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Chapter 1

Almost Perfect

The worst day of my life started out like any other day in my new school. In other words — almost perfect.

Of course, it had its moments...

“Penina, can you answer the question Rashi just asked?”

Silence.

“Penina? Did you even *hear* the question?”

Dimly, I became aware that my name had been spoken. Twice. But before I could gather my wits enough to figure out why, Morah Gunner asked sharply, “*Penina Kellman, are you with us?*”

Now I was.

“Um... What was the question again?”

I’m not normally so scatterbrained. But I’d just learned a new piece for our upcoming performance, and I’d been playing it over in my head to make sure I knew it per-

fectly. Practicing the notes on an imaginary flute in my mind was a great way to practice without really practicing, if you know what I mean. Unfortunately, it also made it impossible to spare any attention for my teacher that morning.

“If you’d been paying attention,” Morah Gunner said, “you would know the question — *and* the answer.” She looked around. “Who can tell me? Esti?”

Esti looked anxious. “I know the question. But the answer...” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Not so much.”

“Nomi?”

To the relief of every one of her classmates, Nomi knew both the question and the answer. Now we could move on.

Or maybe not. As the bell rang for lunch, the teacher fixed me with her eagle eye. “Penina, please stay behind for a minute.”

“Okay, Morah.” My heart dropped.

I watched my classmates troop out of the classroom, eager for their lunches. My friend Ora threw me a sympathetic look and mouthed, “Good luck!” Chaya dragged her feet, as if she wished she could stay and support me through the coming ordeal. I saw Gali give me a discreet thumbs-up before she disappeared through the door. The room was empty now, except for Morah Gunner and me.

With trepidation, I moved closer to the front of the room. When I was standing right in front of the teacher’s desk, Morah asked, “Where was your head today, Penina? I’ve never known you to be so spaced out in class before.”

“I’m sorry, Morah. I — I was just thinking about something.”

“Is everything alright?”

I nodded. How could I tell her that rehearsals for the upcoming Tu B’Shevat performance were demanding all of my attention? Especially since that performance would be a sort of dress rehearsal for the biggie: our spectacular show in London in the spring! How could I pay attention to even the most fascinating Rashi with all of that going on?

Morah seemed to see right inside my head. She clasped her hands on the desk in front of her and said, “As the principal is always telling you girls, being in a school like this is a big responsibility. There’s your schoolwork... and there are your rehearsals. You need to keep them separate. And you need to keep your priorities straight. Do you know what that means?”

I nodded again, but she explained anyway. “It means that, during rehearsals, you focus on music. But during class time, you need to keep your mind where it belongs: *in the classroom*. Yes?”

“Yes,” I said. I knew she was right. But it was so hard!

“I’ll expect to see an improvement tomorrow,” Morah said. I was dismissed.

I nodded a third time, threw in another, “I’m sorry!” for good measure, and made my escape.



My friends had saved me a seat in the lunchroom. I ran through the doors, waving my arms over my head to

show them that I was still alive. I ran over to the sinks to wash my hands, and then ran over to the table. By the time I sat down and unwrapped my sandwich, I felt as if I'd just been in a marathon.

Ora waited until I'd taken my first bite, and then asked, "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Penny! What did Morah say?"

I shrugged. "What do you think? She scolded me for not paying attention in class."

"That's it?"

"That's it. She wasn't too happy."

"That's the way my math teacher feels about *me*," Chaya said. Chaya and math have never been the best of friends, though she's doing better now that Ora's helping her. "She always says I should pay more attention. But hearing her talk about algebra is like listening to someone speak in a foreign language!"

Ora grinned and rolled her eyes. For her, the language of numbers is almost as easy as English. It was Gali who said, "I know exactly what you mean, Chaya. Only with me, it's history. Memorizing all those dates?" She faked a shudder.

I was more than ready to change the subject. "Who's excited about Tu B'Shevat?" I asked, just to generate the kind of conversation I like. When I said "Tu B'Shevat," they all understood that I was referring to the performance we were scheduled to have on that day. It would take place in Philadelphia, a two-hour trip from our school.

My friends, of course, were all *super*-excited. With

some input from Chaya, who's also in the choir, Ora started talking about the fabulous new songs they were learning. Gali told a funny story about messing up a difficult step in her dance group and nearly falling flat on her face. I described the new piece I'd just learned for the flute.

"It's harder than anything I've ever done before," I said. "But it's gorgeous!"

Ora was looking at me with admiration. "I can't get over how well you play, Penny. I may be able to sing — but when it comes to playing an instrument, I have two left thumbs."

"Well, I'm going to play as if *I* have two left thumbs if I don't get a chance to practice! Mrs. Judowitz is a perfectionist. Make a mistake once, and she gives you *The Look*. Do it again, and... *watch out*." I imitated Gali's shudder. Only mine was the real thing.

"So why don't you practice more?" Chaya asked.

"In *my* house? I'd like to see anyone manage to practice there for more than two seconds without being interrupted."

Chaya nodded politely, but I could tell that she didn't get it. And I'll tell you why. Chaya's house is big and beautiful and hushed. She's never been part of a large family living in a house that's way too small for them. She can't imagine what it's like to search for a quiet corner to practice your music in. Her house is *all* quiet corners.

"You can come to my house to practice if you want," Ora offered.

The others quickly added, "Or mine!"