

# CONFRONTATION

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## The Job

THE APPLICATION WAS ONE PAGE. Tovah had provided half the requested information that Friday. There were no answers for the remaining questions.

“Didn’t go to college, huh?”

“Well, Mrs. Portman, I took some technical classes after high school at—”

A wave of the hand. “I don’t need your life story, honey. And call me Susan, or Mrs. Susan as the children do in Prespace and Earlycare. Anyway, it’s refreshing. I’ve got a stack of applications from girls at the university with these formal letters telling me how much they know about childhood development. Probably want to use the children here at the J as guinea pigs to try out all that psychobabble.” Mrs. Portman clicked a ballpoint and tapped its end to a spot on Tovah’s application. Then, a scribble. “So, what’s this Anchor Palace you worked for in Louisville? Sounds like a bar.”

“It is,” Tovah said, sure they were now simply going through the motions and wondering if she would be able to catch the early bus back to her new neighborhood. The summer had just begun, there were still other job opportunities.

“Oh, really,” Mrs. Portman said, removing her thick, plastic-rimmed eyeglasses that Tovah was convinced were just for show, part of the persona of a woman who did not have much other than her position. Tovah’s mother had been the same with each of her own company advancements, beginning in the phone room and eventually retiring as a receptionist in the returns department. Tovah imagined Mrs. Portman had started here at the Jewish Community Center thirty or so years before as a volunteer picnic organizer. “Well, when you worked at this bar did drunks ever spill beer you had to clean up after?”

“Every night.”

The application was tossed to the desk. It skidded slightly, stopping at the foot of a bronze cube the size of a butter dish with the inscription *2010/5770 JCC Charity Bake Off – Second Place.*

"Listen, Miss ..." An eye back to the application. "It is Miss, isn't it? I mean to say—"

"Sochall. Yes, it is Miss," Tovah said. "But Tovah's fine. Or Miss Tovah, if that's what you prefer."

Mrs. Portman stared at Tovah, emotionless, for what seemed not very long, and finally grinned. "Okay. Now, Summercare preschoolers are like miniature drunks. I need to know that if one of them pees his pants you aren't going to become some quasi shrink and delve into analyzing why it happened. I want to trust that you're going to take the child to the changing room, find the extra undershorts and jeans his parents have given us to keep on hand for these types of moments, clean the kid up, and send him back to the sandbox. Did you care why drunks spilled beer when you worked at this Anchor Palace in Louisville?"

Tovah was beginning to like Mrs. Portman. "I suppose I didn't."

"Of course not." Mrs. Portman's hands were now flapping in front of her large bosom. "You wiped up the spilled beer and dealt as best you could until somebody took the drunk home. That's what we do here. Think you can handle that?"

Tovah smiled. "Yeah."

"And I assume you like children?"

Tovah had never given the matter much thought. She just needed a job that was convenient to her bus line. "Sure, kids are okay."

"Ideal attitude." Palm smack to the desk. "I don't want my second in command going mushy; the tiny brats see you're soft and they'll take advantage with no remorse. We're not in the business of enabling them at Prespace and Earlycare; we're here to do the job. Today you get fingerprinted and Monday you start. There'll be some paperwork; show up half an hour early. Everyone provides the necessary information. And you wear either long skirts or below the knees dresses around the children, no jeans or pants. I've got a good feeling about you. If it works out for Summercare this might become permanent in the fall with benefits. However, for this summer you do get a complimentary membership to our fitness center, including towel service. Members may of course come and go at their own will. Any questions?"

A slight shake of her red hair.

"Good."

TOVAH STILL HAD INK SMUDGES ON HER FINGERTIPS Monday morning. That previous Friday she had done as instructed and had gone to the

security desk at the east wing of the grounds. The Jewish Community Center was a small fortress of its own. In addition to Prespace and Earlycare, it housed Kinderspace through eighth-grade private schooling, the fitness center, the full-size gymnasium for everything from gymnastics lessons to recreational basketball, racquetball and tennis courts, a softball field and picnic area, a dance studio for ballroom and jazz lessons, a theatrical stage, a downstairs banquet hall complete with kitchen facilities, both indoor and outdoor swimming pools, countless facility rooms for everything from B'nai B'rith youth group meetings to adult education classes, and of course the Hebrew Learning Academy for bar- and bat-mitzvah preparation. Tovah did not like having her picture taken at the security desk but she did not protest when it was done to have a digitally-produced laminated identification card created with a scannable bar code for her to enter the various sections of the grounds.

The paperwork never ceased. Every time Tovah completed one form, another was placed in front of her. The female officer who had been processing her had finally said, "Okay, I need to photocopy your driver's license." Tovah did not have one and instead produced her social security card and a cancelled MasterCard with a very dated picture of her imposed in its corner. "This should be fine," the officer had said. "And your address?" Tovah unfolded the piece of notebook paper she had penciled it to, having moved into the furnished studio space only two weeks before when she moved to this coastless town. She preferred to live away from water these days. "Your home and cell phone numbers and e-mail address?" Tovah said she did not have any of those. "And finally, information to direct deposit your salary." She did not have a bank account either. "Then we'll just cut you a check every other Thursday and you can collect it here."

"That will be just fine," Tovah had said, and looked to her wristwatch to see if she would catch the early bus back to her new neighborhood.

Now, Monday morning, she had arrived with ink still on her fingertips. She wore a long skirt, as instructed, had put her back-length red hair up, and held a handbag over one shoulder that contained a change of clothes so she could try the fitness center after work. She had also brought a sack lunch consisting of yogurt and nuts, a peanut butter on wheat sandwich, and a banana, figuring that so long as she did not bring any meat onto the premises she was abiding by the form she placed her signature to declaring that she would adhere to kosher dietary laws while on Jewish Community Center property or face consequences.

That first Monday Tovah did not do much other than shadow Mrs. Portman about the Prespace and Earlycare rooms, learning the boundaries established for the children. Mrs. Portman was a firm believer in rules and procedures. "Miss Tovah also believes in consequences, don't you Miss Tovah?" Mrs. Portman would say. And Tovah would smile and nod to the children, always wondering why everything in the Prespace and Earlycare rooms smelled like glue.

The Summercare routine was firmly established, everything from story corner hour to nap time beginning and ending at precise moments of the day's crowded hours. The day concluded with Mrs. Portman and Tovah escorting the children to the carpool turnaround to be retrieved by their parents—mostly mothers. Mrs. Portman introduced Tovah to all of them. Finally, they were left with one boy who was fidgeting in a cross-legged position on the four-square asphalt with his small Spiderman-imprinted backpack in his lap.

"Mr. Westerton," Mrs. Portman said, looking down to the child. Mrs. Portman addressed all of the children as Mr. or Miss. "Pick yourself up and go to the little boy's room to relieve yourself. Number one or number two?" The boy rose and held out the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. "Make it fast, then." He left the backpack and retreated into the building. Mrs. Portman turned to Tovah. "A hopeless case. He isn't a member of the tribe, but I'm sure you already figured that out." Tovah had not. "His mother mistakes being a bitch for independence—a typical divorcée. She was asked to withdraw her precious Danny from St. Michael's in the Valley and we all know what that means, don't we? Even Jesuit Daycare refused him. It's amazing what Rabbi Schultz and the rest of the board will stoop to when offered a hefty check towards the remodeling of the locker room saunas, but that's what we get from our unelected leadership. I'm surprised the boy's yenta mother picks him up from here herself since they're a classic nanny family. She's driving me meshuga with all her memos to Schultz insisting we no longer give the children graham crackers after recess and instead provide granola bars and dried fruit. She may feed her own kid healthy, but I swear Danny isn't right in the head."

"How so?" Tovah asked.

"Well, it's hard to explain. I usually have to tell these children to use their words economically, that God gave them two ears and only one mouth for a reason. But I'd be at a loss to even tell you what Danny

Westerton's voice sounds like, and I don't say that in a good way. Oh, I forgot to tell you, don't even think of giving him a red crayon."

"Why not?"

"Just don't. The child's father works for Enemy Radio for God's sake."

Tovah had never heard of Enemy Radio, assumed it was Mrs. Portman's way of referring to National Public Radio, the way she had heard conservative Jews in her now almost forgotten childhood youth group call it National Palestinian Radio.

The boy returned just as a BMW pulled into the half-moon carpool pickup swoop. Mrs. Portman leaned into Tovah's shoulder and whispered, "She leases a new car every six months. A bit odd, knowing how she came out in the divorce; I'll fill you in later."

"Let's get going, Danny," Mrs. Westerton called out to the boy, who said nothing and climbed into the front passenger seat. "Sorry I'm late," she said to Mrs. Portman. Tovah now noticed that Danny was the only freckled boy in Prespace and Earlycare and assumed his mother was the same under all of that cosmetic foundation one could easily carve initials into with a fingernail.

"Let's just not make it a habit," Mrs. Portman said, then took Tovah by the elbow. "Mrs. Westerton, this is our new addition to the job of Prespace and Earlycare, Miss Tovah Sochall."

Tovah extend her hand. Mrs. Westerton simply waived her French-manicured nails from the open driver's window. "Hey," she said, then paused. "Your hair. It's so red; I must have met you before. Did you play soccer at the university with my niece, Stephanie?"

"Miss Tovah came here from Louisville," Mrs. Portman said.

"Oh," Mrs. Westerton said. "Now, Mrs. Portman, have you thought more about discontinuing the graham crackers and switching to granola bars or dried fruit for the sake of the children's well being?"

"It remains under consideration, Mrs. Westerton."

"Fine then. We'll see you tomorrow morning. Right, Danny?"

The boy nodded—mute.

As the BMW pulled away Tovah realized that there was something familiar about Danny Westerton, although she had never been around many children. The BMW stopped at the signal to the grounds, and Tovah noticed its bumper sticker, which had the image of a pistol and beside it, "I DON'T CALL 911." She ruled out Danny's father working for National Public Radio.

"Nobody's going to say it to the family," Mrs. Portman said as she erased lower case alphabet letters from the wipe board, "but Danny Westerton has some real problems and needs serious help. He brings being out of true to a new level, know what I mean?" Tovah did not. "Of course, his mother would be too proud to accept it if she were confronted about his issues, would probably think we were inferring her own flaws. And everyone knows about her special coziness with Rabbi Schultz; only a matter of time before that's exposed for what it is. The shame. I'm sure you're as outraged as I am that she has the audacity to drive her son to and from the J in that disgraceful German-made Nazimobile of hers she was awarded in the divorce. Speaking of her divorce, the only time she ever mentioned it to me, she simply said that her now ex-husband woke up one day with a new idea and she and Danny weren't a part of it. Can you believe that line of baloney?" Tovah was scooping crayons into an empty Nike shoebox from the crafts table in the corner and paused as she noticed that all of the red ones were broken in half. "By the way, you had a fine first day on the job. I believe this is going to work out nicely. Are you socializing with friends tonight? You seem like the kind of young girl who always has fun plans."

"No. I don't have any friends," Tovah said, factual, still collecting the crayons.

"Oh," Mrs. Portman said, and proceeded to take the child-sized plastic chairs and place them atop the short worktables to make cleaning the floors more convenient for the custodians. "Well, there's certainly nothing wrong with spending time by yourself with personal hobbies."

"No," Tovah said, indifferent, placing the cardboard lid atop the shoebox. "I don't have any of those either."

TOVAH SWIPED HER LAMINATED IDENTIFICATION CARD at the fitness center door and heard the lock click. She entered, waved her card one more time before the reader on the reception desk countertop. A short man with silver hair put down the crossword puzzle section of the newspaper and leaned forward, staring through bifocals at the computer monitor before him. He sighed hard through his nostrils, close-lipped, then, still leaning forward, bent his head upward to Tovah. She thought he looked like a painting of Rumpelstiltskin she once saw in a museum with her mother as a child, only without the beard.

"I'd like a towel, please," she said.

"If you want to shake your tuchas and get sweaty and wipe it, you have to pay for towel service," he said in a voice that sounded like shards of glass being rattled in a ceramic mug. It was a voice similar to that of somebody she had known in Louisville, whom she no longer wished to remember. "Thirty-five dollars for the year, sweetheart."

"But I was told I have free towel service."

"Free? You think Rabbi Schultz and those schmucks on the board make anything free? Did you register for the service or not when you joined? I assume you're new because I've never seen any young woman with red hair here before. We'll need to look into this." He reached for the telephone.

"Well, I didn't join, I was hired last week and today's my first day and I was told I could use the fitness center and—"

"Oh," the man said slowly. "So, it's you they hired to replace Violet in Prespace and Earlycare for the job with Summercare."

Tovah had assumed Mrs. Portman had a previous assistant. People leave or are asked to leave employment for different reasons. Still, the name Violet conjured images of the kind of women Tovah once saw in photograph albums her mother kept before they were no longer kept.

The man waved a hand in front of his face. "One moment." He took the telephone and pressed a key with his wrinkled pinkie finger, which was adorned with an oversized class ring. "Yes, it's Marvin." He leaned toward the computer screen again and squinted. "A Miss Sochall. Yes, I believe that is correct about her. Yes, the job. Does she have towel service? You know what I mean. Yes, that's what I mean. I see. I will take care of it. No, no consequences." He hung up and turned to Tovah. "Your paperwork did not transfer here to the fitness center. All that is needed is for me to take your picture for our own files and I will log you as having towel service. Please, look into the recorder." He fingered a small, circular object and pointed the eye of a bright, almost blinding red light to Tovah, who squinted.

"Just open your eyes and stare, sweetheart, so I can permanently log you into the system."

Open.

Click.

"That's just fine," Marvin said as he tapped his keyboard several times. "Now, would you like a set of headphones to use with the treadmills so you can watch the televisions as you move in place?"

Tovah was beginning to regain sight in her left eye as she said, "I would like the headphones."

She thought that not much had changed about Jewish community centers since her childhood. She marveled that women still paraded about the locker room naked showing off varicose veins, only now they were not tapping ash from Pall Malls to the sinks or wearing plastic hair caps to protect managed perms in the sauna. She made her way to the fitness center and was pleased to find it sparsely filled. A few teenage boys were using the free weights and spotting for each other. Tovah grinned, noticing them examining their toned bodies in the wall mirrors. Retirees were still in street clothes, slowly turning the pedals of stationary bicycles. The treadmills and the indoor swimming pool were what kept Tovah after work to try her membership. She held the headphones in her hand as she stretched, only to feel a tap on her shoulder. She turned to see a very fit young woman probably her own age with raven-black hair held back in a neat ponytail staring at her straight-lipped. She wore a tight-fitting tee shirt with the words "EVE WAS FRAMED" in imitation Hebraic lettering.

"Do you intend to use one of the treadmills?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then you must sign in for the one you desire."

Tovah turned to see the far wall of the fitness center lined with ten treadmills, each facing a separate television screen. All empty.

"You must be very specific about which treadmill you choose," the young woman continued. "I have never seen you here. None of our members have red hair. The treadmill you decide upon today will be the one you always use; the only."

"Pardon me?"

"That is the policy. Violation will result in consequences. Remember to always sign in." The young woman pointed to the wipe board at the wall and then departed.

Tovah shrugged, took an erasable marker and scribbled her initials in the box to reserve the next half hour. She then had a sip of water from the fountain and finally stepped onto the number four treadmill.

She had not jogged since running laps in physical education classes in high school to work off her excessive unexcused absences senior year in order to graduate on schedule. She decided to start easy and set the treadmill at a number two progression with no incline. As the machine

muttered to a start, she fitted the earbuds of the headphones and slipped the cord into the socket hole of the receiver on the treadmill's arm. Instantly she heard television number four before her. The five o'clock news hour. Tovah could not recall the last time she cared about what was going on in the world and moved her feet gingerly as she learned of the local weather, the fire department's annual charity auction, and the mayor—whom she had never heard of—apologizing for a youthful indiscretion now coming to light three decades past the fact.

Tovah had been steadily increasing the speed of the treadmill during the news hour until she was at a number five setting with a number four incline. She decided she had had enough of the news. She looked to her right and saw a talk show with an actress as its guest that she thought she recognized from a movie she saw with her mother as a teenager. With a light tap of her fingertip on the control panel on the bar of the treadmill, Tovah switched the channel to the number three television.

Instantly, she heard through the headphones, "Tovah Sochall, do you remember what happened to you in Louisville, why you left?"

Tovah's legs froze.

"THOSE ARE VERY BAD BRUISES," Mrs. Portman said.

"I fell off my bicycle," Tovah said. She did not own one.

"Yes, you did say that. Are you fit for the job today?"

Tovah said she was and went about preparing for the children to arrive, bringing the small plastic chairs from the tabletops to the carpet. But she could not stop contemplating the treadmill incident from the day before. She had blanked out only momentarily but awoke to find herself on the tiled floor of the fitness center with the treadmill before her still turning and the raven-haired young woman leaning over her. When she had finally returned to the fitness center reception desk all she could do was hold out the headphones to Marvin and, in almost a whisper, say, "These are defective."

Without lifting his eyes from his crossword puzzle, Marvin had said, "No, they're not, sweetheart."

Tovah had placed them on the countertop and left. Now she was making sure there were enough juice boxes and granola bars in the inventory for the Summercare children of Prespace and Earlycare. Mrs. Westerton's appeal to the board had been approved that morning.

Rabbi Schultz sat cross-legged in his seasonally appropriate suit on the carpet in front of the dozen or so Summercare children. He had a large

cardboard box in front of him with several Barbie dolls and plastic figurines of animals. Tovah and Mrs. Portman stood at the back of the room.

"You see," Rabbi Schultz said, "people were really bad, so God decided to start over, like when you shake an Etch A Sketch because you don't like the way you drew something. So, God found this really nice person named Noah." The rabbi held up a Ken doll. "Noah was very good and followed all of God's rules and treated everyone the way he wanted to be treated himself. Who wants to be treated nice by other people?" All of the children's hands lifted toward the ceiling, all except Danny Westerton's. "Great. Now watch." The rabbi began placing the plastic animal figurines and dolls into the cardboard box. Tovah watched all of this thinking that if the rabbi were any more laid back he would be a puddle. "God asked Noah to build a big boat, an ark," the rabbi went on, "because God decided to cover the entire earth with water so you could only see ocean and all the land was beneath it. He did this to get rid of all the badness. So, God asked Noah to take his wife and three sons and their wives and all of the animals on the earth onto the big boat and—"

"Rabbi?"

It was Danny Westerton.

"Yes, young man?" Rabbi Schultz said.

"What happened to all of the bad people who didn't go on the big boat?" Danny asked. "What did God do with them?"

It was the first time Tovah had heard the boy's voice.

Mrs. Portman immediately took the child by the earlobe and handed him over to Tovah, saying, "You deal with this one."

Tovah stood in the hallway with Danny Westerton as the rabbi finished his talk with the other children inside the Prespace and Earlycare rooms.

"I don't know what I was bad for," Danny said.

"Well," Tovah said, "sometimes we say things that aren't right that we don't mean to say and there are consequences for the way we said them." Tovah paused, amazed that she was speaking to the boy as Mrs. Portman might approve.

"Did I say something not right?"

"Maybe." She then saw Danny staring at her scalp. "Can I help you, Da—I mean, Mr. Westerton?" she said, remembering Mrs. Portman's insistence that they address the children professionally.

"Your hair," he said.

"Yes, what about it?"

"I don't like red."

Silence.

"Miss Tovah?" Danny said as Tovah saw through the little glass piece of the door to the Prespace and Earlycare rooms that Rabbi Schultz was rising from the carpet and the children were being distributed granola bars by Mrs. Portman, wrappers dispersing to the tabletops.

"Yes?" Tovah said, looking back to the boy.

"How many babies do you have?"

Tovah thought for a moment, then said, "I don't have any at this time," and she opened the door to guide the boy back inside.

MARVIN DID NOT LOOK AT TOVAH as he handed her a towel at the fitness center reception desk. "I see you decided to return," was all he said.

"I thought I'd try the indoor swimming pool instead of the treadmill," Tovah said.

No response.

Tovah did not have a swimsuit. It was one of the great ridiculing rituals of her teenage years to annually shop for one. She opted instead for a tee shirt and jogging shorts. She fitted the swimming goggles she had bought at Walgreens snug over her eyes, the elastic band tight to her pulled back red hair, and dove head first into the fourth lane.

Tovah's ears instantly filled with chlorinated water to the point of pain and she became motionless, her head bobbing to the surface. She could hear nothing but the words, "Tovah Sochall, do you remember what happened to you in Louisville, why you left?"

She scrambled to the edge of the swimming pool, clasping her fingers to the tiled rim, her knees scraping against the concrete siding as she lifted herself from the deep end, water still in her ears, hearing only, "Tovah Sochall, do you remember what happened to you in Louisville, why you left?" She finally pulled herself from the water and pressed her knees and elbows to the floor, shaking her head furiously as she heard, "Tovah Sochall, do you remember what happened to you in Louisville, why you left?" until a ping pressed to both her ears and she felt the water escape, drain, the air of the world returning, and heard her own voice screaming. When she stopped she looked about and saw the teenage lifeguard and the elderly women in one-piece swimsuits staring at her as she gasped for air, relieved it was over—again.

TOVAH WAS PLACING VARIOUS TUBES of half-empty plastic glue bottles on the small tables for the children along with cardboard cutouts of the letter L that they were learning with for the day. The Summercare children were acquiring the English alphabet in preparation for the Kindercare program—it was simply expected that they would matriculate in the fall. Mrs. Portman slipped a CD into the portable media unit and told the children they were going to listen to “The Letter L Song.”

All of the alphabet songs were essentially the same tune with the letter being repeated and words beginning with the letter attached to the melody. “I’m the letter L and I stand for loud, I’m the letter L and I stand for love.” Mrs. Portman had been trying to find a media education unit to purchase for teaching the Hebrew alphabet in the same manner. None suited her pedagogical sensibility.

As soon as Mrs. Portman pressed the play button, all Tovah heard as the CD began and the children sang along and squirted glue on their cardboard L’s and then dumped glitter atop was, “Tovah Sochall, do you remember what happened to you in Louisville, why you left?”

Another scream.

“IT’S OKAY,” MRS. PORTMAN SAID TO TOVAH. “Everyone at the J is upset about the switch from graham crackers to granola bars; nobody likes being pressured. These alterations are stressful for each of us. But we will transition. The children shall forget about what took place today, as I already have. Why don’t you take the rest of the afternoon off?”

Tovah went right to the security desk.

“I want to see the original paperwork I filled out when I was hired,” she demanded, arms folder over her small chest. She felt a slight breeze from an air-conditioning vent swooping from the tiled floor up her denim skirt. “And I want to know what information that Marvin at the fitness center gave you, or you gave him, or whatever.”

“I’m sorry,” the young female officer said. “We shred and recycle all forms after you complete them and we’ve logged the information into the system.” She tapped a stubby index finger to a computer monitor before her.

“Fine,” Tovah said, moving toward the waist-high swing door leading to behind the counter, “I’ll just come around and you can open my file and I’ll look over it on the screen.”

The female officer rose. She had not come across as so hefty to Tovah from her seat behind the desk. Now Tovah thought she looked

to be a walking compacted specimen of flesh, like pounds and pounds of cookie dough shoved under every inch of skin that covered her body.

The officer put out a lumpy hand, as if attempting to reach for one of Tovah’s small breasts, her other palm on her belt—tight. “I’m sorry, it’s against policy to let you see anything in our system. I could face consequences.”

“Consequences?” Tovah shouted, her hands flailing about her sides uncontrollably. “Consequences? You have no idea what consequences are!” She then instinctively grabbed the first item she saw on the security reception counter—a tissue box. She cocked her arm back and then saw nothing, only felt the sting to her eyes as she released the cardboard box over her shoulder and heard the thud of it connecting with the tiled floor behind her.

TOVAH SAT ON THE WOODEN BENCH facing the sandbox of the outdoor recess area where she delivered and monitored the Summercare children at ten o’clock every morning, as they scrambled around the playground.

Mrs. Portman was still dabbing Tovah’s eyes with a damp cloth. “There, there, Miss Tovah, it’ll all be better soon,” she said. “And let’s remember that there is equal blame to go around. Officer Reficul did not know about our troubles with the switch from graham crackers to granola bars. I know, Mrs. Westerton and Rabbi Schultz don’t understand that none of us can transition well; it’s been rough on everyone at the J, but you really must keep yourself composed. True, Officer Reficul overreacted and there was no need for the Mace, but there is also no reason she or you should lose your positions over such a misunderstanding. We shall forget this ever happened.” Mrs. Portman removed the cloth once again from Tovah’s face and squeezed out the mascara-tinged water into one of the disposable plastic bowls they used during finger painting hour on Tuesdays. Tovah stared at her, eyes still reddened. Mrs. Portman smiled. “Perhaps you should meet some new people. The young singles function is this Sunday in the recreation wing, room six-thirteen. You might get to know some nice young men there.”

“I don’t want to meet any nice young men,” Tovah said, still looking into Mrs. Portman’s eyes, her red hair no longer held up but instead draped over her face and the split ends lying in the lap of her skirt.

“Then meet some not-so-nice young men,” Mrs. Portman joked, smiled, then let her lips go flat when Tovah did not respond with the nervous giggle she had intended to solicit.

“I don’t want to meet any men at all,” Tovah added.

Mrs. Portman scooted back on the bench. "Oh, forgive me, Miss Tovah, I didn't . . . your lifestyle really is none of my business."

Tovah looked at her, confused. "Excuse me?"

THE AIR OF THE BASEMENT BANQUET HALL was cool and the children had calmed after coming in from the outdoor recess area. They sat around four of the conference tables as Mrs. Portman and Tovah shuffled in and out of the kitchen facility to deliver them balls of dough for miniature challah-making day.

To her genuine surprise, Tovah had rather enjoyed being left alone to prepare the dough for the children while Mrs. Portman had chaperoned them to the outdoor recess area. While Mrs. Portman had reprimanded Danny Westerton for throwing sand at girls enjoying the swing sets, Tovah had followed the instructions given to her.

"But I don't cook," Tovah had slightly protested when initially given the task.

"Now you do; it's part of the job. Besides, a woman who can't make toast will never have a husband to burn it." And Mrs. Portman had turned her back.

Once Tovah had found all of the ingredients in the kitchen facility and went to work following the instructions she found great pleasure in the preparation step of punching down the dough with her fists then kneading with her knuckles.

The children divided their dough balls into threes and then rubbed each in their palms to create long lines. The girls immediately went about braiding the dough lines of their miniature challahs; the boys watched, all except Danny Westerton. He sat dressed in a Spiderman hooded sweatshirt at a separate table as a consequence for throwing sand and was diligently and competently going about braiding his own miniature challah loaf. Tovah looked at her watch and saw that the ovens she had preheated to 375 degrees would be ready soon. She felt badly for Danny, knew Mrs. Portman had it in for the boy and thought that, had she been watching the children at the outdoor recess area instead of preparing the dough, she might have prevented the incident.

"That's very impressive, Mr. Westerton," Tovah said as she approached his solitary table. Danny did not turn to her. He kept his eyes fixed on the braiding of his dough. Tovah had not realized until now that the boy had incredibly long fingers. "I'm sure it will taste wonderful."

"I'm not eating it," Danny said.

"Oh, it's so sweet that you're going to give it to your mother."

"She can't have it."

"Well, what do you plan to do with it? Something nice, I hope."

The child did not move as he was finishing the end of the dough braid. "I'm taking it to Louisville."

Tovah's throat felt as though a tree branch had been smacked across her jugular vein. "What . . . I mean . . . where did you say you were sending it, Da—Mr. Westerton?"

"Louisville. That's where my daddy lives. He works for Enemy Radio. The challah's for his birthday."

Tovah's hands began to itch. She breathed steady and said, "Oh, your father's birthday is this week."

"No," Danny said, "in December, on Christmas Day, so I can always remember. My daddy is good at Christmas and wears a white Santa hat because he knows I don't like red, except red like your hair is okay, that's red I like—for now." Danny looked up from his completed dough braid and stared at Tovah. "Have you ever been to Louisville, Miss Tovah?"

Her throat contained a scream she was incapable of releasing. "Yes. Yes I have," she said, and turned her head away from the child for a moment, closing her eyes slightly, her breathing measured. She looked back at Danny and saw that the boy's challah dough was now completely blackened, scorched atop the banquet hall table. Danny now had a draping, peppered beard in which his fingers were braiding long strands of hair that fell to his lap. A velvet yarmulke was now atop his scalp, a black vest snug over his Spiderman hooded sweatshirt—gray forelocks dangled from his temples to his small shoulders. And black calfskin-encased phylactery prayer boxes were now fastened by leather thongs to his forehead as well as woven around his left arm and hand; the box at his scalp had a tiny trickle of smoke that smelled of fired tobacco leaves seeping from its base where it touched his skin, rising to the fluorescent-lighted ceiling of the banquet hall.

"So," Danny said, still braiding his long beard, the same beard of a man Tovah once knew until she had good reason to no longer wish to know him, "what happened when you were in Louisville?" Only it was not Danny's voice. It was Marvin's from the fitness center, that voice that sounded like shards of glass being rattled in a

ceramic mug, the voice similar to that of somebody she had known in Louisville, whom she tried not to remember but did.

Tovah bit the flesh of her inner cheeks between her molars. She slowly backed away from the boy, the blood leaving her face. She reached above her head, then grasped her red hair in her hands, staring at the crisped challah loaf before the child. She squeezed her eyelids tight, hoping, but instead remembering, that in Louisville she had wanted something badly and had agreed to offer a service in return if it were granted to her and deeply regretting the arrangement. Then she opened her eyes again to find that Danny Westerton was once again beardless with his unbaked braided loaf before him.

“I MUST BE FRANK. ON OCCASION, we do drug test all employees,” the manager said.

“That will not be a problem,” Tovah said, her hands flat over her skirt to keep it from slipping downward between her legs that she never closed when sitting.

“Just being open with you. You seem quite collected, the type who knows some questions can’t be answered with a Google search, but I would hate for there to be unnecessary consequences down the road.”

Tovah swallowed hard. “It will not be a problem.”

The manager looked at her, emotionless, his razor-burnt cleft chin resting on his fist. He finally nodded and rose from behind his desk, not having once eyed Tovah’s half-page résumé the past fifteen minutes. In fact, this was the first he had looked at her eyes; the majority of the time he had stared at the ear-length red hair she had recently chopped herself with a Swiss army knife blade. He motioned a palm upward to indicate that she could rise. He then extended his other hand. Tovah took note of how warm his skin was, how lightly he held her fingers, barely even giving them a shake, as he said, “Let’s introduce you to our team, Miss Sochall. How does Monday sound for your start date? Unless of course you have a previous obligation or need to settle affairs with another employer before beginning here.”

“I have no conflicts,” Tovah said. “Monday is fine. Really. I’m ready for the job.”