



The Reference She Cannot Give

Ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The Blank Beside Reliability

The form has five lines. Tirtza likes four of them.

Name of applicant. How long known. Relevant skills. Name of reference.

Between skills and signature comes the fifth: Can this applicant be relied on to arrive at the agreed time?

Chaviva, seventeen, stands beside the classroom window while Tirtza reads.

"Mrs. Adler says she needs somebody to help prepare the younger girls' craft sessions. Just supplies, not being in charge of children. Two afternoons a week. It's paid."

"That sounds good."

"You know what my folders look like. Tell her I'm organized."

Tirtza knows the folders. Chaviva labels everything, keeps scissors where scissors belong, and can prepare twenty sets of paper without giving nineteen girls the wrong color.

Tirtza also knows the last three supervised class-project afternoons. Chaviva is late to two and absent from one without telling the teacher until afterward. Each time, Tirtza rearranges the shared work.

She looks at the fifth line.

"I can't say yes to that one."

Chaviva stops smiling.



Chapter 2: The Part That Is True

"It's only a reference," Chaviva says.

"That's why she's asking."

"I'm not applying to run the school."

"She needs the supplies before the children arrive."

Chaviva takes the form back.

"You could say I'm usually reliable."

Tirtza almost accepts usually. It is a comfortable word. It has enough room to hide the afternoons neither girl wants to discuss.

"I don't have experience of that," she says. "I can write about how carefully you prepare things. I can't promise arrival times."

"Friends are supposed to help."

"I want to help honestly."

The sentence sounds like something from a school poster. Tirtza dislikes hearing herself say it. She wishes there is a less polished way to give an answer Chaviva does not want.

"You know what I mean," she adds.

Chaviva folds the form.

"I thought I did."



She leaves for the next lesson.

Tirtza spends most of the lesson thinking about a blank she has not even filled in.

Chapter 3: A Reference Is Not a Verdict

At home, Tirtza asks Mama to read the form's wording without naming the applicant.

Mama's green tichel covers all her hair. She wears a high-necked blouse and a long skirt, and she sits at the table with the page between them.

"If I can't answer this," Tirtza says, "am I saying she's a bad person?"

"What does it ask?"

"Whether she arrives at an agreed time."

"Then answer about that, or say you aren't the right reference. You aren't being asked to judge her whole character."

"She might have reasons for being late."

"Then she can discuss what she chooses to discuss with the person offering the role. Don't guess the reasons for her."

Tirtza thinks about all the ways she can soften the fifth line. She also thinks about Mrs. Adler setting out tables and waiting for prepared supplies.

The friend is real. So is the person who relies on the answer.

"Can I just not fill it in?"



"You can decline to be a reference. Tell your friend clearly, rather than leave her thinking the form is coming."

Tirtza writes two possible answers on a scrap. She keeps them specific. Neither contains always, never, or the word irresponsible.

Chapter 4: The Conversation They Do Not Finish

The next morning, Chaviva does not sit beside Tirtza at break.

Tirtza waits until they are alone near the classroom door.

"I won't fill in a reliability statement I can't support," she says. "I can give a reference limited to your supply work, if that's useful and Mrs. Adler accepts that. Or you can ask someone else."

"That sounds worse than saying nothing."

"Then don't use me for the reference. I don't want you expecting the form from me."

Chaviva looks down at her folder.

"I need the job."

Tirtza knows that makes the answer matter more. It does not make her experience different.

"I'm sorry it's difficult."

"You could make it less difficult."

"Not by saying that."



They go into class. They do not reach an agreement that makes everyone comfortable.

Tirtza does not tell the other girls why Chaviva sits elsewhere. She does not turn the reference into a story about how principled she is. At lunch, she puts Chaviva's borrowed ruler back on her desk. It still belongs there.

Chapter 5: A Smaller Answer

Two days later, Chaviva comes to Tirtza with a fresh sheet.

"Mrs. Adler says a skills-only reference is useful, but she will still need to check the timing question separately. I told her you can't answer that."

Tirtza reads the revised request.

It asks what tasks she sees Chaviva complete, and how carefully.

"I can answer this."

"Let me read it before you give it in."

"Yes."

Tirtza writes that she works beside Chaviva on three supervised classroom projects. Chaviva sorts materials accurately, labels sets clearly, and leaves tools in their assigned places. Tirtza does not write that Chaviva completes work at times she does not meet.

Chaviva reads the page.

"It sounds smaller than I hoped."



"It's specific."

Chaviva points to one sentence. "The folders are for the history display, not the reading display."

Tirtza checks her notes and corrects it.

Being careful about one claim does not make all her other claims automatically right.

They agree on the exact limited reference. Mrs. Adler receives it in the way she requests. Chaviva speaks to her separately about schedules and the role's expectations.

Tirtza does not attend that conversation. It is not hers to manage.

Chapter 6: Not Her Decision

A week later, Chaviva says she does not get the fixed-afternoon role.

Tirtza feels a pull to apologize for the entire result.

"I'm sorry you didn't get it."

"She's looking for somebody with experience of being on time for something regular. She says I can ask about a supervised preparation trial later, if there is an opening."

"Do you want to?"

"Maybe. Not today."

Tirtza nods.



"I'm still annoyed with you," Chaviva says.

"I know."

"But I don't think you should have written something false."

Tirtza wants to make that sentence the end of the problem. Chaviva's first sentence is still there too.

They walk down the stairs together. At the bottom, Chaviva turns toward the office, and Tirtza goes to the courtyard.

There is no reason to pretend they need the same route to prove anything.

Chapter 7: The Folder Between Them

On the next class project, the teacher asks pairs to choose their work.

Chaviva asks Tirtza to join her.

"We should write down which parts are each of ours," she says.

They choose a display with three sections. They arrange two supervised work periods and tell the teacher who will bring each supply. Tirtza does not promise to finish Chaviva's parts if she misses one.

Chaviva arrives on time for the first period. Tirtza does not congratulate her as if punctuality is an unexpected trick.

They work.



At the second period, Chaviva arrives on time again. Tirtza is pleased. Two afternoons are evidence of two afternoons, not a lifetime guarantee. If someone asks her later, she can describe the new experience accurately.

When they finish, Chaviva closes the folder.

"You can say this one is the history display."

Tirtza laughs. "I have that written down."

"Good."

They carry their own parts to the teacher's desk.