

After her Bat Mitzvah, all Alyssa wanted to do was dance. She loved the practice sessions at the studio. And she loved performing. But suddenly there were so many other pressures. The persistent but sympathetic rabbi wanted her to join the Confirmation class. Alyssa's best friend was very sick and needed her badly. And if Alyssa missed another dance rehearsal, she would be thrown out of the Nutcracker. If only she could decide what to do ...

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# CHAPTER 1

I closed my Hebrew book with a sharp slap. It was the end of the last Hebrew class before my bat mitzvah. It was also the end of five years of Hebrew school, eight years of Sunday school, and six months of bat mitzvah training. After Saturday, my days would be my own, to spend doing the only thing in the world that mattered to me—dancing.

I gathered my things and raced for the door. With

a quick backward wave, I called out “Good-bye, Mrs. Hershkowitz” and nearly bumped into Rabbi Pearlman, who was standing just outside.

“I’m glad I caught you, Alyssa,” Rabbi Pearlman said. “I’d like to speak with you for a moment.”

I knew what was coming. He was going to give me the “It’s a mitzvah to continue your Jewish education” speech. My older brother, Brad, had told me about it when he had his bar mitzvah three years ago.

“He gives it to all the kids,” Brad said. “He wants you to come back for confirmation class. And he doesn’t give up easily.”

Brad, who is good at cartooning, made a poster with Rabbi Pearlman staring straight ahead and pointing his finger like the man in recruitment posters. Instead of Uncle Sam’s top hat, he showed the rabbi with a blue and white striped yarmulke. Underneath he lettered the words: RABBI PEARLMAN WANTS YOU. I thought Brad would get into trouble when he showed it to the rabbi, but Rabbi Pearlman clapped his hands and cried “That’s perfect!” and hung it on the bulletin board outside his office. Brad was confirmed last spring.

“Come,” the rabbi said. “Let’s go to my study

where it's a little quieter." He laughed. "I mean, where it's a lot quieter."

We walked through the crowded hallway, past Brad's poster, and into the rabbi's study.

"Well, now, Alyssa," said Rabbi Pearlman, "Saturday is the big day."

I nodded.

"I know you'll do a beautiful job up on the *bimah*. You read well, your chanting is fine, and you know the prayers. It will be a pleasure for me to share this simcha with you."

"Thank you, Rabbi," I said, waiting.

"But you know that just because you become a bat mitzvah, you don't suddenly stop being Jewish. There are certain responsibilities that go along with being a daughter of the commandment."

Here it comes, I thought.

"For years you have studied Hebrew so you could read the prayers. You learned about our holidays and the history of our people. While it must have seemed like a lot to you, it was only in preparation for understanding what it all means; *that* you get in confirmation class. You can finish the year out in your regular Hebrew class or you can join us right now. Our discussions go on all year. We are



currently discussing the status of the Arabs in the state of Israel—”

“I’m not going to confirmation class,” I interrupted. I wanted to stop Rabbi Pearlman before he really got wound up with the subject as he did with his sermons. It would make it harder for me to say no.

“But, Alyssa, you’re such a good student. You know it’s a mitzvah to continue your Jewish education,” Rabbi Pearlman said.

“Yes,” I whispered, trying not to laugh.

“It would be a shame to go through the mechanical work and not allow yourself to enjoy the interesting part. Next year we will be studying the Jewish theater. Mrs. Hershkowitz mentioned you are interested in the performing arts, am I right?”

“Ballet,” I said.

“Well, this would be right up your alley.”

I was about to tell Rabbi Pearlman that ballet was very different from the Jewish theater, but he went right on with his speech.

“And we will be going on special trips to other congregations to observe their services, so that you will feel at home in any synagogue you enter.”

“I’m sorry, Rabbi—”

“And wait until Purim! The confirmation class is

going to put on a Purimspiel for the whole Hebrew school.”

“Rabbi, I can’t—”

“Don’t say can’t. We can do anything, with God’s help,” Rabbi Pearlman said. “Maybe you just need a little time off from your studies. I’ll put your name down on the list for next year.”

I shook my head. Brad had warned me it would be hard to say no to Rabbi Pearlman, but I had to, I must, if I wanted to become a dancer. There was just not enough time for both.

“I don’t understand why you don’t want to go to confirmation class,” my mother said for the thousandth time since I had broken the news to her. She ladled out soup into the bowl I was holding.

“I wanted to make this for Friday night, but I thought with your grandparents coming over for dinner, perhaps we should be a little more traditional. I’ll make chicken soup and challah.”

“Grandma once told me chicken soup is boring,” I said. “She said she put in cayenne pepper to give it a little ‘zip.’”

“So that’s why I was always so thirsty on Friday nights,” Mom said. “Well, she is going to have to be bored this time.”

I laughed to think of my grandmother sabotaging the Sabbath soup. I put out the soup bowls.

“Will you please call everyone to dinner, Lyssa?” my mother said.

“Dinner!” I yelled from where I was standing.

“Honestly, Lyssa, I could have done that myself.”

Brad came charging up from the basement.

“Wash your hands, Brad,” said my mother as he headed for the table. “Have you been finger painting down there?”

“No,” said Brad. “It’s only marker.” He held up his stained hands. “I was coloring in my latest cartoon adventure of Mystery Man. You see, Mystery Man is about to walk across a rope strung between two ninety-story buildings, only he doesn’t know that his old enemy, Grimes, has tampered with the rope. . . .”

My mother pointed to the sink.

“It won’t come off anyway,” he grumbled on his way to wash.

My father ambled into the kitchen in his blue sweatshirt. I knew exactly where he had been. He develops his own photographs and always wears that same sweatshirt. It’s like a uniform.

“Working in the darkroom, Dad?” I asked.



“Uh, huh. I’m getting the cameras ready for Saturday night.

“Are you sure your father doesn’t mind taking pictures at the reception, David?” Mom asked.

“You mean the king of the candid shot? He loves taking unposed photographs.”

“But, Daddy,” I cried. “Grandpa always takes close-ups of noses.”

“Yeah,” chimed in Brad. “I have pictures of noses I don’t even recognize in my bar mitzvah album.”

“Don’t worry, Alyssa. I bought extra film so we can throw away Grandpa’s noses and still have plenty of pictures left. Is that hot and sour soup I smell?”

“I *did* call everyone to dinner,” my mother said, “or rather Lyssa did.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” my father said, heading for the table. He is a great one for eating dinner on time, on time being whenever *he* is ready.

“Lyssa doesn’t want to go on with confirmation studies, David,” Mom said as we sat down to eat.

“Have you thought about it, Alyssa?” my father asked. “Brad seemed to enjoy the class . . .”

“That was Brad,” I said. “He also likes to draw cartoons. I don’t.”



"But, Lyssa, 'it's a mitzvah to continue your Jewish education,'" said Brad.

I glared at him. Brad laughed and slurped his soup.

"Don't slurp, Brad," said Mom.

Brad stopped slurping. Instead, he nearly choked.

"What is this stuff?" he asked. "I thought it was Chinese hot and sour soup."

"Did *I* say it was Chinese hot and sour soup?" Mom retorted. "I just said it was hot and sour soup, that's all."

"Well, what kind of hot and sour soup is this, Rhoda?" asked Dad, cautiously lifting his spoon to his lips.

"It's Hot and Sour Sole Soup," Mom said.

"You mean it's got pigs' feet in it?" Brad asked, horrified.

"It isn't soul soup, it's *sole* soup. Sole, as in fish."

"You know I hate fish, Mom. Ever since you became a recipe-tester for *Wonderful Foods Magazine*, we have been eating some pretty strange stuff."

"Sole soup isn't that strange, and you can't even taste the fish because of the spices."

"I can and I'm not eating it."

"I have thought about it," I said, picking up the conversation from before. "I've thought about it

every Monday and Wednesday for the past two years. I've thought about it each time my ballet class learned a new variation and I was a day behind, struggling to catch up. I've thought about it whenever I had to miss a rehearsal because I had Hebrew or Sunday school."

"We'd like you to give it a try, at least," Mom said.

"What's the point?" I asked. "I'd just quit in the middle."

"How do you know? Maybe you'll like it. It's not as if you'll be going by yourself. Most of your friends will be in your class."

"You always tell me to think for myself and now you want me to do something because everyone else is doing it."

"It's just that, well, I never had the opportunity to go to Hebrew school or to be confirmed and now I think I missed out on something."

"Then, *you* go to confirmation class," I said.

"Watch it," said my father. "Only the soup is supposed to be hot and sour tonight."

"That's it," Mom said. "If you don't like it, don't eat it. I'll just tell my editor that Mrs. Woonsprocket's recipe did not pass the taste test."

Mom cleared the soup bowls from the table and

returned with a casserole that was divided into three colors. We all stared at it. For a painting, it wasn't bad. For dinner, it was definitely questionable. Mom saw our questioning faces. She sighed.

"This is called Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Eggplant Casserole."

"Is this another of Mrs. Woonsprocket's creations, Mom?" I asked as she dished it onto my plate.

"No. Mrs. Harbinger-Smith of Philadelphia sent it in."

"Aw, Mom, can't we have a normal meal once in a while?" moaned Brad.

"You had lamb chops yesterday and chicken the day before."

"You mean Tía Maria's Chicken Olé?" said Brad. "It had string beans and chili peppers in it!"

"String beans are good for you," Mom said. "Although I'm not so sure about those peppers."

"But, Mom . . ."

"Think of it as broadening your culinary horizons," said Mom.

She finished serving the casserole. It sat on our plates, staring back at us. I poked it with my fork. It didn't look promising.

"Can we get back to what we were discussing?"



I said. "It isn't as if I plan to use the time to hang out on street corners and get into trouble. I need it to improve my technique."

"I think she's just tired from studying for her bat mitzvah, Rhoda," said Dad. "Let's leave her alone until after Saturday."

"It won't make any difference," I said. "I don't see why I should have to be confirmed if I don't want to be."

"I just don't want you to lose your Jewishness," my mother said.

"I don't have to sit in a classroom to feel Jewish, Mom. That's inside me. But I do have to be in dance class if I am going to get anywhere. The other girls take class six days a week—seven during performances."

"It doesn't seem natural . . ." Mom began.

I tried to keep calm, but my voice trembled. Couldn't they see that a ballet dancer didn't get very far if she didn't dance? No matter how hard I worked, I could see the other kids in class improving their technique faster than I was just because they were in class more often.

"Surely a day or two out of class couldn't make that much difference," said Dad.

“If you miss one day, you know it. If you miss two days, your class knows it. If you miss three days, *everybody* knows it.”

“Who told you that?”

“My dance teacher, Nadine Perrin. She used to dance with the North Lakes Ballet. She said that whenever a dancer was absent, her teacher made her come in an hour early to warm up. Otherwise she would not be able to keep up with the class.”

“I don’t know, Alyssa,” Mom said. “We’ve let you take dance because it seemed so important to you, but we don’t like the idea of you being so obsessed with it.”

“I’m just trying to broaden my cultural horizons,” I replied.

Brad snickered.

“And what will happen to the rest of you if all you do is dance?”

“There won’t *be* any rest of me if I don’t dance,” I said. “That is what I am—a dancer.”

My parents looked questioningly at each other across the table.

“You’re right, Mom, you don’t understand!” I cried, and ran from the table. Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Eggplant was left uneaten on my plate.