



STARDUST

BY SHIRA MOSKOWITZ

THE BRISK SEPTEMBER

wind blows back my long, strawberry-blonde ponytail as I step carefully around the puddles dancing with rainbows from yesterday's storm. I enter the school building and make my way to the cavernous auditorium, with its cathedral-like domed ceiling, stage and the hundreds of chairs placed just so atop the slightly discolored green carpet with flecks of white.

There are masses of girls seated, talking and chattering with their friends. I'm not sure which is ninth grade, but in any case, I won't sit with them. They don't want me there and I don't want them. Carefully, I choose a seat in the middle. It's far enough from the crowd so I can be alone, but not too far back that it looks strange.

Rebbetzin Friedlander, the principal, mounts the stage and approaches the shiny wooden podium. She taps her microphone twice and everyone quiets down.

"Good morning, *banos!*" she starts. "It's so wonderful to see you all back here for another year of learning!"

I hear some groans that are

quickly stifled when Rebbetzin Friedlander launches into a beginning-of-the-year *d'var Torah*.

After our principal – or *me-naheles*, as she insists we call her – finishes, she gives a couple more announcements. After the last one about never being allowed to use your cell phone in the building during school hours, she announces, "And with that, *banos*, Mrs. Silverman will introduce your G.O.!"

Murmurs ripple through the high school. I hear one girl whisper to her friend, "I heard the theme this year is going to be something with ships."

"Nah, I heard flowers."

A brunette with hazel eyes hisses, "I really hope the G.O. is better than last year's."

I sit back in my seat and stare at the stage, where Mrs. Silverman, the G.O. coordinator ascends to the podium. I study her. She's a tiny, cute woman with a blonde *sheitl* put up in a messy pony and seems to radiate energy and fun. Everyone quiets down without her even having to tap the mike.

"Good morning, girls!" Mrs. Silverman exclaims exuberantly.

"Presenting, as your G.O. heads, Talia Young! Kayla Feingold! Aaaaand Miri Pollack!"

The three G.O. heads burst onto the stage, and Mrs. Silverman flips the switch of a CD player and the new G.O. theme song starts blasting.

Talia, Kayla and Miri are doing the motions, involving a complex twisting of their hands and some weird twirling move that I could never in a million years do. But the tune...I listen intently. It's a jaunty one. I like it.

The song finishes and Mrs. Silverman starts talking again. "Soo, the theme for this year is 'On the Road!' Look out for exciting upcoming events!! And now, I'll play the song again! Let's see if you girls can figure out the motions!"

As the song starts again and the girls all start imitating the G.O. presidents (although some aren't doing such a great job), I quietly get out of my seat and slip out of the auditorium. No one notices me. As usual. I walk down the hallway with its airy, lavender walls, floor-to-ceiling windows and gray carpeting.

Where's the bathroom? I rack

CHAPTER 1

I SEE MASSES OF GIRLS SEATED. I'M NOT SURE WHICH IS NINTH GRADE, BUT IN ANY CASE, I WON'T SIT WITH THEM. THEY DON'T WANT ME THERE, AND I DON'T WANT THEM.

my brains, trying to remember where they were when I came yesterday for orientation. I walk down another corridor, and then find an inconspicuous door, squeezed in between two lockers. The only reason I notice it is because of the typical plaque tacked on the door with a stick figure in a dress and reads 'Women.' Ha. Like there'd be a boys' bathroom here...well, maybe for the janitor.

I push open the door and walk inside. It's larger than the bathroom in elementary; that is to say, it has more than five stalls.

Unfortunately, that doesn't mean it smells any nicer (still smells like chemicals) or that there's still a semblance of cleanliness (dirty pink tiled floor and some walls are actually *wet*, plus there's quite a few flies zipping around). I choose the handicapped one all the way at the end and step in, locking the door behind me. In addition to a toilet, there's also a small bench. I sit down and sigh.

So. Your first day of high school. How's it going so far, Avigail? I heave a deep breath. Dunno why I expected it to be any different from elementary. It's the same thing, just with different girls and a different setting.

I sit for another few mo-

ments, listening as the booming music swells, and then slowly dies away. Another deep breath. I *should go. The assembly probably finished already.* I inhale one last time and step out of the bathroom.

I hear laughter and chatter from one of the halls and follow the sound of girls chattering. Clusters of excited girls are examining their schedules and classes.

"Hey, I'm with you this year, Chana!" squeals a girl with hair as golden as the sun.

Chana squeals back and they clasp hands.

I wait for the crowd to thin a bit; I don't usually push or shove. When the girls gradually move away, I approach the lists. Scanning the ninth grade, I find myself in 9C. I don't recognize any names.

I head to my new classroom. Almost everyone's there already, and most of the desks are picked out. I groan inwardly. The back corners, where I usually deign to occupy, are all taken up. The only choices are in the front middle or in the third row, next to a girl with jet-black hair and vivid green eyes.

I take my chances with the girl. Dumping my bag on the

desk, I quickly arrange my pencil cup and Post-Its.

"Hi, I'm Chassi Fein," says the black-haired girl in a friendly voice. "What's your name?"

I start. I'm not used to people talking to me. "Oh! Um...hi. I'm...uh...Avigail Klar."

"Nice to meet you!" says Chassi excitedly.

I can't help but smile at her lively tone.

"Which elementary school did you go to?" she inquires.

"Bnos Sarah."

"Oh, I went to Bais Rivka... do you live in this neighborhood?"

"Yup, just a few blocks away."

"Really?" exclaims Chassi. "I also do! What street?"

"167th."

"I live on 168th!" Chassi says. "That's so cool! I can't believe we never met!"

Just then, our Chumash teacher walks in, which puts our small conversation to an end. As I flip open my Chumash, I can hardly believe it. Chassi actually seems interested in being my friend! Maybe this year will be different after all.

TO BE CONTINUED...