

P R O L O G U E

Devorah

At the top of the steps, I hesitate, preparing myself for everything to come. I knock on the closed door. "Yonatan," I call.

I knock again. Down the stairs, I can see light shining in the common room; I hear the hushed voices of the others. Up here, all is silent and dark.

If he doesn't answer, it could mean the future I have seen is not yet certain. Or maybe there is more time than I understood. How I wish this could be true.

I knock a third time. "Yonatan." I lift my shoulders, prepared to turn away. "Devorah," he calls, from within.

I don't allow my faith to falter. I open the door.

The room is plain, with wide plank wood flooring and bunk beds lodged against each of the four cement walls. Several of the beds are made up with sheets, white pillows, and army blankets. The men staying have stored their clothing, folded neatly, on the wood shelves between the beds.

But the space is not lacking in beauty. One empty shelf is painted with an explosion of flowers. A guitar case, artfully covered with stickers, pokes out from under a bed. Another shelf holds a much-used collection of Hebrew books.

Yonatan lies twisted in a rough brown blanket on a bottom bunk, staring hard out the window to the valley and mountains in the distance. At this time of year, the view is barren and dry.

I take a folding chair from the wall and settle my long skirt over my legs. The forlorn figure before me looks nothing like the nineteen year-old boy I met in Jerusalem when he first agreed to learn with me. His forehead is now lined with pain and sadness. In his dark beard, I can see the first strands of gray.

"Yonatan, I'm sorry," I murmur. "For you, for all of you. I'm so sorry."

His silver eyes aim like arrows out the window, hiding his anguish.

"I don't understand it," I say. "But the Ribbono Shel Olam¹ will bring good of it. Her memory will be a blessing, in the end."

¹ Ribbono Shel Olam: A traditional Hebrew name for G-d, meaning Master or Creator of the World.

A hawk soars across the sky outside, landing beyond our sight. Yonatan's breathing is rough, labored. At last, he turns to face me.

"Why are you here?" It's a simple question, but his raspy voice turns it into a demand.

He already knows the answer. Shloshim, the ritual thirty days of mourning, is over. It's time for him to leave this place. But duty requires me to say it.

"Your time here is complete."

He meets my eyes and holds them. I understand how lost he is feeling; yet I know the strength of this man. He will find his way.

A breeze rustles blue and white flags on a distant hill as he turns back to the window. "I have nowhere else to go."

"You do now," I tell him. "A prophetess has been called."

His laugh is cynical. "You're asking me to teach someone now?"

"Yes." I rest my shaking hands on my knees. "She is the katanah."²

His shoulders give a little jolt, and I know he understands. The true test of a prophetess is in passing the flame.

"Devorah..." My name comes out as a moan. I glimpse his face, contorted with new sorrow, before his hands cover his eyes.

"Give her to someone else," he says. "Teach her yourself. Please."

I shake my head. "This calling is for you."

I know how hard it will be for him to untangle himself from his bed and become the person we all need him to be. But he will not be the first to go on in life when it seems everything is lost. Nor the last.

"Do not underestimate the resilience of the human heart," I advise him.

He uncovers his face. As we stare at each other, something sparks inside him—the flicker of a connection he'd imagined lost forever.

"Please," I say. "Do it for me."

His eyes turn upward, toward the unfinished ceiling. "For you," he repeats. "Devorah." His voice breaks on my name, as his gaze returns to meet mine. "I will do it for you."

² Literally, the small one.

C H A P T E R 1

When I was a little girl, my grandfather would visit us on Friday nights. After dinner, my father and older sister, Beth, would disappear to their rooms, but Mom would hover in the kitchen, washing dishes, listening.

By the light of the candles my mother had lit, Zaide³ taught me Jewish wisdom. The Hebrew alphabet. Simple prayers. Hebrew words: *Shabbat* for Sabbath. *Shalom* for peace. *Siddur* for prayerbook. *Hashem* for G-d. He would never even spell out the full English word, so as not to risk taking His name in vain.

Stroking his white beard, Zaide told me about the town he had escaped before the Nazis came, where his grandfather was a great rabbi. His magical tales included holy people who spoke directly to their Creator, asking for wisdom, protection from plagues, or favor in the eyes of the government. In these stories, there was always a happy ending. G-d and His people always prevailed.

The silent end to his stories was never spoken—how in the great fire of the Holocaust, Zaide’s entire world of Jewish Europe was swept away.



The morning he died, my mother stroked my forehead with the tips of her fingers, waking me. “Rachel,” she said, in her gentlest voice. I saw the expression on her face and knew he was gone.

Zaide was 87 years old, exactly 70 years older than me. He went peacefully, in his sleep. I guess I imagined he would always be there, walking more than a mile to our house on Saturday afternoons in his black hat and buttoned white shirt. He often frowned to find us using the dishwasher or the television, but still sat in the corner armchair as Mom brought him a cup

³ “Grandfather” in Yiddish.

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of juice and a plate of cookies. He made loud, clear blessings in Hebrew over the food, not so much for himself, it seemed, but in the hope I might imbibe some Jewish tradition through osmosis.

Next to him in my shorts and T-shirt, I felt at least a world away. Still, his presence mattered to me. I loved the stories, the questions, the ancient Jewish traditions he shared. I was a Jew, if not a particularly good one. This man was my single link to a chain that connected me back to Abraham.



At Zaide's funeral, Mom, Beth, and I sat in the front row of the women's section of his Orthodox synagogue. Though it was August in Baltimore, we wore long skirts and long sleeves. Mom had given up her own Orthodox religious observance years ago, but to be respectful, we dressed like we fit among them. Over with the men, my father—in real life an irreligious psychology professor—wore a black velvet kipah⁴ at Mom's request.

Mom's black dress was plain, and she wore a thin dark sweater over it. One of our aunts had ripped the sweater for her, in keeping with the tradition of tearing one's clothes when a close relative dies. Mom had tied her auburn hair under a black beret. Without her usual makeup, I could see dark cavities below her eyes, and shadows of frown lines along her cheeks.

After the funeral, we gathered for *shiva*⁵ at my Uncle Zev's house, about five miles from ours on the other side of Pikesville, the Jewish community of Baltimore. I knew the house because we had sometimes joined them for Passover seder. The living room was large, but so crowded with family members, friends, and community members that people had to stand. Mom even had a few of her own visitors, from the dentist's office where she worked as an office manager.

Mom was the youngest of her family, so our cousins were older than Beth and me. They had come from Cleveland and Atlanta, Chicago and Los Angeles. Several of them gathered on the deck outside with babies and small children. You could hear them laughing from time to time.

"Excuse me," said one of my cousins, a tall young man wearing a black

⁴ Kipah: traditional Jewish head covering.

⁵ Shiva: a period of ritual mourning observed after a close family member dies.

hat, with white strings poking out beneath his white shirt. The strings were *tzitzit*, as Zaide had explained to me; all Orthodox Jewish men wore them according to biblical command. I glanced up, encouraged he had noticed me—then realized I was blocking his way into the living room. He didn't look at me as he passed.

I shouldn't have been surprised. Our cousins didn't want much to do with us since Mom had given up her traditional observance. Only Zaide continued to include us in his life. Mom even kept our home kosher so he could eat in our house. She used her mother's beautiful kosher dishes, which Zaide had given her when she got married.

I escaped down a half-flight of stairs to wander the house, and found myself in a den. The dim room had an unlit fireplace, a shag rug, overstuffed leather sofas, and shelves and shelves of Hebrew books. In the corner was a framed photograph of Uncle Zev's family, from when my cousins were still kids. One of the girls resembled Beth and Mom quite a bit, with hair Dad always said was the color of a burnt sienna crayon, and light blue eyes.

I had inherited my dad's hair, straight, thick, and so dark it was almost black. Dad's eyes were hazel, a color that hadn't made up its mind about what it was. My eyes were green.

Once, when Zaide was teaching me, he paused, looking at my eyes. "Your eyes are the color of light coming through emeralds," he said. "Like my mother's."

I had seen a photograph of her once, black and white of course, with hair like Mom's peeking out from under a dark kerchief. Her eyes were wide and kind. Until then, I had never known their color.

"What happened to her?" I'd dared ask, because he never spoke of her. I envisioned cattle trains, gas chambers, screams fading into silence. But Zaide only shook his head.

"I decided I didn't need to know," he said.

Shivering a bit, I turned from the picture to explore the books. Though I didn't know enough Hebrew to understand their meanings, they reminded me of Zaide's faraway lessons. He had taught me to say the Shema, the prayer that declares G-d's unity in the world. Even now, I sometimes said those few words if I was having trouble falling asleep.

Zaide taught me that individuals have the power to speak to G-d and

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G-d will listen, even to words in English. Even to the words of a young child. I was maybe seven years old then, and I believed him. In my childish voice, I would ask G-d to protect my family, or to make a friend better when she was sick. When I was scared or lonely, I asked Him for help.

Those Friday night visits had ended a long time ago, and I hadn't said much to G-d in years. Now I wished I could ask Zaide how you reconnect with G-d, when the person who taught you is gone.

It hit me then: I'd never be able to ask Zaide anything again. Overwhelmed with sudden grief, I sank to the ground, beneath the picture of a family that didn't look like me.

"Do you mind a visitor?" asked a hesitant voice.

I lifted my eyes to see Lauren in the doorway, one fingernail pressed to her lips. Her red hair was pulled back from her freckled face with a headband. Though we'd been best friends for ten years, this was one of the first times I'd seen her in a dress; she'd clearly worn it out of respect for my religious family. I appreciated the effort.

"No," I said, standing to welcome her. "Thanks for coming."

We sat together on the leather sofa.

"I'm so sorry about your grandfather, Rach." Lauren's eyes lingered on the picture of my Orthodox family. She gnawed the cuticle of her index finger. "I'm not sure I ever met him. Were you close?"

I shrugged one shoulder. "Kind of. We spent a lot of time together when I was little."

Two weeks ago, Zaide had come to our house. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon; Beth was at dance practice and Dad was at the university. I was only home because I had the day off from my summer job serving ice cream at a swim club.

Mom got him a glass of cold water, then drifted in and out of the living room while I sat on the floor beside the armchair he always chose. He asked me how things were going in school. When I pointed out it was mid-summer, he chuckled.

"That's right," he said, his voice still lilted with a European accent. "You're on a learning break."

I shook my head at him, feeling as usual he belonged to another place and time, where children always studied, and angels might come to visit

when you least expected.

“I’m starting my senior year in the fall,” I said, gently shaking him back into what I considered the real world.

“Be good,” he said, and it was impossible to know whether he meant in the sense of morality, academics, or Jewish practice. Maybe all three. Now I wished I had taken the time to understand more of his world. I wished I’d asked what those final words meant.

Lauren pulled out a book peeking from my purse. “I’m glad to see you’re using the poetry journal,” she said. She flipped through colorful blank pages, each embellished with the shadow of a butterfly. I had been keeping notebooks for poetry since second grade; I already had stashed perhaps a dozen in my desk drawers. Lauren had given me this one for my birthday last May.

“It’s perfect now,” I said. “Once I start putting words into it, it will never be the same.”

I didn’t really expect Lauren to understand this. She had spent the summer taking pre-law classes at Hopkins, trying to increase her chances of getting into Yale. To her, writing was a straightforward thing. But she set the book gently on the sofa, nodding in agreement. “Life is messy,” she said.



After Lauren left, dozens of men gathered in my uncle’s living room for prayers. Dad wasn’t with them; I suspected he was using the opportunity to check email on his phone. Mom, Beth, and I stood with the women in the kitchen, which was hot from the oven and the bright August sun streaming through undressed windows.

“I’m going to have to duck out for practice,” Beth whispered to me.

All summer long, Beth had been one of the dancers in *The Phantom of the Opera* being performed in downtown Baltimore—her first professional dancing job. Soon she would go back to college in California, to start her sophomore year in a competitive ballet program.

Beth had wanted to be a dancer since she was eight years old, but this summer had transformed her. The constant exercise and care with her diet had made her lean and muscular. She even walked like a ballerina now, light

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on her feet with head held high and straight.

"I'm sure Mom will understand," I said.

Beth put her arm around my shoulders. "You had a real connection with Zaide."

I looked toward the men praying in the living room. "Nothing like how *they* knew him."

"I don't know," Beth said. "You meant a lot to him. Remember all those Friday nights he'd stay and talk to you? He never did that for me."

"Only because you disappeared into your room so fast," I said.

She shook her head. "He never even offered to teach me. I mean, you're right, I wouldn't have been all that interested. But... he wanted to teach you. And you wanted to learn." She smiled. "It was a really special thing."

"I don't think he ever saw me for who I really am," I said. "Only who he wished I would be."

"...Or who he hoped you might become," she corrected. "There's no harm in that."



Mom's friend Kay came to *shiva* on Thursday, bringing along my friend Maya, who had just returned from her summer with her father on Cape Cod. Kay and Mom had become friends years before in a JCC aerobics class, when Maya's parents were newly divorced. They started getting us together for playdates when we were ten. We'd been friends ever since.

Kay was a petite Asian woman. I'd heard from Mom she converted to Judaism to marry Maya's father. You could catch glimpses of her mother's heritage in the almond shape of Maya's chestnut eyes, her tanned complexion, and her luscious mahogany brown hair.

As Kay sat beside Mom, Maya and I retreated to the den. "I'm sorry I missed the funeral," she said, stretching on the shag rug. She wore hot pink lipstick to match her painted fingernails, and looked sun-kissed and healthy in her stylish new mini-dress. She always got new clothes when she was with her dad.

I shrugged. "I'm glad you came today. It's been kind of unbearable around here."

Maya raised her eyebrows. “No doubt.” She frowned, plucking at my long dark skirt. It was one of four I owned, and I’d already worn it twice this week. “Do they really wear this kind of thing all the time?”

“Guess so,” I said. “How was the Cape?”

She grinned. “I met a guy.”

I laughed. “Why am I not surprised?”

Maya had dated perhaps a dozen boys since we started high school. Last year she joined the cheerleading squad and had dated every football player who asked her out. I’d once heard her say you have to try a lot of hay before you find your needle.

“He was so tall,” she said. “And he knew just how to –” she broke off, blushing, looking up at the Hebrew books. “Well, I liked him.”

“Will you see him again?” I asked.

She shook her head wistfully. “We agreed it was just a summer thing. What about you, Rach?” she asked, leaning forward with her hands under her chin. “Did you go on any dates this summer?”

I shook my head, and she sighed. I had only been on a handful of dates in high school, two of which Maya had arranged. Sometimes I thought she considered my lack of a boyfriend a personal failure.

“You know what you need?” she said, stretching backward again. “A party. There’s one at the Franks’ tomorrow. Can you get out of here?”

I exhaled. “Yes, finally. We’re done tomorrow night, when Shabbat starts.”

“Perfect,” she said. “I’ll fix your hair and find something for you to wear.” Her eyes twinkled. “I bet Chris will be there.” The sound of his name had the usual effect: my heart gave a little leap, then I gritted my teeth.

I had no right to feel excited about Chris. We had been friends since his family moved in a few houses from mine when he was five years old. Of course, Maya knew I’d had a crush on him once. But she also knew he’d joined the football team in our sophomore year and dated half the cheerleaders since then. As for me, I’d given up any expectation we’d ever be more than friends. Her suggestion he would be at the party was both a tease and a longing hope she knew I couldn’t afford.

I tried to keep my face even as Maya stared at me, willing me to admit I still wanted him. “That’s nice,” I said calmly. “It will be good to see him.”

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She kept her eyes on my face, grinning. "Yeah, I'm sure it will be."

CHAPTER 2

The party was a couple blocks from my house, in the backyard of one of Maya's cheerleading friends. Security lights streaked the yard like spotlights in the dark. Loud music played from a Bluetooth speaker set up with someone's iPhone. Citronella candles had made the air thick and faintly citrus.

Maya wore a strappy sleeveless shirt with short shorts, and deep purple lipstick matching her fingernails. "Have a drink," she said, handing me a Coke. I didn't drink caffeine, but I held the can like a lifeline.

As usual, I felt out of place in Maya's crowd. The girls had perfectly applied make-up and clothing like Maya's; even their toenails were manicured in their rhinestone flip-flops. Every now and then the cheerleaders would synchronize into an improvised routine, their long legs pointing, crossing, and turning at the same moment. Then they would break into babbles and giggles as they fell out of line.

The guys were tall and athletic, wearing graphic T-shirts with nice jeans. They gathered in packs, eating pepperoni pizza, glancing at the girls from under their baseball caps.

They were so different from my grieving Orthodox Jewish family, but they also wore uniforms and had their own language and codes. And in the same way as I had at my uncle's house, here too I felt like an outsider.

What would my cousins think of me, if they knew where I was tonight? I wondered. Then I shrugged the thought away. My coming to a party like this was probably already factored into their contempt.

Maya had done her best to dress me up tonight. I usually kept my hair back in a ponytail, but she had used some magical gel to keep it from frizzing, and brushed it out long so it hung halfway down my back. After tsking a bit at my closet, she chose a sleeveless blouse with khaki shorts. Then she applied her own makeup on my face: moisturizer, foundation, concealer, blush, mascara, eyeliner, and lip gloss.

When she was finally satisfied, she turned me around to face the mirror

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and admire her efforts. I had to admit I looked nice, but I would never spend that long getting ready for anything on my own.

Chris sailed past in the dark yard, surrounded by a small cloud of admiring girls. He had spent the last three weeks coaching at a kids' sports camp in Pennsylvania. Last night, he had texted me to say he was finally home.

I watched Chris stop in front of a blond cheerleader. She laughed, pleased by his attention. They joined hands, and he led her to the center of the yard, where some kids were already dancing. Chris looked so confident, touching her hands and releasing them. Their bodies brushed against each other, moving to the beat of the music. Her face was upturned, eyes closed, like she hoped he would kiss her. I wondered how long he had known her.

I had been watching the girl for several moments before I realized Chris was looking at me. He winked, grinning, before returning his eyes to her.

The moment reminded me of times in his backyard in second grade. He would swing and climb across the jungle gym as if I wasn't even there. And then, unexpectedly, he would look down at me. It was clear then it had all been a show: irrelevant without the audience.

Maya returned to find me still standing near the yard fence, holding my unopened Coke. "Come dance, Rach."

I shook my head. "You go on."

She looked uncertain, but I waved her away. Then I felt ashamed. All her efforts had been wasted. I didn't know what I needed tonight, but it wasn't this. I watched the cluster of teens dancing in the dark, wishing I could just go home. I set my Coke down on a lawn chair and pulled out my phone to check the time.

A hand rested on my shoulder; it was Chris, behind me. "Hey, Rach," he whispered into my ear, sending tingles down my neck. "Having a good time?"

I shoved my phone into my back pocket. "Sure," I lied, turning to face him. I reminded myself we were friends. Good friends. "Welcome back."

"I was sorry to hear about your grandfather."

"Thanks," I said.

His eyes explored my face. "Would you like to dance?"

I squinted at him. "Seriously?"

“Well, if you aren’t sure,” he said, taking both my hands and pulling me playfully toward the group. Several girls eyed me incredulously. Maya watched from a distance, eyes wide.

The music had changed; the new song had a slower beat. Chris spun me in a circle, then pulled me in close, his chin resting on my hair. I felt grateful for the few dance moves Maya had taught me the summer before.

“Having more fun now?” His arms felt warm on my back.

“Yeah.” We passed the blond cheerleader, who glared at me. “I think your last girl is jealous.”

He laughed. “At least you can enjoy that part.”

Don’t hope, I reminded myself. *Don’t want it*. I knew Chris wasn’t interested in me like this. He was just being nice. To comfort me, because of Zaide.

“Are *you* having fun?” I managed to ask.

He grinned. “Sure.” He took both my hands, prepared to push me away.

Just then I heard it, a high-pitched whisper not far from my left ear; almost like a voice, but there was no one near me on that side. There was also a burst of light, like a shooting star, on my right. The dark yard whirled around me. I wobbled, losing my balance.

“Hey.” Chris gripped my shoulder to steady me, then touched my cheek with his fingers. “Do you need some water?”

The dizziness evaporated quickly, but my cheeks burned. “No,” I said. “I’m OK.”

The music changed to something faster and louder. The other kids jostled us as they danced.

“I should head home,” I said.

“Do you want me to walk you?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Can you tell Maya I had to go?”

He nodded, his concerned eyes following me out.

I closed the gate behind me before I looked back. Candles blinked like tiny stars, and one of the security lights shone on Maya dancing with a football player. Chris had picked up with another girl, a brunette with curly hair pulled into a perky ponytail, which bobbed as she danced. I felt humiliated and weary as I turned away.

He doesn’t belong to you, I thought. *He never did*.

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Because of the burst of light, I wondered if a migraine was coming on. I'd struggled with them since puberty. Two years earlier, I'd had a terrible string of them. I'd finally reduced them by cutting caffeine out of my diet. They still came occasionally, but I hadn't had one all summer.

I opened my purse, considering the little tablet I always kept with me just in case. Though a migraine was far worse, I didn't like how I often felt sick to my stomach after I took it.

This didn't feel like a migraine. There was no pulsing dart of pain above my right eyebrow, and the flashing lights had disappeared rather than gotten stronger. I felt better now, away from the loud music.

I took three deep breaths of the warm night air and closed my purse. I kicked a rock the rest of the way home.



When I reached our driveway, I found Dad getting out of his car. He had taken off the week to be with Mom, but had returned to work at his first opportunity.

Dad was tall, with a long, narrow face, and watchful eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. A psychology professor at the University of Maryland, for the last several years he had also managed a research clinic that provided therapy for clients in the Baltimore community. He was also writing his first book. The multiple projects meant that, until we'd been moored together in my uncle's house for the week, we had hardly seen him all summer.

He stopped and grinned when he saw me approaching. "You look pretty."

I waved at my face and clothing, as if they required an explanation. "Maya dressed me up. For a party."

He tilted his head to appraise her efforts. "She did a nice job. Did you have fun?"

"I guess." I pulled my hair back from my face, wishing I had a rubber band to tie it back into my usual ponytail. "It was pretty different from the rest of the week."

He chuckled, rolling his eyes up to the sky. "I don't know if those people have ever been to a party in their lives."

"Doesn't seem like it." I released my hair; it cascaded down my back with

a thump. He opened his arms and I melted into them, smelling his familiar Irish Spring soap. “How was work?”

“I had hundreds of emails waiting for me,” he said. “To be honest, it was a nice dose of reality.”

I hesitated a moment. “You’ve been so busy this summer,” I said into his chest. “I’ve missed you.”

He patted my back. “There are people out there who really need help, Rach,” he said. “I’m just trying to give them what I’ve got.”

“I know.” I was proud of how my father helped people. “How’s Mom?”

“She’ll be okay,” he said. “How about you?”

In considering my answer, I thought about my Orthodox cousins, the dizziness I felt while dancing with Chris, and Zaide, who would never tell me stories again. Then I looked up at Dad, relishing the warmth of his arms around me.

When I was younger, we used to go hiking on the Catoctin Mountain, just the two of us talking for hours on a Saturday afternoon. Then he hurt his knee, his job became more intense, and our hikes ended. We hadn’t talked like that in years.

Was I doing all right? Probably. But if I wasn’t, where could I even begin?

“I’m fine,” I told him.



On Sunday evening, we ordered Chinese food and ate it together in the den, far from my grandparents’ kosher dishes. It was our last meal with Beth before she went back to school.

Nine days after losing Zaide, Mom’s face still looked like glass that had been shattered and hastily pasted back together. Her eyebrows pulled together into a sad little frown, and she kept pressing her palms together, rubbing one hand over the other, stroking her wrist with a thumb—little twitches that showed the effort it was taking to keep herself together. She picked at the shrimp fried rice that was normally her favorite. Dad sat next to her on the sofa, occasionally brushing her shoulder in support.

Beth sprawled on the loveseat with her long auburn hair spread behind her, eating her chow mein with chopsticks. I sat cross-legged on the floor,

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barefoot, eating pork lo mein at her feet.

“Are you excited to go back to college?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She grinned. “It’ll be good to get home.”

“Beth,” I said, a little hurt, “this is your home!”

“Oh, you know, Rach.” She waved her chopsticks in the air. “Back to my regular studio, the shows, my friends.”

She had spent all summer in a studio, dancing in a show, and seeing friends. But Beth was lucky. She was the kind of girl who could find home anywhere.

“She’ll be back in her *real* home for Thanksgiving,” Dad said.

Beth frowned and set her carton aside. “Why are all the times we get together about food?”

“It’s only once a year,” Mom said.

“It’s not once a year!” Beth burst out. “It’s Thanksgiving, Chanukah, New Years, Passover. Every time I come home!”

We all stared at her. She picked her carton back up and started picking again at her food with the chopsticks. “I’m just saying. It makes it hard for a dancer to stay the proper weight.”

“You’ve managed it pretty well this summer,” Dad said.

I agreed. “You look beautiful, Beth.”

She shrugged, lifting a single mushroom from her carton and swallowing it. “It’s not easy.”

“I can make some low-fat things for Thanksgiving,” Mom said.

Beth twisted her lips. “That might help.”

“You’ve been a real professional this summer, Beth,” Dad said. “Keeping in shape and in practice. And you even made money dancing!”

She looked up at them, shyly. “But you still think I need the double-major?”

This had long been a sore spot between Beth and my parents. Beth had gotten a scholarship for dance, but my parents only agreed to let her go if she also majored in something else. “Something you can make money with,” Dad said. Beth’s second major was in business, but it wasn’t what she really wanted.

“Yes,” Dad said. “Just in case dance doesn’t work out as well as you planned.” Mom nodded in agreement.

Beth sank a little in the sofa. She set her half-eaten Chinese food on the side table and took a sip of Diet Coke. Then, after a moment's reflection, she turned to me. "Rach, did I hear you were dancing with Chris Marino at the Franks' party on Friday night?"

Startled, I looked up, as my parents watched with bemused expressions. "Where did you hear that?"

She grinned. "When you dance with a hottie like that, it gets around." She turned the soda can around in her hands. "So are you finally dating him now?"

I felt my face flush red. "Of course not. We're just friends."

"Friends," Beth said sarcastically, taking another sip of her soda. "Whatever you say, Mrs. Marino."

From my spot on the carpet, I kicked her playfully in the shins. She held the soda can high to keep it from spilling on us.

"Easy," Beth said, giggling. "This body has a lot of dancing to do." She reached down to tickle me. I scooted away, then attacked her with a pillow.

Beth collected her soda and tossed her carton in the trash. "I'll be waiting for wedding news from California," she teased, as she headed back upstairs to finish packing.