

1

A SPECIAL ASSIGNMENT

Hooray!" Sara shouted as she glanced out the window during lunch. "It's finally snowing."

Her excited exclamation caused a mad rush to the windows.

"It's really sticking," I commented excitedly.

"Hey," Naomi said. "Maybe we'll be lucky and get out of school early."

"Maybe we'll really be lucky," Sara added, "and not have school at all tomorrow."

Everyone laughed.

"I thought you loved school," I admonished Sara.

"I do," Sara admitted. "But I love vacation even more."

We stood gazing out the window, watching the wind swirl the snowflakes around.

"I know what you mean," I said to Sara as we stood hypnotized by the frolicking snowflakes. "I could use a couple days of vacation, what with midterms just around the corner. First I was so busy with the school production, then the *Chanukah chagigah*, and before we're given a chance to breathe, it's time for midterms."

"Yes," Sara agreed. "Midterms should be outlawed. I wish the teachers would come up with a new and creative way to test our knowledge. We need a great suggestion that would have a bit of fun in it."

Before I had a chance to agree, disagree, or even make any further recommendations, our revelry was interrupted by Mrs. Tzeddakah's arrival in class.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Bracha Friedman.

I'm fifteen years old and attend the Rivkah Gross Academy High School for Girls in Pineville, New Jersey. I'm in the tenth grade, and I love school. It's true I love school *now*. But when I was entering ninth grade last year, all I wished for was to be anyplace else.

You see, my mother's the assistant principal in Rivkah Gross Academy. She and I started high school together. I didn't want to attend this school because all my friends from elementary school were going to Bais Leah. But I wasn't given any choice in the matter. My parents insisted that I attend the school of their preference. Now, although I hate to admit it, I'm glad they did. My whole life revolves around Rivkah Gross Academy High.

And that's because of my best friend Sara Goodman.

Her mother is the principal of the school.

Sara is a bundle of animation. She's constantly energizing the classroom with her love of excitement, antics, and fun. She's always daring, brave, and dauntless. There's never a dull moment when Sara's around. And because we're best friends, I always get swept along with the tide. Don't get me wrong! I love it! But this day promised to be no different.

The day continued amid tension and anxiety. Each teacher announced the date of her midterm and warned us of its severity. The response became routine — one long groan.

Finally, it was Mrs. Stein's turn.

"Okay," Sara said with a grimace and a groan. "Here goes nothing. I'm sure we're in for another scheduled midterm."

"Who cares about midterms?" Naomi commented to no one in particular. "Just look at that snowstorm. There for sure won't be any school tomorrow."

We looked out the windows and couldn't believe our eyes. We had drifted from classroom to classroom throughout the afternoon. Every period someone else had reported on the snow, but the last we'd looked it had seemed to be tapering off. But in the last half hour, the snow had really begun to fall heavily. The whole outdoors was densely blanketed. The street lights had turned on and were emitting a beautiful and eerie glow.

Sara opened the window and put out her hand.

"It's gorgeous," she said. "Look how beautiful! It's like a carpet of white lilies."

"Or a thick comforter of soft feathers," I suggested.

“Those are beautiful descriptions,” Mrs. Stein interrupted us as she entered the room.

We all quickly rushed back to our seats.

“Does anyone have any other suggestions?” she asked.

There was a short span of silence, until Naomi’s voice broke it.

“A shoulder full of dandruff?” she suggested, not too seriously.

We all laughed as the mood shifted.

“Globs of white paint from an artist’s paintbrush?” was another suggestion.

“All right,” Mrs. Stein said with a smile. “Let’s get down to business.”

“Does that mean you’re going to announce what we’re responsible for on our English midterm?” Sara asked with a sigh.

Mrs. Stein nodded. “Only,” she added, “you’re not having an English midterm.”

Before she had a chance to explain herself, we all began to cheer.

“Instead of a midterm,” Mrs. Stein interrupted our gleeful shouts, “you’re having a special assignment.”

We all sat quietly, and a little anxiously, and listened attentively to Mrs. Stein’s directions.

“First let me give you a brief introduction,” she said. “When I was still single, I had only one thought on my mind.”

I began to smile and saw Sara smiling in return. I then noticed that the whole class was grinning, probably thinking along the same line as we were. So was Mrs. Stein.

“No,” she continued quickly, a little flustered. “I wasn’t thinking only about getting married.”

The class laughed.

“I was more concerned with what was happening in the moment than with what would happen in the future or what had occurred in the past. I must admit, though, that after I got married and after Mrs. Tzeddakah’s wedding, I began to think a little bit differently. First let me start with my grandmother.”

Mrs. Stein paused and we continued to listen attentively.

“I’m the oldest daughter, my mother is the oldest daughter, and so is her mother. My grandmother lost her parents during the Second World War, so when she requested to have a picture of the three generations of eldest daughters, I could well understand the emotional excitement behind the request.”

Mrs. Stein paused again.

“It was at this point that my plan began to germinate. Then, when Mrs. Tzeddakah got married, I saw a different aspect to the whole idea. If you remember, those of you who attended Mrs. Tzeddakah’s wedding, her *chasunah* was very different from mine and the ones you’re used to.”

I smiled to myself as I remembered the variations in the ceremonies, being that Mrs. Stein’s *chasunah* had been a typical Ashkenazic affair, while Mrs. Tzeddakah’s had followed the Sephardic *minhagim*.

“We’re all Jews,” Mrs. Stein continued. “Yet look around the classroom. We have redheads and blondes

and brunettes. There are girls with dark skin, olive skin, and those with very fair complexions. We have girls from Russia, Iran, France, and Germany. There are girls who are third-generation Americans. Yet we're all descended from Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. We're all Jews and, if possible, can trace our roots back to our *Avos* and *Imahos*."

So what's our assignment? I wondered.

"The class will be divided into teams of four girls," Mrs. Stein concluded. "Each of you is to trace your roots. You are to interview the oldest member of your family — the patriarch or matriarch. I would like to see some pictures of your childhood years and your family's growth. Visit Ellis Island if your ancestors entered through those gates. Find out some interesting anecdotes and include them. Help your teammates, and when you've completed your research, you will present both an oral and written report."

We began to talk excitedly among ourselves.

"I hope you're on my team," I whispered anxiously to Sara.

"Well, we've managed being separated before," Sara answered as we both recalled being on opposite teams the previous summer in color war.

"I know," I answered. "But this report could be so much fun. I can't wait to discover all your hidden secrets."

We both fidgeted with anticipation as Mrs. Stein silenced the murmuring in the classroom.

"All right," she said. "Now to pick the teams, I'll draw out the name of one person from this box. That person will