

**EXCERPT from HIDDEN CITY by J.S.FURLONG**

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## 1.

*Sunday, June 17, 2001. New York City, NY.*

I bit down hard on the chunky hand pushing on my mouth.

“Ow!” cried the fat kid, jerking his hand back.

I was too short to see over him and find out if anyone in the bustling hotel hallway had heard. I took a big breath to scream. Joseph Thornton shoved me back through the ladies room door. Up until that moment I hadn’t been scared. Angry, yes. Surprised, yes, but afraid of these idiots? No. As I lost my breath hitting the door, that changed. A jolt of fear ran through me.

The kid I bit stayed outside, but the other crony followed. Luck was on their side. The bathroom was empty.

“Throw the match,” Thornton growled, pushing me hard against the bathroom wall. “I need this win for college. And you,” he paused, “*Miss* Goldman, are going to Throw. The. Match. Do you understand?”



My fights happened on chess boards, not in bathrooms. If you had told me an hour ago that this foul sack of teenager would have me pinned to the bathroom wall like a knight pinned to the edge of the board, I would have straightened my Amnesty International tee shirt and told you to be quiet. It was the new millennium for crying out loud. Beyond, in fact. It was two thousand *and one*. An

hour ago, I would have thought civilized New Yorkers, even overly mature, hairy jocks with neck beards starting, were culturally beyond boys threatening girls in bathrooms.

An hour ago, I had eleven seconds left to win.

I watched closely as my opponent decided. Pretty brown eyes flicked over the board then lingered on my bishop. His forehead squashed together like he was attempting differential equations without a calculator. One mahogany curl bumped each cheek as his head tipped to scrutinize the board. Uh-oh. Did he see it? I'd spent my last five moves setting up this trap for his queen. I took a breath and waited, anticipating he was too logical a player to see my hidden mate.

I noticed his yarmulke, blue with an embroidered pattern that looked like pawns. Cute. The tiny velvet cap, no bigger than my hand, was bobby pinned to his hair right at the top of his head. Air-conditioning blasted from the vent above us as if the hotel thought people were actually dancing in this ballroom.

I imagined I heard the boy's brain ticking. Then his hand flashed up from his lap like a pilot light, snatched his queen and captured my bishop. Elation thrilled through my veins, an adrenaline rush that thumped my heart against narrow ribs. Two moves later, six seconds out of my eleven, I had him. Mate.

My opponent waved his hand for the proctor while I wrote down the final moves in my notebook. Once the proctor agreed that our board had a legitimate checkmate, we got up and nodded to each other. I would have stuck my hand out to shake, but orthodox boys aren't allowed to touch girls, even in a sportsmanship show of acknowledgement. I think it's a purity thing.

"Good game," I said following him out of the cone of silence. Ballroom door shutting behind us, I said "You used your tactics really well. That fork of my rook and knight in the middle game was exciting . . ." He shot me a glare and walked away. Well, that's the last time I think you have pretty eyes, I said to myself.

A tornado crashed into my side, hugging me with scrawny black clad arms. Meredith.

"Did you win, did you win? Of course you won! Look at your face! My god, woman, you're a machine! You need some water!" She grabbed my hand and dragged me down the hall toward the skittles room where we all kept our stuff during the tournament. My grandmother sat at one of the tables, feet propped on a chair with a fluffy, wool-looking project in her lap. She looked up when I came in and set aside her work. She stood, thick red socks blending into the hotel carpet and opened her arms wide for a hug. I embraced her and she squeezed me tight. "Four out of five?" she asked.

"Yup." \$680 raised for my cause and one win away from my first actual title. National Master. It's not like I would be the only fourteen year old girl from New York City to hold a national master title, but it wasn't common either. I could count us on my fingers. She pulled back and took my face in her hands.

"Shayna," she said using her Yiddish nickname for me, "You are the smartest person in our family." She searched my face to make sure I knew she meant it. "And you can tell your father I said

that. In fact you should tell him. He could use a little knocking off his fancy partner pedestal.” She smiled at me, pride in my father and me gleaming from her eyes like her one gold tooth glinted from the corner of her top row of teeth.

“Thanks, Bubbe,” I said. “But you’ll have to tell him yourself. If I do it -- ”

“He’ll say you’re bragging. Which,” she said, brushing some escaped hair out of my face and back toward my braids, “you are absolutely entitled to do when you win today! One more game, right? What is it, thirteen more hours of this interminable waiting-death-by-boredom?”

“They say we’ll be out by 8:00,” I said.

“They say that every year. Will you stop bouncing like that?” Bubbe said to Meredith.

“I gotta use the bathroom,” Meredith replied, “I was waiting til the end of the match so I wouldn’t miss anything. And Stacy needs this.” She wagged a bottle of water. I reached for it. “Come with me.” My grandmother gave my best friend a raised eyebrow. Meredith aimed a pointed look at my frizzing hair and Bubbe let me go.

Meredith pushed open the ladies room door and ran to a stall. I had to pee, too, but not as badly as she did!

“How was the kid you played?” Meredith asked.

“Cute. In a Jane Austin sort of way. I think I played him a couple years ago. Might have beaten me. I forget.”

“Liar. You remember every single game you play.”

“I do not.”

“You so do.” She flushed and I heard the sink start. I adjusted my skirt and unlocked my stall. She appraised me in the mirror.

“You’d be a ton scarier behind the board if you would dress like a human being.”

“I am a human being and I am dressed, therefore -- ”

“You know what I mean. If you dressed like a *girl*. Please tell me at least you’re wearing a bra?”

“My god, Mer! Of course I’m wearing a bra!”

“Last week you -- ”

“Learned my lesson. Double A or not, bras it is.”

She nodded her approval then sighed in disappointment. “You look like a fourth grader in that denim knee skirt.”

“I look like a fourth grader no matter what I wear.”

I learned just last month that there is a name for how I look to other people. Neanimorphic. It means looking younger than one’s years. There’s nothing wrong with me, I’m just small and don’t look my age.

“Come on, Stace,” Meredith said. “I gave you all those clothes!”

“They’re all black.”

“Black is sophisticated.”

“Black is Goth.”

Meredith pulled a hair brush, *my* hairbrush, out of a small canvas messenger bag she wore across her body and stood behind me.

“You have my hairbrush?” I said.

“I took it from your bag. It’s gross if you use mine.” She let out my braids as I guzzled the water she’d handed me. She popped the brush over my shoulder. “Use it.”

When Meredith had a mind to change the way I looked there was no stopping her. Her own hair was dark brown, too but she had dyed it black. She wore thick eyeliner and purple lipstick with sparkles. Fine boned and delicate like a hummingbird, Meredith was made of love and colors and speed. She had been my other half since the first day of kindergarten when we promised each other to be friends forever.

“Did you grab my —” Before I even finished the sentence my wristwatch appeared in her hand.

“How many of these stupid things have I been to?” she said. Too many to count. I buckled the little blue strap and reached for my hair ties.

“Oh no,” she said, swiping them out from under me and stuffing them in her pocket. “Wear it down.”

“It’s distracting that way. I need coffee.”

“My god woman, you are pedestrian.” Meredith opened her hand for my brush and swooped over my head. Four minutes later my long, straight hair wrapped around itself in a french twist behind my head. Her finishing touch was a strong tug on the collar of my tee to stretch it out. “I wanna see the necklace. It’s so pretty.” She tapped my gold Star of David pendant with her finger. It had teeny diamond chips at the corners and was probably the most expensive thing I owned. It was my bat mitzvah gift from Bubbe, saved for special occasions. Meredith had insisted today qualified.

“Beauty,” Mer said with a flourish. “Now when you win your title and I take the picture, you won’t look as much like a dweeb. Do you want lipstick?”

I wanted coffee and a sandwich. I rolled my eyes and exited past her out the door. I had one concern more pressing than food. My stomach rumbled, but I had to see if they posted the next rounds yet.

If he’d won his last game, I’d be playing Joseph Thornton, a square, jock looking kid who had needed a hair cut and a shave since he was twelve. He came from somewhere not New York and we played each other every Nationals. If Joseph had lost, I’d be up against Jon Yu, a string bean Asian super nerd from the Bronx. I liked Jon. He was an aggressive player, very predictable, but also a very nice guy. I could not say the same of Joseph. Our matches ended in a seething draw every time. Not today, I thought. Not today. Today too much was at stake. I was ready. Today I refused to settle for a draw.

Rabbi Berman, my chess coach, careened around the corner.

“Stacy! Stacy! Asa won his match! Thanks to him winning and you winning, we might actually take this thing!” Rabbi’s voice was quiet, but thrilled. His suit rumbled around him like a bathrobe

forgotten in the dryer. He had trimmed his beard for the occasion and it matched his grey pin stripe suit in it's salt and pepper-ness.

"Have you lost weight since the last time you wore that suit?" I asked. His eyes opened in surprise.

"Matter of fact I have. Hello Meredith," he said as if seeing my friend for the first time.

"Are you okay?" I asked, concerned. "You're not sick or anything?"

"No, I started running a few months ago."

"Running? At your age?"

Meredith elbowed me hard in the side.

"Ow!"

"I'm not dead yet, Stacy. The Torah tells us everyday is a new opportunity to live a better life." He smiled. Did the Torah say that? I couldn't remember, but I didn't think it did. "Your hair looks very nice." Rabbi turned to Mer. "When will you join our team, eh? We could use another brilliant player to cement these wins."

"Sorry, Rabbi," she said with a smile. "Chess isn't my thing. I'm just here to save her the trouble of telling me all about it later."

"What a thoughtful friend," he said shrugging his shoulders. "My wife has been my wife for forty-five years and she's never once in her life come to a tournament."

"I bet she would if you played," Meredith said.

"She would come if it was my funeral, but don't let that give you any ideas. Listen, Stacy, they just posted the final matches."

"Jon?" I said, hoping.

The corners of his eyes crinkled in concern.

My belly rumbled again, but this time I didn't feel just hungry.

"It's gonna be okay," he said. "You can do this. Joseph's coach is furious. Our team is tied with his thanks to Asa." Rabbi put his hands on my shoulders and leaned down. "And to you. Joseph's going to play an aggressive game. He'll try to psych you out. You must. Not. Let him."

I nodded.

"Whatever you do, protect your rooks."

Joseph loved to hide his rooks, capture yours and then use his to sweep up in a checkmate we liked to call "The Lawnmower."

"I got it."

"I know you do," Rabbi said. "Just do like always: Make a plan. Stick to the plan. Be ready to change the plan. Keep your mind on the mate."

I pushed my feet into the floor. Joseph, not Jon. Rats. It's really more fun to play with people you like.

This tournament was not for fun, though. This tournament was for a National win for my school team which had won exactly zero Nationals, for a National Master Title for me and for a little

contribution to the NYPAG. Joseph was heading into his senior year, so for him, this would be about scholarships.

“I need to eat something.”

Rabbi walked us back to the skittles room.

“How many sponsors did you all end up getting?” He asked me as we walked. “Fifty-four!” I replied. Thirty-four of them were mine. This tournament was also my first fundraiser since becoming president of the Youth Philanthropy Group at Beth Israel, the temple where my Grandfather used to be rabbi. We picked two charities a year to do a volunteer project with or help them raise money. I had chosen one of this year’s charities, the New York Prisoner Advocacy Group. They fight to get prisoners who have been wrongfully imprisoned released and to get mental health benefits and treatment offered to prisoners who need it. I have a thing about wrongful imprisonment. I also have a thing about mental health care.

There are people that belong in jail, and there are people who don’t. I knew one who did. I also knew that what that person did may not have entirely been their fault. It might have been something they couldn’t help because they were sick. You don’t get mad at a dog for biting someone if it has rabies. The dog can’t help it. It’s still bad someone got bit, but it wasn’t really the dog’s fault.

A month ago, I had the idea to turn this tournament into a fundraiser for my charity. For every game I won, my sponsors would donate money. I had won four games already and my average donor committed to five dollars a game. Three other teammates including Asa, had also gotten sponsors. Together we had fifty-four. I smiled in pride when I thought about it.

Arriving in the skittles room, my grandmother had laid out three sandwiches, soup, salad, knishes, iced teas and one giant cookie each from Jerry’s. I think the real reason she agreed to be my chaperone at Nationals every year had to do with her enjoying buying us a much bigger meal than we could possibly eat and a bored Meredith always happy to get out and do the run to the deli.

Meredith slid her hand into mine as we sat down to eat. She squeezed, said nothing and let go, but I knew what she meant. She meant that she knew I was worried, she knew Rabbi was worried and that she had faith in me. She thought I would win. If you have to have only one friend in the whole world, pick someone who believes in you. Someone who thinks you’re awesome and that you can do anything, is a valuable someone. I bit into my pastrami.

While Meredith and my grandmother cleaned up, I trotted back to the bathroom for a final break before the game. The final round started in less than ten minutes. When I came out, Joseph and two of his teammates stood across the hall.

“Hey Lesbo,” he said. “Can we talk?” They started toward me.

“I don’t talk to morons,” I said.

“I don’t talk to deviants but I’ll make an exception for you.” His cronies snickered.

I opened my mouth to blast him with a loud and furious lecture about the difference between homosexuality and deviance. I wanted to pound his ignorant, hairy face into the carpet. The bigger part of me knew to save it for the board.

“Sorry, Joseph. Go talk to someone who a) is a lesbian and b) gives a crap. I do not qualify.” Very restrained, I told myself, feeling anger rushing to my face.

“Oh, I thought your girlfriend was here with you again. But maybe I saw you going into the bathroom to make out with someone else.”

Something about him fired up a rare desire for me, the desire to go ballistic on someone. This is your plan? I thought, resenting him for disrupting my calm, winner mood. This is how you try to psych me out? You’re going to have to think of something better.

I said nothing, turned away and started to walk down the hall. One of his cronies stepped in front of me. A black-haired kid with glasses. Not intimidating, despite being tall.

“Get out of my way.”

The hall grew more crowded as players and coaches thronged back toward the ballroom.

“I’ll scream if you don’t move,” I said.

The kid’s eyes flicked to Thornton’s bulk.

“I just want to talk,” Joseph said, stepping closer.

“No.”

They closed in on me, pushing me back toward the wall. I realized no one could see me. I opened my mouth to scream and Joseph’s fat crony pushed his blubbery hand over my mouth.

## 2.

*June 17, continued.*

I sucked in a gasping breath. My body trembled under the force of Joseph's thick hands on my shoulders. He used his hip to pin mine so I couldn't kick up and hit him in the nuts.

"Look. I don't care anything about you or your hot girlfriend or what you do in private, but today I need this win and you will give it to me."

"I will not." My voice came out hoarse and scared.

"If you don't, I'll say I saw your coach giving you hand signals from the sidelines. That'll get you disqualified."

"I'll tell them you attacked me!"

"Your word against mine," he said. "No witnesses. All my teammates will back me."

I said nothing, but the heady mix of fury, indignation and the absolute commitment to not let him get away with this must've read on my face.

He paused. "Leak one word and I'll trip your grandmother down the stairs."

"You will not."

"Try me," he said. I gulped in a huge breath to scream. Joseph shook my shoulders. My head snapped against the wall so hard bright lights flashed in front of my eyes. "I am not kidding," Joseph said. "You resign before the 40th move, or give me the mate. I hope we're clear." A knock on the bathroom door.

"Joe, it's one minute to get in."

He grabbed my hand and gripped it tight, big fingers squeezing like a boa constrictor around my wrist. I was dizzy as he dragged me out of the bathroom. "Let's go. Friend."

Tears of anger and pain had sprung to my eyes when I hit my head. I staggered as he pulled me with him. He smiled at a group of three more team mates waiting outside the bathroom to escort us. He put his arm around my shoulders in a friendly way, walking me into the ballroom. I looked around desperately for Rabbi Berman. His back was to me as he exchanged some final words with Asa.

Joseph's coach waved us over to the middle table. He smiled a thin, wet smile and wished me a good game. My head hurt from hitting the wall, and I said nothing. Disgusting lizard.



Joseph was to play black. The varsity football jacket his coach draped over his shoulders reeked of deodorant and onions. Still clutching my hand, Joseph pulled my chair out. Finally letting go, he tucked me in, like we were dining at a fancy restaurant. My side faced Rabbi. The second Joseph sat down, I stood so fast my chair toppled. I bolted across the ballroom.

Grabbing Rabbi's jacket, I whispered "You have to get out of the ballroom!" He started to open his mouth in protest. "You can't watch us play!" I grabbed his sleeve and started tugging. "Please Rabbi! I can't explain, there's no time! Just go, now! And tell Meredith not to leave my grandmother under any circumstances! Not any! Please!" He nodded. I left my bewildered rabbi and turned to run back to my board.

"What did you tell him?" Joseph hissed once I sat. I stared at him with all the hatred I felt at that moment. I said nothing.

"What did you tell him?" Rage rose behind his eyes.

"That you raped me in the bathroom."

"What?" he shrieked.

"No talking!" called a proctor. "Shake hands." All dozen of us final rounders stood up. I noticed I was the only girl. And my watch was still on my wrist. I took it off and stuffed it in my pocket. Joseph's hands were twice the size of mine. We both squeezed too hard. It hurt. For a second I thought he might break my fingers. When we let go, my gaze shot to the door. Rabbi stood in the entryway, his shoulders tight with worry and confusion. I made a hard, pointed look at the door. He put his hands together to bless my game. And, thank god, turned and walked out of the ballroom.

I won't bore you with the entire game, but I will say that Joseph was not his usual self. He had gotten better since last I played him, sharper moves, better timing. He'd been memorizing patterns. He used tactics more aggressively. If he hadn't just physically hurt me and threatened me and my grandmother in the bathroom, it would have been a fun game. I wrote down every move and used the opening to calm my shaking nerves. I closed my eyes for a second before and after each move like Jill, my actress-turned-therapist step-mother, had taught me to do to keep myself calm and focused. I reminded myself of my goal: checkmate. Paralyze the king. I saw only the king . . . I did not look at the monster across the table. Forcing away the emotions pulsing under the surface of my mind, and the ache from my head hitting the bathroom wall, I saw only the board.

Chess for me is like dancing for Meredith. She loses herself in the music and volume and movement. Playing chess, I get lost. My body becomes irrelevant, my mind sorts through information like nothing outside of strategy and prediction exist. It is private and sweet and filled with surprises and adrenaline. It gives me space to be nothing, to become the game, to be just me.

An arm's length across the table, Joseph started getting creative. He moved a rook, setting a trap for my queen. A smile tickled the corner of my mouth. I shoved it away.

I did not capture his queen set out to lure my bishop into disaster. I moved fast so he would think he'd fooled me. Sacrificing my remaining b rank pawn, I pressed my knight to defend a pawn

twice that had only one piece attacking it. It looked like a wasted move, but one move later it would open a diagonal file for my queen to wreak havoc on the center of the board.

Sociopathic Joseph hadn't expected that. He faltered, likely wondering how I could have made such an egregious positional error.

We danced in an out, trading advantage in position, for advantage in material. I captured one of his rooks and got the upper hand. If I lost it, I would not recover and he would win. Move 39. I had no intention of throwing this game.

The cavernous ballroom cocooned us in quiet. The silence amplified itself with every click of a clock in contrast.

Don't get cocky, Goldman, I told myself. Check everything. Studying the board fast, I observed: material: equal, meaning our captured pieces were worth the same number of points, position: his remaining rook floundered, pinned by my two pawns, his knight stayed stuck trapped on the edge of the board and his king crept toward the center, forced by my remaining bishop. The absence of the bishop he'd captured improved my position by opening a key file for my rook and for my open pawn to cross the board for promotion if I failed to win this exchange.

He hit his clock. I moved my knight into position at g4, a royal fork!

"Check."

His queen, pinned to his king, guaranteed a valuable capture for me while forcing him to move his king to one of two available squares. Both squares were better for me than for Joseph. And then I made a mistake. I looked up.

Joseph's blue eyes bored into me from a face shiny and pink. Sweat dripped onto the table from his forehead, his hair soaked. His fingers gripped the table. I'm used to seeing boys stress out when they play me, but I've never seen one look ready to throw the table over and leap across to rip out my throat. Meredith would tell me to curb the dramatics, but his expression stuck my breath in my chest.

I remembered his heavy paws on my shoulders, the feeling of his breath on my face as he slammed my head against the wall. He was not just a mean kid, something about him was different. His eyes gave me chills. An unfamiliar fury filled me, like what I had felt when he first approached me, only more intense. My face got hot. My skin felt itchy, like if I didn't reach over the board and hit him right now, I might start screaming and be unable to stop.

Goldman! I scolded myself. Who *are* you right now? Where is your mind? Come back and play this game! I looked back at the board, lost, and not in an in-the-flow way. I had no idea what had been happening. Had he moved? Had I? My clock ticked so he must've moved. Where had he gone? Valuable seconds later, I saw it. He had moved his king. Right, I'd been playing that fork. I captured his queen and hit my clock, still pushing the intense emotions away. He had one chance to redeem his game and play for a draw, but he threw one of his knights away by mistake and voila! I had him. Three more moves and BAM! I took his remaining rook with mine, simultaneously trapping his king. Checkmate.

I did not look at him again, choosing instead to only look at my notebook as I wrote down his last moves, and mine. Across from me, his breathing came thick and furious. I raised my hand for the proctor. Mate approved, I looked past my seething opponent, searching. Rabbi was nowhere in sight. Good Rabbi! I stood. Joseph stood too, and walked away without shaking my hand. I came back fully to my sane, logical self.

I guess I had after game cooties today.

“So you’re asking to register an official complaint against the team?”

“Yes,” I said. “Against Joseph Thornton first, and the team second. He asked me to throw our game.”

“That’s a serious offense.”

“I’m aware.”

“Are you sure he wasn’t just teasing you?”

My brows scrunched together. Teasing me? Was he joking?

“I’m sure.”

The proctor had sweat through his button down shirt and pushed his glasses up on his nose.

“Okay,” he said, sighing in annoyance.

“You should be grateful I’m reporting this.” I said as Sweaty Proctor Man shuffled through a large file box. “Who knows how many other kids he’s threatened? What if all his wins today were faked?” Ignoring my comments, SPM pulled out a pink xeroxed form. “Write your complaint on the third line and sign here.”

“How will I know this actually gets filed with the Federation?” I asked as I wrote.

“If you write it, it’ll get filed.”

“Can I track it? Is there a case number or complaint number or something you can give me?”

“What are you, a lawyer?”

I eyeballed the sweaty, nerdy man. Pride filled me, converting my scowl into a smile. “Nope. I’m a National Chess Master. Now tell me how to track my complaint.”

“He slammed me against a wall in the bathroom and threatened me if I didn’t throw the game!” I said low enough that only Meredith could hear me.

“Holy crap! Are you okay? Did he hurt you?” The Goth Princess crouched next to me as I packed my stuff. I glanced up to check on Bubbe. Rabbi stood with her, talking in excited animation as she arranged her knitting in a bright purple bag.

“Other than harboring a sudden and deep desire for revenge, and a mild headache when I stop to think about it, I’m fine.”

“Aren’t you going to tell?”

“I filled out the complaint form.” Speaking of revenge. “It’s all you can do.”

“But he physically assaulted you!”

“His coach was in on it! He’ll say that all the guys were with him before the game and I am lying. I have no witnesses, and they have an alibi. Nothing will come of it except I will get a reputation in the Federation as a troublemaker.”

“You’re a National Master now, doesn’t that count for something?”

“I’m a fourteen year old girl in a man’s sport. Did you see the face of the judge who handed me my trophy? He looked like his owner had just spanked him with a newspaper.” She nodded. Meredith was many things. Stupid, thank god, was not one of them.

“What did Rabbi say when you told him?”

“He registered a complaint, too. That members of his team had been trash talked by the Saint Whoever’s team.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s all I told him.”

“For a smart girl you can be majorly stupid,” she said. “You should go over there right now and tell him the whole story. Remember when Jacob thought he couldn’t tell us he was gay and tried to kill himself?”

“That’s different.”

“It’s not! The secret ate away at him. This one could eat away at you! If Jacob had told us, we would have been like oh okay but in his head it was this big thing -- ”

“Shh. Here they come.”

Rabbi’s eyes were lit like Hanukkah candles he was so happy. He chatted the whole way down the hall and to the elevators about what a wonderful job we had all done. I hugged Asa and told him he had gone over the top in his games today. Together, we had raised over \$1000 for the NYPAG. We promised to replay our best games from today in the final club meeting of the school year on Tuesday.

“Jewish Day School Team Picture everybody!” Meredith called holding up her fancy new DSLR camera. We all scrunched together under the US Chess Federation Banner. Someone shoved the team trophy at me to hold. Asa giggled as I set it down. It came up past my waist.

“Is it huge or are you just short?” he said smiling.

“I am officially five feet tall now, smart stuff,” I said. “Rabbi, you hold it.”

It didn’t take much persuading. Rabbi hefted the trophy onto his hip and we all stood smiling beside the giant gold statue.

“It’s like the chess Oscars,” Meredith said as we all herded toward the elevator. There were stairs from the mezzanine to the lobby, but after the conversation in the bathroom, I wanted Bubbe nowhere near them. I put her in front of me as our team piled into the elevator, me bringing up the rear.

As I stepped through the elevator doors, a heavy weight slammed into my back. I lurched forward knocking into Bubbe. She smacked hard into the side of the elevator. She'd put out her hand to catch herself and avoid falling into the kid in front of her. Beside me, the click of a camera.

Meredith said, "I got that, you jerk."

"Sorry about that," said a foul, familiar voice.

Joseph Thornton smiled at me, a dirty, nasty smile showing small white teeth. His team stood behind him, staring in awe.

"Bubbe, are you okay?"

She gripped her wrist close to her chest. She turned as best she could in the packed elevator, looked Joseph Thornton in the face and said a phrase in Yiddish that means something so nasty I will not translate. I gaped in astonishment. The elevator doors were closing.

"We had words earlier," she said.

"What kind of words?" But I suspected I knew exactly what kind.

Rabbi looked at Bubbe's wrist when we unplied into the lobby. She winced when he tried to rotate it.

"It is a bad sprain," he said. "Let's get you home and ice it. It's not a break or it would be bruising and you wouldn't be able to move it."

"How do you know?" I asked, worried.

"Former Coney Island EMT. I wasn't always a rabbi," he said. He looked over my head at one of our team's chess parents for a quick discussion on getting the other kids home.

Once everything was handled, Rabbi got a us a cab. Fifteen minutes later, we were all settling in at Bubbe's Upper West Side apartment.

"I'll be home in an hour or so," Meredith said into the phone. She explained to her parents what'd happened. "Dad you don't have to. She's fine." She looked at the phone and pressed the off button. "He'll be here in ten."

"Can we start from the beginning?" Rabbi Berman asked. "I feel like I'm in a vortex and have no idea why or what's happening."

I looked at Bubbe. She passed the plate of cookies I'd arranged to the rabbi and pushed the honey toward his tea cup.

"Do you want something stronger to put in that?" she asked with a sly look. "I won't have you starve to death or not have a celebratory sip on my account. We have a national master and a first place team win to celebrate!"

"Please tell me. What happened?"

She sighed. "When I was setting up dinner for the girls, the coach from the other team asked if he could talk to me. I said sure, he seemed friendly. He explained that this tournament was crucial for one of his players. I said, mine too. Then he asked if he could give me five hundred dollars to pretend to get sick and take Stacy home before the fifth game! I said certainly not, she was gonna win her title if she won. I was polite, Shayna pour me a glass of the red would you? He then upped

his offer to a thousand dollars! Can you imagine? A thousand dollars to pull her out of the tournament! I said no and told him to go -- " she cursed in Yiddish again.

Rabbi's eyes got wide.

"My goodness." He turned his gaze on me. I shrugged.

"Nobody offered me a thousand bucks," I said.

"Joseph and two of his teammates trapped her and shoved her up against the wall in the bathroom so hard she hit her head," Meredith said. She stuck her hand on the back of my head.

"Ow!"

"Feel it, woman! There's a huge goose egg here!"

"There is?" I said. I reached around and sure enough a massive lump had raised on the back of my head. Mer stood up, talking and walking toward the kitchen at the same time.

"And then he threatened her! He said -- "

Rabbi held up one hand. "Let Stacy tell the rest."

Mer looked at me, eyes narrowed. "If you leave out any of the details, I will shake you till you see stars myself!"

Oh good grief.

Meredith came back from the kitchen holding something wrapped in a dishtowel. A baggie full of ice. She pointed to my head. Holding the ice to my skull, I told the rest of my story in gory detail. I left nothing out, including how I dumped over my chair and bolted for Rabbi right before the final match.

Rabbi and my grandmother sipped. No one said anything for a few minutes, absorbing.

"I'll do a formal complaint with the main USCF office on Monday. That coach has been a problem for years. This is one too much."

"He has?" I said.

Rabbi nodded and sipped his tea. "The Ohio branch of the Federation has had so many complaints against him, his team is banned from tournaments there."

We talked some more chess politics and I got up to dump my baggie. Its useful ice had transformed into useless cold water. While I was up, I got Bubbe a fresh bag of frozen peas to put on her wrist.

Our dads arrived. Meredith's first, yes, just a sprain and then mine, oh my god what happened freak out etcetera and the whole story got told again. After Bubbe calmed everyone down, and no, I did not have a concussion, she made my dad go into her freezer and pull out a secret something.

It was an ice cream cake with Congratulations Stacy and a chess queen drawn on it in fancy icing.

"I didn't want to jinx it, so I had it done a month ago so I could forget about it til today, in case you won."

I threw my arms around her and kissed her crumply cheek. "Thank you, Bubbe," I said. "I love it."

“Of course you do,” she said. “It’s your favorite.” She looked at my dad, still in corporate casual from spending his entire Sunday at the office. “You should be ashamed of yourself for making work more important than your daughter today, Ernie.” She fixed him with her serious mother stare. “If you had been there none of this would have happened.”

“You’re right. I would’ve taken the grand!” We all just stared at him. “Sorry,” he said. “My stand up teacher said that playing into the stereotypes while being self deprecating is supposed to be funny.”

Bubbe rolled her eyes and sighed.

“You’re a wonderful lawyer dear. Be happy with that. Now, get the plates,” Bubbe shook her head. “And cut the slices big!” Dad turned to the kitchen. He stopped and tuned back to us. “Did I tell you? Jill and I finally figured out the solution to keeping marriage fresh,” he said. Oh god. Another one. “It’s two romantic dinners a week. She goes on Tuesday and I go on Thursday.” Meredith snorted a laugh. Her dad laughed for real.

“Thank you, Meredith, thank you, Saul,” said Dad. “At least they appreciate me.”

Bubbe looked at Rabbi Berman as my dad went into the kitchen.

“Thank God his father made him go to law school instead of being a comedian,” she said.

“It didn’t work,” I said. “He’s still totally repressed.”

Dad came back with the plates. The glorious ice cream cake made its rounds.

“To Stacy Goldman, our faithful champion, undefeated by chess, bullies or pink paperwork,” said Rabbi. “Mazel tov.”

“Mazel tov,” we toasted.

## 3.

*Saturday, October 27, 2001. Richmond, VA*

This is not my house, I said to myself as the heavy wooden door shut behind me. Cold struck my face in the open wind. Indignant, frustrated and sad, my chest tightened. Having learned to repress from the best, I shoved the uncomfortable emotions away. I had come. I had done everything they asked. I had given it a chance, like I had agreed to do. Two hours had been long enough, thanks. It was time to go home.

Make a plan. Stick to the plan. Be ready to change the plan. Keep your mind on the mate. Rabbi Berman's voice was close in my head as if he stood beside me, solemn and kind in his rumpled suit. Make a plan.

That was easy, get back to New York. If I went for a visit, I could maybe convince Bubbe I should stay. I could help her with things when I wasn't in school. I'd be useful at the temple, I could help her clean the sanctuary or manage the office.

The open space pressed against me. I can't stay here, I thought feeling slightly panicky. I have got to get home. Bubbe would understand.

I clutched the phone handset to my chest, hoping it would get a signal out here. Purple twilight filled the empty sky over the tops of wide, old trees as I dialed.

"Shayna, honey! I miss you so much already! How was the trip?" Bubbe's loud voice comforted me.

"I'm thinking maybe I can come back next weekend to visit you. What's changed since I left? How's your wrist?"

"Why are you asking about my wrist? That was months ago! And changed since this morning? Nothing."

Things *could* change, though. They could change in a second. Your life could be torn out from under you in the time it takes an airplane to crash into a building. And that is exactly what happened. On September 11, two airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center towers six blocks from our apartment and two blocks from my school.



This house, this twilight sky, this empty void of not New York was the result. The world changed in a blink. It was as if New York had evaporated and morphed into this unreal image of a city that wasn't a city, as least not as I knew cities.

"Why are you really calling, honey?" Bubbe said. "Is everybody okay? Is something wrong with the house?"

The house. God, the huge god-forsaken perfect house. Its charming stone exterior stared in pompous humility at me from under the too wide sky.

"The house is fine. We're all fine." I repressed a tidal wave of emotions. Hearing Bubbe's voice made me want to dissolve and wash away into the Long Island Sound. I could not wash this away, though. This was too big and I was too trapped in the role I had created for myself. Stable Stacy, the big sister, easy going and always responsible. I was a chess champion for crying out loud. No meltdowns allowed.

Summer after the tournament had flowed like any New York City summer, stiflingly hot days spent between apartments, The Met, and movie theaters accented by a couple weeks out of the city with Meredith's family in the Hamptons. It had been sweet and typical, an endless string of iced coffee runs, card games and late night conversations. Labor Day came and went. School started. The second day of school was September 11, the day that launched not only the biggest disaster in National and New York City history, but also the biggest disaster in Stacy history. Meredith argued it was the second biggest disaster and nicknamed it Disaster Number Two since I was so young when Disaster Number One happened. I might disagree.

Five weeks had passed since September 11. Five stunned, shocking weeks. Here it was, Saturday, October 27, 2001. I stared at an inviting bench swing hanging from a massive tree that overhung a cobbled driveway. I didn't even want to sit on it. Bundled in my wool peacoat and the gold scarf Bubbe had made and wrapped around my neck this morning, wind whipped my hair across my face. Bubbe had kissed both my cheeks, held my face in her hands and said to me, tears in her eyes,

"You are my Shayna maidel and you always will be. I am always here for you, don't forget that. And remind your no good father that I have to see you at least once a month or my cancer will come back and it will be all his fault. Tell him that."

"I'm sure you will tell me plenty yourself, Ma," he said. "I wish you would come with us. I could get you your own -- " She held up her hand.

"I have lived in this city since I was fourteen years old and I will leave it like your father left it, God rest his soul. In a box."

"Trains are boxes," said Steve. My muppet-like six-year-old brother held hands with his parents, my dad on one side and Jill on the other. He had floppy brown hair, tucked under a Batman hat, wide eyes and a happy expression, kind of a cross between Barney the dinosaur and Big Bird with superhero gear. Jill on the other hand, looked like a picture out of a Macy's catalog, put together in her tan long coat and knee boots with a splashy matching hat and scarf. My father looked like he always looked, straight up and ready to catch his train to the office. This was not his normal train,

though and not his normal office. This train would deliver us all, willing or no, to the new branch of his firm and the house it bought us. In Richmond, Virginia.

“Tell me about it! Do you like it?”

“Like what?”

“The house!”

Again, the house.

“It’s bigger than Mt. Sinai Temple,” I said. “The kitchen alone can fit our whole apartment.”

“That’s not saying much. What’s your favorite thing about it?”

I reached, I didn’t have a favorite thing. Two staircases, five bedrooms and seven (*seven*) bathrooms. Ridiculous. Dad had a furniture company come in and a designer do most of the furnishings calculated to be cozy and formal/ showy at the same time.

“Jill really likes the wall colors,” I said. “They are beige. I mean, sand.”

“Did they put in the red drapes she wanted from the catalog?”

“I think so.”

“Pay attention, Shayna! Inquiring minds want to know. But I didn’t ask what her favorite thing was. I want to know *your* favorite thing.”

I scrunched my face up under my glasses.

“Jill says I’ll be able to walk a lot of places once I’m out of the neighborhood.”

“That’s not terrible.” The phone beeped a call waiting. My heart leaped again.

“Can I call you back, please, Bubbe? I think Meredith is on the other line and I haven’t talked to her yet. I called you first.”

“Of course honey. I love you. Make him buy you biscuits. I hear there’s good biscuits in Richmond.” She hung up and I clicked over to the other line. Meredith was already talking.

“Good grief, woman I’m dying over here! This is a terrible connection, can you go closer to the base?”

“I’m in the yard.”

“Why? It’s dark out. You were supposed to call me! Tell me everything! How’s the house?”

“Why are you people obsessed about the house? And it’s only twilight.”

“Oh my God, of course it is! You can see the sky. Is the pool heated?”

“It’s October! I have no idea if the pool is heated. My dad called my room the princess suite and I nearly vomited. It’s stupid. Too big. I hate it.”

“Stacy Rachel Shayna stupid head Goldman! Stop it right now! You will not ruin this for me. The only way I am holding my crap together at all is by thinking of what a wonderful new life and house you have that I get to come visit and that you are going to be happier there than here, so quit complaining! Now tell me something I can cling to to keep me from entirely falling apart, do you understand?”

A knot of guilt bunched in my stomach. I'd been so self absorbed feeling sorry for myself and thinking about everything that had happened that I hadn't even thought about how horrible this was for her.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I should have thought about that." Meredith fell quiet on the other end. She sniffed.

"If you cry, I'm gonna cry," I said.

"I'm not crying butt face," she sniffed. "Now tell me about the house." I wanted to ignore it. It wasn't home, so that made it bad.

"Jill keeps bragging to her friends about the seven-thousand square feet, built in 1925, historic home -- "

"Can you really see a river from your room?"

"Yup."

"It is beautiful?"

"I guess so. But it's not New York."

"Shut up. Did you get a fireplace?"

"I think so. I don't know."

"Go inside and look." Manicured grass sprung under my shoes as I crossed the wide expanse of lawn to the driveway. Dad's brand new car, forest green, gleamed in the light shining from square sconces on both sides of the front door. As I climbed the wide steps, Jill appeared wearing a puffy coat and sweatpants.

"You were outside?"

I pointed to the phone.

"Sorry! Meredith?" she said. I nodded. In her hands she held a Tupperware with a screw driver and a small plastic wrapped package. "Mezuzah," she said.

I walked through a wide open foyer with a staircase on the left, narrating as I went. I described some of the weirder details, like the potted plant in the hall, and the gigantic Chinese vase which made no sense except as an umbrella stand.

"There's oriental carpets."

"For your Dad."

"And big modern furniture."

"For Jill. Can totally picture it. A perfect marriage of G-old and new, I love it!"

"You are a dweeb."

"I love architecture."

"This isn't architecture, Mer. It's *decor*." I stood in the living room. "Fireplace, check."

"Good. I require a fireplace."

My scowl softened. Leave it to Meredith to make me almost smile, even in all this.

"Wainscoting in the dinning room?"

"What the heck is Wayne's coat-ing?"

"It's the paneling under the chair rail."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. It's just walls. Table is glass. The base is this big driftwood looking sculpture thing. It matches the cabinets."

"Sexy! Is the fridge big?"

"Enough to fit a body in. Why do you care about the fridge?"

I took her up to my room and went over every detail for about another forty minutes. My dad stuck his head around my door.

"Why didn't you answer me?" he said, irritated.

"I didn't hear you."

"Hello Meredith," he said, raising his voice. "Stacy has to come for dinner now."

I put her on speaker. "Hello Mr. Goldman! Congrats on the move!" she shouted.

"You're on speaker."

"Oh, sorry. Stacy gave me the tour."

"Very nice. Tell your parents I said hello, but she has to go now."

"K, bye!" she said cheerfully. "Call me tomorrow." I pushed the off button and got up from my new bed.

"You didn't hear me calling you? I shouted a dozen times."

"No, I didn't hear you. Have you walked this place from end to end yet? It's ginormous." I followed him down the stairs.

"What's your problem? Jill is very happy. Steve is very happy. I am very happy." I contemplated giving him a truthful answer for about a half second. I'd felt better talking to Meredith, but now the wave of homesickness washed back.

"Meredith is dying to come. Bubbe said she wants me to visit her later this month, so I thought maybe next weekend I could take a bus or the train and go home."

My dad turned to face me. We stood on a thick, red oriental rug half way across the open living room. I glanced at the floor to ceiling windows and saw the room in reflection, a wide screen tv, long coffee table and a sectional couch big enough to accommodate my entire chess team with room to spare. Dad fixed me with the litigation stare.

"No."

"Why not?"

"You live here now. You have to get used to it. Maybe closer to the holidays."

"We just had the holidays!"

"I mean Hanukkah/ Christmas, that whole thing. Maybe then. The city needs time to recover."

"I don't see what me visiting Bubbe has to do with the city needing -- "

"I said no, Stacy and that is that." I took a step backward in surprise. My dad wasn't particularly cuddly, but this was brusque even for him. Who are you? I thought to myself.

“Are you stressing, Ernie?” Jill said, looking over from the dining room. She stood unpacking little cartons of take out while Steve bounced up and down on a springy new chair. “The realtor said this was the best Chinese in Carytown,” she said.

Dad turned away and walked to the table to sit.

“Carytown’s one of the things the realtor said we’d love about this place. It’s like we’re in the best part of Connecticut, rural and peaceful, but everything we need to feel at home in the city is just a few miles away. St. Ignatius’ is only three miles.”

At home, the JDS was three blocks. I pulled my stiff, new seat toward the table. Resentment burbled under my skin.

I’ll convince Bubbe she needs me at the temple, I thought to myself. She’ll help me. I can do this. I’ve got a plan. Stay calm, stay rational. I looked through the glass table top at my legs.

Jill walked around the table to put a plate in front of Dad.

“I love you so much, Ernie. Thank you for this. It’s a beautiful house and we are all going to be so happy here.”

Speak for yourself, I thought.

“Mu shu or lo mein?” said Jill. She kissed Dad’s forehead.

Under the table Steve waggled his fingers at me from his lap.

“Did you see the swimming pool?” he asked, eyes dreamy and excited. I scowled. Then I caught myself. I took a breath. Steve didn’t need me to be a party pooper right now. He needed someone to enjoy the adventure with.

Lighten up, Goldman, I told myself. It’s just Meredith’s vacation home. You can leave as soon as you figure out how.

I sat up straighter and thought about home. Right. Good. I had a plan. Time to fake some happy for Steve.

“How about you show me when we’re done?”



*Monday, October 29, 2001*

“This is the sanctuary,” said Sister Tour Guide. She had been introduced to me as Sister Mary Louise, or Miriam Ruth or somebody. Sister Two Names Together I could not remember. I decided to call her what I would not forget. Sister Tour Guide.

“We have a gift shop,” she said pointing back the way we came. “You can buy a St. Ignatius sweatshirt, sorry, ‘hoodie’, or a mug for your mother.”

Ha, I thought. My actual mother hated the word “mug”. I couldn’t blame her.

Sister Tour Guide showed me around for another half hour. Jill had attempted to soften the new uniform up for me by tumbling it in the dryer, but it hadn't done much good. The navy skirt fell in stiff pleats above my knees and the matching (yes, matching) navy blouse felt dry and scratchy. I reminded myself to wear a tee shirt underneath tomorrow. We walked the flagstone corridor and beneath the border arch that divided St. Ignatius' church from St. Ignatius' school.

Lots of kids in the narrow tiled halls stared at me as Sister Tour Guide finished my tour. Something struck me as odd about the place, besides the obvious unfamiliarity of being a Catholic school, but I couldn't place it.

I started at Battery Park Jewish Day School in kindergarten and had been there, with Meredith, until last Friday. Isaac came in second grade, Sorrel in fourth. Jacob came just last year, but we liked him right away and adopted him into our group. Right now, my uniform clung to my back, damp with sweat. My breath came in shallow pulls and I felt headachy, a persistent press behind my eyes. I'd never been the new kid. Not once.

I headed to my locker after lunch to ditch my blazer and get a fresh notebook for AP Chemistry. I didn't pay much attention when the tall kid leaned up next to my locker.

"Listen up, new girl," he said scowling down at me, "We don't like your kind around here." He blocked me in between him and two other guys. It was such a classic bully move I nearly rolled my eyes. Was this guy for real?

My first day at St. Ignatius' College Preparatory Academy, the most academically aggressive school in all of Richmond, and I did not want to be late for class.

"What?" I said, standing as tall as I could and heaving my backpack onto my shoulder. "What did you say? Or are you just so stupid that you don't know you don't make sense?" I slammed my locker door so hard it made the shock of black hair that fell over his eyes blow back.

"We don't like people like you," he said again as if I hadn't spoken.

"And what kind of people am I?" It occurred to me I should maybe be scared of this idiot, but what was he going to do? Hit me in the school hallway? Over my shoulder, a nasty, familiar voice rattled off a long, offensive list of terms for People Like Me.

It ended with "Jews."

I froze. It couldn't be *him*.

"Welcome to Richmond, *friend*." I whirled. A thrill of horror rippled up my spine.

END OF SAMPLE