been crushing all over Andrew Finkel since the first day of seventh grade, when he showed up at our school. He barely knew I was alive, but in the nine months he'd been in our class, I'd become fairly sure he would be the perfect boyfriend and the perfect guy to go to the seventh-grade dance with. Not that he would ever ask me in a million years, but still, a girl can dream, right? Andrew had shaggy brown hair and emerald-green eyes. Perfect. And he was really nice, which is also very important in a potential boyfriend.

"Lilah!"

I stopped thinking about Andrew and turned toward my friend. "What?"

"I asked what you thought of *him*." She nodded toward the dessert table, keeping her eyes on me.

I slowly turned my head to find the object of her inquiry. It was my cousin Ira. "He's eighteen, Alex."

"Yes, but when he's forty-eight, I'll be forty-two, and by then it won't matter."

"Whatever. I really think . . . uh-oh." I stopped midsentence because my aunt Rosie was making a beeline for our table.

Alex followed my eyes and groaned when she saw my aunt.

Two seconds later, she was looming over us.

“Hi, Aunt Rosie,” I said. “You remember Alex?”

She nodded politely at my friend. “Nice to see you, Alexandra.”

Alex, who loathed being called by her full name, mumbled something in return.

Aunt Rosie quickly turned back to me. Without warning, she grabbed my chin tightly in her hand, holding my gaze with her amber eyes. “Everything going okay, Delilah?”

Maybe a little backstory on Aunt Rosie is required. She and Mom are sisters, but sharing a little DNA from their parents is where the similarities end. Mom’s a money-motivated financial adviser for one of the big banks. Rosie’s a true bohemian chick who makes jewelry in her one-bedroom apartment and sells it at a farmers’ market (and sometimes, if sales aren’t great and she ends up with a surplus, on Etsy, thanks to yours truly). She always smells like sandalwood incense and even wore a peasant skirt and Birkenstocks to the wedding, much to my mother’s horror.

Anyway, there she was, holding my face and staring at me while she waited for my answer.

“Yeah, I’m fine, Aunt Rosie.”

She frowned, but let go of my chin. "I see something."

I grabbed the compact out of my tiny clutch purse and held it up to my face. "What? Do I have food on my face? Am I breaking out or something? I knew I shouldn't have eaten all that cake at the rehearsal—"

"No, Delilah, I don't see a blemish on your face, but a rift in your aura. Something big is coming for you."

See what I mean?

"I'm fine, Aunt Rosie, really, maybe it's just . . ." I was going to say the stress of the wedding or my period was coming, but before I could finish, she squealed and flittered off, having suddenly noticed the dessert table.

"What a kook," Alex said. Exactly what I had just been thinking.

I watched my aunt load up a plate with sweets and fruit and then head over to the bar for what undoubtedly was not her first glass of champagne. She was weird, but totally harmless, and usually a good source of amusement. I shrugged it off, not paying much attention to what she had said.

"Lilah?"

I turned toward my friend. "What?"

"Guy at the chocolate fountain."

As inconspicuously as I could, I turned to look.

Jason, Stan's son and my new stepbrother, was holding a handful of fruit under the chocolate drizzle. He may as well have put his mouth under the nozzle.

"Gross," I said. "That's Stan's son."

Alex was practically drooling as she gawked at him. "I know. He's cute."

I clucked my tongue. "He's disgusting."

"So? What's a few germs between friends?"

"You're hopeless."

She shrugged and went back to ogling Jason.

Sipping my tea, I scanned the crowd, trying to find my mom. She and Stan were at table eight, holding hands and talking to their guests. They were both smiling and laughing, having a great time. My heart swelled a little at how happy Mom obviously was.

She and Stan had met at the supermarket; I'd even been there to witness it. They were at the deli counter, Mom for shaved turkey and Stan for roast beef. As they waited for their numbers to be called, they struck up a conversation about olives. It was weird, because I still can't believe anyone likes olives, but there they were talking about pimentos and Kalamatas versus green olives or whatever it is one discusses when talking about olives. (I'll be honest and tell you I really wasn't listening.) But I guess, after all, it wasn't really about olives, because the very next

Friday night they went on a date, and it turned out they didn't even eat any olives (I asked when Mom got home).

But as I watched them now, it made me think of my dad, who had no one to discuss olives or lunch meats with, other than me. He was lonely, and I think until very recently (like when he dropped me off at the synagogue that very morning) he actually thought there was a chance Mom would still be coming back.

Um, no.

And just because he still insisted on wearing his wedding band didn't mean he was still married.

It was really sad. But what could I do?

I sipped the last of my tea and turned to Alex. "Want to dance or something?"

She shook her head. "Too hot."

I nodded. It really was hot. The people on the dance floor were nuts. But they seemed to be enjoying themselves. The music was okay, but it was all songs I didn't recognize; they were obviously old-school tunes that the adults could dance to.

"So Lilah, when do you think we'll get out of here?"

"Dad's picking us up at four thirty."

Alex sighed but pushed herself off her chair. "If I'm gonna be stuck here another two hours,

I'm gonna need to rehydrate. You want another drink?"

I nodded. "Yes, please."

"Lilah!" Mom said, appearing at our table. "Are you having a good time?"

"Of course! And may I say once again, you are a breathtaking bride!" (These are the kinds of things you must say to the bride, whether or not she's your mother.)

Her big smile told me I was right on the money. "Thanks, hon."

"And you look fetching, too, Stan."

He nodded politely, but I could tell from his eyes that he appreciated the compliment. Stan is a guy of few words. Which is okay because my mom is a woman of many.

"We're getting ready to go soon, Lilah, but we wanted to thank you again for being my bridesmaid and for helping out with the wedding."

"You're welcome," I said. "You two seem very happy."

Mom smiled. "Thanks, honey." Then, her eyes got all glassy. "I'm going to miss you soooooo much."

Of course, then *my* eyes filled up. I was going to miss Mom, too. Even though I live with Dad in the house I've always lived in, it was going to be hard not to see Mom for the month that she and Stan

would be touring Europe on their honeymoon. I usually slept over at her house at least once a weekend, and we had lots of shopping days and movie nights, so I was definitely going to notice her not being around for thirty whole days. "I'll miss you, too, Mom. Make sure you guys take lots of pictures and you can e-mail me every day."

Of course Mom would e-mail. She was so attached to e-mail that she almost made her BlackBerry a bridesmaid (I'm kidding).

But still, e-mail wouldn't be the same.

"Where's your bouquet?" she asked suddenly.

I looked around the table, realizing I hadn't seen it in a while. My heart skipped in panic because I had big plans to dry the flowers and make them into a nice potpourri to give to Mom on her next birthday.

"I think you left it in the limo," Alex said.

"Oh! That's right!" I'd been so excited about my first ride in a limo with Mom and Stan from the synagogue to the reception that I left my bouquet on the seat.

I jumped out of my chair. "I'll be right back; I want to go get it before you leave."

Stan looked at his watch. "We'd better get going, Maggie," he said to my mom.

She nodded. "I just need to thank the rabbi."

I threw myself at my mom and gave her a big hug. “Congratulations, Mom. I’m really happy for you.”

She squeezed me tight. “Thanks, honey. I’ll e-mail you every day, I promise.”

I couldn’t help but cry a little, but since Mom had tears in her eyes, too, I figured it was okay. Before we really messed up our faces, I turned and headed toward the limo to get my bouquet.

There was a long winding path that would take me to the parking lot, but it was faster to cut across the lawn, so I jogged across the grass as best I could in my heels.

The sky was darkening and a bunch of clouds had rolled in—maybe a storm was coming. Even though I was practically melting from the heat, I sped up my pace, not wanting to get stuck in a shower.

The limo driver opened the door so I could get my bouquet, which was very nice of him. I noticed there was a bottle of wine chilling in a bucket of ice, which was a really classy way to travel, if you ask me. I thanked the man, who tipped his hat at me. Then I jogged back to the tent, bouquet in hand.

I got under the canopy and held on to the support pole as I scraped the mud off my shoes on the edge of the temporary floor.

Suddenly, a shiver ran through me and all the little hairs on my arms stood on end, freaking me

out a little. A rumble seemed to vibrate through the earth. I leaned out of the tent and looked up into the dark sky.

There was a sudden, deafening *snap!*
And then everything went dark.